

□ Easy to confuse with *Andropogon virginicus* (broomsedge). It has a straight awn, and two or more stalked seed clusters per branch. Little bluestem has a twisted, bent awn, and a single cluster of seeds per branch.

# Little Bluestem

## *Schizachyrium scoparium*

**Family:** Poaceae **Genus:** *Schizachyrium* **Species:** *scoparium* **Average Height:** 36 inches

**Bloom Time:** August **Elevation Range:** All elevations of the Piedmont.

**Geologic/Soil Associations:** Grows on a variety of geologic substrates and soils. **Soil Drainage Class and Moisture Regime:** Well drained;

eric to mesic. **Light and Aspect:** Part to full sun. East, south, and west.

**Habitat Associations:** Grasslands, including upland barrens, prairies, savannas, and woodlands. Dry clearings and old fields, powerline rights-of-way, and along old roads and paths. Although it remains one of the most widespread native plants in Virginia, little bluestem is a positive indicator of soil and habitat health, only growing well where the ground has been spared abuse, or has been given significant time to heal.

**Flora Associations:** In barrens it can be seen rising above clumps of *Cheilanthes lanosa* (hairy lip fern) and *Carex pensylvanica* (Pennsylvania sedge). In prairies it is likely to be found growing alongside *Sorghastrum nutans* (Indian grass) and *Solidago juncea* (early goldenrod), as well as more conservative species like *Liatris pilosa* (grass-leaf blazing star). In savannas it occurs with a variety of widely spaced trees, including *Quercus stellata* (post oak). Wet prairies might host it, along with its semi-parasitic associate *Agalinis purpurea* (purple false foxglove), and in open woodland settings it mingles with *Symphyotrichum patens* (late purple aster).

**Fauna Associations:** Little bluestem is critical for wildlife. Grasshoppers are a common associate, and they are a significant food source for birds. Species to look for include *Chortophaga viridifasciata* (green striped grasshopper), *Dissosteira carolina* (Carolina grasshopper), and *Syrbula admirabilis* (admirable grasshopper). Little bluestem hosts the caterpillars of many skippers, including *Polites origenes* (crossline skipper). Several increasingly rare birds breed in habitats with little bluestem, including *Ammodramus savannarum* (grasshopper sparrow), *Setophaga discolor* (prairie warbler), and *Sturnella magna* (eastern meadowlark). The plants were once enjoyed by bison, elk, and other large herbivores.

**Notes:** • 19th century farmers kept native “insurance prairies” for use during droughts. Some old remnants survive today and serve as models for restoration.

• When expansive grasslands were common in the Piedmont,

Native American cultures used little bluestem for insulation in their footwear.

• The Genus name comes from the Latin *schizein* meaning to split and *achyron* meaning chaff. The Species name, *scoparium*, means broomlike.

**common wood nymph**  
(*Ceryonis pegala*) x 1

**eastern meadowlark**  
(*Sturnella magna*) x 0.5

**eastern black ratsnake**  
(*Pantherophis alleghaniensis*)  
x 0.75

**wrinkled grasshopper**  
(*Hippiscus ocelote*) x 1

**funnel weaver spider**  
(*Agelenopsis naevia*) x 1



□ The stem bases have a lavender-blue hue; the whole plant turns a rich rusty-pink in fall.

