

Grasslands on the Manitoba Escarpment

The Prairies in the Rural
Municipality of Stanley

Leanna Fehr



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Interview Participants

Bernie Loeppky: landowner

Bill Turner: grassland conservationist

Dean and Tiina Hildebrand: ranchers practising regenerative agriculture

Gerry Peters: landowner

Henry and Elma Martens: Founders of the A Rocha Pembina Valley Interpretive Centre

James Friesen: Co-manager of the Stanley Trail

Linda Nichols: landowner and beekeeper

Murray Seymour: landowner

Tim Fehr: landowner

Wayne Penner: landowner

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Prairie Grasses. Drawing by Pamela York-Hardy.

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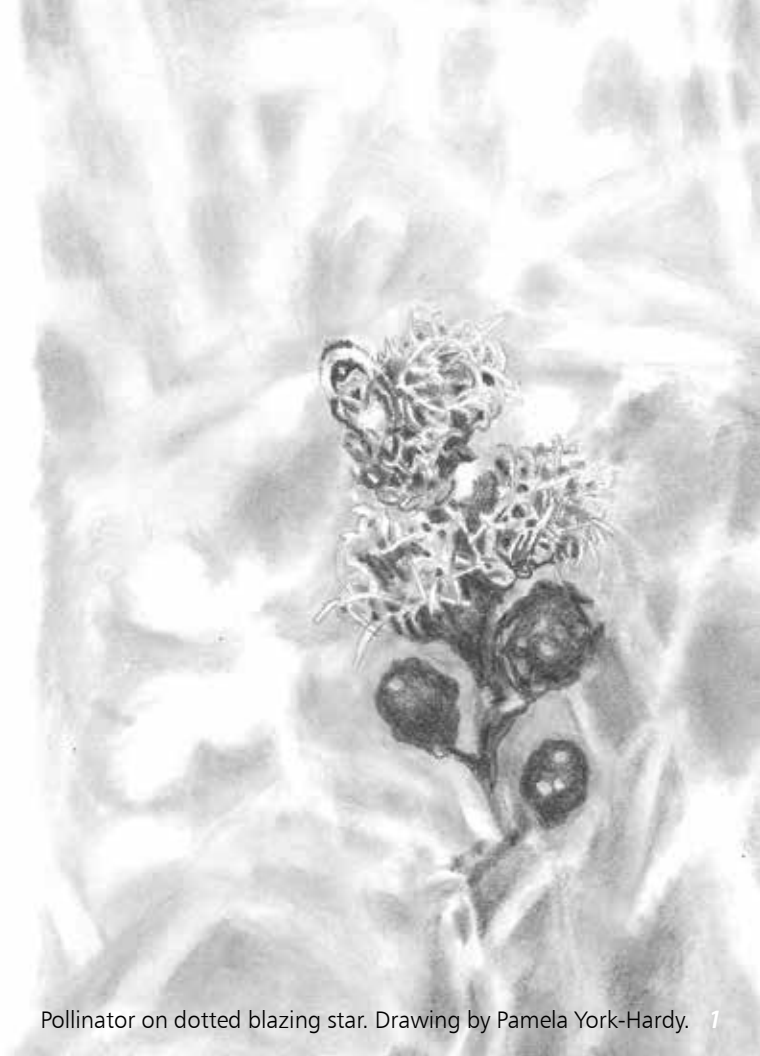
Photo: Leanna Fehr

Introduction

During the summer of 2017, I interviewed fifteen people from the RM of Stanley, a local government district in south-central Manitoba, about the value, use, management and future of grasslands. These were all people involved in the management of grasslands in some way and they contributed to this booklet to share their hands-on knowledge and insight. Also featured here are photos and artwork of grassland landscapes and species on the Manitoba Escarpment taken by residents of the RM of Stanley.

As you explore this region through the lenses and experiences of the people who contributed to this project, I hope you will gain an appreciation for the amazing places called grasslands.

Leanna Fehr



Grasslands in the RM of Stanley

This map shows an areal view of the RM of Stanley. The Manitoba Escarpment runs from the bottom of the map to the top left. The grasslands areas highlighted in green are owned or managed by individuals that participated in this study.



4 2 0 4 Kilometers

Author: Leanna Fehr
Date: 2018-02-20

Legend

- Escarpment (Study Area)
- Grasslands in the Study

What and where are Grasslands in the RM of Stanley?

Along the Manitoba Escarpment, grasslands were a prominent part of the original landscape. Grasslands are areas predominately covered in grasses – on the Canadian Prairies, grasslands are often home to both introduced species and native prairie plants such as big bluestem and purple prairie clover. Birds and other wildlife depend on grasslands for places to live and for raising young.

The Manitoba Escarpment is an interesting place because it used to be a transition zone between fescue and mixed grass prairies to the west and tall grass prairies of the Red River Valley. This history means there is a wide diversity of native grassland species on the Escarpment. In the past, grasslands would have been a prominent part of the landscape. Today, most grasslands on the Escarpment are found in pastures, hay land and in marginal areas unused for agriculture.

A photograph of a lush flower bed filled with native prairie plants. In the foreground, several yellow coneflowers with dark brown centers are prominent, interspersed with clusters of purple prairie clover. Tall, thin stalks of big bluestem grass rise above the flowers. The background shows a portion of a house with light-colored siding and a brown roof, partially obscured by the foliage.

Section One:

The Value of Grasslands

A Morden resident has planted a flower bed of native prairie plants: yellow coneflower, purple prairie clover and big bluestem grass. Some people value grasslands because of the unique native species found there.

How are grasslands ecologically valuable?

"I'd say grassland is very valuable to me because it slows the degradation and has value for wildlife. I don't like people breaking up native land because then the wildlife won't be able to live there."

—anonymous landowner

"Grasslands are better than forest for sequestering carbon when properly managed."

—Dean Hildebrand

"Grasslands are important for making healthy soil. It should be a practice that part of your property should be grassland for a time because you're replacing organic matter."

—Tim Fehr

"In the area where we are, we do a lot of monoculture in agriculture. The grasslands provide areas for birds, insects, butterflies and pollinators to have a more diverse food source and ecosystem."

—Linda Nichols

"The value of grassland is that it's a carbon sink. We need a particular amount of nature to keep the environment clean."

—anonymous landowner



How are grasslands valuable for people and communities in the RM of Stanley?

"I love sharing [my grasslands] because it's beautiful here. I think once people see that we have these beautiful places right here in our community, people will want to care for them more. The Escarpment in general needs protecting because once it's stripped then it's gone."—Gerry Peters

"I know when visitors come through the area, they are impressed with the Trans Canada Trail especially where it comes alongside creeks, along tree lines and open grassland areas. There's just huge appreciation from people outside the region for the diversity here. The grasslands add to that uniqueness."

—James Friesen

"The biggest value of grasslands is for us to have a natural environment to live in. That's my own personal value, although, that's probably the value that grasslands add to the community too."

—Gerry Peters

"It's been a concern for many, many years that the native prairies have been disappearing, so we wanted to preserve these particular places for wildlife, but also for us as humans to appreciate the past and to learn from the environment that it presents."

—Henry Martens

How are grasslands economically valuable?

"Swamp, slough, escarpment, grassland: they say it's crappy land because you can't grow potatoes on it. Well, how about when you put houses on it? Go to BC; to me that's crappy land but they pay an awful amount of money to put a house there."

—Wayne Penner

"The little bit of rent that we'd get off those grasslands isn't worth renting them for cultivation. We're only giving up about fifty bucks an acre per year, so I mean, it's not a lot of money that we're giving up. And then we get this big place, the dogs love it as you can see. Lots of room to run."

—Gerry Peters

"I was actually growing native prairie plants and selling the seeds to Ducks Unlimited when they were doing the project at Oak Hammock Marsh."

—Bill Turner

"The grassland is our livelihood. We're raising cattle and we have two bee yards which do very well here because there are no pesticides being used on our property."

—Dean Hildebrand

"I don't get any money for keeping bush, trees or grasslands. I just enjoy having it there. Different people think I'm crazy."

—anonymous landowner

The image is a landscape photograph of a grassy field. In the foreground, a large, round hay bale sits on the grass. In the background, several other hay bales are scattered across the field. A dirt road or path runs through the middle ground. The sky is filled with large, white, puffy clouds, and the overall lighting suggests a bright, sunny day. The image is split vertically into two halves: the left half is a darker, more saturated green, and the right half is a lighter, more natural green.

Section Two:

How Grasslands are Used

Grasslands can be used to make hay as shown in this picture. These hay bales will be dried in the field then used to feed livestock over winter.

What are grasslands used to produce?

We use grasslands as pasture, for honey bees, recreation. Cattle, hay and clay extraction also comes from the grassland. Once the gravel gets depleted we turn it back into grassland because there has to be some kind of revenue from the property. Sometimes it's not practical to do crops but you can comfortably grow forages.”—Tim Fehr

“We always had some land that couldn't be used for cropping; that's where we had land for livestock and haying. As I got more involved, I liked working with the livestock and the idea of putting more land back into forages because it helped reduce erosion that was happening.”

—Dean Hildebrand

“I was a rancher, so its all pasture and it's always been pasture. The one piece has been a pasture since before I was born. It had black Angus and before that it had buffalo.”

—Wayne Penner

“This is the best land in the country for growing hay - not great for crops but it can sure grow hay!”

—anonymous landowner

Are grasslands used for recreation?

"We've heard of people using our grassland for birdwatching. For myself, I go up there to find species like wild bergamot and milkweed."—Linda Nichols

"We've used the grassland for picnics and stuff, but we try not to disturb the natural growth there." —Bernie Loepky

"Different people wonder why I don't bother breaking my grassland, but it is excellent country to take the dog for a walk in." —anonymous landowner

"There were some people who visited our pasture because they loved looking at flowers, like the crocuses when they bloom. A lot of those people are fairly old now so we're losing big groups of them. Most people don't even know there are crocuses blooming half a mile from Morden in the grassland."

—Wayne Penner

"I go hunting there. There's a lot of deer so you have to."

—Wayne Penner

Do you allow others to use your grasslands?

"We had some neighbours cut trails there which have been used for hiking and mountain biking."

—Linda Nichols

"I allow people access to hike or bike and for nature observation. Those are the three uses that I would allow in our grassland."

—Bernie Loeppky

"There are some places where we've allowed the neighbor to bring his cattle fence onto our property. For my case it's just to keep some of the trees down; the cattle help it to stay as grasslands since the trees invade pretty quickly in some areas."

—Gerry Peters

"We certainly want it for people to enjoy but we don't want to have anyone starting fires. Depending on the time of year, it would be very hard to put out a grass fire. And we don't allow hunting so that people can enjoy using the trails without being afraid they'll be shot at."

—Linda Nichols

"I allow some people to come hunting late in the season."

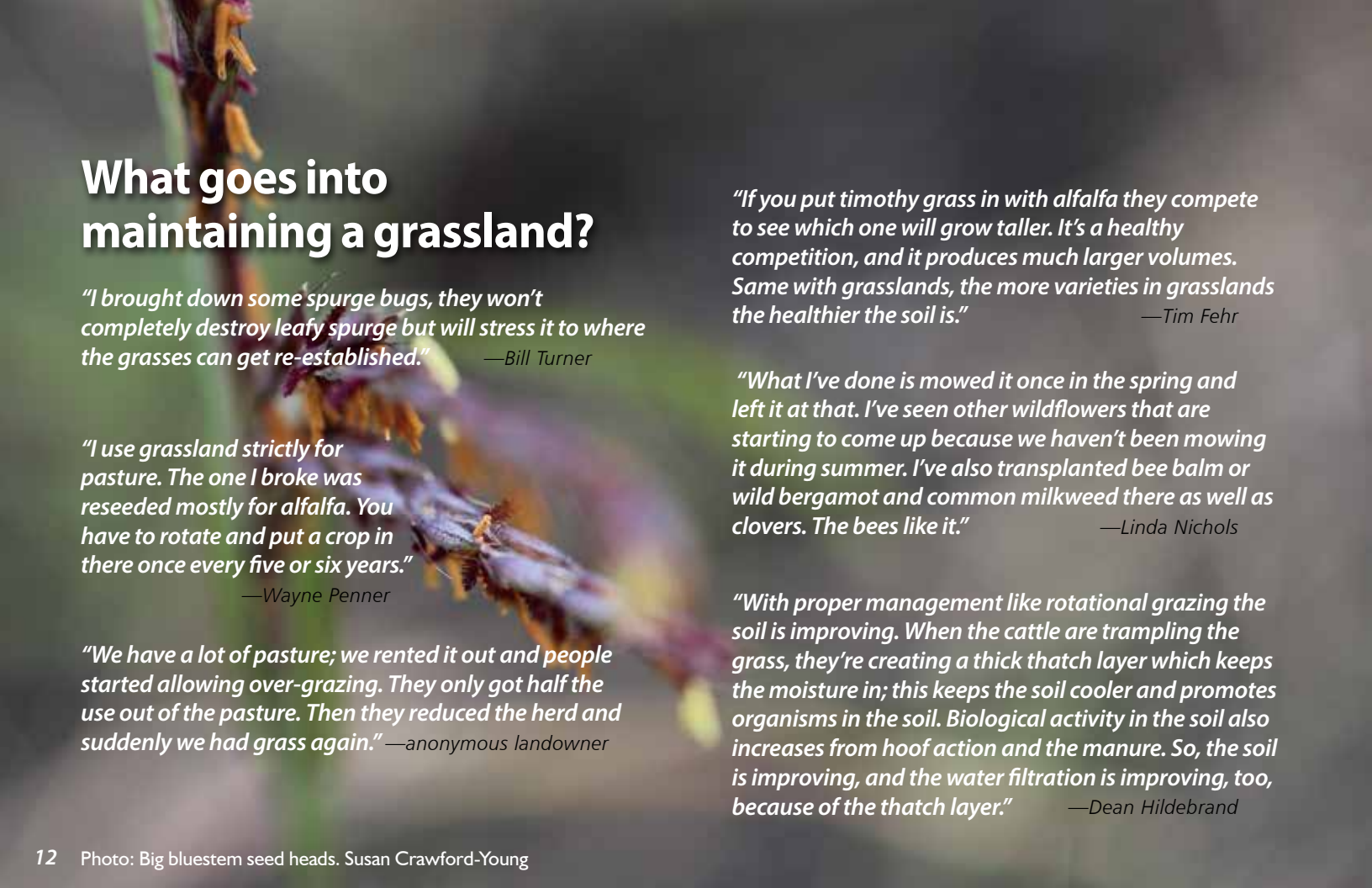
—Dean Hildebrand

Section Three:

Managing Grasslands

Local cyclists use the Trans Canada Trail to travel through a grassland area; pasture on the left and a hayfield to the right. These two grasslands are managed differently for different uses.





What goes into maintaining a grassland?

"I brought down some spurge bugs, they won't completely destroy leafy spurge but will stress it to where the grasses can get re-established."

—Bill Turner

"I use grassland strictly for pasture. The one I broke was reseeded mostly for alfalfa. You have to rotate and put a crop in there once every five or six years."

—Wayne Penner

"We have a lot of pasture; we rented it out and people started allowing over-grazing. They only got half the use out of the pasture. Then they reduced the herd and suddenly we had grass again."

—anonymous landowner

"If you put timothy grass in with alfalfa they compete to see which one will grow taller. It's a healthy competition, and it produces much larger volumes. Same with grasslands, the more varieties in grasslands the healthier the soil is."

—Tim Fehr

"What I've done is mowed it once in the spring and left it at that. I've seen other wildflowers that are starting to come up because we haven't been mowing it during summer. I've also transplanted bee balm or wild bergamot and common milkweed there as well as clovers. The bees like it."

—Linda Nichols

"With proper management like rotational grazing the soil is improving. When the cattle are trampling the grass, they're creating a thick thatch layer which keeps the moisture in; this keeps the soil cooler and promotes organisms in the soil. Biological activity in the soil also increases from hoof action and the manure. So, the soil is improving, and the water filtration is improving, too, because of the thatch layer."

—Dean Hildebrand

How is conservation a part of grasslands management?

"I think land use that optimizes the balance between generating a fair profit while allowing some of the natural riparian and grassland areas that exist on the margins to flourish, makes for a more sustainable environment. The Pembina Escarpment in particular would benefit from this balance."

—James Friesen

"Sometimes I find native grassland species growing in other areas and I dig them up and plant them on my property hoping that they'll take off. I look for ones we don't have here like prairie smoke."

—Gerry Peters

"When you stop the overgrazing for a couple of years then the flowers come back - brown-eyed Susans, crocuses, berry bushes, etc. It's beneficial."

—anonymous landowner

"Sometimes people take pictures of stuff they shouldn't...A photographer was in my grasslands and found what they said could be an endangered species and that we should shut the quarter down from grazing. Well, the only reason that plant is there is because the cattle are there. The right plant person or the right bird person knows why species are where they are."

—Wayne Penner

In what ways do you co-manage grasslands with others?

"We don't have big meetings about sharing the hay land; sometimes we park the trucks on the gravel road and talk for twenty minutes. What works is being neighbourly I guess. And like I say, we're coming from different angles but we both have common goals. We both want to conserve nature."

—Gerry Peters

"We worked with the committee to plan the Trans Canada Trail through our land. What worked was having the same goals and the same vision as to how the land would be used."

—Linda Nichols

"I let the neighbours clean the hay off it. There's too much dead grass otherwise so it's nice to get it cleaned up."

—anonymous landowner

"I manage my own grasslands the best I know how and save the rest for hunting. People come and ask to hunt on my property, so I do have some hunters every year. And, like I mentioned, I allow the bee hives and in exchange we get honey each year."

—Tim Fehr

"Alternative land use like the Trans Canada Trail relies on marginal land for its existence because anything that is arable, for the most part, is under crop most of the time. So, we depend on that co-existence between farmers being able to operate successfully while giving permission to put a trail in some of these grassland or marginal areas for all to enjoy."

—James Friesen

Section Four:

The Future of Grasslands

Many grassland areas on the Manitoba Escarpment are used for pasture. In this way, pasture management is an important part of maintaining grasslands for the future.





What future would you like grasslands to have?

"Any future development needs to be in terms of protecting the environment that is there, both grassland and wooded areas. The balance between those different types of vegetation needs to be maintained in some way."

—Bernie Loeppky

"I know there are patches of prairie to be found in marginal lands. Between municipalities and farmers, they could set some of this aside as a park just like the Binney Corner Nature Preserve."

—Bill Turner

"We don't have a lot of native prairie out there, allowing some areas to go back to the way it was before can surprise us. Things will start growing that wouldn't otherwise."

—Linda Nichols

"We practice rotational grazing of grass-fed cattle. I think that rotational grazing would be fantastic everywhere, it makes a big difference."

—Tiina Hildebrand

"We would all benefit if we saw the value of grasslands in their natural state. I think the value of open spaces for humans, animals and indigenous plant life is an idea that is growing in society, but it requires understanding and care to find creative ways of retaining these spaces so the burden doesn't exist only with the landowner."

—James Friesen

What have current trends been for the grasslands?

"With the value of the land, people are tempted to keep shrinking the size of the grasslands as much as they can and losing out on what nature's put there. It would be pretty barren if they were all gone."

—Murray Seymour

"A lot of people that have gotten out of livestock in the past few years have worked up different grasslands for cropping. It's either young people who haven't raised animals growing up. Or because ranching takes more intensive labor."

—Dean Hildebrand

"I think existing grasslands need to be protected because they have been shrinking over the years. And I think it's hardly worth the effort to put crop in what's left. And once you do, you lose the grasslands."

—Bernie Loepky

"Every time a new guy buys it you almost always lose grasslands."

—Wayne Penner

How do you think your desired future for grasslands can be achieved?

"Education is important. A lot of people are trying not to eat meat because they think it's bad for the land. They'd rather eat grain. Well, if you look at how grain is raised and compare it to how grass-fed cattle are raised, really which is better for the grasslands?" —Tiina Hildebrand

"I'd like to put native prairie in at Lake Minnewasta just to draw people's attention to the fact that the prairie is also here and has almost disappeared. It has nothing to do with money; it's about awakening to the fact that as a society we need to value the world around us. If I can establish some local prairie at this site, then all these hikers and bikers may awaken to the prairie wonder. My intent is for them to realize that these marginal lands are important."

—Bill Turner

"We need news articles and papers about the good things that farmers are doing in rural areas. People want to see greenspace on the landscape, it benefits everyone, so the folks maintaining grassland areas on their property should be compensated for what they do to help everybody in the province." —Murray Seymour

"Education is the key. If people don't know something exists, they can't properly care for it. There needs to be an effort to help people understand nature including grasslands. They need to fall in love with it, because only then will they protect it."

—Henry Martens

"Any future development needs to be done in terms of protecting the environment that is there, whether its grassland or wooded area."

—Bernie Loepky

What role should the Government have in the future of grasslands?

"It would be nice if there were more involvement from the municipality or the province in saying let's keep a percentage of our grasslands from being developed and allow them to remain natural." —Linda Nichols

"I think there is a provincial responsibility to compensate farmers or landowners who engage in conservation, who keep forests and grasslands there instead of stripping the land clean." —Murray Seymour

"We're talking carbon credits, but grasslands guys get nothing?" —Wayne Penner

"The government needs to make sure we're not penalized for protecting nature." —Bernie Loeppky

"We need a policy that you put cattle on for three months and then take them off. If you give the grass a chance to regrow you get the benefit in the long run."
—anonymous landowner

"We opt out of all government support because once you start being incentivized by somebody else, then you have to answer to them and do their paperwork. We'll incentivize ourselves. We're motivated because we feel like God wants us to do this: take care of the land, take care of the livestock, and provide good beef to people that's healthy to eat without chemicals, pesticides, growth hormones and antibiotics. That keeps us going, even when it's tough going."
—Tiina Hildebrand

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