

Nature Notes

...from Sharon

Groundsel or Saltbush is an evergreen woody shrub or small tree in the Sunflower (Aster) family. Another common name for this shrub is Sea Myrtle. As their name implies, saltbushes are common along the coastal areas and have high salt tolerance. However, they are not restricted to these types of environments and may occur in a wide variety of disturbed, open and moist soil habitats. They can reach a height of ten feet with a spread ten feet wide.

Groundsel or Saltbush



Take a walk on the most northern boardwalk from parking area #1 and you will see this shrub in full bloom on the right, just before the concession. Not only is it full of blooms, it is full of bees, so be careful. Compare the size of the blooms to the bee at the left and you will see how small the flowers are. Bees and small butterflies enjoy the nectar from the male flowers of saltbush, which in turn attract songbirds to forage on the insects.

Groundsels are dioecious. This means that each plant is either a male or a female and each plant produces male/female flowers accordingly. Only the female plants produce the fluffy silvery white flowers late in the fall. The white, hair-like bristles extend beyond the leafy bracts of the female flowers, giving it a cottony or silvery appearance. The

bristles also help in dispersing the tiny fruit/seeds. Male flowers are yellowish-green in distinctly rounded spheres. To see some female flowers/bushes, take a walk on the estuary trail from the third parking area. They stand out during the fall, as you see the white, silvery blooms. When not in bloom, they are just a small, inconspicuous bush.



There are three species of saltbushes and they have many similar traits. All three occur near coastal areas from North Carolina south throughout Florida. Differences are most apparent in their vegetation. The following brief descriptions will help identify the three species: 1) *Baccharis angustifolia*: As the scientific name implies, it has narrow, needle-shaped leaves. Its leaves are attached directly to the stem without a leaf stalk. The shape of its leaf is the easiest way to distinguish this species from the others. This one has not been identified in the Preserve. 2) *Baccharis glomerulifolia*: As its scientific name implies, this species has rounded flower heads. The uniqueness of these flowers, however, is that they are attached directly to the branches without a flower stalk. This is not true for the other two species, and is the best way to distinguish this one from the following species, which has similar foliage. This has not been identified in the Preserve. 3) *Baccharis halimifolia*: This is the common, almost weedy species found through out the Southeast, north to Massachusetts and south to the West Indies. It also is the most likely saltbush to be found in inland settings. The leaves often are rather diamond-shaped, up to 3 inches long, and most display distinct teeth along the outer margin and can be variable. The foliage is a grayish-green. This one has been documented in the Preserve.

Groundsel leaves are toxic to livestock and the small fruit from the female plant is poisonous to humans. Indigenous people used the leaves to make yellow dye. This was also known as the consumption weed. Root decoctions were taken for colds and stomach pain. *Baccharis halimifolia* contains baccharine and is used in domestic medicines against respiratory diseases and for fever.