

-State Species Abstract-  
-Wyoming Natural Diversity Database-

*ASTER MOLLIS*  
SOFT ASTER  
Family: Asteraceae

Status:

US Fish & Wildlife Service: None (former  
C2 candidate)

Agency Status: USFS Region 2: Sensitive.  
USFS Region 4: Sensitive.

Heritage Rank:

Global: G3 State: S3

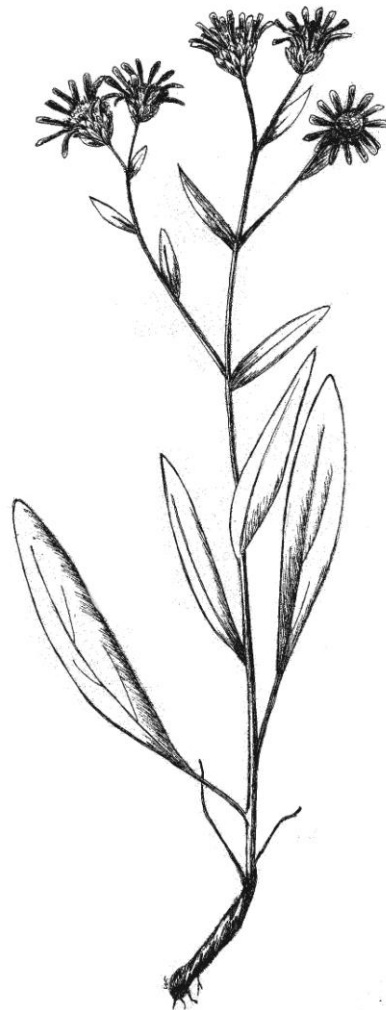
WYNDD Plant List: State Endemic  
(Medium Conservation Priority)

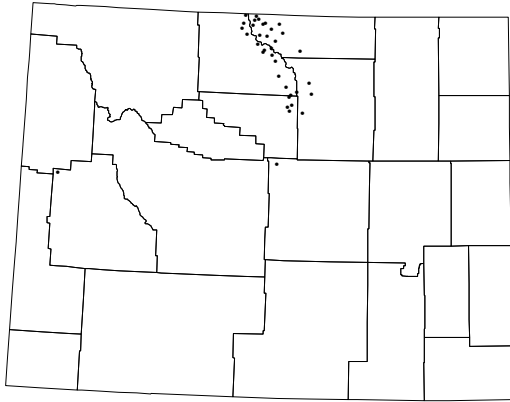
Description: Soft aster is a perennial, multi-stemmed herb averaging 30-50 cm high. The leaves and stems are covered with soft, multicelled, wavy, non-glandular hairs, giving the entire plant a grayish appearance. Leaves are entire, alternate, and largest near the base, with blades up to 10 cm long and 2.5 cm wide. The lower leaves are long-petioled, while those higher on the stem are clasping. The sparsely-leafy, broad inflorescence is composed of numerous heads with violet or purple ray flowers surrounding yellowish disk flowers. The 8-9 mm involucre consists of 4-5 rows of overlapping, grayish-hairy bracts that are purple and green at the tips and whitish at the thickened base. Fruits are achenes 2.5-3.5 mm long with soft, white pappus bristles (Dorn 1992; Fertig et al. 1994; Jones 1984; Marriott 1992; Fertig 1999).

Similar Species: *Erigeron* spp. have a single row of non-overlapping and uniformly green involucre bracts. *Aster ascendens*, *A. foliaceus*, and *A. occidentalis* have glabrous leaf surfaces. Hybrids between *A. mollis* and these species can be recognized by their sparse leaf pubescence (Fertig et al. 1994).



Above and Below: *Aster mollis* by Walter Fertig.





Wyoming distribution of *Aster mollis*.

Flowering/Fruiting Period: Late July to mid September.

Distribution: Soft aster is a Wyoming endemic restricted to the Bighorn Range (Big Horn, Johnson, Natrona, Sheridan, and Washakie counties) and Cliff Creek/Hoback Canyon area of Sublette County (Fertig et al. 1994). Jones (1984) also reports a specimen of *Aster ascendens* from Fremont County "with possible influence of *A. mollis*". Potential habitat may extend into Montana at the far northern end of the Bighorn Range (Crow Indian Reservation).

Habitat: *Aster mollis* occurs primarily on deep, rocky calcareous soils in dry mountain big sagebrush or shrubby cinquefoil grasslands and mountain meadows bordered by aspen or conifer woods at 6400-8500 feet. Populations have also been documented from limestone outcrops and redbeds. Common associated species include *Festuca idahoensis*, *Elymus trachycaulus*, *Stipa nelsonii*, *Leucopoa kingii*, *Erigeron subtrinervis*, *Eriogonum umbellatum*, *Aster foliaceus*, *Potentilla arguta*, and *Penstemon procerus*.

Occurrences in Wyoming: Known from 34 extant and 2 historical in Wyoming, 32 of



Above: *Aster mollis* habitat on semi-disturbed limey soils in a montane meadow bordering conifer woodlands. Photo by Hollis Marriott.

which have been discovered or relocated since 1990 (most recently in 1999).

Abundance: Many populations are locally abundant, containing several thousand individual plants. Accurate censuses have been difficult to attain at some sites, however, due to the presence of hybrid individuals and other difficulties in making positive identifications.

Trends: Probably stable, although trend data are lacking for most populations.

Protection status: Three occurrences are protected in The Nature Conservancy's Tensleep Preserve. One population also occurs within the Bull Elk Park Research Natural Area. Ten populations are found within the potential Devil Canyon, Dry Fork, Elephant Head, Pete's Hole, McLain Lake, Poison Creek, Tongue River, and Mann Creek Research Natural Areas.

Threats: Grazing and trampling have been identified as potential threats, although low levels of herbivory or disturbance do not appear to have a negative impact.

Managed Areas: Found on lands managed by Bighorn and Bridger-Teton National Forests

and the BLM Buffalo, Casper, and Worland Field Offices.

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