

Keeping the Grass **In Grasslands**

How Montanans are conserving the state's remaining native prairie.

BY SCOTT McMILLION

AS FAR AS THE EYE CAN SEE Sprouting lush growth after summer rains, a shortgrass prairie in Valley County seems to stretch to eternity. Two centuries ago, most of central and eastern Montana looked like this. But with settlement came the need for farmland, requiring the transformation of native grassland into wheat, barley, and other crops.

“When done right, ranching can sustain prairie and wildlife diversity.”

For something so vast, Montana's intact prairie often goes overlooked. Too many people traveling the steppes see only long, empty highway, put the pedal down, and hurry off to somewhere with more trees. “The grasslands were not considered scenery by the descendants of the European tree culture,” writes Richard Manning in his sweeping study of the prairie, *Grassland*.

People tearing along the asphalt don't know what they're missing. There's a lot going on in a native prairie, but it takes a little time to soak it up. You've got to stop the car and get out. Climb a little knob and have a look around. Think about distance, about crossing this country on foot or horseback, the way people used to do it.

The first thing that hits you is the size, an immensity that overwhelms even in a modern vehicle going 70 mph. But the native prairie is a lot smaller than it used to be, even in Montana, home to some of the nation's largest tracts. And it continues to shrivel, suffering what biologists call “the death of a thousand cuts.” That's because the only thing that can put a prairie down for good is the plow, one of mankind's oldest tools and arguably the most useful. Without the plow, the world would be a hungrier place and Montana would be unrecognizable. Farming is a major industry in this state, creating thousands of jobs and supporting communities—people and schools and businesses—from Eureka to Sidney.

There's no denying that cultivation makes it a lot easier to fill your plate. But that does not mean it belongs everywhere, even though powerful forces, from various homestead laws to today's growing national craving for organic foods, offer incentives to break sod. Though Montana still holds vast expanses of native prairie, it is losing ground, literally. Between 2005 and 2009, another 47,000 acres of previously unbroken sod was

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busted, according to the Montana State Farm Service Agency, adding to the millions of acres tilled in previous generations. Fortunately, conservation agencies and organizations—along with a growing number of landowners—are working to retain Montana's remaining grasslands and restore some of what has been lost.



ANNE SHERWOOD

GRASS STEWARD Leo Barthelmess, Jr., a third-generation rancher in Phillips County, identifies native grasses on his property. Winner of the 2009 Montana Neighbor Award for land stewardship, Barthelmess says his cow-calf and sheep ranch now sees more elk, deer, and pronghorn after he began a restoration grazing regime.

After its sheer vastness, the prairie strikes you next with the magnitude of its quiet. Chances are, it's been a while since you've put all the world's machines out of earshot. You might not even notice them much of the time. But in the prairie, it's easy to escape the din, at least for a while. So listen. At first, you might not hear anything. Listen some more and you'll hear wind, probably some birds, maybe your own heartbeat. But that's about it. The silence out there is palpable.

Then look around your feet, at the grasses and sagebrush, not much of it taller than your knee. This foliage is ancient, part of a perpetual cycle going back to the time when

glaciers chewed this country. For 10,000 years, this suite of plants—nearly 200 grasses and forbs (flowering plants) such as blue grama and Lewis's blue flax—has survived the kind of droughts that split open the earth. It outlives fire that can outrun a race horse. It stands up to winds that can peel the hide off a barn. It endures cold that cracks stones and has learned to live with the teeth and hooves of millions of animals. It existed during the time of mastodons and camels and the short-faced bear. It saw the coming of bison and elk and humans and cattle. Through all this, the prairie has survived.

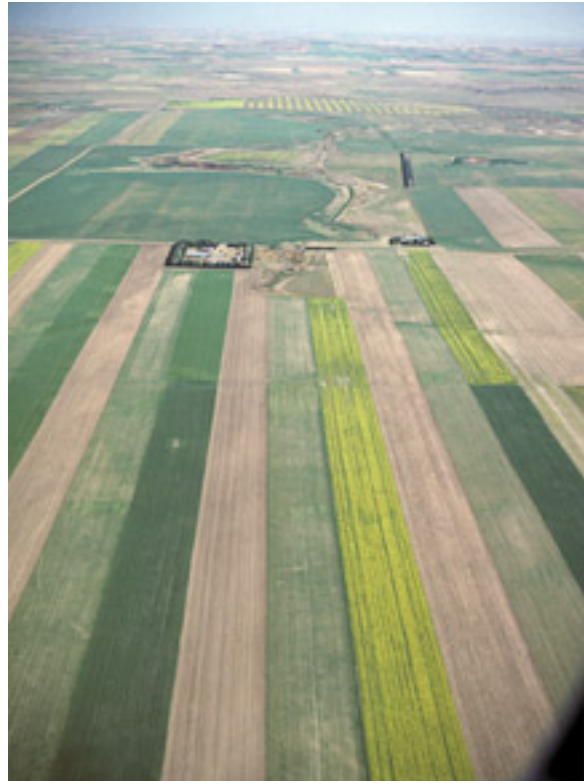
So has prairie wildlife. According to the American Bird Conservancy, more than 200 native bird species live on shortgrass prairie, at least part of the year, including chestnut-collared longspurs, sharp-tailed grouse, and Baird's sparrows. Plus, you'll find prairie dogs, antelope, both mule and white-tailed deer, and predators in the air and on the ground. Elk are returning to their historic grassland range in eastern Montana. Ducks and geese swarm the waterways, paddling over northern redbelly dace and other prairie fish that swim below. Beavers have learned to build dams with mud and cattails instead of tree limbs. Coyotes howl most every night, and you might spot a bobcat or a cougar. They all depend on grass, in one way or another.

In addition to supporting life above ground, prairie plants create productive soil underneath. On the arid northern Great Plains, roots need a long reach to find water. And during times of drought, native plants retreat into those roots, where they wait for rain. Thousands of years of plant growth has produced rich soil that, when tilled, grows crops that feed people and support farm families and sustain agricultural communities. That, in part, is why the federal government's farm program has supported the conversion of prairie to farmland. The program poured \$4 billion into Montana's agricultural economy between 1995 and 2006, according to the U.S. Department of



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: DONALD JONES.COM; DEE LINNELL BLANK; DIANE HARGREAVES

BIOLOGICAL RICHNESS Montana's shortgrass prairie is home to hundreds of native bird, forb, and grass species. A sampling, clockwise from top: savannah sparrow; nipple cactus at the Comertown Pothole Prairie Preserve near Plentywood; blue grama grass near Malta.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: CHRIS BOYER; PAUL KUNZE; KRISTI DUBOIS

CONVERSION CONTINUES Federal farm policy has long encouraged prairie plowing (top). Even today, while some programs pay for restoration, others encourage sodbusting. Though devastating to prairie ecosystems, cultivation has been the lifeblood of agricultural communities such as those in the Golden Triangle north of Great Falls (above left) and, along with ranching, communities such as Malta (above).

“Last year a herd of antelope came through that had to be a couple of miles long.”

Agriculture. And most of the money has gone to parts of the state east of the Continental Divide that were native grasslands.

About \$1.3 billion of that went to the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), which pays landowners a rental fee to plant grass on parcels of broken sod and leave it alone. The goal is to prevent erosion and restore land that probably never should have been plowed in the first place because it was too dry or too erodible. CRP is popular with hunting and conservation groups because it creates habitat for game birds, waterfowl, and songbirds and helps keep soil from blowing downwind, into waterways. But the handful of grass species planted on CRP lands can't replicate the full ecological value of native prairie previously there. And while the USDA pays people to put farmland into grass and let it rest, the farm program also produces powerful financial incentives to continue busting sod and put it into crops, mostly wheat in Montana.

Such enticements are nothing new. The federal government has subsidized conversion of grassland to farmland since the Civil War, when it first granted applicants title to 160 acres each of undeveloped land in the West. And crop subsidies have become a key component of modern agriculture in America, helping it survive the vagaries of weather, insect infestations, and global price fluctuations.

Still, the vast and complicated farm program offers contradictory enticements for both sodbusting and grassland restoration. “Farm program payments and conservation programs may be working at cross-purposes with one another,” concluded a 2007 General Accounting Office report on the federal farm program. It cited an example: Between 1982 and 1997 landowners in South Dakota enrolled 1.69 million acres of busted sod into CRP. Over the same period, 1.82 million new acres were broken.

Putting additional pressure on remaining prairies are dryland farming techniques and genetically modified crops that make it possi-

ble to farm in places where it wasn't possible before. Ironically, America's growing appetite for organic foods such as pasta and bread also encourages sodbusting. If a field has been treated with chemicals, it takes three chemical-free years before its crops can be certified as organic, and thus fetch a higher price. When an untainted native prairie is plowed, the conversion to organic comes immediately.

Brian Martin stresses that he is not in the cattle business. But the director of science for The Nature Conservancy (TNC) in Montana sees cattle as an effective tool for what he calls his organization's “conservation business.” Part of his job is overseeing TNC's sprawling Matador Ranch in



DEA/VOGEL

LONGTIME RESIDENTS Pronghorn sometimes do well in croplands but usually require undisturbed sagebrush and prairie, where they have evolved for thousands of years.

southern Phillips County, a place where the plow has been lightly used. “Out here, we're better than 80 percent grass,” Martin says. “There's not a lot of those places left.” He describes his native North Dakota as mostly “crops, with a few patches of grass.” He and a growing number of conservationists and landowners are doing all they can to help Montana's prairies avoid that fate.

The Matador Ranch, once part of a string of cattle properties that ran from Texas to Saskatchewan, now operates as a grass bank. That means it sells grazing opportunities to

ranchers, with conditions. If the ranchers take specific conservation steps on their own property, like protecting sagebrush cover for sage-grouse and maintaining prairie dog habitat—which also benefits mountain plovers and burrowing owls—they get as much as a 50 percent discount on grazing rates on the Matador. “But if you bust ground on your home ranch or leased land, you're permanently out of the grass bank,” Martin says. That's because once sod is tilled, it loses much of its value to prairie birds and other native wildlife.

The Matador model gives TNC considerable conservation leverage. While the organization's ranch contains 60,000 acres, the incentives it offers to neighbors extend prairie-friendly ranching to 240,000 acres. The ranchers do the cowboy work, moving cattle frequently to establish a mixture of short, medium, and tall grasses for native birds. “Some species like it tall, some like it middle, and some like it short,” Martin says.

Dale Veseth is one of about a dozen ranchers who graze cattle on the Matador. He says he likes the program, in part, because he believes incentives work better than regulations. Veseth, whose family has ranched in southern Phillips County since 1886, is part of the Ranchers Stewardship Alliance, composed of 35 Montana ranching families. The group's goal is to protect prairie as well as the economic livelihood of ranching families and communities. “When done right, ranching can sustain prairie and wildlife diversity,” Veseth says.

Veseth started learning to identify grass species when he was eight years old. Now he's learned to identify most of the birds on his ranch, knowledge he'd like to see spread wider. “I'd like every rancher to learn the spring call of the Sprague's pipit,” he says.

Helping protect native plants and wildlife isn't just a hobby. Veseth and other ranchers want to keep the weight of the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) off their necks. “You get a whole group of regulations,” with an ESA listing, he says. “At the grassroots level, people feel very threatened by that.”

“People like me have no intention of selling our ranches. Our ranches are our life.”

The U.S. Department of the Interior recently ruled that, under the ESA, the sage-grouse is “warranted” for federal protection “but precluded” from listing as endangered for now because other species are even worse off. Though sage-grouse are faring well in Montana, federal listing would affect all states where the bird lives. Other bird species also are in serious decline, and many breed on Montana’s native prairie. Veseth says he’d like to keep them there. And keeping bird habitat intact is good for lots of critters.

“My dad grew up on the ranch,” he says. “He’s 68. And he saw his first antelope when he was 13. Last year a herd came through that had to be a couple of miles long. You couldn’t see the beginning or the end.”

When it comes to wildlife and livestock, it doesn’t have to be an either/or decision, says Veseth. “In my mind, it has to be both.”

Plenty of other players are working to conserve prairie habitat. As budgets allow, both state and federal governments buy, from willing landowners, conservation easements that ban sodbusting. Groups like the Montana Stockgrowers Association, working under a now-expired federal earmark, helped the owners of more than 1 million acres find ways to make their property better for both wildlife and cattle through the Undaunted Stewardship Program.

Northeast of the Matador Ranch, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks conserves upland and riparian habitat through its Milk River Initiative. The department purchases, on private ranches, conservation easements that require sellers to maintain wildlife habitat and public access for hunters and others. “It’s not just about pheasants and whitetails and turkeys,” says Pat Gunderson, FWP northeastern region supervisor in Glasgow. “We also want to conserve prairie habitat for songbirds and frogs and all the other grassland species out here.”

So far, Gunderson’s region has compiled 50,000 acres of conservation easements, and

more ranchers are interested. The initiative allows ranchers to stay in production, protects prairie, and ensures public access. It also helps FWP avoid future property management expenses, such as spraying for weeds, because the land stays in private ownership, Gunderson says. The goal on each property is to leave half the ground in agricultural production and half in habitat. “If we can stitch enough of these small places together, then we can have something,” he says.

One of the newest, most ambitious, and

me have no intention of selling our ranches. Our ranches are our life.” State officials are aware that APF’s work is a sensitive topic. “We understand the foundation’s objectives and respect their right to purchase private property,” says Joe Maurier, FWP director. “But we also appreciate and respect local concerns with the impacts such large acquisitions can have on an area’s culture and economy.”

Interest in conserving Montana prairies extends beyond state borders. The APF’s board of directors includes titans from the



ANNE SHERWOOD (LEFT); KENTON ROWE (RIGHT)



GREEN GRAZING Dale Veseth (above left) and Greg Oxarart (opposite, moving cattle across pasture south of Malta) are two of a dozen ranchers using the Matador Ranch’s grass bank. Ranchers have long held that, when managed properly, cattle can actually improve grassland health (above right) by mimicking the historic grazing of bison across the prairie.

most controversial prairie conservation organizations is the American Prairie Foundation (APF). It aims to put about 3.5 million acres of Montana prairie into conservation management. So far it has purchased 11 ranches in southern Phillips County, totaling 121,000 acres. The group seeks properties that lie between big blocks of public land, which already have a mandate to manage for wildlife. “Our goal is to glue it all together,” says APF president Sean Garrity, a native Montanan and lifelong hunter. “We want to see more elk, more deer, more bighorns, more antelope.”

The prairie conservation organization raises eyebrows among some neighbors, Veseth among them. In a recent article profiling the APF in *Reader’s Digest*, he said, “People like

business, artistic, and scientific world across the country. It has raised more than \$20 million from private donors. Veseth, too, can rattle off a substantial list of scientific, agricultural, and social groups working with his stewardship alliance to conserve Montana’s prairie and ranching communities, ranging from the Malta Chamber of Commerce to the Arizona-based Malpai Borderlands Group. He says he’s working with groups from Washington state to the southern Great Plains addressing common concerns.

Driving across the prairie is a yawner for a lot of people. But a lot of people are taking a closer look, too.

The first step begins with getting out of the car. 🐾



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