

Obiajulu  
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The Loss of the Canadian Prairies: The Threat of Habitat Loss and Destruction on Prairie  
Wildlife and Biodiversity



The Wideview Complex, situated between the two blocks of Grasslands National Park in southwest Saskatchewan.  
Calvin Fehr / Viewer Submitted.

The Canadian Prairies are a staple of our nation. Filled with hundreds of years of historic wildlife, and thousands of different organisms intertwined through years of interspecies development and growth, the main prairie region of Canada consisting of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba is home to flourishing grasslands and fields, which have been the epicenter of Canadian agricultural development for hundreds of years (The University of Manitoba Libraries). However, in the past two and a half decades there has been a significant decline in the once vast Canadian Prairie due to human activities, now with over 25 million acres of grassland

lost (Nature Canada). The overall health of these regions has declined through habitat loss, as a result of natural grasslands being unnaturally altered for industrial reasons, reduced biodiversity caused by the widespread loss of many natural habitats, and the population decline of many Canadian species such as the Plains Bison, and the Chestnut Collared Longspur (Herriot). The decline of these regions is detrimental to the health of our nation as a whole, and it must be stopped. It is possible for the loss of Canadian Prairies to be reduced through national and provincial conservation efforts, as well as collaboration with Canadian governments and agricultural workers to ensure the protection of Canadian wildlife, however, it must be done soon. The future of many species and ecosystems are at risk, therefore progress can only be achieved if there are active and continuous efforts to maintain the Canadian Prairies and wildlife found in the heart of our nation.

Habitat loss in the Canadian Prairies is not a sudden phenomenon. Since the beginning of the North American industrial age, the natural resources of Canada have been mined and cultivated for profit, hurting many ecosystems due to carelessness towards the regions targeted. (The University of Manitoba Libraries). The impact of the loss of Canadian Prairies affects not only Canadian wildlife and species, but also Canadian people, as Canada's grasslands contribute to regulating the climate and protecting the quality of drinking water for residents of the prairie provinces (Nature Conservancy Canada). The current state of industrial agriculture is unfortunately a prime example of the negative effects of human activities on natural environments (Meek).



The clearing of forests for oil sand development in Alberta, Forest Watch Elk Valley.

Continued agricultural development in delicate regions has resulted in high rates of habitat destruction, with farmland being responsible for over 80 percent of global deforestation (De Sy). Several studies have estimated that with the current state of food production occurring worldwide, the need for more agricultural centers will inevitably grow, causing widespread agricultural expansion which will destroy numerous habitats of terrestrial animal species (Williams). Furthermore, the high rates of habitat loss in the Canadian prairies are currently causing massive threats to biodiversity as well, through negative impacts of habitat loss on species abundance and genetic diversity. Species abundance is actively being reduced as grassland habitats are destroyed, because the habitats no longer support the organisms present, and genetic diversity suffers a loss as well, as population sizes decline. (Furlan).

In addition to the negative effects of habitat loss on biodiversity, the loss of the prairies presents a threat to the population growth of many native grassland animals (Bellar). The swift fox once roamed the Great Plains, but due to habitat loss as a result of agricultural expansion and industrial development, they are now considered an endangered species in 90% of their historic range. The Burrowing owl is another prairie animal that is considered to be endangered in

Canada, due to habitat loss and fragmentation (Nature Canada). There has been a sharp reduction in ground squirrels, prairie dogs and insects, resulting in fewer burrows available for nesting and less prey for Burrowing owls to feed on, putting them at risk. The threat to wildlife and biodiversity due to the ever-growing loss of the Canadian prairies is intimidating, but nevertheless, there are ways to combat these issues effectively.



The Swift Fox, currently endangered in 90% of its historic range. Court, Gordon.

The fifteenth Sustainable Development Goal of the United Nations is centered around reversing land degradation, while halting biodiversity loss, which is precisely what must be done to halt the loss of the Canadian Prairies (United Nations Environment Programme). In order to reach the expectations, set by the United Nations, it is important for Canadian conservation organizations to continue their efforts to work with landowners, to ensure that ecosystems and wildlife are not further damaged while land is being cultivated (Lark). *The National Conservancy of Canada* has already begun creating projects centered around the conservation of prairie grasslands in Canada while working closely with conservation-minded ranchers to protect Canadian grasslands (Nature Conservancy Canada). Furthermore, an increase in prairie monitoring by various provincial governments would ensure that the health of the Canadian

Prairies is not neglected, and continuing to produce accessible studies on prairie loss in Canada within economic and environmental fields can help policy and public efforts to promote conservation in these areas. Farmers and ranchers who own grassland areas can also contribute to conservation efforts by managing the grazing patterns of their livestock to minimize overgrazing, and fencing off wetlands and waterways to protect them from harm (Nature Canada).

The loss of the Canadian Prairies is an impending threat to Canadian wildlife, ecosystems and communities. The benefits derived from Canada's grassland regions are invaluable, and cannot be taken for granted. Hundreds of plant and animal species depend on Canada's grasslands, and Canadian communities depend on the products that these species provide. Through continuous efforts made by Canadian conservation organizations, the loss of the prairies can be halted, but action must be taken swiftly, and done considerately, for the benefit of all.

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