

# The Prairie Conservation Forum Newsletter

Issue Number 8—Winter 2011



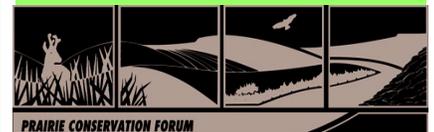
K. Taylor—Dinosaur Provincial Park

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## PCF Committee Work in 2010

The PCF has many committees that form over the years to address the specific needs of the PCF. 2010 marked a busy year for one such committee, the PCAP committee, as they developed the next 5-year Prairie Conservation Action Plan for 2011-2015. We are now in the final stages of formalizing this plan and are accepting feedback from the PCF membership on the new direction of this plan. Other committees, such as the PCF education committee are long-standing committees that will continue to exist as long as prairie conservation education is required. Projects and specific directions of this committee change over the years, but the goals always remain the same—to educate Albertan's about the prairies. 2010 was the inception of an exciting new plan to educate youth about grassland education by taking them on two-day field trips. This allows them to see the prairie first-hand and interact with experts in the field at the same time. 2010 also saw the formation of a new GVI committee that is committed to promoting the Grassland Vegetation Inventory to anyone that might be interested in using it, as well as a website committee, that will be busy working to update the PCF website in 2011. If you are interested in becoming involved in any of the PCF committees, please let us know! There is always room for more enthusiastic individuals!



## Our Vision:

To conserve the biological diversity of Alberta's native prairie ecosystems for the benefit of current and future generations.

## Our Goals:

**Research:** Enhance the information base for Alberta's native prairie and parkland landscapes.

**Stewardship:** Conserve Alberta's native prairie and parkland landscapes.

**Education:** Increase awareness and importance of Alberta's native prairie and parkland ecosystems.

## *Back from the Brink: Black-Footed Ferrets Give Birth in the Wild and Second Release Bolsters Population — Grasslands National Park, SK*

In March/April 2010, over a two week monitoring period, ferret trackers positively identified a minimum of 12 individual ferrets, corresponding to a 35% survival rate from ferrets originally released in the previous October 2009. This over-winter survival rate is similar to other reintroduction sites in the United States.

In the early morning hours of July 25, 2010, a playful litter of kits was observed on a black-tailed prairie dog colony. For the first time in more than 70 years, black-footed ferrets had been born in the wild in Canada! The black-footed ferret mother and her 3 kits appeared healthy and engaged in honing their survival instincts. This exciting discovery was captured by a documentary film crew for *Nature of Things with David Suzuki*. The inspiring footage will be shared with Canadians early in 2011. "It is a privilege and profound experience to be able to be part of this story," shares documentary director, Kenton Vaughan. "This species was on the brink of extinction and now we have caught the first glimpse of a new generation of wild born animals."

Monitoring and trapping of ferrets was conducted over a 2 week period in August 2010 to assess animal health, population reproduction, and to tag wild-born kits. This effort was supported by 30 individuals from across the country, including 21 new volunteers, 3 returning volunteers, and 16 individuals providing in kind support: Parks Canada Agency (GNP-4, Saskatoon-2, Calgary WNSC-2), Calgary Zoo (4), Toronto Zoo(3), and Sask. Min of Environment(1).



U.S Fish and Wildlife Service

In August, over a 9 night period, approximately 750 hours were spent searching for and trapping ferrets, while veterinarians and trained Parks Canada biologists spent about 170 hours in 2 remote field labs. Then, mid-September, 4th year veterinary students and instructors from five Canadian veterinary colleges came to support the monitoring program as part of their Ecosystem Health Rotation. Dr. Todd Shury, Parks Canada wildlife health specialist, hosted the students at Grasslands during this time. Over 3 nights, PCA staff spent approximately 30 hours in field labs while volunteers dedicated approximately 203 hours toward re-trapping kits and searching for any other ferrets to assess reproduction.

From the 2009 release sites, the 2010 monitoring results indicate the Snakepit dog town has 4 adults (1 male and 3 females) with 2 of the females showing evidence of birthing. One litter of three kits was trapped (2 females and one male – all in very healthy condition) and another lactating female was discovered. The kits were anesthetized using portable gas anesthetic units and implanted with microchips and vaccinated against sylvatic plague and canine distemper; two diseases which were identified as major threats in the recovery strategy. These kits are important to the recovery program as it indicates that the population is successfully reproducing in Canadian conditions and bodes very well for future population growth of this fragile population of prairie carnivores.

At the Larson, Monument, and Dixon prairie dog colonies, adult females were identified however no signs of litters were apparent. Of significance, is that the low male survival from the 2009 release and their limited distribution was such that 4 ferret females were not bred during 2009.



Roland Seitre

### **Second Ferret Release 2010 and Fall Activities**

In the twilight hours of September 23rd, 15 ferrets were welcomed into their new home on the Canadian prairie dog towns in Saskatchewan. Once again, the ferrets were transported under the careful eye of Scott Larson, USFWS. This year, very special guest Valerie Naylor, Superintendent from Theodore Roosevelt National Park, North Dakota attended the release. Ms. Naylor stated, "I will never forget the „ferret night“. I was very moved... I learned a lot from the way you involved the community and volunteers in the ferret program. It is exceptional!"

Thirty days after the 2nd release, ferret trackers headed into the prairie night to search for the captive-born kits. Longer nights required longer hours in the field to survey the dusk to dawn period for ferrets. PCA staff, Recovery team partners and volunteers, including 11 Lakeland College students, spent approximately 800 hours over 5 nights surveying prairie dog colonies for signs of the newly re-introduced ferrets. There were multiple sightings of ferrets. In total, 13 individuals were identified: 7 adult ferrets released in 2009 (5 females : 2 males) and 1 was a 2010 wild-born male. Five newly released 2010 ferrets were identified, 1 of which could not be PIT tag confirmed (1 Female : 3 Males : 1 unknown sex).

Since their reintroduction, this once extirpated native species has been closely monitored by biologists from Parks Canada and supporting governmental agencies or organizations and dedicated volunteers. The early success of the black-footed ferret reintroduction program has attracted widespread interest, strengthening the connection between Canadians and conservation efforts in Canada. The recovery strategy for this species depends on the dedication of many to make it possible. **Thank you to Recovery Team partners and volunteers for your ongoing support!!**

## Sprague's Pipit: Goldilocks of the Prairies

### Operation Grassland Community



Stephen Davis

Have you ever wondered what in the world is making those ethereal, slurred, descending, “zeer, zeer, zeer, zeer, zeer” notes high in the clear blue June sky while you’re out checking cattle, riding on horseback, or even taking a coffee break on your tail-gate?

That’s the song of the male Sprague’s Pipit, a small, sparrow-sized ground-nesting songbird defending his territory. This secretive prairie song-bird is so camouflaged in a dull brown, buff, and white striped plumage, it blends right in with its natural grassland habitat and is tough to spot on land. If you’re lucky enough to see a pipit, you’ll recognize the distinctive contrasting white and brown inner tail feather pattern, most noticeable during flight, a “necklace” of brown striping on the upper breast, a relatively thin bill, and large brown eyes. The easiest way to know if you have this secretive songbird on your property is to use your ears! From mid-May until early August, listen for the male singing up to 100m (330 ft) in the air! In fact, when you are out on the open prairies, the Sprague’s Pipit is the only song-bird you will hear singing above your head.

Not only does the Sprague’s Pipit have a unique breeding song, it is also very particular about its nesting habitat. Sprague’s Pipits do best in large blocks (> 160 acres) of native mixed-grass prairie of moderate height with little or no woody vegetation. They are rarely found on cultivated lands, or native prairie that has been replaced by planted forage species. Nests are usually found at the base of a tussock of grass and are made up of a woven cup of dry grasses, partially or completely covered in a dome of woven grasses. Sprague’s Pipit is the **Goldilocks** of the grassland birds: they depend on healthy pasture that’s not over-grazed, not under-grazed, but **“just right”!**

### Sprague’s Pipits: A Bird in Trouble

The Canadian Prairies are essential places for Sprague’s Pipits. Unfortunately, large tracts of healthy prairie that Sprague’s Pipits need to survive are not as common in Prairie Canada as they once were prior to colonization. About 75% of the original natural grassland on the Canadian prairies has been lost to cultivation. As a result, the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada has designated the Sprague’s Pipit as **Threatened**. This means it is likely to become endangered if nothing is done to reverse the factors contributing to its decline. It is illegal to kill or disturb Sprague’s Pipits or their nests.

### How to Help Sprague’s Pipits:

Here are 5 land management options that can benefit Sprague’s Pipits and overall prairie health:

1. **RETAIN ALL NATIVE PRAIRIE:** Areas larger than a quarter section (160 acres or 64 ha) are most valuable for pipits and other prairie wildlife.
2. **GRAZING AT STOCKING RATES RECOMMENDED FOR YOUR SOIL ZONE** to create pasture that is in good health or condition. Native rangeland in good to excellent condition is critical for the survival and recovery of Sprague’s Pipit.
3. **REDUCE OR REMOVE WOODY OR EXOTIC/INVASIVE SPECIES** (i.e., shrubs, weeds, tame grasses) by burning, grazing, mowing or manual removal.
4. **DELAY HARVESTING** hay until after the breeding season (3rd week in July). Haying during the nesting season may destroy nests and adults or reduce overhead vegetative cover and expose nests to predators and inclement weather.
5. **AVOID USING PESTICIDES** in or adjacent to native prairie. Adult birds may be poisoned or have to abandon sprayed areas to avoid starvation. Pesticides can reduce hatching rates and alter physical and behavioral development of growing birds.

Operation Grassland Community is committed to promoting sustainable agricultural activities that benefit species at risk like the Sprague’s Pipit. OGC can cost-share with qualified participants to install cross-fencing as part of a rotational grazing system.

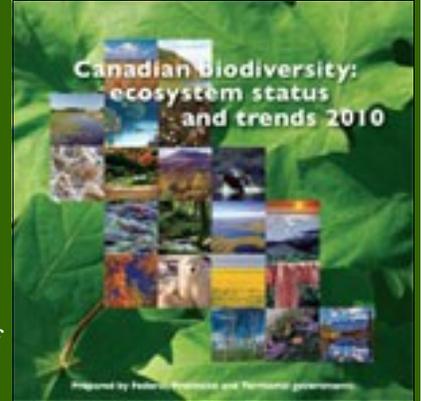
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Stephen Davis

# In the News

**Canadian Biodiversity: Ecosystem Status and Trends 2010.** This 2010 assessment is a collaborative project of the Canadian federal, provincial and territorial governments. It was designed and prepared under the guidance of a federal-provincial-territorial steering committee and is published by the Canadian Councils of Resource Ministers. It forms part of Canada's commitment to the Convention on Biological Diversity. Authors and reviewers include hundreds of experts from across Canada. See [About this Assessment](#) for more information.



This website features the [key findings](#) of the assessment and background information, including [lists of background technical reports](#), [authors and contributors](#). The series of ecozone<sup>+</sup>-based and thematic technical reports that support the 22 key findings of the assessment will be available soon. To read the report, please visit this link: <http://www.biodivcanada.ca/default.asp?lang=En&n=6F7EB059-1&wsdoc=A519F000-8427-4F8C-9521-8A95AE287753>.



K. Taylor

**Native Prairie Restoration/Reclamation Workshop.** SK PCAP is hosting a Native Prairie Restoration and Reclamation Workshop on February 16-17, 2011 in Regina, SK. This workshop will focus on the benefits of restoring native prairie, regulations surrounding native prairie reclamation as well as the agronomics of establishing native prairie plants.

Registration for this workshop will open in January 2011. For more details, please visit the Upcoming Events page on the PCAP website, or contact their office at 306.352.0472. <http://www.pcap-sk.org/?s=1.home>.

**Online tool identifies potential effects of harmful species from outside Alberta.** Alberta has a new tool to identify and evaluate potential impacts of land-based plants and aquatic organisms from outside the province. This will help government, companies and individuals coordinate early detection, rapid response and containment. Alberta's Invasive Alien Species Risk Assessment Tool, a web-based evaluation, looks at a species' likelihood of establishing and spreading, and its possible effects on an area. The tool focuses on aquatic organisms and land-based plants. It is a key component of Alberta's Invasive Alien Species Management Framework. The tool and framework are being piloted for feedback until June 1, 2011. To learn more or to use the tool and submit feedback, visit [www.agriculture.alberta.ca/risktool](http://www.agriculture.alberta.ca/risktool).



K. Taylor

Thank-you to our contributing partners:



**Government of Alberta**



*If you have any comments, questions or ideas, please contact the PCF Coordinator at:*

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