

## A landscape purple with cheatgrass

By Larry Hyslop



Tall heads of maturing cheatgrass signal another dangerous summer

Cheatgrass is just now maturing. Its drooping grass heads have turned purple and will soon be dead and tan. It has been a good spring for cheatgrass and this invasive grass is tall. Anyone looking across the landscape can easily see how much cheatgrass covers the ground, since entire hillsides show as purple. Every purple patch of ground is most likely an area dominated by cheatgrass. A small amount of purple may come from Sandburg's bluegrass but most of it, by far, is cheatgrass.

Today's purple grass heads reveal its most dangerous characteristic. While native grasses will remain green for at least another month, cheatgrass will soon dry out. By the time July thunderstorms begin rolling across the sagebrush landscape, cheatgrass will be dry tinder and ready to burn. By drying out so early, it contributes to wildfires that destroy native plants and open more space for cheatgrass.

As an annual grass, it dies by early July, leaving seeds as the only living material during the heat of summer. Come fall, with good fall precipitation, those seeds can germinate and begin growth. During warm winters, this growth can continue. During early spring, cheatgrass begins growth before other grasses and forbs, giving it an incredible advantage over other plants.

The purple patches represent one more important fact. The most common type of control for cheatgrass is livestock grazing. Nevada cattle eat more cheatgrass than any other type of grass. While spring cheatgrass remains green, it is excellent food and this spring's ample moisture means it has been green longer than average. But as it dries out, barbed spikelets harden on the seed heads and livestock will no longer eat it. Only after the seeds drop off the dead stalks in early fall will livestock return to feeding on it, especially if fall moisture softens the dead stalks.

As I look across our purple landscape, it signals me that summer has arrived in Elko County. Soon, lightning storms will provide the sparks all this cheatgrass is waiting for, so that wildfires can once again help spread cheatgrass into more areas. Next June, even more of our landscape will be purple.

Elko Daily Free Press, "Nature Notes", 7/1/2011

© Gray Jay Press, Elko, NV

Return to [Elko Nature Notes](#)