

Landowner Habitat Stewardship Guide

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Key Points

- Maintaining the ecological integrity and viability of the land is key for not only the landholders' livelihood, but also the wildlife habitat they manage or conserve.
- The "*At Home on the Range Guide – Living with Alberta's Prairie Species at Risk*" is a landholder friendly guide that discusses several ways in which landholders can enhance and maintain native habitat on their land.
- Most of Alberta's species at risk fall under provincial jurisdiction.
- The success of MULTISAR can be attributed to the multi-species approach, voluntary collaboration, partnerships, and acknowledgement that many of these species still exist due to the conservation practices of landholders.

At Home on the Range

MULTISAR is a process for multi-species conservation at the landscape level. In 2007 MULTISAR expanded to the grasslands of Alberta and will continue to work collaboratively with landholders as part of MULTISAR's awareness and education campaign (www.multisar.ca). An important tool for MULTISAR's awareness and education campaign is the "*At Home on the Range – Living with Alberta's Prairie Species at Risk*" guide. "*At Home on the Range*" is a landholder friendly guide that discusses several ways in which landholders can enhance and maintain native habitat on their land. The guide starts with a brief introduction on Alberta's grasslands before starting into **Species at Risk 101**, which looks at who, what, where, why and how certain species came to be at risk. The second chapter looks at the implications (good and bad) of having species at risk on your land and the rest of the guide contains positive practices that can benefit species at risk and their habitat. The "*At Home on the Range*" guide also contains a mini-guide within entitled "*Over and Under the Range*", which describes the importance of maintaining the ecological integrity of the range to not only benefit wildlife, but also soil stabilization, weed control, water filtration, nutrient buildup, and ultimately provide long-term economic returns.

Species at Risk 101

Species at risk is a general term for plants and animals that have low or declining population numbers and are 'At Risk' or 'May Be At Risk' of disappearing. Some of these animals and plants may also be sensitive to human disturbances or natural events. In Alberta, species are assigned a general status as 'At Risk', 'May Be At Risk', 'Sensitive' or 'Secure'. Other species in which there is insufficient information on are classified as 'Data Deficient'. The general status of Alberta's wildlife can be found online <http://srd.alberta.ca/fishwildlife/default.aspx>. In Alberta, wildlife are addressed under

Alberta's Wildlife Act except for those that fall under federal jurisdiction in the Migratory Bird Act, Canada Fisheries Act, and those that occur on federal lands (military reserves and national parks). The Alberta government retains primary responsibility for all other birds (birds of prey and upland game birds), mammals, reptiles, amphibians, plants, and invertebrates that occur on Alberta's private and public lands. These include many of Alberta's species at risk like the burrowing owl, sage grouse, and swift fox. For species that are identified in Alberta's Wildlife Act as 'Endangered' or 'Threatened' a recovery plan is prepared by a team of experts and stakeholders under the leadership of a wildlife biologist.

Implications of Having Species at Risk

Sharing your land with species at risk can have some implications, but for the most part these implications are good and don't require drastic changes. In fact if you already have species at risk on your land then you must be doing something right and people can learn from your positive practices. Having species at risk can indicate that you are managing your land well as they indicate long-term sound land management practices and a healthy ecosystem. Having species at risk can also equal agricultural sustainability as diverse healthy ecosystems are more resilient to natural disturbance and provide stability and greater predictability to an agricultural operation. Water quality is improved, forage production is higher, and weed invasion is reduced. Species at risk can also effectively control pests such as mice and ground squirrels ("gophers"). A pair of ferruginous hawks can eat 500 ground squirrels during a single breeding season and species like the prairie rattlesnake and long-tailed weasel can significantly reduce juvenile ground squirrel populations. Other species like loggerhead shrikes, burrowing owls, and long-billed curlews feed on grasshoppers and other insect pests. Species at risk and the habitat they use are also a part of our heritage and western identity and can provide new opportunities to landholders (ex. ecotourism). Landholders can also profit from species at risk by working with several conservation organizations such as the Nature Conservancy of Canada, Operation Grassland Community, or MULTISAR.

Some of the concerns about species at risk include the fear that your land will be taken away, which is untrue as a landowner will not lose his or her land if there are species at risk living there. On private and public lands most species at risk fall under provincial jurisdiction and those that are 'Endangered' or 'Threatened' have recovery plans developed. These plans may involve groups working with landholders and making recommendations on ways to maintain or improve habitat. In most cases if you already have species at risk then you are already doing the right thing. If some tweaking is required and there are costs involved then various conservation groups can help cover these costs.

Positive Practices

There are many positive practices that landholders can do to maintain species at risk habitat. These can be as simple as holding on to what you have to more intensive work like restoring native grasses. In most cases minor tweaking of operations can make a huge difference. Below is a list of ten things that landholders can do to help species at risk:

- 1) Keep a Grip on Your Grasslands - all native prairie habitats are important to species at risk and in Alberta only 26% of our grasslands remain in their natural state.
- 2) Don't Let Slumps and Other Slopes Get You Down - these areas may appear to have little value, but are important habitat for some species at risk. Limit disturbance to these areas as much as possible.
- 3) Wood is Good – Maintain or protect trees and shrubs as they provide important nesting sites for species like the ferruginous hawk and loggerhead shrike.
- 4) Riparian Health Means Wealth- Healthy riparian zones provide habitat for species at risk and increase biodiversity. Riparian zones also improve water quality and quantity, provide erosion control, and water storage. Ephemeral ponds are also important habitats for toads and waterfowl and should be left undisturbed.
- 5) Keep Your Grassland Under Cover – Healthy native grasslands with good plant cover are the most beneficial to species at risk.
- 6) Nip Exotic Plants in the Bud – Exotic plants can invade native habitats and cause an overall loss of health and function.
- 7) Shhhh! Do Not Disturb – Some species at risk are highly sensitive to human disturbances. Minimizing disturbances near nesting and breeding sites is important during certain time periods.
- 8) Prey for Species at Risk – Maintaining a population of prey animals is important for several species at risk. This may simply be some tolerance of prey populations and encouraging natural predators or using non-toxic methods to reduce prey if required.
- 9) Cultivate Your Relationship With Prairie Birds – Where possible maintain spring nesting cover until after the breeding season (May to mid July), use flushing equipment, implement zero till or minimal tillage, and consider winter wheat, which requires less disturbance in the spring and summer.
- 10) Take the Plunge and Restore the Range- Consider converting non-native lands such as marginal cropland to native prairie or other permanent cover.

Over and Under the Range

Healthy rangelands perform a variety of jobs for us and for wildlife and plants. Rangelands provide forage for livestock and wildlife as well as protect the soil from water and wind erosion. Like a sponge rangelands store, retain, and release water for plant growth and help keep our watersheds clean by filtering nutrients and sediment out of runoff water. Rangelands are also our front line protection when it comes to holding back weeds. Healthy rangelands are cost effective as they do not require fertilizer inputs or irrigation water to make them productive. A diversity of grasses, forbs, and shrubs are also characteristics of a healthy rangeland which helps contribute to the overall biodiversity.

Conclusion

Species at risk and the native habitats that support them are a valuable and important part of our prairie heritage, as is ranching and farming. Through continued conservation practices we can help ensure this prairie heritage is maintained for future generations.

References

Saunders, E., R. Quinlan, P. Jones, B. Adams and K. Pearson. 2006. *At Home on the Range: Living with Alberta's Prairie Species at Risk*. Alberta Conservation Association and Alberta Sustainable Resource Development, Lethbridge, Alberta.