

# FIGHTING FOR SURVIVAL

## Pale Blue-eyed Grass



Photo: Mike Marsh

### A RARE BEAUTY

Pale Blue-eyed Grass (*Sisyrinchium sarmentosum*), a type of iris, is found on only 1,000 acres on earth in south-central Washington and northern Oregon. Several populations have declined or disappeared and many are too small to persist. About 90 percent of all individual plants are found on a single livestock grazing allotment on the Gifford Pinchot National Forest.

### PROTECTING THE PALE BLUE-EYED GRASS

This wildflower grows in seasonally wet open meadows or meadow-like environments, among grasses, sedges, and other plants. It faces a long list of threats including development, agriculture, plant succession, livestock grazing, off-road vehicle use, logging, invasive plants, small population size, and hybridization with another iris. Protection for the meadows the blue-eyed grass calls home could safeguard other meadow species, such as the Mardon Skipper butterfly (*Polites mardon*), a candidate for Endangered Species Act listing.

### KNOW YOUR PLANT

- **Leaves Like Grass:** the Pale Blue-eyed Grass's flower stems and slender leaves are pale green or blue-green, resembling grass blades although the plants are in the iris family, and each stem has 2-7 minute pale blue flowers. Each plant typically grows to about 6-8 inches tall.
- **The Sensitive Type:** Pale Blue-eyed Grass can be badly damaged by cattle when grazed or trampled before or during the flowering period. If plants are prevented from producing seed, genetic recombination does not occur and the population's ability to adapt to changing climate is limited.
- **Slipping Through the Cracks:** the Fish & Wildlife Service once considered this wildflower a candidate for federal protection, but it dropped off the radar screen in 1996.

### CLIMATE CHAOS

Climate change effects to this iris include increased droughts and encroachment of woody shrubs into the blue-eyed grass's meadow habitat.

