



## **Assiniboine Park Conservancy, Minnesota Zoo, and John Ball Zoo Receive AZA North America Conservation Award for Poweshiek Skipperling Recovery Efforts**

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**Winnipeg, MB | Apple Valley, MN | Grand Rapids, MI** – The Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) has recognized the Assiniboine Park Conservancy, Minnesota Zoo, and John Ball Zoo with top honours in the 2025 **North American Conservation Award** for their groundbreaking and collaborative work to save the critically endangered Poweshiek skipperling butterfly. This award highlights the essential role of accredited zoos and aquariums in collaborative species conservation and recognizes more than a decade of perseverance, innovation, and cross-border cooperation.

**The Poweshiek skipperling is one of the world's most endangered butterflies.** Once abundant across the tallgrass prairies of Canada and the central United States, its population has plummeted over the past two decades with significant declines first observed in the 1990s. Scientists believe a combination of factors – including habitat loss and fragmentation, pesticide use, extreme weather, and climate change – has contributed to its near disappearance.

Today, the species has vanished from nearly all its former range and can only be found in a few isolated pockets in Manitoba and Michigan. It hasn't been seen in Minnesota since 2007.

In response to dwindling Poweshiek skipperling populations, the Assiniboine Park Conservancy, Minnesota Zoo, and John Ball Zoo (in collaboration with Michigan State University's Haddad Lab) have led a coordinated, science-based recovery effort to save the species from extinction.

The Minnesota Zoo began its work with Poweshiek skipperlings in 2012. The Assiniboine Park Conservancy launched a parallel program in 2016. John Ball Zoo joined the effort in 2021.

Together, these organizations have established successful captive breeding programs, developed advanced rearing and reintroduction protocols, conducted cutting-edge field research and genome sequencing, and coordinated cross-border recovery efforts through the Poweshiek Skipperling International Partnership ([savingskipper.org](http://savingskipper.org)). **Most importantly, they are releasing thousands of zoo-reared butterflies each year to help stabilize and grow the remaining wild populations.**

Despite these efforts and early signs of success, fears of extinction peaked in recent years, with U.S. populations falling to critically low levels as recently as 2022. **Sustained, cross-border collaboration and support are urgently needed to ensure this species isn't lost forever.**

In Manitoba, the Assiniboine Park Conservancy and Nature Conservancy of Canada are making significant progress with a two-pronged approach that aims to restore wild populations and protect the specialized grassland habitat the species needs to survive and thrive. At the Assiniboine Park Zoo, conservation scientists lead a breeding and release program focused on increasing the wild population by rearing butterflies through their most vulnerable life stages before releasing them into the wild.

A major highlight of this year's summer field season was the release of 175 adult butterflies into the Manitoba Tall Grass Prairie Preserve, the last place the species is found in Canada. This is the eighth consecutive year of releases for the program. The 2025 tally brings the cumulative program total to 719 butterflies released back to the wild.

#### **Other Signs of Progress in Manitoba:**

- A record-breaking number of eggs were collected this summer with improved pairing and breeding techniques. Over 700 eggs will be held in climate-controlled freezers over the winter in preparation for next year's release of adult butterflies.
- Evidence of wild population growth, with more butterflies observed farther from release sites.
- Expansion of cutting-edge eDNA monitoring to track wild populations more effectively.

While challenges remain, the measurable progress seen in 2024 and 2025 — including verified persistence at the reintroduction site and a dramatic increase in wild sightings — provides much-needed optimism for the future of the Poweshiek skipperling. **However, without continued investment and long-term commitment, this fragile progress could quickly be lost. Ongoing support is essential to secure a future for the species and build on the momentum of recent successes.**

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#### **Quotes**

“The establishment of our program at Assiniboine Park Zoo was made possible with the support of many collaborative partners, including those working to protect remaining prairie habitats. This award is a meaningful recognition of years of dedication and hard-won successes, achieved despite significant challenges. It's also a clear reminder that continued investment on both sides of the border is essential to prevent the extinction of this precious species.”

— *Dr. Stephen Petersen, Director of Conservation and Research, Assiniboine Park Conservancy*

“The world would be a smaller, lonelier place without this amazing little butterfly. We seem to have narrowly averted extinction, but the big gains that we have made to help ensure a brighter future for Poweshiek skipperling could not have happened in a vacuum. We are proud to work alongside John Ball Zoo and Assiniboine Park Conservancy and dozens of other incredible partners.”

— *Dr. Erik Runquist, Conservation Research Scientist, Minnesota Zoo*

“Every year, so many staff and volunteers from departments across the John Ball Zoo directly or indirectly support our important work on this project ... people driving butterflies, planting host plants, watching breeding trials, troubleshooting incubator issues, and touring groups through the facility.”

— *Andy McIntyre, COO, John Ball Zoo*

**MEDIA ASSETS:** Photos and video are available for media use in our [online media library](#). See attached background for more information about the program and our partners.

#### **For more information, please contact:**

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

#### **Additional Media Contacts:**

- Minnesota Zoo: Diana Hein | [diana.hein@state.mn.us](mailto:diana.hein@state.mn.us) | 952-681-9199
- John Ball Zoo: Michael Martin | [MMartin@Jbzoo.org](mailto:MMartin@Jbzoo.org) | 248-345-6170



## BACKGROUND

### **About the Poweshiek skipperling**

The Poweshiek skipperling is a small grassland butterfly species whose historic range includes southern Manitoba and the Midwestern United States. There are 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.

### **About Manitoba's Tall Grass Prairie**

Tall grass prairie is one of the most endangered habitats in the world with less than 1% of Manitoba's historic habitat still intact. The habitat is characterized by tall and medium height grasses including Big Bluestem, Freshwater Cordgrass, and Prairie Dropseed, and many types of flowers. Manitoba's tall grass prairie is home to around 28 different species at risk, including birds, plants, amphibians, and butterflies.

### **About the Grassland Butterfly Conservation Program**

This award-winning program is a cross-border collaboration between government, zoological, and conservation organizations aimed at understanding the causes of butterfly population declines and preventing their extinction. Partners include the Assiniboine Park Conservancy, Nature Conservancy of Canada, Minnesota Zoo, John Ball Zoo, Environment and Climate Change Canada, Government of Manitoba, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and many other organizations in Canada and the United States.

### **About the AZA North American Conservation Award**

The North American Conservation Award recognizes exceptional efforts toward the conservation of wildlife native to North America. Honourees must demonstrate measurable impacts, strong partnerships, and a commitment to long-term success in species recovery.

### **About the Assiniboine Park Zoo**

Operated by the Assiniboine Park Conservancy, Assiniboine Park Zoo has been a favourite destination for families, school groups, tourists, and animal lovers for over a century. The Zoo is open year-round, providing visitors with the opportunity to interact with animal species from around the world. The Zoo is accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums and Canada's Accredited Zoos and Aquariums and a member of the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums. As an accredited zoological organization, the Zoo is committed to excellence in animal care, safety, veterinary services, and active leadership in conservation, research, and education. For more information visit. [assiniboinepark.ca](http://assiniboinepark.ca)

### **About the Minnesota Zoo**

The Minnesota Zoo is a year-round destination providing a window into the natural world. With hundreds of species of animals, worldwide conservation efforts, and acres of scenic beauty, the Zoo is a resource to connect people, animals, and the natural world to save wildlife. The Minnesota Zoo is an accredited member of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) and an institutional member of the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA). The Minnesota Zoo is home to beloved traditions, such as Farm Babies, the Jack-O-Lantern Spectacular, and Wild Nights Music series. [mnzoo.org](http://mnzoo.org).

### **About the John Ball Zoo**

John Ball Zoo is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation founded in 1891 and located in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Guided by the five core values of Conservation, Education, Community, Celebration and Compassion, John Ball Zoo accomplishes the mission to inspire our community to be actively engaged in the conservation of wildlife and wild places. As a conservation organization, John Ball Zoo works to protect wildlife and wild places, starting right here in our Great Lakes region. John Ball Zoo is accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, demonstrating that we hold ourselves to the highest standards in animal care and welfare. [jbzoo.org](http://jbzoo.org)