Are prairies in trouble?

Native prairies are a severely endangered habitat in western Oregon. They cover less than 1% of their former area because of conversion to agricultural use, fire suppression, urbanization, and invasion by non-native plants. Many tall, non-native grasses have escaped from agricultural use and some ornamental plants, such as oxeye daisy (shown here), have escaped from gardens. Non-native plants shade out shorter, native plants and compete for limited resources.

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Some species, such as the Western meadowlark and sharp-tailed snake shown above, can survive in a variety of open habitats but have been nearly eliminated from prairies in western Oregon because the sites that remain are small and fragmented. Other species, such as the Fender's blue butterfly and Kincaid's lupine shown below, have declined to the point that protection under the federal Endangered Species Act was necessary to save the species from extinction.

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What is being done to save prairies?

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Many people are conducting research and actively managing wet and dry prairies. This research and management focuses on ways to eliminate non-native plants such as handpulling, selective herbicide applications, prescribed fires, mowing, and even the use of insects that destroy pest plants. Research is also being conducted on propagation of native prairie plants to help bolster wild populations that have severely declined. Through these activities and with the help of dedicated researchers, managers, private landowners, and volunteers alike, western Oregon prairies will survive into the future.

How can you help?

The groups listed below often form volunteer work parties to remove invasive plants and plan other activities which benefit prairies of western Oregon.

The Nature Conservancy	(503)230-1221
Corvallis Environmental Center	(541) 753-9211
Eugene Stream Team	(541) 682-4850

For restoration assistance on your property, contact the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Willamette Valley Refuge Complex at (541) 757-7236.

All photographs used with permission. *Front cover* Prairie, harvest brodiaea, and Anise swallowtail by Melissa York; gopher snake by John Sullivan. Brochure prepared by Melissa York and Daniel Rosenberg, Department of Fisheries and Wildlife, Oregon State University. Cooperators include:

OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY

U.S. FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE

WESTERN OREGON PRAIRIES

What are prairies?

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The word “prairie” has become synonymous with grassland and meadow. Native prairies in western Oregon are dominated by bunch-grasses and other flowering plants and can be wet or dry. Dry or upland prairies normally occur on slopes with well-drained soils. Wet (or wetland) prairies occur mostly in low-lying areas of the Willamette Valley. Wet prairies usually contain water throughout the winter and into late spring and gradually dry out during the summer.

Most prairies require fire or disturbances that mimic the effects of fire to persist. Disturbances such as fire keep shrubs and trees from invading, providing open areas for many low-growing grasses and flowering plants. These low-growing plants, in turn, provide habitat for many animals; some spend their entire lives in prairies while others rely on prairies for breeding activities, such as finding mates and nesting.

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Animals and plants of wet prairies

Dragonfly *(Odonata spp.)* adults lay their eggs in or near water where the juveniles hatch and develop.

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Common camas *(Camassia quamash)* was one of the most important food plants for Native Americans. The bulbs were steamed for at least 24 hours to make them digestible and sweet.

The northern harrier *(Circus cyaneus)* is one of the most common birds of prey in wet prairies and can often be seen flying low in search of prey items such as small rodents or frogs.

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Red-legged frogs *(Rana aurora)* require water in which to lay their eggs. Adults feed on invertebrates, small mammals, and other amphibians.

Animals and plants of upland prairies

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The savannah sparrow *(Passerculus sandwichensis)* requires open habitats such as prairies in which to construct an open-cup nest on the ground.

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Meadow death-camas *(Zigadenus venenosus)* often grows in similar habitat as the edible common camas. However, bulbs of this species are highly toxic and can be fatal if eaten.

Oregon iris *(Iris tenax)* has beautiful showy flowers and very tough leaves; the word “tenax” means tenacious in Latin.

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