

A Sea of Grass

May 20, 1840.

I adjusted my knapsack on my back and left my home on foot. I planned to hike through the countryside to get a closer look at the prairie. The land was so interesting that I must tell you all about it. What charming country.

Gentle rain was falling as I climbed a high bluff covered with rock and soil to get a good view of the countryside. The bluff itself was covered with forests. The trees were not clustered together, but stood separate, each tree spreading its broad branches over the hillside. At the top, the bluff was bare except for the grass, which covered it like a bright green blanket.

From the top of the bluff, I could see the wide river that ran along the base of the bluff. It seemed to go on for miles. The rain stopped, and sunlight poured onto the land, turning the river into a bright blue ribbon at the edge of the green prairie. Tall trees bordered the river. Beyond the river, however, few trees grew. Instead, endless fields of high grasses waved in the wind. It looked as if a gardener had planted the fields. Of course, that is not the case. The grasses grow naturally. So do the wildflowers.

I climbed down the bluff and hiked across the prairie. I counted a dozen kinds of wildflowers. They are not timid little plants like those grown in many gardens. Prairie wildflowers are sturdy plants in bright colors. These flowers covered much of the ground in various shades of red, blue, and pink. Beautiful white lupines grew on the prairie too. So did white and purple violets.

The wildflowers and grasses attracted butterflies and birds of all kinds. Eagles and hawks soared above me, their wings spread wide. They swooped down looking for rabbits, gophers, and mice. These furry prairie animals live in underground burrows but leave at times in search of food. They are part of the prairie's food chain. All prairie plants and animals work together as part of a complex system that supports life.

From the bluff, the prairie had looked quiet. Up close, it is not so. The prairie was alive with the sound of crickets, bees, and other insects. Birds called to one another, and there were many sounds I could not identify. Was that a coyote howling? Perhaps so. Frogs croaked and the grasses swished as I passed through them. I knew that snakes and lizards were hiding in the deep grasses, but I was never able to see them.

I was alone, but I did not feel lonely. The land was gentle and inviting. I followed a winding dirt path through the country. Suddenly, a spot of red flashed at the edge of my vision. I stood still, frozen in place. For a minute or so I did not move. I remained alert, and my patience was rewarded. I heard a soft mewling sound. A second later the reddish flash reappeared. It was a fox! And in her mouth she carried a small, wriggling cub. I watched as she placed her little one on the ground and trotted off. Perhaps she was returning to her den for a second cub. I was tempted to move in for a closer look, but I did not do so. This was their home, not mine. I was a visitor, and I felt happy simply to have observed the fox family for a short moment.

I took a deep breath, soaking in the fresh smells of grass and flowers. I listened to the music of birds and insects. And then I hiked back home, marveling at all that I had seen on the great American prairie.

Saving the Prairies

Sunset Ridge, April 21—At one time, 170 million acres of land in North America were prairies. Prairies stretched from Canada to the Texas coast. They went from the Rocky Mountains to the Mississippi River. Prairie grasses grew in the deep, rich soil. Herds of bison roamed the prairies. So did other prairie animals. But in the last 300 years, many prairies in the United States have disappeared. Farms, ranches, and cities have taken over. Cities now sit on land that was once covered with prairie grasses and wildflowers. Today, only a small part of these prairies are left. Without help, prairies will eventually disappear.

Students at Sunset Ridge Elementary School want to help bring back some of the prairie that has been lost by development. They are restoring an acre of land in front of their school, hoping to make it appear similar to what the prairie may have looked like 150 years ago. They are planting prairie grasses and wildflowers. So far, the students' accomplishments have created habitats for prairie animals to live. Butterflies are often seen fluttering across the school's prairie, and birds have built nests near the prairie. Animals, such as gophers and rabbits have been seen scurrying into the tall grasses for a safe place to hide.

Students at Sunset Ridge Elementary School are not the only students in the United States hoping to restore prairies. Students at Otter Lake Elementary School are helping too. The school received money that will be used to restore about two acres of prairie behind their school. They have also planted prairie grasses and wildflowers. They hope these plants will attract a variety of wildlife. The prairie will also be used as a research station for science classes at the school.

Adults are also helping. In Illinois, the Save the Prairie Society is working on Wolf Prairie. Wolf Prairie is 80 acres of prairie. It is about 14 miles west of Chicago. In the 1920s, the land was set aside for building houses. Sidewalks were laid in about half of the area. When the housing plan failed, the land was left empty. Over time, the land was bought.

Today, volunteers are restoring this prairie. They have brought back over 360 different kinds of prairie plants and grasses. These plants attract insects, birds, and other animals. Slowly, the area is creating a small prairie ecosystem similar to ecosystems hundreds of years ago.

The prairie ecosystem is in danger. There are projects designed to help save the plants and animals that live on prairies. It's not easy to save prairies, but it is important. They are home to many species of plants and animals. Some of these plants and animals only live on prairies. Without prairies these plants and animals will not survive. Bison have nearly disappeared. Some populations of foxes, hawks, and antelope have also declined.

Animals are not the only ones that depend on prairies; people do too. Prairies are beautiful. Many people enjoy spending time hiking and fishing in some of these prairies. They want to see prairie animals like deer, elk, and bison. Some people like to watch birds. People also depend on prairies to grow much of their food. Restoring prairies is good for plants, animals, and people.

32. Which sentence from the passage "A Sea of Grass" supports the idea that the author feels comforted by the prairie?
- (A) "I adjusted my knapsack on my back and left my home on foot."
 - (B) "The land was gentle and inviting."
 - (C) "I remained alert, and my patience was rewarded."
 - (D) "A second later the reddish flash reappeared."
33. What **best** describes the overall structure of "A Sea of Grass"?
- (A) a comparison of the total rainfall received yearly by North American prairies
 - (B) a sequence of one city's efforts to improve life on North American prairies
 - (C) a list of effects that farming has had on a prairie in North America
 - (D) a description of a visitor's experiences on a prairie in North America
34. Read the sentences from "Saving the Prairie."

"Students at Sunset Ridge Elementary School are not the only students in the United States hoping to restore prairies. Students at Otter Lake Elementary School are helping too. The school received money that will be used to restore about two acres of prairie behind their school. They have also planted prairie grasses and wildflowers."

What does the word restore mean as it is used in the passage?

- (A) recognize
- (B) register
- (C) renew
- (D) report

35. How does the author of “Saving the Prairies” use evidence to support the point that the disappearance of the prairies has negative effects?

- (A) by telling stories about where prairies existed in Canada
- (B) by sharing how research stations are being built on school property
- (C) by stating how herds of bison roamed prairies in the West
- (D) by including facts about how populations of certain animals have declined

36. This question has two parts. Answer Part One and then answer Part Two.

Part One

Based on information in **both** passages, how can prairies benefit people?

- A. Prairies allow people to find pleasure in experiencing nature.
- B. Prairies allow people to direct research projects on ecosystems.
- C. Prairies allow people to develop buildings on the surrounding land.
- D. Prairies allow people to harvest crops that have been planted.

Part Two

Which sentences from the passages **best** support the answer in Part One? Choose **two** answers.

- A. “It looked as if a gardener had planted the fields.” (“A Sea of Grass”)
- B. “I took a deep breath, soaking in the fresh smells of grass and flowers.” (“A Sea of Grass”)
- C. “There are projects designed to help save the plants and animals that live on prairies.” (“Saving the Prairies”)
- D. “Many people enjoy the beauty of the prairies and enjoy spending time hiking and fishing on these prairies.” (“Saving the Prairies”)

37. Which idea is emphasized in **both** passages?

- (A) Many acres of land in the United States were once covered by prairies.
- (B) The plants and animals on prairies depend on each other to survive.
- (C) The United States government is working hard to help save the prairies.
- (D) Many projects have been developed to increase the amount of prairies.

38. Both passages provide information about North American prairies. Write an essay analyzing the differences in focus and the information between the two passages. Use evidence from **both** passages to support your response.