

Wild Times

A Free Publication of the Wyoming Game & Fish Department

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THE HABITAT CONNECTION: PRAIRIES



Prairies can also be grasslands.

It seems like you can see forever when you are standing on a prairie or grassland. There are sagebrush and grasses, but very few trees. That is what makes the prairie a good home, or habitat, for the pronghorn antelope. Not only do they eat sagebrush, but they also have great eyesight that allows them to see across the prairie. Pronghorn antelope can see you scratch your head from three miles away. Scientists say it is almost like looking through binoculars. If the pronghorns' habitat were a forest, do you think they could see very far?

Pronghorn antelope are also very fast runners. They can reach speeds of 60 miles per hour, making them the fastest mammals in North America! Even though they can run, they aren't good jumpers. This can cause problems when they are trying to cross fences. You will see

pronghorn antelope going under fences instead of jumping over them. In Wyoming, many fences are too hard for pronghorn antelope to crawl under, and they can't get where they need to go for food. Next time you take a road trip, watch for the different kinds of fences. Which do you think are best for pronghorn antelope?

One thing you might not see much of on the prairie habitat is water. Over the last several years, Wyoming has been in a drought. A drought is when not enough water falls in the form of rain and snow. When there is drought on the prairie, there will be less grass and sagebrush growing. This is hard on the wildlife that counts on the prairie for food.



Pronghorn antelope depend on sagebrush for food.



Many animals, like the sage grouse, depend on prairie habitat.



Several types of sagebrush grow on prairies.

Images by Luke Parker

FIELD Wildlife Journal

Martin Grenier, Mammal Biologist

There are many different biologist jobs with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department. There are wildlife biologists, fisheries biologists, nongame bird biologists and even nongame mammal biologists. Martin Grenier is a nongame mammal biologist for the department, and he gets to work with all kinds of interesting creatures. Nongame means wildlife that is not hunted in Wyoming. He studies animals like bats and voles. One of the important mammals he works with is the black-footed ferret.

When asked about the black-footed ferret, biologist Grenier responded, "Black-footed ferrets have an interesting history. It was 25 years ago when a dog named Shep brought a black-footed ferret home to his owners who lived just outside Meeteetse, Wyoming. Biologists thought the black-footed ferret was extinct until that day in 1981. But tragedy soon hit the newly found ferrets when disease caused their numbers to go down. Biologists saved what black-footed ferrets they could and placed them in a research center. In captivity, the number of ferrets grew, and biologists started to release them into the wild."

"Black-footed ferrets depend on prairie habitat to survive because that is where the prairie dog lives, the ferrets' most important food source. Without the prairie dogs, the ferret would not survive."

Black-footed ferrets eat prairie dogs and use their burrows to live in.



Black-footed ferrets live on the prairie near Medicine Bow.

A place in Wyoming that has been really important to the black-footed ferret is the Shirley Basin, just outside Medicine Bow. That is because it has a healthy population of prairie dogs.

In addition, biologist Grenier says, "We have been releasing more black-footed ferrets close to areas where other ferrets live and we know they survive. We hope this helps increase the numbers of ferrets that survive in the wild."



Black-footed ferret



Black-footed ferrets were raised in captivity to increase their numbers.

"We spend many nights on the prairie with flashlights looking for ferrets. Their eyes reflect back, and we know it's a ferret. In 2006, we found 196 ferrets in our study area in Shirley Basin. We suspect there are many more animals that we did not see."

If you would like to help an animal recover from the Endangered Species List, you might want to be a nongame mammal biologist with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department. "Where else can you make a difference in the wild world of wildlife?" says biologist Grenier.

Images by
LuRay Parker

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LutRay Parker



WGFD



LutRay Parker



Mark Crocker

WILDLIFE PROFILES

Prairie Falcon

Size: stands about 16 inches tall with long, pointed wings that span $3\frac{1}{2}$ feet.

Eats: small birds, small mammals (like mice) and insects.

Lives: in open prairies and grasslands with cliffs for it to build a nest in.

Did you know a prairie falcon has a “mustache”? This falcon displays a narrow brown stripe of feathers above its beak that looks like it has a mustache. This “mustache” helps people identify this bird from other falcons. The prairie falcon is usually found far from water. You might see a prairie falcon perched on top of a fence post, telephone pole or even a cliff searching for food. It is a fast flier, and when it sees a smaller bird, it often swoops down and captures its prey.

Black-footed Ferret

Size: about 19 inches long with a 5-inch tail.

Eats: prairie dogs.

Lives: in prairie dog burrows underground in sagebrush prairies and grasslands.

Black-footed ferrets were believed to be extinct, which means people thought all of the ferrets were dead. But in 1981 near Meeteetse, Wyoming, a group of black-footed ferrets was found. They are now on the Endangered Species List, and scientists are working hard to keep the few black-footed ferrets we have in the wild and bring back even more to Wyoming. The ferret, keeping its body close to the ground, stalks the prairie dog's burrow and peers into the entrance. If the prey is near the surface, the ferret lunges into the burrow after it. The ferret also slithers down the tunnel and quickly kills the prairie dog the way weasels do, with a bite to the base of the skull. After eating, it buries any remains.

Bison

Size: stands about 5 to 6 feet tall and weighs 800 to 2,000 pounds.

Eats: feeds mostly on grasses.

Lives: in open prairies and grasslands.

Did you know bison is the Wyoming state mammal? Bison are one of North America's largest mammals! Bison are huge animals with massive heads and high humps on their shoulders. They have long, shaggy hair on their shoulders and front legs. They like to wallow, or roll in mud and dust to help “clean” them. This also removes any insects that are biting them. In the spring, wallowing helps remove their winter fur so the bison won't be so hot all summer. Watch for bison in Yellowstone National Park, one of the last places in Wyoming bison still roam the prairies. Bison are sometimes called buffalo.

Prairie Dog

Black-tailed

White-tailed

Size: about 12 inches long, weighing 1 to 3 pounds.

Eats: large amounts of grasses, plant leaves, roots and seeds along with a few insects, like grasshoppers.

Lives: in prairies and grasslands.

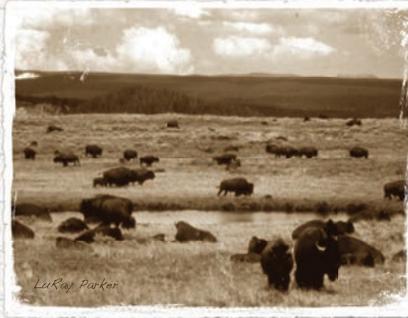
There are two kinds of prairie dogs; the white-tailed and the black-tailed. Did you know that prairie dogs aren't really dogs? Instead they are members of the rodent family. You can see where they live when you look across the prairie and see mounds of dirt, like a pitcher's mound in baseball. All of these mounds put together are called a town. Prairie dogs are very social animals and like to be around other prairie dogs, so they like to live in these towns.

OUR Wildlife Heritage

Bison

Many years ago, the Wyoming prairies looked much different than they do today. That is because many bison used to roam free. At one time there were so many bison, or buffalo, that their stampedes across the prairie sounded like the roll of thunder.

The large numbers of buffalo were a main food source of the Native Americans who lived on the plains. As the herds migrated with the seasons, the Native Americans would follow them, and the people learned hunting techniques to keep their families fed. Native Americans would be able to sneak up on a group of buffalo and make a successful kill. Native Americans also knew that bison would follow each other if they were stampeded. So they would trick the bison into stampeding to their deaths over a cliff.



In the past, large numbers of bison covered the prairies of Wyoming.

They would then have enough meat for the tribes for many weeks and even months!

But times were changing. As white settlers moved to the prairies, the bison's numbers went down. They even neared extinction. By the end of the 1880s, the bison population in America was only about 1,100 animals.

Although their roaming area is barely a fraction of its original size, bison numbers have steadily increased over the years. This is because of conservation efforts made by people. Today bison are estimated to number nearly 80,000. Many of these wild bison can be found in Yellowstone National Park. Go there and see some soon!

Today bison are found in Yellowstone National Park.

Mark Gocke



Around Wyoming



LizRay Parker

Sagebrush grows in Thunder Basin National Grassland.

What if there were no sagebrush?

One problem facing Wyoming's sagebrush is the lack of fire on our prairies. There are some plants animals can't eat, and fire helps keep these plants from taking over the sagebrush habitat. It also helps new sagebrush grow. This provides cover for animals, like the sage grouse, that nest in the sagebrush. Insects that provide food to different birds also do better after fire.

The little green brush

Did you know Wyoming has more sagebrush than any other state? Sagebrush covers about 50 percent of Wyoming. That's a lot of sage! And there isn't just one kind of sagebrush, but thirteen different types. There are both big and small varieties of sagebrush. Some sagebrush plants have gray leaves while others are silver. All sagebrush have a distinctive smell, so next time you are in the prairie, don't forget to smell the sagebrush! But watch out, there are many bushes that look like sagebrush but are really something else.



Sagebrush images by LizRay Parker



Robin Kepple

A home on the range

Sagebrush habitats are very important to all different kinds of animals across the state. There are about 87 kinds of mammals and 297 kinds of birds that depend on sagebrush habitats. A mammal is an animal that has hair and nurses its young with milk.

Biologists measure the growth of sagebrush.



There are 13 different kinds of sagebrush.

Outdoor Classroom

Plants on the move!

There are many plants called invasive plants that live in our sagebrush habitat. Invasive plants are plants that are not native to an area. Some may live as close as Colorado and others as far as China. But they are slowly moving into Wyoming. In fact, some of them are already here, like cheatgrass. Cheatgrass is taking over areas that have been disturbed. Most animals won't eat cheatgrass and cheatgrass won't let other grasses grow on the prairie. It is really good at spreading by sticking in the fur of wildlife.

What can you do?

To help keep the prairies free from these invasive plants, you should always take special actions. If you have been out hiking, make sure you look for hitchhikers on your clothes and even your dog! Many plants have sticky seeds that will attach to you without you even knowing. You spread them by not knowing they are on your clothes and traveling somewhere else where you find them and pick them off. People usually throw them on the ground, where they can start to grow and invade a new place.



Don't forget to remove hitchhikers from your shoes and clothes!

Cheatgrass seeds stick to clothes and animal fur.



You can help keep Wyoming's prairies free of weeds!

Larson Parker

Create a Weed

Weeds are interesting plants. They seem to have superpowers that let them grow anywhere. Can you use what you know about different plants in the prairie and what you know about weeds to create a "superweed"? Draw it on a piece of paper and explain to your class what superpowers your weed has.



Thistles can cause problems on prairies

Chris Madison

Image courtesy Mike Coronella/DeepDesert.com

▶ TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE ◀

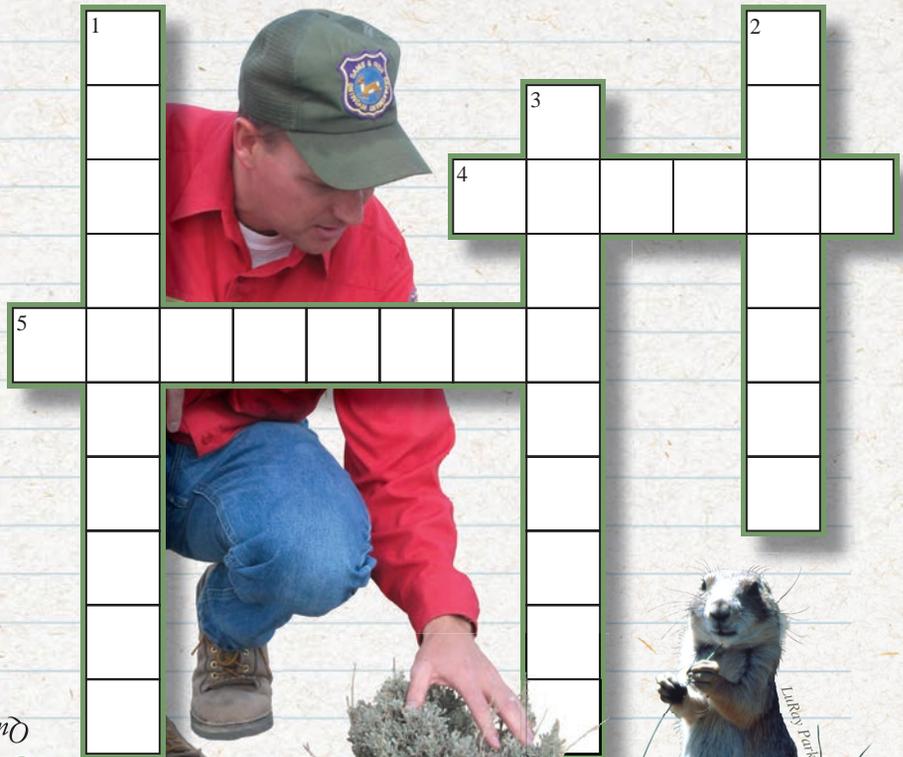
Crossword Puzzle

ACROSS

- An animal that has hair and feeds its young milk is a ...
- Something (either plant or animal) that is not native to an area said to be ...

DOWN

- Both the black-footed ferret and the bison were close to being completely gone. This is called ...
- A type of habitat that is covered by sagebrush and grasses is called a ...
- This plant is an important food source for animals living on the prairie.



Quiz Answer: Prairie Dog
DOWN 1. Extinction 2. Prairie 3. Sagebrush
ACROSS 4. Mammal 5. Invasive

Quiz

I am a mammal that lives on the prairie and is an important food source for the black-footed ferret. I am what is called a keystone species for the prairie, which means I am very important to the food web for prairie animals. Without me the black-footed ferret would be extinct. What kind of animal am I?

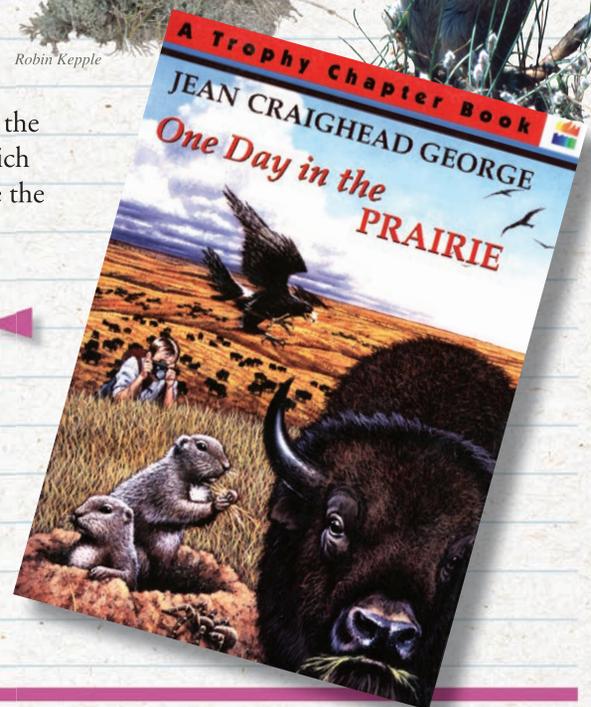
▶ LEARNING LINKS ◀

Book

One Day in the Prairie

by Jean Craighead George

A storm is brewing. Excitement builds from the first page of this story about animals living near an Oklahoma prairie dog town. The book is fun to read and contains lots of facts about prairie wildlife.



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