

Fido's Foe

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The Okanagan is full of dog lovers and if you're like me, the balmy days of summer mean extra walks with your canine companion. At this time of year, however, it's important to watch out for cheatgrass or downy brome (*Bromus tectorum*) when going for that daily stroll. Okanagan residents commonly refer to this invasive plant as spear grass due to its sharply pointed seeds. For humans, the seeds can be mildly annoying and somewhat painful when they penetrate socks and laces. But for our beloved dogs, it's far worse. The seeds can lodge themselves in their paws, ears and can burrow through their skin resulting in both internal and surface abscesses. Seeds can even be inhaled when stuck on a favourite tennis ball.

Few places in the Okanagan are immune from this invader. While cheatgrass thrives on open dry sites where soils have been disturbed, it can also invade shady, moist sites. This extremely aggressive and ubiquitous grass has invaded most of the grasslands and low elevation forests in the Okanagan and Similkameen valleys. It is particularly prevalent along trails, roadsides, abandoned fields, burned areas and sites heavily grazed by livestock or wildlife.

This annual weed was one of our earliest Eurasian invaders, arriving to the Columbia Basin in contaminated seed in the 1890s then spreading via the railways across the west. It grows on all exposures and all types of topography from desert valley bottoms to local mountain peaks. Mature cheatgrass can be as short as 2.5 cm (1 inch) or as tall as 60 cm (2 ft). Cheatgrass changes colour from green to purplish-red to brown as the plant matures and eventually dries. Branches are slender, drooping and hairy, hence the alternate name downy brome. Because cheatgrass grows throughout fall and winter, by the time the rain stops in spring, cheatgrass seeds are already maturing. Unlike native bunchgrasses, cheatgrass then dies by the end of July, avoiding the hottest and driest part of summer. This gives it an advantage over native grasses. When dry, cheatgrass is extremely combustible and can represent a major fire hazard.

So, how to deal with this invader? Minimizing soil disturbance and maintaining vigorous perennial plant communities can prevent new infestations. If you have cheatgrass on your property, hand pulling can be effective for small infestations, especially before the plants set seed. On larger infestations, mowing or weed whacking plants will be the better option. Unfortunately cheatgrass has already gone to seed in many locations, so plants should be carefully bagged to prevent further spread. Control will be required for several years due to seeds in the soil continuing to germinate. Regardless of the option you choose, the area should be seeded to perennial grasses to help out-compete the cheatgrass and lessen your work in future years.

To help fido, make sure to give him a good brushing when you come back from your walk, visit to the dog park or camping trip. Pay particular attention to paws, checking the webbed areas between the pads and removing all seeds. If your dog is shaking his head a lot or scratching his ears, there could be a seed in there which requires veterinary attention. Your canine companion will thank you for the extra attention!

For further information on invasive species go to our website: www.oasiss.ca

Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/invasivespeciessociety>

or contact the Program Coordinator for the Okanagan-Similkameen, Lisa Scott, at 250-404-0115 or oasiss@shaw.ca