

# Grasslands

Calgary is predominantly a grassland natural region. Grassland natural regions and foothills fescue subregions make up a total area of 95,565km<sup>2</sup>; that's 14.4% of the provincial landscape. Grasslands that are found in cool, high elevated areas such as mountain areas are classified as the foothills fescue natural subregion. Grasslands are the most threatened of Alberta's six natural regions, and therefore so are the species that depend upon this scenic zone.

## Wildlife and Plant Life

Grassland and foothills fescue subregions consist of a variety of exciting plants to identify and explore! Calgary's parks are home to many Alberta native grass species such as spear grass, oat grass, and rough fescue. These terrains also boast many native wildflowers like *Gaillardia* and sticky purple geraniums, and large trees like the trembling aspen.

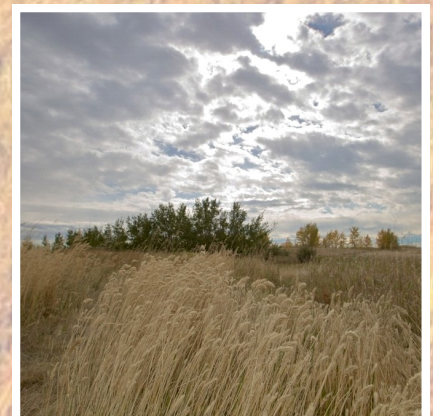
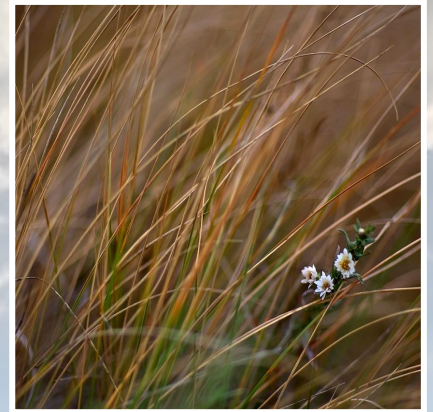
As cities expand, grassland habitats are lost. More than half of the animals on Canada's endangered species list reside in prairie regions. Despite the disappearing populations, grasslands are still home to extensive tree and shrub communities, as well as a variety of unique wildlife. The grassland growing season is short, with cool summers and harsh, cold winters. Calgary is working towards the conservation and restoration of native grasslands to help our prairie species thrive. Keep your eye out for a variety of birds, White-tailed Deer, Coyotes, North American Porcupines, and even the odd American Badger in Calgary's grassland areas.

## Richardson's Ground Squirrel

The Richardson's Ground Squirrel is often mistakenly called a gopher, and plays a crucial role in grassland ecosystems. Richardson's Ground Squirrels are a main food source for a number of predators, including Coyotes, Red-tailed Hawks, and the American Badger. Other animals will use ground squirrel burrows as a home, such as mice, snakes, burrowing owls, and insects. Like many mammals, ground squirrels hibernate deep in their burrows during the cold winter months, so their predators often migrate to find other food sources until the spring.

## Did You Know?

Dusk and dawn are the times you're most likely to see wildlife. Many animals avoid humans and the heat of the day, and instead look for cool, grassy or shaded places to rest. Animals that are most active during the twilight period (dawn and dusk) are called crepuscular.





# Grasslands Study

## Overview

These activities are designed to promote awareness and stewardship of grassland landscapes and their unique inhabitants. Through investigating seed dispersal and wildlife, participants will understand the importance of grasslands in our city, and how they contribute to biodiversity.

### Activity 1: Habitat Restoration

(A) Over the last 100 years, Alberta's grasslands have drastically changed due to human activity. Brainstorm how our grasslands might have changed, as well as potential reasons for these changes?

(B) With urbanization comes the need to create balance to protect plants and wildlife. Habitat restoration offers many benefits to our city and the inhabitants living here. Simple habitat restoration projects are called naturalization. Naturalization may include removing non-native plants, planting native species, and allowing natural grasses to grow. Why is habitat restoration important? How could you complete a naturalization project?

(C) Wildlife often needs to adapt to changes to their habitat. Draw or discuss the ideal habitat for a grassland animal, such as a ground squirrel, badger, hawk, or snake. Add details and labels to describe your habitat. What do animals do when their habitat is lost or altered?

(D) Camouflage Game: Play a game of hide and seek in a grassland area. Notice how difficult or easy it is to camouflage depending on the colours you're wearing. Choose one person to represent a predator to try and spot the camouflaged prey. How do local animals camouflage?

### Activity 2: The Food we Grow

Native plants provide habitat for pollinators and help Alberta's ecosystems thrive. Pollinators such as bees and butterflies are responsible for many of the foods we eat (hint: think about all of the fruits and vegetables that flower). Pollinators help maintain healthy, resilient ecosystems that many other species rely on. Without pollinators, most of our trees and plants would not be able to reproduce, resulting in less habitat for wildlife, fewer natural resources, and less diverse environments. Discuss:

(A) Which foods grow thanks to healthy grasslands and pollinators?

(B) Use any plant guides, online resources, or the *Seek by Inaturalist* app (free) to scan a grassland terrain and identify at least five different plants. Research to find out if they are native or non-native species.

(C) How do seeds disperse in a grassland? Discuss plant needs and how these plants can propagate in local ecosystems? Do plants need humans for any reason?

(D) Who's scat is that? One way seeds disperse is by being eaten by animals that are moving from place to place. Animal scat provides seeds with nutrients to help them grow. Discuss the different ways seeds move from place to place, either by animals, water, or the wind.

### Activity 3: Grassland Animal Report

Grasslands are great for watching wildlife. If you're still and quiet you can see many animals and birds emerging from the tall grasses and trees. In small groups, make connections between at least five different grassland species. Describe where these animals find food, water, and shelter, as well as the interactions between them. Why is the grassland region important for these species? Are there similarities or differences between the interactions of species chosen by other students in your class?



# Visiting a Grassland Park?

What you need to know.

## Park Etiquette — [Click here for bylaws related to parks and pathways](#)

- Stay on designated trails at all times, unless otherwise posted. This helps to protect the habitat of plants and animals that live in the park.
- Use quiet voices. Running and yelling will scare away wildlife and reduce the opportunities to view these species.
- Do not disturb or feed wildlife, including birds.
- Look but do not remove vegetation (including flowers and berries). These plants could be food, nesting material, or a rare native species.
- Do not litter. Place all garbage, recycling, and compost in appropriate bins or take them back to your school.

## Nature Kit Information

Calgary Parks would like to encourage you to explore the amazing landscapes of the prairie grasslands. To enhance your experience, we have a free learning kit available for you to use which includes:

- A map of the park or region
- Biofacts (bone clone mammal/bird skulls, track and scat molds, egg replicas)
- Bird plushes with audio of bird call or song
- A tree cookie (cross section from a known tree species)
- Alberta natural history field guides and booklets relevant to the topic of the kit
- Printed resources to supplement the park study activities
- Various laminated photographs and information on local plant and animal species
- Nature BINGO activity page

## Renting a Nature Kit

- Kit is available for a one-week duration FREE of charge.
- User is responsible for picking up and dropping off the kit at the designated location.
- If the kit is not returned, or materials are missing or damaged, the user will be charged a replacement fee.