



Grasslands Gazette

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Horned Lark on Two Marys Nature Preserve © Jess Alford

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The Southern Plains Land Trust's mission: To create a shortgrass prairie reserve network that enables native plant and animal communities to once again thrive, with minimal human intervention. Join our membership to enact effective, permanent protection for prairie wildlife. If you're already a member, please let your friends and family know about us.

SPLT's mission was furthered in November and December 2011, as we reviewed and provided comments on the proposed Kiowa and Rita Blanca National Grasslands plan, advocating for native wildlife. In November, we established a dedicated fund for land acquisition – every cent in this growing fund will go toward buying land. We have a big year planned for 2012, including a May/June tour of SPLT's preserves. If you've always wanted to see the lands we've protected, now is your chance. Please contact us for more information.

A NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR: NEW BOARD MEMBERS

SPLT Vital Statistics

Board of Directors:

Robert Alsobrook
Alena Amundson
Misty Ewegen
Melissa Hailey
Jennifer Melton
Judith Miller Smith, Vice President
Jay Tutchton
Daniel Ziskin, President

Volunteer Accountant:

Donna Mei Lin Driscoll, C.P.A.

Staff:

Nicole J. Rosmarino, Director

SOUTHERN PLAINS LAND TRUST

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SPLT's mission is to create a shortgrass prairie reserve network that enables native plant and animal communities to once again thrive, with minimal human intervention.

SPLT is a 501(c)(3) organization. We are very streamlined, putting as much money directly into land acquisition as possible. **All donations are accepted, in whatever amount, and are fully tax-deductible.** Donors may specify whether they wish their contribution to be applied exclusively for land acquisition. In addition, you may choose to "adopt an acre" for \$200. You can dedicate the acre to whomever or whatever you choose.

SPLT is a member of the Colorado Coalition of Land Trusts and the Land Trust Alliance. SPLT is certified to hold conservation easements by the State of Colorado.

Editor: Nicole Rosmarino

We're welcoming two new terrific women to the SPLT board: Misty Ewegen and Alena Amundson. Misty & Alena have hit the ground running, pitching in on fundraising and growing SPLT's membership.



Alena (pictured left, photo by Matthew Linton) is a lawyer based in Denver, CO. Alena's appreciation for nature and her commitment to its preservation began as a child in the forests of Stockholm, Sweden, and her naturalist instincts continued to be refined as she grew up in Boulder, CO. While earning her Bachelor's degree in philosophy from the University of Colorado at Boulder, Alena became passionate about animal rights and, specifically, the moral status of animals in relationship to humans. In 2007, Alena received her Juris Doctor from the University of Denver, Sturm College of Law, with a focus on environmental law. As a solo practitioner, Alena represented WildEarth Guardians as outside counsel in numerous cases involving the protection of endangered species. Some of the species Alena helped to protect include the Fin, Sei and Sperm Whales as well as rare mountain snails and stoneflies. No matter how large or small the species, Alena zealously advocates for its right to exist. Alena is currently a trial attorney with the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of the Solicitor, specializing in mine safety and health enforcement.

Misty (pictured right) is a partner at Ellis, Wright, & Ewegen, LLP, a small downtown Denver law firm she started with two of her study partners from law school. The trio decided to "firm up" because they had similar interests in law and a shared desire to work towards protecting the environment. Misty spent much of her childhood meandering through the Rocky Mountains and the Eastern plains. Misty's grandfather owned a farm out in Eastern Colorado where Misty and her brother would play hide-and-seek among cornfields and race under an endless sky. In Misty's view, "farmers have an almost physical understanding of the need for water on parched earth." She learned to respect natural resources early on. Misty graduated pre-law from the Metropolitan State College of Denver, where she interned with the Colorado State Senate. She attended the University of Denver Sturm College of Law in 2003, where she represented abused and neglected children, managed a student team writing a Domestic Violence manual for the State of California, provided legal research for voting rights organizations, sat on the board of several public interest groups, co-chaired Death Penalty Week, and assisted a number of environmental groups with legal research and analysis.



Cover animal: The horned lark (*Eremophila alpestris*) is a delightful year-round resident of the Southern Plains. Horned larks are the birds we often see fluttering along prairie roadsides. Pick up a pair of binoculars and look at them closely, and you'll see their dark breastband and "horns" (tufts of black feathers).

THANK YOU

We have a lot of thank yous this issue. Thanks to Roberta Gibbons and Dyne Stephenson for dedicating an acre to their sons, Nations and Henry. Thanks to Ted Harris for a generous donation, the majority of which he requested be placed in our new dedicated fund for land purchases. We gladly obliged!

And thanks to individuals and companies that made SPLT's holiday gift catalog more cost-effective. High Plains Films provided discounted DVDs so that we could put more proceeds toward our mission (check out *Varmints* and *Facing the Storm: Story of the American Bison* in our catalog)! Candace Savage and Perseus Books did the same for Candace's splendid book, *Prairie: A Natural History* (reviewed at p. 7). Sharyn N. Davidson donated her gorgeous illustrations of prairie wildlife for our new gift cards. Over the years, photographers Jess Alford, Dr. Lauren McCain, and Dr. Rich Reading have provided beautiful pictures of shortgrass prairie wildlife, plants, and landscapes, which they have always generously donated to SPLT. We thank them heartily!



Ferruginous hawk hunting prairie dog colony on Marianne Rees Nature Preserve, Fall 2011 © Nicole Rosmarino. Note the two prairie dogs in the bottom left corner of the third frame, considering their next move.

PUBLIC LANDS PROTECTION

When SPLT started in 1998 in southeast Colorado, we were intentional about our location. We were conscious of the need to safeguard not only private lands, but public lands as well, and this area contains the largest block of publicly accessible federal lands in the Central Shortgrass Prairie Ecoregion: the Comanche National Grasslands. Nearby, in western Kansas, are the Cimarron National Grasslands. To the south are the Kiowa National Grasslands of eastern New Mexico, and the Rita Blanca National Grasslands in the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles. Together, these federal lands total approximately 775,000 acres, with the Comanche leading the way, at 435,000 acres.

This federal land tends to be arranged in a checkerboard pattern, with private and state lands interspersed among federal. Buying inholdings and land adjacent to public lands is one way to ensure that some threats – such as cropland agriculture – are completely removed. It also provides us with place-based knowledge and experience that strengthens our advocacy for native ecosystems and the full complement of native species on public lands. For instance, the Two Marys Nature Preserve in Baca County is directly adjacent to a portion of the Comanche National Grassland. By buying and protecting land in close proximity to federal lands, we can strive toward a private/public shortgrass prairie preserve network, with the goal of safeguarding a broad landscape on which all native flora and fauna are welcome.

SPLT is working to protect precious public lands in the southern plains, alongside scientists, conservation groups, and landowners, but buying land outright is central to our mission. All donations made now through the end of 2011 will be put in a special private land acquisition fund.

In this issue, we feature the national grasslands, going both back and forward in time. On pages 4 & 5, we explore how the Dust Bowl in the 1930s gave rise to these federal lands, which is good news for the public, as public lands are otherwise scarce in the Southern Plains. And on pages 5 & 6, we focus on the Kiowa and Rita Blanca National Grasslands, for which the U.S. Forest Service is currently accepting public comments on a new management plan. The proposed plan has far-reaching implications for black-tailed prairie dogs, mountain plovers, and other wild elements of the shortgrass prairie. We urge you to contact the Forest Service by Dec. 28, 2011 and express your views on how these important federal lands should be managed.



Out of the Dust Bowl...

By Nicole Rosmarino, SPLT Director

I'll admit I've become a bit mesmerized by tales of the Dust Bowl in the 1930s. It started with Tim Egan's book, *The Worst Hard Time*. He writes about areas with which we're well-acquainted, including Baca County, Colorado. The stories of topsoil blowing away by the ton, sand dunes piling up across the prairie, black blizzards stretching a mile high and depositing Southern Plains dust all along the East Coast, and cattle (and people) dead from lungs full of dirt, would seem like tall tales were the events of this period not well-documented through photographs, government agencies, scientists, and local residents.

The Dust Bowl, though, is as much a place as an event, and it happens to overlap nearly perfectly with SPLT's geographic focus area, the southern Great Plains. Most of this area is shortgrass prairie, which was hit hard by cattle grazing in the 1890s, followed by a frenzy of wheat production in subsequent decades. When wheat prices climbed in the 1920s, area residents (as well as entrepreneurs rushing in) climbed onto newly-purchased tractors and plowed up the shortgrass.

But the shortgrass was literally anchoring the land in place. The deep roots of the prairie's backbone grasses, buffalograss and blue grama, stretched for several feet underground. Once they were turned "the wrong side up," there was nothing to protect the rich prairie soil from blowing away – given the omnipresent forces of drought and wind.

After Egan, I turned to a classic, Donald Worster's *Dust Bowl: the Southern Plains in the 1930s*. Worster, an environmental historian who grew up in the Southern Plains, pulled no punches. He pointed, forcefully and articulately, to the capitalist system as the overriding reason for the dust storms of the 1930s. And the 1950s. And even the 1970s. He lambasted cattle grazing as much as crop production and heaped the blame at the doorstep of an economic system that has an unquenchable thirst, for more production, more profits, more inputs of all kinds. Quite simply, more.

Worster wrote,

As the world's population moves increasingly onto marginal land...and as unfavorable shifts in climate appear likely, even

in temperate zones, the need for ecologically adaptive cultures becomes all the more crucial. Capitalism cannot fill that need; all its drives and motives tend to push the other way, toward overrunning a fragile earth.

Writing in 1979, Worster's warnings about a burgeoning human population, climate change, and a mercilessly overrun fragile earth, ring true today. But what was most urgent in Worster's book, whether you care for his critique of capitalism or not, was heeding nature's warnings.

The Dust Bowl was the clearest message that nature could possibly send that humans had overstepped her bounds. Nature screamed the message. From the static electricity running along barbed wire fences, to birds and rabbits fleeing at the approach of Black Sunday, to dust invading even the most tightly sealed up farmhouse, to human residents dying from "dust pneumonia," nature howled the message over and over again.



Dust Storm in the Texas Panhandle, March 1936.
Photo by Arthur Rothstein.

But for many, that message (although not the vivid memories) either never sunk in or was simply forgotten. Once the region experienced a wet year or two, the dry ones faded from memory. By the end of the 1930s, wheat production was not only profitable but had a patriotic tinge during World War II, setting the stage for more and more land to be converted to crops in the 1940s. Dry years in most of the 1950s led to another spate of severe dust storms.

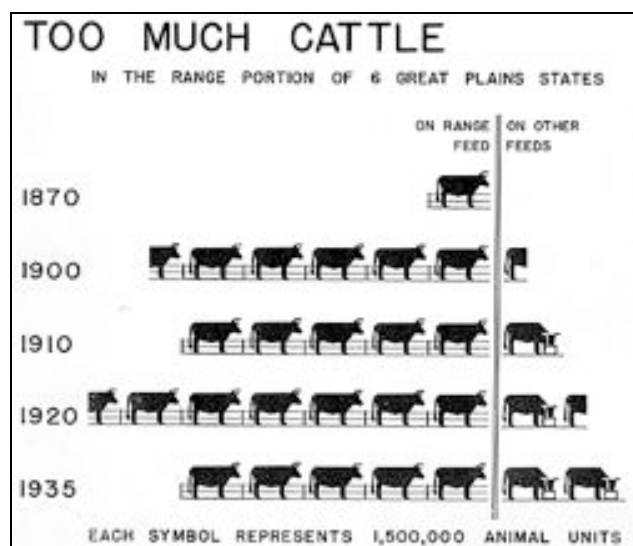
Today, you can see farmers in the southern plains plowing up fields in the bleakest years. In one of the worst on record – 2002 – I drove through a dust storm in Baca County.

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LIFE ON THE PRAIRIE

I was amazed that one of SPLT's neighbors was out plowing his field. I noticed it again this fall (2011) – the plowing and the dust alike. Despite what government scientists consider “Exceptional Drought” in southeast Colorado, the plowing hasn't stopped.

While both criticize crop agriculture, Worster is more critical than Egan of cattle grazing. Likewise, in 1936, a newly assembled government body, through its “Report of the Great Plains Drought Area Committee,” underscored that abuse of the Great Plains by both land uses was to blame for the dusters.



Graphic from 1936 U.S. Government report, which pointed to livestock grazing as partly to blame for the Dust Bowl.

Most climate change models predict a hotter, drier Southern Plains. Unless drastic changes are made to the current scale and intensity of farming and cattle grazing in this region, nature will undoubtedly be sending more messages to modern day residents of the Dust Bowl.

...Sprang the National Grasslands

In the darkest days of the 1930s, the federal government undertook a rescue plan. In addition to providing a slew of new subsidies to desperate Dust Bowl farmers and ranchers, the government also set about purchasing badly abused land. The original goal was to buy up 75 million acres. The government fell short, buying approximately 11 million acres, 3.8 million of which were eventually designated as “national grasslands” in 1960. These new federal lands would be managed by the U.S. Forest Service.

Crops would not be grown on these lands, but cattle would.

Echoing Worster, SPLT would like to see a new approach to this region, and an “ecologically adaptive” culture at that. We think that the economy here should be premised on intact ecosystems, populated by native wildlife and plants. We take heart in celebrations of nature that are also bringing in badly needed income streams to local communities, such as Karval, Colorado’s “Mountain Prairie Festival” or Canadian, Texas’s “Lesser Prairie-Chicken Festival.” And we find heartening former Kansas Governor Mike Hayden’s conversion to the notion of a Great Plains “Buffalo Commons,” set forth by Frank and Deborah Popper.

But we’re not seeing much new in the proposed Kiowa-Rita Blanca National Grasslands plan. Ranchers are assured little or nothing will change on livestock management. Of the two native keystone species, there’s no mention of bison. And while the plan hopes for expansion of the other keystone – the black-tailed prairie dog – it provides no protections from threats, and therefore no roadmap for prairie dog ecosystem recovery.

The proposed plan for the Kiowa and Rita Blanca (“KRB plan”) has some positive features. It envisions a complex of prairie dogs large enough to support black-footed ferrets. It discusses nature-based tourism as an important economic activity in the region. It acknowledges the problems caused by off-road vehicles, particularly in precious prairie streams. But the KRB plan falls short on actually providing protective measures to accomplish either the stated goals or to redress the recognized threats.

Of most concern is the black-tailed prairie dog. While the Forest Service correctly describes the prairie dog as a keystone species, the agency also asserts prairie dogs are causing soil erosion and reducing forage for cattle. The latter charge, in particular, is a holdover from the past and does not reflect the robust body of research showing that prairie dogs mitigate for forage they consume by increasing the nutrition and succulence of the plants that remain.

But what really matters is whether prairie dogs on the grasslands would be protected from the threats they face. That seems unlikely. The Forest Service is

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LIFE ON THE PRAIRIE

placing stock in a promised future prairie dog management plan that is several years away. In the meantime, there are no restrictions on shooting prairie dogs on these grasslands. Poisoning could also be allowed. And the future plan for prairie dogs will in all likelihood allow continued lethal control of this keystone, imperiled species.

This lack of protection matters. At one point in the plan documents, the Forest Service states that there are 1,500 acres of prairie dogs on the Kiowa and Rita Blanca, combined. In another document, the agency says there are 2,731 acres. Either way, it amounts to around 1 percent (0.6-1.2 percent) of the total acreage of these grasslands (230,526 acres). Even if only considering the area the agency defines as shortgrass prairie (181,900), the prairie dogs still occupy only 0.8-1.5 percent. Simply put, these grasslands need more prairie dogs, but the KRB plan does not provide any assurance that this will come to pass.



Rita Blanca National Grassland, Photo by U.S. Forest Service.

What appears more certain is that cattle will remain ubiquitous here. Cattle are allowed to graze on 99 percent of these grasslands. There is no discussion in the plan documents of the pressure to kill off prairie dogs and control predators (such as coyotes, mountain lions, bobcats, and bears) that may be voiced by some of the grazing permittees themselves.

The KRB plan would also do little to head off the damage done by off-road vehicle (ORV) users. The proposed plan would allow motorized vehicles on 219,936 acres (95 percent of the KRB) versus non-motorized areas of just 8,139 acres (4 percent).


The KRB could be leased for oil and gas, with very few restrictions. The power of the oil and gas industry

is evident in the U.S. Forest Service's claim that "production of oil and gas products is vital to the national, regional and local economies and to the quality of life of most Americans." The agency does not make the same generous claims about wind energy (it also says that some people value the sight of oil and gas wells on the landscape, but that people apparently find wind turbines unattractive), even though wind has a big advantage over oil and gas: it provides energy without contributing to climate change or harming local air quality.

While there is a lengthy discussion in the KRB plan about problems that climate change will cause on the grasslands, this does not translate into any measures of restraint in the plan. With more pressure on the landscape from hotter, drier weather, one would think that relieving other stressors (reducing livestock grazing, oil and gas development, and ORVs, for instance) would be prudent. But the Forest Service stops short of making such adjustment. Rather, the agency simply assures the public that adaptations will be made in the future. Ignoring prudence is never wise in the home of the Dust Bowl.

One good buffer would be a wilderness designation for the beautiful Mills Canyon area (which the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance has advocated) and the designation of the Canadian River as a Wild and Scenic River. The Forest Service refuses to advocate either in the KRB plan.

Overall, the most problematic feature of the KRB plan is that it lacks teeth. The only legally enforceable measure such plans can provide is what is called a "standard." But in the entire KRB plan (except for the oil and gas section) there is but one standard – and that is a carryover from the 1985 plan that the proposed plan is supposed to replace.

Without legal levers, any positive features in the plan amount to a wish list that may or may not be realized. That is bad news for prairie dogs that survive on only 1 percent – or less – of these grasslands. It is bad news for predators that remain on the run from guns and poisons. And it is bad news for the land itself. Please write a letter or send the enclosed form to the U.S. Forest Service by December 28, 2011, voicing your concerns. 

LIFE ON THE PRAIRIE

Update on the Bison Project

The Denver Zoo has just completed its first full field season working on what we like to call “the Bison Project.” The goal of the Bison Project is to study the biodiversity of the shortgrass prairie, and to research the effect that bison have on the land. To do this, we are looking at bird, mammal, herptile, and vegetation populations in areas where bison are present, and comparing them to areas where cattle are grazing. Although not many Zoo staff have been heading down to Baca County now that the weather has turned cold, we were able to collect a lot of data last summer and into the fall.

Every new trip down to our field site this year helped us get closer to understanding all the species that are interacting with the bison on the shortgrass prairies of southeastern Colorado, and every trip was a new adventure. There is so much interesting wildlife to see and so many experiences to have on Bison Project trips. While working on the project we have observed badgers, coyotes, and pronghorn running across the land. It is wonderful to see the number of species that are included in our study. Kangaroo rats, rattlesnakes, tiger salamanders, and burrowing owls have all been found on our study sites, along with many other species.

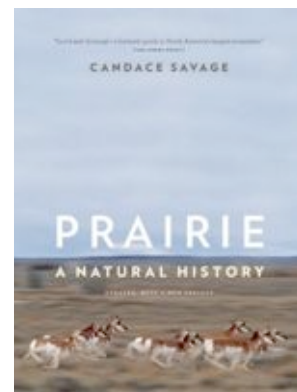
Many different people have joined in on this project to help collect data. Everyone who has made it down to the study site has been fascinated by the beauty of the land that SPLT and partnering landowners are working to protect. It is difficult to imagine anything more stunning than watching a bison herd moving along the horizon silhouetted by a prairie sunset. We are excited for next spring when we can begin another fascinating field season, and for the all the Bison Project-filled years to come. By the time the Bison Project comes to an end we hope to understand not only the intricacies of the shortgrass prairies, but also how we can help to save them.

--Jean Fleming, Conservation Biology Intern, Denver Zoo



BOOK REVIEW: PRAIRIE ~ A NATURAL HISTORY

Candace Savage’s 2011 book, *Prairie: A Natural History* is an excellent read and reference for prairie enthusiasts. And hopefully folks who haven’t yet uncovered the intrigue of North American grasslands will pick this book up, as they will swiftly be converted. Savage approaches prairie ecosystems on this continent with both breadth and depth. She’ll take you back in time hundreds of millions of years, to explore the rich geological underpinnings of modern-day prairie life. And her inquiry reaches as deep as the downward-stretching prairie grasses she celebrates. From thundering herds of bison to microscopic waterbears, she covers the gamut of life. Savage speaks in a scientifically grounded voice that is at times literary, often witty, and always accessible.



In her advocacy for land uses that make more sense in the Great Plains, Savage brings us back to Donald Worster’s urging of a new approach to agriculture in *Dust Bowl* (see article on p. 4). Savage re-opens that crucial conversation, one that should spill over to public land managers and private landowners alike, from the Northern to the Southern Plains, stretching from Canada, through the U.S., to Mexico. From conservation easements to “setting aside sweeping landscapes for wildlife” (that should sound familiar to SPLT supporters) to ranching and farming that is more mindful of native plants and animals, Savage surveys a range of options. But the goal she presses for is steady throughout: a prairie world abuzz with the full complement of native flora and fauna, intertwined by the varied and delicate threads within intact prairie systems.

The material in Savage’s book is a rich resource, pulled together in a truly engaging fashion. With gorgeous photos, beautiful maps, illustrations, and informative and entertaining side-bars, *Prairie* will capture your attention from cover to cover. In fact, we liked it so much that we’ve included this book for sale (1 of only 2) in our holiday gift catalog. (Contact us if a copy of the catalog is not enclosed with this newsletter.)

--Nicole Rosmarino, SPLT Director



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Rabbitbrush on Fresh Tracks, late 2011. The lush blooms of this single plant stretched for several feet in a moist swale on the western portion of Fresh Tracks © Nicole J. Rosmarino.

SPLT GIFT CARDS!

Choose from one of the drawings shown here or buy a variety pack.
Price: 4-pack for \$6.00 or 8-pack for \$10.00. All designs donated by Sharyn N. Davidson ©. Always printed on recycled paper.



Here's a feature item from our SPLT holiday gift catalog. If a catalog is not enclosed with this newsletter, contact us at: splt@southernplains.org or 720-841-1757 to request your copy.
