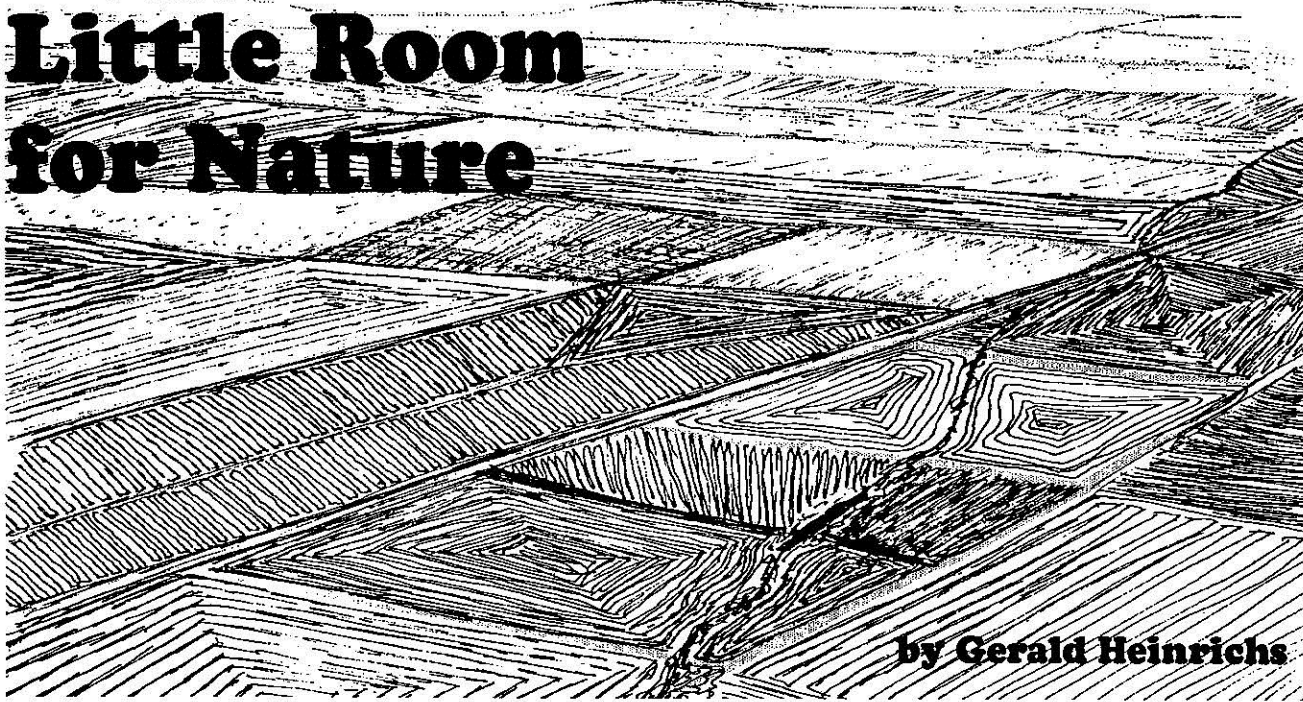


# Little Room for Nature



by Gerald Heinrichs

## Saskatchewan's Settlement Blueprint

It is difficult to imagine how Southern Saskatchewan looked at the time of Confederation. In the early 19th Century there were tens of millions of buffalo wandering North America's Great Plains. In 1858 the explorer John Palliser rode across Saskatchewan's South and wrote, "The whole region as far as the eye could reach was covered by buffalo, in bands varying from hundreds to thousands." By 1890, however, there were fewer than 3,000 buffalo and their numbers have not grown substantially to the present day. The buffalo were exterminated in a reckless and tragic episode. Thereafter, Western settlement and farming consumed the flatlands. Ten millennium of creation of natural habitat was transformed over the course of a few short decades, and Saskatchewan's grasslands became what might be the most altered landscape on earth.

Consequently it is a wonder that buffalo will soon again be thundering over Saskatchewan's prairie. Cheryl Penny is a spokesperson for Parks Canada. She reports that biologists are carefully planning how to acquire and integrate a healthy bison herd into Canada's most significant prairie reserve - Grasslands National Park. "Right now we aren't exactly sure how many bison the Park can support," she says by telephone from Val Marie. "The buffalo are, however, a key part of the Park's long-term plans." The fortunate buffalo will have almost 500 square kilometres to call home. Moreover, the park plans to expand in the coming years to 900 square kilometres of natural prairie.

The enthusiasm today at Grasslands National Park is in stark contrast to our national government's plan for the prairies at the turn of the Twentieth Century. Those early blueprints left little room for nature and habitat in what is today Southern Saskatchewan. By 1876, for example, every acre of Saskatchewan's grasslands were surveyed and staked under a grand scheme for settlement. The settlement policies introduced in 1872 and 1908 (*The Dominion Lands Acts*) make no significant mention of preserving lands for habitat or nature on the prairies.

According to Canada's Confederation visionaries, the Great Plains of Canada had only a few simple purposes. The vast flat acres were only good for railways and settlement. So it followed that the scores of bison who called the prairies home had no fit purpose and in fact, their existence was a curse upon civilization. Similarly, the era of wandering Indian tribes had to end since this lifestyle too vexed any large settlement plans and so the First Nations people were boxed onto reserves. The grand new economic purpose of the prairies was re-emphasised even for them. The Indian was now to pursue "civilized habits" and "adopt the habits of the whites, to till land and raise food, and store it up against a time of want," wrote Lieutenant-Governor Alexander Morris.

When looking over the open plains, federal government officials could only describe the virgin prairie as "unoccupied surveyed agricultural lands" or worse yet



*As portrayed in this painting by James Henry Moser, expert “snipers” could sometimes kill over 100 bison before alarming the herd, in the acts of extermination.*

“waste lands”. There was very little acknowledgment of beauty or natural merit. There was also little acknowledgement of any obligation to care for the prairie habitat that was now alleged to be conquered. Instead, almost every single acre south of Saskatchewan’s tree line was allocated for some private or economic purpose. Moreover, the federal mandate (as spelled out in the 1908 Dominion Lands Act) to “break” and “cultivate” the land was executed at a startling rate. By 1929 at least 85 percent of Saskatchewan’s grasslands were in private hands, which is an astonishing proportion compared to other jurisdictions. In three short decades, Saskatchewan’s population grew from sparsity to 729,000 souls. Government officials reported in 1929 that the mass settlement scheme was completed. They trumpeted that “the railways have been built and the lands settled.”<sup>1</sup>

In the stampede to settle, nature preservation was left in the dust. A few square miles were preserved for antelope in the South West and a few more for waterfowl at places like Last Mountain Lake. It is odd and tragic though that in 1900 no large-scale areas of grasslands were set aside exclusively for grassland parks or permanent nature reserves. Nature, by and

large, took a back seat to the narrow-minded vision of settlement and agriculture.

It is true, as some may say, that community pastures and ranching have not vastly damaged prairie lands but this preservation was by default and not by design. It just happens that responsible livestock grazing is almost compatible with preserved prairie. Nonetheless, most of the rangeland in Saskatchewan is leased from the Crown, and in the past ranchers frequently lost their leases when settlers were prepared to move in and break the land. At the drop of a hat, habitat lost out to almost any economic need.

All in all, the toll on nature in Southern Saskatchewan by farming, settlement and industry is enormous. At a 1993 presentation to the World Wildlife Fund and the Canadian Council on Ecological Areas, David Gauthier (director of the Canadian Plains Research Centre) stated that, “Agriculture, and to a lesser degree urbanization, have transformed more than 80 percent of the Canadian native prairie landscape into a highly fragmented system. Some 90 percent of the rough fescue grassland in Canada has been ploughed, and much of the remaining 10 percent has been significantly modified by

livestock grazing and haying. Almost all of the tall-grass prairie is gone. Only 18 percent of the once abundant short-grass prairie remains in its native state, about 24 percent of the mixed grass prairie, and 25 percent of the aspen parkland. Agricultural expansion has been the major force in the prairies in removing 71 percent of the wetlands since settlement with significant declines in waterfowl populations.”

Today, Saskatchewan’s principal land management system also gives only a second thought to nature. Some 297 Rural Municipalities (RMs) have been established to oversee most of Saskatchewan’s prairie acres. Although many farmers and municipal councillors value and appreciate nature, RMs primarily need to gather tax revenue, maintain roads, and guard the interests of landowners not gophers. Therefore, recovering land for nature in 2003 is a tricky undertaking. RM’s are not anxious to see rural lands taken from farming or private hands without a replacement of the taxes that are levied on those lands. Any attempt today to preserve prairie land is unavoidably coupled with a fight or compromise with a municipality that relies heavily on land revenue. The faulty presumption that land must *earn* an economic living is stacked against all nature preservation efforts.

Discouragingly, a minority of farm lobbyists (but sometimes a vocal minority) perceive further habitat preservation as jeopardizing the farming way of life or, worse yet, a threat to the struggling rural economy. This paranoia is perhaps confirmed in how the Saskatchewan Wildlife Federation emphasizes that it is acquiring only “marginal agricultural use” lands for nature. That same organization felt compelled to acknowledge that landowners are entitled to reimbursement for “feeding” wildlife on their property and for economic protection from wildlife “depredations” on farmlands.

Similarly, Grasslands National Park administrators reassure landowners that when the government acquires lands for the Park “there will be no expropriation” of private property. All of this illustrates a fragile respect for habitat when weighed against the interests of now-entrenched landowners. That tenuous respect for nature was perhaps best demonstrated during the Saskatch-

ewan drought of 2002. During that farm-crisis time, Saskatchewan Party politicians demanded that habitat Crown lands be swathed to provide hay for struggling ranchers. Even though these lands yielded only the tiniest economic benefit, there was little hesitation by some politicians to sacrifice and pawn these habitat

acres. Any esteem for nature was quickly trashed when politicians saw an opportunity to cut it down for the farm economy.

The fate of Saskatchewan’s grasslands is bleak but not hopeless. Organizations like Ducks Unlimited and the Nature Conservancy have slowly taken back and purchased lands for nature preservation. Additionally, both the federal and provincial governments have recognized habitat preservation policies in much of their crown land management. Much of this was

prompted, however, by Saskatchewan’s large agricultural expansion in the 1970s. Between 1976 and 1981 approximately 2,000,000 native prairie acres were ploughed. Ironically, this big step backwards for nature lead to a small step forward for preservation.

Despite all the efforts though, preserved habitat acres in Saskatchewan remain only a small fraction of the total. They are tiny islands in an ocean of agriculture. They are flakes of pepper on a giant plate of cultivation and human habitation. The commendable efforts these last 30 years have yielded only fragmentary increases in preserved prairie. Despite the best efforts native prairie will likely never come close to a 30 percent level that would ensure broad species survival and diversity.

If there is to be hope, then Saskatchewan people must recognize the terrible planning errors that were made a century ago. If we do, then it is easier, perhaps, to aggressively plan for a large-scale reclamation of prairie lands for nature. We must imagine how Saskatchewan would look today if a large and worthy place for nature had been carved out long ago. That must be our vision. If instead we accept or condone or forgive the errors of our forefathers, then we will only eternalize the vacant and wrong-headed blueprints they left behind.

*Gerald Heinrichs is a lawyer in Regina.*

