

## Alaska Native Plant of the Year

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### Splendor in the Cottongrass:

#### *Eriophorum angustifolium*

By Martha Raynolds

One of the benefits of living in northern latitudes is we get to share it with a most appealing sedge known as *Eriophorum angustifolium* Honck.

In the summertime, this sedge fills our wet boreal and Arctic landscapes with dense stands of white tufts tossing in the wind on long stems.

Sedges throughout the *Eriophorum* genus have uncommon charisma. Pollinated by wind, not bugs, their flowers develop into seed-bearing spikelets made up of white bristles at the top of their peduncles (flower stems). Western cultures familiar with the unrelated cotton plant from southern latitudes named these plants cottongrass or bog cotton. Up here in the north, the Indigenous plant names for some of these sedges relate to more familiar things like mittens or snowshoe hare tails.

*E. angustifolium*'s names in regional languages and dialects include iitaat (Yup'ik), pikniq (Iñupiat), suptauajak (Inuktitut), Klófifa (Icelandic), svartmyrull (Norwegian), Eira'r Gors (Welsh), and linaigrette à feuilles étroites (French). One of 13 species in the *Eriophorum* genus, *E. angustifolium* is known in English as tall or common cottongrass.

*E. angustifolium* varies quite a bit in appearance and has over time been divided into a number of subspecies and varieties. The Flora of North America project recognizes two subspecies based on plant size and the roughness of the peduncles. *E. angustifolium* spp. *angustifolium* is larger – it can be up to a meter tall, and grows in wetter areas, sometimes forming dense stands along wet drainages. *E. angustifolium* spp. *triste* (Th. Fries) Hultén is smaller, has narrower, yellower leaves and rougher (scabrous) peduncles, and grows in drier tundra areas. Both subspecies are common and sometimes dominant in tundra. They are found throughout the circumpolar Arctic and



*Eriophorum angustifolium* spp. *angustifolium*, Alaska North Slope, photo courtesy Martha Raynolds.

boreal zones, with *E. angustifolium* spp. *angustifolium* extending farther south than *E. angustifolium* spp. *triste*. *E. angustifolium* spreads underground through rhizomes, so it spreads easily and can be found colonizing disturbed areas such as roadside ditches.

*E. angustifolium* differs from the other *Eriophorum* species in that it has multiple spikelets growing at the top of its flowering stem. Tussock sedge (*E. vaginatum*) and russet sedge (*E. russeolum*) have only one spike per stem. One tip for identifying vegetative *E. angustifolium* when it has no flowers: the tips of its glossy, green leaves feel fattened when you run your fingers down them. The tips are trigonous, meaning triangular in cross-section. *E. angustifolium* often grows with another sedge, *Carex bigelowii*, which has less glossy, rougher, bluer leaves with thin tips.

## Alaska Native Plant of the Year, cont.

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When I was new to the Arctic and first learning this plant, my friend and mentor Torre Jorgenson suggested I pull it up and chomp on the base. Sure enough, the basal sheaths of the leaves form a juicy, sweet-tasting bulb. As part of their traditional subsistence diet, Yup'ik people in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Region eat the lower parts of the stem with seal oil and harvest the edible tubers as 'mouse food' (collected by hand from vole caches). And people aren't the only ones that know about this tasty tundra treat. On Baffin Island, I saw wetlands that looked like they'd been run over by a golf club aerator, poking holes in the soil. But the many holes were actually from geese plucking the plants, gobbling them up until there were very few left.

Traditional uses for the tassels include candle and lamp wicks, swabs for cleaning and wound dressing, boot or mitten liners, and even making paper.

So, I was pleased to learn that the Alaska Native Plant Society recently selected *Eriophorum angustifolium* as the 2026 Native Plant of the Year. It's a well-known but sometimes under-appreciated part of our local vegetation.

*Martha Reynolds is a research scientist at the University of Alaska's Institute of Arctic Biology. Her research interests include the vegetation of the Arctic, what controls its distribution, and how the vegetation is responding to climate change.*



*Eriophorum angustifolium* spp. *triste*, Baffin Island, photo courtesy Martha Reynolds.



Tall cottongrass drawing by AKNPS volunteer Amanda Reimer.

## AKNPS volunteer Amanda Reimer provides 2026 Alaska Native Plant of the Year artwork

Last fall, after the Alaska Native Plant Society board selected *Eriophorum angustifolium* (tall cottongrass) as the 2026 Native Plant of the Year, member Amanda Reimer volunteered to create the artwork to use on our annual native plant month t-shirts.

Amanda moved back to the East Coast a while ago but remains an active AKNPS volunteer. She enjoys creating art in watercolor, colored pencils and line drawings, and designed a previous New York State Habitat & Access stamp featuring an opossum. When asked about an honorarium for this project, she preferred to draw the artwork for "remote volunteer hours."

Amanda described *E. angustifolium* as "simple yet difficult" to draw when she sent us her artwork in January. We admire and appreciate Amanda's contribution and we expect the shirts to be a great hit this year!