

## Grass as High as a Horse's Belly

By Larry Hyslop



A stand of basin wildrye along the highway near Adobe Summit

A native grass standing 6-10 feet high commands attention. Early explorers described it as scraping the bellies of their horses as they waded through a stand, if not completely hiding the horse. Basin wildrye (also known as giant wildrye) is said to have once covered one million acres of the Humboldt River Basin.

It is a bunch grass that can form a clump three feet across. Leaf blades may be 15-25 inches in length and seed heads are usually 6-10 inches long. It is the largest cool-season bunchgrass in the intermountain West.

Wildrye has always been a vital grass to man. The seeds were once an important food source for Native Americans. Today, it is an important food for mule deer, elk and jackrabbits. The large clumps provide good nesting cover for upland game birds and winter cover for small mammals.

Cattle graze it in spring, but after the coarse grass matures and turns tan, it is fairly unpalatable until fall moisture softens it up. Then this tall grass provides good winter forage.

Such an important grass must be carefully grazed. Much of the historical wildrye stands were decimated near 1900 by season-long heavy grazing and haying. It is susceptible to grazing in spring, when at least ten inches of stubble height must remain to maintain grass health.

All grasses put up reproductive shoots bearing leaves topped with seed heads. These shoots have growth points, which means if cattle bite off a stem above a growth point, the plant can fairly easily regrow the upper leaves (at least before seed production.) If the bite is taken below the growth point, the grass must replace the entire stem, requiring much more energy. The grass may not recover during the current growing season from such a bite. Some grasses have growth points close to the ground, making it difficult for cattle to bite off the stem below the growth point. Such spring grazing allows the grass to recover fairly easily.

The problem is wildrye is so tall, its growth points are 10-12 inches above the ground. Spring grazing often means bites remove the growth points and stop that year's growth.

Wildrye has a good root system and is often used as a soil stabilizer, especially for mine and fire reclamation. The tall grass reduces wind erosion and traps blowing snow. It tolerates drought and its seeds germinate easily. All this makes its wildrye seed valuable. Commercial growers can get 400 pounds of seed per acre from irrigated fields.

Many ranchers are re-establishing large stands of wildrye on private pastures. They depend on wildrye as a winter feed for their cattle.

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