

FROM DUST BOWL TO PUBLIC PRAIRIE:

THE NATIONAL GRASSLANDS STORY



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by Tom Domek

The National Grasslands, Their Size and Location

State	Acres	District Headquarters
North Dakota		
Cedar River NG	6,717	Lemmon, SD
Little Missouri NG	1,028,051	Dickinson and Watford City, ND
Sheyenne NG	70,268	Lisbon, ND
South Dakota		
Buffalo Gap NG	595,538	Wall and Hot Springs, SD
Fort Pierre NG	115,997	Pierre, SD
Grand River NG	155,075	Lemmon, SD
Wyoming		
Thunder Basin NG	571,971	Douglas, WY
Nebraska		
Oglala NG	94,480	Chadron, NE
Colorado		
Comanche NG	435,319	Springfield, CO
Pawnee NG	193,060	Greeley, CO
Kansas		
Cimarron NG	108,175	Elkhart, KS
Oklahoma		
Black Kettle NG	31,286	Cheyenne, OK
Texas		
Caddo NG	17,784	Decatur, TX
Lyndon B. Johnson NG	20,309	Decatur, TX
McClelland Creek NG	1,449	Cheyenne, OK
Rita Blanca NG	92,989	Texline, TX
New Mexico		
Kiowa NG	136,417	Clayton, NM
California		
Butte Valley NG	18,425	Yreka, CA
Oregon		
Crooked River NG	111,352	Prineville, OR
Idaho		
Curlew NG	47,756	Malad, ID

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Preface

Nothing so captures the birth of America's national grasslands as the Dust Bowl: Fence lines buried in dunes of silt. Great clouds of earth sweeping like black tidal surf over farms, towns, whole counties. Sodbusters staring from newsreel film. They turn, lean into the wind, step into the dust thick as smoke, then walk out of the frame and into our history.

While these images are accurate as a picture in time; still, they don't clearly represent what the national grasslands are today. That is, the national grasslands are far more than their difficult Dust Bowl birth. Their natural history extends back millions of years, while their human occupation arcs back more than 10 millennia. Today's national grasslands remain some of our last best islands of grass in a great sea of change. They are reservoirs of biological diversity in a vastly altered Great Plains landscape. They

represent virgin plains and prairie ecosystems that in some cases remain only as remnants of their once extensive expanse. The National Grassland System is one of the most significant public investments our nation has made in the perpetuation of native grasslands. National grasslands are, by virtue of their beauty, history, surprise and solitude, inherently worth exploring.

This book is written with two goals in mind: first, to provide a historical account of the national grasslands, how and why they were organized and what these lands have been; and, secondly, to provide a representation of the National Grassland System by profiling South Dakota's three national grasslands: The Buffalo Gap, Grand River and Fort Pierre National Grasslands. In addition, two short sections at the end of the book describe some of the basic federal laws that govern management of the 20 national grasslands, and indicate the names of the national grasslands, their acreages and their state locations.

A History of the National Grasslands

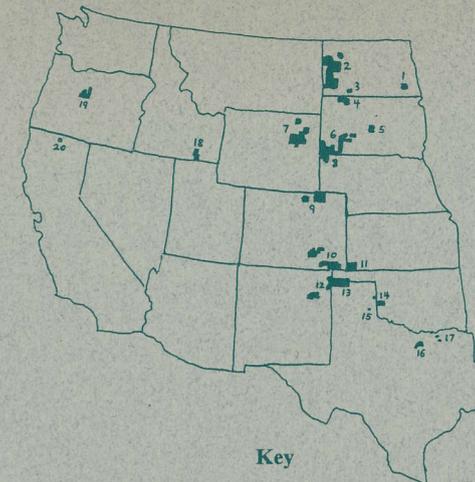
America's national grasslands are special. If ever a system of public land had to rise like a phoenix from the ashes of environmental degradation, it would have to be America's national grasslands. But like the phoenix—that mythic bird scorched by fire and heat—America's Great Plains and her national grasslands once again could be scorched by great heat and drought. Another decade-long drought, like that of the Dust Bowl '30s, could revisit North America's mid-continent. In truth, another drought is not only a possibility, it is an eventuality.

This century, major droughts have occurred roughly every 20 years: in the 1930s, the 1950s and the 1970s. Because droughts are cyclical, another years-long drought is due. Some climatologists believe that portions of the southern plains are already in another major drought cycle, though it's still too soon to know for sure. One certainty cannot be denied. A significant drought will return, perhaps sooner, perhaps later. In either case, another major drought is inevitable. It is vital, therefore, that we treat our lands and its resources wisely in order to reduce the environmental consequences that accompany cyclical droughts.

Today's National Grassland System is undeniably a product of the Dust Bowl and Great Depression of the 1930s. In that decade, Dust Bowl conditions and economic devastation stripped a good deal of the Great Plains of its protective vegetation and forced thousands of farm families from their homesteads. Back then, however, no national grasslands existed.

The national grasslands were not organized into a National Grassland System until 1960. Prior to that, these lands were known primarily as Land Utilization Projects, or LU lands. LU lands were purchased by the federal government mainly from homesteaders facing bankruptcy and foreclosure due to drought and depression in America's heartland. Today, these old land restoration and reclamation projects (LU lands) provide productive rangeland for cattle, increasingly serve as recreational destinations, and act as "islands of biodiversity" in a surrounding sea of cultivation and private rangeland.

Twenty national grasslands can be found in 12 western states: North and South Dakota, Wyoming, Nebraska, Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas, Idaho, Oregon and California. All told, there are more than 3.8



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| 1. Sheyenne National Grassland | 2. Little Missouri National Grassland |
| 3. Cedar River National Grassland | 4. Grand River National Grassland |
| 5. Fort Pierre National Grassland | 6. Buffalo Gap National Grassland |
| 7. Thunder Basin National Grassland | 8. Oglala National Grassland |
| 9. Pawnee National Grassland | 10. Comanche National Grassland |
| 11. Cimarron National Grassland | 12. Kiowa National Grassland |
| 13. Rita Blanca National Grassland | 14. Black Kettle National Grassland |
| 15. Lake McClellan National Grassland | 16. Lyndon B. Johnson National Grassland |
| 17. Caddo National Grassland | 18. Curlew National Grassland |
| 19. Crooked River National Grassland | 20. Butte Valley National Grassland |

million acres of national grasslands, all administered by the U.S. Forest Service, and all open to the public for their enjoyment and use. In fact, 82 percent of this 3.8-million-acre system is found in the Northern Great Plains states of North and South Dakota, Wyoming and Colorado.

Today, South Dakota can claim three national grasslands: the Buffalo Gap National Grassland in the southwestern portion of the state, the Fort Pierre National Grassland

near Pierre, and the Grand River National Grassland near Lemmon. Among the three, more than 866,000 acres of publicly owned grasslands exist in the state.

Though in many ways the national grassland story begins with the Dust Bowl, in other ways it also might begin in 1862, with the passage of the first federal Homestead Act. The Homestead Act and its subsequent amendments offered 160 acres of public domain to essentially anyone—citizen or immigrant—who, after paying a \$10 fee, would undertake the difficult task of living on and cultivating for no less than five years the land to which they staked a claim.

Over the years, this seemingly generous offer attracted as many as 1.5 million homesteaders who settled as much as 200 million acres of land on the Great Plains. The 1862 Act, however, had some glaring flaws. For one, 160 acres often was too small an area to develop a profitable venture, especially in water-deficient regions like the Great Plains and the Southwest. In addition, poor soils, dramatic swings in the climate, grasshoppers, and wild fires all conspired against the homesteader. It is estimated that by 1890 only one in three homesteaders had successfully suffered

the hardships of the prairies to actually gain the deed on their claim.

Later homestead acts tried to do better by homesteaders. The Kinkaid Act of 1904 allowed 640-acre tracts, but only applied to western Nebraska. The Mondell Act of 1909 provided 320 acres in the rest of the West. The Stock-Raising Act of 1916 granted 640 acres, but applied to a region where, often, one cow needed from 50 to 100 acres of pasture to be moderately sustained.

Still, the nation was bursting at its seams, with immigration escalating between 1890 and 1920, rising by more than a million in North and South Dakota, Wyoming and Nebraska. By 1930, just under three million people were living in these four states. The majority came for land, and were sold on the notion by land speculators and the agents of land-grant railroads who, exaggerating the amount of fertile ground, boasted that “the rain followed the plow” or other such nonsense.

Relatively wet years between 1910 and 1920 fooled many into believing that rain truly did follow the plow. Thus, tens of thousands of homesteaders poured onto land only

marginally suited for crop production. With the growing need for grain, especially during World War I, farmers plowed up every available acre, hoping to cash in on the world's demand for grain. Success, however, was short-lived. Grain prices plummeted in 1920, and while most of the country roared along in prosperity during the following decade, farmers in the heartland suffered grievous economic hardships.

Then came the crash on Wall Street in 1929, and the painful drought which, in the Dakotas, was a wrenching, full-decade long—between 1929 and 1939. The drought was made worse by two looming factors: the spill of immigration onto semi-arid submarginal land, and the continued unwise cultivation of that land by honest, though ill-fated homesteaders.

As the sun baked the land dry of vegetation, and as the winds of the region tore at the earth, great clouds of dirt rose into the sky, billowing into black storms that buried whole farms and towns in dust and despair. Such storms were especially frequent in southern Great Plains states, such as Kansas and Oklahoma, but were also a painful, though less torturous, reality in the north as well. Added to



Scenes such as this were common on the Southern Great Plains during the Dust Bowl (Morton County, Kansas, circa 1936).

—Photo courtesy of USDA - Forest Service, Cimarron National Grassland, Elkhart, Kansas.

the dust were vast swarms of grasshoppers that ravaged the meager crops and native grasses. Both environmentally and economically, the Great Plains were transformed from grasslands of plenty to dustlands of despair.

To partially offset the economic ruin faced by so many, the federal government enacted a series of legislative bills to purchase bankrupt and foreclosed-upon homesteads. In 1931, a national conference titled “Land Utilization” called for a survey of submarginal lands. Once these lands were identified, the government began to purchase them

under the authority of the National Industrial Act of 1933 and the Emergency Relief Appropriations Act of 1935. The aim of these and subsequent bills was to control erosion, produce more forage, and ensure the economic stability of any remaining rural residents.

Such legislation allowed for depleted cropland to be replanted with grass and to promote rotational grazing methods, which assured that rangeland wouldn't be grazed by livestock non-stop year-round. In some areas, newly formed grazing associations were organized to secure grazing land for their members on government-owned lands through a permit process. Furthermore, various agencies, such as the Soil Conservation Service (SCS), undertook water and soil conservation projects.

Between 1933 and 1946, 250 "land utilization" projects were sponsored on 11.3 million acres in 45 states. The voluntary sale of land by homesteaders redirected the title of these lands to the federal government for about \$47.5 million or approximately \$4.40 an acre.

The 11.3 million acres of LU lands were first administered by the Resettlement Administration, later renamed the

Farm Security Administration. In 1937, the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act gave custody of LU lands to the Secretary of Agriculture and pushed for more rigorous conservation efforts. The SCS was given the management of LU lands in 1938, a task that lasted until January 1954, when the U.S. Forest Service was assigned the duty.

Beginning in the mid-1930s and continuing to today, agencies such as the SCS (now called the National Resources Conservation Service) and the Forest Service have conducted a myriad of projects on former LU lands, including the construction of stock ponds, the planting of shelterbelts, the reseeding of once-tilled cropland to native grasslands, and the control of wild fire.

Through an administrative order signed by the Secretary of Agriculture, the Forest Service took over management of LU lands on January 2, 1954. In 1958, approximately six million of the 11.3 million acres of LU lands were transferred to the states and a number of colleges for their use and management. Much of the remaining land was retained by the U.S. Forest Service as part of the National Forest System. On June 20, 1960, more than 3.8 million acres were reorganized, still under U.S. Forest Service

management, as 19 national grasslands. The final and twentieth national grassland, Butte Valley in California, was not designated as such until 1991, although it, too, had been purchased in the 1930s as an LU project.

Today, all national grasslands are managed under the multiple-use, sustained-yield principles championed by the U.S. Forest Service. In short, these lands are managed to demonstrate sound grassland agriculture—as described in the Preamble to the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act of 1937— and to ensure the health of the land and its ample resources. For instance, national grasslands management is conducted so as to maintain the viability of plant and animal species, many of which are unique to America’s grasslands, including several that are threatened and endangered, such as the black-footed ferret, blowout penstemon, western prairie-fringed orchid, and whooping crane.

South Dakota’s three national grasslands are front and center in this grassland system. Two are administered by the Nebraska National Forest: the Buffalo Gap and the Fort Pierre. The other, Grand River, is administered by the Dakota Prairie Grasslands, organized in 1998 from

portions of the Custer National Forest. Each of these grasslands, with their varied and ample resources, is featured below.

The National Grasslands of South Dakota

The Buffalo Gap National Grassland

The Buffalo Gap National Grassland lies in southwestern South Dakota, virtually surrounding Badlands National Park, then reaching west into the rain shadow of the Black Hills, nearly to the hogback. One of the original 19 national grasslands, this 595,000-acre public prairie is the nation’s second largest national grassland, about half the size of the country’s largest, the 1.1-million-acre Little Missouri National Grassland in western North Dakota. Parts of the Buffalo Gap border both the states of Nebraska and Wyoming and the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota.

The grassland is divided into two ranger districts: the Wall Ranger District, with offices in Wall on the east, and the Fall River Ranger District, with offices in Hot Springs on the west. Approximately 86 percent of the grassland was acquired as “land utilization” lands. The rest was integrat-

ed into the Buffalo Gap as public domain lands never claimed by anyone under the homesteading laws.

The Buffalo Gap National Grassland is a mixed-grass prairie, with such grasses as western wheatgrass, green needlegrass, little bluestem, blue gramma and buffalo-grass. Other plants, such as the rare Dakota buckwheat and rare Barr's milkvetch, are found on the grassland. The Buffalo Gap's landscape includes rolling prairie, especially in the west, and rugged badlands, more fully represented on its eastern district. Such species as pronghorn antelope, mule deer, ferruginous hawks, coyotes, prairie dogs and the rare swift fox make the grassland their home.

Currently, a very successful black-footed ferret reintroduction project is underway in Conata Basin, both on national grassland and Badlands National Park lands. The native ferret is an endangered species and is, next to the Everglades puma, the rarest mammal in the country.

Livestock grazing is the most visible land-use activity on the grassland, and helps to stabilize local communities, such as Oelrichs, located south of the Black Hills. The historic Anglo-American Cattle Company operated out of Oelrichs, a town named after the company's first presi-

dent, Harry Oelrichs. The Anglo-American, financed by Eastern capitalists like James Gordon Bennett, owner of the *New York Herald*, and Englishmen, like J.J. Cairnes, was established in 1880.

The Anglo-American Cattle Company was one of many large cattle operations on the Northern Plains. Its sizable stock yard and modern packing plant, with a rail link to Eastern markets, ensured its success, so long as unfenced range was available. However, by 1895, the company collapsed. Homesteaders had staked their claims and fenced pastures so effectively that the Anglo-American's cattle could not reach ample water and feed. The railroads, which had helped secure an eastern market, with fast transport of beef in refrigerated railcars, now had brought homesteaders and their own form of ranching to the region. The days of the open range in southwestern South Dakota were over. Today on the Buffalo Gap, grazing typically occurs between May and October, on a rotational basis.

Recreation is also in big demand on the Buffalo Gap. Hunting is a major activity in the fall. Hiking into such remote roadless areas as Red Shirt and Indian Creek is

growing in popularity, while Railroad Buttes provides a concentrated site for those who enjoy motorcycles and other off-road recreational vehicles. The many agate beds, such as the Kadoka and Fairburn beds, attract rockhounds, and the beds include such gems as prairie agates, jasper, red carnelian, moss agate, blue chalcedony, puddingstone conglomerate, and the South Dakota's state gem, the highly collectible and colorful Fairburn agate.

The open plains and scenic badlands also increasingly attract mountain bikers seeking a prairie experience. Canoeing is also available in the Cheyenne River, which offers good stream flows in the spring, with excellent views of cottonwood stands, cedar breaks and rugged badlands landscapes.

A veritable treasury of fossils is found on the Buffalo Gap. In fact, fossil resources from the Oligocene (35 to 40 million years ago) and the Eocene Epoch (32 to 37 million years ago) are some of the richest to be found anywhere in the world and are revealed in the clays eroding from the color-banded buttes and cutbanks. Oligocene and Eocene fossils include prehistoric horses and camels, titanotheres (similar in size to the rhinoceros), pigs and saber-toothed

cats. Marine fossils from an even earlier time—the Late Cretaceous age, some 65 to 80 million years ago—also turn up, and include ammonites, mosasaurs, sea turtles and the Loch Ness-like plesiosaur, a ferocious-looking reptile as long as a bus.

Fossil hunters from the mid- to late-1800s certainly found choice specimens in abundance, carting them from the badlands in wagon loads, destined for the fine museums in the eastern United States and abroad. Today, federal laws forbid the commercial collecting of vertebrate fossils on the national grasslands. Theft does occur, however, and law enforcement officers are kept busy trying to protect these public lands from fossil thieves.

The Fort Pierre National Grassland

The Fort Pierre National Grassland is just minutes from the nation's smallest capital city, Pierre. This public prairie includes more than 115,000 acres of federal land, intermingled with other federal, state and privately held lands. The grassland lies south of Pierre/Fort Pierre, north of Interstate 90, and west of the Lower Brule Indian Reservation. The Missouri River extends just miles to the east of the grassland. District offices are in Pierre.

A full 99 percent of the Fort Pierre was organized from “land utilization” lands. Only one percent was still in the public domain. Selenium is present in the soil and vegetation and can poison livestock when ingested in high enough concentrations. High, localized concentrations of selenium is one of the reasons some of these lands came back into government ownership in the 1930s. A good deal of the land surrounding the Fort Pierre is cultivated, thus creating a quilt work of agricultural monoculture—large fields of single crops, such as wheat, sorghum and, occasionally, sunflowers.

The Fort Pierre National Grassland is a mixed-grass prairie on a rolling landscape, though some of the grasses are taller than those found farther west. Such grasses as big bluestem and side-oats grama, western wheatgrass and porcupinegrass thrust up from earth, and can be seen blowing on ungrazed portions of the grassland. Few trees can be found, except for occasional cottonwoods, green ash, willow and Rocky Mountain juniper.

One plant species of recent concern is *Echinacea angustifolia*, otherwise known as purple coneflower. This thick-stemmed flower, once abundantly common throughout the

Great Plains, is rapidly being harvested from the wild (wild-crafted) to feed the burgeoning natural herbal-remedy market. In fact, *Echinacea*—used to treat colds and flu—is the best-selling herbal remedy in the country, with annual sales of up to \$80 million. While commercial growers are beginning to successfully cultivate this pretty native, demand continually grows. And although it is illegal to commercially harvest *Echinacea*—or other plants—from federal lands like the national grasslands without a permit, thieves are willing to risk the penalties for the rewards of their theft.

Plenty of other plants have been wild-crafted to the point of crisis. Wild ginseng, for instance, or golden seal and cohosh. Such thievery does underline a considerable point about native ecosystems—namely, the biodiversity they provide. Native ecosystems, like those represented on America’s grasslands, are the medicine chest for the world. More than 40 percent of all medicines prescribed in the United States contain chemicals derived from plants. And most synthetic drugs are “copies” from plants derived in nature. Of the estimated 250,000 plant species on Earth, perhaps only two percent have been thoroughly screened for chemicals with potential medicinal value.

Consider the Pacific yew. For years, this tree was burned as trash by logging operations in the old-growth forests of the Pacific Northwest. In 1975, researchers found that taxol, a chemical in the bark of Pacific yew, reduced the production of cancerous tumors. Now, taxol is used to treat breast cancer, ovarian cancer and leukemia. In addition, the Pacific yew now has enormous economic value.

So what's to say we don't have other miraculous plants, like *Echinacea*, on our native prairies? Once our forebearers thought that bison were so numerous they were inexhaustible, that it would be impossible to annihilate them. Although far less the physical or, at least, the symbolic presence of bison, could *Echinacea*, too, go the way of the wild bison?

The Fort Pierre also sports a number of wildlife species: white-tailed deer, pronghorn antelope, waterfowl, such as ducks and geese, and the greater prairie chicken. Blinds are made available free to the public to view the fascinating springtime courtship rituals of prairie chickens and sharptail grouse. The greater prairie chicken, becoming rare throughout its historic range, is fortunately abundant on the Fort Pierre. For more information about reserving

the viewing blinds, contact the district office for the Fort Pierre National Grassland in Pierre.

Hunting, especially for the greater prairie chicken, is popular in the fall and prairie dog shooting is popular year-round. Deer, sharp-tailed grouse and waterfowl are also popular game. Both prairie chickens and prairie dogs draw hunters from across the nation, and the money they spend adds to the local economy. Only three other states offer hunting opportunities for the greater prairie chicken: Nebraska, Kansas and Oklahoma. In part because of its relatively low populations across the Great Plains, many hunters consider the greater prairie chicken a trophy bird.

Prairie dog shooting remains a controversial sport, for several reasons. First, shooters don't shoot prairie dogs for the table. Instead, prairie dogs are considered by many, particularly some ranchers, to be varmints, and therefore are targeted for elimination. Environmentalists consider the prairie dog a keystone species which, given its burrowing activities, provides unique habitat for a host of other prairie species. Today, many scientists contend that only about two percent of all historic prairie dog colonies remain active. As a result, many feel that the precipitous

drop in populations of prairie-dog-dependent species (such as the black-footed ferret and swift fox) is directly linked to the significant decline in prairie dogs. Many people, in fact, are calling for the prairie dog to be listed as a federally threatened species. Such a listing could bring prairie dog shooting on the national grasslands to a virtual halt.

A number of the 400 stock ponds on the Fort Pierre National Grassland provides sport fisheries for such species as bass and the black bullhead. Birdwatching is also popular. More than 200 species of birds, such as the American white pelican, prairie falcon, the endangered whooping crane, eastern screech owl, ruby-throated hummingbird, dickcissel, and willow flycatcher have been identified on the Fort Pierre National Grassland.

Like other national grasslands, the Fort Pierre has a strong commitment to livestock grazing. Typically, pastures on the grassland are grazed by cattle over a six-month season, spring to fall. In the past, sheep have been grazed, although none are currently grazed on the Fort Pierre. Visitors can expect to find a relatively high density of fence lines on this national grassland due to the rotational livestock grazing systems currently used.

The Grand River National Grassland

The Grand River National Grasslands is one of the most secluded national grasslands in the country. Representing one of the last regions in the country to undergo Euro-American settlement (in the 1880s), this national grassland, near Lemmon, boasts more than 155,000 acres of mixed-grass prairie. Like the Fort Pierre National Grassland, 99 percent of the Grand River National Grassland was acquired as land utilization lands. The other one percent was public domain land that had never been homesteaded.

The district office, in Lemmon, is also headquarters for the tiny 6,700-acre Cedar River National Grassland across the border in North Dakota, where one of the last significant bison hunts in the Dakotas occurred in 1883. Ten thousand bison are said to have been slaughtered.

Sixty years earlier, one of the West's great frontier stories began in the vicinity of the grassland. In 1823, trapper Hugh Glass was mauled by a mother grizzly. Left by his partners to die, Glass, his wounds covered in maggots, bravely crawled 200 miles over the next six weeks to Fort Kiowa on the Missouri River, where he finally recovered.

Glass's tenacity and will to survive captured the heroic spirit of early wilderness trappers, adding a fascinating chapter to the early settlement of the West.

One of the first people to settle in the area was a Texas trail driver named George Lemmon. He arrived with his cattle outfit in northwestern South Dakota in the late 1870s. By 1902, Lemmon had settled on the L-7 Ranch, near the present site of the town that bears his name. That year, the L-7 Ranch leased 865,000 acres of land on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation and enclosed the area with three-wire fence, then making it the largest fenced pasture in the world.

More than 48,000 acres of the Grand and Cedar River National Grasslands originate from Standing Rock Indian Reservation lands that were once homesteaded. These lands were acquired by the federal government in the 1930s. About 11,000 acres were later returned to the tribe; however, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe has requested that the rest be returned, as well, since the land had been reservation land prior to homesteading. This issue, which cannot be resolved by the U.S. Forest System but which is, instead, a Congressional matter, remains contentious.

The Grand River exhibits a rolling landscape and is home to such species as pronghorn antelope, prairie dogs, rattlesnakes, burrowing owls, white-tailed deer, and healthy populations of grassland songbirds. One other notable topographic feature is a vegetated sand dune locality that provides special habitat conditions for a number of unique prairie plants.

Recently, the Nature Conservancy rated the grasslands in the Grand River area to have retained some of the best native characteristics and highest compositional integrity of any on the Northern Great Plains. Because the grassland exhibits highly rated native integrity, the opportunity to experience excellent birdwatching is fully available.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said in many areas of the Great Plains. All across the continent, grassland bird species are in jeopardy. They are, in fact, the single bird group in North America experiencing the steepest decline, even though bird populations have been historically high in the heart of the nation. Of the 435 bird species breeding in the United States, 330 have been documented on the Great Plains. Declines in some species of up to 91 percent have been recently documented. Loss of critical habitat to

agricultural practices, and the increasing “forestation” of the prairies are definitely two of the predominant reasons for population declines.

Many of these birds are singers—songbirds we may have taken for granted for too long. Such birds as the bobolink, red crossbill, lapland longspur, yellow-throated vireo, eastern and western bluebirds, rock wren, rose-breasted grosbeak, magnolia warbler and rare Baird’s sparrow have been found on the Grand River National Grassland, but may be in decline. Imagine a world without the voice and color of a songbird. The Grand River really is an island of biodiversity and, under proper management, may help stem the decline of grassland birds.

As for the escalating forestation of American grasslands, woody vegetation, such as the Eastern red cedar and other trees, are increasingly invading previously grassy areas due to the nearly complete suppression of wild fires.

While fire suppression may protect valuable property and resources, American grasslands historically evolved under a periodic regimen of fire. As such, past successes at squelching fires are leading to challenges in maintaining viable, native grassland ecosystems. Well-managed “pre-

scribed fires” can be used to help return grasslands to healthy conditions. Even so, many scientists argue, quite effectively, in fact, that more planned fires should be ignited on national grasslands and elsewhere to more appropriately maintain native prairies. Such fires can be contained within prescribed areas so that the loss of property and resources are nearly always negligible.

Visitors may wish to find seclusion in the mostly unroaded portions of the Grand River National Grasslands, such as Twin Butte Creek, Spring Creek or the Grand River Badlands. These backcountry areas may provide the visitor with an experience similar to the frontiersmen’s or the Lakota’s more than 100 years ago.

Hunting opportunities and prairie dog shooting are also attractions on the Grand River National Grassland. Yet as more private lands across the country are posted “no hunting,” or as more private landowners limit hunting only to those who can afford the fees they’d charge, open and accessible public lands—including national grasslands—become increasingly important to the average American hunter.

National Grasslands and Federal Law

As public lands administered at the federal level, many federal laws apply to the management of the national grasslands. A few of the primary ones are described below.

Title III of the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act of 1937 provides, perhaps, the basic authority for managing the national grasslands. Section 31 of Title III directs the Secretary of Agriculture to:

Develop a program of land conservation and land utilization, including the retirement of lands which are submarginal or not primarily suitable for cultivation, in order thereby to correct maladjustments in land use, and thus assist in controlling soil erosion, reforestation, preserving natural resources, mitigating floods, preventing impairment of dams and reservoirs, conserving surface and subsurface moisture, protecting the watersheds of navigable streams, and protecting the public lands, health, safety and welfare, but not build industrial parks or establish private industrial or commercial enterprises.

The Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act of 1960, as amended in 1976, mandates that all national forests and grasslands be administered for recreation, range, timber, watershed, wildlife and fish purposes. In other words, the

national grasslands are to be managed for a variety of uses—including livestock grazing, hunting, hiking, nature study—so long as the cumulative effects of those uses can be provided without reducing the sustainability resources associated with grassland ecosystems, such as forage production, plant and animal viability, fossil protection and water quality.

The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 requires that agencies, like the U.S. Forest Service, develop environmental impact statements (EISs) that disclose the effects of their activities. These reports are to be comprehensive and made readily available to the public for their input and review.

The Endangered Species Act of 1973 requires conservation of federally listed threatened or endangered species from projects or actions that might be detrimental to them or their habitats. This act is an important cornerstone in the wise stewardship of grassland resources.

The National Forest Management Act of 1976 requires that land and resource management plans be developed and revised every 10 to 15 years in order to respond to

changing conditions on Forest System lands and trends in public use on those public lands. These management plans are like operating manuals that the Forest Service uses to implement projects and sustain grassland habitats.

Dozens of other federal laws and statutes apply to the national grasslands, all of which must be considered in properly managing this public system of grassland resources.

In many ways, the national grasslands are a significant part of the "last Great Plains" in America. Urbanization, dam building and other tremendous land conversions, especially for agricultural purposes, have inextricably altered the native characteristics of grasslands in the United States. The National Grassland System, then, does indeed provide at least a few islands of native grass in this sweeping sea of change.

