

# “The Sea of Grass:” the Story of the National Grasslands and National Grasslands Visitor Center

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The National Grasslands Visitor Center, in Wall, South Dakota, is the only center in the United States that is dedicated to telling the story of the 20 National Grasslands in the United States. The Visitor Center features exhibits on Great Plains history, prairie plants and animals, recreational activities, and management activities on the National Grasslands. A visit to the Center is on the agenda for one of the post-convention tours of the 1997 Society for Range Management meeting.

At the Visitors Center, you will hear the tale of the sea of grass, the Great Plains. These windswept plains have seen the pageant of the frontier, the tragedy of the dust bowl, and the wonders of modern agriculture—and all that has passed proclaims our dependence on grass. These lands were once home to many Indian tribes who followed the abundant buffalo herds as they roamed through this never-ending sea of grass. By the 1870's, buffalo were replaced by huge herds of cattle brought in by the barons of the west.

Late in the 19th century, these lands were opened up under the Homestead Act of 1862. This act limited homesteads to 160 acres. Although later this was increased to 640, these lands were not suited to the eastern and European farm practices that settlers used. And, it soon became clear that farming in this land of drought was not sustainable.

The financial crises created by the Great Depression coupled with nature's intense drought made the situation on the grasslands even worse. By the early 1930's, as many as 70 percent of the homesteaders were delinquent in their taxes. Hundreds of thousands were forced to leave. As the dust storms darkened the skies, it became evident that help was needed.

The National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 and the Emergency Appropriations Act of 1935 allowed the Federal Government to purchase and restore damaged submarginal lands and to resettle destitute families. These lands were called Land Utilization (LU) projects. These LU lands were assigned to the Secretary of Agriculture and administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service, then called Soil Conservation Service in 1938. In 1954, these lands were transferred to the Forest Service, becoming National Grasslands in 1960. The Buffalo Gap National Grassland was officially named in 1961.

The purpose of the National Grasslands was to serve as demonstration areas for the proper management for forage, wildlife, woodlands, minerals, water and outdoor recreation. Today, twenty National Grasslands are managed to sustain these diverse remnants of the great sea of grass. Much

of the region has been cultivated to provide fertile farm land, so the grasslands provide some of the last remaining glimpses of native prairie.

The grasslands appear open and empty, often boring to the casual observer. In reality, these vast open grasslands, “prairies”, are home to a deceptive variety of plants and animals. The primary vegetation is, naturally, grass. On the Buffalo Gap National Grassland, dominant species include western wheatgrass (*Agropyron smithii*), green needlegrass (*Stipa viridula*), buffalograss (*Buchloe dactyloides*), and blue grama (*Bouteloua gracilis*). These are plants that have adapted to the harsh environment and historic grazing patterns.

Common animal species of the Buffalo Gap include coyote (*Canis latrans*), pronghorn (*Antilocapra americana*), black-tailed prairie dog (*Cynomys ludovicianus*), white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*), mule



A prairie vista on the Buffalo Gap National Grassland. Photo by Bill Perry, District Ranger, Buffalo Gap National Grassland, Wall, S.D.

deer (*O. hemionus*), sharp-tailed grouse (*Tympanuchus phasianellus*), cottontail (*Sylvilagus floridanus*), and black-tailed jackrabbit (*Lepus californicus*). These animals have also adapted to the harsh extremes of the prairie. Pronghorn, the fastest animal in North America, uses speed to survive in these open areas. Many animals have adapted by burrowing, such as the prairie dog. Prairie dog towns provide habitat for a number of other species including the endangered black-footed ferret.

Because of the history of the National Grasslands, the Buffalo Gap National Grassland is not a solid block of public land. It is made up of intermingled pieces of grasslands, other federal lands, state and privately owned parcels. This lends to the uniqueness of the National Grasslands and increases the challenges in managing these lands. The key to good management is balancing uses within the limits of the resources.

Historically, livestock grazing was the primary emphasis on the grasslands. Domestic cattle have replaced bison as the dominant grazers on the prairie and provide the primary source of income for the local economies. Livestock grazing is an important component of the economic stability in many small rural communities.

Today, the grasslands are being recognized as prime public lands for a variety of recreation. Visitors come to hunt, hike, camp, bike, ride all-terrain vehicles or horses, collect rocks, or just to enjoy the vistas of the prairie.

The East Half of the Buffalo Gap National Grassland is administered out of the town of Wall. This rural community depends on tourism for its survival. This is a stopover for visitors on their way to the Black Hills and Yellowstone. The area also features the Badlands National Park, one of the premier prairie parks.

Oh, and while you are in town, don't miss the world famous Wall Drug Store, the largest drug store in the world. No, this is much more than a pharmacy. You'll also find an art gallery, western store, rock shop, book store, cafe and one of only four *Tyrannosaurus Rex* exhibits in the country. And, you can still get a cup of coffee for only 5 cents.

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