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Where the Sky Began

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WHERE THE SKY BEGAN

Where the Sky Began: Land of the Tallgrass Prairie. John Madson. 1995. Iowa State University Press, Ames. 326 pages. \$24.95 (cloth).

"My own feeling for tallgrass prairie is that of modern man fallen in love with the face in a faded tintype. Only the frame is still real; the rest is illusion and dream. So it is with the original prairie. The beautiful face of it had faded before I was born, before I had a chance to touch and feel it, and all that I have known of the prairie is the setting and mood—that broad sky of pure and intense light, with a sort of loftiness to the days, and the young prairie-born winds running past me from open horizons."

Although used as a conclusion to the book, this passage could just as easily have introduced and set the framework for John Madson's eloquent discussion of the once and former vast tallgrass prairie ecosystem of North America. In this revision of the author's classic 1982 work, Madson makes it clear that he is a prairie lover through and through. The book is divided into two parts: *The Place and The People*. Beginning with the early settlers of the continent's expectations of the new land and how their experiences did not prepare them for the vast eastern forests, the author describes the movement west and, for some, their revelry in the openness of the land and sky, and, for others, the oppressive loneliness of the treeless prairie. There are chapters on the formation of the prairie, the geology, climate, and soils that combined in this region to provide the environment that favored prairie grasses and forbs. The importance of fire in the natural history of the prairie, and the necessity of settlers to deal with its potentially devastating effects, and how prairie resulted in fire, not vice-versa, are described. The unique adaptations of prairie plants and animals to their environment and the basis of the prairies' ultimate demise—its exceptionally fertile soils—are well covered. I was particularly interested in the chapter on the weather of the region—the blizzards, extremes in daily and seasonally temperatures, tornados, and drought. As Madson describes it, "It is a region where giant airs wrestle at the outer edge of the montane rain shadow, filling the skies with fury that always spends itself and abates in periods of peace and beauty, tempering and strengthening the land below."

In "The People," Madson treats the white settlers: the values they brought with them; their sufferings at the hands of the weather, fire, and disease; their simple lifestyle; their lack of appreciation for education that was not applicable to the daily business of providing for necessities; and their community mindedness. An expanded chapter on prairie restoration techniques and restoration projects gives recognition to the tremendous increase in interest in this subject since the first edition was issued over a decade ago. Along with the chapter on restoration is a new appendix listing midwestern prairie nurseries and sources of seed. The appendix listing representative tallgrass prairies has been updated and includes a short description of each site.

The book is an extremely well-written, generally complete discussion of the many faces of the prairie. Deficiencies I noted are the lack of discussion of positive land-use practices that have occurred in the last ten years such as the Conservation Reserve Program and the adoption by many farmers of no-till practices. A discussion of the plight of many grassland bird populations is also missing.

The revised edition includes some additional information regarding prairie restoration, but on whole, it is essentially a reprint of the 1982 edition. New readers will enjoy and learn from it, but for those familiar with the first edition, I would recommend dusting it off for a re-read.--James J. Ruwaldt, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bloomington, IN 47403.

MAMMALS OF THE SOUTH-CENTRAL STATES

Handbook of Mammals of the South-Central States. Jerry R. Choate, J. Knox Jones, Jr., and Clyde Jones. 1994. Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge. 304 pages. \$30.00 (cloth).

The authors have been largely successful in their stated effort to provide a concise field guide that includes both diagnostic information and summaries of natural histories for mammals of the south-central states (Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi and Tennessee). The geographical coverage of this volume is particularly welcome, as there are no modern mammalian treatises available for three of the states, and ecological research efforts concentrating on mammals have been sporadic or localized throughout most of the region.

The book begins with a short introduction to the climate and physiography of the region, followed by an interesting discussion of the influence of physiography and habitats on the zoogeography of the south-central states. This discussion is marred somewhat by the use of 'spaghetti diagrams' of species distributions, which do not clearly reveal suggested patterns. Most of the remainder of the book is devoted to dichotomous keys, descriptions, photographs, and range maps. The keys are particularly useful, with individual keys provided for orders, families, and for the species within families. Characters used generally include at least one readily observable external character, paired with at least one more precise diagnostic character such as a skeletal feature. Frequent use of anatomical terms in the keys will keep students flipping from the key to the glossary. The range maps are well done, although they stop at the borders of the seven-state area. A welcome feature would be an inset map to show the species' distributions across a broader geographic area. Most of the black-and-white photographs are excellent, although color would be valuable for distinguishing among some species. Some photos show obviously dead or anesthetized specimens; fortunately these are few in number.