

The Dry Prairies

by **Keith F. Best**, Swift Current

In our present series, we have moved from the dunelands through the sandhills to the dry hillsides. Now let us look at some of the plants found in the drier portions of the open prairie and on the eroded areas. As much of this area is only used by the rancher, we might first study two plants of some economic importance to livestock men.

Winter-fat (*Eurotia lanata*), often called White Sage, Winter Sage or Feather Sage, is not a true sage, but belongs to the Goosefoot family. The generic name *Eurotia* is from the Greek *euros* (mold) referring to the white hairy herbage. The specific name *lanata*, from the Latin *lana* (wool or hair), also alludes to the dense, woolly hairs that cover the plant.

Winter-fat is a perennial half-shrub or herb from six to 18 inches in

height. It has fine, star-like, white hairs which becomes rusty as the plant matures. The leaves are narrow, one-half to two inches long, and have rolled margins. Male and female flowers are borne separately on the same plant, with the male clusters above. The female flowers and fruit are enclosed in two bracts and have two horns at the top. The entire female inflorescence is covered with long, white, silky hairs making the plant very conspicuous in the fall.

Widely distributed over the dry prairie and on heavy lands, it extends to Texas and is commonly the dominant and most conspicuous plant on vast areas of winter range. It grows in distinct patches from several feet to thousands of acres in area, and with its deep tap root and numerous extensive lateral roots is remarkably resistant to drought.



Fig. 1. Winter-fat



Fig. 2. Nuttall's Atriplex

Grazed by all classes of livestock, it is very high in crude protein. Stock grazed on lands where Winter-fat grows thrive well and are said to be remarkably free of disease because of the tonic properties of this plant. It is a prolific seeder and is easily grown under cultivation, especially if the seed is covered by raking or harrowing. Although it grows well under conditions of controlled grazing, it may be completely destroyed by overgrazing and is often replaced by Rabbitbrush.

Nuttall's Atriplex (*Atriplex nuttallii*) is one of the saltbush species

in the Goosefoot family, and is found on badlands, eroded soils and alkali flats throughout the southwest. It is a low, leafy shrub, with a very deep rooting system. Generally growing almost prostrate, it may branch up to 2½ feet in height. The stem and leaves are pale green, with a fine scurfiness. Leaves are ¾ to two inches long, from linear-oblong to spatulate or ovate. Male and female flowers are on separate plants. Few plants are more alkali tolerant than this species and it is readily eaten by livestock, being highly rated for its mineral content and palatability.