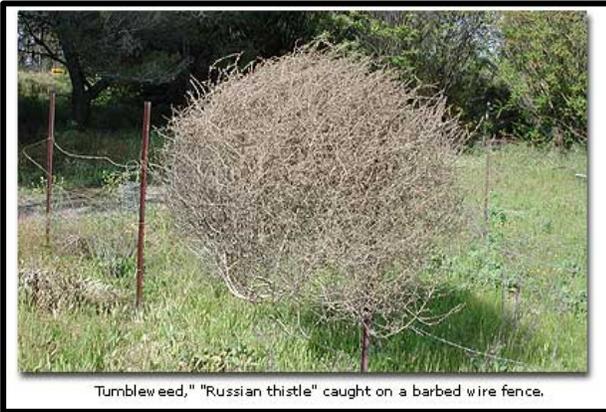


RUSSIAN THISTLE

Salsola kali

(Aka Tumbleweed)



Tumbleweed, "Russian thistle" caught on a barbed wire fence.



Russian thistle in bloom.

Biology:

Virtually everyone recognizes a mature Russian thistle, which looks like the skeleton of a normal shrub. Plants may be as small as a soccer ball or as large as a Volkswagen beetle. Most people, however, would fail to recognize the seedling and juvenile plant's bright green, succulent, grass-like shoots, which are usually red or purple striped. Inconspicuous green flowers grow at axils (where leaf branches off of stem) of the upper leaves, each one accompanied by a pair of spiny bracts. Mice, bighorn sheep and pronghorn eat the tender shoots.

Habitat:

As it rolls down a desert road, Russian thistle plants do what they do best, disperse seeds, which typically number 250,000 per plant. Seeds are unusual in that they lack any protective coat or stored food reserves. Instead, each seed is a coiled, embryonic plant wrapped in a thin membrane. To survive winter without a warm coat, the plant does not germinate until warm weather arrives.

When moisture falls, the plant is ready to uncoil and germinate. All that is required are temperatures between 28 and 110 degrees Fahrenheit. It then quickly sends up two needle-like leaves and begins to shoot skyward. By autumn the plant has reached maximum size, flowered and begun to dry out. A specialized layer of cells in the stem facilitates the easy break between plant and root, and the journey begins anew.

Like many invasive weeds, Russian thistle exploited the destruction of native ecosystems. When farmers removed prairie grasses, they created a perfect environment, smooth and flat, for a plant that could roll across the landscape dispersing seeds. Herbicides now control the spread of Russian thistle by disrupting the maturation process of the plant.



Russian thistle when green.



Provincial Designation:
Nuisance

