

AMERICA'S LINGERING WILD

GREAT PLAINS

MICHAEL FORSBERG WITH DAN O'BRIEN, DAVID WISHART, AND TED KOOSER







WEBSTER COUNTY, NEBRASKA

A monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*) gathers nectar from Indian blanket flowers (*Gaillardia pulchella*). Each spring succeeding generations of short-lived monarchs move up the Great Plains as far north as Canada, following the prairie bloom. In fall they make an astonishing long-distance migration to the forests of central Mexico.



NIOBRARA NATIONAL SCENIC RIVER, NEBRASKA

Morning fog gathers along the Niobrara River, considered a “biological crossroads” of the Great Plains. Six distinct ecosystems converge in this narrow corridor of diversity, supporting 600 different plant species, 200 bird species, and 85 species of butterflies.



AUDUBON SPRING CREEK PRAIRIE, NEBRASKA

Captured on film by a “camera trap,” a female bobcat (*Lynx rufus*) pauses along a creek drainage in tallgrass prairie. Though relatively common in parts of the Plains, these cats are seldom seen, a tribute to their solitary habits and to the way their coats perfectly match their surroundings.

HARDING COUNTY, SOUTH DAKOTA

The only surviving species of their kind, pronghorn (*Antilocapra americana*) are a living remnant from the Pleistocene. They evolved on North America's grasslands and can outrun and outlast any predator that ever roamed here. Topping out at speeds of 60 miles an hour, they're one of the fastest land mammals on Earth.





BUFFALO GAP NATIONAL GRASSLAND, SOUTH DAKOTA

A bison herd (*Bison bison*) moves across the shallows of the Cheyenne River. Even in extremely hot weather, bison only need water every few days, a distinct advantage for wide-ranging Great Plains grazers.







ONE MILLION SQUARE MILES belongs to the Great Plains, a swath running 1,800 miles down the center of the continent. Its complicated and critical mesh of ecosystems have been shaped by native grazers, fire, and a harsh continental climate that becomes more arid as one moves west. While the Plains' exact boundaries are often disputed, for the purposes of this book, it has been broadly delineated into three major regions—the Tallgrass Prairie and the Northern and Southern Plains. Seasonal wetlands, playas, and rivers that run like ladder steps up and down the Plains provide punctuations of natural activity in this vast region. But there are others as well—huge prairie dog towns that support a host of wild creatures both above and below the surface, sky-island mountain ranges and deep canyons that harbor large predators like mountain lion and bear, and small creeks whose recesses promise as much colorful aquatic life as a Caribbean reef. In many parts of the Plains, these worlds are increasingly threatened as urbanization, energy development, and large-scale agriculture fragment natural habitats; invasive species overpower endemic ones; and poor land and water management put immeasurable strains on the fragile but elegant natural systems, migratory traditions, and native creatures of the Plains.





TNC KONZA PRAIRIE BIOLOGICAL STATION, KANSAS

A rainbow frames butterfly milkweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*) blooming in the Flint Hills prairie. Of the original 142 million acres of tallgrass prairie, less than 5 percent remains, the majority in the Flint Hills.

Tallgrass Remains

COMMENCING WITH SMALL “OAK OPENINGS” in Indiana, the tallgrass prairie once spread through much of the American heartland, covering Iowa, southern Minnesota, the eastern portions of the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, northwestern Missouri, and north into south-central Manitoba. To the west, with decreasing rainfall the tallgrass gave way to mixed-grass, and the woodland diminished to slender fingers of cottonwood and willow, reaching out into the heart of the Great Plains.

The tallgrass prairie must have been a sight to behold. Early travelers struggled to capture in words its immensity and diversity, its fragrance, its teeming wildlife, its strangeness. William Clark of the Lewis and Clark Expedition frequently wrote about this plentitude in his journal. On July 30, 1804, Clark climbed the bluffs of the Missouri River Valley in what is now Washington County, Nebraska, to gain a view of the country. Before him he saw “the most butifull prospects imaginable,” a seemingly boundless upland prairie of little bluestem, needlegrass, and prairie dropseed, with big bluestem on the lower slopes. “Nature appears to have exerted itself to butify the scenery by the variety of flours,” Clark wrote. He specifically noted bright yellow sunflowers ten feet high, but he also would have seen slender white prairie clover, silvery leadplant, bushes of purple aster, and many of the other 250 varieties of forbs (flowering herbaceous plants) that added profusion and color to each square mile of the prairie.

In the dense vine-strewn woodlands on the Missouri River floodplain, Clark identified stands of cottonwood, mulberry, ash, elm, hickory, oak, Kentucky coffee tree, and sycamore, as well as abundant species of wild fruits — plums, grapes, gooseberries, currants, raspberries, chokecherries, and tart red buffalo berries. The wildlife Clark observed — and sometimes shot — included bison and beaver in great numbers (even in the immediate vicinity of an Omaha Indian village), prairie dogs, badgers, elk, antelope, and deer, which were “as plentiful as hogs about a farm.” At one point the Missouri River was coated from bank to bank for three miles with a layer of white feathers, the source of which, the explorers eventually discovered, was an immense gathering of pelicans on a sandbar. Nearby, the explorers threw a net into a creek and pulled out 318 pike, bass, freshwater drum, catfish, crayfish, and mussels.

Lewis and Clark, like European explorers and particularly the French before them, hoped on their westward passage to encounter the “Garden,” a mythical earthly paradise of fertility and tranquility. In the verdant tallgrass prairies they believed they had found it. They, and the Indians who preceded them by thousands of years, were fortunate to see the tallgrass prairie in its prime. In the following two centuries the





MISSOURI NATIONAL RECREATIONAL RIVER, SOUTH DAKOTA/NEBRASKA BORDER

One of the last unchannelized sections of North America's longest river, this stretch of the Missouri was once only a small part of a dynamic 2,340-mile-long braided prairie river ecosystem.



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MICHAEL FORSBERG

WITH A FOREWORD BY **TED KOOSER**, CHAPTER INTRODUCTIONS BY **DAVID WISHART**, AND ESSAYS BY **DAN O'BRIEN**

The Great Plains were once among the greatest grasslands on the planet. But as the United States and Canada grew westward, the Plains were plowed up, fenced in, overgrazed, and otherwise degraded. Today, this fragmented landscape is the most endangered and least protected ecosystem in North America. But all is not lost on the prairie. Through lyrical photographs, essays, historical images, and maps, this beautifully illustrated book gets beneath the surface of the Plains, revealing the lingering wild that still survives and whose diverse natural communities, native creatures, migratory traditions, and natural systems together create one vast and extraordinary whole.

Three broad geographic regions in *Great Plains* are covered in detail, evoked in the unforgettable and often haunting images taken by Michael Forsberg. Between the fall of 2005 and the winter of 2008, Forsberg traveled roughly 100,000 miles across 12 states and three provinces, from southern Canada to northern Mexico, to complete the photographic fieldwork for this project, underwritten by The Nature Conservancy. Complementing Forsberg's images and firsthand accounts are essays by Great Plains scholar David Wishart and acclaimed writer Dan O'Brien. Each section of the book begins with a thorough overview by Wishart, while O'Brien—a wildlife biologist and rancher as well as a writer—uses his powerful literary voice to put the Great Plains into a human context, connecting their natural history with man's uses and abuses.

The Great Plains are a dynamic but often forgotten landscape—overlooked, undervalued, misunderstood, and in desperate need of conservation. This book helps lead the way forward, informing and inspiring readers to recognize the wild spirit and splendor of this irreplaceable part of the planet.

“The Great Plains of America are not for sissies, but those who respond to their haunting beauty will not be driven off. The photographer Michael Forsberg and three of his writing friends show why. Forsberg has spent a long time looking at the Great Plains and now he has shared what he saw.”

LARRY MCMURTRY

“*Great Plains* strikes me as a signal event in the history of American publishing, a true event where the authors Ted Kooser, David Wishart, Dan O'Brien, and the simply fabulous photographer, Michael Forsberg, are a perfectly graceful mix. Having criss-crossed this area dozens of times it was wonderful to see my grand memories between covers.”

JIM HARRISON

“This is an invaluable book for those who already love the Great Plains, but it is an important book for those who have not considered the importance of the Plains in America's ecosystem. The area has been called America's Outback, but this beautiful book should make it accessible to anyone.”

Kathleen Norris

MICHAEL FORSBERG is a Nebraska native and a professional photographer whose images have appeared in publications including *Audubon*, *National Geographic*, *Natural History*, *National Wildlife*. He is a Fellow with the International League of Conservation Photographers and a charter member of the North American Nature Photographers Association. To learn more about his work, visit www.michaelforsberg.com.

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