

An Unnatural History

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October 31, 2008

Mention the word ‘prairie’ and people will generally think of grass. Lots of the stuff, brown and extending farther than the average person is willing to walk. The sad reality is that this once expansive landscape has been miniaturized into fragments not much larger than suburban lawns; the pieces that remain did so by evading the farmer and his plow.

These so-called “postage stamp” prairies are hardly recognizable as such to the untrained eye. By reducing the size of this landscape we have simultaneously applied a magnifying glass to it. No longer are the terms ‘grassland’ and ‘prairie’ synonymous—in losing the expanse of the prairie, we are forced to examine it closely and realize that there is much more than grass that meets the eye. Even the term grass is misleadingly simplistic. Each individual stem of big and little bluestem, side-oats gramma, switchgrass, prairie dropseed, porcupine grass, and Carolina lovegrass warrant attention: the prairie is truly a menagerie of grasses rather than a single clump of grass.

In the space between each of these individual grasses one will find an array of plants, many of which are equally delightful and strange. Aldo Leopold’s beloved *Silphium*, the compass plant, towers over the rest, but displays its daisy-like flowers modestly, perhaps wishing to conceal the genius adaptation for which it gets its name: its leaves point north and south to avoid mid-day desiccation. *Baptisia* is also bizarre in appearance, from a distance it tantalizes observers by invoking thoughts of chocolate-covered tumbleweeds. Moving closer, it becomes obvious that this bushy plant is covered in hundreds of hard-shelled pods that create a percussive melody with each gust of wind. Plants like prairie bush-clover, which might appear normal in a suburban garden, invoke thoughts of furry rodents suspended in mid-air when placed against the prairie background.

Many might argue that in fragmenting this once continuous landscape we have lost the grandeur of the prairie. It seems to me that what has been lost in spacial grandeur is made up for by the added attention that each individual species can now receive as an integral part of the remaining prairie ecosystem.