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Review of The Shortgrass Prairie

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The Shortgrass Prairie. By Ruth Carol Cushman and Stephen R. Jones. Boulder, Colo.: Pruett Publishing Company, 1988. Map, photographs, appendices, bibliography, index. 118 pp. \$18.95.

Perhaps the most poorly known and least appreciated ecosystem in all of the U.S. is the shortgrass prairie. It is not as though this vegetation type only occurs in a limited area of the country. Shortgrass prairie dominates the landscape of an enormous region stretching from Canada to New Mexico. Why is there so little understanding of this expansive grassland? Perhaps it is because few people have bothered to write about it. Ruth Cushman and Stephen Jones took on this task and we may be thankful to have their book, *The Shortgrass Prairie*.

The book begins rather poetically, recounting various impressions of the landscape—how

it made people feel. From this point the authors enter gradually into a discussion of the forces and events that have shaped this region and made it what it is today. In this context they deal with geology, prehistoric life, climatic change, plant adaptations, and the wildlife of the shortgrass prairie.

Two chapters focus on the impact of man on the Plains. "Footsteps Past" and "Footsteps Present" move the reader from the prehistoric migration of man onto the Plains all the way to modern day controversies over range management techniques. The need for conservation and preservation is stressed.

The final chapter, entitled "Revery," is a collection of photographs accompanied by a brief text quoting the responses of various people to the question, "What do you like best about the prairie?" It is a delightful conclusion to the book. Appendices listing plants and animals of the region are included at the end, as well as a useful listing of selected places to see shortgrass prairie.

The photography, which is excellent, adds a great deal to the text. It appears that the majority of the photographs were taken in eastern Colorado, which is understandable since both authors reside in Boulder. It might have been interesting, however, to have included

more scenes from areas to the north and south, such as western Nebraska or northeastern New Mexico. The only serious flaws noted by this reviewer were a few pages with rather blurry printing of the text, which may have been an isolated occurrence limited to the reviewer's copy.

In *The Shortgrass Prairie* Cushman and Jones have succeeded in capturing not only the essence of the region but also a glimpse of the complexity that underlies the apparent simplicity of the landscape. To the reviewer's knowledge, this is the first book totally dedicated to the subject, which alone makes it a valuable contribution. The importance of this book does not lie in its content only, however; it is more than a technical treatment to be read by a limited audience of range scientists or prairie aficionados. The enjoyable writing style and evocative photography in *The Shortgrass Prairie* make it a book that will appeal to general readers and perhaps develop in them a greater appreciation for this subtly magnificent region.

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