



# NORTH AMERICA'S NORTHERN GREAT PLAINS

## Restoring one of the world's premier grassland ecosystems

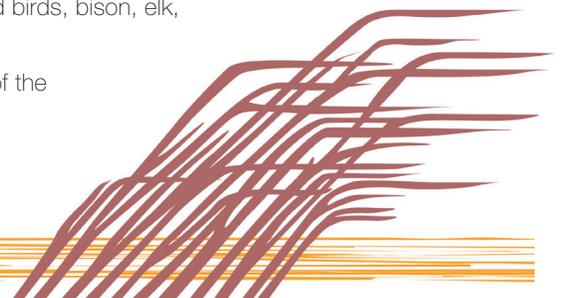


Photo: Alan Mark  
Indigenous short grass prairie  
Blackfoot Reservation, western Montana

## The Central Grasslands

The prairie grasslands of North America are found in the central and western interior of the continent, and include what are commonly referred to as the mixed grass and short grass prairie. Together, they are known as the Central Grasslands which extend in a relatively continuous swath through the heart of the continent covering almost 6 million square kilometres and extending longitudinally for about 1,500 kilometres from southern Canada to northern Mexico. These grasslands once rivalled the renowned Serengeti Plains of Africa for their diversity and abundance of wildlife with populations of a wide variety of grassland birds, bison, elk, pronghorn antelope and deer and their predators, numbering in the tens of millions.

Spanning the boundary between Canada and the United States at the northern end of the Central Grasslands, the Northern Great Plains Ecoregion encompasses an area of approximately 225,000 square kilometres.



# The Northern Great Plains of North American



Maps courtesy of the World Wildlife Fund



## The Challenge and Opportunity to Make a Difference

As occurred throughout the Central Grasslands through the late 19th and early 20th centuries, excessive hunting followed by unbridled settlement eliminated much of the prairie wildlife, and the original grasslands were largely replaced by some of the most extensive farming and ranching areas on the planet. On the Northern Great Plains, as much as 99% of the non-urban land base is actively used for farming or ranching, with only about 1.5% of the entire region in areas managed primarily for biodiversity conservation. As a result, about 74% of those species reliant on grassland habitats with distributions centred in the Northern Great Plains are listed as imperiled by federal, state, and provincial governments. On average, temperate grassland biomes have suffered a greater loss of species than other biomes, and more species have been extirpated from at least part (and often an extensive part) of the grasslands than any other North American biome.

Fortunately, about 48% of the Northern Great Plains remains under relatively natural vegetation cover. Within these remaining natural and semi-natural areas, the potential exists to conserve and protect several grassland landscapes, millions of hectares in size, that can recapture the lost magnificence of the North American prairie. A recent conservation assessment of this region, in a landmark study called *Ocean of Grass*, confirmed that the Northern Great Plains, while not a naturally functioning ecosystem, retains some of the largest blocks of untilled prairie remaining in North America and harbours considerable potential for restoring grassland ecosystems on a landscape scale. This assessment recommends increasing the level of protection of the Northern Great Plains in areas managed primarily for biodiversity conservation from its current level of 1.5% to 10–15% by 2020. Such restoration efforts could provide habitat to once again support ecologically viable populations of a suite of

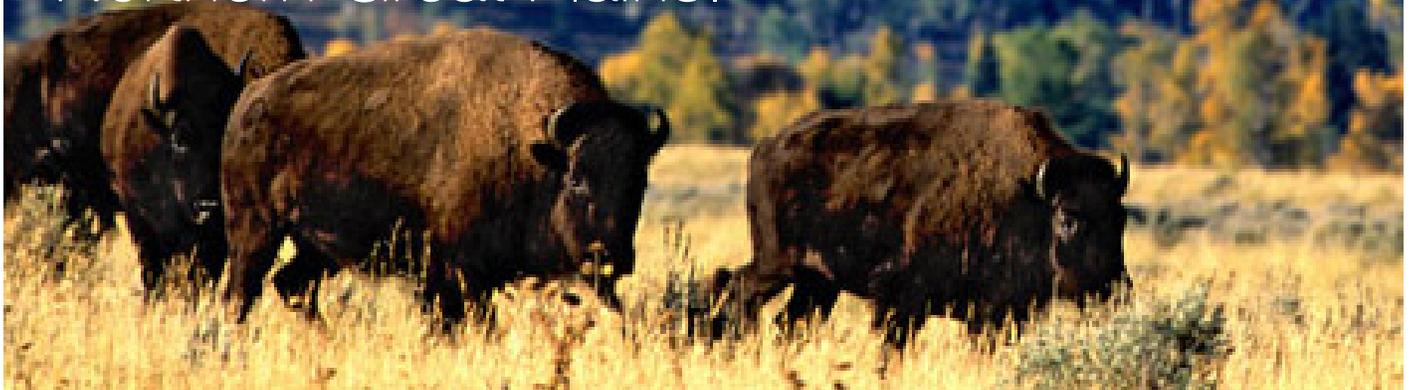
prairie wildlife, including free roaming herds of bison, and to re-establish large-scale ecological processes.

To achieve the vision of *Ocean of Grass*, a number of grassroots, regional and national conservation organizations working in the Northern Great Plains in both Canada and the United States formed the Northern Plains Conservation Network (NPCN) in 2000 to coordinate their mutual interests in grassland conservation and to chart a future that integrates conservation with the renewal of the human communities and economy of the Northern Great Plains.

Due to funding and staff limitations, the NPCN has been relatively inactive in recent years. This vitally important vehicle for facilitating international collaboration toward the conservation and protection of the Northern Great Plains, on a transboundary basis, has faltered. With the background work completed through the *Ocean of Grass* process, the knowledge is in place to understand where the priority areas are for conservation and protection – an important component of the mechanism to make it happen is missing. The Temperate Grasslands Conservation Initiative (TGCI) can bring added value to this initiative by:

- Rejuvenating and supporting the Northern Plains Conservation Network (NPCN) to develop ideas and approaches to the conservation and protection of the Northern Great Plains at all levels, from community-based resource conservation to transboundary collaboration.
- Involving IUCN regional secretariat, Commissions, institutional members and other key regional partners to seek solutions to the long term health of the Northern Great Plains ecosystem.
- Bringing international recognition to the significance of the Northern Great Plains in the context of temperate grasslands globally.

Free roaming bison can once again become common on the Northern Great Plains.



## Scope of the Project

The main goal of the project is **to coordinate existing partners and existing programs to engage them collaboratively in the common goal of restoring the ecological health of the Northern Great Plains.**

These partners include federal, provincial and state government agencies in Canada and the United States and a number of non-government organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund, the Grasslands Foundation, the Prairie Conservation Action Plan in Saskatchewan and the Alberta Wilderness Association. A revitalized Northern Plains Conservation Network would develop the necessary strategies and approaches to implementation for the conservation and sustainable management of the Northern Great Plains, and the restoration of ecologically viable populations of the suite of prairie wildlife, while recognizing the economic and social value of these grasslands to North American society. Success will be sought by recognizing the full value of the natural capital that remains in the Northern Great Plains and the opportunities it presents for public-private partnerships in pursuit of nature-based economic activities to help diversify and strengthen the regional economy in a way that serves both agriculture and biodiversity conservation.

The objectives of this project are:

1. To revitalize the Northern Plains Conservation Network and hold annual meetings.
2. To promote the adoption of sustainable land use practices throughout the Northern Great Plains.
3. To identify areas of high conservation value, promote the creation of new protected areas and contribute to the consolidation and effective management of pre-existing protected areas in the Northern Great Plains.
4. To document the true value to society of the full range of the economic and ecological goods and services provided by intact indigenous grasslands in the Northern Great Plains and help guide the transition to a regional economy based on the integration of biodiversity conservation with agriculture.

### Further reading

Forrest, S.C., H. Strand, W.H. Haskins, C. Freese, J. Proctor and E. Dinerstein. 2004. *Ocean of Grass: A Conservation Assessment for the Northern Great Plains. Northern Plains Conservation Network and Northern Great Plains Ecoregion*, WWF-US, Bozeman, Montana, USA.



Photo: Carter Thurman  
Medicine Lake, Montana

## Funding Requirements and Timetable

The approximate budget for this project is \$50,000US per year over five years and is subject to further project development.



### Temperate Grasslands Conservation Initiative



[http://www.iucn.org/about/union/commissions/wcpa/wcpa\\_what/wcpa\\_conserving/wcpa\\_grasslandstf/](http://www.iucn.org/about/union/commissions/wcpa/wcpa_what/wcpa_conserving/wcpa_grasslandstf/)

### Contact:

Temperate Grasslands Conservation Initiative (TGCI)

Bill Henwood

Project Director

300-300 West Georgia Street

Vancouver, BC CANADA

V6B 6B4

Tel: 1-604-666-0285

Fax: 1-604-666-0446

Email: [bill.henwood@pc.gc.ca](mailto:bill.henwood@pc.gc.ca)

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