

Grassland Butterfly Conservation Program Releases the Highest Number of Poweshiek Skipperling and Dakota Skipper to Date in Effort to Save Critically Endangered Species from Extinction

For immediate release: Winnipeg, August 7, 2024 – Over the past four weeks, the Assiniboine Park Conservancy successfully released 219 critically endangered Poweshiek skipperling onto a site in the Manitoba Tall Grass Prairie Preserve and 51 endangered Dakota skipper into Manitoba’s Interlake region, bringing the total number of butterflies released to 270. This is the highest number of endangered butterflies released annually since the program’s inception in 2017 and is the seventh consecutive year the Assiniboine Park Conservancy has released endangered butterflies back onto the landscape.

“It was a very successful year for us, as we released the highest number of both species to date. I am incredibly proud of the hard work of our crew in rearing, releasing, and monitoring hundreds of released butterflies,” said Laura Burns, Conservation Program Manager, Assiniboine Park Conservancy. “Our team, many partners, and volunteers who care deeply for these species on the brink of extinction can be proud of this year’s efforts and the indicators of success that we are seeing.”

This year, the team observed several signs that the release program is helping to save this species from extinction, including an observation of butterflies mating in the wild after being released. More significantly, several wild-born Poweshiek skipperling were observed in a site where they were reintroduced for the first time last summer after years of planning and site preparation with our partners.

“This was an incredibly exciting sign that our efforts are working. Last year was the first time a reintroduction of Poweshiek skipperling had been attempted, and we had to wait an entire year to see if the released butterflies mated, laid eggs, hatched into caterpillars, and survived the winter to become butterflies,” said Burns. “Seeing those butterflies this summer is one of the highlights of my career.”

Located in the RM of Stuartburn, the Manitoba Tall Grass Prairie Preserve is the only remaining location where the once abundant Poweshiek skipperling can be found in Canada. The Poweshiek skipperling and Dakota skipper were both once bountiful across the prairies, but their populations experienced abrupt declines during the 1990s and 2000s. The exact cause of these declines is uncertain but contributing factors likely include habitat loss, pesticide use, extreme weather events, and climate change.

Grasslands are havens for wildlife. They’re teeming with a stunning diversity of plants, insects, birds, and mammals. Poweshiek skipperling and Dakota skippers rely on these very specific grassland ecosystems to survive and thrive – you won’t find species like these anywhere else. Prairie grasslands are one of the most endangered and least protected terrestrial ecosystems on the planet, with more than 80 per cent already converted from native prairie to other uses. These habitats are critical to the survival of at-risk and other prairie endemic species, such as the burrowing owl and plains bison.

“Paired with releases, careful management of prairie habitat is critical to reaching our shared goal of helping Poweshiek skipperling and Dakota skipper become more secure in Canada,” said Melissa Grantham, Conservation Biologist with Nature Conservancy of Canada. “Management tools such as prescribed fire, brush mowing, and grazing in partnership with local producers, help mimic natural disturbances needed to maintain quality prairie ecosystems.”

Nature Conservancy of Canada and its partners work 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.

“Grassland species like Poweshiek skipperling and Dakota skipper are part of what makes Manitoba special. They are preserved on these lands because of past and current generations - the incredible tall-grass prairies, forests and wetlands of the Stuartburn area have been cared for by generations of local people. NCC and our amazing partners have worked to continue the heritage of land management necessary to maintain critical prairie habitat and the species that depend on it,” said Grantham.

These local communities are closest to the land and some of the best advocates for conservation. Several community members from towns near the Tall Grass Prairie Preserve were invited to take part in a release. Working with community members in the RM of Stuartburn is crucial to maintaining this land as habitat for Poweshiek skipperling and other species at risk. Beyond the range of Poweshiek, all Manitobans can play a role by supporting initiatives to protect habitat and by taking actions in their own yards. Choosing plants that are native to Manitoba for your garden will help many species of butterflies, other pollinators, and birds.

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 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. The Nature Conservancy of Canada manages some of the last remaining habitat for these species in Canada. Other partners include the 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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