

Change is in the air. The sweet smell of the balsam poplars has faded away and that mysterious peppery scent associated with willow thickets can be detected. Mornings are growing quieter as nesting season comes to an end. Soon, the frantic alarm calls of nervous parents and pestering squawks of ravenous adolescent birds will no longer be heard as the young birds strike out on their own. The sweet-smelling prairie lily (the only red flower on the Preserve) signals the change from spring to summer, when tadpoles morph into full-sized frogs, fawns lose their spots and wood ticks become less abundant. Before long, the sweet scent of peach grass (a.k.a. prairie dropseed) will fill the air while waving stems of big bluestem and Indian grass will beckon curious souls to take a closer look at one of the most beautiful places on Earth.

A Case of Mistaken Identity

As the western prairie fringed orchid starts to flower, so too, does the **smooth camas** (*Zigadenus elegans*). From a distance, smooth camas may be mistaken for this endangered orchid, but up close, these plants look quite different. Smooth camas has 6 creamy white petals. At the base of each petal is a green, heart-shaped gland that attracts a variety of flies, including the bright green soldier fly. This camas is often referred to in the literature as “death camas”. However, even though smooth camas contains a toxic substance, reported cases of poisonings in both animals and humans seem to be caused by related species that occur further west in Saskatchewan and Alberta.

A Dirty Little Secret

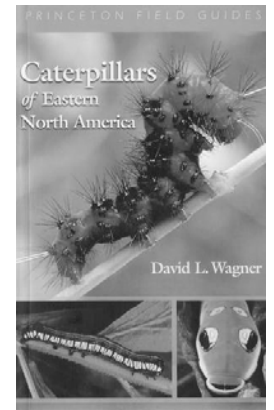
The Manitoba Tall Grass Prairie Preserve and surrounding area is great habitat for **woodchucks**, which like mixed woods, pastures and fence rows, studded with stumps and large boulders. They tend to dig their burrows on dry ridges to reduce the risk of flooding. Woodchuck burrows are generally 5-6 inches in diameter – large enough for themselves, but too small for their main predators – foxes and coyotes. The main entrance, which may be up to 12” across, is dug from the outside in, resulting in a telltale pile of loose dirt beside the hole. Nearby, a narrower entrance or “plunge hole” is created with a vertical drop of about two feet into

the main tunnel. This entrance, which is dug from the inside out, is effectively hidden, providing a valuable escape route from predators. A lack of scat around a burrow usually means that the burrow belongs to a woodchuck, as these animals bury their scats in a latrine chamber in their burrow or in the soft dirt by the entrance.

Playing it Safe

The Preserve is home to over 330 species of butterflies and moths, which equates to over 330 different kinds of **caterpillars**. Does that make you wonder where they all are? Why don’t we see more of these caterpillars on a regular basis? Caterpillars have adopted a wide range of physical and behavioural defence tactics to keep them safe from predators, including birds, mammals, spiders and other insects. Some caterpillars, such as the monarch, only eat plants that contain substances that are toxic and bad-tasting to other animals, and are therefore left alone. Others, such as the buckmoth caterpillar, have poison-filled spines that result in a wasp-like stinging sensation when carelessly handled. Several species, including mourning cloaks, tortoise shells, and fritillaries have similar-looking spines that, unbeknownst to their predators, are completely harmless. Mimicry is a physical defence tactic in which the colouration of a caterpillar resembles, for example, a non-food source such as a fresh bird dropping, or a potentially dangerous predator, such as a snake. This type of mimicry is common among swallowtails and viceroys. However, the majority of caterpillars depend on excellent physical or behavioural camouflage to avoid predation. Loopers and inchworms provide some of nature’s most incredible examples of camouflage, perfectly matching many different plant parts, including leaves, flowers, buds, bark, twigs and petioles.

At last! A field guide devoted to caterpillar identification! Check out “Caterpillars of Eastern North America” by David L. Wagner to learn more about caterpillars and what they turn into.



Upcoming Events

NCC Conservation Volunteer Events:

Tansy Pull and Stroll, Saturday, August 15.

Prairie Meadow Clean-up and Tour, Saturday, September 19.

For more info, contact Cathy Shaluk at (204) 942-0900 or visit www.conservationvolunteers.ca.

Prairie Day! Saturday, August 8. Help us celebrate the Preserve's 20th anniversary! Explore upland and wetland habitats, learn about Manitoba bats, natural hazards, caring for wildlife, the use of fire in prairie preservation, and more! Kids will love bug hunting with a professional entomologist, critter dipping, face painting and bannock bake. (Note: Wetland explorers should consider a change of clothes.) Special evening activities will include a traditional Ukrainian supper, driving tour, bat detecting and black-lighting for nocturnal insects. Prairie Shore Trail, 2 miles east of Tolstoi. For more information and supper reservations call (204) 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. No water.

Free public tours are available for groups of 5 or more. Contact the Preserve Headquarters at 425-3229 or 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.

Manitoba Tall Grass

Prairie Preserve



Prairie Ponders

Summer 2009