

Common Reed

Phragmites australis (Cav.) Trin. ex Steud.

Botanical Description

Perennial grass. Culms (above-ground stem) 2 - 4 meters tall, to 2 cm or more in diameter, hollow. Usually unbranched, with blue-green, flat blades up to 0.5 - 5 m long and 1 - 5 cm wide (mostly) with scabrous (rough to touch) or glabrous (hairless) texture on the margin. Due to an abscission layer near the ligule (a thin outgrowth at the junction of leaf and leafstalk) there is a long-tapered apex (stem) which breaks off easy. The ligule is papery and minutely ciliate with hairs 0.5 - 3 mm long. The panicle (branched flower clusters) is plume-like and oblong (elongated form with parallel sides) to obovoid (shaped like an egg with the attachment at the broad end) mostly 15 - 50 cm long and about 20 cm wide. Densely flowered while initially being gray-purple in color then becoming whiteish tan once spikelet's are mature. Spikelets narrowly lanceolate (shaped like a lance head) that are 10 - 16 mm long, 2 - 10 flowered. The rachilla (part bearing spikelet) with spreading, silky hairs 6 - 11 mm long. Glumes (bract below the spikelet) thin, elliptical (oval) to lanceolate and unequal, ranging from 3 - 15 mm long [5].

Identification Tips

Common reed, also known simply as Phragmites, has a native subspecies, *ssp. americanus*, that is quickly being replaced by the introduced, aggressive *ssp. australis*. The invasive subspecies *australis* is distinguished from the native form by its darker, blue-green leaf color (vs. lighter, yellow-green) and ligule (small outgrowth of the stem-leaf junction) that has hairs less than 1 mm, whereas *ssp. americanus* has hairs 1-1.7 mm long.

Fun Fact!

Due to its hollow stem, *Phragmites australis* can be made into a flute-like instrument [10-15]. As a wetland plant, it improves water quality by filtration and nutrient removal [6].



[4] Panicle seedhead



[7] Ligule



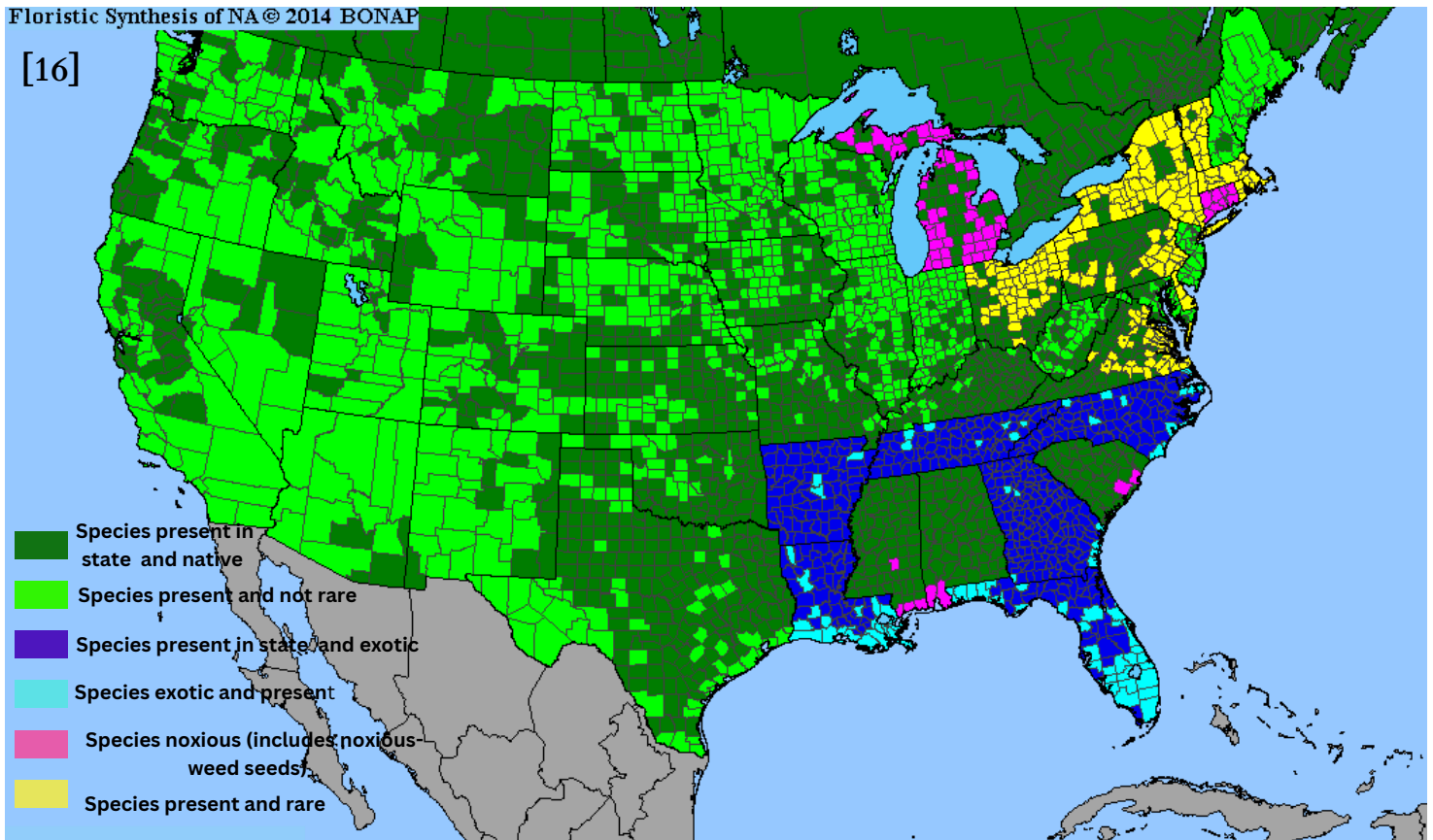
[8] Culm, above-ground stem

Ethnobotanical and Other Uses

Historically, common reed was used all across the United States, with at least 46 Native North American tribes reported to use it [9]. The White Mountain Apache tribe used the root for diarrhea and kindred diseases, the stem as an arrow shaft for hunting small birds with arrows, as well as for smoking and creating pipes [10]. Other uses included the Blackfoot tribe using the whole plant as an emetic [11], the Cahuilla tribe using stems as a splint for broken limbs as well as a flute [12], the Chippewa tribe using it to create a weaved frame to dry berries [13], the Havasupai tribe used stems to make mats for drying yucca fruit pulp, baked mescal, peaches or figs [14], and the Kawaiisu tribe would dry and beat the stems with sticks to remove sugar crystals [15].

Habitat Range

[16]



Conservation Status

Common reed has both a non-native (*ssp. australis*) and native subspecies (*ssp. americanus*) in Utah. The non-native form was introduced several decades ago to Utah and has outcompeted and replaced much of the native subspecies, causing the native one to be threatened. The invasive form has colonized vast areas around the Great Salt and Utah Lakes, among others.

Plant Ecology

Common reed is found along waterways and in saline or freshwater streams and marshes at 915 to 1980 m. Present in most counties in Utah and throughout the United States [5]. *Phragmites australis* mostly reproduces vegetatively through horizontal underground rhizomes, but can also reproduce through seeds that are then dispersed through wind, water, and wildlife [17]. Flowering starts by late July.

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