

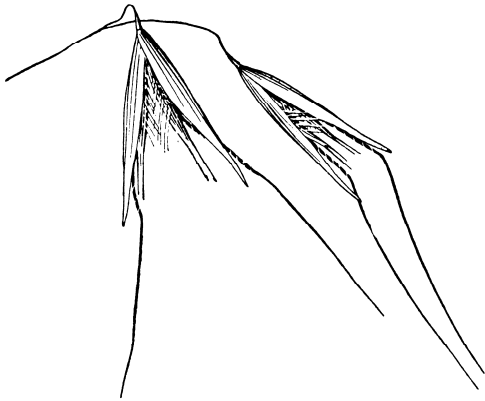
# Seven Grasses of Henry W. Coe State Park



Park hills once held cattle ranches.  
Grass fed the cattle.

Of the 49 grass species that have been identified at Coe since 2007, 21 of the species are native and 28 are introduced. Let's look at 2 introduced annual grasses and 5 native perennials. They all grow commonly at Coe.

## Slender wild oat



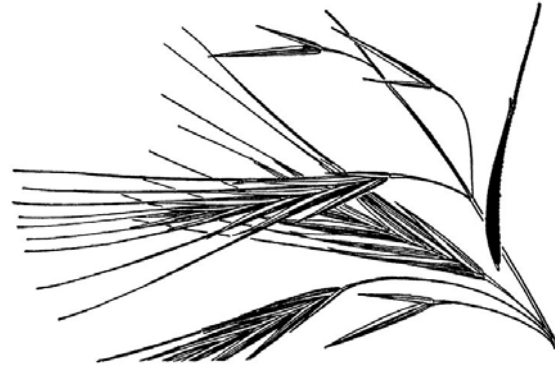
The most conspicuous single species by far is **slender wild oat**, introduced from Europe during the Franciscan Missionary era, and widespread in California by 1890. It is most of what we see growing on any sunlit grassy field that has suitable soil.

It sprouts from seed when the rains start—thus, it is an annual plant. Flowering stems grow up to 5 feet tall (usually less), and keeps ripening seed until hot weather dries the field. Then the plants die and dry out but continue standing until wind or next winter's rains knock them

down. Before the seed grains mature, it is good forage for cattle and horses, and it spread widely through the coastal mountain ranges during the missionary era. The standing flowering parts have leaf-like papery bracts (glumes) that flutter brightly in the wind after the seeds have fallen.

**Slender wild oat** requires bright sun and considerable water to thrive. It doesn't compete well in partial shade, and doesn't grow at all in full shade or anywhere on quickly drying soils.

For example, watch which grasses you see as you walk from full sun into full shade. The oats stop abruptly where the shade starts, but many



other grasses take their place. In deeper shade, you see little more than scattered tufts of **Torrey's melicgrass** (see next page).

## Ripgut brome

Where the shade just starts to discourage **slender wild oat**, we often find **ripgut brome**, another annual grass, growing from seed each year. It, too, was introduced from Europe. It grows to 3 feet tall under light shade.

Many of its flowering parts end in 2-inch-long needle-like, nearly parallel shiny awns that can injure cattle. However, the green plant is good

forage before the flowering parts become dry and stiff.

## Torrey's melicgrass

We can see **Torrey's melicgrass** all year in rather shady locations (and occasionally in brighter places). It is native to California. In shade, it is often a small tuft of green or dry straw-brown leaves attached to the uphill side of a trail. It is a perennial, so green leaves start growing out of the tuft of dry leaves soon after fall rains start.



It is a commonly seen perennial grass species, but it is inconspicuous because it doesn't grow tall or in masses of identical plants. The drooping stems may reach 3 feet long.

## Blue wildrye



We often find **blue wildrye** in light shade, where trees reduce the sunlight just enough to discourage **slender wild oat**. **Blue wildrye** is a tall perennial grass, native to

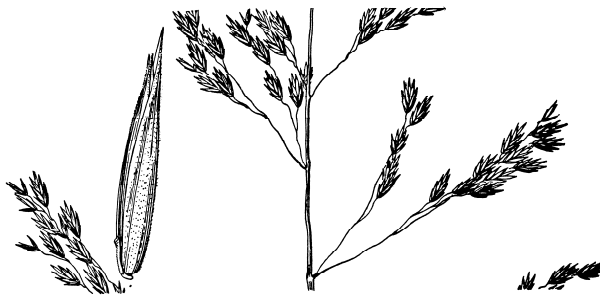
California, often forming clumps a foot or two in diameter. The clumps of leaves are up to two feet tall, while each flowering stalk is 3 to 5 feet tall, with a cylindrical mass of flowering parts at the top.

The seeds mature by autumn and gradually fall off, but many stems remain standing through the following summer. Look for the plants under widely spaced trees in fields and especially on ridges. They are fairly common in suitable locations. A patch of **blue wildrye** on a ridge can make a striking photo.

## California fescue

This is a large perennial grass with stiff leaves, native to California. It grows on shady hillsides that retain more moisture. **California fescue** makes a clump of stiff, thick, dark green leaves surrounded by the dry leaves from previous seasons. Out of that clump grows several 3 to 5-foot-tall flowering stems that divide into

multiple branches carrying many tiny heads, as illustrated.



It was about the only good cattle forage remaining late in the season, so cattle sought it out. It seems to be increasing since cattle grazing stopped at Coe, but it is not very common. Look for it, for example, along the northern parts of Flat Frog Trail.

## Prairie Junegrass



We can find **prairie Junegrass** in scattered tufts all over Coe, but as the name suggests, it grows relatively late in the season. It is usually under enough shade to subdue the **slender wild oats**, but other than that it doesn't seem to be too particular. It is a perennial grass native

to California; it dies back pretty much to the ground surface each year.

Rather soft leaves are topped by a flowering stem 12 to 24 inches tall. The cylinder of shining flowering parts at the apex often has a few gaps at its lower end.

## Purple needlegrass

This perennial, native grass grows on hot, sunny (or lightly shaded) slopes that dry early, and it develops roots to two feet deep. The edges of road cuts often offer sites like that, where much of the topsoil has washed off. It will grow also on clay and serpentine soils. All in all, it grows on sunny sites where dryness and soil type discourage competition.



**Purple needlegrass** is the official California State Grass. Out of a tuft of long, narrow leaves, flowering stems grow up to 3 feet tall; at the top are shiny clusters of flowering parts that have needle-like threads (awns) up to 4 inches long each, usually with one or two bends. Until they dry, the flowering parts have a purple tinge.