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Assiniboine Park Conservancy and Nature Conservancy of Canada Mark Another Successful Grassland Butterfly Conservation Season

For immediate release: Winnipeg, August 6, 2026 – The Assiniboine Park Conservancy (APC) and Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) are celebrating significant steps towards recovering one of the most endangered animals in Canada through the Grassland Butterfly Conservation Program. This season's accomplishments are highlighted by:

- the release of 199 critically endangered adult Poweshiek Skipperling onto the landscape in the Manitoba Tall Grass Prairie Preserve – one of the largest releases in Manitoba since the program launch,
- the largest population estimates to date, supported by record-high survey counts and a 19-fold increase in observations at annually monitored sites since 2018,
- the detection of wild Poweshiek Skipperling in areas near past release sites where they had not previously been observed, indicating that the population may be naturally expanding,
- collection of nearly 800 eggs in preparation for next year's release,
- refining care methods for adult butterflies with support from the Assiniboine Park Zoo's veterinary team.

APC and NCC are part of an international collaborative effort to save the Poweshiek Skipperling from extinction by restoring wild populations and protecting the specialized grassland habitat it needs to survive and thrive. Once abundant across the prairie landscape, the species experienced abrupt population declines during the 1990s and 2000s. Contributing factors likely include habitat loss, extreme weather events, and climate change. Today, the Manitoba Tall Grass Prairie Preserve, located in the RM of Stuartburn, is the only location in Canada where the Poweshiek Skipperling can still be found.

At the Assiniboine Park Zoo, conservation scientists breed the delicate and critically endangered butterflies in a controlled environment and care for them through the most vulnerable stages of their life cycle before releasing them as adults the following year. This intensive care gives the butterflies a better chance to survive and reproduce in the wild. The 2026 release of 199 Poweshiek Skipperling brings the cumulative program total to over 900 butterflies returned to the wild.

As the program evolves, conservation teams are also refining methods to provide the best possible care for the butterflies. This year, conservation scientists worked closely with Assiniboine Park Zoo's veterinary team to conduct an immobilization study aimed at improving care procedures and reducing handling time for adult butterflies as they are marked before release. The optimal methods for marking have now been identified, allowing adult butterflies to be marked safely and efficiently in the years ahead.

“Over the past nine years, we have seen tremendous progress in this program, and each field season gives us more reason to be hopeful,” said Laura Burns, Manager of Conservation Programs. “Seeing more wild Poweshiek Skipperling on the landscape speaks to the success of this collaborative effort and the impact of many years of dedicated conservation work.”

Progress was especially evident this year during release and population survey activities. Wild Poweshiek Skipperling were found near release sites where they had not previously been observed, while transect surveys recorded the highest counts and largest program population estimates since the program began. Since 2018, observations at annually surveyed sites have increased 19-fold, with overall observations now 27 times higher than in the program's first year. Nearly twice as many Poweshiek were observed this season compared to last year despite fewer surveys being conducted. For the third consecutive year, wild-born Poweshiek were documented at a reintroduction site where Zoo-reared butterflies were first released in 2023, further demonstrating the success of recovery efforts.

"Butterflies, such as the Poweshiek Skipperling, depend on healthy tall grass prairie, one of the most endangered ecosystems in the world," said Kristen Martin, Program Director at NCC. "When we protect and restore prairie habitat, we are doing more than helping this single species. We are maintaining resilient landscapes that support a rich diversity of plants and wildlife, sustain ecological processes, and provide benefits to local communities."

As part of ongoing collaborative conservation and recovery efforts for Poweshiek Skipperling, NCC actively protects, restores, and stewards the tall grass prairie habitat essential to the species' survival. Through long-term habitat management, NCC works to maintain the complex mosaic of conditions that prairie species need to thrive. By investing in healthy habitats today, partners are contributing to stronger communities, more resilient ecosystems and a future where species like the Poweshiek Skipperling can continue to be part of Manitoba's natural legacy.

"Prairies evolved alongside natural disturbances such as fire and grazing, and many species depend on those processes to persist," said Martin. "Using tools such as prescribed fire, grazing and woody species control, we help maintain healthy, functioning grasslands that are better able to support species like the Poweshiek Skipperling, while building resilience to future change. Working alongside local landowners, community partners, and conservation organizations, we are helping ensure these iconic landscapes remain healthy and support generations to come."

Those living among Manitoba's remaining tall grass prairies can be proud of the globally significant landscape that surrounds them and the stewardship that has helped keep it intact. The Manitoba Tall Grass Prairie Preserve (MTGPP) remains one of the last places in the world where Poweshiek Skipperling persist, demonstrating the importance of collaborative conservation and ongoing habitat management in supporting species recovery.

For the fourth year running, RM of Stuartburn community members from towns near the MTGPP were invited to take part in a Poweshiek Skipperling release, offering a rare opportunity to experience one of the world's most endangered butterflies up close. Engaging local residents in recovery efforts helps foster a sense of connection to the landscape and a deeper understanding of the unique species and habitats found in their own 'backyard'. By bringing people closer to the species and the prairie it depends on helps build local pride, strengthen relationships, and inspire the next generation of community leaders.

All Manitobans can experience the Poweshiek Skipperling's home by visiting the Manitoba Tall Grass Prairie Preserve and help care for it by supporting ongoing conservation efforts and spreading the word about Poweshiek Skipperling and the spectacular prairie they call home.

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 Manitoba's Tall Grass Prairie

Tall grass prairie is one of the most endangered habitats in the world: less than 1% of Manitoba's historic tall grass prairie still remains. The tall grass prairie is characterized by tall and medium height grasses including Big Bluestem, Freshwater Cordgrass, and Prairie Dropseed, as well many types of flowers. By working to protect the habitat of the Poweshiek Skipperling, NCC is also helping to conserve this ecosystem and the many species that rely on it. In Manitoba, our tall grass prairie ecosystem is home to around 28 different species at risk, including birds, plants, amphibians, and butterflies.

About the Grassland Butterfly Conservation Program

The Grassland Butterfly Conservation Program is part of a collaborative effort in Canada and the United States to understand why these butterflies are declining and to save them from extinction. The Assiniboine Park Conservancy is responsible for a breeding and release program for the Manitoba population, which aims to increase the wild population size by raising the butterflies through their most vulnerable life stages before releasing them back onto the landscape. Program partners include the Nature Conservancy of Canada, Minnesota Zoo, John Ball Zoo, Environment and Climate Change Canada, the Government of Manitoba, US Fish and Wildlife Service, University of Winnipeg, and many other partners in Canada and the United States. The Association of Zoos and Aquariums recognized the Assiniboine Park Conservancy, Minnesota Zoo, and John Ball Zoo with top honours in the 2025 North American Conservation Award for this groundbreaking and collaborative work to save the critically endangered Poweshiek Skipperling butterfly.

About the Nature Conservancy of Canada

Since 1962, the Nature Conservancy of Canada has brought people together to protect the lands and waters that sustain us all. As an environmental charity working hand in hand with communities, Indigenous Nations, governments and businesses, we deliver nature-based solutions at a scale no one else can. Our conservation work safeguards clean air and water, stores carbon and reduces the risks of floods and wildfires — protecting our health, strengthening local economies and building more resilient communities. Together, we unlock nature's power, so life can thrive. Learn more at natureconservancy.ca.

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