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Review of Konza Prairie: A Tallgrass Natural History

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Konza Prairie: A Tallgrass Natural History. By O. J. Reichman. Illustrated by Teri Miller. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988. Illustrations, color photographs, index. xi + 226 pp. \$17.95.

This attractive book is perhaps the only one that has been written on the ecology of a single prairie study area; earlier classics such as J. E. Weaver's *North American Prairie* have dealt with North American prairies in general, and more recent titles, such as Terry Evans' *Prairie: Images of Ground and Sky* and Patricia Duncan's *The Prairie World* have typically attempted to show the often subtle and occasionally stark visual beauty of prairies, with an emphasis on color photography. By comparison, *Konza Prairie* approaches its subject (a protected area of about fourteen square miles in northern Kansas) as a series of extended natural history chapters, interposing short essays on some basic principles and processes such as evolution, fire, competition, and photosynthesis with descriptions of specific ecological patterns, such as grasslands, forests, soil, and streams. This interesting dichotomy, which is highlighted by printing the essays on basic processes in italics, makes for an innovative approach and convenience in locating particular kinds of discussion.

The book's approach is inviting to a lay reader; there are no distracting footnotes nor indeed any specific references at all other than some suggested sources of additional readings. I personally found this rather distressing and had to keep reminding myself that the book is not intended as a source of technical information. With this major limitation firmly in mind, it is possible to read the book with enjoyment and

with a full appreciation of Reichman's ability to present a great deal of ecological information on grassland ecology without frightening off the average reader. There are few statistics or other mathematical jargon, but a substantial amount of sometimes interesting numerical data is nevertheless presented. There is a strong sense of history in the book, both geologic and recent, and constant reminders that even under protection we cannot expect the prairie ecosystem to remain immutable. The value of Konza prairie as a natural dynamic laboratory, as well as a repository for a wide array of living organisms that are otherwise fast disappearing as a result of human influences over most of the prairie grassland region, is often reinforced.

The book is pleasantly illustrated with fifty ink drawings by Teri Miller and by eighteen color photographs apparently chosen more for their information content than for simple pictorial beauty. An indication of scale would have been helpful for some of the drawings, especially those of very small objects. I found only a few specific errors, such as the statement that "most" owls have asymmetrical skulls (only a small percentage do), but such problems are inevitable since one must confront virtually the whole biological world when discussing prairie ecology.

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