



TALLGRASS ASPEN PARKLAND

Preserving a landscape of historic proportions

conservation profile

The Nature Conservancy's Tallgrass Aspen Parkland project in northwestern Minnesota and southeastern Manitoba seeks to preserve one of the most intact grassland systems remaining in the Midwest, a significant goal considering that in Minnesota alone, more than 99 percent of the tallgrass prairie is gone.

The unique Parkland, where most of the original native species including wolves, black bear and rare plants still thrive, offers public access for hiking, birding and hunting.

To accomplish conservation goals in the Parkland, the Conservancy works with partners including the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, the Nature Conservancy of Canada, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

To protect the remarkable biodiversity of the grasslands, the Conservancy and its partners use land management tools ranging from prescribed fire, logging and managed grazing to prairie and wetland restoration.



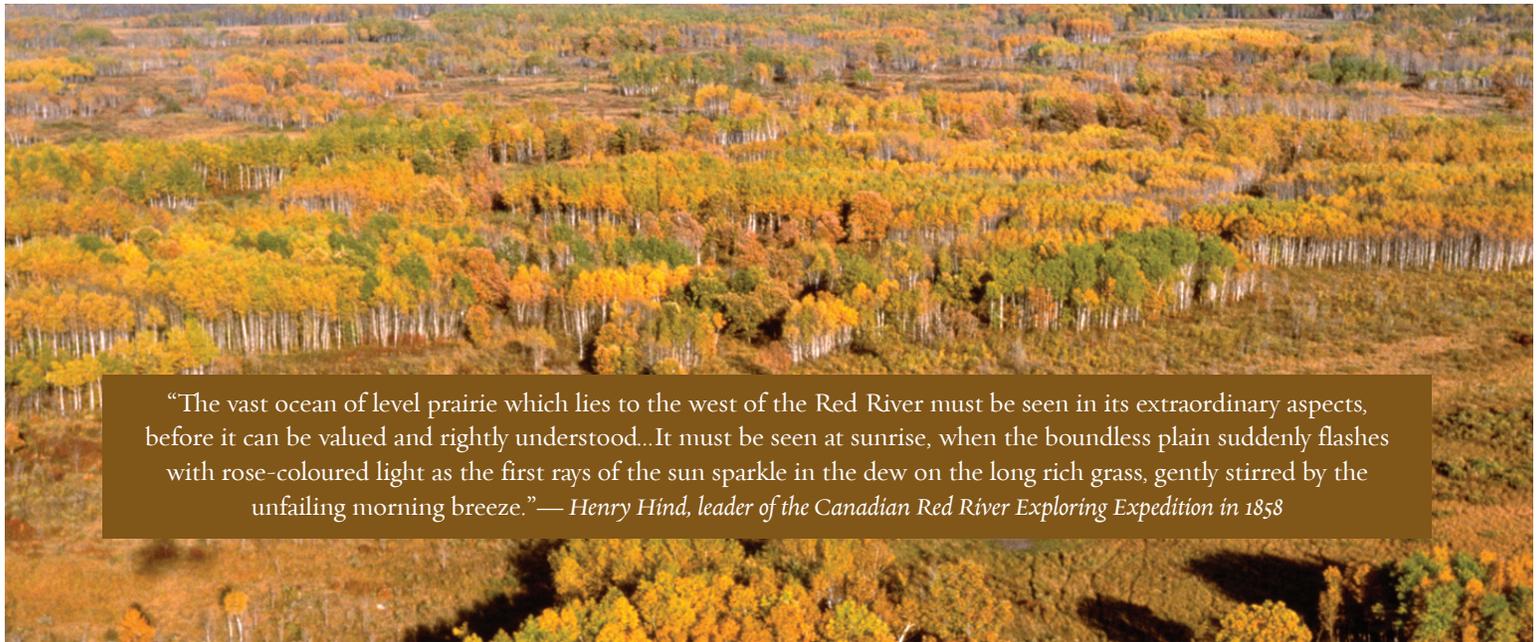
An aspen stand against a bright blue sky at the Wallace C. Dayton Conservation and Wildlife Area
© John Gregor/Coldsnap Photography

The sweeping vistas of the Tallgrass Aspen Parkland encompass some 2 million astonishingly well-preserved wild acres stretching from Red Lake Falls in northwestern Minnesota to the town of Steinbach in southeastern Manitoba. The Wisconsin glaciation and the subsequent formation and retreat of the glacial Lake Agassiz 10,000 years ago created a relatively level region largely characterized by poor drainage. The resulting wet, rocky terrain discouraged agricultural development because it was not friendly to the plows of European settlers. Today, The Nature Conservancy is working to preserve a landscape that looks much as it did more than 150 years ago.

A rich mosaic of natural communities

Part of the Northern Tallgrass Prairie Ecoregion, the Tallgrass Aspen Parkland features open grasslands studded with aspen groves, dense shrub thickets, wetlands and peatlands. Marking the transition between tallgrass prairie and forests, these systems support an impressive variety of species.

Abundant rainfall sustains big bluestem grass, cordgrass and tufted hairgrass. The world's largest—and Canada's only—population of the lovely western prairie fringed orchid also blooms here. Large mammals like gray wolves, black bear, elk



“The vast ocean of level prairie which lies to the west of the Red River must be seen in its extraordinary aspects, before it can be valued and rightly understood...It must be seen at sunrise, when the boundless plain suddenly flashes with rose-coloured light as the first rays of the sun sparkle in the dew on the long rich grass, gently stirred by the unfailling morning breeze.”— *Henry Hind, leader of the Canadian Red River Exploring Expedition in 1858*

Aerial view of aspen stands at the Tallgrass Aspen Parkland © John Gregor/Coldsnap Photography

and moose know no boundaries—they experience the increasingly rare opportunity to roam across broad, uninterrupted ranges. Maintaining connections between the habitats required for elk, moose and others is but one long-range goal of the Conservancy.

The Conservancy and its partners are working to preserve a landscape of historic proportions that is not only significant to the Great Plains but also to the world. Temperate grasslands, the most threatened major habitat type on Earth, have been significantly changed, with some 46 percent converted to agriculture worldwide.

Challenges and Strategies

In an area that includes six counties and seven municipalities, community-based conservation brings many groups and individuals together. The Conservancy’s partners include local governments, the Nature Conservancy of Canada, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation.

Working together, the Conservancy and its partners have the opportunity to stave off the fragmentation that has already proved fatal for other grasslands. At the heart of the Conservancy’s work lies the expansive 15,000-acre Wallace C.

Dayton Conservation and Wildlife Area as well as the oak savannas and prairies of the Norway Dunes Preserve. As more and more large private parcels are split into smaller recreational lots, conservationists have the chance to slow this segmentation and protect tens of thousands of acres.

Once land is protected through purchase or conservation easements, management strategies aim to control the encroachment of woody vegetation and the spread of invasive species like purple loosestrife and reed canary grass, while restoring native cover. Large fires, once called the “red buffalo of the prairie” because they roared across broad areas, are critical to the regeneration of grasslands and savannas. Prescribed fire serves as an important tool for the Conservancy and its partners.

During past decades, development has diminished the natural rhythm of fire that is critical to the well-being of grasslands. Working with partners and private landowners, the Conservancy uses prescribed burns to prevent aspen and other trees from taking over and reducing open prairie. Fire also releases nutrients that are otherwise unavailable to plant life.

Along with fire, water is an important element of the Tallgrass Aspen

Parkland’s health. The same roads, ditches and fields that interrupt the natural fire regime cut off the natural direction of surface water flow to wetlands and wet prairie areas. Management strategies include filling in ditches and carefully planning the placement or removal of culverts and ditch plugs.

Other strategies include logging to remove trees and restore the open landscape, as well as the implementation of sustainable grazing practices for livestock. Limits on gravel extraction will preserve important habitat as well.

Preservation for future generations

The Tallgrass Aspen Parkland, a stunning mosaic of interconnected natural communities, represents a type of vast and varied landscape that has largely disappeared from the Earth.

Ongoing research and monitoring, strong relationships with partners and careful management strategies all work together to ensure that conservation activities continue to expand. Future generations will be able to step back in time here, and stand in awe of the sheer abundance of plant and animal life supported by the Tallgrass Aspen Parkland.

Visit www.nature.org/Minnesota for more information.