

Next Week: The Appalachian Trail

# A Sea of Grass



Prairie managers set grasses on fire to control the burn and make the soil more fertile.

Mini Fact:

When American settlers headed west, they came upon a great area covered with tall grasses. There were almost no trees or bushes.

The first Europeans to explore this grassy area named it "prairie," from the French word for meadow.

Constant wind made the grasses sway like the waves of the sea. Early settlers often called the prairie "a sea of grass." They called their covered wagons "prairie schooners." (A schooner is a sailing ship.)

# Lost in the grass

When settlers reached the prairies in midsummer, grasses could be 12 feet high. If

cattle strayed, the only way to find them was to stand on top of a horse and search for something moving in the grass.

Pioneers, especially children, had



A fawn hides among the tallgrass at Pipestone National Monument in Minnesota.

to stay close to the wagon when they walked. If they wandered too far, they could get lost.

Today, climate conditions have changed, and the grasses usually grow to about 6 feet high — still high enough to get lost in.

# A special system

Prairies are one of the most special ecosystems, or habitats, in the world. They have a wide variety of plants and animals. Many experts believe the only ecosystem with more variety is the rainforest in Brazil.

The diversity, or variety, in the prairie system helps to keep it healthy.

Weather can range from very hot to very cold. Drought, tornadoes and blizzards also strike in the prairie.

# Types of prairies

There are three types of prairies: tallgrass, mixed grass and shortgrass. The tallgrass prairie gets the most rain; the shortgrass gets the least. The mixed-grass prairie falls in

# **Prairie plants**

Plants growing in the prairie have developed thinner leaves than most other plants. That way they lose less moisture from evaporation.

Prairie plants also may have hairlike growths on their leaves. The hair helps capture the morning dew.



The plants on prairies have extra-long roots. Some can go as deep as 20 feet.

Bison were once hunted almost to extinction. This herd grazes on the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve in Kansas.

### Prairie animals

About 300 species, or types, of birds, about 80 species of mammals and hundreds of species of insects live in the prairie.

Because there are so few trees, birds such as prairie chickens build their nests on the ground, hidden by the tall grasses.

Small mammals such as prairie dogs and badgers make homes by tunneling underground. They run into their burrows to escape predators, grass fires or heat.

Large mammals, such as bison, graze on the tall grasses, moving from place to place. Before settlers arrived, the American elk grazed on the tallgrass prairie. The destruction of their habitat has pushed most of them out of the prairies and into mountain areas.

# Resources



#### On the Web:

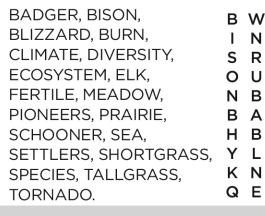
nps.gov/tapr

#### At the library:

• "Bluestem Horizon: A Story of a Tallgrass Prairie" by Evelyn Lee

Try 'n' Find

Words that remind us of prairies are hidden in this puzzle. Some words are hidden backward or diagonally, and some letters are used twice. See if you can find:



BWSHORTGRA ISREVIDQE SREENOIPLSEU OURNTORNADOP NBUMETSYSOCE ADGERWODA EMAEA S MVSCHOONERVH K NQ E ILCSEICE Т AM



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# Cook's Corner **Cheesy-Topped Tomatoes**

### You'll need:

- 4 medium-size tomatoes
- 1 cup seasoned bread crumbs
- dash of salt and pepper
- 1/2 cup shredded sharp cheddar cheese
- 2 tablespoons dill weed



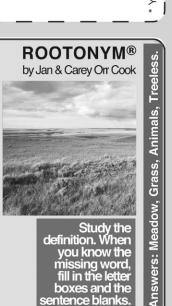
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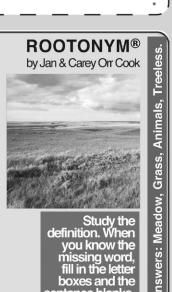
need

### What to do:

- 1. Cut tomatoes in half and arrange with sliced side up on a microwavable dish.
- 2. Sprinkle with bread crumbs, salt and pepper.
- 3. Cook, uncovered, in a microwave oven on medium power for 2 minutes.
- 4. Remove tomatoes and sprinkle with cheese and then dill weed.
- 5. Place dish in microwave again and cook on high power for 1 more minute.
- 6. Let cool and serve. Makes 8 servings.

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1. An open field 2. Green plant with that grows wild thin, pointed leaves (6-letter noun) (5-letter noun) 3. A group of living 4. Area without woody things that can find food plants with long trunks (7-letter plural noun) or branches (8-letter adj) 1. Franco watched butterflies in the behind the barn. 2. Julie walked and played in the in her bare feet. 3. Susie identified birds, fish and insects as vacant lot next door. 4. Nothing grew tall in the

Mini Jokes

Patsy: What do you call a single bison? Paul: A buffalonely!

# Eco Note

Human activities have caused almost 600 plant species to go extinct over the past 250 years, according to scientists from Britain's Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew and Sweden's Stockholm University. The loss is occurring up to 500 times faster than the rate plants would naturally disappear. Their research found that plants have gone extinct twice as fast as birds, mammals and amphibians since 1753. The loss has been highest on islands, in the tropics and in regions with a Mediterranean climate.

### For later:

Look in your newspaper for articles about animals and plants in the wild.

**Teachers:** For standards-based activities to accompany this feature, visit: bit.ly/MPstandards. And follow The Mini Page on Facebook!

