



Grasslands  
National Park

# *ECOTOUR SCENIC DRIVE*

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## **SELF-GUIDED DRIVING TOUR**

An 80km driving loop featuring stunning landscapes,  
rich history, and active conservation



Douglas Walker



Parks  
Canada

Parcs  
Canada

Canada



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## Introduction

Take a journey with us across a landscape replete with stories of past and present, and experience first-hand the colourful natural and cultural history of Grasslands National Park.

You will witness a place reminiscent of a time when glaciers scoured the land, their melt-waters carving out the landforms you see today. You will become acquainted with the First Nations people who thrived in the grasslands that emerged following the glacial melt, leaving behind reminders of the way they lived. You will set foot on the same soil that millions of bison once thundered across, their footprints and grazing patterns shaping the prairie landscape. You will encounter animals that were once on the brink of extinction, only to be re-united with their native prairie in recent years.

You will observe remnants from a time when homesteaders braved this unforgiving land to cultivate a “new life” for themselves. Allow yourself to be mesmerized by the grasses, dancing under a veil of sunlight – the remainders of a mixed-grass prairie that now enjoy the protection of a national park. You will learn that all life forms are closely interconnected, and that the whole of the prairie is not simply the sum of its parts.

We hope that by visiting our unique park and participating in the self-guided driving tour, that you may come to understand and appreciate the significance of this rare and protected area, and support our vision to conserve one of the largest tracks of unbroken grassland habitat.





# Stop-1

## Welcome to Grasslands National Park of Canada

You are about to experience an extraordinary place. Grasslands National Park is the only national park in Canada that represents the prairie grasslands natural region. It is one of the finest examples of mixed-grass prairie, of which over 70% has disappeared from North America. The prairies are one of the most endangered ecosystems in the country because they are attractive to development and settlement, which threatens the existence of native prairie species.

Grasslands National Park plays a major role in preserving some of the remaining mixed-grass prairie in its natural state. More than “just grass”, this exceptional ecosystem is home to a wide variety of plants and animals, including some that are found nowhere else in Canada.

There are approximately 20 species living in Grasslands National Park that are listed as “at risk” by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada. Their survival depends on the health and survival of other species – the dynamics are such that one cannot be impacted without another being affected. The park is taking action to protect the mixed-grass prairie by restoring fire and grazing processes, re-introducing extirpated species, and restoring previously cultivated fields to native prairie.

The park also plays a role in promoting the respect and protection of cultural resources as it is home to over 12,000 teepee rings and over 3,000 pre-contact cultural resources such as lithic scatter, cairns and bison drivelines.



## Your Ecotour Experience

Time Required: 1-3 hours

Length of Tour: 80 km round-trip

How to Get There: Follow the signs, 15 km east of Val Marie on highway 18

## Be Prepared

Make sure you have enough fuel in the vehicle to complete the 80-km round-trip. If you are planning on exploring away from the interpretive Stops, please be conscious of your surroundings. As there are rattlesnakes in the park, sturdy ankle-high footwear and snake gaiters are recommended. Keep your distance from all wildlife so as not to disturb them, as well as for your own safety. Maintain 100-m distance from bison (length of a football field). Vehicles

must stay on public roads and designated pull-offs. Remember to wear insect repellent containing DEET to prevent bites from fleas, ticks and mosquitoes. If you come across artifacts or rare plants, please leave them where you found them. Remember, this is a national park, so it is unlawful to remove or disturb any item found here. Take only photographs, leave only footprints!

Enjoy your Ecotour Adventure!

Dogs are not permitted on prairie dog colonies and must be on a leash at all times.



# Stop-2

## *Standing on Top of the World!*

That's what we are doing at this Stop, because we are overlooking one of the Northern-most Black-tailed Prairie Dog colonies left in Canada! In fact, Grasslands National Park and area is the only place in the country where prairie dogs still exist in their natural habitat. Here, they are at the most northern extent of their range. Their population numbers North America-wide declined dramatically due to disease and habitat loss. Less than 3% of the historic continental population of Black-tailed Prairie Dogs still exists, and Canada has listed them as a species of Special Concern.

Observe the fascinating "town" these jovial little creatures have constructed. Mounds of dirt mark the entrances to the 'dogs' homes, where they spend much of their time renovating, mating, nesting, sleeping, or simply seeking refuge from the elements. When above-ground, they spend half of the

time watching for predators, and the other half eating succulent grasses and forbs, keeping them "mowed" to a nice height (this way they can see if a predator is coming). Do you hear that high-pitched "barking" sound? That is one or more prairie dogs letting the others know that danger (you or another animal) is nearby! If you are lucky, you may see some of these friendly little creatures "kissing" – a behaviour that actually helps the prairie dogs recognize others in the colony, and perhaps strengthens bonds between them.

Black-tailed Prairie Dogs aren't the only ones benefiting from the protection provided by Grasslands National Park and the Species at Risk Act. A whole array of animal species depends on the existence of prairie dogs for their survival. You will learn about these at Stop 7!

### LOOK FOR OTHER CANADIAN RARITIES.....

Grasslands National Park is home to these Species at Risk:

#### ENDANGERED

Black-footed Ferret  
Mountain Plover  
Sage Thrasher  
Burrowing Owl  
Greater Sage Grouse  
Greater Short-horned Lizard

#### THREATENED

Loggerhead Shrike  
Sprague's Pipit  
Swift Fox  
Ferruginous Hawk  
Black Tailed Prairie Dog  
Eastern Yellow-bellied Racer

#### SPECIAL CONCERN

Mormon Metalmark  
Short-eared owl  
Long-billed curlew  
Peregrine Falcon  
Northern leopard frog  
Prairie Rattlesnake



## *Spy on the Locals...*

Shift your focus now from the prairie dog town, over to the shrubby, textured landscape at the valley edges. Shrub-lands and wooded coulees make up less than 10% of the Park's area, and provide a very different type of habitat for wildlife than the open grasslands. Animals that have adapted to denser vegetation cover call this place home. Meadow voles and Nuttall's Cottontail rabbits are common inhabitants of coulees; both nibble on the succulent vegetation, all the while hiding

from the Long-tailed Weasel who searches far and wide to make them his lunch! You might see bark stripped from the bases of twigs and trees – that is probably from the little meadow vole gnawing away during the winter under the snow! A more noticeable creature you may see browsing the shrubby edges is the mule deer. Watch for signs like browse marks, scrapes, beds, and droppings. What other critters do you think might live here?

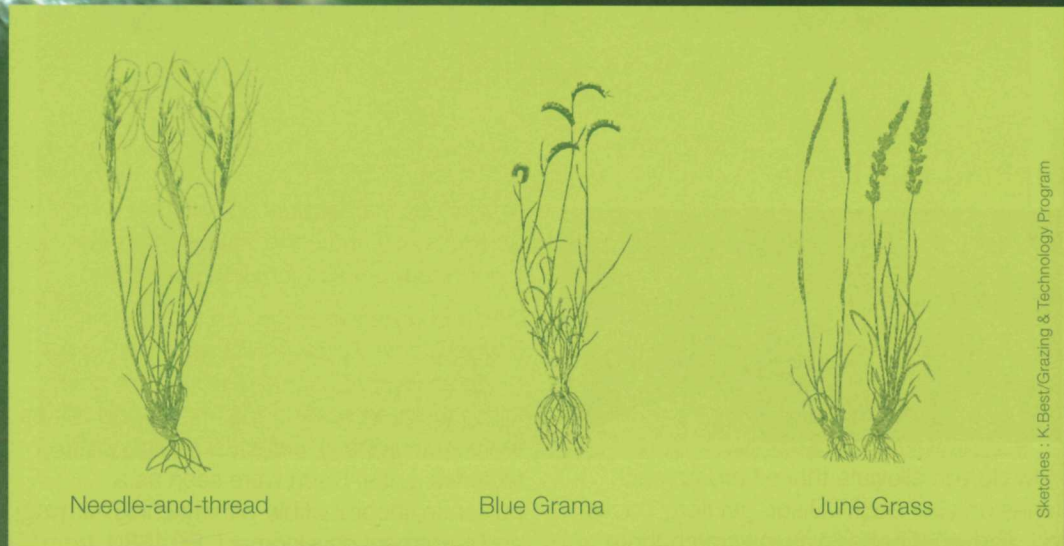


# Stop-3

## Grasses Reign Supreme

As we learned at Stop 1, Grasslands National Park is home to one of the largest remaining intact section of mixed-grass prairie in Canada. Although we are in the prairie ecosystem, there are approximately 5 different vegetation communities found in the park: Grasslands, Shrubs & Coulees, Wetland Meadows, Saline & Eroded and Cultivated Disturbed. Grasslands dominate here, covering over 70% of the park's area, with a large portion being in the uplands. At this Stop, we can see the Needle-and-thread and Blue grama grass that make up the Grasslands community. Grasses have

evolved to withstand little precipitation, drying winds, and extreme heat and cold. Take a look at some of these tough little plants while you are here. Blue grama grass – a favorite food of the bison – is readily identified, with flowering head stems that look like eyelashes! Needle-and-thread grass “knows” how to survive in this landscape, with a long, twisted “tail” that drills into any crevice it can find, in the hopes of becoming next year’s growth. These are just two of over 70 grass species found in the park!



Needle-and-thread

Blue Grama

June Grass

Sketches : K.Best/Grazing & Technology Program



James Page

## Crested Wheatgrass – Friend or Foe?

### SOME NATIVE PLANTS USED IN RE-VEGETATION PROJECTS AT GNP

#### GRASSES

- Western wheatgrass
- Needle-and-thread grass
- June grass
- Blue grama grass

#### FORBS

- Coneflower
- Gaillardia
- Blazing star
- Purple prairie clover

Non-native plant species threaten the prairie ecosystem when they prevent native plant species from growing, and reduce overall biodiversity. Sometimes non-native plants are intentionally introduced to an area, such as Crested Wheatgrass was to Saskatchewan in the 1930s. Farmers planted this grass because it was beneficial to them – it stabilized soils (preventing erosion), and provided spring fodder for grazing livestock. Unfortunately, Crested

Wheatgrass out competes native vegetation for light and moisture. Park staff have been eliminating this species from the area by mowing, applying herbicides, prescribed burning, and planting native seed in its place. The field before you was once dominated by Crested Wheatgrass before these actions took place. Observe some of the native plants that call this field home again, after years of suffocation by Crested Wheatgrass.

James Page



# Stop-4

## Coming Full Circle



James Page

How do you alleviate those hard to reach itches on your back? Bison get itchy backs too, and what better way to scratch them than with a big chunk of pink granite left over from the last ice age? Rocks like this ancient back-scratcher are called glacial erratics – the product of sheets of ice, pushing and depositing them in areas thousands of kilometres away from their source. Not only was this bison rubbing stone pushed around by glaciers 12,000 years ago, but it was also visited by thousands upon thousands (perhaps millions) of bison over time. It's been through a lot!

Before European contact, there were around 30 million bison roaming the Great Plains of North America. Bison were extremely important to First Nations People, supplying them with food, clothing, shelter, tools, and more. These people had adapted to a lifestyle of following the bison, taking up temporary

residences in coordination with their whereabouts, and using various methods to kill and process them into resources.

When Europeans arrived on the prairies, a war against the bison ensued. They saw bison as a great source of economic gain, killing them and selling their hides and bones to various clothing, industrial and chemical factories. Later, bison were seen as a nuisance, incompatible with ranching, farming, and settlement development. By 1880, from numbers estimated at tens of millions in the pre-contact era, there were only a few hundred bison left in North America. Luckily, two ranchers in Montana had the good sense to try protecting the plains bison from extinction. They captured the last remaining bison to keep on a ranch. There were many trying times over the years for the bison in captivity, as they are susceptible to disease. However bison have made a comeback and are no longer threatened with extinction. A herd of purebred plains bison has come back home to Grasslands National Park after a 120-year absence. Grasslands National Park has reintroduced bison to restore a grazing regime to the prairies and to contribute to the conservation of this symbolic species.



Wayne Lynch

## Teepee Rings

Bison drive lanes, cairns, and teepee rings – these are all types of stone alignments you will find right here in Grasslands National Park – evidence of First Nations people having lived here for thousands of years! Including these stone alignments, artifacts, and more, the park has thousands of archaeological find sites and is one of the largest concentrations of undisturbed pre-contact cultural resources in Canada. All of these finds help us to understand the type of people that once lived here, where they were located, and how they made use of the land and its resources.

Imagine a life that centered on enormous herds of bison that you depended on for food, clothing, shelter, and tools – a life that had you following these animals across the

prairie, setting up temporary residences along the way. Experience one of these intriguing habitation sites yourself as you stroll a short distance to the valley's edge, where an example of teepee rings lies. You will see glacial cobbles arranged in circular patterns; these rocks once held down the skirt of a teepee to prevent it from blowing away with the wind. There are several ideas which seek to explain why these temporary homes may have been placed here, on the coulee edges of the uplands. Perhaps this gave them the perfect vantage point from which to spot intruding enemies or wildlife. Maybe they enjoyed the cooling breezes and freedom from insects. Listen to the whispers in the wind – maybe one of the old occupants of this teepee will tell you why!



Windy Michael



# Stop-5

## *Frenchman River Valley*

If we were standing here 12,000 years ago, we would be washed away with a violent cascade of glacial melt-waters. That is how most of the common landforms in Grasslands National Park were formed; glaciers melted, sending a large volume of water flowing over the landscape, and carved out the Frenchman River Valley and several steep-sided channels from the uplands down to the valley bottom (coulees). These landforms, along with glacial till, cobble, and erratics that are distributed throughout the park are all evidence that the area was indeed subjected to glaciation. The mixed-grass prairie constituents that emerged

following the de-glaciation now make up a plethora of different niches for animals that are specially adapted to them. You learned in Stop 2 about some of the wildlife that are adapted to life in the coulees, and in Stop 5 you will discover which species (other than the black-tailed prairie dog) thrive on the valley bottoms. While you are here, however, envision what a tangled ball of snakes living in the slumping cliffs of the Frenchman River Valley looks like. Bull Snakes, Plains Garter Snakes, Prairie Rattlesnakes, and the endangered Yellow-bellied Racer are all snakes that have adapted to life here.







Wendy Michael

### Ranch Corrals

These corrals are symbolic of a time of the open range, cowboys and the wild west. They have been here for many years and once belonged to the 76 Ranch. This is one of the grandest ranches ever proposed! In 1887 Sr. John Lister-Kaye set up ten separate estates between Moose Jaw and Calgary – and each estate consisted of 10,000 acres!

The '76' has a complicated and eventful history as company after company purchased the herd of cattle and the '76' brand. The original outfit had started in Oregon in 1876. The '76' ranch produced some of the best stock cattle in Canada.

Although mighty in size, the ranch was hindered by drought, prairie fires, disease and severe winters. The harsh winter of 1906-1907 saw the loss of two thirds of the cattle that perished in the cold. The Homesteading Act of 1908 closed the open range in favour of farming. Cattle had to be fenced; the glory days of the open range were gone. The ranchers and homesteaders who stayed, combined ranching and dryland farming with hospitality and friendliness to create the prairie communities surrounding the park today.



James Page

### Critter Communities

Here in the valley bottom, the vegetation differs from that found in the upland areas. Taller grasses like Western Wheatgrass and thicker shrubs like Thorny Buffaloberry grow here, providing food and shelter for a different variety of wildlife. Sharp-tailed Grouse call the shrub-lands home, and in the spring they gather right here at this road-side pull-out for the males to strut their stuff for the females. These communal mating grounds are called leks. Nearby ponds and sloughs are home to waterfowl like Northern Shovelers and Northern Pintail ducks, and shorebirds like Wilson's Phalarope or the willet. There are only 6 amphibian species in Grasslands National Park. One of those – the threatened Northern Leopard Frog –

requires water at all stages of their life, and is therefore found only along the Frenchman River and a few larger creeks in the East Block of the Park. From early spring to early July the male Northern Leopard Frogs simultaneously engage in cacophonous mating calls, especially after dark. Another species you are likely to see here along the Frenchman River, is the threatened Loggerhead Shrike. Wearing their little bandit mask, these crafty hunters are known to impale mice or insects on sharp objects like the thorns of the thorny buffaloberry shrub. What other wildlife might you see in the wetland meadows, which make up about 10% of the park's area?

Wendy Michael



# Stop-6

*“To my way of thinking there’s something wrong, or missing, with any person who hasn’t got a soft spot in their heart for an animal of some kind. With me, my weakness lays toward the horse.”*

## *A Cowboy of Mystery*

This quote by the legendary artist and novelist Will James characterizes him very appropriately, as many of his books and drawings are about horses and the cowboy way of life. His captivating stories come to life with his colourful language and lively illustrations. Many of these stories and sketches are the product of James’s own personal experiences living life as a cowboy, and some of that experience was gathered while living right here in Grasslands National

Park where he homesteaded and worked on the 76 Ranch in 1911. Will James was inducted into the Hall of Great Westerners of the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City in 1992. Pick up one of his 23 illustrated novels – perhaps his most famous, “Smoky” – and through James’ eyes envision life as a cowboy on the prairies!



## *One of a Kind*

It takes a lot of determination and courage to set up a homestead anywhere on the prairies, unforgiving as they are. To withstand the hot and dry summers, frigid and hostile winters, and remote isolation, and to still flourish despite it all is no small feat. But, like so many First Nations people, European fur traders, homesteaders, and ranchers before him, this is what Walt Larson did. After working for the 76 Ranch, Walt decided to become a rancher, engaging in all kinds of activities from bronc riding to coyote trapping to help support his ranch and eventually own or lease 191 quarters (32 000 acres) of land and numerous cattle. He must have

managed his cattle well, as they often took home prizes for best-in-show. Imagine the hard work that went into making the ranchstead before you a success.

Walt Larson knew the importance of establishing a national park to protect the grasslands that served him so well, and was a very eager participant in planning meetings and land transfers which lead to the establishment of Grasslands National Park. The park recognizes the ranching history within its boundaries, and appreciates the stewardship of local landowners who have made it possible to create a national park.

## *Using What’s on Hand....*

....was the name of the game in Walt’s day! Just as there are no trees available today for building with, such was the case back when the Larsons were setting up ranchstead here. The steep banks of the Frenchman River was an ideal spot for Walt to build a horse barn, as it was cool in the summer, warm in the winter, out of the elements, and close to water. Just as this horse barn had earthen floors and walls and a thatched roof, so did many of the first homes of the area’s settlers. Since many could not afford much, and sod was virtually free, they made do with sod homes.

Home furnishings were also improvised, with wooden boxes filling in for chairs, trunks for tables, and beds being nothing more than a blanket on the floor. Diets also left something to be desired, with a few basic staples, garden vegetables (if they had a good rain season), and some wild game (if they were lucky) comprising the bulk of their meals. Water was scarce, and often one had to resort to fetching water from the nearest stream or creek. Not every settler could accept this lifestyle, however, and others left because of the rough topography, semi-arid climate, and poor soils.



# Stop-7

## A Prairie Hot Spot

We learned about Black-tailed Prairie Dogs at Stop 2, but did you know that these friendly little members of the squirrel family are a key component of grassland ecosystems? Without them, a myriad of other species would be affected. The endangered Burrowing Owls do not dig their own burrows; instead they make their homes in the abandoned burrows of rodents like the prairie dog. Prairie Rattlesnakes, Black Widow Spiders, and other insects also seek refuge in their burrows. Coyotes, foxes, badgers, golden eagles, Ferruginous Hawks, and rattlesnakes all prey on Black-tailed Prairie Dogs (and other rodents that may be attracted to the dog towns). Pronghorn Antelope and White-tailed Jackrabbits are attracted to prairie dog colonies because the intensively grazed area means fresh new growth for them to nibble on.

Whether they supply shelter, food, or range for other animals, one thing is for sure – the Black-tailed Prairie Dog is a critical link woven into a complicated tapestry of life.

Perhaps the most notorious example of a species affected by the disappearance of prairie dog communities is one of the most endangered mammals in the world – the Black-footed Ferret. The decline of the Black-tailed Prairie Dog in North America, along with disease led to the disappearance of the Black-footed Ferret. It is only recently that this iconic prairie species is making a comeback due to the re-introduction efforts of the park and the increased population of prairie dogs. Pretty good for a species that was once thought to be extinct!



## Conclusion

Thank you for joining us on this journey through Grasslands National Park. We're sure you've been impressed by the stunning landscapes and rich biodiversity, and intrigued by stories about human survival on the prairies, and the coming-home of extirpated species. The health of the mixed-grass prairie ecosystem depends upon the health and survival of all of its components.

We hope you leave with a sense of national pride, knowing that through actions taken in the park, that this remaining piece of prairie grassland and the ecological and cultural resources within will be conserved for future generations.

*“In wildness is the preservation of the world”*

– HENRY DAVID THOREAU, 1862

### BIRDS ON ECOTOUR ROAD

Grasslands National Park is a bird watchers paradise.





