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Review of *The National Grasslands: A Guide to America's Undiscovered Treasures* By Francis Moul

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The National Grasslands: A Guide to America's Undiscovered Treasures. By Francis Moul. Photography by Georg Joutas. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006. xii + 153 pp. Photographs, maps, notes, index. \$19.95 paper.

When one first opens a book one never quite knows what to expect (one of the joys of reading!). That was the case with *The National Grasslands: A Guide to America's Undiscovered Treasures*. The title suggests a field guide to the nooks and crannies of the national grasslands whereas the stunning photography suggests a coffee-table book. So I was surprised to find something much deeper. This book is also an excellent account of the history of the national grasslands and, more importantly, a discussion of their future.

In a style as refreshing as a prairie breeze, Moul begins by describing the formation of the Great Plains. Then he navigates his way through the convoluted and painful human history of the grasslands, a journey made easier by his deft mixing of arcane government programs and personal accounts of the European settlers.

The least satisfying part of the book, oddly enough, is the middle section, the "guide" to the grasslands. Much of the information seems to come straight from Web sites or Forest Service employees. Unfortunately, there are several errors. For example, there is reference to "long-tailed badgers" (did he combine a badger and a long-tailed weasel?), "western wheat needle" grass (apparently a mixing of two different species), and a "grass sparrow" (he probably meant grasshopper sparrow). And while the grassland maps are a good start, any visitor to the sites would want a Forest Service-produced map because of the checkerboard ownership within the grassland boundaries.

Similar to the Buffalo Commons idea of Frank and Deborah Popper, Moul in the last chapter ("Bison Instead of Cattle?") uses bison as a metaphor for change. He correctly notes that in many rural Great Plains counties "the biggest income maker is not agriculture and cattle but transfer payments from government

sources.” Like other scholars, Moul recognizes the value of public land consolidation in terms of ecotourism, biodiversity conservation, government efficiency, and economic relief for farmers and ranchers. His unique proposal is to use the mineral royalties generated from the national grasslands for funding land trades and purchases within the acquisition boundaries.

Perhaps the book’s greatest value is its eloquent and passionate advocacy for one of the grandest but most ignored biomes in North America. As a new Farm Bill looms on

the horizon and the area continues to suffer socioeconomically, the volume’s relevance increases. Rather than seeing the end of the Great Plains, Moul and Joutras see a new chapter in this long saga, with the national grasslands playing a key role.

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