THE LAST OF THE GREAT GRASSLANDS*

Story and photos by CLAUDE MONDOR

. . . that country is notable primarily for its weather, which is violent and prolonged; its emp-ess, which is frighteningly total; and its wind, which blows all the time in a way to stiffen your r and rattle the eyes in your head".

WALLACE STEGNER, "*Wolf Willow*"

i rings such as this can be found along valley rims and bottoms throughout the adian Plains.

hen a young fur trader by the e of Henry Kelsey travelled south- from Hudson Bay in 1690, he rged from several hundred miles reacherous rivers and forests to me the first European to see the immensity of the Canadian plains. He notes in his diary for August 19 that ". . . this plain affords nothing but short round sticky grass and Buffalo (sic), and a great sort of a bear which is bigger than any White Bear, and is neither white nor black, but silver-haired, like our English rabbit. Ye Buffalo likewise is not like those to ye Northward, their horns growing like an English ox, but black and short." Later, while travelling across the open

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prairie, he described the plains as "barren ground, it being very dry heathy land and no water, but here and there small ponds."

To Kelsey, the west was an empty wilderness, a negative illusion of the Canadian Plains which still runs through the minds of many Canadians. Viewed personally and historically however, that almost featureless prairie glows with color.

Before Canada's Confederation in 1867, the Canadian plains, the lands rolling westward from the Red River in Manitoba to the foothills of the Rockies in Alberta and northward from the U.S. border to the forest lands, were primitive.

They were as thousands of years of geological and climatic evolution had made them. Grasses clothed the bareness of land and softened the beat of wind and rain; the prairie fires ran in the wind; the bison, elk and pronghorn grazed through the changing colours of the seasons.

Rivers flowed to distant seas unchecked. Across empty miles the wind whistled, turning over every blade of grass, every pale primrose, in search of whatever it is looking for, and blew the hawks and song birds about the sky. The sky was the biggest anywhere, a light pure transparent blue, across which moved navies of cumuli, fair-weathered clouds, their bottoms parallel to the earth's surface. The air was clean, there was no haze, the horizon — a clean line a dozen miles away.

Primitive, but not uninhabited Man had barely touched them, for man himself was primitive, in that he had adapted himself to the ecology, and not the ecology to himself. One could not travel for long on these grasslands without seeing the Plains Indian and his works. Early travellers were particularly impressed by the way the bison provided most of the materials

The prairie crocus is common in open prairie and hills. Sheep may be poisoned by this plant and their digestive system may be impaired by the felty hairs.

required for his needs: with the skins he clothed himself, built his teepees, made ropes and obtained wool; with the sinews he made threads; from the bones he shaped awls; the dung he used for firewood; the bladders he used as jugs and drinking containers.

Particularly impressed was George Catlin, an artist and writer, who in 1842 advocated that the entire plains region be set aside as a National Park to preserve both the buffalo and the Indians who depend upon them for their livelihood. As he notes in his book detailing his adventures amongst the North American plains Indians —

> "And what a splendid contemplation too, when one (who has travelled these realms, and can duly appreciate them) imagines them as they might in future be seen, (by

Plains Indian rock cairn on the Suffield Military Reserve. Located on a high promon-
y, it forms the centre of a 'medicine wheel' and is connected to a circle of stones over
) feet in diameter by radiating spokes of straight lines of stones.

me great protecting policy of
overnment) preserved in their
istine beauty and wildness, in a
agnificent park, where the world
uld see for ages to come, the
tive Indian in his classic attire,
lloping his wild horse, with sinewy
w, and shield and lance, amid the
eting herds of elks and buffaloes.
hat a beautiful and thrilling
ecimen for America to preserve
d hold up to the view of her
ined citizens and world, in future
es! A nation's Park, containing
n and beast, in all the wild and
shness of their nature's beauty!"

He was too far ahead of his time to
taken seriously. None of his readers
d heard of a "National Park", or the
nservation of wilderness for the
ure. It would take another 30 years
fore Yellowstone would be
established as the first National Park.

The plains remained archaic or neo-archaic until a century ago because they were isolated, even more isolated than the Arctic Ocean is today. This isolation was to end; the already dwindling bison herds were only an anticipation of what was inevitable. The end of the plains ecology and plains Indian culture can be dated exactly: the signing of Confederation in 1867. As W. L. Morton, a leading Canadian historian noted: "Confederation was, in part only, but also in essential fact, a prelude and preparation for the annexation of the prairies to the Canadian version of continental integration". Yet, merely 30 years after that crucial date, the railway, the town, agriculture from the east, ranching from the south, industry and modern civilization followed — the

plains had been domesticated, the emptiness occupied.

The fruits of modernization of the plains awaits any tourist who travels the Trans-Canada Highway between Winnipeg and Calgary. Mile after weary mile he is greeted by the all pervasive checkerboard texture of black summerfallow alternating with an ocean of wind-troubled grain fields, interrupted occasionally by ship-like farm buildings, of shelterbelt trees, and regularly spaced towns with their towering red and orange elevators that seemed to be differentiated in name only.

Unnoticed, to the travellers eye however, are the more subtle and fa reaching effects of this thrust of se tlement. Creature after creature of th plains — each a unique an irreplaceable work of eons of years evolution — has declined since th prairies were annexed to the rest Canada. Some have been the victims heedlessness and greed: the seemingl endless flocks of Eskimo Curlew were slaughtered with grim efficienc because there was "sport" or money i it. Others have been exterminate because of real or imaginary threats t the interests of men: the strikingl

Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park is an area of mystery and beauty. A holy place to t Blackfoot Indians, it contains many priceless pictographs as above, some of which we carved upon the rocks before the white man had ever seen the waters of the Milk Rive

beautiful "white" race of plains wolf and the huge and powerful plains grizzly, the last of which was painted by John James Audubon in 1843. Other species of Canadian Plains fauna teetered on the brink of extinction — the plains bison and the pronghorn antelope, the sole living mammal which is distinctive to North America.

In more recent years, environmental contamination by chemical pesticides and the decline of suitable habitat, have become factors in the further dwindling of the plains wildlife resources. The Prairie Falcon and other grassland birds of prey are becoming increasingly rare because of the cumulative effects of pesticide poisons derived from their prey. The shy little kit fox with his big ears living on kangaroo rats, ground squirrels and grasshoppers, faces an uncertain future for he has fallen victim to the traps and poisoned baits set out for the coyote. The black-footed ferret, never very common, has become perhaps the rarest of all our mammals with the continued destruction of the prairie-dog colonies on which it depends for both shelter and food. The prairie-dog itself is also in peril of extermination

Erosion has removed the thin cover of glacial till of the Killdeer badlands in southwestern Saskatchewan, exposing the underlying sediment to further erosion and creating bizarre-shaped landforms.

Wayne Ridsdal

in Canada. Restricted to a few colonies in the valley of Frenchman River southeast of Val Marie, Saskatchewan, it is often shot for sport or poisoned by the ranchers who allude that they compete with his livestock for available forage.

The impact of modern civilization on the Canadian Plains has been devastating. The bulk of the great central grasslands has disappeared past recall. The plow has broken the deep prairie sod and turned its store of riches to the production of wheat: domestic cattle now roam the range where the great bison and pronghorn herds once grazed. Towns and cities linked by railroads and highways now cluster the Canadian plains, and only names are left to remind us that this was once a different country.

Despite the progress, there still remains a number of areas where remnants of the Plains, as an ecology, as a native Indian culture, can be viewed and appreciated in a relatively undisturbed state. The most extensive o these include the Suffield Militar Reserve, the Milk River, Manyberrie and Dinosaur Badlands areas i southeastern Alberta, and th Govenlock, Wise Creek and Va Marie-Killdeer areas in southwester Saskatchewan. There, it is still possibl to step into the past for a little whil to turn the clock back a century an experience the original grandeur an solitude that so awed the early visito to the Canadian Plains. Here, it possible to mentally reconstruct th details of the sketches drawn b Catlin, Parkman and Kane, althoug their subjects have gone forever.

Although there is yet an appare abundance of undisturbed grassland - the need for protecting plains ecolog is approaching urgency. All th remaining areas are being affected b human pressures and their quanti does not ensure the protection of an individual one.