

## ***A Brief History Lesson***

Twenty years have passed since the Manitoba Naturalists Society (MNS) conducted its Tall Grass Prairie Inventory Project. The goal of the project was to systematically search the Red River Valley for remnant tall grass prairie sites. MNS surveyors spent two summers investigating over 3000 potential sites. Only 88 of these were considered to contain good quality tall grass prairie. In the primary study area of the Red River Valley, most of the surviving sites were less than 10 acres in size and, interestingly, over half of these occurred along railway rights-of-way. There were, however, some good-sized sites found in the southeast portion of the province, between the towns of Gardenton and Tolstoi. These sites were on the sparsely wooded, less productive soils on the fringes of the original tall grass range but nevertheless contained some of the best sites remaining in Manitoba. As a result of this inventory, the surveyors came to the dismal conclusion that only a fraction of 1% of Manitoba's historical 1.5 million acres of tall grass prairie remained and a recommendation was made to establish a 2,500-acre preserve to try and protect some of this endangered ecosystem. The area between Tolstoi and Gardenton was the only area in which there was enough intact tall grass prairie left to do so.



The alarming results of the Tall Grass Prairie Inventory project helped spur the creation of the Critical Wildlife Habitat Program (CWHP), a cooperative program involving seven conservation organizations, which began securing lands in the Tolstoi-Gardenton area of southeastern Manitoba in 1989. The original CWHP agreement was signed by the Manitoba Naturalists Society, Wildlife Habitat Canada, World Wildlife Fund, Manitoba Habitat Heritage Corporation and the Department of Natural Resources. These partners provided significant funds for land acquisition and field staff who conducted baseline species inventories and monitoring. The Nature Conservancy of Canada joined the CWHP partnership in 1992 and Environment Canada joined in 1993. Also in 1993, a Tall Grass Prairie Local Advisory Committee was established to address local concerns and to ensure local input and support for the

Preserve. The committee included local cattle producers, a merchant and representatives from the LGD of Stuartburn, the Gardenton Museum, and the South East Border Game and Fish Association. Members of the LAC secured grant money to develop The Prairie Shore Interpretive Trail. Public donations were also solicited through the MNS Prairie Patrons Program, whereby individuals and organizations could “buy an acre of tall grass prairie” with every \$50 donation. While other organizations were promoting similar programs to preserve the Amazon rainforest, in less than a year, nearly \$25,000 had been raised to preserve Manitoba's own endangered tall grass prairie with matching funds obtained from the Province's Special Conservation Fund.

In 1990, an 80-acre parcel containing the globally imperilled western prairie fringed orchid was acquired. Although this area was not originally within the boundaries of the proposed prairie preserve, the orchid was considered important enough to enlarge the proposed preserve by adding a second block. Thanks to the continuing efforts of the CWHP and its partners, the Manitoba Tall Grass Prairie Preserve now includes over 8,000 acres of essential habitat for a growing number of rare and endangered plants, mammals, birds, insects and reptiles.

## ***Puzzled***

The tall grass prairie ecosystem is like a giant jig-saw puzzle, with many pieces that all fit together to make a whole. Unfortunately, we don't know what the finished puzzle should look like because most of the tall grass prairie was destroyed before we knew much about it. But we do know that we are missing some of the pieces, like bison, prairie wolves and natural fires. We have also added pieces from other puzzles, like weedy species and cattle. When a piece that is the wrong shape or size is fitted into a puzzle, the whole puzzle is effected – some pieces no longer fit snugly together while others bulge up from the flat surface. The goal of Preserve staff and researchers is to better understand how all of the pieces fit together. If finding the missing pieces is not possible, we try to make the introduced pieces fit in the best way possible. This is a challenging and complicated task!



## Upcoming Events

**Volunteer Opportunities: Monday, June 30<sup>th</sup> and Saturday, September 6<sup>th</sup>.** Join NCC and Native Orchid Conservation Inc. in a search for endangered species north of the Vita drain. These are great opportunities to hang out with plant experts and other nature enthusiasts in a fun and informal setting. For more info, call Cathy at (204) 942-0900 or go to [www.natureconservancy.ca](http://www.natureconservancy.ca).

**Canada Day tour, Tuesday, July 1<sup>st</sup>.** Celebrate Canada's natural heritage! Join NCC for a walking tour of the Preserve's Agassiz trail as part of the Vita Canada Day festivities.

**Prairie Day! Saturday, August 9<sup>th</sup>.** Prairie Shore Trail, 2 miles east of Tolstoi. Learn about wild carnivorous plants, hunt for bugs, learn how to make herbal medicines and more! Join us for a family-friendly day of fun on the prairie. For info call 425-3229.

### Self-guided Interpretive Trails

- **The Prairie Shore Trail** - 2 miles east of Tolstoi on PR209. Washroom and picnic facilities.
- **The Agassiz Trail** - 1 mile east of the junction of PR201 and PR209 and then a ¼ mile north. Washroom and picnic facilities.

Public tours are available for groups of 5 or more. Contact the Preserve Headquarters at 425-3229 or [tgpphq@mts.net](mailto:tgpphq@mts.net).

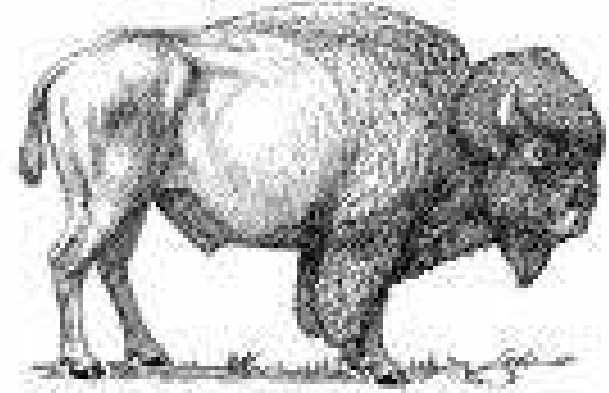
To learn more about the cultural history of this area, visit the Gardenton Ukrainian Museum. Call 425-3072 for more info.

*The Preserve was established to protect and conserve the native species found there. Please do not pick, dig or collect any of the plants or animals. Remember motorized vehicles are prohibited.*

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# Manitoba Tall Grass

## Prairie Preserve



# Prairie Ponders

## Spring 2008

**Critical**  
Wildlife Habitat Program