

TALL GRASS
COASTAL PRAIRIES
OF
BRAZOS BEND STATE PARK



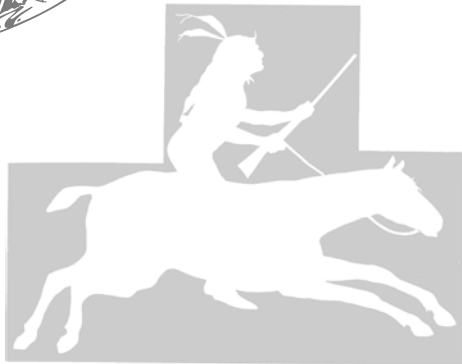
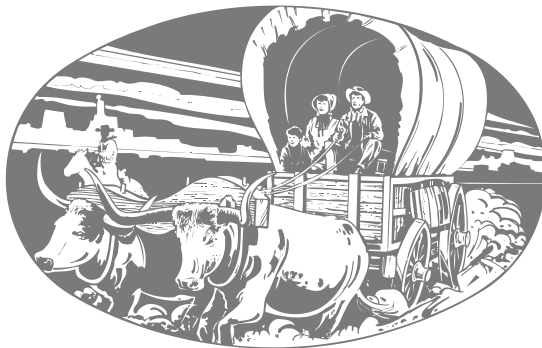
A quiet, subtle place, the prairie rewards
those who pause and look carefully.

PRAIRIES PAST

Within the park, visitors have an opportunity to explore small communities of native grasses that only hint of days gone by. Around the mid-1800's much of Texas was covered with "tall grass prairie". These tall grass prairies were covered with grasses reaching 8-10 feet tall! Cowboys told tales of standing on their saddles in order to locate their cattle.

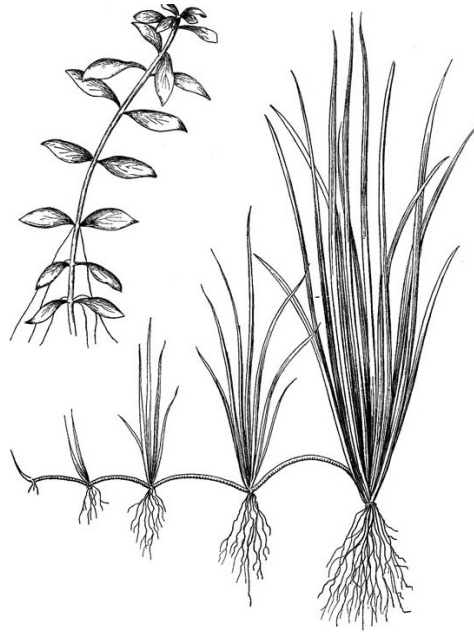
This prairie ecosystem was part of a much larger prairie ecosystem stretching from southern Canada into northern Mexico, east to the Appalachian Mountains and west to the Rocky Mountains. Early travelers along the Oregon Trail described it as a "sea of grass", thus dubbing the covered wagons as "prairie schooners".

Long ago, the Brazos River brought sediment into a shallow ocean, providing a foundation for the park's prairie land. After the ocean receded, a great grassland grew in its place. The grass once provided homes to pronghorn antelope, red wolves, black bear, cougar, prairie chickens, wild turkey, and vast herds of bison (buffalo).



PRAIRIE'S PREDICAMENT

Much has changed since bison grazed these prairies. The fertile soil of the prairie made it ideal for farming, it's elevation ideal for development. Today in the US, less than 2% of native prairie exists undisturbed. The habitat once supported a diverse population of species that could not survive elsewhere. It's not too late to save the prairie.



PRAIRIE PRESERVATION

One of the most important aspects of a healthy prairie has always been fire. In the past, lightning strikes burned thousands of acres of prairie, yet the prairie returned again and again. Invading woody plants were kept under control while grasses thrived. The reason is quite simple. Woody plant root systems are quite shallow, non-resistant to fire. Roots of grasses run deep into the earth, remaining untouched. With some species, new growth occurs in as little as a week, quickly bringing life back to the burned area. Native Americans relied on these burns to bring the bison that were so vital to their existence. Today park staff manages these several hundred acres of prairie by conducting controlled burns along with herbicide treatment targeting woody plants and mowing.

PRAIRIES PRESENT

The surviving prairie remains a place of diversity, in part because of undulations in the land. Sandy deposits called pimple mounds dot the ground, creating an environment attractive to pocket gophers and other burrowing animals and even a carnivorous plant, the sundew.

Ephemeral ponds create a significant amount of surface water on the prairie, adding life forms ranging from microscopic invertebrates to the occasional alligator—a predator one might not ever conceive of existing in a prairie ecosystem. Another aspect of these “temporary wetlands” that one may not even consider is their importance to our daily lives. In our area, these wetlands help recharge the Gulf Coast Aquifer which supplies us with most of our drinking water.

Although the days of the bison and red wolf are long gone, many animals still exist among the grasses. Most of the rodent population is found on the prairie, along with bobcats and coyotes that prey on them. You may also discover two box turtle species, the three-toed and ornate box turtles, plus other reptiles including the slender glass lizard and prairie king snake. Bird species are also abundant, ranging from species of native sparrows, warblers, meadow larks, killdeer, Northern bobwhite quail, sandhill cranes and larger hawks and owl species, such as red-tailed hawks and great-horned owls.



Plant diversity ranges from a multitude of grass species, including little bluestem, bushy bluestem, Indian grass, switch grass and a few remaining stands of big bluestem, to an extensive variety of native Texas wildflowers.

Certainly much has changed since nomadic tribes of Native Americans hunted these lands. As you stand atop the prairie observation platform and gaze out on the landscape, imagine herds of thousands of bison among grasses ten feet tall swaying in the breeze. Understand that the area you are standing in supports the existence of numerous plant and animal species. It's not “just a bunch of grass”.

Information compiled by Sharon Hanzik, 2008