

Grassland Butterfly Conservation Program Expands into a New Site in Effort to Save Critically Endangered Species from Extinction

For immediate release: Winnipeg, July 14, 2023 – The Assiniboine Park Conservancy has released 58 critically endangered Poweshiek skipperling onto a new site in the Manitoba Tall Grass Prairie Preserve. Located in the RM of Stuartburn, the Preserve is the only remaining location where the once prolific species can still be found in Canada. In addition, 19 endangered Dakota skippers – a closely related species – were released at a site in Manitoba’s Interlake region, bringing the total number of butterflies released this year to 77.

This is the sixth consecutive year the Assiniboine Park Conservancy has released endangered butterflies back onto the landscape and the first attempt to reintroduce Poweshiek skipperling to a formerly populated location. Owned by the Manitoba Habitat Heritage Corporation, the location is jointly managed by the Nature Conservancy of Canada along with other partners of the Manitoba Tall Grass Prairie Preserve Management Committee.

“Year over year, we have been seeing more butterflies where we have done Poweshiek releases over the past five years. Based on those encouraging results, in consultation with our program partners, we made the decision to shift our releases to a new site this year,” said Laura Burns, Conservation Program Manager, Assiniboine Park Conservancy. “Poweshiek haven’t been observed there in nine years, but due to habitat management, it is an ideal location for the species, and we are optimistic about the opportunity to re-establish a population in this area. With the population currently limited to a few small, isolated areas, a re-established site will decrease the risk of losing this species in Canada due to extreme weather events and other threats.”

Once abundant across the prairies, the Poweshiek skipperling and Dakota skipper both suffered sudden, dramatic population declines in the 1990s and 2000s, the cause of which is uncertain. Loss of habitat through conversion, the use of pesticides, effects of climate change, and extreme weather events are believed to be contributing factors.

Poweshiek skipperling and Dakota skippers rely on very specific grassland ecosystems to survive and thrive. Prairie grasslands are one of the most endangered and least protected terrestrial ecosystems on the planet, with more than 80 per cent already converted as the loss continues. These habitats are critical to the survival of at-risk and other prairie endemic species, such as the burrowing owl and plains bison. Nature Conservancy of Canada works to conserve, maintain, and restore the integrity of high-quality grasslands and wetlands that not only provide important habitat but also help to mitigate flooding, filter our drinking water, sequester and store carbon, and support sustainable agriculture by attracting pollinators and protecting the land against drought.

“Grasslands are vital to the health and well-being of nature and people,” said Melissa Grantham, Conservation Biologist with the Nature Conservancy of Canada. “It’s our responsibility to steward the lands under our care. Disturbances, such as grazing and fire, can help to restore and maintain the health of grassland ecosystems. They create a mosaic of habitats, providing the right conditions to support a greater variety of plants and animals such as prairie skippers.”

Local communities are often closest to the land and some of the best advocates for more conservation. For the first time, two residents of the RM of Stuartburn had the rare opportunity to participate in this year’s Poweshiek skipperling releases. Working with communities and engaging with people out on the landscape helps raise awareness and connects people to nature, and to their local species and habitats. Interactions with Poweshiek skipperling are limited as the exact locations are not publicly released due to the sensitivity of the species. This gives these skippers their best chance to thrive.

The Grassland Butterfly Conservation Program is a collaborative effort between organizations in Canada and the United States to understand why these butterflies continue to decline and prevent them from becoming extinct. The Assiniboine Park Conservancy is responsible for a head-starting program for the Manitoba population, with the aim to increase the wild population size by breeding and raising the butterflies through their most vulnerable life stages before releasing them back onto the landscape.

While this year's release numbers are down from last year, owing to unfavourable weather conditions during last summer's captive breeding period, the results of the most recent population surveys are promising. Better weather conditions this year have also led to great breeding success, laying the groundwork for a larger release of adult butterflies next year after they spend the winter in human care at the Zoo.

"It is normal to experience fluctuations in a conservation effort such as this, so we focus on the long-term trends, which are positive and bode well for the ongoing success of the program," said Burns. "Ultimately, the goal is to increase the wild population sizes to stable, self-sustaining levels. We have a long way to go but are encouraged by this year's results."

Partnerships with organizations such as the Nature Conservancy of Canada are key to that success.

"By working together and being leaders in land and biodiversity conservation we can begin to make a difference for the recovery and conservation of species at risk such as these amazing prairie skippers," said Grantham.

About the Poweshiek skipperling

The Poweshiek skipperling is a small grassland butterfly species whose historic range includes southern Manitoba and the Midwestern USA. Today, there are only two small, isolated locations where the butterfly can still be found: the Tall Grass Prairie Preserve in Manitoba and a second site near Flint, Michigan. It is one of the most endangered species in the world.

About the Dakota skipper

The Dakota skipper is a northern prairie butterfly species whose historical range included tall grass and mixed-grass prairie habitat in a vast area extending from southern Saskatchewan and Manitoba into the Dakotas, Minnesota, and Iowa, and east toward Chicago. In Manitoba, this endangered species can still be found in small numbers in the Interlake and pockets of southwestern Manitoba.

About the Grassland Butterfly Conservation Program

The Poweshiek skipperling conservation project is a collaborative effort between the Assiniboine Park Conservancy, Nature Conservancy of Canada, Minnesota Zoo, John Ball Zoo, Environment and Climate Change Canada, US Fish and Wildlife Service, University of Winnipeg, and other partners in Canada and the United States. In Manitoba, the program has been expanded to include the Dakota skipper, a closely related species.

This project was undertaken with the financial support of the Government of Canada through the federal Department of Environment and Climate Change. Ce projet a été réalisé avec l'appui financier du gouvernement du Canada agissant par l'entremise du ministère fédéral de l'Environnement et du Changement climatique.

For interviews and information requests, please contact:

Laura Cabak
Director of Public Relations & Communications
Assiniboine Park Conservancy
E: lcabak@assiniboinepark.ca
C: 204-795-0091

Christine Chilton
Community Relations Manager
Nature Conservancy of Canada, Manitoba Region
E: Christine.Chilton@natureconservancy.ca
C: 204-793-4344