



PROTECTING PRAIRIE LANDSCAPES

Cooperation for species and habitats at risk

When Grasslands National Park was established, many Canadians thought first and foremost about the many species at risk that call the prairie ecosystem their home. Grasslands harbours the tiny Burrowing Owl, the colourful Sage Grouse, the delightful Black-Tailed Prairie Dog and dozens of other creatures that depend on prairie habitats.

Park staff realized immediately that they could not be successful in helping vulnerable species recover if the focus was solely on individual species. The rich prairie ecosystem had been shrinking precipitously for over a century. The park had to work cooperatively to conserve the grasslands as a unit – a vastly complex system of plants and animals interacting with their environment.



Grasslands National Park of Canada

Stretching across borders



Sage grouse mating dance © Parks Canada

There are several types of borders; they exist between countries, government and non-government agencies, and neighbours. Each 'border' poses a challenge when conserving species that require large, intact landscapes.

For example, Swift Fox, reintroduced into southwest Saskatchewan and southeastern Alberta, have expanded into areas of northern Montana. Burrowing owls migrate across the continent.

The Crossing the Medicine Line Initiative, funded by the Priority Investment Fund for Species at Risk (PIFSAR), has created a Partnership Network to work with our neighbours and stakeholders to develop transboundary partnerships and to coordinate the delivery of our respective programs in the interest of conservation. Every spring, we meet with our Initiative partners and host a workshop on a topical issue.

An open border leads to new answers

Almost immediately after the launch of the Initiative, because of our newly created partnerships, Parks Canada began to learn more about the creatures in our own back yard. In 2007, for example, we combined with the US Bureau of Land Management and the University of Montana to study the endangered Sage Grouse. Researchers captured and radio-collared hens in Canada and the US and tracked them through the seasons. They were surprised to learn that the Sage Grouse populations in Grasslands National Park East Block and the adjacent areas in northern Montana migrate to central Montana for the winter. Researchers believe they may be choosing their seasonal locations based on the differences in sagebrush habitat types. This type of information is critical, if we want to protect habitats that species need to survive.



Burrowing Owl © Parks Canada

How long should the grasses be?

We also needed to understand the role of grazing on the ecosystem. Historically, grazing bison helped maintain and renew the grass cover and provide habitat for other wildlife by creating a patchwork mosaic of plant types and heights. With settlement, cattle replaced the bison, and grazing patterns shifted towards greater similarity of grass types and heights. This helped some species to prosper; others did not.

The Sprague's Pipit and McCown's Longspur, for example, both benefit from grazing. But the two like grasses of different heights. The Sprague's pipit is relatively abundant in the park and prefers relatively taller grasses, while the McCown's longspur is much less common and likes short grass with more bare ground. Grazing management is one of the few management tools available to land managers for creating the needed heterogeneity in grass height. Grasslands National Park is cooperating with many universities and agencies in a grazing and biodiversity management experiment to better understand these relationships.



Park staff working with local landowners in fighting invasive species © A. Sturch

Neighbours and the park join in the fight

Protecting the grasslands also means fighting off aliens – invasive species that is. Some of these, like the leafy spurge, spread like prairie fire, crowding out native plant life and making the grasslands less hospitable to wildlife. It is also a serious challenge for local ranchers as it threatens the sustainability of their rangelands for livestock. Here, we could find allies in the local ranching community.

Rural Administrator Mike Sherven credits Parks Canada for helping the community understand and confront the alien threat. "Parks Canada was able to bring in experts and really bring home the need to control these species," says Mike. Through the Initiative, Parks Canada supported a weed management area around Grasslands. Municipalities, with funding from Environment Canada, undertook to eradicate leafy spurge. Local people provided the hands-on work to keep the invaders at bay. This cooperation built understanding between park staff and the community. "Once you build trust and respect, there's no end to how much you can help each other," says Mike Sherven.

Between visitor and nature — bridging the gap

Many visitors are unaware of the role that our neighbouring ranchers and land managers play in prairie conservation. Many of our neighbours are unaware of the 'passion' that our visitors share for this place. Sharing the stories of these conservation efforts will bridge the gap between the visitor from Toronto and the rancher from across the fence.

Supported by the Initiative, there will now be new learning opportunities within the renewed park Visitor Centre, and along the park driving tour. Visitors will encounter the 'stories of cooperation' through various, interactive media and interpretive panels.

Achieving conservation success for threatened species will require each of us doing our part, with only the prairie horizon as our shared boundary.

For more information:

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Black-Tailed Prairie Dog © Parks Canada