

LIGHTS and SHADOWS

from the
Dishman Hills

June 2005

NATURES LAWN

There is an important part of the Dishman Hills ecology that is often overlooked. It's a native plant with a history: it's habitat, it's a food source, it's a soil stabilizer, it's bunchgrass. This component of "natures lawn" is well suited to our area and thrives on 10-20 inches of annual precipitation while remaining free of diseases and insect pests, and is resistant to weed invasion. These plants in the Hills include rough fescue, Idaho fescue and bluebunch wheatgrass. Other grasses identified in the Natural Area include pinegrass, spike oatgrass, and ryegrass. The bunchgrasses form the natural understory layer to our ponderosa pine/douglas fir forest and are outliers and remnants of the vast expanses of grasses that once covered the Palouse Prairie to the southwest of Spokane.



Idaho fescue

Bunchgrass is just what it sounds like, a perennial grass that grows in clumps or bunches, often separated by other plants. Plants can reach one foot in diameter and three feet tall, and are called "cool season" perennials, because its growth occurs mainly in the spring and early summer when soil moisture is available. They are long-lived with roots that can penetrate as deep as six feet into the soil, allowing them to tap moisture that is not available to other ground plants when things get dry. During winter and the drier, warmer months leaves turn brown and are referred to as the standing dead. Plants can turn green again in the fall when the rains return, using stored carbohydrates in the roots to rebuild the green leaves. Unlike the sod-forming grasses of the Great Plains, which grow from networks of roots called rhizomes (like most lawn grasses), bunchgrass grows as clusters of numerous tightly packed growing points. Leaves and flowers die each year, but the plants regrow from the same root system each spring. Native bunchgrass species are better for the ecosystem than non-native species for several reasons. First, they have a lot of space between individual plants, creating areas for good foraging, hiding, and nesting habitats for insect, birds, and small mammals. The plants are also a high quality, reliable food source for the local animals.

The Palouse Prairie used to be a sea of perennial bunchgrass that supported a rich ecology and a native American culture based on foraging and hunting on the prairie. With European-American settlement prairies were transformed into farms and most of the grasslands were gone by 1900 with some remnants kept in pasture for draft animals and cattle. Since then, with intensified agriculture, urban growth, and continued mechanization, the remaining grasslands have disappeared. As of 1990, 94% of the native grass prairies and 97% of the wetlands in the Palouse Ecosystem had been converted to human uses. As of today only 1% of the original bunchgrass prairie remains. This makes the Palouse grasslands one of the most endangered ecosystems in the United States, although none of the plant or animals species of the original ecosystem are extinct or extirpated. This why it is so important to save what is left of the grassland habitat, so don't walk on the grass of natures lawn.

In its broadest ecological context, economic development is the development of more intensive ways of exploiting the natural environment.

- R. Wilkinson, American Economist/Historian (1973)

GIVING STATS

The donations that we receive of money, volunteer time, supplies, and equipment are the fuel for the Associations efforts. A recently released National Generosity Index gives us some interesting numbers that profile peoples generosity in supporting charities. The American southeast heads the list as the most generous with Mississippi, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana the top four, and New England sits at the bottom. Washington ranks 34th from the top of the list. Our fair state is 11th in the nation for average income but 25th in amount of average donation thus our 34th ranking. Given this trend of an index ranking that is inversely tied to income, eastern Washington probably has a higher index than the west side. Last year donations made in Washington had an average of 49% of money received going to charity; the rest going to the cost of fundraising. Your "volunteer" donations to the Association go 100% for natural land conservation! In any case, all you supporters are pure gold.

Washington Department of Transportation has stepped up to offer a number of cement "jersey" barriers so we can start blocking motor access off Appleway into the northern side of the Natural Area. The main problem is the open field just off the corner of Appleway and Sargent Road. Over the last several months we have had a number of incidents here of unauthorized camping, four-wheel driving, and dumping. The barriers will just be on loan till we can find a more permanent solution.

ORGANIZATION NEWS

We are a non-profit organization dedicated to saving nature areas in the Spokane region for public enjoyment and education. Call Michael Hamilton, 747-8147, if you have any questions. We meet every other month on the third Tuesday at Opportunity Elementary School, S. 1109 Wilbur, in the teacher's lounge, 7pm. Since we are on summer break our next meeting will be September 20.

The following are our May donors that have consented to be listed: Marjorie Benander, James Conaty, Ruth Cunningham, Carol Ellis, Donald & Pauline Hagan (memorial for Paul & Erna Jean Staeheli), Patrick Killian, Diane Rogers, Spokane Valley Sunrise Rotary Club, John & June Warner, Washington Native Plant Society, Howard Waterman, Jeanne Wilson, and two anonymous donors. Thank you for your support.

Please use this form when sending **CONTRIBUTIONS or DUES**

All contributions are tax deductible.

Send contributions to: DHNAA

3415 S. Lincoln Dr.

Spokane, WA 99203

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