

Grasslands National Park 2024 (R. Foster, L. Bresele)

Prompted in part by mammalwatcher responses to Nathan Myhrvold's post about where to photograph coyotes, I thought I would send off a quick trip report of our recent visit to Grasslands National Park in southwestern Saskatchewan. Established in 1981, this park is poorly known and less visited than many of Canada's more famous national parks, but it encompasses one of the largest patches of intact mixed-grass prairie in North America.

The park consists of two areas: the West Block with mainly prairie and hills along the Frenchman River Valley (FRV), and the East Block dominated by heavily eroded fossil-bearing badlands. Each block has a small campground with ~20 sites for tents or trailers/RVs, as well as a few "Otentiks" for rent (a cross between a tent and a cabin). Bear in mind that, depending on the season, it can be quite cold or hot (it was 40°C during our stay), and prairie winds can be relentless. Both campgrounds place you in the heart of the park, so you can even use a thermal scope from your tent if you pick your site wisely (#10 or #6 are best at the FRV campsite). Night drives are permitted, as is walking off-trail through the prairie – just watch out for cacti, rattlesnakes and bison. There are a few inholdings with grazing that are transitioning to park, but there is plenty of wild landscape to explore.

The mammal diversity isn't that high, with 30+ species of mammals known from the park. Sadly, black-footed ferret (*Mustela nigripes*) is no longer found in the park, with the small population that was reintroduced in 2009 winking out around 2014 due to sylvatic plague and repeated drought. Swift fox (*Vulpes velox*), another species at risk in Canada, has also been reintroduced to GNP and still persists. The park hosts at least 31 species of mammals, birds, reptiles, and other taxa that are considered at risk in Canada.

This most recent trip to GNP was to survey for a rare butterfly, but we still managed to have some good looks at a few mammal species including:

- **Black-tailed Prairie Dog** (*Cynomys ludovicianus*): ~25 colonies of this species are found within the West Block (the only place in Canada), with some colonies easily viewed from park roads.
- **Richardson's Ground Squirrel** (*Urocitellus richardsonii*): Abundant and easily observed in the park, including in the FRV campground.
- **American Badger** (*Taxidea taxus*); two observed crossing the road and one watched at length early morning at a burrow in the FRV picnic area.
- **Coyote** (*Canis latrans*): one individual observed as it trotted through a prairie dog town bisected by a park road, apparently unconcerned by our vehicle.
- **American Bison** (*Bos bison*): several lone bulls seen at close range from vehicle, and a mixed herd of 80+ seen across the valley. Bison were re-introduced to the park in 2005 after a 120-year absence and now number ~400. They roam freely within the West Block but kept within the park by fences and Texas gates (cattle grates); visitors on foot should keep at least 100 m distant.
- **Pronghorn** (*Antilocapra americana*): Two separate individuals observed from the road for several minutes at close range.
- **White-tailed Deer** (*Odocoileus virginianus*): several individuals observed along the river valley in morning or evening.
- **Mule Deer** (*Odocoileus hemionus*): multiple individuals observed along the river valley or prairie in morning or evening.
- **Moose** (*Alces alces*): One bull was seen trotting across the valley one evening, admittedly an odd sight given the habitat.

I know it is heresy, but the real treats on this trip were actually reptile and avian species at risk such as sage grouse, burrowing owl, long-billed curlew, loggerhead shrike, prairie rattlesnake, and my personal favourite, the greater short-horned lizard (the northernmost species of this prehistoric-looking family).

American Bison



Black-tailed Prairie Dog



Richardson's Ground Squirrel



Coyote



Pronghorn



American Badger



Burrowing Owl



Long-billed Curlew



Prairie Rattlesnake



Greater Short-horned Lizard

