Tallgrass Prairie

Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve
Kansas

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

"Whenever you stop on the prairie to lunch or camp, and gaze around,
there is a picture such as poet and painter never succeeded
in transferring to book or canvas . . .
[We] ought to have saved a . . . Park in Kansas, ten thousand acres broad—
the prairie as it came from the hand of God,
not a foot or an inch desecrated by 'improvements' and 'cultivation.'
It is only a memory now."

D.W. Wilder, editor of the *Hiawatha World*, 1884

The Last Stand

© KEVIN SINK

Greater prairie-chicken
© R. MOOSE PETERSON / WRP

Eastern meadowlark
© TOM MURRAY

Tallgrass prairie once covered 140 million acres of North America. Now less than 4 percent remains, mostly in the Flint Hills of Kansas. On November 12, 1996, Congress created the 10,894-acre preserve, protecting a nationally significant example of the once-vast tallgrass prairie ecosystem, while preserving a unique collection of cultural resources from prehistoric times through the ranching era.

Central North America, once called the Great American Desert, supports three types of grasslands. Tallgrass, mixed grass, and short grass prairies respond to decreasing rainfall amounts, while providing food and habitat for hundreds of prairie animals. Four grasses dominate tallgrass prairie—big and little bluestem, switch grass, and Indian grass. Travelers and traders crossed the vast prairie to find greater opportunities, but development was inevitable as settlers discovered the rich prairie soil.

After John Deere invented the steel moldboard plow—it could cut tough prairie sod—settling and cultivating the prairie grew by leaps and bounds. In less than a generation the prairie soil was broken, the land settled and forever changed.

American Indians knew well the value of the prairie and of human harmony with nature. Tribes of Kaw, Osage, Wichita, and Pawnee made this region their home and hunting grounds. Millions of bison roamed the plains, providing food, shelter, and ceremonial life for the tribes. As the United States expanded, Indian removal policies forced the Indians onto reservations and changed their cultures. In part to subdue the Indians, the bison were slaughtered almost to extinction. As settlement and agriculture followed, the tallgrass prairie made its last stand.

Coyote
© RON NIEBRUGGE

American bison
© D. ROBERT & LORRI FRANZ

A LIMESTONE LAYER CAKE

Evening light accentuates Flint Hills terraced limestone.
© STEVE MULLIGAN

THE FLINT HILLS OF KANSAS Over 250 million years ago this area was a vast inland sea that deposited great layers of limestone, shale, and flint. The Flint Hills were created as softer shales eroded away, leaving behind hardened flint shelves, in a process called differential erosion. The Flint Hills were too rocky to plow, except in the bottomland of creeks and rivers.

PRAIRIE FIRES Before humans lived here, lightning-ignited fires raced unchecked over the prairie until a large river or stream stopped them. Bison followed the burning prairie, grazing on tender new plant shoots. Seeing this, American Indians used fire for attracting large grazing animals to hunt. Managing the prairie by using fire and grazing allows for greater prairie diversity. Today the preserve staff works to mimic these natural processes for the prairie's health.

Fire stimulates new growth from plant roots below ground.
© LARRY SCHWARM

Wild blue indigo
© ALAN DETRICK / PHOTO RESEARCHERS, INC.

Compass plant
© KENNETH HIGHFILL / PHOTO RESEARCHERS, INC.

Lead plant
© MIKE MCDOWELL

Butterfly milkweed
© CALVIN J. HAMILTON

Blue sage
© DON KURZ

Gayfeather
ANDREW LAWSON / © DORLING KINDERSLY

Switch grass
© MIKE HADDOCK

Little bluestem
© MIKE HADDOCK

Big bluestem
© MIKE HADDOCK

Indian grass
© MIKE HADDOCK

Buffalo grass
© MIKE HADDOCK

Canada wild rye
© PAUL JENKINS, WILDFLOWER FARM

THE PRAIRIE LIVES UNDERGROUND

A significant world exists underground as the tallgrass prairie root systems reach down 15 to 25 feet into the soil, surviving fire, drought, and the changing environment. In dry periods prairie plants go dormant, conserving energy for regrowth when rain penetrates the soil. Thousands of nematodes and other animals help keep the prairie healthy through their normal life functions. They turn and aerate soil by digestion or burrowing. A handful of sod can hold 50–100 nematode species, microscopic worms that eat their way through soil. Burrowing mammals and reptiles evade predators by tunneling.

Over 200 springs and seeps on the preserve begin underground and meander through layers of limestone before they reach the surface. Aquatic life, like the endangered Topeka shiner, thrives in these pools and streams. This seldom-seen underground world—nematodes and vast plant root systems mining rich, deep soils—gives life to the creatures above.

BACKGROUND ROOT SYSTEM © HEIDI NATURA

PRAIRIE LIFE ABOVE GROUND

Over 400 species of plants, 150 kinds of birds, 39 types of reptiles and amphibians, and 31 species of mammals await your discovery here. Examples of most commonly seen animals are rabbits, turkeys, ornate box turtles, snakes, upland sandpipers, collared lizards, and grasshoppers. Far more elusive are foxes, pocket gophers, coyotes, and deer. Bears, antelopes, panthers, and bison roamed the North American prairie before it was settled.

Greater prairie-chickens prefer areas away from human activity, and their presence indicates that the prairie is biologically diverse. These members of the grouse family need taller, denser grasses for nesting, but they also need open spaces with shorter vegetation—called leks or booming grounds—for breeding. Where the conditions are diverse, prairie chickens will return to the same leks yearly to mate. The birds are threatened by habitat loss, due to conversion of native prairie to cropland and development.

Prairie life above and below ground work together, along with the preserve's cultural heritage, to tell the continually unfolding story of this fascinating and special place.

Legacy of the Tallgrass Prairie

Lithograph of Spring Hill Farm and Stock Ranch, 1887.

Stephen F. Jones

Lower Fox Creek School, 1882.

The Benninghovens owned part of the land in the early 1900s.

Hired hands eating watermelon in the 1920s.

Hazel Slabaugh and team, 1940s.

Moving cattle in 1955. ALL PHOTOGRAPHS NPS

ONE PRAIRIE, MANY PEOPLE

Before this land became Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, many people had cared for it. Set in the Flint Hills of Kansas, this was the traditional land of the Kaw, Osage, Wichita, and Pawnee before its legacy of owners, which included railroads, settlers, ranchers, and business people.

In 1878 Stephen F. and Louisa Jones came here to build a cattle feeding station for their family's Colorado cattle operation. They bought land from individuals and the railroad, growing the Spring Hill Farm and Stock Ranch to 7,000 acres. The Joneses owned the land only 10 years, but left behind ranch buildings in the Second Empire architectural style. They also left over 30 miles of stone fence that had been needed when the cattle range went from open to closed. The fence remnants remind us of this period of change in the cattle industry.

Barney Lantry, the Joneses' neighbor and business partner, bought the ranch in 1888. He combined it with his own ranch for a total of 13,000 acres. After he died, the ranch went through a series of subdivisions, including 1909 to 1935 when the Benninghoven family owned part of the ranch. After they lost it in the Great Depression, George Davis bought it and other land to reunite the Jones and Lantry ranches. In 1955 Davis died; his 11,000-acre ranch with its grand buildings became the Z Bar Ranch.

The Z Bar Ranch, with all the Joneses' grand structures intact, became Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve in 1996. The Nature Conservancy, which owns most of the land, manages the preserve with the National Park Service. As you experience the park, look for clues to the past, present, and future of this prairie legacy.

EXPLORING THE PARK

The preserve is near Strong City, KS, between Wichita and Topeka. Hours and programs are listed on the park website. You can observe ranch activities, and enjoy hiking, fishing (catch and release only), programs, and tours. The visitor center is two miles north of the US 50 and KS 177 intersection, ½ mile west of Strong City.

Park programs include living history demonstrations, ranch building tours, guided prairie tours, and self-guiding cell phone tours. Children can participate in a Junior Ranger program.

FOR YOUR SAFETY In case of emergency call 911. • Cell phone coverage is not reliable in the park. • Report accidents or safety hazards to a park ranger. • Be cautious around wildlife such as bison and rattlesnakes. • Carry plenty of water. • Watch for fires, which can move very fast here. • Be aware of changing weather.

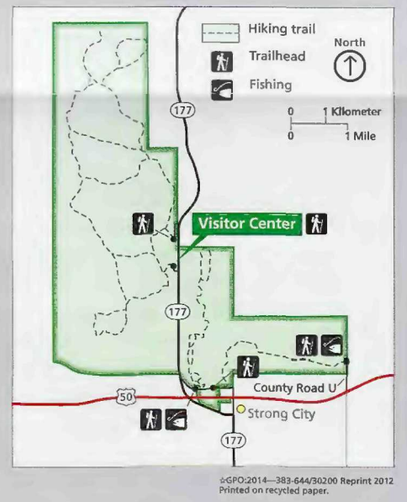
FIREARMS For firearms regulations, check the park website.

ACCESSIBILITY The visitor center is accessible but most historic buildings are not. We strive to improve our facilities, services, and programs so they are accessible to all. Contact the park for the latest information.

MORE INFORMATION
Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve
2480B KS Hwy 177
Strong City, KS 66869-6869
620-273-8494
www.nps.gov/tapr

We are also on Facebook.

Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve is one of over 390 parks in the National Park System. Visit www.nps.gov for more information about national parks and National Park Service programs in America's communities.



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The Ranch Buildings

The Spring Hill/Z Bar Ranch represents a continuous ranching legacy from 1878 to 1986. The buildings show remnants from its earliest beginnings as well as changes made by the ranch's many owners. The original owners, Stephen and Louisa Jones, built the nearby Lower Fox Creek School and their daughter Loutie attended.

1 LIMESTONE BARN
This massive limestone barn, 110 x 60 feet, housed livestock, equipment, and enough hay and grain to feed the animals in winter. In 1882, 5,000 pounds of tin covered the roof. The grain bins, cupolas, and iron support beams were added in the 1940s.

2 CORRALS AND FENCES
The Joneses enclosed the 7,000-acre ranch using a readily available resource—limestone. They also built inner pasture fences for selective breeding and to carefully distribute cattle in grazing areas.

3 OUTBUILDINGS
Built after 1900 these were workshops and storage for vehicles and equipment.

4 SCRATCH SHED
This shed enabled chickens to exercise in winter, which boosted egg production. South-facing windows let in plenty of sunlight to warm the interior. The building was remodeled many times.

5 CHICKEN HOUSE
The hill and the sod roof of this 1882 building provide natural insulation. Two ceiling vents regulate temperature and air flow, promoting greater egg production. The west door led to the scratch shed.

6 CARRIAGE HOUSE
Built between 1910 and 1920, this building housed ranch vehicles and equipment.

7 RANCH HOUSE
Built in 1881, this limestone mansion is classic Second Empire style. Its features include a mansard roof, large windows, solid walnut staircase, faux painted woodwork, ornate cornices, and ceiling medallions. The house was built into the hill for natural insulation and used spring water, piped through an intricate underground system.

8 CURING HOUSE
The Joneses used this 1881 structure to cure ham and other meats, which were hung from hooks in the rafters. Port holes and cupola vents allowed the air circulation needed for proper curing.

9 OUTHOUSE
Built in 1881, this building has interior walls of rough-cut ashlar stone and exterior walls of block limestone. Its three holes, two for adults and one for children, are unusual for ranch outhouses.

10 ICE HOUSE
Built in 1882, this structure stored ice cut from the Cottonwood River and other nearby sources. The ice was placed in sawdust and hay for insulation. This gave the Joneses ice all year, a luxury for the time. The door was originally on the north side, but was moved to the south to meet the ranch's changing needs.

To Southwind Nature Trail and
LOWER FOX CREEK SCHOOL
Built in 1882, this one-room school served students until 1930, when it was abandoned and reverted to the ranch owner. The school is a ½-mile walk from the ranch headquarters.

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