

Tufted Bird Vetch (*Vicia cracca*)

Overview

Tufted bird vetch is a perennial herb in the pea family. A native from Europe and Asia, tufted bird vetch was introduced in North America purposely for forage and cover crops.

Tufted bird vetch has escaped from cultivation and is found throughout Canada, Alaska and the northern US states.

Tufted bird vetch is very palatable to livestock.

It is found in gardens, waste places, old fields and along roads.

Tufted bird vetch reproduces by abundant seed production and vegetative spread by underground stems.

Infestations in Yukon are found in most communities including Whitehorse, Dawson, Watson Lake and Haines Junction.



Tufted bird vetch crowds out native vegetation and can aggressively take over areas by overgrowing existing vegetation.

Photo: Yukon Government

Identification

Flowers: Flowers are pea-like and are arranged on one side of the stem. The 10 to 30 flowers are densely packed.

Stems: Multiple, branching, climbing or trailing up to 2 meter long. Vine-like stems are weak but have small tendrils that allow for climbing.

Leaves: The leaf consists of 12 – 24 leaflets. Leaflets are linear to lanceolate and end in a pointed tip.

Seed: The 4-8 seeds grow in a pod. Seeds are viable for five to seven years and large seed banks are common.



Flowers grow in a one-sided spike.
Photo: M. Rasy, University of Alaska, bugwood.org.



Tendrils allow the plant to attach to other plants or objects.
Photo: M. Rasy, University of Alaska, bugwood.org.

Ecological Impact

Tufted bird vetch alters soil conditions due to nitrogen fixation. This plant is very successful at climbing and covering fences, trees and other vegetation. Dense growth of tufted bird vetch out competes other plants for sunlight, space and moisture. It is been documented to invade undisturbed natural areas including spruce forest.

Similar Species

There are four vetch species found in Yukon. All have blue flowers and tendrils. Three of these species are introduced including tufted bird vetch. **Spring vetch** (*V. sativa*) and **shaggy vetch** (*V. villosa*) are only known from historic collections in Dawson City. The only native vetch is **purple vetch** (*V. americana*) which is widespread in southeast Yukon but appears to be spreading and is now found in Rancheria, Mayo and on the Dempster Highway. Purple vetch has fewer flowers (3-9) per bunch than tufted bird vetch (10-30).

Prevention

Tufted bird vetch is a high priority species in Yukon for early detection and rapid response.

- Cutting of plants is effective, since this species does not have the ability to resprout after cutting. Remove all the roots to prevent regrow from the underground stem.
- Tufted bird vetch is spreading effectively by seed, therefore trimming and mowing is best done before seed set.
- Do not plant it in your garden.

Control

Tufted bird vetch is difficult to eradicate once it is established.

Mechanical: Mowing in early spring can starve the roots and prevent flowers and seeds from developing.

Hand removal can also be an effective control method especially for small infestations. Repeated treatments may be necessary.

Chemical: Several herbicides are effective at controlling tufted bird vetch. Herbicides are especially recommended to control larger areas. Consult Yukon's Agriculture Branch for more information.

Habitat

This species is adapted to a broad range of habitats. Though it often initially becomes established in disturbed areas, it can invade undisturbed forest habitats.



Tufted bird vetch can overgrow herbaceous vegetation and low shrubs such as alder and willow.

Photo: M. Rasy, University of Alaska, Bugwood.org.

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