

For the Love of

By Rachel Whitehouse

If you were asked to name the most endangered ecosystem in the world, you might say coral reefs or the Amazon rainforest. But you would be wrong. The world's most endangered ecosystem is right here in Canada—grasslands!

What is a grassland?

A grassland is an area dominated by grass species, which grow where it is generally too dry for trees. Over thousands of years, wildfires—some started by lightning, others deliberately set by humans—have ensured that forests do not take over.

The **grasslands of North America** have lost more of their total area to development and cropland than any other ecosystem.

Although grasslands occupy less than 0.8% of British Columbia, more than 30% of our at-risk species call the grasslands home. Preserving healthy grassland ecosystems is critical for species such as Burrowing Owls, Blotched Tiger Salamanders, Racer Snakes, and Ferruginous Hawks. Some species, such as the Sage Grouse, Long-billed Curlew, and the Pygmy Short-horned Lizard, have already disappeared from our grasslands because humans have destroyed their habitat.



In Canada, grassland ecosystems stretch across southern Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and the Interior of B.C.



Ferruginous Hawk



Burrowing Owl



of Grasslands

*I'm helping
the grasslands!*

There are many threats to our grasslands: farming, ranching, housing, industry, ATV use, invasive plants. In B.C., the major economic activity in the grasslands is ranching. Fortunately, when herds are managed properly, cattle can actually help to keep grasslands healthy and diverse.

Spotted knapweed has invaded many grassland areas of B.C. It is such a problem that it's known as "the wicked weed of the West"!

What do healthy grasslands mean to us?

Grasslands clean our water by absorbing rain and snowmelt. They act as a natural filter to remove chemicals and pollutants. Grasslands also prevent floods by absorbing running water and storing it in the soil and in aquifers.

Grasslands store carbon in their roots and the soil, so healthy grasslands can help to slow climate change. This ability to store carbon is especially important in dry areas where wildfires are frequent. When trees burn, the carbon in their needles and branches is released into the atmosphere, but carbon stored underground by grasses is not.

Rachel Whitehouse, P.Ag., is a Range Ecologist and co-leader of Merritt NatureKIDS.

Rachel and the Merritt NatureKIDS earned a donation of \$250 for their hard work removing invasive plants from the grasslands!

Trembling Aspens