

# THE GRASS-LIKES

by Lewis L. Yarlett

The grass-like species are so called because of their resemblance to grasses. Belonging to the families Cyperaceae (sedges) and Juncaceae (rushes), they have characteristics which often confuse them with members of the grass family, Gramineae: the blades are much the same, root systems are similar, and their general stature and growth habits are the same. Both grass-likes and grasses can be seen on a walk through any ecological community.

A word of caution on common names: often the common name of a species may be misleading; for example, sawgrass is a sedge, not a member of the grass family, and beakrushes and spikerushes are also sedges, not members of the Juncaceae.

Historically, more emphasis has been placed on the identification of the grasses, for grasses — corn, wheat, oats, rye, etc. — have provided a staple food for both man and livestock for hundreds of years.

Recently, however, the grass-likes have become more widely recognized as a result of developing environmental regulations which identify a large number of species contributing to the functions of wetlands. An increasingly greater value is also being placed on many species for their livestock forage and wildlife food value.

Depending on the author and publication, approximately 19 Cyperaceae genera and 200 species occur in Florida. The family Juncaceae is represented by only two genera and approximately 19 species. Interestingly, the grass genera number 96 with 340 native species, plus a number of introduced species.

Distinguishing between a grass-like and a grass is not as difficult as generally believed. Once the basic characteristics are known, the task becomes much easier (see illustration). Species identification in many instances is difficult, as it is often necessary to find specimens with mature capsules or achenes. Frequently, these are the key to positive identification, requiring a strong hand lens or even greater magnification under a laboratory microscope.

Several vegetative characteristics also are often used in identification, such as rhizomes or a distinct inflorescence. Stems are usually

round with opposite blades on *Juncus* spp. or triangular with three-ranked blades on the sedges (*Cyperus* spp., *Carex* spp.). Unlike the grasses, most of the genera in both families have solid, pithy stems without nodes or joints.

Occurrence of grass-likes is widespread. Several species occur on xeric sites, including sand scrub and sandhills, but the greatest number occur in wetland communities. Some species are good indicators of soil and moisture regimes of freshwater marsh habitats. Examples of these include two spikerushes, *Eleocharis equisetoides* and *E. cellulosa*, and Tracy's beakrush, *Rhynchospora tracyi*.

Probably the best-known grass-like species is sawgrass, *Cladium jamaicense*. Sawgrass forms extremely dense stands in low salinity

and freshwater marshes. Two other sedges, *Scirpus olneyi* and *S. robustus*, and the black needlerush, *Juncus roemerianus*, are natural components of the salt marsh community.

Many *Carex* and *Cyperus* species occur throughout wetland communities. One large species, *Carex lupulina*, occurs frequently in forested wetlands. *Carex glaucescens* frequently occurs in the herbaceous understory of cypress ponds and strands. A dark green and leafy sedge, *Dulichium arundinaceum*, which is easily identified by its distinct three-ranked leaves, occurs in lakes, swamps, and bogs, often in standing water.

Only one grass-like species is classified as rare in Florida by the Florida Committee on Rare and Endangered Plants and Animals. Coville's rush, *Juncus gymnocarpus*, is known only in the vicinity of Paxton in northwest Walton County.

