

WESTERN BLUE FLAG (*IRIS MISSOURIENSIS*)

IN PROCESS

Description

The western blue flag is a member of the Iris family (*Iridaceae*) and is a long-lived perennial that grows from a thick underground rhizome. The plant is 30 to 60 centimetres tall, with long thin sword-like leaves. It relies on insects (usually bees) for pollination

History

The western blue flag grows in damp sunny meadows where the soil is moist in the spring but dries later in the summer. The western blue flag has very specific habitat requirements, which means that its habitat is easily damaged by human activities. Drainage, water diversion, cultivation and overgrazing are all problems faced by this species. However, the western blue flag does benefit from light to moderate cattle grazing. This plant is sensitive to herbicides.



The western blue flag is at the northern edge of its range in Alberta, and healthy populations exist in many western states. The plant is found only in the extreme southwest corner of the province in sub-regions of the grassland and parkland natural regions. It is not found elsewhere in Canada.

There are eight sites with native populations of western blue flag in the Police Outpost, Carway and Whiskey Gap, areas, all near Cardston in an area of less than 800 km², a very limited distribution. (Four other locations, where the plant is thought to have been introduced, are also known.) The status of these sites is uncertain, and declines were recorded in the 1990s, although some populations appear to have stabilized. Five of eight sites examined in 1987 had been modified by human actions.

Management

In 1997, Alberta's *Wildlife Act* was amended to allow designation, protection and recovery of threatened or endangered plants. The Endangered Species Conservation Committee since has recommended that the western blue flag be classified as a "threatened" species. However, appropriate standard protections for threatened and endangered plants in Alberta are still needed. While new regulations are being developed to protect Alberta's first plant to be officially designated as "threatened," Alberta Sustainable Resource Development staff has been contacting landowners to identify their concerns and attempt to reach cooperative conservation agreements in preparation for official designation. A cooperative program is underway involving preparation of range management plans to develop management recommendations for the western blue flag within the context of overall ranch management. Several landowners and stakeholders have been recruited for the recovery team, which will initiate in September 2001.

Because the western blue flag is a peripheral species in Alberta, the emphasis will be on conservation and



management of the remaining population rather than reintroduction of plants. To this end, government land use management systems will be strengthened on crown land and for government-regulated activities. Most western blue flag sites are on private land, however, so landowner conservation initiatives will take precedence in this case. The distribution and population trends of this plant in Alberta will be closely monitored.

Status

Alberta:	Ongoing consultations with landowners to determine appropriate actions; Threatened designation recommended by Endangered Species Conservation Committee Canada
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Canada (COSEWIC):	Threatened
USA:	Relatively rare in Nebraska and North Dakota but common to abundant in many other states where it occurs (Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, South Dakota, Washington, Wyoming, Utah)

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP

- As a land manager:
 - Your cooperation in reporting any observations of western blue flag, to the Fish and Wildlife Division office in Lethbridge is encouraged.
 - Your cooperation in adopting grazing management practices that emphasize light to moderate grazing and minimize heavy grazing and alteration of hydrology in areas where western blue flag plants are found will benefit the species.
 - Please feel free to contact wildlife management staff at the Fish and Wildlife Division office in Lethbridge for information on ways that you can minimize impacts on western blue flag, ways that you can help western blue flag, and ways that you can assist in monitoring the status of western blue flag populations.
- As a member of the public:
 - Your voluntary cooperation in refraining from collecting wild western blue flag plants is requested.
 - Your cooperation in reporting any observations of western blue flag to the Fish and Wildlife Division office in Lethbridge is encouraged.
- As an industrial developer:
 - You can assist in western blue flag recovery efforts by reporting any observations of western blue flag to the Fish and Wildlife Division office in Lethbridge.
 - Please contact wildlife management staff in the Fish and Wildlife Division office in Lethbridge to discuss ways that you can modify industrial activity to minimize impacts on western blue flag and ways that you can help monitor populations or assist in western blue flag recovery.