

ISLAND OF GRASS

By Ellen Wohl

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Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2009. xiv + 224pp. Diagrams, photos, maps, notes, bibliographic references, glossary, and index. \$24.95 hardcover, ISBN 978-0-87081-963-6.

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Interest in preserving nature has been a hot topic over the last half century as we panic over its loss. Since the mid-1800s, around the onset of Euro-American settlement on the Great Plains, scholars estimate that settlers have usurped 60 to 80 percent of the shortgrass prairies for grazing, urbanization, and other land uses that alter the natural landscape. Such metamorphosed grasslands are now unable to house the original flora and fauna that lived in and on these ecosystems. *Island of Grass* is a case study on a preserved shortgrass prairie located in Fort Collins, Colorado—the Cathy Fromme Prairie Natural Area. The city dedicated this open space, which they had reserved in 1960 to serve as a barrier between the cities of Fort Collins and Loveland, to preservationist and councilwoman Cathy Fromme, who passed away from breast cancer in 1992. Anyone interested in geography—particularly the conservation, preservation, and ecology of shortgrass prairie systems—and/or the natural history of Colorado will find this diagram, map, and photo-filled book useful.

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Ellen Wohl, a professor of geology at Colorado State University, has authored over sixty publications, including six books, with the majority of her publications focusing on aspects of fluvial geomorphology. This book comes from both Wohl's firsthand observations and archival research. Wohl moved to the area in 1997, to a location just two streets away from Fromme Prairie. Soon after, she witnessed the carving up of the prairie for the suburban "boxy houses" so desired by Americans (p. 148). She points out that Americans often regard grasslands as they do deserts—"as wasted lands to be exploited or thoroughly remade" (p. 180). Indeed, American culture is, Wohl explicates, "marked by a lack of appreciation for the interior grasslands" (p. 3). Wohl seeks to impact such thinking.

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Wohl's case study adds another volume to studies on grassland preservation and ecology as she highlights the "connectedness among plants and animals" that works in ecosystems like that of the Fromme Prairie (p. 30). Even though the Fromme Prairie is the main study area, Wohl works hard to prove that all such islands of grass, regardless of size, should be "noticed,

preserved, and emotionally possessed" (p. 181) and to foster a basic respect for the natural environment even if it is not "particularly dynamic or exciting" (p. 1). In order to foster that appreciation, she introduces us "to the millions of non-human lives that are lived out on this landscape" (p. 6) that form an "intricate web" of nature whereby every element in the system is dependent on another in order to sustain life (p. 179).

The book is divided into two sections—"The Greater Context" and "The Fromme Prairie." The first section details the evolution of the Great Plains grasslands that stretch from Alberta, Canada to northern Mexico, from deep time, to the first inhabitants, on to the European settlers, and then to a look at the prairies today. This is partially because of the diffusion of invasive plant species. Wohl explains that the state of the prairies today is not only the result of the diffusion of invasive plant species but also of the impact humans had as technological advances, the Green Revolution, and different types of land uses developed in the region over time.

In Part Two, Wohl explains the complex ecological communities of the Fromme Prairie. To show that the Fromme Prairie is an intricate web of nature—a system of delicately interdependent elements—Wohl provides the reader with a seasonal tour of the prairie from the perspectives of the many animals and insects that make their homes in this area. Far from being cartoonish, this method works well to accomplish Wohl's purpose of educating readers on the often-slighted ecosystems of the shortgrass prairies. Furthermore, the tour viewpoint offers a unique outlook highlighting not only the problems but also the value of preserving this habitat.

Wohl begins the tour with a solid case study on the soil ecology with a focus on the blue grama (*Bouteloua gracilis*)—a hearty, naturally-occurring grass that helps prevent soil erosion and provides insects and animals with a lifeline of nutrients and protection. She goes on to depict the life of the brownspotted grasshopper (*Psoloessa delicatula*), an insect that depends on blue grama. Next, Wohl illustrates the lives of the prairie dogs (*Cynomys ludovicianus*) who are also dependent on blue grama and the other grasses that grow on this island of grass. The prairie dog, the most conspicuous of the animals on the Fromme Prairie, is, according to Wohl, the "keystone" to any prairie system as their digging has a great influence on the soil chemistry and the levels of nutrients animals and plants can receive (p. 132). Indeed, the brownspotted grasshopper can utilize the soil prairie dogs have tilled to lay their eggs. The next vantage point comes from the hunter residing here—the coyote (*Canis latrans*) who depends on the prairie dogs as a food source. The last prairie tour is courtesy of the red-tailed hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) and provides the reader with a bird's-eye view of the natural history of the prairie. From these vantage points, one is easily able to

imagine the impact humans have had on this small environment—whether it is from a coyote dead on the roadside after being hit by a car or from houses that block the old flight path to the red-tailed hawk's hunting grounds.

The aforementioned animals are clearly not as picturesque as the mighty buffalo and elk that Yellowstone National Park protects or the butterflies that people pay money to hold and ooh over in botanical gardens or state and county fair exhibits. The blue grama is not as exciting as the cancer-curing plants found around the world that obviously deserve consideration for preservation. Wohl, however, does a good job of explaining why eco-communities like that of the Fromme Prairie and other grasslands like it need to be preserved not only so they can be carefully studied and explored to understand the full ramifications of our perpetual building on these landscapes but also because they have an aesthetic and peaceful appeal of their own. Awareness-inducing works like Wohl's are important contributions to the never-ending battle to preserve nature no matter how dynamic or exciting the place might or might not be. The issue of conservation is just as vital and intricate as the web of life in the grassland. Wohl reached her goal of making readers more aware of the unfamiliar but significant lives that form the prairie ecosystem; but the suburbanization that is occurring near the Fromme Prairie continues to encroach on the web of life there and, as a result, is threatening the very existence of this fragile milieu.

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