

# VIEWPoints

## The Semantics of Sagebrush

By Jim Brunner

Only recently have wildlands workers found that some sagebrush species are palatable and should be recognized. Back in 1972 I authored an article on sagebrush that was printed in the *Journal of Range Management*. I described a tall sagebrush that was highly palatable and called it “widelobe.” At that time I speculated that this might be a tall ecotype of Wyoming sagebrush (Beetle). But someone in the Natural Resources Conservation Service coined the term “Wyoming big sagebrush” and from then on all large intermountain sagebrush were lumped as one species.

Fast forward to December 1999. Enter Dr Durant McArthur of the US Forest Service shrub lab in Provo, Utah. He examined “widelobe” with the help of Stewart Sanderson, University of Nevada, and Dr Jim Young of the USDA Agricultural Research Service, Reno, Nevada, and named the plant *Artemisia arbuscula longicaulis*. He also suggested a common name of “Lahonton sagebrush.”

The new nomenclature was not immediately recognized by field workers. A recent sagebrush article in *Rangelands* (February 2004) by Mike Frisina and Carl Wambolt described “widelobe” and called it *Artemisia tridentata wyomingensis*. The only problem is that the plant that Dr Beetle named *wyomingensis* is a small (10-inch-tall) sagebrush that has very distinctive leaves in that the center lobe is too wide for the slot between the 2 outer lobes. *Wyomingensis* seems to grow only on sedimentary soils. An identical plant that grows on shallow red rock volcanic soils

is distinguished from *wyomingensis* by its odor; the crushed leaves smell like brake fluid. The vegetative leaves of Lahonton sagebrush are illustrated both in my article and in the recent *Rangelands* article. The Lahonton leaf is long and gracefully curved with a distinct “V” on its upper side.

So could we please drop “Wyoming big sagebrush” from our vocabularies (mainly because there isn’t any such thing)? Lahonton is a nice term that rolls easily from the lips. And while we’re talking about big sagebrush, please be assured that any stand of tall sagebrush in the intermountain basin is guaranteed to consist of about one-half Parish’s sagebrush, *Artemisia tridentata tridentata parishii*, with the rest being a mix of predominantly Lahonton sagebrush, with some *Artemisia arbuscula xericensis*, or blackbark sagebrush (as named by Dr Al Winward), plus some “whitebark” and “no-lobe” unnamed sagebrushes.

Parish’s sagebrush is unpalatable, but it makes large amounts of seed and therefore probably furnished most of the available sagebrush seed. It is notable for its yellow anthers, which gives the plant a yellow cast when in full bloom. Lahonton seed is largely unavailable because constant grazing reduces seed production. One can identify Lahontan sage from 100 feet away because of its hedged appearance. ♦

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