

## Plant of the Month

***Hesperostipa neomexicana*** – New Mexico feathergrass; similar species: *Hesperostipa comata*, needle-and-thread

**Family:** Poaceae, grass family

**Habit:** Bunchgrass growing 40 to 100 centimeters tall; leaf blades rolled, 10 to 30 cm long and 0.5 to 1 mm wide; seeds adorned with a 12–22 cm long bristle (awn) that is covered in fine white hairs; base of seed sharply pointed.

**Habitat:** Rocky ridgetops, open slopes, canyons and grasslands, 4,500 – 8,500 ft. Flowers May – July.



In the plant world, grasses tend to be overlooked. The flowers – yes, grasses have flowers too! – are small; the floral parts have an entirely different terminology from forbs, and they can be difficult to identify. However, New Mexico feathergrass is a species that is hard to ignore. It grows up to 3 feet and has seeds with a long, fuzzy awn that captures the light, giving hillsides a flourish of silver. If that doesn't grab your attention, the sharply pointed seed might. The seed can hitch a ride by sticking into fur and poking through pants and socks. The tip also enables the seed to stick in the ground like a dart, preparing the seed to drill into the soil surface. How does it drill, you ask? When the awn is exposed to moisture, it will straighten, but as it dries, it will curl back up, which twists the seed deeper into the soil.

New Mexico feathergrass looks like *Hesperostipa comata*, needle-and-thread. Both species have a similar habit, but the awns of needle-and-thread are not as hairy as New Mexico feathergrass.

Intact, healthy grasslands are among the most threatened ecosystems globally, as they are often viewed as wasted space and frequently destroyed for development and cropland conversion. Grasslands may seem boring compared to other ecosystems, but a diverse grassland can support a wide range of plants and animals. In fact, before colonization, the American prairie rivaled the African Serengeti with massive herds of buffalo, elk, and pronghorn. For carbon sequestration, we often think of trees, but the extensive root systems of grasses are just as effective carbon sinks as forests.

So don't just speak up for the trees; give a shout-out to the grasses, too! They need our protection just as much as the forests, waters, and animals do.



B. Winckelmann



M. Licher



*Hesperostipa neomexicana* awns



*Hesperostipa comata* awns

## Sources:

Ackerfield, J. (2022). *Flora of Colorado*. BRIT Press, Fort Worth Botanic Garden, Botanical Research Institute of Texas.

Flores, D. (2016). *American Serengeti: The Last Big Animals of the Great Plains*. University Press of Kansas.

*Hesperostipa neomexicana*. Our Native Plants. (n.d.).

<https://ournativeplants.com/plant/hesperostipa-neomexicana/>

*New Mexico feathergrass (Hesperostipa neomexicana)* — Spadefoot Nursery, Inc. Spadefoot Nursery. (n.d.). <https://www.spadefootnursery.com/grasses-grasslike-plants/new-mexico-feathergrass-hesperostipa-neomexicana>

Thayer, D. (n.d.). *Hesperostipa neomexicana* - New Mexico Feathergrass. Wild Grasses of Arizona. <https://www.azgrasses.org/common-name.html>

World Wildlife Fund. (n.d.). *What are grasslands and why do we need to protect them?* | WWF. World Wildlife Fund. <https://www.worldwildlife.org/resources/explainers/what-are-grasslands-and-why-do-we-need-to-protect-them/>