

# **GRASSES**

## **of the Northern Territory Savannas**

### **a field guide**



**Sam Crowder & Boronia Saggars**

**Greening Australia**



# FOREWORD



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Cattle grazing native red soil pastures in the late dry season

## **Native grasses are the building blocks for the success and sustainability of the beef cattle industry in the northern Australian savannas.**

This book builds on the success of the book *Plants of the Northern Australian Rangelands* which provided plant descriptions, images, forage value and weediness of a range of plants found in the Northern Territory, western Queensland and Western Australia savannas.

*Grasses of the Northern Territory Savannas* provides descriptions, distributions, habitat information, images and forage values for 66 of the common native grasses from the Gulf of Carpentaria, through the Barkly Tablelands, across the Victoria River District and north to Katherine.

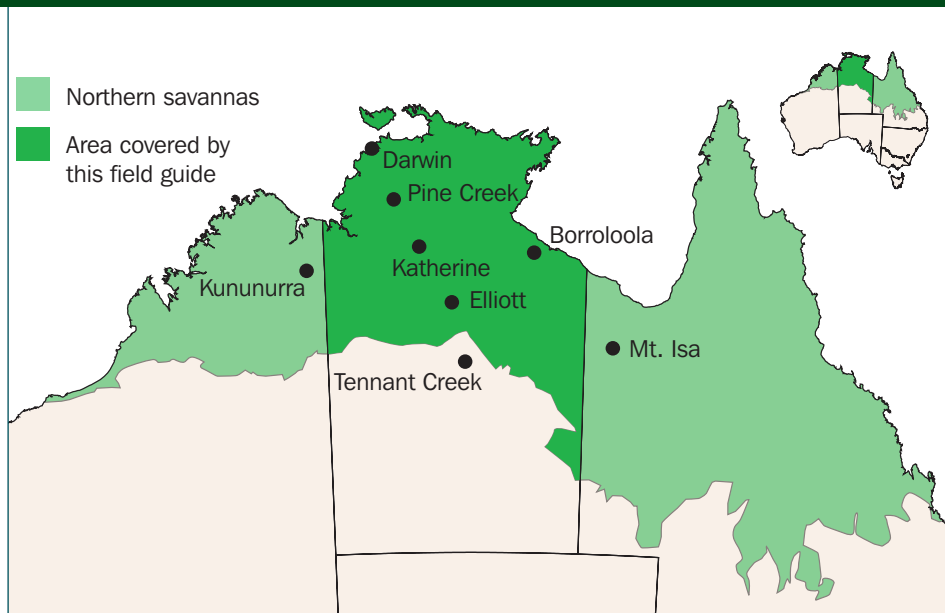
It is presented as a robust 'Ute Guide' which will allow it to be used in the field. It will assist all land managers in the northern savannas to identify and become familiar with their native grass resource.

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# INTRODUCTION



The northern savannas

## THE REGION

Australia's northern savannas form the semi-arid, sub-tropical region spanning from Western Australia, through the Northern Territory and into north west and central Queensland, covering more than 1.5 million square kilometers.

This book focuses on the Katherine region in the Northern Territory, including the Victoria River District, the Sturt Plateau and Gulf Country.

## THE CLIMATE

The climate of the region is characterised by a hot, humid wet season and a long, cooler dry season. Rainfall occurs mainly from December to April and is usually associated with thunderstorms, monsoonal troughs or cyclonic activity. The average annual rainfall ranges from 400mm in the south of the region to 1600 mm in the north.

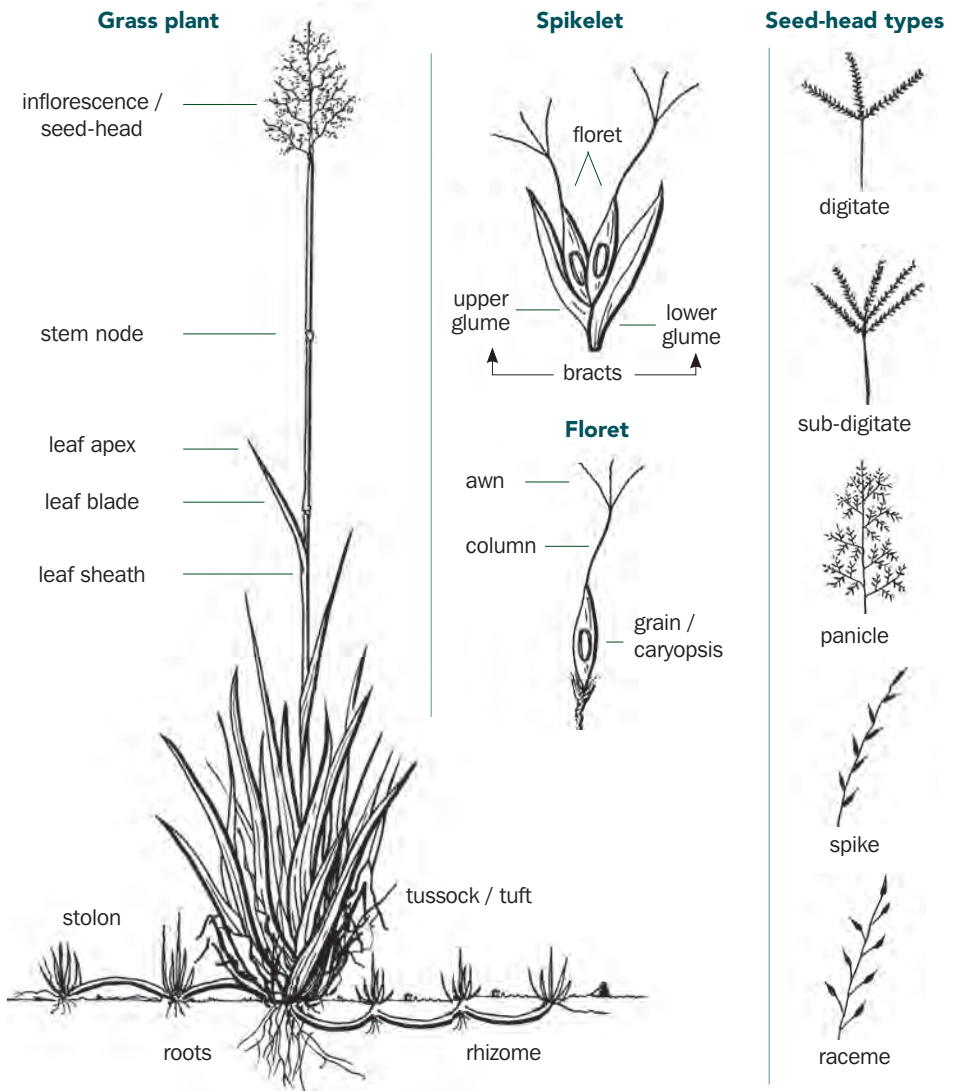
## THE COUNTRY

The northern savannas are made up of numerous and diverse habitat types but are generally dominated by open woodland with a grassy understorey. The type of habitat that occurs in a particular area depends mainly on the soil type, the annual rainfall and the land management history. Each grass species has different habitat requirements. Some species are very particular, only growing on certain soil types in certain areas. Other species occur right across the region on a wide variety of soils.

## GRASS IDENTIFICATION

The correct identification of grass species, and an understanding of their pasture value, is integral to reading the health of the country and making informed grassland management decisions. If we are to get the most out of native pastures and ensure the survival of the more useful grasses, it is important to monitor changes and try to manage for the mid to long term.

Grass species identification is easiest during the growing season (December–May). Each species has certain distinguishing characteristics, usually relating to the seed-heads and/or seeds. As you become familiar with the more common grasses, it will become easier to identify less common and more difficult species.





## *Themeda quadrivalvis*

### Grader Grass

Declared Weed in the Northern Territory

#### PLANT DESCRIPTION

A tufted, annual grass growing to 2 m. Tufts vary from a few stems up to ten or more, often turning reddish to golden brown on maturity.

Leaves are up to 60 cm long and yellowish green to green in colour turning golden to red with maturity.

Seed-heads grow to 90 cm long. Dark brown, awned seeds are held in drooping leafy looking spikelets with many long hairs growing on the outer part of each seed husk. Seeds are approximately 5 mm long. Mature stands have a golden-red appearance.

Flowers February–June.



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#### HABITAT & DISTRIBUTION

Introduced into Australia from India, Grader Grass occurs along the east coast of Queensland and is becoming more common in the Northern Territory and Western Australia. It readily invades and dominates in open woodland, along creeklines and in disturbed areas such as along roadsides and in degraded pastures.

#### NOTES

Grader Grass is a vigorous, unpalatable grass, capable of invading both native and improved pastures, and competing with useful pasture species in heavily grazed, disturbed or burnt areas. Stock may graze on young plants but mature plants are unpalatable. It is prevalent along roadsides after grading hence the name “Grader Grass”. It is spread in hay, pasture seed and by machinery.

Grader Grass is similar in appearance to Kangaroo Grass (*Themeda triandra*) but can be distinguished by the very hairy seed-heads and being an annual grass, it is short lived, with a comparatively weak root system, and can be easily pulled out of the ground. Burning can accelerate the spread of Grader Grass



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