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# Floristic Diversity of Grasses (Poaceae) in Selected Wetlands of Tirunelveli District, Tamil Nadu

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**ABSTRACT**

The present study evaluates the diversity and distribution of grasses (Poaceae) in selected wetland habitats of Tirunelveli district, Tamil Nadu, South India. Field surveys were conducted from July 2022 to March 2023 across marshes, paddy fields, pond margins, and riverine ecosystems. A total of 88 grass taxa belonging to 48 genera and six subfamilies were recorded, including five taxa endemic to Tamil Nadu. Among the subfamilies, Panicoideae was the most dominant in diversity with 53 species, followed by Chloridoideae (28), while Aristidoideae (3), Micraroideae (2), Arundinoideae (1), and Oryzoideae (1) were lesser represented. The results emphasize the floristic richness and conservation significance of wetlands in the Tirunelveli district and provide baseline information for wetland biodiversity management and conservation planning.

## Introduction

Wetlands are among the most productive ecosystems globally, functioning as dynamic transition zones between terrestrial and aquatic environments and providing a wide range of ecological services such as groundwater recharge, flood mitigation, control of soil erosion nutrient cycling, and habitat provision for diverse biota (Satheesh et al., 2018). In India, wetlands are of immense ecological and socio-economic importance, supporting fisheries, irrigation, tourism, water purification, and local livelihoods. Wetland ecosystems support a wide array of aquatic and semi-aquatic vegetation, including free-floating, submerged, emergent, amphibious, and marsh plants.

The hydrological regime of wetlands strongly influences soil properties and vegetation structure, enabling the establishment of specialized hydrophytic plant communities adapted to waterlogged and anaerobic conditions (Rejmankova et

al., 2006). Despite pronounced seasonal fluctuations in water availability, these ecosystems sustain high levels of biological productivity and ecological complexity.

The Ramsar Convention has designated 75 wetlands in India as sites of international importance, of which 20 are located in Tamil Nadu (Tamil Nadu Wetland Mission, 2020). These wetlands are recognized based on criteria such as ecological uniqueness, support for threatened species, significance for water bird populations, and fisheries productivity, highlighting their conservation value at both national and global scales.

Tamil Nadu is floristically rich, harboring about 6,723 plant taxa, among which Poaceae is one of the most diverse families with 479 recorded species (Narasimhan & Irwin, 2021). Grasses form a fundamental structural and functional component of wetland vegetation, contributing to primary productivity, sediment stabilization, nutrient cycling, and water filtration (Ban et al., 2017). Globally, Poaceae comprises approximately 780 genera and 12,000 species, making it one of the largest and most ecologically significant plant families (Packiaraj et al., 2019). In wetlands, grasses exhibit high ecological plasticity, occupy varied niches, and often dominate plant communities, along with other families such as Cyperaceae and Commelinaceae (Lakshmanan & Saravana, 2018).

Despite their importance, wetlands worldwide are increasingly threatened by anthropogenic pressures and climate change. Agricultural expansion, urbanization, hydrological modifications, pollution, and biological invasions have led to widespread degradation and loss of wetland habitats. In India, invasive species such as *Eichhornia crassipes, Salvinia molesta, Pistia stratiotes,* and *Prosopis juliflora* have severely altered wetland structure and function, negatively impacting native biodiversity and water quality (Sarkar et al., 2021). In addition to ecological consequences, wetland degradation affects the economic and cultural services these ecosystems provide, including livelihoods, freshwater availability, carbon sequestration, and climate regulation (Bassi et al., 2014; Kingsford et al., 2016).

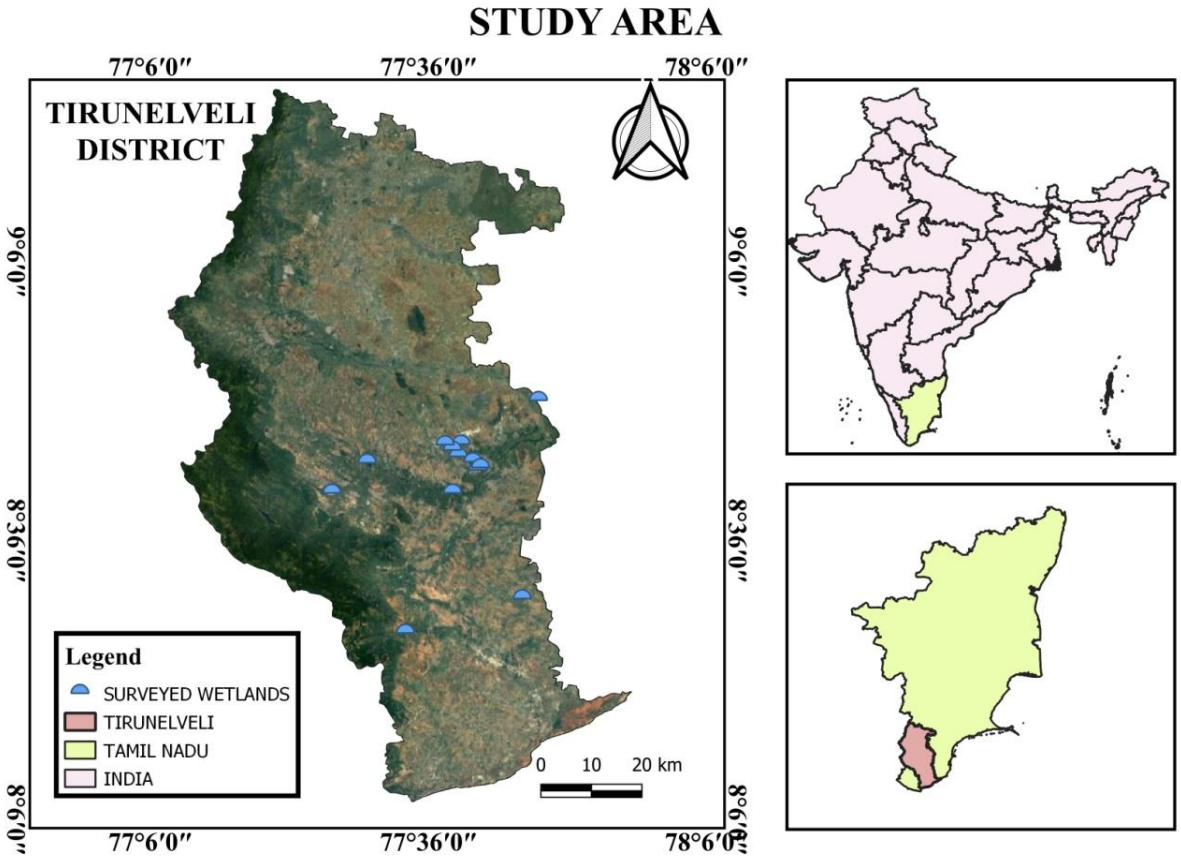
In this context, the present study aims to document the diversity, distribution, and ecological characteristics of grass species occurring in selected wetlands of Tirunelveli district, thereby contributing baseline data essential for effective wetland management and conservation strategies.

## Materials and Methods

### Study Area

The study was carried out in selected wetland ecosystems of Tirunelveli district, Tamil Nadu, India, to document grass species diversity and distribution (Table 2). The district is situated between 77°09′–77°59′ E longitude and 8°08′–9°25′ N latitude, encompassing an area of 5,597.55 km² and comprising nine taluks within three revenue divisions. It is bordered by Virudhunagar district to the north, Kanyakumari district and the Gulf of Mannar to the south, Thoothukudi district to the east, and Kanyakumari district and the state of Kerala to the west. The

physiography is largely plain with slight undulations in the western and northwestern regions, and soils range from alluvial and black to red and lateritic types. The drainage system is dominated by the Thamirabarani River and its associated tributaries, while the climate is semi-arid tropical with distinct cool (December–March), hot (April–June), and monsoonal seasons, receiving most rainfall from the northeast monsoon. Temperatures peak above 35 °C during April–May and drop to around 22.9 °C in November–December, conditions that strongly influence wetland vegetation dynamics. The selected wetlands were chosen based on their ecological significance, extent of anthropogenic pressure, and representation of major wetland types in the Tirunelveli district. Several sites experience intensive grazing, agricultural encroachment, and hydrological modification, making them suitable for assessing the response of grass communities to disturbance. The selection of these sites allowed for a comprehensive evaluation of grass diversity across both relatively undisturbed and human-influenced wetland habitats. Several of the surveyed wetlands are subjected to seasonal grazing, shoreline encroachments for agriculture, and sediment deposition, while also supporting fishing activities and serving as feeding and nesting grounds for migratory and resident water birds.




**Floristics Survey for Grasses**

Floristic surveys were conducted between July 2022 and March 2023 across diverse hydrophytic and marshy habitats, including rice fields, ponds, tanks, rivers, canals, ditches, seasonal puddles, and other waterlogged areas, particularly following monsoonal rainfall. During field visits, observations on habit, habitat, inflorescence characters, phenology, and associated species were recorded, and specimens were photographed in situ. Collected grass specimens were processed using standard herbarium techniques, and detailed morphological characters were examined under a stereomicroscope. Species identification was carried out using regional floras, taxonomic literature, authenticated herbarium specimens, and online databases such as World Flora Online and Plants of the World Online. Voucher specimens were deposited in the Sundaranar Herbarium (SH). The collected data were analyzed for phenology, habitat preference, distribution, and morphological variation; nomenclature was verified, classification followed the APG IV system, taxa were arranged alphabetically, artificial identification keys were prepared where applicable, and information on endemic status, vernacular names, and uses was documented.

## Results and Discussion

### Floristic Composition and Diversity

The present investigation documents the floristic composition and diversity of grasses occurring in selected wetlands of Tirunelveli district, Tamil Nadu. A total of fifteen wetlands—Abishekapatti (Ab), Alaangamaraikulam (AK), Gangaikondan Periyakulam (GP), Gandhinagarkulam (GK), Gopalasamudram (GS), Ilanthaikulam (IK), Kammalankulam (KK), Kandiyaperi Kulam (KP), Koonthankulam (KTK), Nainarkulam (NK), Thirukkurungudi Kulam (TKK), Thalarkulam (TK), Thernakulam (TRK), Thulukkarkulam (TLK), and Vellalankulam (VK) were surveyed, collectively representing the major wetland types distributed across the district.

Floristic analysis revealed a total of 88 grass taxa belonging to 48 genera and six subfamilies of Poaceae (Table 1 & Fig 1). These taxa were distributed across a wide range of habitats, including wet localities and moist places, wetland margins, pond edges, submerged ponds, moist sandy grounds, cultivated fields, paddy field margins, and stream and river edges, indicating considerable ecological adaptability. The highest species richness was recorded in wet localities and pond edges, each supporting 23 taxa, highlighting the strong influence of hydrological conditions on grass distribution.

Based on habitat preference, the 88 taxa were categorized into distinct ecological niches:(Table 1 & Fig 2) wet localities and moist places (23 taxa), pond edges (23), wetland margins (9), submerged ponds (6), stream edges (6), cultivated fields (7), moist sandy grounds (3), paddy field margins (1), and river margins (1). This pattern reflects the ability of wetland grasses to occupy both permanently inundated and seasonally moist habitats, as well as moderately disturbed agricultural landscapes.

Among the recorded subfamilies, Panicoideae was the most dominant,

contributing 53 taxa, followed by Chloridoideae with 28 taxa, while Aristidoideae (3 taxa), Micrairoideae (2 taxa), Arundinoideae (1 taxon), and Oryzoideae (1 taxon) were sparsely represented. This dominance is consistent with earlier studies from South Indian wetlands and reflects the adaptability of these groups to tropical climates and fluctuating moisture regimes.

Notably, five taxa endemic to Tamil Nadu - *Iseilema jainianum, Ischaemum timorense, Dimeria ornithopoda, Arundinella ciliata,* and *Arundinella nervosa* were recorded from the surveyed wetlands. The occurrence of these endemic grasses underscores the role of wetlands as important refugia for regionally significant taxa and highlights the need for focused conservation of wetland habitats in the Tirunelveli district.

**Fig: 1 Sub family wise classification**

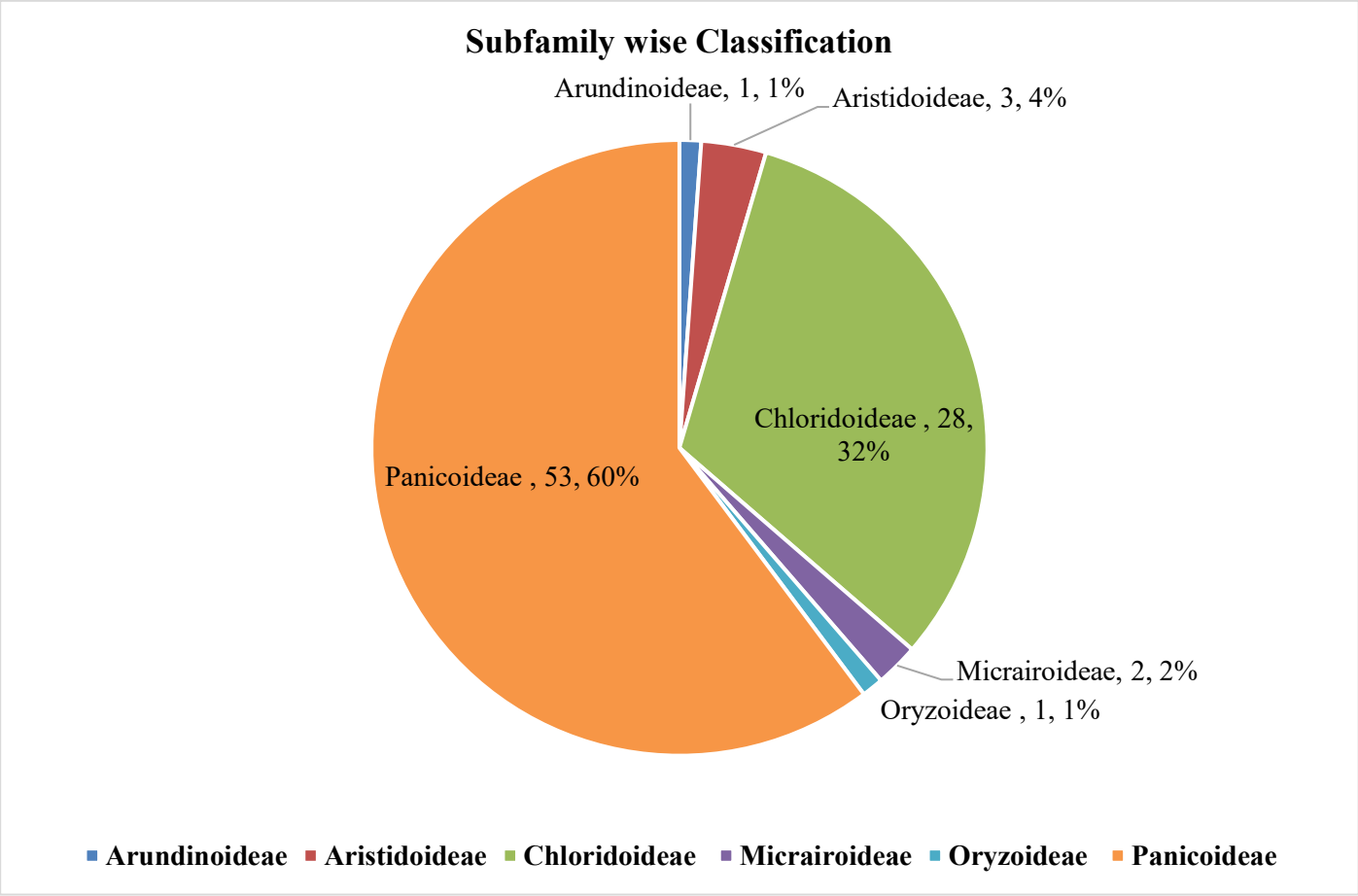



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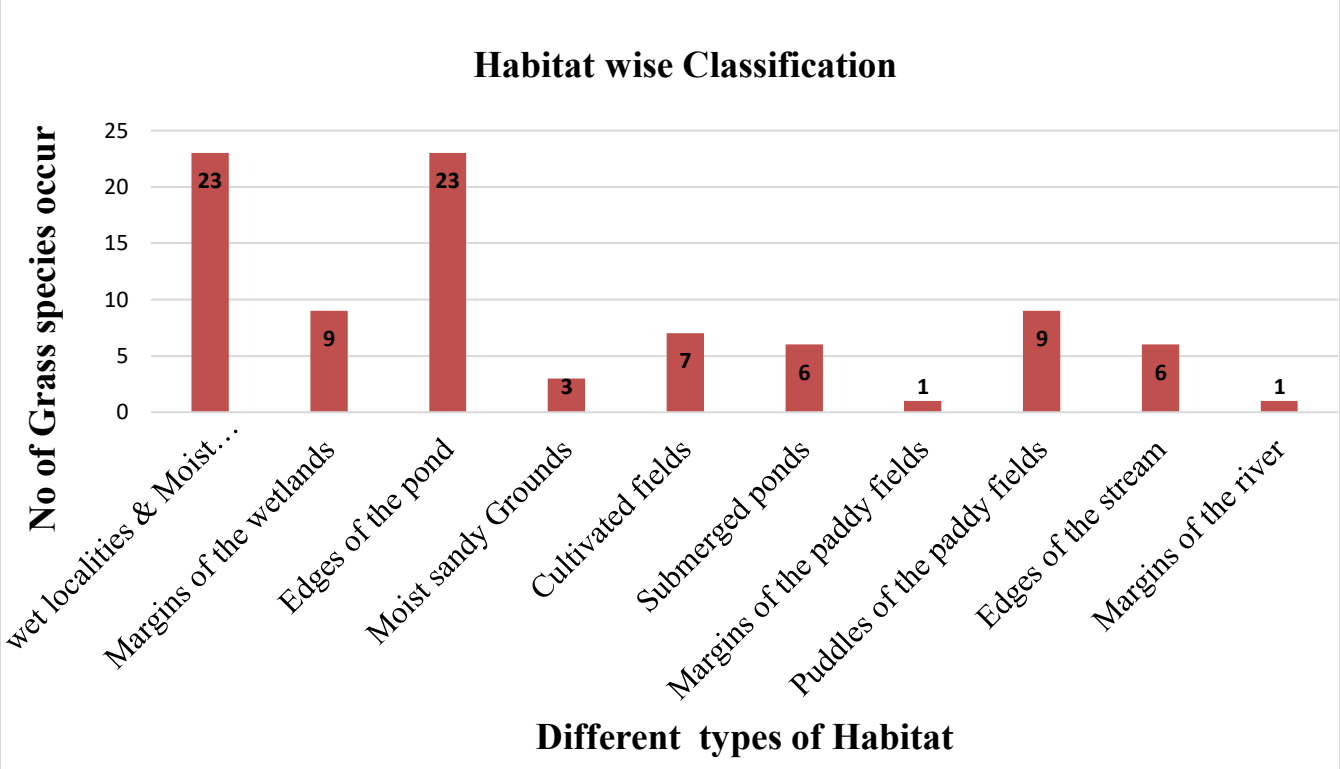
**Fig: 2: Habitat wise classification**




## Discussion

The present study recorded a comparatively higher diversity of grasses, with 88 taxa belonging to 48 genera, from selected wetlands of Tirunelveli district, when compared with earlier wetland studies from other regions. Sukumaran and Jeeva (2011) reported 39 Poaceae species from wetlands of Kanyakumari district, emphasizing the ecological and economic importance of grasses such as Oryza, Cynodon, and Saccharum, a trend that is also evident in the present investigation where grasses occupy a wide range of wetland and agro wetland habitats. Likewise, Palit et al. (2017) documented 28 grass species representing 18 genera from the wetlands of Birbhum district, West Bengal, noting the dominance of certain genera in maintaining wetland health, although species richness there was lower than that observed in Tirunelveli, possibly due to regional differences in climate and hydrology. Within Tirunelveli district, Lakshmanan and Saravana Ganthi (2018) recorded 28 Poaceae species from the Nambineri wetland, further confirming the dominance of grasses among monocots. The higher number of taxa documented in the present study can be attributed to extensive spatial coverage, inclusion of multiple wetland types, and detailed habitat-wise

sampling, highlighting the role of wetland heterogeneity in supporting rich grass diversity and reinforcing the need for their conservation and sustainable management. The presence of grazing, encroachment, and fishing activities in many of the wetlands may influence grass species composition by favoring disturbance-tolerant taxa, while potentially reducing the abundance of sensitive and endemic species. At the same time, the use of these wetlands by water birds and local fishing communities highlights their multifunctional ecological and socio-economic value.

## Summary and Conclusion

The present study documents the diversity of grasses (Poaceae) in selected wetlands of Tirunelveli district, Tamil Nadu, recording 88 taxa belonging to 48 genera and six subfamilies, including five endemic taxa. Species richness was highest in wet localities and pond edges, highlighting the influence of hydrological conditions and habitat heterogeneity on grass distribution, with Panicoideae emerging as the dominant subfamily followed by Chloridoideae. Comparisons with earlier studies indicate relatively higher grass diversity in the Tirunelveli wetlands, likely due to extensive sampling across diverse wetland types. The occurrence of endemic and ecologically important species underscores the role of wetlands as biodiversity refugia, while the presence of grasses in agro-wetland habitats reflects their ecological adaptability and increasing human influence. Overall, the study provides baseline information essential for wetland conservation and sustainable management in the region.

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**Plate 1: Common grasses found in Surveyed area:**


**Fig 1. *Urochloa mutica*, 2. *Sacciolepis indica* 3. *Paspalum scrobiculatum* 4. *Leersia hexandra*, 5. *Isachne gracilis*, 6. *Eragrostis japonica***

**Table 1. A checklist of grasses recorded in the Wetlands of Tirunelveli**

| S/No | Binomial Name | Locality | Phenology | Habitat |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | *Acrachne racemosa* (B.Heyne ex Roth) Ohwi | AB,GK | Mar - Dec | Wet localities |
| 2 | *Alloteropsis cimicina* (L.) Stapf | GK | Mar - Aug | Margins of the wetlands |
| 3 | *Apluda mutica* L. | AK,TRK | Throughout the year | Edges of ponds, ditches |
| 4 | *Aristida adscensionis* (L.) | GK | Throughout the year | Edges of ponds, ditches |
| 5 | *Aristida funiculata* Trin. & Rupr. | Gk | Nov - May | Moist sandy grounds |
| 6 | *Aristida hystrix* L.f. | Gk | June – March | Margins of the wetland |
| 7 | *Arundinella ciliata* Nees ex Miq. | Ak,TRK | Oct – Mar | Edges of ponds, ditches |
| 8 | *Arundinella nervosa* (Roxb.) Nees ex Hook. & Arn. | TRK | June – Aug | Edges of ponds, ditches |
| 9 | *Bothriochloa pertusa* (L.) A.Camus | GP,GK | Sep - June | Edges of ponds, ditches |
| 10 | *Cenchrus ciliaris* L. | AB,GK | Throughout the year | Wet localities |
| 11 | *Cenchrus pedicellatus* (Trin.) Morrone | GP,GK, KK | July – Feb | Wet localities |
| 12 | *Chionachne koenigii* (Spreng.) Thwaites | KK | July – Mar | Margins of paddy field |
| 13 | *Chloris barbata* Sw. | TK,VK | Throughout the year | Edges of ponds, ditches |
| 14 | *Chloris gayana* Kunth | AB | June - Nov | Moist sandy grounds |
| 15 | *Chloris montana* Roxb. | KTK | Throughout the year | Edges of ponds, ditches |
| 16 | *Chloris virgata* Sw. | KK | Oct – Feb | Edges of ponds |
| 17 | *Chloris wightiana* Nees ex Steud. | AB,GK | Throughout the year | Wet localities |
| 18 | *Chrysopogon aciculatus* (Retz.) Trin. | TRK | Apr - Nov | Wet localities |
| 19 | *Chrysopogon zizanioides* (L.) Roberty | AB | Aug - March | Margins of the pond |

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|---|---|---|---|---|
| 20 | *Cynodon dactylon* (L.) Pers. | KP,TK,TRK,VK,GK | Throughout the year | Edges of streams |
| 21 | *Cyrtococcum longipes* (Wight & Arn. ex Hook.f.) | TRK | July – Mar | Margins of the paddy field |
| 22 | *Cyrtococcum trigonum* (Retz.) A.Camus | AK,TRK | July – April | Wet localities |
| 23 | *Dactyloctenium aegyptium* (L.) Willd. | AB,GK, KP,KTK | Throughout the year | Edges of ponds, ditches |
| 24 | *Dichanthium caricosum* (L.) A.Camus | AK | Sep – Mar | Cultivated lands |
| 25 | *Digitaria bicornis* (Lam.) Roem. & Schult. | TK | Aug – Feb | Edges of the stream |
| 26 | *Digitaria ciliaris* (Retz.) Koeler | AB, | Throughout the year | Cultivated fields |
| 27 | *Digitaria longiflora* (Retz.) Pers. | AK, TLK | June – Feb | Edges of ponds, ditches |
| 28 | *Digitaria sanguinalis* (L.) Scop. | AK,TRK | | Wet localities |
| 29 | *Dimeria ornithopoda* Trin. | TRK | Nov - Jan | Edges of ponds, ditches |
| 30 | *Dimeria thwaitesii* Hack. | AK | Mar - Apr | Edges of ponds, ditches |
| 31 | *Dinebra retroflexa* (Vahl) Panz. | Kk,GS | Throughout the year | Cultivated fields |
| 32 | *Echinochloa colonum* (L.) Link | IK,KK,NK,TLK,TRK | Throughout the year | Puddles and paddy fields |
| 33 | *Echinochloa crus-galli* (L.) P.Beauv. | TK | Throughout the year | Puddles and paddy fields |
| 34 | *Eragrostiella bifaria* (Vahl) Bor | AK,TRK | Aug - May | Margins of the wetland |
| 35 | *Eragrostis aspera* (Jacq.) Nees | AK,TRK | Nov – Feb | Submerged of ponds |
| 36 | *Eragrostis atrovirens* (Desf.) Trin. ex Steud. | AK,TRK | July – Feb | Submerged of ponds |
| 37 | *Eragrostis gangetica* (Roxb.) Steud. | GK,GS, AK | Throughout the year | Cultivated fields |
| 38 | *Eragrostis japonica* (Thunb.) Trin. | AB,KK | Throughout the year | Moist places |
| 39 | *Eragrostis pilosa* (L.) P.Beauv. | AK,TRK | May – Mar | Moist places |
| 40 | *Eragrostis tenella* (L.) P.Beauv. ex Roem. & Schult. | KK,GK | Throughout the year | Wet localities |
| 41 | *Eragrostis unioloides* (Retz.) Nees ex Steud. | AK,TRK | Throughout the year | Edges of ponds, ditches |
| 42 | *Eragrostis viscosa* (Retz.) Trin. | AB,KK, | May – Mar | Edges of ponds, |

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|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | GK | | ditches |
| 43 | *Eriochloa procera* (Retz.) C.E.Hubb. | AB,KK, GK,TLK ,VK | Throughout the year | Edges of ponds, ditches |
| 44 | *Heteropogon contortus* (L.) P.Beauv. ex Roem. & Schult. | AK,TRK | Throughout the year | Margins of the wetland |
| 45 | *Imperata cylindrica* (L.) Raeusch. | VK | Throughout the year | Wet localities |
| 46 | *Isachne globosa* (Thunb.) Kuntze | AK,TRK | May – Feb | Edges of ponds, ditches |
| 47 | *Isachne gracilis* C.E.Hubb. | AK,TRK | Aug – Mar | Puddles and paddy fields |
| 48 | *Ischaemum rugosum* Salisb. | TK | Nov- Feb | Puddles and paddy fields |
| 49 | *Ischaemum timorense* Kunth | AK,TRK ,IK,KP, | Nov- Mar | Puddles and paddy fields |
| 50 | *Iseilema jainianum* P.Umam. &P.Daniel | AB,GK | Dec – Jan | Margins of the wetland |
| 51 | *Iseilema laxum* Hack. | AK,GK | July – May | Puddles and paddy fields |
| 52 | *Leersia hexandra* Sw. | AK,TRK | June – Mar | submerged of ponds |
| 53 | *Leptochloa chinensis* (L.) Nees | AB,GK | Throughout the year | Puddles and paddy fields |
| 54 | *Leptochloa neesii* (Thwaites) Benth. | AK | Nov – Feb | Cultivated fields |
| 55 | *Leptochloa uniflora* Hochst. ex A. Rich. | AK,TRK | Oct – Feb | Cultivated fields |
| 56 | *Megathyrsus maximus* (Jacq.) B.K.Simon& S.W.L.Jacobs | KK,GK, AK,TRK | June – Apr | Wet localities |
| 57 | *Melinis repens* (Willd.) Zizka | AK,TRK | Throughout the year | Wet localities |
| 58 | *Mnesithea laevis* (Retz.) Kunth | AK | May - June | Edges of ponds, ditches |
| 59 | *Panicum curviflorum* Hornem. | AK | Mar – Dec | Cultivated fields |
| 60 | *Panicum paludosum* Roxb. | AK,TRK | Aug – Dec | submerged of ponds |
| 61 | *Panicum psilopodium* Trin. | KK,AK, TRK | July – Mar | Edges of ponds, ditches |
| 62 | *Panicum repens* L. | TK | Throughout the year | Margins of the wetland |
| 63 | *Paspalum scrobiculatum* L. | AK,TRK ,IK,KP,K P | Throughout the year | Edges of ponds, diches |

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|---|---|---|---|---|
| 64 | *Perotis indica* (L.) Kuntze | GK,KK, AB,GP | Throughout the year | Edges of the stream |
| 65 | *Phragmites karka* (Retz.) Trin. ex Steud. | AK | June - Mar | Margins of the river |
| 66 | *Pommereulla cornucopiae* L.f. | GK,AB | Oct – Feb | Wet localities |
| 67 | *Pseudosorghum fasciculare* (Roxb.) A.Camus | AK | Oct – Dec | Edges of the stream |
| 68 | *Sacciolepis indica* (L.) Chase | AK,TRK | Aug – Apr | Submerged of ponds |
| 69 | *Sacciolepis myosuroides* (R.Br.) Chase ex | AK,TRK | May – Dec | Edges of ponds, ditches |
| 70 | *Setaria flavida* (Retz.) Veldkamp | AK | May – Mar | Puddles and paddy fields |
| 71 | *Setaria geminata* (Forssk.) Veldkamp | TRK | May – Mar | Puddles and paddy fields |
| 72 | *Setaria homonyma* (Steud.) Chiov. | AK | Sep | Sandy areas near streams |
| 73 | *Setaria punctata* (Burm.f.) Veldkamp | TRK,GS | Sep - Mar | Moist localities of paddy fields |
| 74 | *Setaria verticillata* (L.) P.Beauv. | AB,AK, KK,IK | June – Apr | Edges of ponds, ditches |
| 75 | *Sorghum nitidum* (Vahl) Pers. | AK | Aug – Dec | Edges of the stream |
| 76 | *Sporobolus coromandelianus* (Retz.) Kunth | AB,KK, GK | June – Mar | Wet localities |
| 77 | *Sporobolus diandrus* (Retz.) P.Beauv. | TRK | May – Mar | Wet localities |
| 78 | *Sporobolus indicus* (L.) R.Br. | TRK,AK | Throughout the year | Puddles and paddy fields |
| 79 | *Sporobolus virginicus* (L.) Kunth | Gk | July – Jan | Margin of the wetland |
| 80 | *Themeda triandra* Forssk. | AK | Throughout the year | Edges of ponds, ditches |
| 81 | *Trachys muricata* (L.) Pers. ex Trin. | AB,GK, KK,I | Mar - Dec | Edges of the stream |
| 82 | *Urochloa brizantha* (A.Rich.) R.D.Webster | TRK | June - Mar | The margins of the wetland |
| 83 | *Urochloa distachyos* (L.) T.Q.Nguyen | GS,AK | June – Mar | Cultivated fields |
| 84 | *Urochloa mutica* (Forssk.) T.Q.Nguyen | GS,AK, TRK,KP | Nov - June | Submerged of ponds |
| 85 | *Urochloa ramosa* (L.) T.Q.Nguyen | Gk,kp | June – Mar | The margins of the wetland |

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|---|---|---|---|---|
| 86 | *Urochloa reptans* (L.) C.A.Gardner& C.E.Hubb. | KTK | July - Mar | Wet localities |
| 87 | *Urochloa setigera* (Retz.) C.E.Hubb. | AB | Aug - Feb | Wet localities |
| 88 | *Zoysia matrella* (L.) Merr. | GK,KK, TK,VK | Mar - Oct | Wet localities |