A Range Extension for Carex sartwellii in Interior Alaska

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Our documentation of Sartwell’s Sedge, Carex sartwellii, on nine shrinking lakes during fieldwork in the central Yukon Flats, Alaska, represents a range extension for this species. Previously, its range extended as far northwest as Yukon, Canada, with a reported, but lost collection, from Alaska in 1895. Two earlier collections from the Yukon Flats have been verified; one was misidentified as Carex praegracilis until 2007. Carex sartwellii’s assumed absence from Alaska and Yukon flora, misidentification of an earlier collection, and the remoteness of the Yukon Flats may have contributed to the rarity of its collection. In Alaska this species is morphologically similar to C. praegracilis, but can be distinguished using traits of the perigynia, leaf sheaths, and the production of true vegetative culms.

Key Words: Alaska; Carex sartwellii; Sartwell’s Sedge; Carex praegracilis; Clustered Field Sedge; Yukon Flats; drying lakes; range extension

Introduction

In summer 2011, while studying shrinking lakes and plant succession in the Yukon Flats (Wahrhaftig 1965), interior Alaska, we observed a sedge, Carex sartwellii Dewey (Sartwell’s Sedge), that we believed at the time to be undocumented in Alaska. We found C. sartwellii in 16 plots on nine shrinking lake basins in the southern portion of the Yukon Flats (Figure 1) and collected nine specimens from seven lakes as vouchers (Table 1). We found this species in two community types: wet/mesic graminoid forb meadows and open tall shrub meadows on lacustrine alkaline soils (Figure 2). These community types are the result of shrinking lakes, which have been documented across Alaska as a potential effect of climate change (Klein et al. 2005; Riordan et al. 2006; Roach et al. 2011; Rover et al. 2012).

Previous to our study, there had been only two documented collections of C. sartwellii, both from the Yukon Flats. Few studies have documented the flora in the Yukon Flats, Alaska (Johnson and Vogel 1966; Holloway and Alexander 1990; Talbot 1991; Heglund 1992; Larsen et al. 2004; Cortés-Burns and Carlson 2006). The remoteness and vastness of the region may have contributed to the rarity of collections, as field studies are logistically difficult. The area is accessible only by snow machine, boat, or small aircraft, and the terrain is difficult to cross on foot. Furthermore, the assumed absence of this sedge from Alaska and Yukon (Hultén 1941–1950) may have contributed to collections being misidentified as Carex praegracilis W. Boott (Clustered Field Sedge) and overlooked. Carex sartwellii was not included in the treatments of the flora of Alaska or Yukon (Hultén 1968; Welsh 1974; Cody 2000). A. A. Reznicek adapted a Cyperaceae key from the Flora of North America (Ball and Reznicek 2002) for Alaska (Reznicek 2012) that included C. sartwellii, and led to the correct identification of our collections. Carex sartwellii has been documented from New York and Quebec to Colorado and Washington in the west, and north to Northwest Territories and Yukon (USDA 2014). The distribution in Figure 1 (inset map) is based on data from 168 specimens housed in 12 herbaria (Acadia University (ACAD) [3 records), University of Alberta Vascular Plant Herbarium (ALTA) [51], Canadian Museum of Nature Herbarium (CAN) [5], University of Connecticut (CONN) [3], Colorado State University (CSU) [2], Field Museum of Natural History (F) [16], Kansas State University (KSU) [7], Missouri Botanical Garden (MO) [1], University of Toronto Mississauga (TRTE) [1], University of British Columbia (UBC) [26], University of Manitoba (WIN).
Figure 1. Alaska and adjacent Canada showing current range of Carex sartwellii including the location of collections in the Yukon Flats. The gray rectangle delineates the area of the expanded view of the Yukon Flats collections (inset, upper left). Black dots (•) on the range map (inset, upper right) indicate collections from the Yukon Flats, GBIF (2014), and Cody (1978).

Table 1. Location, date, and habitat of Carex sartwellii collections and observations from the Yukon Flats, Alaska.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collector/observer</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location °N</th>
<th>°W</th>
<th>Community type</th>
<th>Vouchered specimens/observations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M. Winterstein</td>
<td>17/7/2011</td>
<td>66.3511</td>
<td>146.4449</td>
<td>Open tall shrub meadow</td>
<td>Observed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>66.2313</td>
<td>146.3773</td>
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<td>ALA V174388</td>
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<tr>
<td>M. Winterstein</td>
<td>20/7/2011</td>
<td>66.2415</td>
<td>146.3662</td>
<td>Graminoid meadow</td>
<td>ALA V174256</td>
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<tr>
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<td>146.3666</td>
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<td>ALA V174257</td>
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<tr>
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<td>ALA V173222</td>
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<td>146.3771</td>
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<td>MICH</td>
</tr>
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<td>146.3677</td>
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<td>Observed</td>
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<tr>
<td>M. Winterstein</td>
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<td>146.3901</td>
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<td>Observed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>146.4141</td>
<td>Graminoid meadow</td>
<td>ALA V173221</td>
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<tr>
<td>M. Winterstein</td>
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<td>146.4089</td>
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<td>Observed</td>
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<td>146.4275</td>
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<td>146.4291</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**History of Collection of Carex sartwellii in Alaska and Yukon**

The first report of *Carex sartwellii* in Alaska occurred over a century ago. Kurtz (1895) reported its collection by Aurel Krause in 1882 on a grassy slope by the Klehini River near the village of Kloquan (Klukwan) in southeast Alaska. Hultén (1940) noted that Krause’s collections from Alaska had been accessioned by Dr. Frederico Kurtz at the herbarium of the National University of Cordoba, Argentina (CORD), and duplicates were sent to the Botanical Garden and Botanical Museum (B) in Berlin, Germany. Hultén (1941–1950) mentioned the report of *C. sartwellii* by Kurtz (1895) under his treatment of *C. praegracilis*, but noted the specimens supporting this record at B were lost during World War II. However, no duplicate collection of *C. sartwellii* was found at CORD (G. E. Barboza, personal communication, 1 April 2015). Because no collection could be verified, Hultén referred this report to *C. praegracilis* because, at the time, *C. sartwellii* was thought not to occur north of British Columbia, Canada (Hultén 1941–1950).

In 1948, the first documented collection of *C. sartwellii* was made by William Benninghoff in the Yukon Flats near the village of Beaver (Figure 1), but it was misidentified as *C. praegracilis*, by Eric Hultén, until 2007 (Alaska: 12 miles North of Beaver, Chandalar Road, 10 July 1948, *Benninghoff 2104*, MICH 1430605, det. A. A. Reznicek; Figure 3). The second collection of *C. sartwellii* in the Yukon Flats was by Stephen Talbot in 1982 (Alaska: Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge, 66.88°N, 145.02°W, 13 August 1982, *Talbot B9-3*, SASK 149366, det. J. H. Hudson; Figure 1; Talbot 1991), 34 years after the Benninghoff collection and the only known collection at that time. Yet, at the time of our
Figure 3. Specimen (MICH 1430605) of Carex sartwellii collected by W. S. Benninghoff and identified and mapped as C. prae-gracilis in Hultén (1968). Photo: A. A. Reznicek.
determinations in 2012, it was still thought to be undocumented for Alaska according to two comprehensive taxonomic guides: the USDA Plants Database (USDA 2014) and the Flora of North America (Ball and Reznicek 2002).

The misidentification of early collections of *C. sartwellii* as *C. praegracilis* led to its assumed absence from Alaska and the Yukon flora for several decades. Hultén (1968) mapped the 1948 W. Benninghoff collection of *C. sartwellii* as *C. praegracilis* in his work Flora of Alaska and Neighboring Territories. Similarly, the only two occurrences of *C. sartwellii* from Yukon were collected in 1960 and 1968, but misidentified as *C. praegracilis*, until 2003 (Cody et al. 2005) and 2008, respectively (Yukon: Mile 26 road from Whitehorse to Dawson, 9 August 1960, Calder & Kukkonen 28039, ALA 43419, det. A. A. Reznicek; Yukon: Alaska Highway milepost 944, 3 July 1968, Welsh & Moore 7763, ISC 281218 (on permanent loan at ALA), det. A. A. Reznicek; Figure 1). Like the Alaska specimen, the misidentified Yukon collections were included as *C. praegracilis* in Flora of the Yukon Territory (Cody 2000), although Cody (2005) made an update to the flora to include the 1960 collection by Calder and Kukkonen, then correctly identified as *C. sartwellii*. Stanley Welsh, who made the 1968 collection of *C. sartwellii* in Yukon, also included this and the other misidentified specimens in the range description for *C. praegracilis*, in his work Anderson’s Flora of Alaska and Adjacent Parts of Canada (Welsh 1974).

Ecology

**Yukon Flats**

The Yukon Flats are located to the north of the Yukon–Tanana Uplands (Nowacki et al. 2002) and to the south of the Eastern Brooks Range (Figure 1). They were formed by the alluvial fans of the Chandalar and Porcupine rivers and the floodplain of the Yukon River (Williams 1962). The region has a mixed geology of alluvial sediments and aeolian silts and sands, largely deposited during the Pleistocene (Williams 1962; Muhs et al. 2003). The area is covered with approximately 40 000 shallow closed basin lakes (Heglund and Jones 2003) and is underlain by discontinuous ice-poor permafrost (Nossov et al. 2013). The climate is continental with low precipitation, averaging 16.7 cm annually (Drury and Grissom 2008), and negative potential evapotranspiration (Oechel et al. 2000). The vegetation is boreal with patchwork stands of mixed *Betula neoalaskana* Sargent (Alaska Paper Birch) and *Picea glauca* (Moench) Voss (White Spruce), *Populus tremuloides* Michaux (Trembling Aspen) on ridges, and *Salix* spp. (Willow) scrub and *Picea mariana* (Miller) Britton, Stens & Poggenburg (Black Spruce) in the lowlands (Williams 1955).

**Shrinking lakes**

Our collections suggest that *C. sartwellii* occurs in a community type that may have been rarer in the recent past. The continental climate of the region, low precipitation, and high potential evapotranspiration (Oechel et al. 2000), along with increased annual temperatures and growing season length because of climate change (Chapin et al. 2005), are contributing to changes in the hydrology of shallow basin lakes (Riordan et al. 2006; Roach et al. 2011; Rover et al. 2012). Seasonal and interannual shrinking of these lakes results in a distinctive pattern of concentric rings of plant communities (Figure 2). These communities are underlain by lacustrine sediments rich in carbonates and with high pH (Heglund and Jones 2003; M. W., unpublished data), which, in combination with the high potential evapotranspiration, create alkaline soils around the lake margins and a favourable habitat for *C. sartwellii* (Stewart and Kanstrup 1972). These plant communities are organized along a moisture gradient and follow the general pattern: lake edge, wet graminoid, wet/mesic graminoid forb meadows, open tall shrubs, forest.

The soils where *C. sartwellii* was collected are of lacustrine origin, highly organic with abundant mullose shells, moderate to basic pH ranging from 6.78 to 7.97 (M. W., unpublished data), and often with a salt crust on the surface. Although *C. sartwellii* is noted as being an obligate wetland species (Liechwar 2013), we found it on soils that were not inundated with water. This may indicate that the site is seasonally wet and that the lake margins fluctuate with spring snow melt. The species was not found at the lake edge in standing water, although it is possible that vegetative shoots may have been overlooked in some plots because of the infrequency of reproductive shoots (Reznicek and Catling 2002a) and unfamiliarity with the species at the time of sampling.

We found *C. sartwellii* growing in open mesic to wet graminoid/forb meadows and open tall shrub meadows (Figure 2). In wet to mesic graminoid meadows it was commonly associated with *Carex aquatilis* Wahlenberg var. *aquatilis* (Water Sedge), *Carex atherodes* Sprengel (Wheat Sedge), *Carex utriculata* Boott (Northwest Territory Sedge), *Geum macrophyllum* var. *perniciosum* (Rydberg) Raup (Large-leaved Avens), *Persicaria lapathifolia* (L.) Delarbre (Curlytop Knotweed), *Chenopodium rubrum* L. (Red Goosefoot), *Rubus arcticus* L. (Arctic Raspberry), *Rumex spp.* (dock), and *Calamagrostis* spp. (reedgrass). In open tall shrub meadows, it was commonly associated with *Salix bebbiana* Sargent (Bebb’s Willow), *Salix pseudomonticola* C. R. Ball (Park Willow), *Calamagrostis canadensis* (Michaux) Palisot de Beauvois (Bluejoint), *Chamerion angustifolium* (L.) Scopoli subsp. *angustifolium* (Fireweed), and *Rubus arcticus* L. (Arctic Raspberry).

**Morphology**

*Carex sartwellii* (*Carex* sect. Holarrhenae) and *C. praegracilis* (*Carex* sect. Divisae) share many similar morphological traits (Reznicek and Catling 2002a,b). Both species have unisexual or androgynous spikes;
beaked perigynia of similar size and shape; an abaxial suture arising at the beak; and both are aphylopopodic and loosely rhizomatous. However, there are diagnostic differences that can be observed in the field to separate them. The four easily identifiable differences in morphology between the two species are in the venation of the perigynia, the leaf sheath fronts, the leaf sheath apices, and the presence of true vegetative stems in Carex sartwellii (Table 2, after Ball and Reznicek 2002).

The perigynia of Carex sartwellii are veined on both faces whereas, on Carex praegracilis, they are only veined abaxially. The leaf sheath front is a region located opposite and just below the disarticulation point of the leaf blade from the culm. In Carex sartwellii, green veins of the culm continue into the leaf sheath fronts nearly to the sheath apex and are uniform in appearance with the rest of the leaf sheath around the culm, whereas, in Carex praegracilis, the leaf sheath fronts are veinless and membranous and differentiated from the rest of the leaf sheath. The apices of the leaf sheath fronts in Carex sartwellii are prolonged 1–4.5 mm but they are not prolonged in Carex praegracilis. Finally, Carex sartwellii produces true vegetative culms that are tristichously leaved and have the distinctive venation described above on the leaf sheath fronts. Carex praegracilis does not produce vegetative stems, but produces a basal rosette of leaves when growing vegetatively. In addition, there are differences in the ligule, which is more pronounced in Carex sartwellii (2.2–8 mm), than in Carex praegracilis (0.6–2.6 mm).

Reznicek (2012) distinguishes the sections that include these two species in the Alaskan Cyperaceae with the following key:

40. Upper leaves of culms with fronts of sheaths green-veined essentially to apex, not differentiated from rest of sheath; true vegetative stems present . . . . . Sect. Holarrhenae [includes Carex sartwellii]
40. Upper leaves of culms with fronts of sheaths with at least a narrow hyaline or whitish-hyaline band extending at least half length of sheath; vegetative shoots not true stems, consisting only of overlapping leaf sheaths . . . . . . . . . . . Sect. Divisae [includes Carex praegracilis]

Table 2. Comparison of morphological characteristics of Carex sartwellii and Carex praegracilis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Carex sartwellii</th>
<th>Carex praegracilis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perigynia</td>
<td>Veined on both faces, ovate</td>
<td>Veined abaxially, broadly ovate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaf sheath, front</td>
<td>Veined nearly to sheath apex</td>
<td>Smooth, lacking veins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaf sheath apex</td>
<td>Prolonged, 1–4.5 mm</td>
<td>Not prolonged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vegetative shoots</td>
<td>Forms tall tristichously leaved vegetative shoots with distinct nodes and internodes, aphylopopodic</td>
<td>Leaves basal, no tall shoots</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

Based on the 1948 Benninghoff and 1982 Talbot collections, this species has occurred in Yukon Flats for some time, and our 2011 collections are not likely a result of a recently established population. It is likely that the vast terrain, limited access to the region, and few field studies have contributed to the rarity of collections over the years. Furthermore, if the lack of collections of Carex sartwellii in the past were a result of misidentification as Carex praegracilis, then we would expect more corrected identifications of Carex sartwellii from Alaska at herbaria; yet this is not the case. However, the misidentification of the Benninghoff specimen by E. Hultén and Hultén’s assumption (Hultén 1940–1951) that Carex sartwellii did not occur north of British Columbia, Canada, did have a cascading effect on subsequent treatments of the flora in Alaska and Yukon (Hultén 1968; Welsh 1974; Cody 2000).

It may also be that this species is more abundant now because of increases in favourable habitat in the Yukon Flats as a result of climate change. It is unusual that there were only two single collections made in 63 years in the Yukon Flats, but we collected it at nine plots in seven lakes across a distance of approximately 15 km. We targeted drying lakes in our sampling efforts which likely increased our collections, but there are differences in the abundance of favourable habitat between the north and south sides of the Yukon River. The Benninghoff and Talbot collections were made on the north side of the Yukon River, where there are fewer drying lakes (Rover et al. 2012), whereas our collections were on the south side (Figure 1).

Our collections, the Benninghoff collection, and the Talbot collection represent separate populations from the nearest documented collections of Carex sartwellii, which are about 850 km away in Yukon, Canada. What is not clear is whether, collectively, these are a fragmented population in the Yukon Flats or they are connected by habitat across the interior of Alaska to the collections in Yukon. For the extension of the range in Alaska, we outlined the geographic area of the Yukon Flats (Figure 1) because of its distinct climate (Oechel et al. 2000), geologic history (Wahrhaftig 1965; Muhs et al. 2003), and the pattern and extent of shrinking lakes (Roach et al. 2011; Rover et al. 2012). These factors have created a patchwork of habitats for this species across the region. This sedge should be looked for in areas of similar habitats elsewhere in Alaska.

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