



**5 Grasses to find**

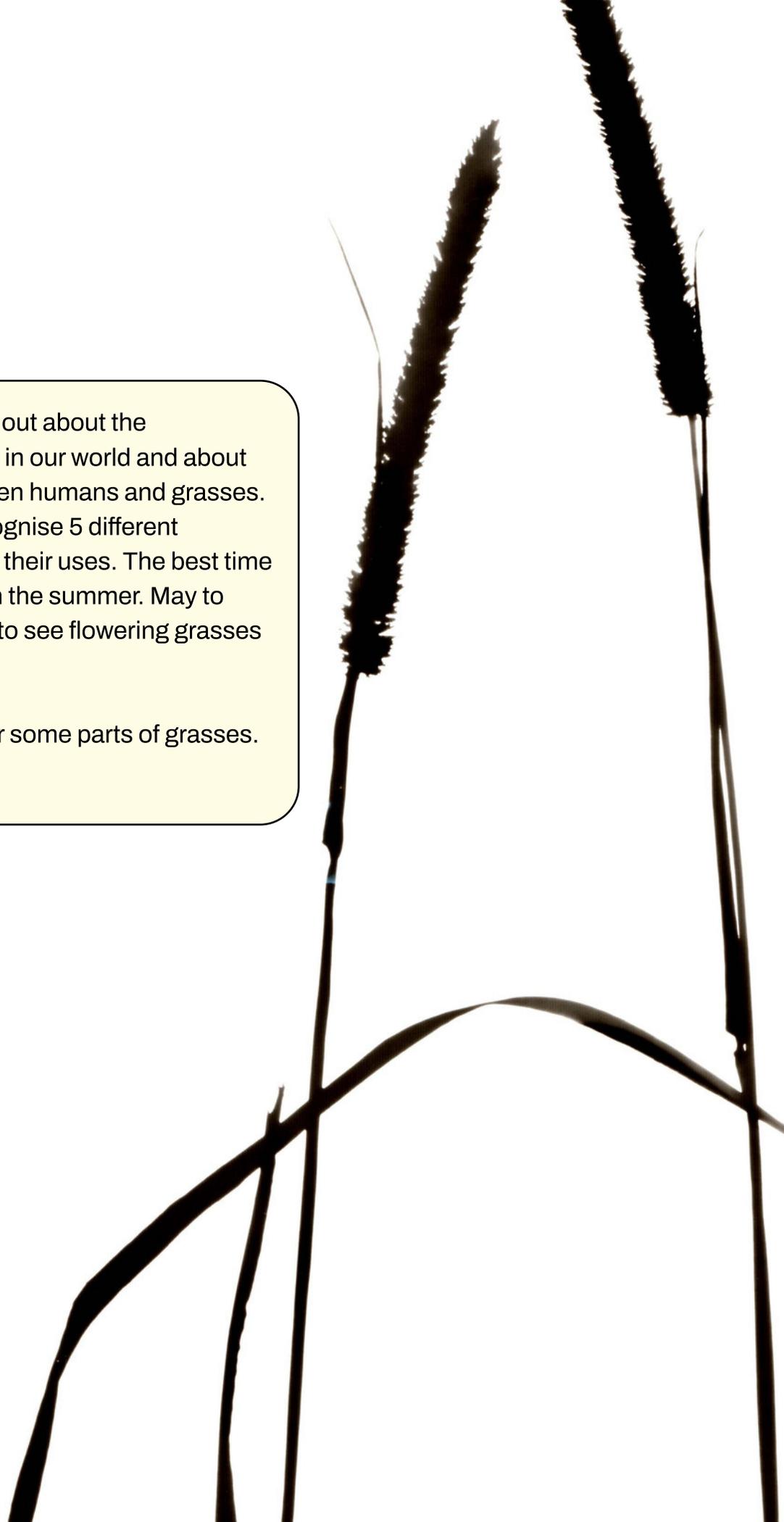


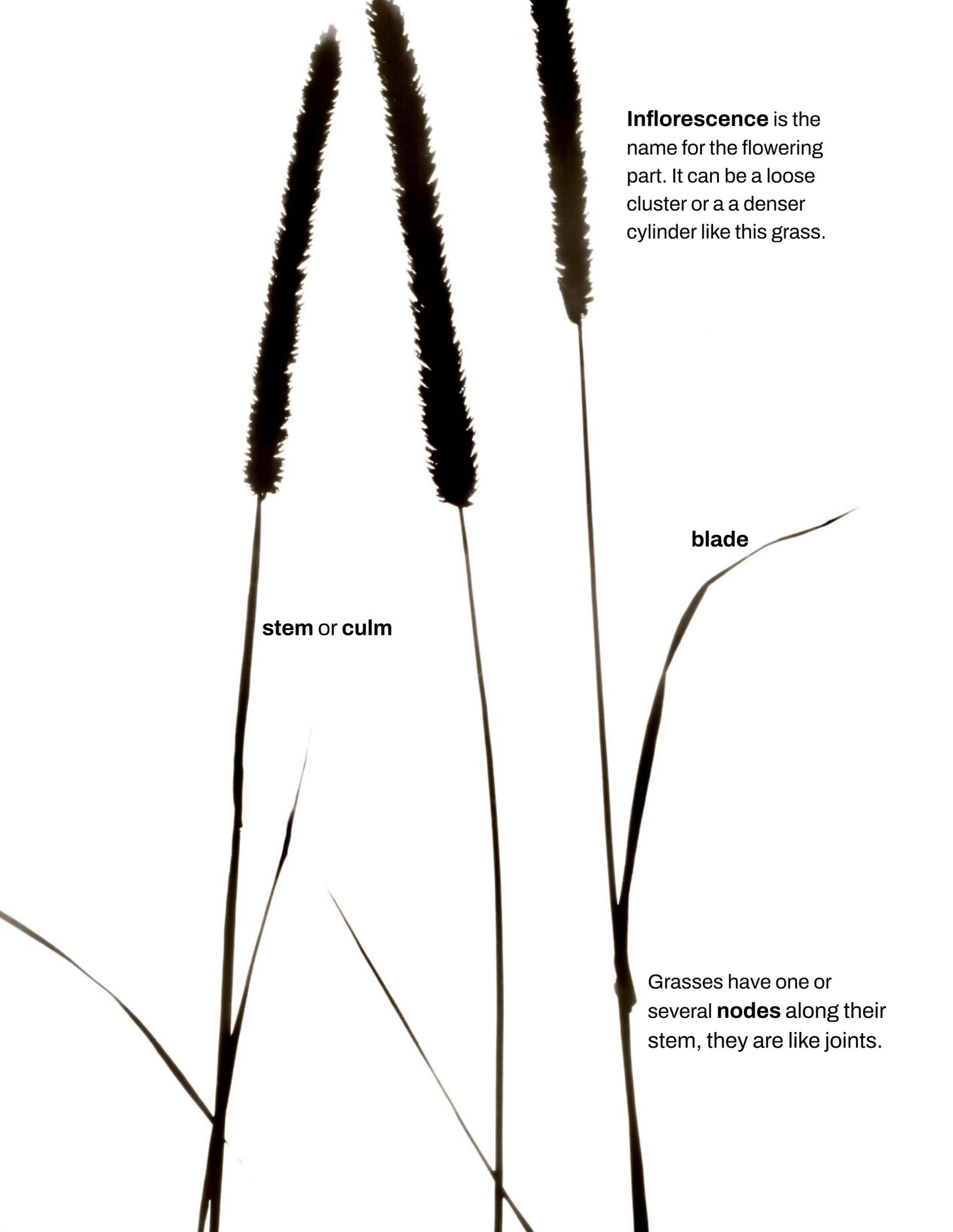
Poetry by Valerie Gillies  
Photography by Rebecca Marr  
Text by Rebecca & Valerie  
with botanical advice from John Crossley

Supported by the National Lottery through Creative Scotland

**We are going to** find out about the importance of grasses in our world and about the relationship between humans and grasses. You will be able to recognise 5 different 'grasses' and discover their uses. The best time to look for grasses is in the summer. May to August is a great time to see flowering grasses in Scotland.

Here are the names for some parts of grasses.



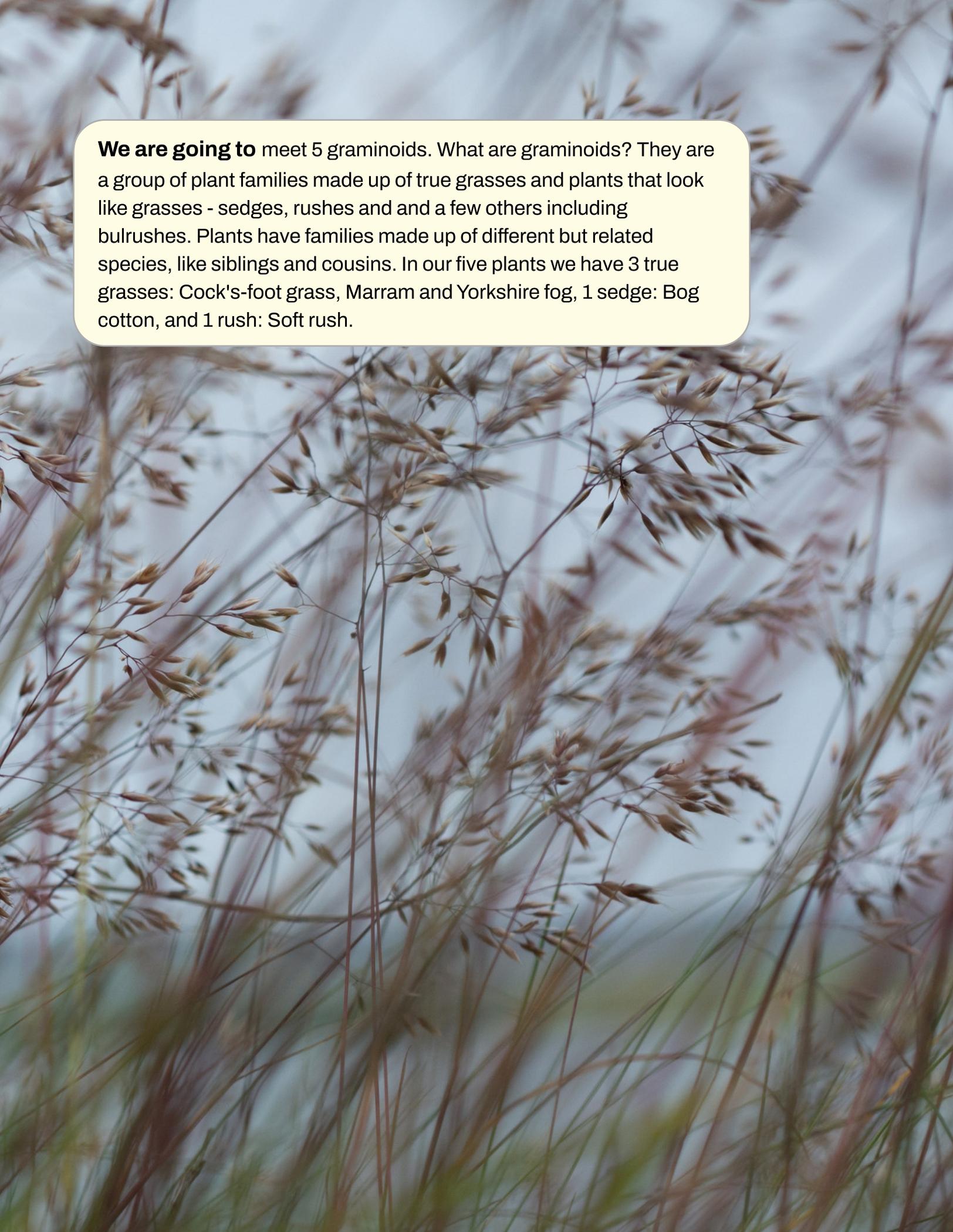


**Inflorescence** is the name for the flowering part. It can be a loose cluster or a denser cylinder like this grass.

**stem or culm**

**blade**

Grasses have one or several **nodes** along their stem, they are like joints.



**We are going to** meet 5 graminoids. What are graminoids? They are a group of plant families made up of true grasses and plants that look like grasses - sedges, rushes and a few others including bulrushes. Plants have families made up of different but related species, like siblings and cousins. In our five plants we have 3 true grasses: Cock's-foot grass, Marram and Yorkshire fog, 1 sedge: Bog cotton, and 1 rush: Soft rush.

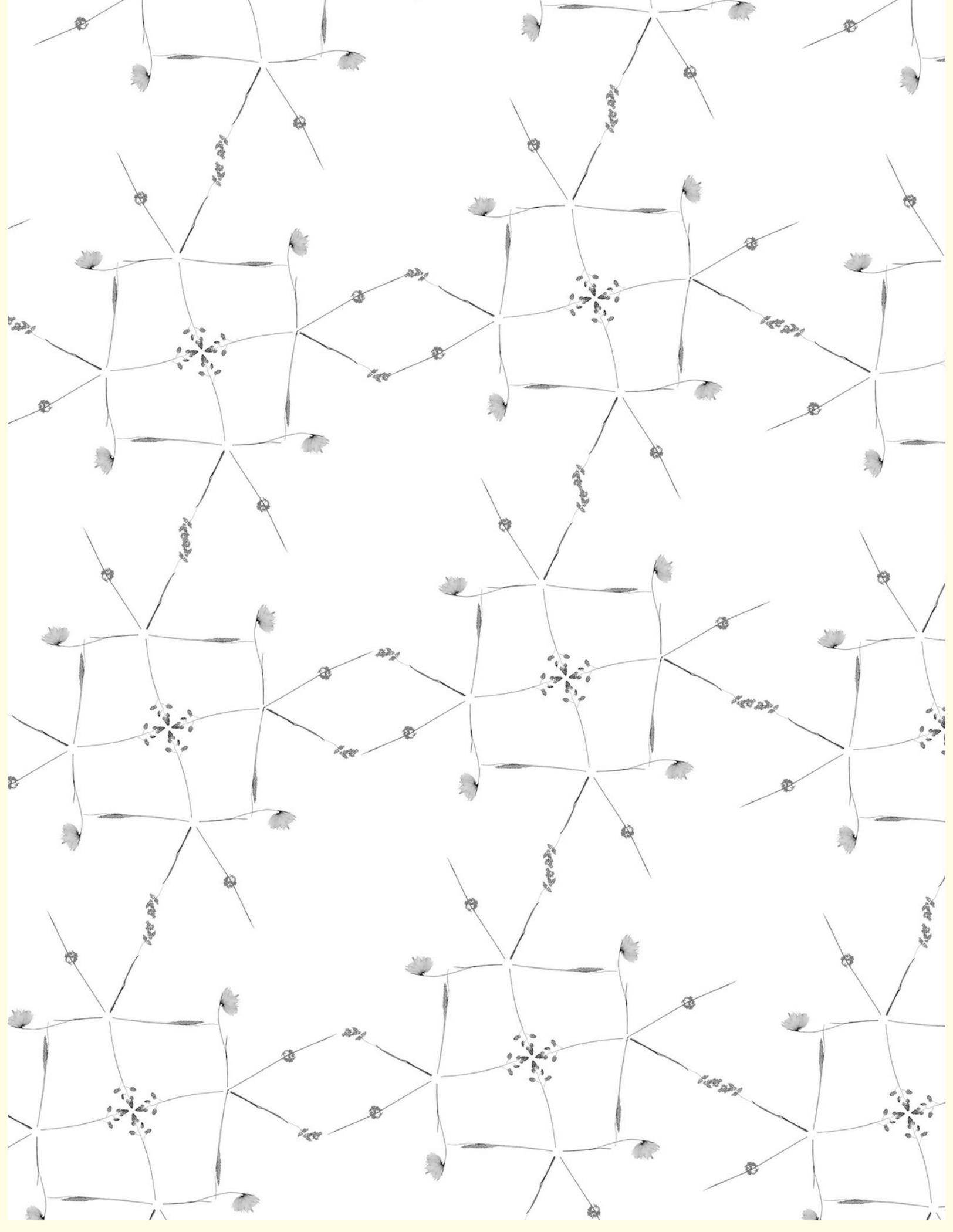
Here are the 5 graminoids  
you will learn to recognise.

Clockwise from the top:  
Yorkshire fog,  
Marram,  
Cock's-foot grass,  
Bog cotton and  
Soft rush.



**Sedges have edges**  
**Rushes are round**  
**Grasses are hollow**  
**Now what have you found?**

This little rhyme is handy to carry around in your head.  
*It's not always true but it often is.*



This pattern of our 5 graminoids was created using details from herbarium sheets kept at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. You will see herbarium sheets from Stromness Museum later in this guide. They are over 100 years old.

**What is a herbarium?** It is a collection of carefully preserved plants. The paper sheets have dried specimens taped down and the botanist who made the sheet will write down details about the plant, such as where it was found, the date, its common names and scientific name. We'll be finding out the scientific names of our 5 graminoids.

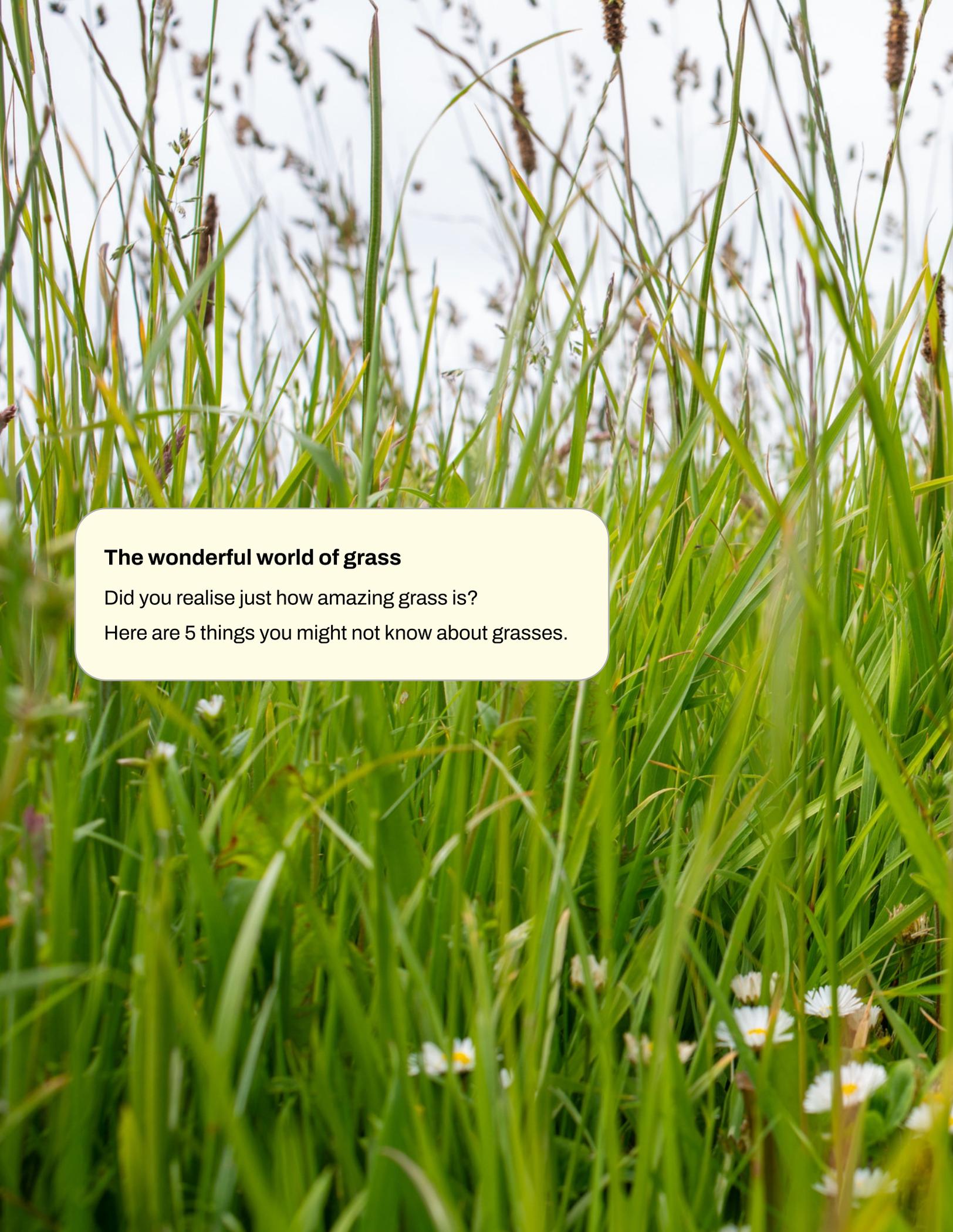
**Can you make a pattern using grasses you have picked?**



**Make your own herbarium sheet**

<https://www.rhs.org.uk/get-involved/grow-with-it/pdfs/creating-a-herbarium-step-by-step-guide.pdf>

This project used specimens from the Herbarium of the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (E).  
E00864044\_5. E00907057\_6. E00857527\_5. E00914382\_6. E00981034\_6.  
<https://data.rbge.org.uk/search/herbarium/>

A close-up photograph of a field of tall, green grass. The grass blades are long and narrow, with some showing signs of being eaten or damaged. In the foreground, several small white daisies with yellow centers are visible. The background is a soft, out-of-focus sky.

## **The wonderful world of grass**

Did you realise just how amazing grass is?

Here are 5 things you might not know about grasses.



**1.** They are the most abundant plant family on our planet, and they cover more of the surface of the earth than any other plant.

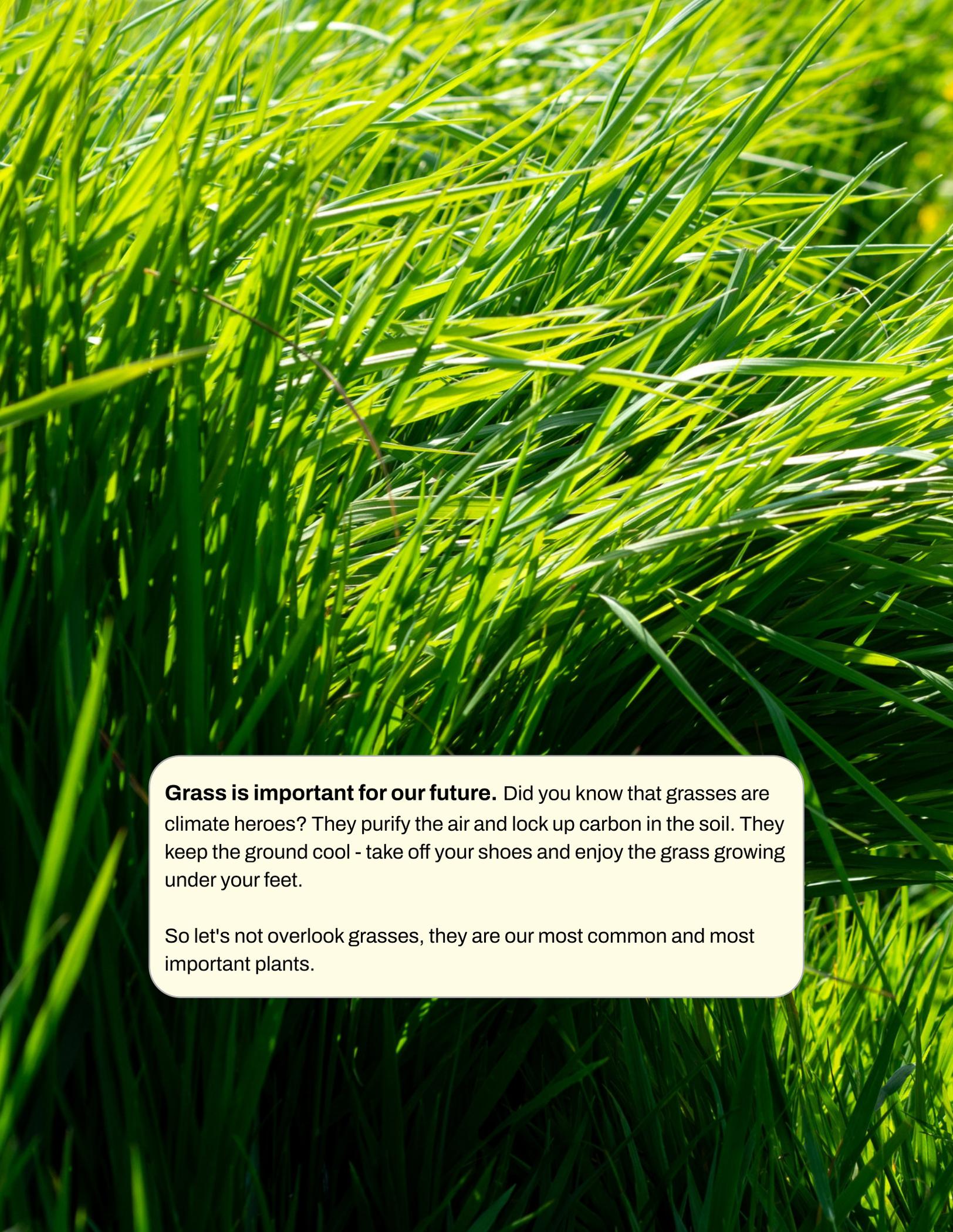
**2.** Grasses grow on every continent and in every climate. They can grow in prairies and wetlands, under forests and on top of mountains. There are species of grass that can live in the wettest and the driest places on our planet.

**3.** Grasses can be very small or extremely tall. Did you know that bamboo is a grass? The Giant bamboo can grow to 30 metres tall.

**4.** Grasses are the most important food source for humans and animals. Cereals such as rice, maize, wheat and oats are part of the grass family. They are cultivated crops descended from wild grasses. If you had toast or cereal for breakfast, you dined on grass.

**5.** Grass can be grazed by animals and keep growing. This is because of special growth cells just above the soil. Many plants would be damaged by grazing or cutting but grass grows from the roots not the tip.

**Humans have a very special relationship with grass. As species we have survived together, reliant on each other.**



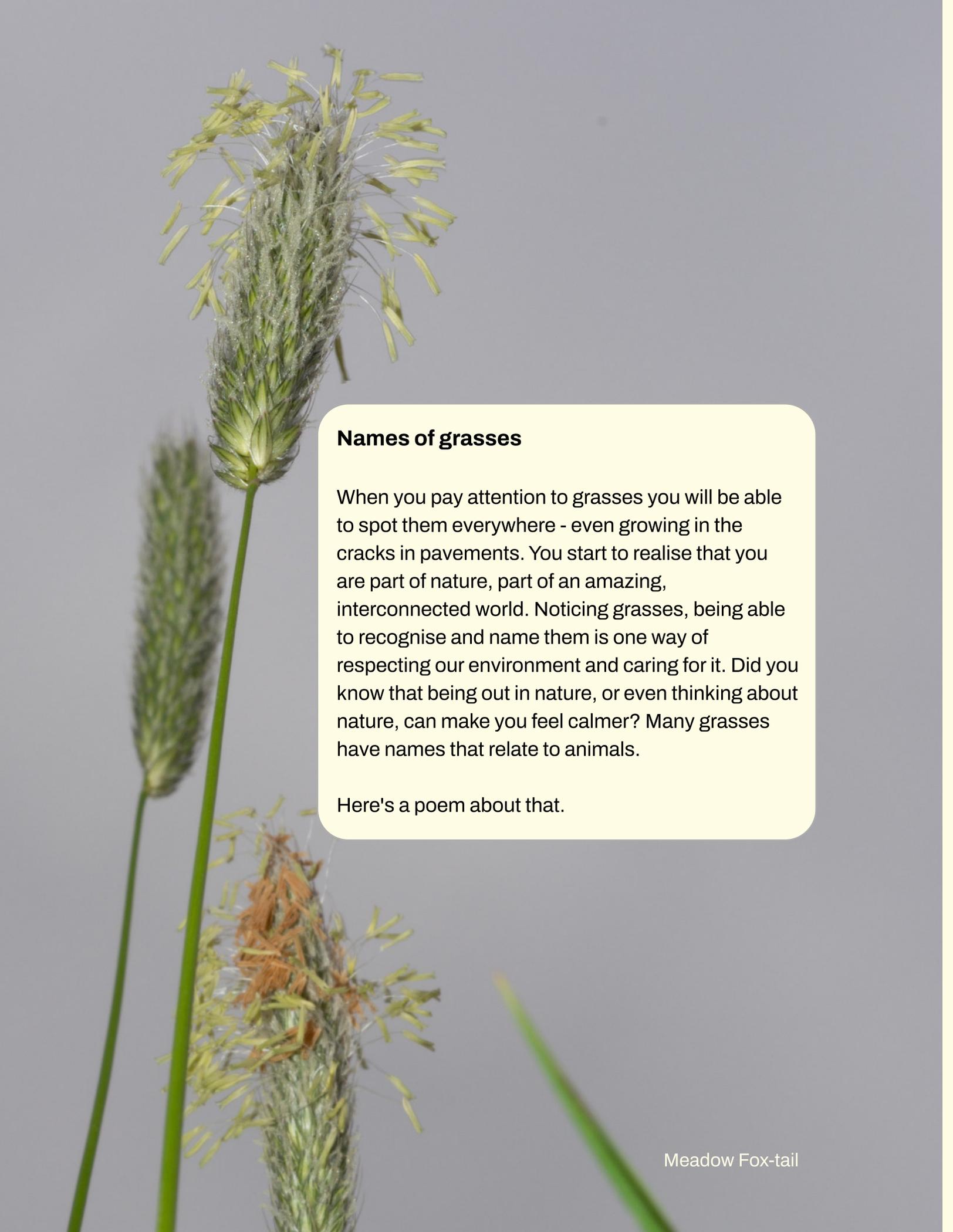
**Grass is important for our future.** Did you know that grasses are climate heroes? They purify the air and lock up carbon in the soil. They keep the ground cool - take off your shoes and enjoy the grass growing under your feet.

So let's not overlook grasses, they are our most common and most important plants.

A close-up, low-angle shot of a lush green meadow. The foreground is dominated by tall, slender blades of grass, some in sharp focus and others blurred. Interspersed among the grass are numerous bright yellow buttercup flowers, some in full bloom and others as buds. The background is a soft-focus field of similar grass and flowers, creating a sense of depth and a vibrant, natural atmosphere.

**Think all grass is the same?**

Why not try a fun challenge. Go out and try to find 2 blades of grass that are identical in every way.



### **Names of grasses**

When you pay attention to grasses you will be able to spot them everywhere - even growing in the cracks in pavements. You start to realise that you are part of nature, part of an amazing, interconnected world. Noticing grasses, being able to recognise and name them is one way of respecting our environment and caring for it. Did you know that being out in nature, or even thinking about nature, can make you feel calmer? Many grasses have names that relate to animals.

Here's a poem about that.

## **A Bestiary**

Rat's-tail, Cat's-tail,  
Mouse-tail, Fox-tail,  
Bristlegrass

Hare's-tail, Dogstooth,  
Rabbitfoot, Cockspur,  
Feathergrass

Frog Rush, Toad Rush,  
Goose-corn, Canary-grass,  
Ticklegrass

Flea Sedge, Nit-grass,  
Deergrass, Squirreltail,  
Adder's Tongue

Bird's-foot, Hart's-tongue,  
Horsetail, Stag's-horn,  
Sheep's Fescue

Cow Quakes, Crab Grass,  
Totter Grass, Beetle-grass,  
Twitch!

Grasses, like other plants, have different types of names. They have a common name - this is the name by which they are known locally. And they have a scientific name - this is a unique name which is the same worldwide. Before scientific names were introduced it was tricky for naturalists across the world or even across Scotland to discuss plants with each other. With scientific names they could be sure they were talking about the same plant.

Scientific names are in Latin and they are always printed in italics *like this*. Sometimes the Latin names describe a characteristic of the species, such as *Holcus lanatus*, the scientific name for Yorkshire fog. *Lanatus* means woolly which describes the fluffy look and feel of that grass.

Scientific names have two parts and it is the opposite to the way we are named. The first name is the genus or family which is like our surname, and the second part is like our first name. Humans, like all other living things, have a scientific name for their species - do you know what it is?



Yorkshire fog



Holy-grass

## **Can you use all your 5 senses to think about grasses?**

**See it** - learn to recognise the structure of grasses. What characteristics do they have? Are they tall or short? How would you describe their greenness: is it bluey-green or yellowy-green? What do their flowering parts look like?

**Smell it** - can you think of the smell of freshly cut grass? Crush some grass in your hand - get some Holy-grass if you can, or Sweet Vernal-grass and have a sniff, how would you describe the smell? What does that smell make you think of?

**Touch it** - grasses have different textures - smooth, rough, toothy, downy, ridged, tickly. Go out and touch some.

**Taste it** - animals eat grass and so do humans in the form of cereals such as rice, wheat and maize. You probably ate some food derived from grass today. Why not keep a food diary for a day and try to note down any foods that are related to grasses. Milk is grass-related because the cows who gave the milk ate grass. And if you eat meat, that is grassy too because the animal the meat comes from will have eaten grass or cereal.

**Hear it** - Skirlrag is the Scots word for a grass blade held closely between the edges of your thumbs and used as a whistle. Have you ever made grass whistle?

Can you hear the sound of grass in the wind in the next poem?

## **Hushle**

Hushle

the way wind crosses a field  
sounding like grass waves  
passing through widening circles

*bushle*

the lightest skiff becomes a skirl  
the gentlest sowff becomes a swoof  
as a shake-wind blows in gusts

*bushle*

grass is growing from the ground  
moving everything within it  
life coursing through every being

*bushle*

*bushle*: a strong wind

*sowff*: murmur, puff

*swoof*: swishing sound

*shake-wind*: blustery wind



A close-up photograph of a field of Yorkshire fog grass. The grasses are tall and thin, with long, feathery panicles that are a mix of light brown and pinkish-purple. The background is a soft-focus field of similar grasses. A white, rounded rectangular text box is centered in the lower half of the image.

**Common name: Yorkshire fog**

Scientific name: *Holcus lanatus*

Scots name: Pluff grass, Haze grass

Gaelic name: Feur a' chinn bhàin

Orkney name: Fussy punds

Other names: Woolly soft-grass,  
Meadow soft-grass, Velvet grass

**Where to find it:**

This grass is very common and can tolerate lots of different types of soils and you can find it in verges, by the shore, in meadows, pastures and woodlands. It grows throughout Scotland.

**How to recognise it:**

It grows in dense tufts and grows all year round. In summer look out for its soft whitish or hazy pink to purplish spikelets. The inflorescence starts close together but opens out in to a loose triangular shape. The culm is soft and covered in whitish hairs.

**How did it get its name?** Foggage is an old name for winter grazing and it can mean grass that grows up after hay is cut. Maybe the fog part of the name comes from that. Or for the way it can look when there is lots of it in a field, woolly and foggy. The botanical name *lanatus* means 'woolly'. But why Yorkshire fog? Maybe Yorkshire is very foggy, but we get a lot of fog here in Scotland too and a lot of Yorkshire fog grass. Maybe it was named by the seed merchants from Yorkshire who sold it as seed to improve pastures. (abridged from Ken Thomson's book *Common or Garden*)

**Can you think of your own name for this grass?** Other people have called it pluff, fussy, woolly, velvet.....

It has been used in the past for making tethers and reins in Orkney and Shetland. Can you imagine riding a pony with reins made of this soft grass? And as we heard it was used as grass seed to provide pasture for grazing animals.





Reference no. 785.  
*Holcus lanatus*

MAGNUS SPENCE'S ORKNEY HERBARIUM.

Reference Number. 785.  
Name. *Holcus lanatus*, Linn.  
Habitat.  
Station.  
Date.  
Collector. Magnus Spence.  
Remarks. Native. No habitat, station, or date recorded by Magnus Spence. - Henry Halero Johnston, 12th April 1922.

Popular English Name. Yorkshire Fog. Orkney Name. Pinn

Magnus Spence Herbarium, Stromness Museum, Orkney



Can you find the Yorkshire fog in this poem?

## On Drowsy Brae

‘Whit are ye daein here, on Drowsy Brae?  
Letting the gress grow aneath ye, in amang  
this saft brome, weel-kenned as *sleepies*?’

Forwandert, we’re doverin ower,  
takkin a rip o pluff-gress for a pillow  
whaur it is nid-nod-nodding.

Oor darg maks us sair forfochten  
and taigled wi aa the chainges,  
we’ve lain doon, tyke-tired.

We’ll streek oor length on Drowsy Brae  
for that’ll keep oor banes green.  
We’ll sleep as soond as a peerie.

We’ll mind o this, when we wauken,  
oor fowk were aye made o gress,  
bairns o the yird an o the universe.

*forwandert*, weary with wandering

*doverin ower*, falling asleep

*pluff-gress*, Yorkshire fog

*darg*, work

*sair forfochten*, exhausted

*taigled*, tired, harassed

*tyke-tired*, dog-tired

*yird*, earth

Drowsy Brae is where a Bronze Age beaker was  
found, at Shieldhill in Lanarkshire.

**Common name: Marram grass**

Scientific name: *Ammophila arenaria*

Scottish name: Bent grass

Orkney name: Benty grass

Gaelic name: Muran



**Where to find it:**

Marram grows on the coast. Living so close to the sea means it can tolerate salty conditions. You will find marram growing in sand dunes and on beaches. Its root system is like a big net which holds the sand and stops coastal erosion. Read about it in the poem.

**How to recognise it:**

Marram is a tall grass with many leaves. These are rough to touch and can be sharp so be careful. The leaves can be rolled. They are a greyish green. Marram grows in large colonies - so look for grass growing in big areas. Marram has tall spikelets of flowers in a close tower shape. It flowers from June to August.

**Marram had many important uses.** Did you know that marram was used to thatch roofs and make baskets? In the Outer Hebrides a basket made of marram is known as a coisan.

Marram was also used to make horse collars, mats, hats and bags and in Shetland the roots were made into a brush to scrub floors. It was twisted into a cord to bind straw together for Orkney Chairs.

It was so widely used in the Highlands and Islands that in the 18th century there was concern that overharvesting was damaging the coastline. **Why do you think that would damage the coastline?**



## **Marram**

*Ammophila arenaria*

Marram, the grass which binds  
the young sand dunes  
its strong roots  
sometimes twenty feet long  
creep through shifting sand

its sea-green leaves  
slowing down the wind  
a glossy grass  
protects the coastline  
engineer of the ecosystem

planted for this purpose  
it creates vast areas  
as the dunes become fixed  
and as other plants colonise  
marram gives way to them

A close-up photograph of Cock's-foot grass (Dactylis glomerata) against a clear blue sky. The grass has several upright, slender stems with clusters of small, greenish-brown flower heads. The background is a solid, bright blue sky.

**Common name: Cock's-foot grass**

Scientific name: *Dactylis glomerata*

Scots name: Rouch girse

Gaelic names: Garbh-fheur, spòg-choilich

**Where to find it:** This grass can be found throughout Scotland. It grows in fields, roadsides and rough ground. It flowers in June through to September and in winter you can find its white skeleton still standing, dried by the wind.

**How to recognise it:** This large grass grows in dense tufts. It is most recognisable because of its bulky heads. Its clustered oval inflorescences look heavy on its branches. It is supposed to resemble a cockerel's foot but it's much more clumpy than that - **can you think of a better name?**

This grass is really enjoyed by horses and cattle. It is often used in haymaking. It grows up quickly after being munched so it is a very important grass to farmers.





**Cock's-foot grass**

*Dactylis glomerata*

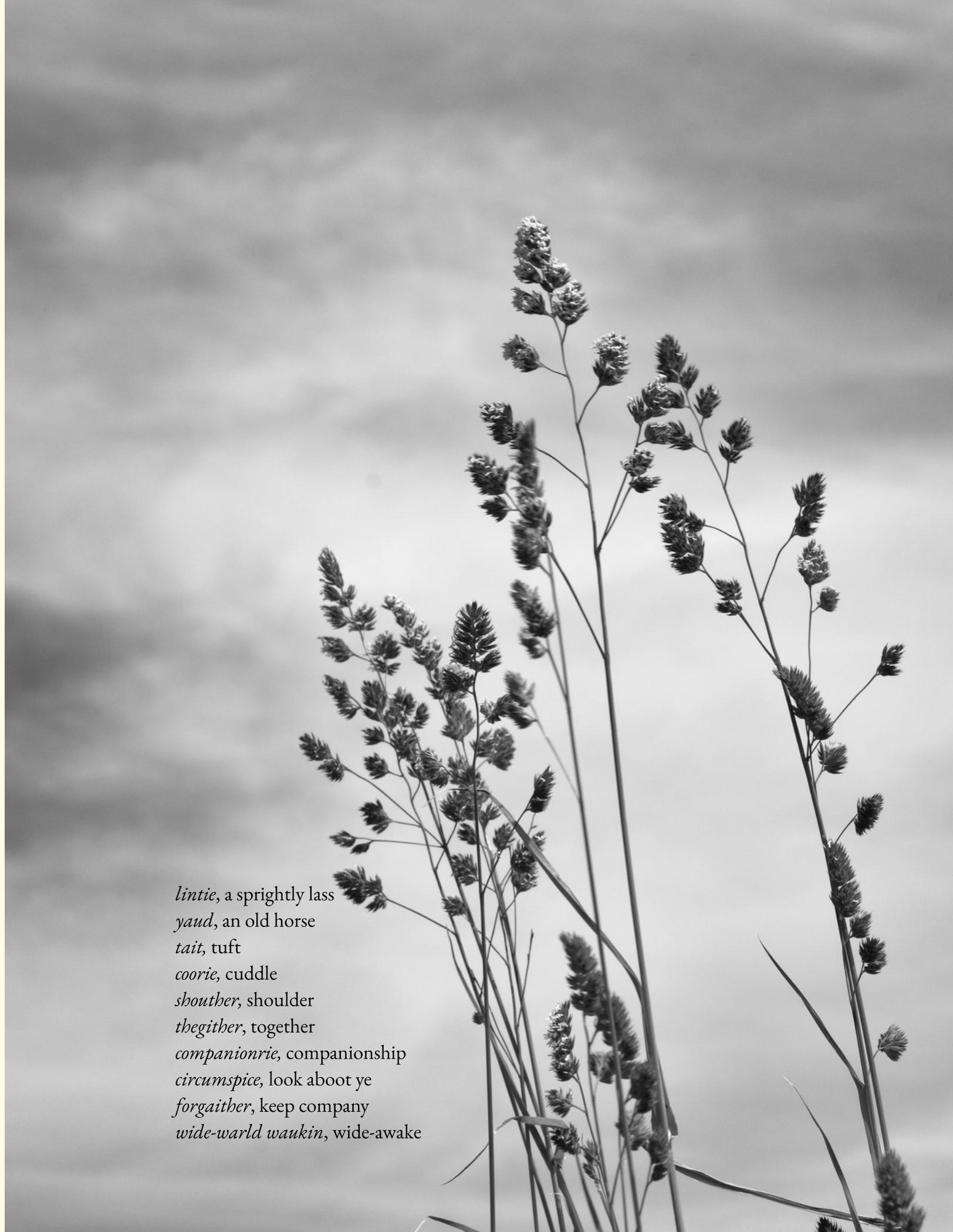
A lintie o a lass rins uphill  
tae the pasture field.  
On the hip o the brae  
the auld grey horse is lyin doon.

A worn-oot yaud  
on his watch knowe,  
his ee is far awa wi it,  
lookin tae the heathery hills.

He's waitin on the bairn  
tae coorie in by his shouther.  
She'll pu a tait o grass for him,  
the cock's-foot he likes fine.

Thegither in companionrie,  
the bairn beginnin  
tae look ower the nest,  
the grey horse beginnin

tae look aboot him  
for a last *circumspice*,  
they forgather on the brae,  
wide-warld waukin.



*lintie*, a sprightly lass  
*yaud*, an old horse  
*tait*, tuft  
*coorie*, cuddle  
*shouther*, shoulder  
*thegither*, together  
*companionrie*, companionship  
*circumspice*, look about ye  
*forgaither*, keep company  
*wide-world waukin*, wide-awake

**Common name: Bog cotton**

Scientific name: *Eriophorum angustifolium* / *Eriophorum vaginatum*

Scots names: Draw-moss, drawling

Orkney names: Lucky Minnie's Oo (Oo means wool), Mussa kruppan

Gaelic names: Canach, ceann-bàn a' mhonaidh

Other names: Common cottongrass (*Eriophorum angustifolium*),  
cotton sedge, Hare's-tail cottongrass (*Eriophorum vaginatum*)



Remember the rhyme 'Sedges have edges'? Bog cotton belongs to the sedge family, but only has edges near the tip of the stem. There are two different species that get called bog cotton and you will easily be able to tell them apart. From a distance they are similar but look closer - one species has one head (*Eriophorum vaginatum*) and the other has 3 or more (*Eriophorum angustifolium*).

**Where to find it:**

There is a clue in its name. Look for these plants in bogs and boggy areas. They like wetlands and peaty moors. If you see bog cotton growing this is a sure sign that the ground is very wet and may be unsafe so be careful.

**How to recognise it:**

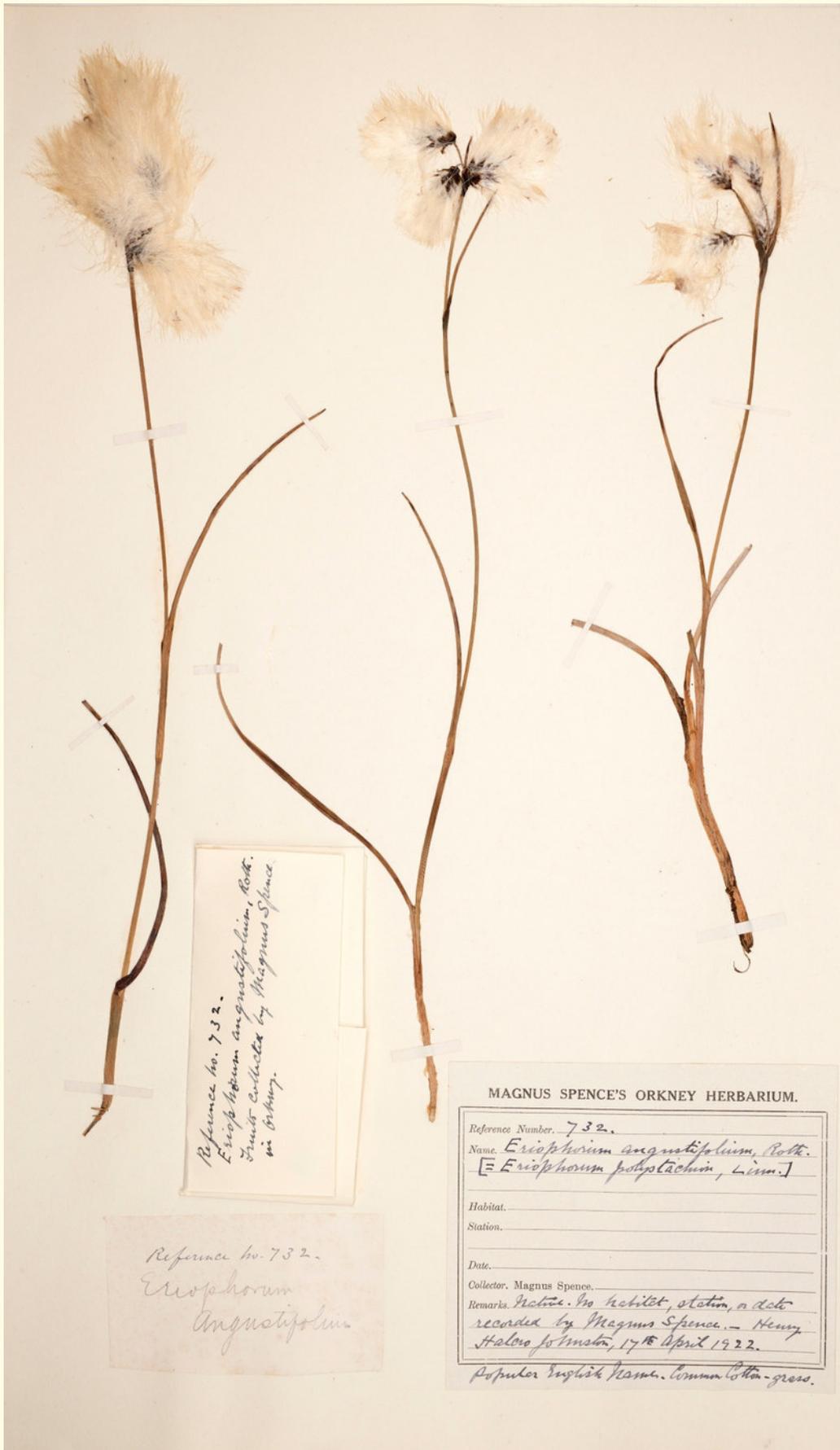
Look for fluffy white heads that move easily in the wind. The flowering parts are silky soft to the touch held up by tough stalks. They flower in April to May.

Sheep like to eat bog cotton before it flowers, farmers say it makes them thrive. It was once used to stuff pillows and you might be surprised to know that it has also been used to make thread and cloth.



These socks, from Orkney Museums, were made in 1907 for the arrival of a baby. The yarn for these socks is believed to be made from bog cotton. It must have taken a long time to gather and spin the bog cotton.





Reference no. 732.  
*Eriophorum angustifolium*, Roth.  
Fruit collected by Magnus Spence  
in Orkney.

Reference no. 732.  
*Eriophorum*  
*angustifolium*

MAGNUS SPENCE'S ORKNEY HERBARIUM.

Reference Number. 732.

Name. *Eriophorum angustifolium*, Roth.  
[*Eriophorum polystachium*, Linn.]

Habitat.

Station.

Date.

Collector. Magnus Spence.

Remarks. Arctic. No habitat, station, or date recorded by Magnus Spence. - Henry Halsor Johnston, 17<sup>th</sup> April 1922.

Popular English Name. Common Cotton-grass.

Magnus Spence Herbarium, Stromness Museum, Orkney



## Glenhead Shepherd

Through the winter, the yowe aye remains  
within a mile o the hoose,  
but when the gude weather sets in  
an the draw-moss shows abune the grun,  
she's aff tae whaur ye see her noo -  
sax mile richt oot-owre the mountains.



**Common name: Soft rush**

Scientific name: *Juncus effusus*

Scots names: Floss, rashes

Orkney name: Axes girse

Gaelic names: Luachair, luachair-bhog

Other name: Common rush



**Where to find it:**

Soft rush lives in damp, marshy areas.

**How to recognise it:**

Soft rush flowers late May to July but you can find it all year round. The flowers are small clusters high up on the stem. Look for tall glossy, green, round, smooth stems growing in circular clumps.



Reference no. 694.  
*Juncus effusus*, Linn.  
Pencil in fruit collected  
by Magnus Spence  
in Orkney.

Reference no. 694.  
*Juncus effusus*  
A. Bennett  
31. 1. 1920.

MAGNUS SPENCE'S ORKNEY HERBARIUM.

Reference Number.	694.
Name.	<i>Juncus effusus</i> , Linn. (file Arthur Bennett, 31 <sup>st</sup> January 1920).
Habitat.	
Station.	
Date.	
Collector.	Magnus Spence.
Remarks.	Native. No name, habitat, station, or date recorded by Magnus Spence. Henry Stalder Johnston, 5 <sup>th</sup> May 1922.
Popular English Name.	Common Rush.

Magnus Spence Herbarium, Stromness Museum, Orkney



## **Using Soft-rush**

*Juncus effusus*

Rush bends to every touch  
bright green smooth stems  
children plait to make bracelets

Pliant, woven into bee-skeps  
or twisted into simmans cord  
a rush-rope to fetch a pony

The saddle-bags made from floss  
the rushes strewn on the floor  
made into mats or chair-seats

It's August for harvesting rushes  
pulled rather than cut  
for the basket-maker

Rush bows to every change  
we're peeling the stems for  
the one white continuous pith

to make into rush-wick lights  
held in a rush-nip holder  
burning with a soft flame

*Green grow the rashes O!*



A wall of St Brigid's Crosses made by Frances Pelly from grasses and plants near her home.  
Pier Arts Centre 2025 *Buss o Gress / Tuft of Grass* exhibition  
Valerie Gillies & Rebecca Marr



The poem talks about lots of different uses for rushes. Being naturally waterproof, easy to find, strong and flexible, rushes provided a useful material to make things from. Do you know what a Bee-skep is? Can you guess?

In the poem Valerie mentions rush-wick lights. They were used long before lightbulbs and electricity. It was the children's job to peel the rushes to get the spongy pith inside, young fingers were better at it because it was too fiddley for bigger hands. The pith was used in a cruise lamp - oil is drawn up through the wick of the rush and burns like a candle wick.

Have you heard of a St Brigid's Cross?

They are usually woven from rushes gathered on the eve of the 1st of February, St Brigid's Day. Traditionally they were hung in the doorway of Irish homes to protect the household from harm and to bless the animals. This time of year was marked by earlier Celtic peoples as a festival celebrating the end of winter.

**Learn how to weave a St Brigid's Cross** > [https://youtu.be/Yn\\_MG4HZVOo?si=9YCuqnExyTYHf0bK](https://youtu.be/Yn_MG4HZVOo?si=9YCuqnExyTYHf0bK)

### **Good luck finding your grasses.**

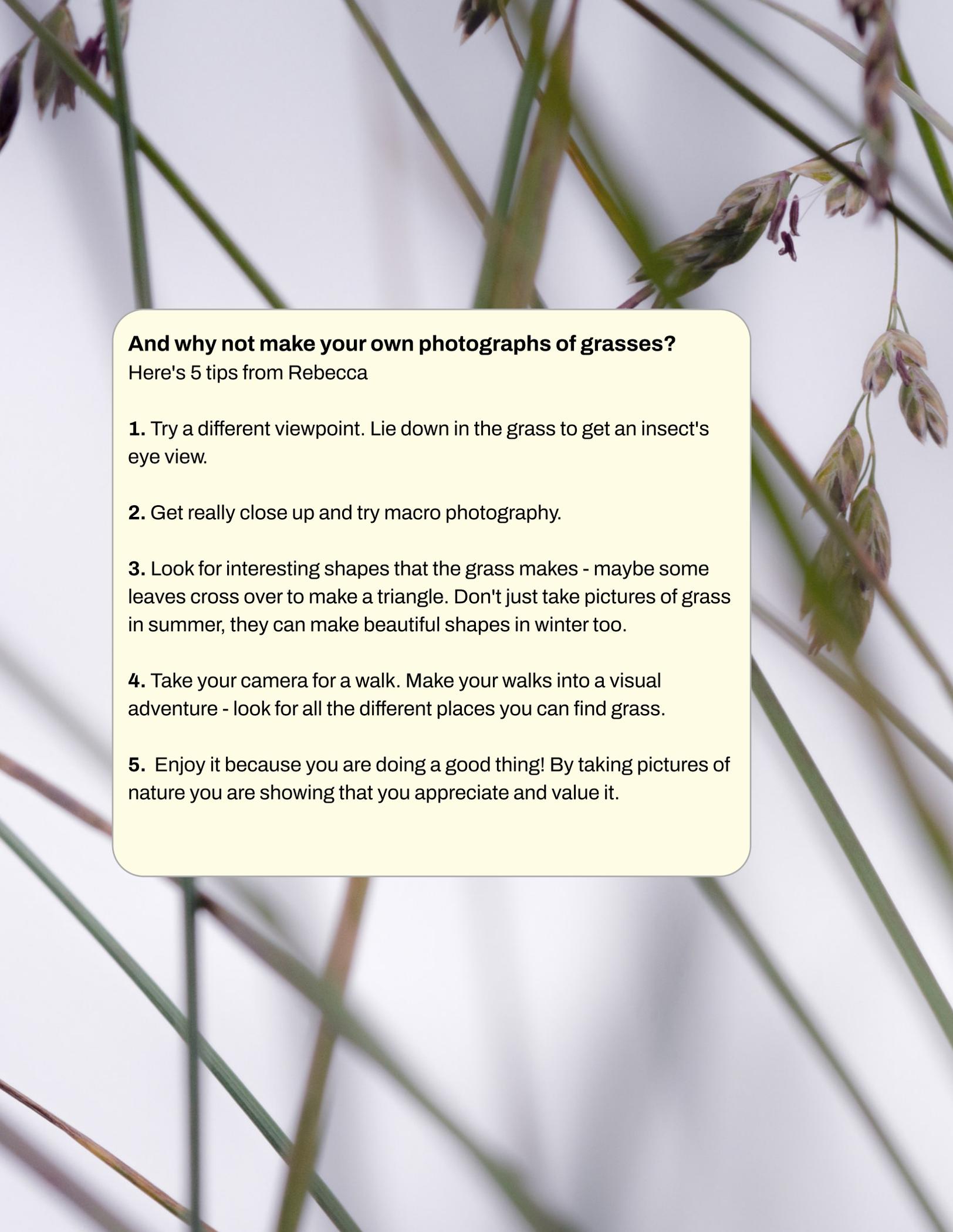
By being able to recognise and name these 5 graminoids you have started your journey to becoming a naturalist.

### **Why not write your own poem about your favourite grass?**

Here's 5 tips from Valerie

- 1.** Looking at a patch of grass from a distance, can you see different shades of green? Where do you find your favourite grass?
- 2.** Gather all the names for your chosen grass that you can find, especially the local ones. Do any of these fit what you can see when you look at your grass?
- 3.** Sit amongst the grasses, next to your favourite. Close up, what is the body of your grass like? Does it have knees or wrists?
- 4.** Shape your lines on the page so that your poem will remind your reader of the natural grass, even if it's just one long line.
- 5.** Read your poem aloud. Does it make you recall the grass you chose? Well done, now you are a 'Nature Writer'.





## **And why not make your own photographs of grasses?**

Here's 5 tips from Rebecca

- 1.** Try a different viewpoint. Lie down in the grass to get an insect's eye view.
- 2.** Get really close up and try macro photography.
- 3.** Look for interesting shapes that the grass makes - maybe some leaves cross over to make a triangle. Don't just take pictures of grass in summer, they can make beautiful shapes in winter too.
- 4.** Take your camera for a walk. Make your walks into a visual adventure - look for all the different places you can find grass.
- 5.** Enjoy it because you are doing a good thing! By taking pictures of nature you are showing that you appreciate and value it.



## Sources

When the Grass Dances, Valerie Gillies & Rebecca Marr

Observer's Book of Grasses, Sedges & Rushes

Flora Celtica, William Milliken & Sam Bridgewater

The Orkney Book of Wildflowers, Tim Dean and Anne Bignall

Collins Guide to the Grasses, Sedges, Rushes and Ferns of Britain and Northern Europe

Common or Garden, Ken Thompson

Gaelic plant names: <https://learngaelic.scot/dictionary/>

## Links

BSBI links (showing distribution maps)

Yorkshire fog

<https://bsbi.org/taxa/2cd4p9h.17g/holcus-lanatus>

[https://bsbi.org/media/pages/learn/resources/identification-guides/grass-id/2232306125-1759150618/holcus\\_lanatus\\_peter\\_gateley.pdf](https://bsbi.org/media/pages/learn/resources/identification-guides/grass-id/2232306125-1759150618/holcus_lanatus_peter_gateley.pdf)

Marram

<https://bsbi.org/taxa/2cd4p9h.ybg/ammophila-arenaria>

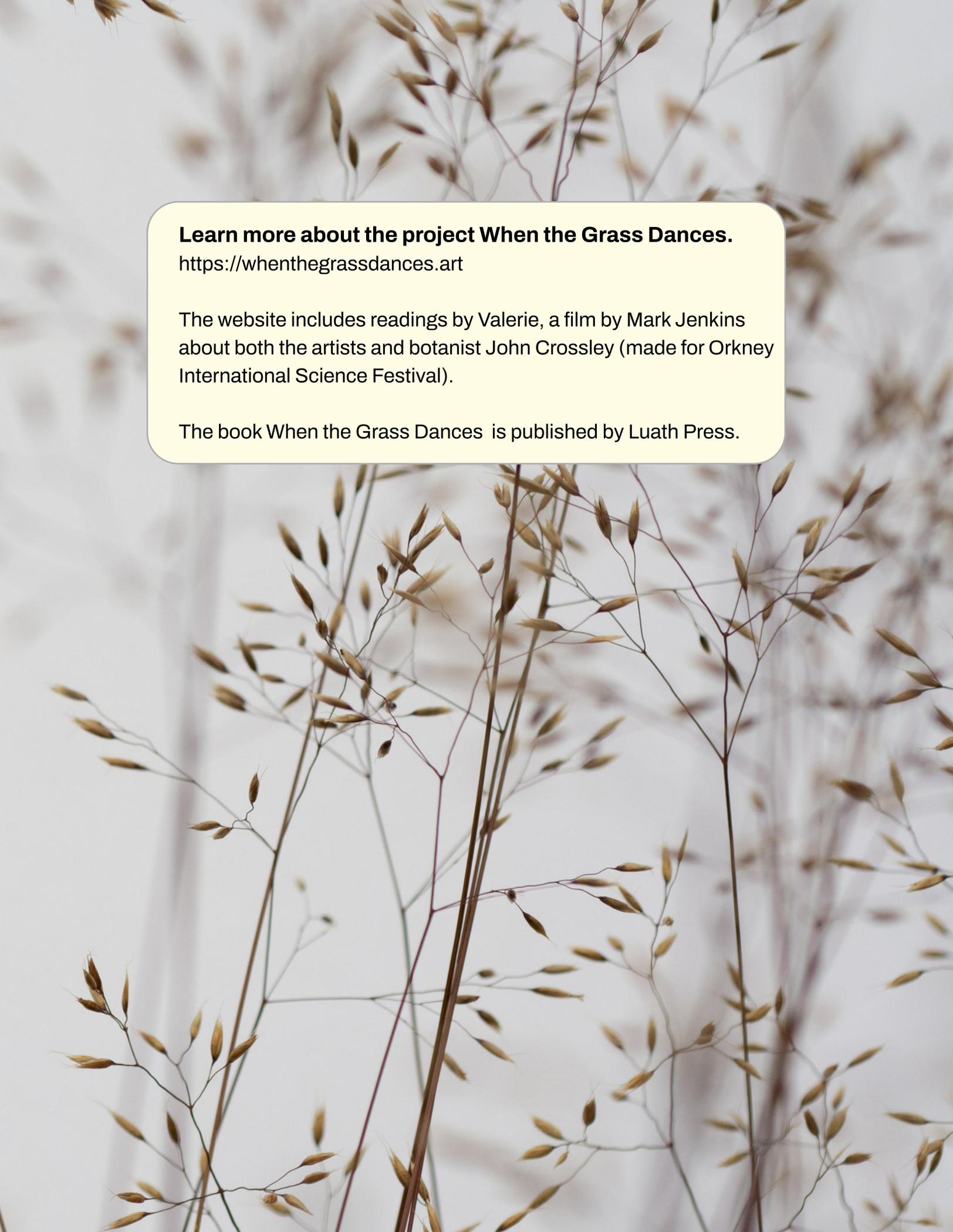
Cock's-foot grass

<https://bsbi.org/taxa/2cd4p9h.f6z/dactylis-glomerata>

Cottongrasses - <https://bsbi.org/taxa/2cd4p9h.ykw/eriphorum-angustifolium> / <https://bsbi.org/taxa/2cd4p9h.8x4/eriphorum-vaginatum?q=eriphorum>

Soft rush

<https://bsbi.org/taxa/2cd4p9h.59w/juncus-effusus>

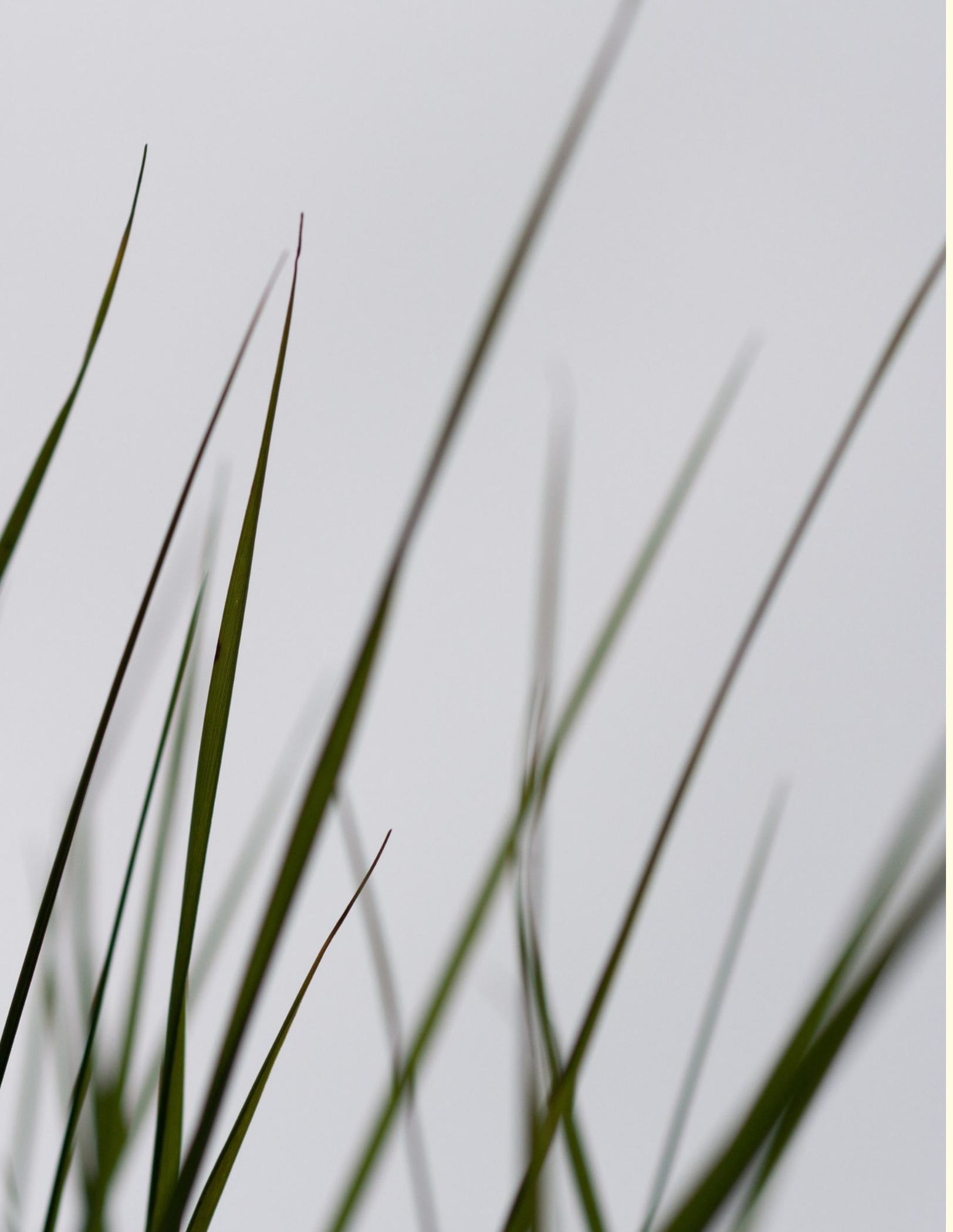


**Learn more about the project *When the Grass Dances*.**

<https://whenthegrassdances.art>

The website includes readings by Valerie, a film by Mark Jenkins about both the artists and botanist John Crossley (made for Orkney International Science Festival).

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