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Fall 2005

Review of *Playas of the Great Plains* by Loren M. Smith

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Locklear, James H., "Review of *Playas of the Great Plains* by Loren M. Smith" (2005). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 796.
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Playas of the Great Plains. By Loren M. Smith. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003. xvi + 257 pp. Illustrations, tables, appendix, references, index. \$60.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

Loren M. Smith and his students at Texas Tech have been studying the ecology of playas for two decades. *Playas of the Great Plains* is the fruit of that work.

Playas (or playa lakes) are shallow, circular basins that hold water following rainstorms but usually dry up later in the growing season. These unique, ephemeral wetlands occur in arid and semi-arid environments around the world, but nowhere more abundantly than on the tablelands of the Southern Great Plains of North America.

Playas are the most significant topographical feature and hydrological attribute of the Southern Great Plains, making their ecology and influence on human relationships of great interest to students of the region. These wetlands are most numerous and occur in greatest density on the Llano Estacado of the Texas Panhandle and adjacent New Mexico. Playas occur as well in the Oklahoma Panhandle and adjacent southwestern Kansas, and in eastern Colorado

and Wyoming. Smith also includes the Rainwater Basin region of south-central Nebraska in his treatment.

Playas of the Great Plains provides a comprehensive, systematic survey of the key details of playa ecology. The first two chapters set the stage by defining and classifying playas, describing the environmental context in which they occur, and presenting theories of the processes responsible for their development. The next three chapters offer detailed information on the plants, animals, and ecological processes associated with playas, with particular emphasis on their importance to migrating waterfowl and shorebirds. The book concludes with chapters on the historical, cultural, and societal values of playas, threats to their ecological integrity, and playa conservation.

While *Playas of the Great Plains* will be most appreciated by wildlife managers and natural history enthusiasts, the book also presents interesting information on playas in the context of human existence on the Great Plains. Smith covers this subject from Paleoindians through the present day, citing observations by members of the Coronado Expedition of 1541 and discussing the uses of the playa region by historic Plains Indian tribes, “buffalo hunters,” and the cattle industry. Historians, sociologists, geographers, and general readers with an interest in the cultural history of the Plains should find this information interesting and valuable.

The volume’s only minor deficiency is its omission of a significant but poorly-known region of playas on the Plains of east-central Colorado, notable as the native range of Colorado bursage (*Ambrosia linearis*), an endemic plant that occurs here in association with seasonally wet habitat. Smith acknowledges in his preface the need for more study of playas farther north in the Plains.

As a scientist, Loren Smith has made tremendous contributions to our understanding of playa ecology. Through *Playas of the Great Plains* he makes a further contribution by helping a wider audience understand the uniqueness and importance of these signature features of the Southern Great Plains. **James H. Locklear**, *Nebraska Statewide Arboretum, University of Nebraska–Lincoln*.