

## Our Local Environment: This One Does Not Belong

by Ann Harris Davidson, Member-at-Large

We each have good reasons why we chose to live in Four Hills Village. For many of us, one reason is that our Albuquerque suburb is largely surrounded by native desert (thanks to City Open Spaces, the arroyos, and the open land of Kirtland Air Force Base). However, throughout New Mexico, its “native desert” has been invaded by a host of non-native species, many of which are thus established in our yards in FHV, but, as welcoming, and diverse, as we would like to be, the plant discussed in this article does not belong and its seedlings should be pulled from our properties in the spring before they have the opportunity to produce thousands of seeds.

The **TUMBLEWEED** is the iconic weed of the West, made famous in Bob Nolan’s 1930 song, “*Tumbling Tumbleweeds*”, which became a national hit from 1934 when it was sung by Roy Rogers (originally named Leonard Slye) in the Sons of the Pioneers group. “*Tumbling Tumbleweeds*” has lyrics (such as “*Lonely but free, I’ll be found, Drifting along with the tumbling tumbleweeds ...*”) that appealed to western mythology. The song was used in the 1935 Gene Autry film of the same name, and, in 2010, the Library of Congress added the original 1934 song edition of “*Tumbling Tumbleweeds*” to the National Recording Registry of recordings that are “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant.”

Here in Albuquerque, we are accustomed to seeing the annual giant tumbleweed snowman (off I-40 east of the “Big I”) and, in a nod to the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2020, the Albuquerque Metropolitan Arroyo Flood Control Authority (AMAFCA) correctly had its snowman wearing a mask! Though many do not realize it, AMAFCA goes to the trouble of creating this snowman to raise awareness of the problems of tumbleweeds clogging up flood control intakes. In addition to tumbleweeds compromising AMAFCA’s flood control efforts, in 2014, there was international coverage about houses in Roswell being buried by blown piles of tumbleweeds, with the U.K.

Metro News reporting, “Residents of ‘alien town’ trapped in houses by tumbleweed invasion” (at

<https://metro.co.uk/2014/01/31/residents-of-alien-town-roswell-trapped-in-houses-by-tumbleweed-invasion-4286232/>).

**But, tumbleweeds are NOT native to the U.S. West; they are more correctly called “prickly Russian thistle”, as this plant is an invader from the Russian steppes** that has many scientific names (including the current



one of *Salsola tragus*, thanks to the 2017 XIX International Botanical Congress). Since 2013, the National Geographic Society has produced

articles, videos, and a film entitled, “*The weed that won the west*”, and has emphasized that a single tumbleweed plant can produce 250,000 seeds. Young seedlings are a pretty, bright green color and are not prickly; as they grow, the lower stems start to show a pink tinge. The three maturing plants in the photo on the left were

growing in the front yard of a home in Four Hills Village in 2020. **Do remove tumbleweeds in 2021!**



Photo credit: Jim Thompson/Albuquerque Journal, Dec.2020

