

Seagrass

Submerged Aquatic Vegetation

Shoalgrass

Halodule wrightii



PHOTO BY WARREN PULICH

Turtlegrass

Thalassia testudinum



PHOTO BY KEN DUNTON



Shoalgrass, widgeongrass, and turtlegrass are seagrasses that occur in Texas' clear, shallow estuaries. Seagrasses are considered an *indicator* species—they provide clues to the health of the entire bay-estuarine system.

Coastal Wetlands

Seagrass

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SHOALGRASS

Halodule wrightii

LEAF

1/16 inch (1.5 mm) wide leaves

HABITAT

Grows in high-salinity waters of all bays south from East Matagorda Bay. Especially abundant in the Upper Laguna Madre. Declining in the Lower Laguna Madre and in West Galveston Bay.

WIDGEONGRASS

Ruppia maritima

LEAF

Very narrow with pointed tips. Also produces yellow flowers. Often, branched shoots at a node.

HABITAT

Abundant in low-salinity waters of all upper bay areas along the Texas coast. Often occurs in spring, growing with shoal-grass. Also, commonly occurs in brackish (salt/fresh) ponds near the coast.

TURTLEGRASS

Thalassia testudinum

LEAF

1/4 to 1/2 inch (6.3 to 12.6 mm) wide, flat leaves

HABITAT

Occurs in deeper waters of high salinities in Aransas, Redfish, Corpus Christi Bays and the Lower Laguna Madre. It is the dominant seagrass in the Laguna Madre. It is a slow grower and takes time to recover from any disturbance or stress.

NOW YOU KNOW!

- More than 90% of the seagrass beds in Galveston Bay have been lost because of storms, hurricanes, disease, plankton-blooms and development.
- About 80% of Texas' existing seagrass habitat is located in the Laguna Madre.
- Not surprisingly, widgeongrass is the food of choice for a large variety of ducks and sea turtles; fish and invertebrates eat turtlegrass.
- Seagrasses are not true grasses. They are actually highly specialized flowering plants.

SEAGRASSES AND THE ECOSYSTEM

Seagrass beds provide important habitat and are important contributors to the estuarine food chain. Their decomposing leaves provide nutrients for larval and juvenile shrimp, crabs and fish. Their leaves also provide protective cover for these species. Seagrass beds are great places to find spotted seatrout and red-fish. Waterfowl, such as redhead ducks, feed on seagrass leaves and roots. Seagrass roots bind the soil together and help reduce erosion.

SEAGRASSES AND PEOPLE

Dredging, boat propellers and high currents stir water and raise sediments making it difficult for sunlight to reach the seagrasses and preventing *photosynthesis*. Without sunlight, the seagrasses will die.

Seagrass habitats are wonderful areas for teachers to use as "outdoor classrooms!"