



WELCOME TO THE PRAIRIES

Understanding and Enjoying Alberta's Grassland

The grassland of southeastern Alberta and southwestern Saskatchewan presents dramatic scenery that may be unfamiliar to many visitors. This brief introduction will help newcomers explore this region with confidence. Urban residents are encouraged to keep these points in mind as they venture into this spectacular landscape.

Please keep in mind that both the ecology and the management of the Canadian prairie differ significantly from that of rangelands in the United States.

Grassland is not a failed forest

Prairie vegetation is what naturally grows in areas with not enough rainfall to support trees. Trees never did grow here, and never will, without artificial irrigation. But the land supports far more vegetation than a desert.

Grassland is a short forest

Prairie vegetation includes several hundred species of plants that interact with each other and a wide range of animals, forming an ecosystem that is as complex as a forest. Some species of grass form long-lived bunches that may be 50 or more years old, similar to the age of some trees.

Grassland produces an abundance of healthy meat

Sunshine and rain allow the Canadian prairie to produce large quantities of nutritious beef, without pollution or artificial inputs. Many other environmental benefits result, including reduced floods and cleaner water. The native prairie removes and stores more carbon than the cattle produce.

Not all prairie is flat or dry

The prairie region has many landforms. While grassland forms the most common natural community, you will also see broad rivers flanked by steep cliffs, and rolling sand dunes. Small groves of trees can be found in the valleys and at the northern edge of the grassland. Glaciation levelled much of the

landscape, leaving thousands of small wetlands, called sloughs. In spite of the low rainfall, the region is home to literally millions of ducks each summer.

Not all grasses are the same

Natural prairie consists of many species of grass. At each site, about half a dozen species will be common, and a dozen others will be found in certain special sub-habitats. Most widespread grasses can be identified by looking at the tall stalk holding the seeds. You can notice these differences, even if you do not know the name for each.

Some grasses are not natural

Some species of grass planted by farmers on the advice of experts compete with native grasses, but are not as long-lived or nutritious. Although these have important agricultural value, they can be considered weeds in natural grasslands. Examples include crested wheatgrass & smooth brome.

Prairie is often brown

Spring comes early on the grassland. By April, the snow is gone and the prairie is turning green. The early flowers are blooming, although the more familiar mountain meadows will still be covered with snow. Visit the prairie in May and June to enjoy carpets of wildflowers and rolling plains of lush green grass. Save the mountain hiking for July and August when the prairies ripen to a rich bronze.

Grassfire

Remember that the brown colour indicates a significant fire hazard. Several recent fires have burned more than 100 sq. km. The native grassland will recover, but a fire means several years without grazing.

Show respect by only smoking in vehicles or on gravel. Park on gravel and don't drive through dry grass, as the catalytic converter can set it on fire.

Barbed-wire fences are not generally intended to discourage access

While most rural fences are made of barbed wire, it is not to keep people out. The sharp barbs are needed to keep the thick-skinned cattle from pushing the fence over. In fact, in southern Alberta, over half the natural prairie is public land that is available for public use, if the rancher leasing the land is contacted first. Ask your county agricultural field person how to gain access.

If the wire has no barbs, it may be electrified. Check for insulators holding the wire to the posts. If the system is turned on, the shock will surprise you but is not painful. Generally, hikers can crawl under the widely-spaced wires.

Grazing is necessary to keep grassland healthy

Without grazing, grasses will flourish at the expense of wildflowers. Animal species that depend on wildflowers, like pollinating insects and pronghorn, will decline. Grazing by cattle duplicates to a large extent the effect of bison grazing, ensuring the prairie retains a healthy mix of plant species. Grasses, being perennial plants, can recover from grazing within a year.

Ranchers adjust the number of cattle to ensure that most grass plants will only be grazed every two or three years, benefiting both cattle and wildlife. A healthy landscape will have an informal patchwork of both very short grass (grazed heavily) and taller grass (grazed lightly).

Cattle that graze on natural grassland are healthy and environmentally friendly

Cattle are well adapted to live in the wide range of weather conditions found in southern Alberta if they have ready access to water. Grazing provides an economic return from the land, reducing the likelihood of it being ploughed up for crop production.

Prairie used to have many more animals

Most people know that bison used to graze on the prairie, but may not realize that other types of animal were also present in large numbers. While bison ate grass, pronghorn ate wildflower plants, and deer ate shrubs. Elk, on the other hand, are not picky and would eat what ever type of vegetation was most common at the time. Numerous wolves and grizzly bears feasted on the abundant

grazing animals as well as smaller prey. Smaller carnivores like wolverine, bobcat and swift fox were also present. Coyotes and deer were less common than now. Elk, wolf and grizzly bear live in the mountains now because they are less likely to come in conflict with humans, not because they prefer that habitat.

Biodiversity means the total variety of living organisms in an area. The biodiversity of grasslands is comparable to that of other types of habitat at similar latitudes.

Species At Risk (SAR)

This general term refers to natural species that are declining in number. The precise designation for each species may vary between jurisdictions or over time. (The provincial rating is not always the same as the federal.) Some Species At Risk are quite commonly seen in southeast Alberta because we have some of the best remaining grassland in Canada.

Finding your way

Nearly every road intersection in rural Alberta has identification signs, so it is easy to know where you are. Township roads run east-west every two miles, and their numbers start at the American border. Range roads run north- south, and are found every mile as you travel east or west. Their numbers start at the Saskatchewan border. Each township extends only six miles in each direction, so the roads are numbered 0 to 5. No township or range roads end in 6,7,8 or 9.

Every county sells a book of maps for \$20-30 that will show you where every road is, and also who owns each parcel of land. Make this important investment if you plan on making more that a couple of visits.

Rangeland Manners

A few tips will get you off to a good start with any landowners you meet.

Farming generally refers to planting crops on cultivated land. Ranching involves raising cattle. Most ranchers would rather not be called farmers, even if they have some cropland. "Producer" is a general term that includes both ranchers and farmers.

How much land?

You will be impressed with the vast expanse of land, but don't ask a farmer or rancher how much they own. Their land is very much their

bank account. Even though the publicly-available county map shows the ownership, asking the producer directly is considered quite rude

How many cattle?

Again, don't ask! Cattle are the rancher's business, and asking how many they have is like asking what his annual income is. Instead, you could ask what breed of cattle he raises, and how the prices are these days. Inquire about the sort of activities that ranching involves.

Driving on gravel roads

Counties do a good job of maintaining gravel roads, but the conditions can change with no notice. The speed limit is 80 km/hr. If you are going faster than that, ask yourself why. It's neighbourly to wave when passing someone, and it's smart to slow right down (less than 30 km/h), to avoid a cracked windshield.

Parking your vehicle

When parking, be sure to not block any gate, even those that don't look used. Although the area may not have fences, don't block the graded approach with your vehicle.

Don't park on grass; keep to the gravel. Vehicle exhaust systems frequently set dry grass on fire, so be safe and make a quick check underneath right after parking.

Gates

Ranchers are liable for accidents due to cattle getting onto roads, so an open gate is a major problem. If you are accessing land (with permission, of course), try not to open any gates. Crawl through or under the fence instead, leaving your vehicle on the approach. If you must open a gate, remember that it is always easier to open than to close it. If it is really tight, don't open it. Sometimes, gates are left open so livestock can access water in the adjacent field. So, whether open or closed, always leave gates as you found them.

Don't be shy

Go out of your way to introduce yourself to people you meet, and explain what you are doing. Mention your area of interest (birdwatching, wildflowers, photography, etc.) and ask where they would suggest visiting. You can tap into a lifetime of information.

Vote with your dollars

Make an effort to shop in the small villages you visit. Buying even a drink or chocolate bar lets you get local insight from the clerk. Mention why you are there, so people realize nature enthusiasts are a part of the local economy. Don't comment on the high prices; that is the cost of keeping small-town services alive. The business owner is not getting rich at your expense.

Dogs

Ranchers, rightly, have zero tolerance for dogs chasing cattle. Unless your dog responds immediately to commands, keep it on a leash, or better yet, leave it at home.

Funny noises aren't very funny

Some urban people "MOO" at cattle. Yes, it often gets a reaction. Sometimes, it gets a **big** reaction! Don't irritate the cows or, especially, the bulls.

Accessing the land

Unless a sign says otherwise, permission is needed to cross any fence. Take the time to find the owner first, and ask permission.

The best place to start learning about the natural prairie is on designated conservation lands. Several provincial parks in the grassland region have staff that can help you enjoy your visit. Alberta Conservation Association (ACA), Ducks Unlimited, Nature Conservancy of Canada, and Alberta Fish & Game Association have each purchased grassland for public use as well as wildlife conservation. In Alberta, check the ACA's website to find a site near you:

<http://www.albertadiscoverguide.com/>

The expert birdwatchers with the Society of Grasslands Naturalists compiled the [Birding Trails of Southeastern Alberta](#). The 80+ sites listed here are great places for other nature as well. A PDF format can be downloaded at:

<http://grasslands-naturalists.org/birding/>

All these locations are available for public foot access without any permissions.

Transition Medicine Hat celebrates our grassland, and the many ranchers who carefully steward it. We help both residents and visitors appreciate the vital role this region plays in the life of modern Alberta.