



Time for Nature



Fire on the prairie

Maintaining a delicate balance in Grasslands National Park of Canada

Most of us are aware of the dangers of forest fires - but did you know how dangerous a grassland fire could be? Wildfires are a risk for much of the year in Grasslands National Park of Canada. Once the prairie catches fire, fine fuels here can burn intensely and spread rapidly in strong winds. These fires can threaten public safety or destroy facilities in and around the park.



Fire can restore prairie habitats by removing dead litter and spurring the growth of new vegetation.
© Parks Canada.

In Grasslands, fire can be a friend as well. It can help maintain prairie habitats by removing dead litter, recycling nutrients in the soil and spurring the growth of new vegetation. In the past, both fire and grazing bison were important to the prairie, providing the pattern of disturbance and renewal the grasslands require.

Today, managers at Grasslands National Park are working to maintain or restore the ecological integrity of the native prairie. This includes a plan to manage wildfires and safely re-introduce fire to the landscape.

How does Parks Canada assess the risks?

To estimate the fire risk at Grasslands National Park, Parks Canada uses tools such as the Canadian Forest Fire Weather Index (FWI) System. That system uses inputs such as temperature, wind, rainfall and relative humidity to assess the fire risk. By considering weather forecasts and the FWI and assessing the level of grass curing, park staff can refine the risk assessment.



Park managers are working to maintain the ecological integrity of the native prairie.
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When conditions are dry and lightning season is upon the park, Parks Canada and surrounding landowners conduct lightning patrols. An important “mode of fire detection is by eye,” says Senior Park Warden, Brent McDougall.

Dealing with high risk situations

When the fire risk is high, extra precautions help prevent accidental fires at Grasslands. For example, park managers may limit backcountry travel, and restrict the use of stoves and vehicles.



Currently, Grasslands receives about 7,000 visitors per year, and that number is growing. More visitation in the park increases the chance of an accidental fire. Visitor education will be increasingly important in making Canadians aware of the benefits and risks of fire in the prairie ecosystem.

Maintaining the balance

Cattle grazing was removed from park lands in the last decade allowing fuels to accumulate and increasing fire risk in certain areas of the park. Parks Canada plans to restore grazing to certain areas of the park by reintroducing the plains bison, where feasible, and using domestic grazers (cattle, sheep, or horses), where appropriate. Small scale prescribed fires will also help maintain this unique prairie ecosystem.

For more information visit www.pc.gc.ca/grasslands



Small scale prescribed fires will help maintain the prairie ecosystem in Grasslands National Park. © Parks Canada.