

Bringing the Public and the Prairies Together

Alex Zellermeier and George W. Scotter

An ever present west wind keeps the blue grama 'eyebrows' in motion and ruffles the hair of an Ontario family walking a prairie trail through native grass. They notice quite a difference from the monoculture crop land the trail had passed through a few moments ago. Every second footstep sends grasshoppers leaping from their path. From the aspen clump ahead a Swainson's Hawk screams and soars into the air, etching ever-widening circles over their heads. Meadowlarks, vesper sparrows, and lark buntings flush secret places only the birds can find again.

For this particular family, a walk such as this may be a once in a lifetime experience. Just an hour ago they were breezing across a stretch of the Trans-Canada highway often described as "boring," "monotonous," or "flat." But now the gentle relief of the prairies is coming alive around them. It is a typical summer day at the Prairie Wildlife Interpretation Centre.

Prairie Wildlife Interpretation Centre presents to the travelling public and opportunity to experience prairie environment. Situated 30 km west of Swift Current, Sask., along the Trans-Canada Highway, the centre is easily accessible to the car-weary traveller. Within its 440 ha are representative samples of the prairie landscape past and present.

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Under the Interpretation Program offered by the Canadian Wildlife Service of Environment Canada, the centre is fourth in a series of what eventually will be seven public programs focussing on Canada's natural regions.

Through a series of self-guided tours, visitors are exposed to various components of the prairie mosaic. By lease to a local farmer, 500 acres of land is kept in production on a crop-fallow rotation. Four hundred acres of native range (mostly spear grass (*Stipa comata*)-blue grama (*Bouteloua gracilis*) association) show typical mixed grass Prairie Wildlife Interpretation Centre vegetation. An alkali lake ringed with prairie bulrush, samphire, and salt grass provides feeding and nesting places for multitudes of shore birds. A freshwater slough provides an example of the typical cattail-fringed pothole of the grassland so important to waterfowl production, while a cactus faced coulee shows the abundance of cover and shelter provided by a quirk of drainage.

To complement the outdoor walking program, a two story reception facility has been built to house printed materials and a staff of interpretive guides. Architecturally designed to blend into the prairie landscape, the building acts as a reception and culmination point for visitors of the Prairie Wildlife Interpretation Centre.

The top floor of the Interpretation Centre serves as a vantage point for interpretative guides to point out the features of the property and suggest to visitors a stroll along a prairie



The Prairie Wildlife Interpretation Centre, situated near the Trans-Canada Highway at Webb, Saskatchewan, allows the public to experience a prairie environment.



A series of self-guided tours expose the visitors to various components of the prairies.

trail that leads directly from the reception level. Trail maps, brochures, and binoculars may be borrowed to further enhance the visitor's appreciation of the prairie environment.

Along this "Prairie Trail," the basic story of the grassland environment is explained with outdoor signs and displays. Prairie landforms, climate, and the resulting nature of



The basic adaptations of animals, such as ground squirrels, and plants to the driest parts of the Canadian grasslands are explained to the visitors, many of whom have not experienced the prairie environment before.

grasses are featured. These are the basic stories which culminate in this short walk's final outdoor display—animal adaptations to live on the grasslands: adaptations to moisture deficiency, temperature extremes, and open spaces.

Around these basic adaptations can be explained the habits of ground squirrels and hawks, the morphology of pronghorn antelope and badgers, or the abundance of shore birds and waterfowl in some of the driest parts of Canada.

This short display path takes only 20 minutes to complete. At this point an option presents itself at a junction: back to the building and the lower level display hall area, or a path ahead to a series of progressively larger loop trails that extend to the farthest reaches of the property. Here is the chance to walk easy paths through chokecherry and rose bush tangled coulees, waist-high fields of grain, or onto the native plant communities. Trail guides are offered for these



A visit to the Prairie Wildlife Centre culminates in a display hall where exhibitions and displays allow visitors to gain more detailed information on the prairie mosaic.

outer trails that provide detailed information on the features along the way.

Perhaps one of the best opportunities for grassland interpretation is provided by a small section of native range. On a knoll overlooking Goose Lake are several tipi rings dating from the mid-1700's; the campsite of Indian buffalo hunters.¹ It doesn't take too much imagination to envision the multitudes of wild animals that ranged on the North American Plains before settlement, or the people who lived their lives so differently from the plains people of today.

For a visitor to see the grass species that fattened buffalo herds is often an exhilarating experience. The sight of an expanse of native grass makes it easier to relate the stories of ranching and settlement, and finally, instill an understanding of the drastic alteration of wildlife habitats that modern man has implemented on the grasslands. The need to manage wisely our remaining wildlife resources becomes obvious.

¹A tipi ring is a circle of stones formerly used to support a cone-shaped tent used by American Indians. Such rings were common in the Canadian prairies in days gone by.

The visit culminates back at the Centre's display hall. Exhibits and displays feature key prairie wildlife stories. Resource materials are available to explain virtually any question the visitor might care to pose. Herbarium specimens are available for identification of species that were seen outside. Bird tapes allow visitors to identify songs they have heard or wish to hear, while texts and guides provide detailed information on everything from flowers to the physiology of ground squirrels in hibernation.

In all parts of the program, both inside and outside, there are interpreters, most of whom are biology students, ready to answer questions, provide information, and encourage the public to visit other spots of particular interest on the prairies. This personal contact of each visitor is an important part

of our program. One well-answered inquiry usually turns into a discussion of some aspect of grassland ecology that opens the door to a better understanding of the land and its wildlife.

To help enhance the visitor's drive after leaving the Centre, take away literature is available, as are field guides and natural history specialty books to encourage an interest in outdoor pursuits.

Visitors take away from the Centre an enriched experience of their prairie travels. We hope that they take, as well, an appreciation for the complex and fragile nature of a vital ecosystem. With this new understanding their continued prairie travel is more meaningful than the stretches of uninterrupted arrow-straight asphalt had led them to believe. ●

Professional Performance and Attainment of Range Management Goals

William F. Schroeder

We are accustomed to hear people refer to themselves as professionals;—football players, prize fighters, and all the rest. The intended distinction is from an amateur, and is offered in terms of there being a material reward for effort. However, making a living from what one does is not what distinguishes a professional. If you think of the word *profession* in the same field as *profess* and *professor*, you will sense what a *profession* is. Its ancient root means "to avow before." The essential ingredient is a public avowing with the purpose of creating an audience reaction and conversion to a special point of view. In a contemporary scene, it is the equivalent of what we dramatized as the agonized "Statement" that erupts in a profound expression of principle of "where I stand" or "what is my space" or "where I am coming from." You are a professional only if you are prepared to make a public avowing or statement in what you do, and if what you do is continuously consistent with that statement.

I do not intend to reexamine what your statement is supposed to be, but I do presume to suggest how you must function within the current of relevant events if the statement of your professional life is to be understood and be effective. John Dewey (1922) said in his *Human Nature and Conduct* that,

Intelligence is concerned with foreseeing the future so that action may have order and direction. It is also concerned with principles and criteria of judgment.

So let us first review the current of relevant events and

attempt to discover something about the future. When we know the course of this flowing river, we can decide how we should travel it.

What is it which is the subject of your profession? To say that it is "land" does not help us very much in understanding how we are to function with respect to it. To acquire that understanding we must first ingest a simple declaration of political fact. Dr. Gene Wunderlich, an economist with the Agriculture Department's Economic Research Service said it best. He said, "Land is a means for distributing and exercising power."

Peter Meyer (1979), in his *Land Rush, A Survey of America's Land*, said this:

Curiously, in the United States the link between control of the land and its resources and political and economic power has rarely been seen as an organizing theme in decisions about either the use and abuse of the land or the people dependent on it. Unlike the literature about the problems of nonindustrialized nations, with its talk of "land reform" "redistribution of wealth", "green revolution", and "absentee landlords", the debate in the U.S. is imbued with such phrases as "land use", "conservation of resources", "stopping urban sprawl", and "protecting the environment!"

I previously tried to develop this link in respect to the Western rangelands, and we now comment upon what that link portends.

A study of existing land ownership patterns shows approximately 2.3 billion land surface acres in the United States. About 1 billion acres of this is owned by federal, state and county governments or are Indian trust lands held by the federal government. This leaves about 1.3 billion acres, or about 55%, of privately owned land, controlled as follows: about 26.3 million acres, or 2

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This article is based on a keynote address Schroeder gave in the townhall session "Role of People in Rangeland Ecosystems" at the 1980 SRM annual meeting, San Diego, California.