



Prairie Grasslands

Represented by: Grasslands National Park

13



Grasslands

PRONGHORNS AND PRAIRIE DOGS

This natural region is often referred to in the past tense, in terms of what once was. It was once an ocean of grass, broken by wide wooded valleys and forest-clad hills. It was once Canada's richest wildlife region, reminiscent of the savannah country of East Africa. But we will never really know what it was like. Only the wind remains unchanged, blowing unceasingly across the sweeping plains.

THE LAND:

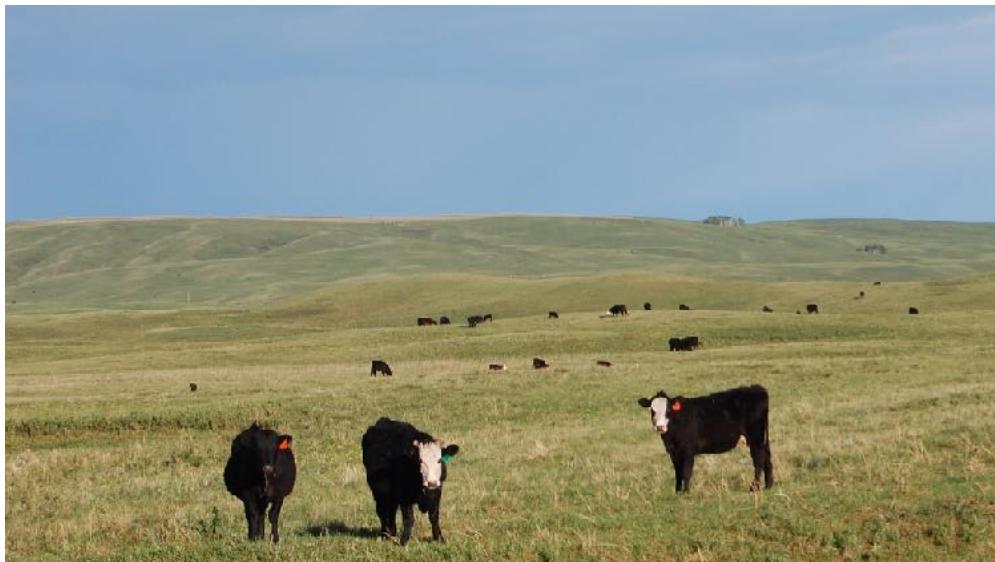
A vast tilted plain, the land rises gently until it ends abruptly at the foothills of the Rockies. The monotonous flatness is interrupted by weirdly eroded badlands, sand dunes, coulees, rocky canyons, potholes, hills and sweeping river valleys. This region rests on a thick mantle of rich, black soil that is cool and moist to the touch - some of the most fertile soils in the country. Within the fertile grasslands is "Palliser's Triangle", semi arid country considered unsuitable for agriculture or stock raising in the opinion of John Palliser, leader of a scientific expedition along the American boundary in 1857-1860.

VEGETATION:

Speargrass, wheatgrass, blue grama, rough fescue, bluebunch fescue, red fescue, needlegrass, little blue-stem - grass is the single characteristic common to the mosaic of habitats making up this region. Mixed prairie, dominated by speargrasses and wheatgrasses, is the most extensive grassland type in this region. Mixed Prairie, as its name implies, includes both tall and short grasses. Blue grama, a drought-re-



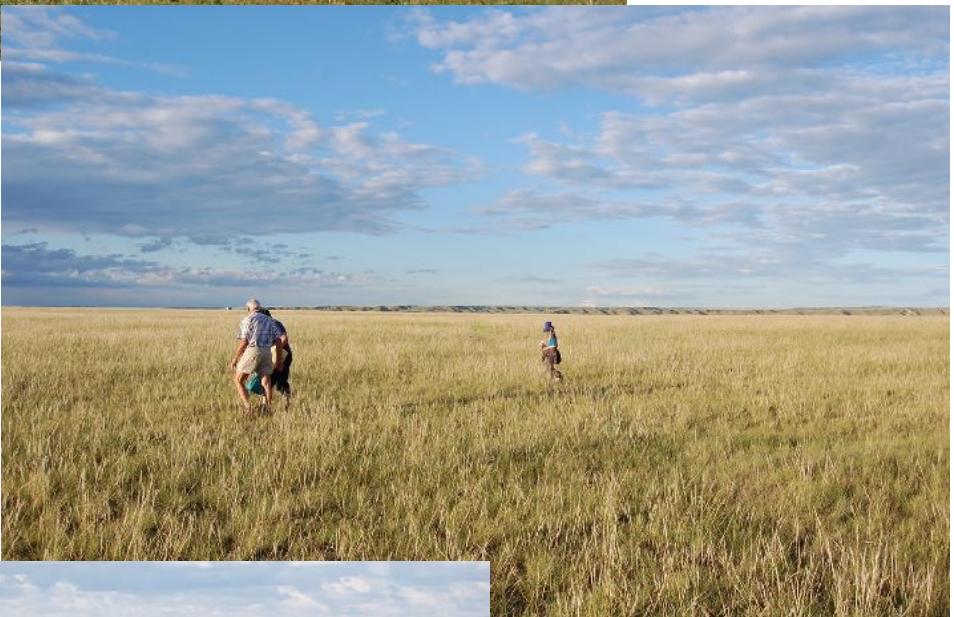
Prairie Crocus



Rolling hills cover most of the Grassland Region, although the area between Moose Jaw and Winnipeg really is flat.



Hikers on this tract of grassland near Medicine Hat, AB, have no need for trails, just keen eyes to avoid the prickly pear cactus.



Over a hundred species of wildflower carpet the grassland. Different kinds bloom every week from late April to September.

Natural Region 13



Burrowing Owl

sistent short grass, is important in dry sites.

River valleys and old drainage channels, important routes for the invasion of plant species that survived the last glaciation beyond the edge of the ice sheet, harbour a rich variety of trees and shrubs: oaks, American elm, cottonwood, Manitoba maple, and green ash, among others. Shallow depressions, some of which are periodically flooded, harbour communities of salt-resistant species, such as alkali grass and wild barley. The thousands of sloughs that characterize this region, ranging in area from a few square metres to several hectares, are dominated by tall sedges and grasses.

WILDLIFE:

It is difficult to imagine the richness of the wildlife of this natural region in pre-settlement days. Herds of bison so vast that they took days to pass, along with untold numbers of pronghorn antelope, mule deer, white-tailed deer and elk, roamed this wilderness of grass stalked by the prairie grizzly, prairie wolf, cougar and other predators.

Today only remnants of this rich fauna remain in the most remote and driest corners of the region. Here, species endemic to the prairies, such as the pronghorn antelope, black-tailed prairie dog and plains pocket gopher, can still be found. The black-footed ferret and greater prairie chicken once lived here, but are believed to have been extirpated.

Waterfowl nest in the potholes that dimple this region, earning it the title "The Duck

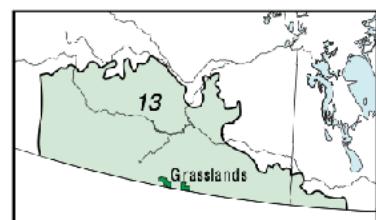
Factory of North America". The open grasslands still provide habitat for such unique prairie species as the sage grouse and sharp-tailed grouse, along with introduced species such as the ring-necked pheasant and the gray partridge.

Several interesting species of reptiles and amphibians are restricted in Canada to this region: the prairie rattlesnake, the eastern short-horned lizard, the plains spadefoot toad, and the great plains toad, among others.

THE STATUS OF NATIONAL PARKS:

This region is represented by Grasslands National Park. In the dry hills, badlands and eroded river valleys, a diversity of wildlife, including pronghorns, rattlesnakes and the only remaining black-tailed prairie dog colonies in Canada, can still be found in this wild corner of the prairies. Archeological investigations conducted to date reveal that the park is one of the richest areas of Northern Plains Indian culture in North America.

A 1981 agreement between the Governments of Canada and Saskatchewan, revised in 1988, provides for the establishment of the park encompassing 906 square kilometres. The park will be proclaimed under the National Parks Act once sufficient lands have been acquired. Approximate 50% (450 km²) of lands required for the park have already been acquired on a "willing-seller willing-buyer" basis.





Bison, one of the keystone species of our grassland, support many other species of plants and animals. For example, in winter, they push the snow aside with their heads to find grass. These openings also enable pronghorn to feed.



Similarly, beaver create habitat for many water-loving plants and animals. By holding water back, beaver dams enable shrubs to thrive. Before trapping reduced their numbers, beaver inhabited every stream on the grassland. These ribbons of green within the sometimes very dry prairie were critical sources for water for local wildlife and migrating birds alike.

Brilliantly coloured chokecherry, saskatoon and willow shrubs decorate this beaver-inhabited watercourse, in contrast with the dry uplands in the distance.



Pronghorn, with their delicate legs for swift running, depend on larger animals like bison or cattle to break the crusty snow.



Blackfoot, Plains Cree and Metis peoples celebrate their culture in colourful pow-wows. The public is encouraged to attend these events, although some more religious rituals are private.



Many towns, both large and small, have annual rodeos, where traditional ranching activities have been formalized to become scored competitions.



The Milk River, shown here, occupies the largest of the many valleys scoured by torrents of meltwater pouring off the retreating glaciers about 12,000 years ago.

Further Information

Check these sources to learn more about Canada's Grassland Region:

- Grassland National Park
- Blackfoot Crossing Historical Park
- Prairie Conservation Forum (Alberta)
- Saskatchewan Prairie Conservation Action Plan
- Dinosaur Provincial Park
- Writing-On-Stone Provincial Park

Aboriginal Peoples

Treaty 2 - Cree
Treaty 4 - Cree and Saulteaux
Treaty 6 - Plains and Wood Cree
Treaty 7 - Blackfoot
(Piikani, Siksika, Kainai)

Main Settlements

Calgary
Lethbridge
Medicine Hat
Moose Jaw
Regina

Major Land Uses

Cattle ranching
Grain farming - wheat, canola
Irrigation farming - hay, sugar beets, corn
Oil and gas
Renewable energy - wind and solar power
Potash



Most of the world's potash comes from south-central Saskatchewan. This fertilizer supports much of the world's agriculture.

The industrial processing plants contrast with the surrounding wheat and canola fields.

The flat grassland typical of areas east of Moose Jaw (foreground) contrasts with the more rolling topography to the west. The change is often quite distinct, as shown here, and is known as the Missouri Coteau.

