




# Field Notes

Oak Hammock Marsh Interpretive Centre


July 2006




## Did you know?

 That **one** single grass plant may have more than 620 kilometres of roots.




 That the Prairie Crocus is Manitoba's provincial flower.



 That Wild Bergamot smells like oregano and is used in Earl Grey tea.



 That the flowers of the Canada Goldenrod can be made into a yellow dye.



## Tall-grass Prairie

Tall-grass prairie is the most endangered ecosystem in Manitoba, and consequently many endangered species are found in the tall-grass prairie, less than 1% of the original 6000 square kilometres remains.

Manitoba has two types of grasslands, mixed-grass prairie and tall-grass prairie. Mixed-grass prairie is on the western side of the province, while tall-grass prairie is in the middle and towards the east of the province.

Mixed-grass prairie takes its name from the medium-height grasses. It has many short species of grasses in a second layer of vegetation cover. It has elements of both short-grass and tall-grass prairie. It usually only grows to knee height. Only 24% of the original 24 million hectares remains.

Tall-grass prairie takes its name from the dominant tall grasses that grow over one metre high. It used to cover an area about one and a half times the size of the province of Manitoba. Less than 0.02% of the original 900 000 square kilometres remains.

We are very lucky here at Oak Hammock Marsh because we have 3 pieces of tall-grass prairie within the Wildlife Management Area. The Brennan Prairie is the largest piece of unbroken prairie in Manitoba.

Be sure to visit our tall-grass prairie and see some of the beautiful flowers.



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## Why is it endangered?

- When the settlers arrived, they noted that the very deep and fertile soil of the tall-grass prairie would make excellent agricultural land. Much of the prairie was ploughed for use in agriculture.
- A lot of the prairie was also lost to urbanization. What is now the city of Winnipeg, used to be covered by tall-grass prairie. Many bison roamed where people's houses are now built.
- Succession of aspen forest has taken over some of the prairie. Aspen, western snowberry, smooth brome, Kentucky blue grass (the grass that we have on our front lawns) and thistle are the most common invading species.



## Big Bluestem

It is the most nutritious and dominant grass of the tall-grass prairie. It is excellent forage for cattle and wildlife. Its deep fibrous root system (up to 4 meters deep) stabilizes the soil and helps prevent erosion. In areas where there were extensive stands of Big bluestem early settlers would cut out chunks of sod to make sod houses. Because of the well developed root systems (approximately 2/3rds of growth below ground for every 1/3rd above) the soil was held very firmly and made ideal material for sod house building. It gets its nickname "turkey foot" from its "three-toed" purple seed head.



## How it is managed?

- Historically fires started by lightning would burn large tracts of prairie. Though destructive on the short term, it was actually beneficial to the overall health of the prairie. Burning benefits the prairie by:
  - getting rid of the build up of dead grasses and plants which can inhibit new growth
  - recycling the nutrients contained in the build up back into the soil where it can be reused
  - darkening the soil surface so that the land warms earlier in spring promoting growth
  - ensuring that dominant species are set back allowing others to grow as well (more diversity)
  - getting rid of unwanted, non-native species of plants.
- As wild fires are no longer common, staged controlled burns are now done.
- Bison and grasshoppers also used to be a vital part of the prairie landscape. As they roamed eating and trampling the prairie, it was stimulated and growth was enhanced.
- Now cattle are used to graze tall-grass prairie. If there are no cattle mowing the prairie can also be an effective way to manage it.



Oak Hammock Marsh Interpretive Centre is a joint project of Ducks Unlimited Canada and the Province of Manitoba

