

## A FIRST TIMER'S EXPERIENCE IN GRASSLANDS NATIONAL PARK

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In September 1992, I took part in a field trip with the Integrated Resource Management students from Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (SIAST), Woodland Campus. The most memorable experience from the trip was the 24 hours we spent in Grasslands National Park, an area harbouring a great variety of wildlife, including many rare species, and with haunting landscapes and a fascinating local history.

Our accommodations were nylon tents in the Val Marie campground. First stop, the park office. A modest facility, it offered maps, auto-tour leaflets and fact sheets on the park's wildlife. As well, the local high school's (less than professionally produced) video on "Rattlesnake Safety" was surprisingly detailed and informative.

Our tour of the park with interpreter Florence Miller took us along the "Frenchman River Eco-Tour" route. Approaching from the north, we crossed a Texas gate into the park. The first view of the valley was from the edge of the escarpment, where we stood amongst teepee rings and buffalo rubbing stones. Hundreds of metres below the Frenchman River was a long green snake of vegetation. Above the river

and grassy plains were white clay slopes that led my eyes to the subtly coloured bands in the cliffs and hill sides. Erosion and time had wrinkled these surfaces that, from a distance, resemble furrowed bark. On the distant hilltops exposed rock of many kinds sparkled in the midday sun. Looking toward the southeast, I could see the many kilometres of coulees that dissect the uplands. Circling high above me was a lone Ferruginous Hawk that proceeded to fly into the valley.

Following the bird's lead, into the valley we drove. The only thing taller than the clumps of sagebrush (*Artemisia cana*) on the level plains were the trees and shrubs that grew along the river — a band of willows (*Salix* spp.), hawthorns (*Crataegus* spp.) and buffaloberry (*Shepherdia argentea*) — with the monotony broken only by the occasional poplar. I had to be sure not to blink or I might have missed the humble river. While crossing the short bridge, we spotted two Western Painted Turtles basking on the banks. Unfortunately, my camera lens and the turtles' patience were not long enough for a snapshot.

Stopping at the Larson ranch gave us a great opportunity to observe a herd of Pronghorn near by. Through

the binoculars I could see a buck struggling to round up a harem. The does would crawl from one side of a fence to another, making it frustrating and difficult for the buck. Among the old grey timbers of the ranch buildings, a small Nuttall's Cottontail was spotted. Unlike the turtles, it quietly sat there allowing a few of us to get some close-up photos.

Down the road, the large Prairie Dog colony was hard to miss. As we drove, I first noticed what appeared to me to be little volcanoes with ash spewing out of them. Beside other mounds stood Prairie Dogs, as sentinels, barking out as soon as we stopped. Sitting on the remnants of an old corral was a Cooper's Hawk, also interested in the goings on of the diminutive community. When I walked among the colony, I was interested to observe the Prairie Dogs' behaviour. The animals vacated a distinct circular area directly around me. Beyond that, they would lie close to the ground at their burrow entrances. Still further out, were Prairie Dogs standing, barking and jumping about, warning their comrades of my presence. We soon left, leaving the creatures to continue their business as usual.

In the late afternoon, at the end of our guided tour, our Wildlife Instructor Hamilton Greenwood led us on a hike to see a Prairie Rattlesnake hibernaculum. It was a 5 km hike across the plains, past fields of cacti (*Opuntia* spp. and *Mamillaria* spp.) sprinkled with greasewood (*Sarcobatus vermiculatus*), sagebrush and Creeping Juniper (*Juniperus horizontalis*). After an hour, the six of us at the head of the group saw our first rattlesnake. Now, I had seen rattlesnakes on television and in zoos, but I had never heard one rattle up close. Believe me, it was unmistak-

able. Yet, it was much louder and much more persistent than I had expected. At this point, we made sure to carry sticks and search the low lying juniper for snakes that might also be in our path. Minutes later, we had another encounter, this time with an Eastern Yellow-bellied Racer. Two racers were seen that day, one young animal and one adult, the latter just less than a metre long. These two racers represented approximately 2% of the Saskatchewan population.

Once at the hibernaculum itself, we saw perhaps half a dozen rattlesnakes. The hibernaculum was nothing unique, just an old fox or coyote den. Again we saw young snakes and adults. One of the adult rattlers was nearly 2 m long. Other species such as Bull Snakes and Garter Snakes use these hibernacula to wait out the winter. Apparently there are several such sites in this area of the park.

By sundown we had returned from the hike ravenously hungry for our meal at the Val Marie Hotel. The hotel itself is worth putting on a park tour itinerary. Unusual statues, photographs of "seven foot long Bull Snakes" and rodeo stars, as well as a beer with proprietor/cowboy, Cliff Olsen, are all musts.

After dinner, we went for a drive through the park during the last hours of light. We wanted to get a look at one of the 20 or more Swift Foxes released just days earlier. In the space of about 10 km, we came across just fewer than 50 Pronghorn, Mule Deer and White-tailed Deer. Most exciting, though, were the four Swift Foxes spotted. Small but fast, they maintained a distance that required us to use binoculars most of the time. One animal was seen

prowling around the Prairie Dog colony, sniffing at burrow entrances. This was a definite highlight of the trip, since Swift Foxes had not lived in the area for years. These were the first re-introduced by the Swift Fox Recovery program. Early the next morning, we started out on another 5 km hike, this time uphill, to the top of "70-mile butte." It was hard work climbing up over cobbles and gravel, past hogbacks and sandstone outcrops. Covering the sandstone were several different shades of lichen, which, when combined with the rust from the ironstone, created beautiful natural works of art. Lichens also covered the Bison horn that we found and turned over to park staff.

Almost at the top, we got an excellent view of a Golden Eagle's nest. Made up of a column of sticks about 5 m high and 2 m wide, it was obviously a venerable structure having been built over so many times. One of the students managed to climb into the nest and retrieve a number of well-weathered rodent skulls and various other bones. Once we arrived at the top of the butte, almost 170 m above the valley floor, the sun started to break through the clouds on the eastern horizon. The valley was filled with a haze of pale orange and yellow light. I could see south into Montana, northeast to Pinto Butte and, all around, a natural prairie wonderland.



All these cattle are of one color, namely brown, and it was a great marvel to see a white bull in such a multitude. Their form is so frightful that one can only infer that they are a mixture of different animals. The bulls and cows alike are humped, the curvature extending the whole length of the back and even over the shoulders. And although the entire body is covered with wool, on the hump, from the middle of the body to the head, the breast, and the forelegs, to just above the knee, the wool is much thicker, and so fine and soft that it could be spun and woven like that of Castilian sheep. It is a very savage animal, and is comparably larger than our cattle, although it looks small because of its short legs. Its hide is the thickness of that of our cattle, and the native Indians are so expert in dressing the hides that they convert them into clothing. *Don Juan de Onate. 1601. True account of the Expedition of Onate Toward the East.*