

7. The North American Prairie: An Icon in History

A prairie is temperate grassland, or plain covered with grass. Most of the interior of North America was a prairie before European settlement. During this time, much of the prairie land was turned in to farmland. Prairies are one of the most recently developed ecosystems in North America, formed about 8,000 years ago. Today, however, the North American prairies are among the most altered environments on Earth. The soil in prairies is excellent for growing crops and much of the grassland in North America has been turned into farms and ranches.

The combination of high summer temperatures, strong winds and little rain makes prairies vulnerable to fire. Prairie fires actually help the prairie by killing off invasive grasses and trees, allowing native grasses to thrive. Fire also helps keep the prairies clean and helps seeds germinate, or spread.

Despite the harsh elements, there is much life in a prairie. Ranging from small insects such as Black Widow Spiders to large mammals such as antelope and bison, these creatures form a food chain in which they depend on one another for survival. Some of the creatures also depend on one another for their homes, such as the black footed ferret, which relies on prairie dogs and the habitats they create.

There are 3 types of prairies: Tall Grass, Short Grass, and Mixed Grass.

Tall grass prairies get about 30 inches of rain per year, which is more rain than Short and Mixed Grass prairies. They have tall grasses, sunflowers and other plants. Grasses in this type of prairie can grow as high as five feet. Tall grass prairies are found in the eastern part of the Midwest.

Mixed grass prairies are found in the middle of the Midwest. They get less rain than tall grass prairies, between 15 and 20 inches a year, and the vegetation grows to about three feet tall.

Short grass prairies get the least amount of rain, less than 10 inches a year. They are found in the western part of the Midwest. Grass in short grass prairies is usually less than two feet tall.

It saddens me that the prairies are shrinking, and creatures that we love are at risk for losing their homes. It is important that we protect and restore our prairies as they are beautiful and fun to explore!

Sources:

<http://www.nhptv.org/natureworks/nwep8d.htm>

<http://www.campsilos.org/mod1/students/index.shtml>