

# A summer vacation you'll never forget

**Dear Friends,**

Every two years enlightened people gather to celebrate and learn about caring for one of nature's greatest gifts to humankind.

That would be the Tall Grass Prairie. And the gathering would be the North American Prairie Conference.

This year, the Conference will be in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Aug. 6 to 10.

We invite you and your family to attend, and we're pleased to bring you this preview of the conference from the pages of Woodlands & Prairies Magazine.

Rich and fun-filled learning experiences fill the agenda, including many activities for children.

On field trips you'll see landscapes as they existed thousands of years ago in all of their glorious diversity. At conference sessions you'll gain insights into what makes these landscapes tick. You'll learn how the principals of ecological restoration apply to managing the land you care about... whether it's your back yard, a back 40 or a public park.

Join us for a summer vacation you'll never forget.

**John P. Morgan**, Chairman,  
23<sup>rd</sup> North American  
Prairie Conference.

**Rollie Henkes**, Editor,  
Woodlands & Prairies Magazine

**For a complete schedule,  
housing accommodations, a  
registration form and other  
details, please go to:  
[www.napc2012.org](http://www.napc2012.org)**

**See you in  
Winnipeg!**



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# WOODLANDS & PRAIRIES

MAGAZINE

with Mrs. Woods ©



## Oh Canada!

**SPECIAL REPORT:** The North American Prairie Conference goes to the tip of the tall grass prairie.

### ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:

Biological control of spotted knapweed and garlic mustard.

Protecting the next generation of oak forests from deer browse.

*Tall grass prairie in the Red River Valley of southern Manitoba.*

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Mrs. Woods

*A sweet lady, but don't push her too far!*

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"We ought to get together"

# The North American Prairie Conference

## ENERGIZING A MOVEMENT

### Dear Friends,

Canada and the 23rd North American Prairie Conference take center stage this issue. That gave me reason to dig into the history of the conferences and to visit with some of the veterans who have been to many of them.

What jumps out at you is how closely the conferences are tied to the growth of the ecological restoration movement. Like a prairie burn, the conferences have spurred the growth of new ideas, and changed lives in the process.

Peter Schramm remembers his first conference very well. In fact, he organized it.

In the mid '60s he was a newly minted biology professor at Knox College, Galesburg, Ill., and had taken over the restoration of a 40-acre tall grass prairie---a project begun in the late '50s by the zoologist and environmental philosopher Paul Shepard. Located on college land that had lost its original prairie habitat, the restoration project was one of the first of its kind.

Schramm wanted to connect with others in this lonely pursuit. He drove up to Wisconsin for a look at an even earlier restoration attempt---the Curtis Prairie at the University of Wisconsin Arboretum. He compared notes with the arboretum's naturalist, Jim Zimmerman, and its director, David Archibald.

"As we exchanged information, we got really excited about prairies and the work we were doing," Schramm recalls. "I said, 'You know, we ought to get together with others doing this kind of thing.' They said, 'Why don't you organize a meeting?'"

### Off and running

And so he did. In 1968, Schramm organized a "Symposium on Prairie and Prairie Restoration" at Knox College. Two years later, in 1970, Zimmerman coordinated the "Second Midwest Prairie Conference," held at the University of Wisconsin. And what was to become known as the North American Prairie Conference was off and running as a biennial event.

No longer voices in the wilderness, conference

*(Continued on page 4)*

## On the cover

Rarely has a black-soil prairie escaped the plow, but that is the case in southern Manitoba, where the Manitoba Tall Grass Prairie Preserve protects 12,000 acres in the flat, fertile Red River Valley. Nuttall's sunflower (*Helianthus nuttallii*) numbers among the more than 900 species of prairie flora and fauna that have been documented here. The photo, which is by Donna Danyluk, was taken a few miles north of the Canada-U.S. border.



goers today are part of a growing movement energized periodically at forums by the exchange of information on a broad range of topics on ecological restoration.

“We knew we were onto something even at the first conferences,” Schramm says. “The scientific papers kept getting better, and the show-and-tell posters and informal discussions were big hit. The interesting thing was the broad mix of participants. In addition to scientists we were getting amateur naturalists, teachers, students, government environmental workers, and people who simply wanted to know more about getting wildflowers and other prairie plants started in their gardens or other land.”

## Down to earth

No ivory tower academic, Schramm has always taken special interest in the applied side of the science, which sometimes he calls more of an art than a science. “I learned more about prairie restoration when planting large areas by machine than when working with small research plots,” he says. Now 78, Schramm applies what he’s learned over the years in his own prairie restoration business. He develops his own forb-rich seed mixes using local ecotype seed, planting it with a Nesbit rangeland grass drill he modified 30 years ago. (Enter “Peter Schramm Prairie Restorations” in search engines on the web.)



Peter Schramm

Other pioneers shaped Schramm’s evolution as a trail blazer in prairie restoration. They included Ray Schulenberg, who put in the first prairie at the Morton Arboretum in Chicago, and prairie Pied Piper Robert Betz, a professor at Northeastern Illinois University, who led many field trips and would spearhead the large-scale prairie reconstruction at the Department of Energy’s Fermilab complex in Batavia, Ill. “I would hang on every word when out with these men,” Schramm says. “They gave me a sense of what a prairie really was. I decided my life’s work would be learning how to restore such prairies.”



Daryl Smith

## “Like a kid in a candy store.”

Prairie elders continue to pass the torch, often abetted by prairie conferences. Daryl Smith attended his first North American Prairie Conference in 1972 at Kansas State University. He was already on the path to prairie restoration work at the University of Northern Iowa

(UNI), and he feasted on the proceedings. “I felt like a kid in a candy store,” says Smith today. “People such as Ray Schulenberg, Paul Christiansen and Peter Schramm were breaking new ground in prairie restoration. Listening to them made me realize I was on the cutting edge of a new world.”

Smith went on to break new ground in his own right, establishing the Tallgrass Prairie Center at UNI. He was also the executive producer of the landmark film documentary about the prairie: “America’s Lost Landscape: The Tallgrass Prairie.”

Smith adds that when he attends the conferences today, he enjoys talking with rookies as green as he was back in 1972. “Their unbridled prairie enthusiasm makes me feel renewed and refreshed. It gives rise to hopes that the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be the century of ecological restoration,” he says.

## A turning point for Packard

Stephen Packard will never forget his first prairie conference. It was in 1978, centered on the Fermilab prairie in Batavia. It was a regional conference rather than the North American conference, but it marked turning point for Packard. “It convinced me that’s what my life was for,” says Packard, who today is the founding director of Audubon Chicago Region. His many writings include chapters in the *Tallgrass Restoration Handbook for Prairies, Savannas, and Woodlands*, which he edited with Cornelia Mutel.



Stephen Packard

Packard has attended North American Prairie Conferences from Ohio to Texas and from Nebraska to Ontario. His impressions follow.

*“Who were these people? Some were focused hard scientists. Some were dedicated volunteers, some were clearly visionaries. The miracle was that we all seemed to fit together as...something. It was hard to figure out what that thing was. It certainly wasn’t that we were thinking the same. But even those with strong disagreements knew we were in something very big and difficult, and we felt in it together. Major ecosystems were fighting for life. We were trying to figure out how to recognize and find them -- and manage them back to health.”*

## Wouldn’t it be nice?

In this election year contending political movements will be sucking more than their share of the oxygen out of the air in our public discourse. Wouldn’t it be nice if North Americans could find common ground in a movement that protects our natural assets? As Mrs. Woods might say, “It’s the ecology, stupid!” ~ Rollie Henkes

# Welcome to the North American Prairie Conference

BY JOHN P. MORGAN

The first North American Prairie Conference I ever attended was in 1990 in Windsor, Ontario---not exactly everyone's idea of a prairie haven. But shortly after I got off the plane, I found myself in a lush, muggy 200-acre prairie and oak savanna that miraculously appeared in downtown Windsor in the middle of one of the most heavily urbanized parts of North America.

Over the next four days I and more than 400 other conference goers were saturated with stimulating information from prairie specialists from all over North America. Some of us, like me, were amazed to learn that much of southern Ontario was once tall grass prairie. But it was almost all gone--- in Ontario as across the rest of its North American range.

We celebrated the remnants that citizens had managed to protect from development, such as the Ojibway Prairie where we were in Windsor, with its stately oaks, 7-foot-tall big bluestem, and a kaleidoscope of tall prairie wildflowers.

We went on field trips and listened to prairie sages tell how we could restore or reconstruct what was lost. As a fledgling prairie enthusiast I could not believe how much people had to share about prairie ecology, history, and restoration.

*This summer the North American Prairie Conference returns to Canada. It will be held Aug. 6 to 10 in Winnipeg at the University of Manitoba. It marks the 23<sup>rd</sup> in the series of these biennial conferences, which stretch back to 1968.*

And I will be there, this time as one of the hosts.

Like the conference I attended for the first time in Windsor, it will be an interdisciplinary feast of presentations, demonstrations, and field trips celebrating our native prairies.

These keynote speakers will start us off on the right foot: Canadian prairie authors Sharon Butala and Candace Savage, agricultural visionary Wes Jackson, and prairie enthusiast and professor Dave Young.

Here's a small sample of session topics: how to restore prairies from back yards to quarter-sections; advances in using native species for foods and medicines; the role of prairies in our diverse cultural make up; bugs and beasts of the plains. An entire session will be devoted to the western prairie fringed orchid. Manitoba harbors more of this spectacular and endangered prairie species than the rest of North America combined.

There will be field trips to unique original and restored native prairies in Manitoba, where the northernmost tall grass prairies meet the easternmost mixed grass prairies. You'll have a chance to see a wonderful slice of the remaining prairie pothole district in the Rough Fescue Prairie. Winnipeg also has the oldest prairie preserve in Canada. Then there's that "other grassland," the Arctic tundra. One of the pre-conference field trips will be to Churchill to see the tundra and its polar bears.

Visit our website for full details, [www.napc2012.org](http://www.napc2012.org), and please join us here in Winnipeg in August 6 to 10<sup>th</sup>. Let's gather for a giant celebration of the ecosystem that supports us all!



## All Things Prairie

**John P. Morgan**, chairman of the 23<sup>rd</sup> North American Prairie Conference, has, among other things: initiated the first systematic inventory of native prairies in Canada; set up the first protected area in Manitoba for small white lady's slippers; negotiated the purchase of the first protected site for the western prairie white fringed orchid in Manitoba; was instrumental in establishing Manitoba's tall grass prairie preserve; produced and directed the award winning film, "Manitoba's Tall Grass Prairie"; co-authored a manual on prairie restoration for land managers. Between times he and his wife, Carol, operate Prairie Habitats, Inc., a prairie restoration company near Argyle, Manitoba. A graduate of the University of Manitoba with degrees in zoology and natural resources management, he brings more than 30 years of experience as an ecologist in working with landowners on conserving prairie ecosystems and developing wildlife habitat.

## Program highlight

# The prairie set to music

At the opening reception of the North American Prairie Conference, before people dig into the meat and potatoes of the conference proceedings, Donna Danyluk and her husband, Ian Ward, will be serving up an audio-visual appetizer.

Standing in front of a large screen, Donna will tell the audience, "This is a year in the life of the tall grass prairie." After a few more introductory remarks there will be no more words---only music as images of the prairie flow from one to another, from spring to summer to fall to winter and back to spring.

Painters, poets, photographers and other artists have long won hearts over to the prairie, playing up the aesthetic s with works like "Tall Grass Seasons." Donna confirms that they've found the show to be a good way

to introduce prairies to people not familiar with them. "We know that those attending the North American Prairie Conference don't need to be sold on prairies," she adds, "but perhaps the show will be an idea they can take home with them. Some who've seen it have said, 'we should do something like that for our area to show at meetings.'"

Avid birders, Donna and Ian got into prairies when they joined other birders at Nature Manitoba, a broad-based non-profit environmental group. In addition to the birds, they fell in love with the habitat. Today, Donna and Ian look back on more than 20 years of volunteer work for Nature Manitoba, focusing on the 12,000-acre Manitoba Tall Grass Prairie Preserve.

Amateur photographers, the pair has also captured thousands

of images over the years of what they've seen on the Preserve and on other prairies. "Tall Grass Seasons" grew from that work.

Their first shows were slide shows of color transparencies, run on two projectors with Donna working the dissolve unit so the images faded from one to another in synch with the music which came from a cassette deck. Now their slides have been scanned and the show put on a computer. The showing at the North American Prairie Conference will mark the premier of their new digitized version.

"The ability to put the show on a DVD opens possibilities for wider distribution of such works," Donna says. "We hope that "Tall Grass Seasons" will start others down the path we followed. Spending many hours on the tall grass prairie in all seasons has given us a lasting connection to this special place," she adds.



**Beyond birding.** Birders Donna Danyluk and Ian Ward found a new passion in prairies and a new outlet for their photographs. Photo: Dennis Fast

*Boning up on Canada. Americans and Canadians share a beautiful, biologically diverse continent that bears protecting. Stories this issue shed light on the ecosystems that connect us. The words and photographs of Canadians Donna Danyluk and Ian Ward provide the following perspective.*

# Ecozone Perspective

BY DONNA DANYLUK

Few countries harbor a larger array of landscapes than Canada--- Great Lakes, boreal and temperate forests, extensive river systems and coastlines, imposing mountain ranges, Arctic barrens, wetlands, deserts, vast plains. The diversity boggles the mind.

This August many minds will focus on one of those landscapes at the North American Prairie Conference.

The Prairies form one of Canada's 15 terrestrial ecozones, covering the southern third of the three



Prairie provinces, extending from the foothills of the Rocky Mountains in Alberta, across Saskatchewan to the Red River Valley in Manitoba. They lie at the northern tip of the Great Plains of North America.

No other ecozone in Canada has been more altered by human activity than the Prairies. The ecozone contains the majority of the country's agricultural cropland and rangeland. Only small remnants of the native ecosystems are left. The Prairies are home to many threatened and endangered wildlife species, and some of the most endangered natural habitats in Canada.

The grassland vegetation has been determined by the region's climate. Short grass and fescue prairies are found in the drier western regions; tall grass prairies occur in the Red River Valley at the eastern edge, while mixed grass prairie covers the large area in-between.

### The parklands

Across the Prairie Provinces, an ecoregion known as the Aspen Parkland lies in the transition zone between the grasslands of the Prairies ecozone and the boreal forest of the Boreal Plains ecozone. Here we find woodlands dominated by trembling aspen (or poplar, *Populus tremuloides*) with occasional stands of spruce. They transition to rolling grasslands scattered with aspen groves and shallow marshes called "prairie potholes." Huge numbers of these small wetlands form in years with high precipitation, and provide critical habitat for North American waterfowl.

Glaciation has determined the topography and soils of both Prairies and Aspen Parkland, creating a generally flat landscape of rolling hills and shallow valleys, covered by deposits from inland seas left behind by the retreating ice sheets. In her book *Prairie: A Natural History*, Candace Savage describes the terrain of the Northern Plains as "an unmade bed of glacial rubble, or till, lying exactly where it dropped when the ice sheets retreated from the landscape 10,000 years ago."

### Uplands and lowlands

Protruding above this landscape are upland areas such as the Turtle Mountains of Manitoba, Wood Mountain in Saskatchewan, and the Cypress Hills of Alberta and Saskatchewan, all remnants of the pre-glacial landscape. In southeastern Mani-

toba, the Red River Valley was once the bed of North America's largest inland lake, Glacial Lake Agassiz, left behind after the Laurentide ice sheet retreated.

Both tall grass prairie and aspen parkland thrive on the fertile soil left by Lake Agassiz. Of course, the same conditions that supported a diversity of flora and fauna, including grass species that can grow to more than 6 feet in height, also favored conversion of this landscape to cropland. Today, tall grass prairie is one of the most endangered ecosystems in North America, with habitat loss being the most critical threat to flora and fauna.

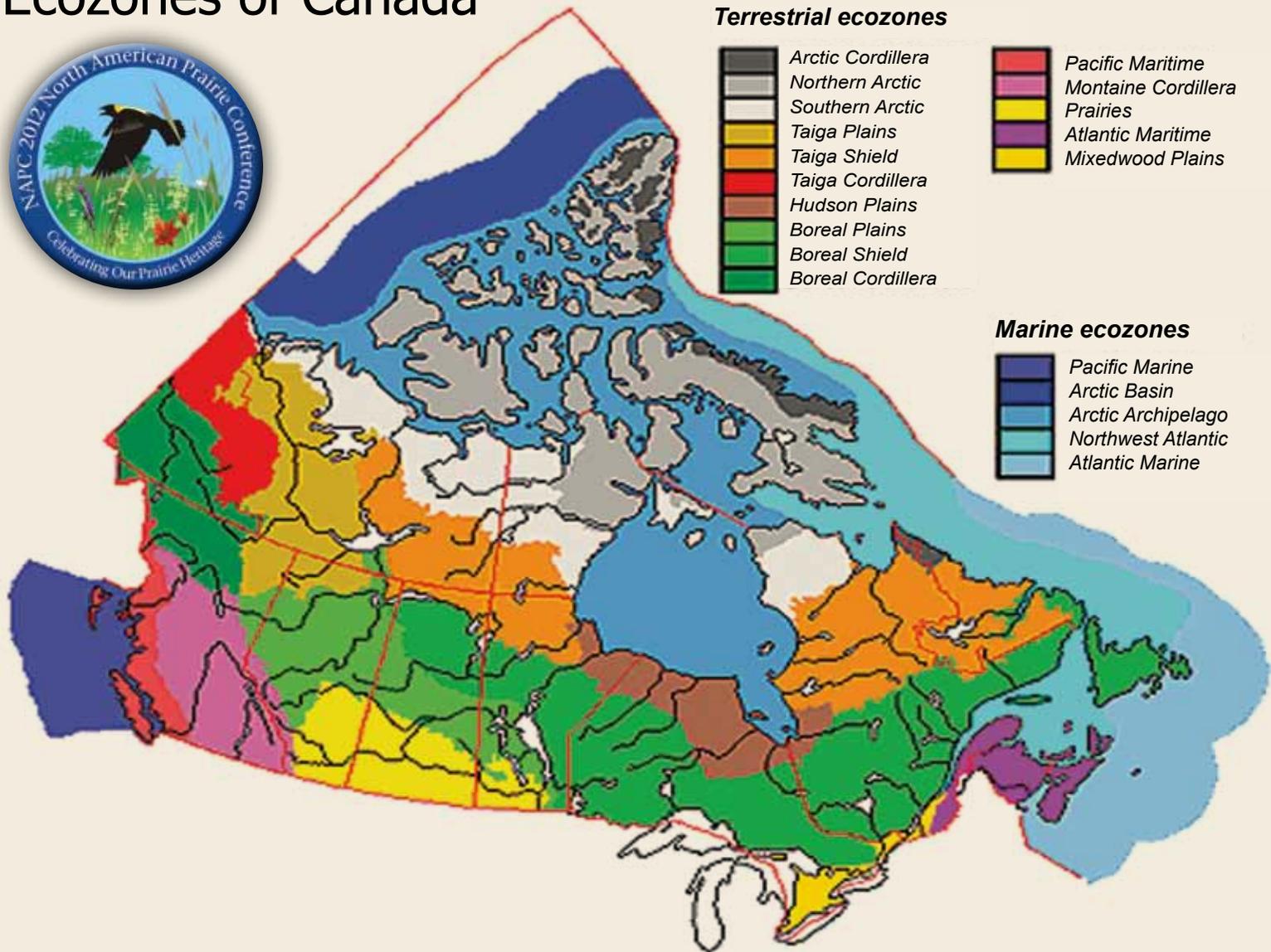
### At the tip of the tall grass

Manitoba lies at the northern end of North America's tall grass prairie ecosystem, which once extended in a wide swath along the eastern side of the Central Plains as far south as Texas. The northern tall grass prairie region is often referred to as Tallgrass Aspen Parkland to indicate the mingling of the two ecosystems, with grasslands dotted by shrub thickets and groves of aspen and oak.

In the late 1980s Nature Manitoba (then known as the



# Ecozones of Canada



Map: Environment Canada

Manitoba Naturalists Society) launched a systematic survey to locate remnants of tall grass prairie in Manitoba. The largest tracts were found in the Red River Valley, about 60 miles south of Winnipeg and just north of the U.S. border. This inventory resulted in a proposal to establish a prairie preserve, and in 1989 a cooperative program called the Critical Wildlife Habitat Program, involving various organizations including the provincial government, was formed to begin securing lands. The Manitoba Tall Grass Prairie Preserve currently protects over 12,000 acres of prairie. It represents most of the less than 1 percent of Manitoba's original tall grass prairie that remains.

The Preserve protects habitat for countless plant, animal,

Sven came to Ole one day and asked him to explain the difference between the words COMPLETE and FINISHED in a way that he could understand.

"Vell," Ole said, "Some people say dere iss no difference between da words COMPLETE and FINISHED. But Ay disagree."

"Vell den, vat do yew tink?" Sven asked.

Ole went on, "Vell, ven yew marry dat right voman, yew air COMPLETE. And ven yew marry da wrong one, yew air FINISHED. And den ven da right voman catches you vit da wrong one yew are COMPLETELY FINISHED."

and insect species, many of which are found only in the tall grass prairie ecosystem. Of the over 900 species that have been documented on the Preserve to date, several are listed as either federally and/or provincially endangered or threatened, and many others are considered rare.

### Small, white, endangered

The small white lady's-slipper (*Cypripedium candidum*) is one of three endangered orchid species on the Preserve. It is known to hybridize with the more common large and small yellow lady's-slippers. Along with habitat loss, this is one of the reasons for this species' endangered status.

### On the fringe

In Canada, the endangered western prairie fringed orchid (*Platanthera praeclara*) is found only in Manitoba's Tall Grass Prairie Preserve, where it lives at the northern limit of



Small white lady's-slipper. Photo: Ian Ward



Western prairie fringed orchid. Photo: Ian Ward

its range. This striking plant can grow to 3 feet in height, and emits a strong fragrance that is most noticeable in the evening and night---presumably to attract its night-flying pollinators, two uncommon species of hawk-moths.

### **Yours truly, *Sorghastrum nutans***

The signature tall grasses of the prairie include Indian grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*), prairie cord grass (*Spartina pectinata*), big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*), and prairie dropseed (*Sporobolus heterolepis*). The photo (on the next page) shows the seedheads of the latter two species. Tall grass prairie is a warm-season grassland community, with growth reaching its peak in late summer. In the Tallgrass Aspen Parkland, grasses such as big bluestem mix with trembling aspen (*Populus tremuloides*), their colors creating striking contrasts in the fall.



Fall color in the Tall Grass Aspen Parkland. Photo: Ian Ward

### **Life giving flames**

Historically, wildfire was an integral part of the ecology of tall grass prairie, not only controlling the advance of trees, but also breaking down the large amounts of dead vegetation, returning nutrients to the soil, and regularly re-invigorating the prairie. Today this process continues through managed burns, which are important for keeping aspen and other woody shrubs from taking over.



Managed burn in the Manitoba Tall Grass Prairie Preserve. Photo: Ian Ward



*Big bluestem and prairie dropseed: tall grasses of the tall grass. Photo: Ian Ward*

*The frog does not drink up  
the pond in which he lives.*

*~ Native American proverb*

*We are seeing the birth of a  
new perspective of the world,  
where ecology and economics  
are two sides of the same coin.*

*~ Leif Johansson*

*We hang the petty thieves  
and appoint the great ones to  
public office*

*~ Aesop*

## **Islands of oak**

The Tall Grass Prairie Preserve also contains classic examples of oak savanna. The scattered and slow-growing bur oaks (*Quercus macrocarpa*), Manitoba's only species of oak, are very fire-resistant. They are a perfect complement to the sea of tall grasses and wildflowers, such as wild bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*).



*Savanna with black oak and wild bergamot. Photo: Donna Danyluk*

## Legacies of the Ice Age

Ice sheets left behind large granite boulders from the Laurentian Shield known as glacial erratics. They helped save areas of Manitoba's Tall Grass Prairie Preserve from the plow. Early settlers called these rocks "sleeping sheep." Bison rubbed against the largest boulders to remove their winter fur.



Granite boulder a.k.a. glacial erratic, sleeping sheep. Photo: Ian Ward

# Beyond the Prairies

## IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

Grassland areas exist beyond the Prairies Ecozone, but as in the Prairie Provinces, they have been largely disturbed, fragmented or destroyed by human activity, and there is a great need to protect the remaining natural tracts. The most extensive of these are in the Montane Cordillera Ecozone, between low mountain ranges and on dry benchlands in the interior plateau region of south-central British Columbia. This area is a northern extension of the shrub-steppe grasslands of the state of Washington. The main threat facing grasslands in B.C. is conversion to orchards and vineyards (as opposed to cropland), as well as urban sprawl.

## IN SOUTHWESTERN ONTARIO

Remnants of the tall grass prairie and oak savanna survive, though barely, in southwestern Ontario, which is part of the Mixedwood Plains Ecozone. Southwestern Ontario lies at the eastern end of a "prairie peninsula" that once extended from the Great Plains through Illinois and Indiana to Michigan, Ohio, and into Ontario. This eastern extension of tall grass prairie developed during a period of warm, dry climate about 8,000 years ago. Forests took over once again as the climate cooled, but prairie persisted in areas with the right combination of soil, microclimate, and fire. Settlement rapidly destroyed these ecosystems, and today less than 1,200 acres of prairie remain in southern Ontario. One of the largest remnants is the Ojibway Prairie Complex, a provincial nature reserve within the city of Windsor across the Detroit River from Detroit, Mich.

*Approximately 72 percent of the waste currently being landfilled or incinerated consists of materials that could be put to higher and better used through recycling or composting. Most of this material is office paper, cardboard, non-recyclable paper, and food waste.*

*~ Minnesota Office of Environmental Assistance*

*That an average citizen can recognize one-thousand brand names and logos but fewer than ten local plants is not a good sign.*

*~ Paul Hawken*

*You can fall in love at first sight with a place as with a person ~ Alec Waugh*

*Not being able to govern events, I govern myself.*

*~ Michel de Montaigne*

*They are much to be pitied who have not been given a taste for nature early in life ~ Jane Austen*

# Oasis of biodiversity in Windsor, Ontario



This black oak savanna grows in the Ojibway Prairie Provincial Nature Reserve, a short drive from the city center. It's part of the more than 800-acre Ojibway Prairie Complex within city limits. The remnant savanna and prairie ecosystems sit within a vast bowl of poorly drained sandy soil saturated with water in the spring but very dry in mid-summer. Strands of trees follow low ridges of sand through the complex. Common woody species are black oak, white oak, pignut hickory, and American hazel, while the understory is typically composed of species such as bracken fern, wild indigo, Culver's root, woodland goldenrod, various asters and sedges. The open prairie glades between the tongues of savanna are wetter and dominated by a rich assemblage of tallgrass prairie species.

The complex harbors over 160 species identified as species at risk in Ontario. Rarities include many insects and savanna/tallgrass prairie plants, as well as the eastern fox snake, Butler's garter snake, and yellow-breasted chat.

The large trees in the photo are black oak. Species in the foreground include wild Indigo and Culver's root.

*~ Story and photo by Paul Pratt, Naturalist, Ojibway Nature Centre. [www.ojibway.ca](http://www.ojibway.ca)*

# The unlikely advocate

Sharon Butala's awakening opened the eyes of many



**Sharon Butala.** "It is the land that teaches you."

BY ROBERT WHITE

In 1976, Sharon Le Blanc married a rancher named Peter Butala. Leaving a promising career of teaching at the University of Saskatchewan, she moved to a remote ranch on a wind-swept plateau in the very southwest corner of the province. Thus began a long, spiritual journal of questioning and awakening that led Butala to become a best-selling author of 16 books and an unlikely grasslands advocate.

*She will recount this journey in Winnipeg on Aug. 7 as a keynote speaker at the North American Prairie Conference.*

During the year-long courtship Butala was enamored as much by the stark beauty of the high prairie landscape and simplicity of ranching life as she was by the strength of character and integrity of her new husband. However, once she arrived, she soon realized that she was an outsider to both

the ranching community and the landscape. The land's vastness and elemental power both awed and bewildered her. Isolated and stripped bare of old labels, she struggled to redefine herself. She began to search for personal and cultural roots of identity in "the glowing, fragile plains, the radiant hills" of her adopted home.

### Making sense of it all

Butala began writing as a way to help establish a new sense of self. Her first four novels included a trilogy in the tradition of regional realism, drawing on aspects of life in her new setting. She also published two collections of acclaimed short stories and was gaining a modest following outside of Saskatchewan. She catapulted into literary stardom in 1994 with the success of her first non-fiction book, *The Perfection of the Morning*. This very personal account of her "apprenticeship in nature" recounted how she had established an emotional and spiritual connection to the land and began to experience it as a living presence. At the same time she examined and sorted through the conflicting views of the same land held by ranchers, scientists, range managers, conservationists, and the nearly lost perspective of aboriginal peoples.

The book spent a year on Canadian best-seller lists.

In her next major book, *Wild Stone Heart*, published in 2000, she narrowed her focus to one 100-acre field. In the late 1980s, Peter decided to leave it entirely free of grazing as an ecological experiment. The book describes her observations of the field over 13 years; how it grew in diversity and richness, and how her discovery of stone circles and other traces of aboriginal inhabitation on the site transformed her understanding of the land.

Both books reflected her soulful quest to see the land as it



*The Nature Conservancy of Canada conserves the Old Man on His Back Prairie and Heritage Conservation Area in partnership with Sharon Butala and the Saskatchewan Ministry of Environment and Ministry of Agriculture. It is located in Reno Municipality No. 51 in southwestern Saskatchewan. An interpretive center is located on the Butala homestead.*

really is. As she relates: "To understand the profound meaning of land -- to walk on it with the respect born of real understanding of the Amerindians, to see it as sacred -- is to be terrified, shattered, humbled, and in the end, joyous. It is to come home at last."

### A bold step

The two books, which reached both popular and academic audiences, helped create a much deeper appreciation of the intrinsic historic, aesthetic, and ecological value of undisturbed prairie landscapes.

#### Well traveled

*Two old boys from County Cork passed a graveyard as they were stumbling home from the pub.*

*Paddy: "Look at this stone, Seamus. I think it says the man lived to 105!"*

*Seamus: "Glory be! Was it anybody we know?"*

*Paddy: "No. 'twas somebody named Miles from Dublin."*

*There is much confusion between land and country. Land is the place where corn, gullies, and mortgages grow. Country is the personality of land, the collective harmony of its soil, life, and weather. Poor land may be rich country, and vice versa.*

*~ Aldo Leopold*

*Then there were the agnostic and the atheist who couldn't decide which church not to send their children to.*



**Homecoming.**  
Bison introduced from genetically pure seed stock complete the picture on the 13,000-acre ranch at the juncture of the short grass and mixed grass prairie of the Great Plains.

Photo: Courtney Milne.  
[www.CourtneyMilne.com](http://www.CourtneyMilne.com)

The public response gave the Butalas the credibility to move ahead on one of the boldest projects in the annals of ecological restoration.

The Butalas' 13,000-acre ranch in the southwestern corner of Saskatchewan exemplified the semi-arid mixed grass prairie that once spanned 160 million acres in two Canadian provinces and five U.S. states.

In 1996, despite local opposition, the Butalas turned their ranch over to the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) to become the Old Man on His Back Prairie and Heritage Conservation Area. It preserves forever a large intact section of mixed grass prairie in an area where strong pressures to plow up native prairie remain. Due to Peter Butala's ecological concerns, the ranch had a very low stocking rate and the grass was in good condition. The 1,200 cultivated acres on the ranch are being restored to native grasses as well.

After the preserve was established, Butala teamed up with photographer Courtney Milne to produce *Old Man on His Back: Portrait of a Prairie Landscape*. Milne's photos pay an elegant pictorial tribute to the landscape, while Butala's text summarizes important questions about the value of land, and in so doing honors the Nekaneet Cree, whose homeland included the preserve. The name Old Man on His Back is also a gift from the Cree, who "a long time ago found an old man up on there on the plateau in bad shape."

Bison introduced in 2003 have added another element of redemption to the story. The herd, which now numbers

128, is derived from genetically pure survivors rounded up in Montana in the late 1800s. It means descendants of the original seed stock will roam freely in a significant area of Canada's Great Plains for the first time in 125 years of Eurocentric occupation.

Peter died in 2007, and Sharon has moved to Alberta to be close to her son and grandchildren. She continues to write and advocate for the land.

In a recent interview she recounted how for centuries both the voices of women and those who perceive a spiritual reality in nature have faced dismissive labeling and worse. In her view, however, "All I did was rediscover what First Nations people had always known. It is the land that teaches you. It isn't you going out with a system of knowledge. You go out knowing nothing, and the land itself, in whatever way, teaches you what you need to know."

*Robert White is a writer and researcher with a special interest in ecology and religion. He grew up on a farm in the parkland region of Saskatchewan and completed a bachelor's degree at the University of Saskatchewan, specializing in plant ecology. After soil survey work in Australia and Northern Canada he earned a master's degree in environmental studies. His career has focused on soil conservation, land use planning, and permaculture design. His monograph, "Spiritual Foundations of an Ecologically Sustainable Society," has been translated into six other languages. He lives in Regina, Saskatchewan.*

### Butala books noted:

*The Perfection of the Morning.* • *Wild Stone Heart.* • *Old Man on His Back: Portrait of a Prairie Landscape.*  
Published by Harper Collins Canada. • <http://www.harpercollins.ca> • Also available through Amazon and other outlets.

# The Prairie in Depth

BOOK REVIEW BY BILL WITT

The history of the origin and evolution of the North American prairie is also a history of humanity's actions within and upon it over the past 10,000 years. To tell such a story thoroughly, clearly, and hopefully requires the narrative and poetic sensibilities of an epic poet—together with a solid understanding of relevant science plus the warmth and wit of a compassionate humanist. The multiple-award-winning writer Candace Savage displays all these skills with seemingly effortless mastery in this updated edition of *Prairie: A Natural History*.

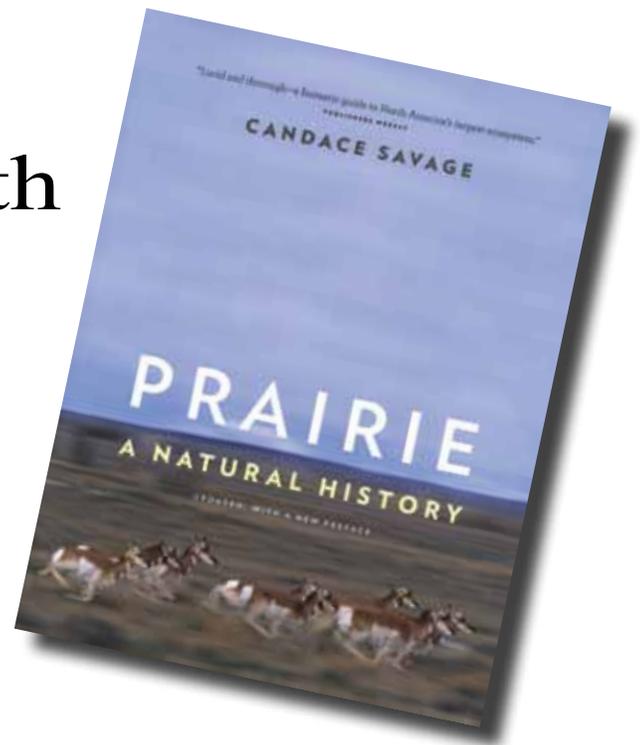
Effortless mastery is never, of course, effortless. Her deep affinity for prairie began early in childhood, in the Peace River country of northern Alberta, as she and her family moved “from one small prairie town to the next.” She has developed her art over a span of some 40 years, through two dozen books and numerous magazine articles, as a researcher, an editor, and a communications officer for the Science Institute of the Northwest Territories.

Like a present-day Dante, Savage begins her natural history by jumping to the middle of the story with explorers' and settlers' encounters with North America's great grassland biome. And they, like Dante's narrator, had found their vision failing.

What the [early European] travelers had encountered, she writes, was a vast, dynamic ecosystem, a kind of tawny, slowly evolving organism that, in a climate of constant change, had sustained itself ever since the retreat of the glaciers thousands of years before. In the presence of this strangeness and grandeur, words and vision failed. ... And this failure of vision—this inability to see and appreciate the Great Plains grasslands for what they truly are—has continued to plague our perception right down to the present. Flat? Boring? Lifeless? Nothing could be further from the truth.

In Chapter One Savage describes the resilient fecundity and beauty witnessed by the early explorers, imaginatively inviting us into the scene. And then she brings us up short: ... the multitudes of humpbacked cattle that had darkened the plains were virtually wiped out in a bloody orgy of killing. Tellingly, the final stages of this slaughter were motivated by the discovery that bison hides could be cut and sewn into leather belts and used to power machines in the burgeoning industrial complex in the East. Modern times had arrived on the prairies.

Having set her stage (“the depth of our ignorance is startling”) Savage sets out to identify and correct these myopic assumptions, and to redeem a vision of ecological and sociological wholeness, by vividly filling in vital details and weaving them into constructive vision and restorative purpose. With



true understanding and without condemning our forebears' or our contemporaries' wayward ignorance, we can, she believes, “shape the course of events by engaging—fully, deeply, and passionately—with the present.”

In Chapter Two, “Digging Into the Past,” she excavates to the geologic beginnings of the North American continent, following hundreds of millions of years of rising and receding seas, volcanoes, and changes of climate, and evolution of plant and animal kingdoms. In Chapter Three, Savage describes the 20-million-year rise of the dynamic prairie biome in response to fluctuations in our “mid-continental extreme” climate. In suc-

## Speaking at the conference

Candace Savage will continue her story in person as a speaker at the North American Prairie Conference in Winnipeg. She appears on the program August 7.

Always in love with words, Savage graduated with honors with a degree in English at the University of Alberta—this after a childhood of living in small prairie towns in northern Alberta. Now living in Saskatoon, she continues her life of letters as well her long-time support of environmental causes. She currently sits on the board of the Saskatchewan branch of the Nature Conservancy of Canada.

Her books about nature include *Eagles of North America*; *Bees: Nature's Little Wonders*, and *Bird Brains: The Intelligence of Crows, Ravens, Magpies, and Jays*. She also wrote *Curious by Nature: One woman's exploration of the natural world*.



ceeding, interrelated chapters—on soil development; the present state of prairie survival amid hundreds of millions of acres of working (and sometimes overworked) landscapes; the advance and retreat of woodlands; and the nature and future of ranching and farming—she considers the conservation status of the Great Plains and leads her readers into a holistic vision of prairie and opportunities for restoring and protecting its wildness.

Savage’s deep, long looks beyond the obvious are enhanced by well-designed maps, charts, graphs; by engaging sidebars; and by the often beautiful and always story-telling photography of James Page.

In her final chapter, “Long-Range Forecast,” Savage brings us to the immediate present, to the numerous, critical tipping points we face in trying to protect, preserve, and yes, to profit from where possible, a vibrant, healthy prairie ecosystem.

*“This is a country filled with light... It is a land where the seasons surge over us like tides... The prairie opens us to the immensities of space and time. Like few other places on Earth, it reminds us that life operates within broad horizons, with sight lines that extend from the past through the present and into the future.”*

In her realistic-yet-hopeful understanding, she sees enlightened collaboration among all the prairie’s human stakeholders as the key to long-term revitalization: Yes, the trends are disheartening. Yes the risks are real; but so is the potential for renewal. The key, she argues, is recovering and expanding our shared vision of what prairie is and can be. “This approach,” Savage concludes, “is sometimes referred to as a strategy of ‘no regrets,’ because the work is worth doing now, no matter what happens next.”

This is a wise, beautiful, and engaging book that is worth reading now, because through it Savage offers invaluable guidance in how to shape what may and must happen next, if we are to restore the biological and spiritual “carrying capacity” of our continent’s greatest natural kingdom.

***Prairie: A Natural History,***  
by Candace Savage;

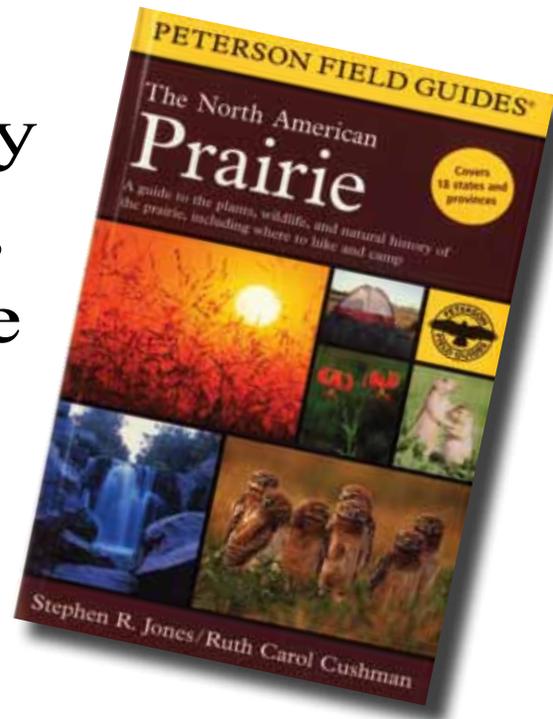
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Bill Witt interprets the natural world as a writer/photographer based in Cedar Falls, Iowa. His photographs and essay appear in the book, *Enchanted by Prairie*, reviewed in the winter 2011-2012 issue of this magazine.

# So Many Prairies, So Little Time

BOOK REVIEW BY  
LAURA REEVES



This book might make you want to hit the road and go prairie hopping.

*The North American Prairie* is one of the most recent additions to the popular collection of Peterson Field Guides. The 514-page compilation features 48 of the best examples of native prairies open to the public, beautifully described in short essays by authors Stephen R. Jones and Ruth Carol Cushman.

***The book includes several premiere prairie preserves in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. If you’re going to the North American Prairie Conference to be held Aug. 6-10 in Winnipeg, you’ll want to take note of four of the seven prairies described in the Manitoba chapter. The conference will host field trips to these prairies, including the Manitoba Tall Grass Prairie Preserve.***

Each account gives practical information on hiking, camping, best times to visit, weather, addresses, and a list of selected wildlife of special interest. In addition to the featured sites, there are also brief descriptions of many other areas worth visiting, including national parks and monuments, state parks, wildlife refuges, and privately owned preserves. All of these sites are highlighted on a map at the beginning of each of the state and province chapters, making it easy to see which ones could be incorporated into a road trip.

Though packed with information, the 4 ½ x 7-inch book is easy to carry.

The first part of the book provides an excellent overview of the ecology of the North American prairie region, including evolutionary history, climate, human impacts, and recovery efforts. Profiles of the four prairie subregions are included: tall grass, mixed grass, short grass, and tallgrass-aspen parkland. And there are descriptions of the wildlife

you can expect to see in each of the prairie subregions, including plants, mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians, along with insects and spiders.

This is an excellent book for anyone who might want to extend their road trip to or from the North American Prairie Conference. I used it to plan a camping trip from Manitoba to Arizona last February and was extremely grateful for the information it provided, including phone numbers that I could use to find out how far south the snow line was. The Guide is a resource that every prairie aficionado should have.

*The North American Prairie: A guide to the plants, wildlife, and natural history of the prairie, including where to hike and camp.*

**Stephen R. Jones and Ruth Carol Cushman**  
Peterson Field Guide Series  
Houghton Mifflin Company.  
215 Park Ave., New York, NY1003  
[www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com](http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com)

Laura Reeves lives in Gardenton, Manitoba, where she works as a botanist for the Manitoba Tall Grass Prairie Preserve. She started working for the Preserve in 1994 while completing her botany degree at the University of Manitoba. She has taken wilderness survival school training and is currently enrolled in the Kamana Naturalist Training Program through Wilderness Awareness School.



She is also a co-instructor for wilderness skills intensives in Manitoba

In 2008, she purchased 160 acres adjacent to the Tall Grass Prairie Preserve and intends to move there in the near future. She says she's excited about restoring this land to its natural condition. At least eight rare or endangered species have been discovered there.

In the photo, she's about to release a merlin, or pigeon hawk (*Falco columbarius*).

## In other stories this issue



**Biocontrol of invasive species:** Read how Eurasian weevils are turning the tide against spotted knapweed.



**New weapon against garlic mustard:** Hopes ride on *C. scrobicollis*. Exclusive interview with scientist Jeanie Katovich.



**Tubetorial:** Jack Knight tells how to protect the next generation of our oak forests from deer browse.

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