

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

For immediate release: Winnipeg, July 24, 2025 – The Assiniboine Park Conservancy (APC) and Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) are celebrating another very successful field season for the Grassland Butterfly Conservation Program, highlighted by:

- the release of 175 critically endangered adult Poweshiek skipperling onto the landscape in the Manitoba Tall Grass Prairie Preserve,
- collection of over 1,500 eggs in preparation for next year's release, and
- the expanded use of environmental DNA techniques to monitor wild populations.

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. The species was once bountiful across the prairies, but experienced abrupt population declines during the 1990s and 2000s. Contributing factors likely include habitat loss, pesticide use, extreme weather events, and climate change. Located in the RM of Stuartburn, the Manitoba Tall Grass Prairie Preserve (MTGPP) is the only location where the Poweshiek skipperling can still be found in Canada.

“We are very excited and motivated by the success achieved this year in all parts of the program,” said Kirstyn Eckhardt, Conservation Programs Manager, Assiniboine Park Conservancy. “The results are encouraging and a testament to many years of work, research, and collaborative effort.”

At the Assiniboine Park Zoo, conservation scientists breed the delicate and critically endangered butterflies in a controlled environment, care for them through the most vulnerable parts of their life cycle, then release them as adults the following year. This care gives them a better chance to survive and reproduce. This is the eighth consecutive year of releases for the program. The 2025 tally of 175 Poweshiek skipperling brings the cumulative program total to 719 butterflies released back to the wild.

This year's breeding success is largely attributed to adjustments in Poweshiek matchmaking, resulting in an increase in the number of breeding pairs and a 160% increase in egg collection. Newly hatched caterpillars will spend the winter in an incubator at the Zoo, continue their growth in the spring, and be released as adults next summer.

“Data analyses completed last winter and insight from our partners at the Minnesota Zoo suggested pairing younger adult female butterflies with older males might result in higher egg production. Of course, age differences are relative when you consider that the adult breeding period only lasts about a week at the end of the Poweshiek life cycle,” said Eckhardt. “Regardless, we adjusted our methods this year and are very pleased with the outcome so far, which bodes well for the future of the program.”

This year, while conducting releases and populations surveys, the APC and NCC teams once again observed several signs that the breeding and release programs are working. For the second year in a row, several wild-born Poweshiek skipperling were observed in a reintroduction site, where Zoo-reared individuals were released for the first time in 2023. Adult butterflies have also been observed over a wider area and further from the release locations, suggesting that the wild populations are naturally expanding their ranges.

The APC team is also trialing a new method of detecting Poweshiek skipperling known as environmental DNA (eDNA) sampling. This technique involves collecting DNA naturally shed by the target species into its environment.

“Over the last decade or so, environmental DNA sampling has served as an efficient tool to detect and monitor species in aquatic habitats, but it is still in the early stage of being used in terrestrial habitats, especially targeting insects,” said Brooklynne Keber, Conservation and Research Specialist (Genetics and Genomics), Assiniboine Park Conservancy. “This pilot project is in the early stages, but we hope by testing multiple sampling approaches in the lab, we can identify an effective method of eDNA sampling that could be used to detect Poweshiek skipperling in the wild.”

“Butterflies, such as the Poweshiek skipperling, are sensitive to environmental changes. Their presence can be an indicator of biodiversity and a healthy ecosystem. Because of this, the loss of these butterflies raises concern for the health of prairie grasslands as a whole, and that’s why people should care,” said Melissa Grantham, Conservation Biologist at NCC. “While we are still working to understand the ongoing threats to Poweshiek skipperlings, we know that much of their original tall grass prairie habitat was historically converted to other uses. It is critically important to conserve and restore these remaining prairie habitats so species like prairie skippers have a healthy habitat to live in.”

As part of ongoing collaborative conservation and recovery efforts for Poweshiek skipperling, NCC focuses on just that – actively protecting and restoring the tall grass prairie habitat essential to species survival and recovery.

“We use land management tools like prescribed fire, grazing, and woody species control to imitate the natural, historic prairie disturbance with which this habitat evolved. In collaboration with amazing local partners, we share knowledge, support sustainable land use, and keep the prairies healthy for both people and the species that depend on it,” said Grantham.

Those living among Manitoba’s remaining tall grass prairies can be proud of the unique natural values and hidden gems that surround them, and the legacy of care that ensured this remains one of the last places in the world for Poweshiek. For the third year running, RM of Stuartburn community members from towns near the MTGPP were invited to take part in a Poweshiek skipperling release – a very special up-close encounter.

All Manitobans can experience the Poweshiek skipperling's home by visiting the MTGPP 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 larger 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, with the aim 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.

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