

“Grasslands” – An Inspired Documentary Film



By **Brittany Verbeek**, *AWA Conservation Specialist*

AWA's outreach program kicked off the New Year by hosting a film screening at the AWA office building in Calgary. The new Canadian documentary called “Grasslands,” the chance to hear from the film's director Ian Toews, and perhaps the irresistible smell of fresh popcorn attracted a sold out crowd for the evening.

This documentary would make even the most extreme prairie naysayer develop an appreciation of its beauty and importance. It is a powerful film. Trevor Herriot, naturalist, author, and one of the interviewees, asks you to simply “experience a place of grass.” Many amazing scenery shots of wide-open prairie make the viewer appreciate the great plains of North America; historically one of the largest unbroken eco-zones, it now stands as one of the most endangered with only approximately 18 percent left intact.

The film emphasizes the biological and cultural significance of grasslands. It shows the amazing resiliency of grasses – their ability to survive under all extreme weather con-

ditions including wind, cold temperatures, snow, flood, and drought. The only irreversible damage to them has been delivered by plow or machine. The mixed grass landscape thrives courtesy of fire and large mammal grazing. They stimulate vibrant second growth in an impressive natural rejuvenation process. Trampling also alters micro-habitat structure creating new niches for other grassland species. Examples of the intricacies and interconnectedness of prairie ecosystems are beautifully woven through the entire film.

Leroy Little Bear is interviewed in the film and describes the connection his people have had with this landscape for generations. “When buffalo started to disappear from the land,” he said, “a large part of the spiritual and cultural being of First Nations also disappeared.” Here the film powerfully demonstrates how grassland species are an integral part of Blackfoot rituals and ceremonies. They are essential to identity.

The film is shot with an Arri Alexa state of the art camera and brings the sights and

sounds of wild grasslands to the screen. Greater sage-grouse dance on their leks, bull elk bugle in the morning mist, prairie dogs dart in and out of their holes, and rattle snakes slither silently through the grass. Gordon Hempton, a wild sound recordist and interviewee, admires the rare exceptional acoustic quality of the grasslands. The film captures prairie sounds as sharp as the chirps of a songbird and as subtle as the rustle of wheatgrass in the breeze.

The documentary was filmed primarily in Saskatchewan's Grasslands National Park, but it includes footage from other prairie locations in Alberta, Montana, and North Dakota. Grasslands National Park is highlighted as being among the largest legislatively protected grassland areas in North America. Parks Canada, along with the help of many First Nations' and ranchers' traditional ecological knowledge of the land, has reintroduced genetically pure plains bison to the park and also allows sustainable cattle grazing. Bison, an umbrella species that has such an important role on the landscape, are once again thriving in the park. An initial herd of 71 bison were reintroduced to the National Park in the winter of 2005; by 2013 the herd had grown to roughly 330 adults and 40 calves. The film offers powerful imagery of the reintroduced bison re-discovering the very same wallows to roll in their ancestors used centuries ago.

The film is poetic – through it we see the way things were to what they are now and where we are heading. There's hope in this cautionary tale that encourages us to cherish this threatened, sometimes underappreciated, part of our natural heritage.



The plains bison – an iconic species central to every facet of plains Blackfoot culture and grassland ecosystems.
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