



Ecological aspects of the life history of *Agropyron smithii* Rydb. in central Montana with related effects of selective herbicide treatments of rangeland
by Henry Edward Jorgensen

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY in BOTANY
Montana State University
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Abstract:

The three problems considered include studying ecological aspects of the life history of *Agropyron smithii* central Montana; relating growth of *A. Smithii*- to environmental factors; and determining effects of rangeland treatments related to *Artemisia tridentata* control.

Procedures used to obtain information on the life history were; weekly measurements of height growth; weekly leaf number counts; density measurements; caryopsis counts; seed germination studies, rhizome and root growth experiments; a study of cluster pattern; and determination of dry matter production= The relation of *A. smithii* growth to environmental factors was studied by correlating results from the life history experiments with information from weather data, soil moisture determinations, soil texture analyses, plant nutrient analyses and growing of *A. smithii* in different soils under controlled conditions.

The effects of herbicide treatment of the rangeland on *A. smithii* were observed by comparing growth and life history patterns between control and treated sites.

These studies produced the following results: Maximum height growth occurs during May and June. Crude and specific densities are very similar, implying an even distribution. The density of living culms drops to zero in winter and increases rapidly during early spring. The plant ordinarily is found with culms in small groups which are interconnected with rhizomes. Reproduction is mainly by rhizomes with sexual reproduction apparently unimportant. The presence of ecotypes resulting from site differences was not indicated by experiment. Differences in soil characteristics (possibly due to parent material differences) resulted in differences in growth and density of *A. smithii* throughout the region. Clay soils generally, although not always, tended to reduce growth of leaves and roots. Highest dry matter productivities were on cracking clay soils, and lowest productivities were on noncracking clay soils. Coarser-textured soils had intermediate productivities. Effects of salinity were not determined. Annual dry matter production is more strongly influenced by moisture conditions in May and June than at any other time of the year.

Herbicide treatment conducted to control *Artemisia .tridentata* resulted in an increase in height growth and dry matter production of *A. smithii* as compared with practically identical non-treated sites for at least 2 years following treatment, The effects were less noticeable after 2 years than after 1 year following treatment, The reason for increased grass growth following herbicide treatment was not ascertained, but could have been due to increased available nitrogen and moisture. The increase in grass growth following contour furrowing is at least partially due to an increase in available nitrogen. in the soil.

ECOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF THE LIFE HISTORY OF *AGROPYRON SMITHII* RYDB.
IN CENTRAL MONTANA WITH RELATED EFFECTS
OF SELECTIVE HERBICIDE TREATMENTS OF RANGELAND

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
VITA	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iv
LIST OF TABLES	vi
LIST OF FIGURES	x
ABSTRACT	xi/i
INTRODUCTION	1
General Introduction	1
Literature Review	2
DESCRIPTION OF STUDY AREA	7
EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURES AND RESULTS	13
Measurement of Height Growth	13
Leaf Number Count	18
Measurements of Culm Density	18
Fruiting Culm Counts	22
Seed Germination Tests	27
Caryopsis Viability	30
Observations of Culm and Rhizome Patterns in Field Plants ..	32
Greenhouse Experiments	34
Measurement of Field Dry Matter Production	38
Root Studies in the Field	41
Root Growth in the Greenhouse	42
Fertilizer Treatment Experiment	48
Determination of Nitrogen, Phosphorus, and Potassium in Random Grass Samples	54
Vegetation Frequency	55
Soil Moisture Measurement	61
Soil Texture Analysis	63
DISCUSSION	67
Life History	67
<i>GENERAL PATTERN AND MEASUREMENTS</i>	67
<i>GENETIC CONSIDERATIONS</i>	73
<i>INDICES OF REPRODUCTION</i>	75

TABLE OF CONTENTS (CONTINUED)

	Page
Differences Due to Site and Soil Differences	83
Growth Curves	94
Phenology	99
Treatment Effects	101
<i>CULM HEIGHT</i>	106
<i>LIVE LEAF NUMBER</i>	107
<i>CRUDE DENSITY</i>	107
<i>FRUITING CULM DENSITY</i>	108
<i>RHIZOME NUMBER AND LENGTH</i>	110
<i>DRY MATTER PRODUCTION</i>	110
SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS	113
Summary	113
Recommendations for Further Study	117
APPENDIX	119
LITERATURE CITED	170

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. SUMMARY OF CLIMATOLOGICAL DATA FOR FLATWILLOW AND VALENTINE, MONTANA AS OF 1941	8
2. MONTHLY TEMPERATURE MEANS AND PRECIPITATION FOR FLATWILLOW, 4NE	10
3. SUMMARY OF SITE SOIL AND TREATMENT CHARACTERISTICS	12
4. MEAN CULM HEIGHT, 1967, <i>AGROPYRON SMITHII</i>	15
5. MEAN CULM HEIGHT, 1968, <i>AGROPYRON SMITHII</i>	15
6. MEAN CULM HEIGHT, 1969, <i>AGROPYRON SMITHII</i>	16
7. CRUDE DENSITY, 1967-1969, <i>AGROPYRON SMITHII</i>	21
8. SPECIFIC DENSITY, 1967-1969, <i>AGROPYRON SMITHII</i>	21
9. 1967 FRUITING CULM DENSITIES, HEIGHTS AND SPIKE LENGTHS, (IN CM), AND SPIKELET NUMBERS	25
10. 1968 FRUITING CULM DENSITIES, HEIGHTS AND SPIKE LENGTHS (IN CM), AND SPIKELET NUMBERS, <i>AGROPYRON SMITHII</i> ..	26
11. 1969 FRUITING CULM DENSITIES, HEIGHTS AND SPIKE LENGTHS (IN CM), AND SPIKELET NUMBERS, <i>AGROPYRON SMITHII</i>	26
12. MEAN PERCENT GERMINATION OF 17-MONTH-OLD <i>A. SMITHII</i> SEEDS AT 24°C	29
13. MEAN PERCENT GERMINATION OF 17-MONTH-OLD <i>A. DASYSTACHYUM</i> SEEDS AT 24°C	29
14. MEAN PERCENT GERMINATION OF STRATIFIED <i>A. SMITHII</i> SEEDS COLLECTED IN 1967	30
15. SPIKELET NUMBER/SPIKE, FLORET NUMBER/SPIKELET, TOTAL CARYOPSIS NUMBER, CARYOPSIS NUMBER/SPIKE, TOTAL VIABLE CARYOPSIS NUMBER, AND VIABLE CARYOPSIS NUMBER/SPIKE. SITES 2 AND 11; 1969, <i>AGROPYRON SMITHII</i>	31

LIST OF TABLES (CONTINUED)

Table	Page
16. MEANS AND STATISTICAL ANALYSIS OF CLUSTER PATTERN DATA, 1968	33
17. TEST FOR ECOTYPES (GREENHOUSE EXPERIMENT NO. 1), <i>AGROPYRON SMITHII</i>	37
18. TEST FOR SOIL DIFFERENCES (GREENHOUSE EXPERIMENT NO. 2), <i>AGROPYRON SMITHII</i>	37
19. TEST FOR GROWTH IN ROOTBOXES (GREENHOUSE EXPERIMENT NO. 3), <i>AGROPYRON SMITHII</i>	38
20. MEAN DRY MATTER PRODUCTION OF ALL SITES IN 1967, 1968, AND 1969, <i>A. SMITHII</i>	40
21. MEAN AND RANGE OF DRY WEIGHT/CULM, 1967, 1968, 1969, <i>A. SMITHII</i>	40
22. ROOT GROWTH INCREMENTS, ROOTBOX EXPERIMENT, <i>A. SMITHII</i> ..	48
23. MEAN <i>A. SMITHII</i> DRY MATTER PRODUCTION ON FERTILIZED PLOTS	51
24. MEAN <i>A. SMITHII</i> DRY MATTER PRODUCTION ON FERTILIZED PLOTS (GRAMS/CULM)	51
25. <i>A. SMITHII</i> FRUITING CULM DATA -- SPRAYED FERTILIZER PLOTS	52
26. PERCENT N, P, AND K IN <i>A. SMITHII</i> FROM FERTILIZED PLOTS	53
27. PERCENT N, P, AND K IN <i>A. SMITHII</i> TAKEN FROM VARIOUS SITES	55
28. VEGETATION FREQUENCIES (PERCENT) OF VARIOUS TAXA AND DENSITIES (NO./0.1 M ²) OF <i>A. SMITHII</i>	58
29. CANOPY COVERAGE OF SELECTED ITEMS FROM SITES 3 AND 4, 1967 AND 1968 (COVERAGE AS PERCENT)	60
30. LINE INTERCEPT OF <i>ARTEMISIA TRIDENTATA</i> (FEET OR PERCENT).	61

LIST OF TABLES (CONTINUED)

Table	Page
31. RESULTS OF MECHANICAL ANALYSES OF WINNETT REGION SOILS ...	66
32. COMPARISON OF NUMBERS OF CULMS/BUNCH BETWEEN GREENHOUSE AND FIELD PLANTS OF <i>AGROPYRON SMITHII</i>	72
33. ESTIMATED TOTAL AND VIABLE CARYOPSIS PRODUCTION, 1967, 1968, AND 1969 (CARYOPSES/M ²), <i>AGROPYRON SMITHII</i>	80
34. POSSIBLE NUMBER OF SEEDLINGS FORMED PER SQUARE METER, 1967, 1968, AND 1969, <i>AGROPYRON SMITHII</i>	81
35. NUMBER OF ERGOTS AND CARYOPSES/METER ² , 1969, <i>A. SMITHII</i> ..	82
36. COMPARISON OF PERCENT CHANGES IN CRUDE DENSITY, INDIVIDUAL CULM MASS, AND TOTAL DRY MATTER PRODUCTION, <i>A. SMITHII</i> ...	90
37. COMPARISON OF PERCENT CHANGES IN CULM HEIGHT AND TOTAL DRY MATTER PRODUCTION, <i>AGROPYRON SMITHII</i>	91
38. HEIGHT GROWTH OF <i>A. SMITHII</i> BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 20 AND OCTOBER 21, 1967 (CM)	97
39. PHENOLOGY CLASSES OF <i>A. SMITHII</i> ON THE SIBBERT STUDY AREA	100
40. PERCENT DIFFERENCE OF TREATMENT SITES OVER CONTROL SITES -- MAXIMUM CULM HEIGHT FOR THE SUMMER, <i>AGROPYRON SMITHII</i> ..	107
41. PERCENT DIFFERENCE OF TREATMENT SITES OVER CONTROL SITES -- CRUDE DENSITY, <i>AGROPYRON SMITHII</i>	108
42. PERCENT DIFFERENCE OF TREATMENT SITES OVER CONTROL SITES -- FRUITING CULM DENSITY, <i>AGROPYRON SMITHII</i>	109
43. PERCENT DIFFERENCE OF TREATMENT SITES OVER CONTROL SITES -- TOTAL DRY MATTER PRODUCTION, <i>AGROPYRON SMITHII</i>	110
A-1. U. S. WEATHER BUREAU DATA FOR 1967, 1968 AND 1969. WINNETT AREA STATIONS	120
A-2. PRECIPITATION AT STUDY AREA RAIN GAUGES, AGUST, 1966 TO JULY, 1968	121

LIST OF TABLES (CONTINUED)

Table	Page
A-3. GROUND LEVEL PRECIPITATION AT STUDY AREAS, 1968 AND 1969	122
A-4. VEGETATIVE CHARACTERS USED IN DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN <i>A. SMITHII</i> ; <i>A. DASYSTACHYUM</i> , AND <i>A. SPICATUM</i> IN THE FIELD	123
A-5. CANOPY COVERAGE AT SITES 3 AND 4, 1967 AND 1968, AS PERCENT	124

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. General map of the central Montana study region	9
2. Average and range of culm heights for all sites through summer, 1969, <i>Agropyron smithii</i>	17
3. Average and range of leaf numbers for all sites through summer, 1969, <i>Agropyron smithii</i>	19
4. Average and range of percent change in dead culm numbers for six sites through summer, 1969, <i>Agropyron smithii</i>	23
5. Average and range of percent change in new culm numbers for six sites through summer, 1969, <i>Agropyron smithii</i>	23
6. Average and range of percent culm density changes for six sites through summer, 1969, <i>Agropyron smithii</i>	24
7. Distribution of <i>A. smithii</i> roots in Gerdrum profile (Site No. 11).....	43
8. Distribution of <i>A. smithii</i> roots in Tealer profile (Slick spot near Site No. 7)	44
9. Distribution of <i>A. smithii</i> roots in Woodhawk profile (Site No. 5)	45
10. Root distribution of <i>A. smithii</i> at Site No. 8 (Soil with tendency toward being a Vertisol)	46
11. Average and range of soil moisture for all sites through summer, 1969	64
A-1. Weather data at Winnett field station, summer, 1968	134
A-2. Weather data at Winnett field station, summer, 1969	135
A-3. Precipitation at Flatwillow, 4 ENE	136
A-4. Precipitation at Roy, 8 NE	137

LIST OF FIGURES (CONTINUED)

Figure	Page
A-5. Yellow Water Triangle study areas and sites, Petroleum County, Montana	138
A-6. Map showing location of Sites No. 8 and 9, Missouri Breaks study area, Fergus County, Montana	139
A-7. Soil moisture changes on the Sibbert study area, in 1967	140
A-8. Total distance between culms (estimate of total rhizome length) for experiments No. 1 and 2 in greenhouse on given dates	141
A-9. Height growth, <i>Agropyron smithii</i> , Sites No. 1 and 3	142
A-10. Height growth, <i>Agropyron smithii</i> , Sites No. 4 and 5	143
A-11. Height growth, <i>Agropyron smithii</i> , Sites No. 6 and 7	144
A-12. Height growth, <i>Agropyron smithii</i> , Sites No. 8 and 9	145
A-13. Height growth, <i>Agropyron smithii</i> , Sites No. 10 and 11 ...	146
A-14. Height growth, <i>Agropyron smithii</i> , Sites No. 12 and 13 ..	147
A-15. Live leaf number, <i>Agropyron smithii</i> , 1969	148
A-16. Live leaf number, <i>Agropyron smithii</i> , 1969	149
A-17. Live leaf number, <i>Agropyron smithii</i> , 1969	150
A-18. Live leaf number, <i>Agropyron smithii</i> , 1969	151
A-19. Culm density changes, <i>Agropyron smithii</i> , Site No. 3	152
A-20. Culm density changes, <i>Agropyron smithii</i> , Site No. 4	153
A-21. Culm density changes, <i>Agropyron smithii</i> , Site No. 5	154
A-22. Culm density changes, <i>Agropyron smithii</i> , Sites No. 6 and 7	155
A-23. Culm density changes, <i>Agropyron smithii</i> , Site No. 8	156

LIST OF FIGURES (CONTINUED)

Figure	Page
A-24. Soil moisture, Site No. 1, 1969	157
A-25. Soil moisture, Site No. 3, 1969	158
A-26. Soil moisture, Site No. 4, 1969	159
A-27. Soil moisture, Site No. 5, 1969	160
A-28. Soil moisture, Site No. 6, 1969	161
A-29. Soil moisture, Site No. 7, 1969	162
A-30. Soil moisture, Site No. 8, 1969	163
A-31. Soil moisture, Site No. 9, 1969	164
A-32. Soil moisture, Site No. 10, 1969	165
A-33. Soil moisture, Site No. 10-A, 1969	166
A-34. Soil moisture, Site No. 11, 1969	167
A-35. Soil moisture, Site No. 12, 1969	168
A-36. Soil moisture, Site No. 13, 1969	169

ABSTRACT

The three problems considered include studying ecological aspects of the life history of *Agropyron smithii* in central Montana; relating growth of *A. smithii* to environmental factors; and determining effects of rangeland treatments related to *Artemisia tridentata* control.

Procedures used to obtain information on the life history were; weekly measurements of height growth; weekly leaf number counts; density measurements; caryopsis counts; seed germination studies, rhizome and root growth experiments; a study of cluster pattern; and determination of dry matter production.

The relation of *A. smithii* growth to environmental factors was studied by correlating results from the life history experiments with information from weather data, soil moisture determinations, soil texture analyses, plant nutrient analyses and growing of *A. smithii* in different soils under controlled conditions.

The effects of herbicide treatment of the rangeland on *A. smithii* were observed by comparing growth and life history patterns between control and treated sites.

These studies produced the following results: Maximum height growth occurs during May and June. Crude and specific densities are very similar, implying an even distribution. The density of living culms drops to zero in winter and increases rapidly during early spring. The plant ordinarily is found with culms in small groups which are interconnected with rhizomes. Reproduction is mainly by rhizomes with sexual reproduction apparently unimportant. The presence of ecotypes resulting from site differences was not indicated by experiment. Differences in soil characteristics (possibly due to parent material differences) resulted in differences in growth and density of *A. smithii* throughout the region. Clay soils generally, although not always, tended to reduce growth of leaves and roots. Highest dry matter productivities were on cracking clay soils, and lowest productivities were on non-cracking clay soils. Coarser-textured soils had intermediate productivities. Effects of salinity were not determined. Annual dry matter production is more strongly influenced by moisture conditions in May and June than at any other time of the year.

Herbicide treatment conducted to control *Artemisia tridentata* resulted in an increase in height growth and dry matter production of *A. smithii* as compared with practically identical non-treated sites for

ABSTRACT (continued)

at least 2 years following treatment. The effects were less noticeable after 2 years than after 1 year following treatment. The reason for increased grass growth following herbicide treatment was not ascertained, but could have been due to increased available nitrogen and moisture. The increase in grass growth following contour furrowing is at least partially due to an increase in available nitrogen in the soil.

INTRODUCTION

This study was stimulated by a desire to study some ecological aspects of the life history of *Agropyron smithii* (western wheatgrass) in central Montana, and its relation to the communities in which it occurs.

Statement of Problem

This paper considers three problems. The first of these is studying autecological features of *Agropyron smithii* in the region around Winnett, Montana. Items determined are; the growth curve during a single growing season, the distribution and areal extent of clonal plants, the heights of culms, the numbers of leaves produced, density and distributions of culms and rhizomes, sexual reproductive capacity, possible genetic variability and the patterns and amounts of root growth.

The second problem is the relation of *A. smithii* to the environments occurring in the region. This problem area includes the effects of soil differences on above and below-ground plant parts, effects of differences in weather between years on the growth and reproduction of *A. smithii*, the responses of *A. smithii* to normal and unusual weather changes taking place through a single growing season, the effects of different soil moistures on growth and the effects of yearly soil moisture distribution on reproduction. An attempt is made to define the effects of macronutrient status of the soil on growth and reproduction

of *A. smithii*.

A third problem is to determine the effects of rangeland treatments related to *Artemisia tridentata* (big sagebrush) control on factors of the environment such as soil moisture and nutrient status; and especially the possible relations between these changes in environmental factors and changes in growth and reproduction of *A. smithii*.

Literature Review

Studies of the life history and ecological requirements of *A. smithii* have been comparatively few. Most information on this taxon has been catalogued from studies of a general nature, for example, those including several species of plants.

The most extensive research concerning root growth characteristics has been carried out by J. E. Weaver. Near Lincoln, Nebraska, Weaver (1942) determined a root growth rate for young plants of up to 0.76 meters in 3 months. In moist soil, most of the roots grew vertically downward, whereas in drier soil there was a greater concentration of roots near the surface. From studies near Burlington, Colorado, Weaver (1958) noted that most horizontal root growth was in the upper 30 to 45 cm of soil. Distribution of root weights according to depth was as follows: 0 to 15 cm = 55 percent; 15 to 30 cm = 15 percent; and 30 to 60 cm = 16 percent. This agrees favorably with some other results from Nebraska (Weaver and Darland 1949) in which the upper soil had an average of 60 percent of the roots, with a sharp decrease in root

weight as depth increased. Coupland and Johnson (1965) estimated maximum rooting depths of 2.1 to 3.6 meters in eastern Nebraska and Kansas, and 1.5 meters in eastern Colorado. In agreement with Weaver they noted that dry soils produced more branching and shallower penetration of roots than did moist soils. However, other factors besides moisture were found to affect rooting depth; for example, soil type and topographical position.

Reproductive capacities of *A. smithii* have been little studied. Mueller (1941), working in eastern Nebraska, reported that rhizomes grew a meter or more with branching by the time the flower stalks were mature. This growth is correlated with growth of the tops and begins as soon as the tops are capable of supplying food. Weaver (1942) found that rhizomes attained lengths of from 15 to 90 cm and noted, in agreement with Mueller, that growth was correlated with that of the tops. Concerning seed reproduction capabilities, Hoover *et al.* (1948) gave an estimate of approximately 1×10^7 seeds per acre being produced under conditions which are presumably optimum for the species. Out of this number of seeds, 80 percent were estimated to be viable. Yields of seed are increased by high soil fertility, abundance of moisture and low temperatures during the flowering period.

Eccesis of a taxon depends upon favorable environmental conditions as well as upon reproductive potential. Judd (1937) noted that *A. smithii* spreads rapidly by rhizomes and seeds but in areas which are occupied by shortgrasses, establishment is curtailed. In areas where

competition is removed, *A. smithii* moves in rapidly. Establishment of *A. smithii* in cheatgrass-dominated localities appears to be retarded by slow germination of wheatgrass seeds (Rummell 1946). Immediately after an *A. smithii* plant has passed the crisis of germination it is susceptible to destruction by conditions which probably do not have a severe effect on a mature plant. Mueller and Weaver (1942), studying the drought resistance of seedlings, found that *A. smithii* seedlings were intermediate in drought resistance among ten dominant species of prairie grasses. The *A. smithii* seedlings were also found to be relatively more susceptible to high temperatures than seedlings of the other grasses. This problem appears to be minimized by the fact that *A. smithii* germinates and completes most of its growth before the heat of summer arrives.

Most researchers agree that the principal growth period of *A. smithii* is in the spring when weather is cool and moist, with a decrease or cessation of growth in the summer (Weaver 1941; Weaver 1950; Hoover *et al.* 1948; Mueller 1941; and Holscher 1945). Flowering ordinarily takes place in late spring or early summer depending on the locality. People working in the prairie regions, including Benedict (1940) and Weaver (1941), agree that flowering occurs in June after the major period of vegetative growth is over. The distribution of precipitation throughout the growing season may have considerable influence on growth and flowering of *A. smithii*. Mueller (1941) states that growth curves follow those of rainfall and that growth occurs any time

in the fall or summer when sufficient moisture is available. Holscher (1945) has determined that in southeastern Montana the main vegetative growth period is from April 20 to June 15, but may continue later providing moisture is available. He noted that maintenance of stands depends upon precipitation from March to July. Flowering apparently depends on moisture present during the spring. Coupland (1961) states that a considerable amount of moisture must be present during May in order that cool-season mid-grasses growing in the northern Great Plains, including *A. smithii*, can flower.

Some research has been carried out concerning food storage in *A. smithii*. Work done by McCarty (1935) with *Elymus ambiguus* shows that most carbohydrates are stored at the bases of stems and in roots. The amounts of carbohydrates stored are highest when herbage growth is the least. This information may or may not be applicable to *A. smithii*. Mueller (1941) indicates that during drought periods, the greatest amount of food is kept just behind the terminal buds of rhizomes in *A. smithii*. Rauzi and Dobrenz (1969) working near Cheyenne, Wyoming, report that protein content declines steadily after the main growth season and does not increase in the fall even if growth resumes.

Studies in Nevada by Robertson (1947) indicate some effects of competition between sagebrush and *A. smithii*. Using three intensities of sagebrush competition -- intense, reduced, and none -- he found that for at least 2 years following the beginning of the study the yields for *A. smithii* were higher for reduced competition than intense competition,

and still higher with no competition. Dry weights per plant increased as competition decreased from intense to none. Hedrick *et al.* (1966), working in central Oregon, found that areas where sagebrush was treated dried earlier than those where it wasn't. This effect was noted for 8 years after treatment. Their explanation was that the increased growth of perennial grass, including *A. smithii*, more than used up the moisture which presumably had been made available upon death of the sagebrush.

DESCRIPTION OF STUDY AREA

The study areas, located in Petroleum and Fergus Counties, Montana, are situated near the eastern edge of the "high plains" area of the east central part of the State (Helburn *et al.* 1962). The topography is characteristic of the western part of the northern Great Plains. The region is mostly rough and sharply stream-dissected, with some relatively flat upland areas and flat floodplains and terraces adjoining major streams. The two sites in northern Fergus County are situated in extremely rough "breaks" country which is the characteristic topography along that portion of the Missouri River. Relief varies from approximately 15-60 meters in areas around Winnett to 15-90 meters in the Missouri Breaks of northern Fergus County. Pleistocene continental glaciers advanced into the region where the Missouri Breaks study sites are located (Reeves 1927), but all topographical effects of glaciation in the immediate vicinity have subsequently been obliterated by stream dissection. The study areas around Winnett were not affected by the continental glaciation (Reeves 1927). Underlying all areas in question are marine shales primarily of Cretaceous age. In the Missouri Breaks these shales are part of the Bearpaw formation and the shales around Winnett are in the Colorado formation (Reeves 1927). The shales contain large amounts of soluble salts, therefore many of the soils in the area are saline, alkaline, or both. Most of the soils are fine-textured, being classed as clays or clay loams. Soil orders represented are Entisols, Aridisols, and Mollisols (SCS 1968). Many areas have "slick spots" or

micropits which are sites of high sodium effects. .

The climate of the region is semiarid with long, cold winters and short, warm summers. Two climatological stations were used to supply data for Table 1; one near Flatwillow (see Figure 1) and another (Valentine), closed down sometime since 1941. The Valentine station was about 16 km (10 miles) south of the Missouri Breaks, and it had a record of 30 years as of 1941. Another station, located near Roy, has not been in existence long enough to supply reliable means of climatic data.

Additional climatic data are presented in Figures A-1, A-2, A-3, and A-4 in the Appendix.

TABLE 1. SUMMARY OF TEMPERATURE AND PRECIPITATION DATA FOR FLATWILLOW AND VALENTINE, MONTANA AS OF 1941.*

	Flatwillow	Valentine
Lowest Temperature Recorded	-44.5°C (-48°F)	-45.5°C (-50°F)
Highest Temperature Recorded	42°C (107°F)	43°C (110°F)
Length of Frost-free Season	130 days	125 days
January Mean Temperature	6°C (21.1°F)	9°C (16.2°F)
July Mean Temperature	21°C (70.2°F)	22°C (70.8°F)
Mean Annual Precipitation	271 mm (11.8")	252 mm (10.9")
Percent of Annual Precipitation Falling from April Through September	75	77

*Data from U. S. Department of Agriculture (1941).

