

VENTURING THROUGH THE TALL GRASS: EXPERIENCING THE MANITOBA TALL GRASS PRAIRIE PRESERVE

The Manitoba Tall Grass Prairie Preserve (hereafter the Preserve) was established in 1989 with a goal of protecting a vanishing habitat and to educate the general public of the importance of native grasslands (M. Latta, Nature Manitoba, personal communication). Starting in the early 1990s, an annual Prairie Day event was organized in early August to provide a means of interaction between prairie enthusiasts, the general public and local residents. Self-guiding interpretive trails with rustic amenities were established in 1996 and 2004. School programs, tours, and a simple two-page newsletter have been used to promote the Preserve and bring out visitors since that time. Guest books located at trail heads and at a welcome table during special events have produced a growing list of communities from which visitors have travelled. In the past 13 years people have visited from many communities across Manitoba, nine Canadian provinces and one territory, as well as 37 American states and 15 other countries.

The Preserve is the largest remaining intact area of tall grass prairie in Manitoba, consisting of nearly 5,000 ha of secured lands (Fig. 1). It is a striking place to visit as it features many different types of natural habitats, from dry upland prairie and savannah, to wet prairie and meadow, and oak and aspen forest. Due to this variation there is a wide variety of flora and fauna, including a number of federally and provincially listed species. Rare and endangered species such

as western prairie fringed-orchid (*Platanthera praeclara* Sheviak & Bowles), Riddell's goldenrod (*Oligoneuron riddellii* Frank ex Riddell), and small white lady's-slipper (*Cypripedium candidum* Muhl. ex Willd.), are locally abundant, while Culver's root (*Veronicastrum virginicum* [L.] Farw.), Poweshiek skipperling (*Oarisma poweshiek*), and short-eared owl (*Asio flammeus*) are less common.

The Preserve has two self-guided trails, the Prairie Shore Interpretive Trail, and the Agassiz Interpretive Trail. The Prairie Shore trail is in the southern portion of the Preserve. It passes through upland and wet prairie during its 1.6-km length and is a good place to see the rare small white lady's-slipper and a large diversity of other forbs. The Agassiz trail is in the northern part of the Preserve. It passes through upland prairie and wet sedge meadow and can be travelled as either a short 2-km loop, or a longer 4-km loop. Western prairie fringed-orchid, Riddell's goldenrod, and open vistas are common on the Agassiz trail. Both trails have been included as stops along Manitoba's Pine to Prairie International Birding Trail as a good spot to observe sandhill crane (*Grus canadensis*) and eastern whip-poor-will (*Antrostomus vociferus*) (Manitoba Conservation and Water Stewardship 2012b). In general the Preserve is a great place for birding, hiking, or to enjoy time outside exploring nature.

Since the development of the first interpretive trail in the late 1990s, visitors have been recorded from 125 communities within the province. Most Preserve visitors are from within Manitoba, with the vast majority visiting from the southern



Figure 1. The Manitoba Tall Grass Prairie Preserve in southeastern Manitoba.

region. The city of Winnipeg recorded the most annual visits to the Preserve, while visitors from the city of Thompson have travelled the greatest intraprovincial distance.

Looking at visitation from across Canada, Manitoba's neighbouring provinces, Ontario and Saskatchewan, have recorded a proportionately higher number of visiting communities. As travel distance increases, visitation by province generally decreases. Most Canadian provinces are represented; to date, the Preserve has not recorded visitors from Prince Edward Island, Nunavut or Yukon. Overall, Canadian visitors from outside of Manitoba, are represented by 88 communities among the following nine provinces (number of communities): Alberta (9), British Columbia (21), New Brunswick (1), Newfoundland (1), Northwest Territories (1), Nova Scotia (2), Ontario (40), Quebec (4), and Saskatchewan (9).

To date, visitors from 37 American states and 114 communities have signed in at the Preserve. The diversity and frequency of visits of US communities increases with proximity to the Manitoban border. Minnesotans in particular, have visited annually and have recorded the greatest number of communities compared to other states. Visitation from the United States, includes the following 36 states (number of communities): Arizona (1), Arkansas (1), California (6), Colorado (4), Connecticut (2), Delaware (1), Florida (5), Georgia (1), Illinois (5), Indiana (1), Iowa (1), Kansas (1), Maryland (1), Michigan (2), Minnesota (27), Missouri (3), Montana (1), Nebraska (2), New Hampshire (1), New Jersey (1), New Mexico (2), New York (3), North Carolina (4), North Dakota (10), Ohio (1), Oregon (2), Pennsylvania (2), Rhode Island (1), South Carolina (1), South Dakota (1), Tennessee (2), Texas (2), Vermont (2), Virginia (3), Washington (2), and Wisconsin (5).

While few visitors from outside North America make their way to the Preserve each year, visitors have come from all inhabited continents except for Africa. England has recorded the greatest number of communities of any country outside of North America. Annually, the Preserve receives visitors from an average of 29 (50%) communities within Manitoba, 13 (22%) from elsewhere in Canada, 12 (21%) within the US, and 4 (7%) from outside North America. Visitors from beyond North America, include (number of communities): Australia (5), Bavaria (1), Belize (1), Bolivia (1), Brazil (1), China (1), England (13), France (2), Germany (8), Ireland (3), Japan (1), The Netherlands (2), New Zealand (1), and Switzerland (1).

Information about the Preserve can be found on-line at Manitoba Government websites (e.g. www.gov.mb.ca/conservation/wildlife/habcons/cwhp/tgp.html or www.gov.mb.ca/watchablewildlife/tallgrassprairie.html) as well as Nature Manitoba (2012; <http://www.naturemanitoba.ca/?q=tall-grass-prairie>) and Nature Conservancy of Canada (2012; <http://www.natureconservancy.ca/en/where-we-work/manitoba/>) sites among others. Websites generally feature maps

and directions to the Preserve, and information about the region. Details about the Preserve and special events are listed in seasonal tourist information booklets prepared by Travel Manitoba (2012) and it has been highlighted in magazines, field guides and local newspapers. Several published books have also featured the Preserve. A small newsletter, entitled "Prairie Ponders" is written by Preserve staff and highlights the plants and animals found on the Preserve as well as general information regarding the state of the area, upcoming events, and local amenities. It is available free of charge within the region as a printed copy or electronic pdf.

An annual field day, Prairie Day, has been held since the early 1990s to encourage local residents and prairie enthusiasts to spend some time in the tall grass prairie. Promotion is done through posters on bulletin boards in the area, notices in local newspapers, upcoming event segments on radio stations, and various nature related websites (e.g., Nature North [2012] and Nature Manitoba [2012]). Prairie Day features talks on a wide range of subjects, guided walks for both plants and birds, and children's activities, such as critter catching and face painting (Manitoba Conservation and Water Stewardship 2012a). Prairie Day attracts 40 to 130 people, with an average attendance of 75 people. As this is an open air event, the forecasted weather can influence attendance. Many attendees are from communities within a one-hour drive; locally, residents from Gardenton and Stuartburn have had consistent attendance over the years. People from greater distances, including Australia and England, have been in attendance.

Two organizations have developed curriculum focused school programs, featuring the Preserve, to educate children in the southern region of the province. Originally, both programs were intended to be completed in two parts, first an in-class presentation, then a follow-up field trip to the Preserve. Nature Manitoba (formally Manitoba Naturalist Society) started their school program in 1998, and has delivered it to 44 schools in 32 communities. The Nature Conservancy of Canada's Prairie Studies Education Program was started in 2003. Between the two programs, over 4,000 students, teachers and parent volunteers from over 50 schools in more than 35 communities have experienced, first-hand, the diversity of southeastern Manitoba's tall grass prairie ecosystem.

Other groups have made special arrangements to visit the Preserve for a guided tour tailored to their interests. The Preserve has hosted tours for a variety of user groups, from retired teacher associations and garden clubs, to home school groups and classes from the Universities of Manitoba and Winnipeg, as well as Nature Canada, the Canadian Botany Association, and various government groups.—*Christie L. Borkowsky¹ and Erin Zahradka. Critical Wildlife Habitat Program, Box 24 - 200 Saulteaux Crescent, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada R3J 3W3; ¹Corresponding author email address: tgpqh@mymts.net.*

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