



Panhandle Prairies

landscape occupies the plains and rolling hills of the northern Panhandle from the Pine Ridge south to the North Platte River valley. It includes the rough breaks and rocky outcrops associated with the Niobrara River in central Sioux County and the North Platte River in Scotts Bluff and Morrill counties. The plains include isolated sand dunes in west-central Sioux County. These dunes support Sandhills dune prairie and sandsage prairie. The landscape is occupied primarily by native prairie with only scattered cropland.



This BUL supports extensive, intact native prairie inhabited by swift fox, prairie dogs, and grassland birds. The North Platte National Wildlife Refuge and a couple of small wildlife management areas are the only protected lands in this landscape.

Stresses Affecting Species and Habitats

- ❖ Specific livestock grazing and haying practices that may reduce native plant diversity and promote uniform habitat structure
- ❖ Invasive plant species, primarily cheatgrass
- ❖ Potential disease in prairie dog populations that can quickly kill an entire colony
- ❖ Conversion of prairie to cropland (e.g., in the Niobrara River valley)
- ❖ Fence type and placement that significantly hinders wildlife
- ❖ Potential losses in CRP enrollment
- ❖ De-watering of the Niobrara River
- ❖ Infrastructure development (e.g., roads, utility-scale wind turbines) in native grasslands

Conservation Strategies

- ❖ Implement ecologically-sensitive grazing and haying strategies on native prairies on private lands, in combination with prescribed fire and rest. In appropriate areas, these strategies can be designed to benefit mountain plover nesting.
- ❖ Coordinate with interested landowners to protect key high-quality sites through conservation easements or voluntary fee title acquisition
- ❖ Re-enrollment of CRP lands and/or establishment of grazing strategies appropriate to the local flora on lands coming out of CRP enrollment
- ❖ Facilitate the establishment of prescription burn associations
- ❖ Promotion of fencing methods that are less detrimental to pronghorn antelope and other wildlife

- ❖ Environmental education to address water conservation strategies
- ❖ Work with wind energy companies to select turbine sites that minimize fragmentation and impacts to native species. Avoid placing wind turbines in native prairies. See Nebraska Game and Parks Commission guidelines for wind energy development.

Collaborative Conservation Opportunities across State Borders

Coordinate with Wyoming conservation agencies and organizations, particularly efforts to benefit like species of greatest conservation need on the NE Panhandle Prairies/WY border (i.e., Goshen County in WY). Identified species include swift fox, burrowing owl, ferruginous hawk, long-billed curlew, and McCown's longspur. Species lists may be modified as new information becomes available. Innovative methods for sufficient information exchange could aid the collaborative process.

Coordinated wildlife management actions should mirror conservation actions (e.g., financial incentives to landowners for grassland conservation) identified in the Wyoming State Wildlife Action Plan. Collaborative conservation efforts across state borders should include researchers, federal and non-profit environmental program coordinators, and landowners, particularly those with properties extending over state lines. It will be necessary to identify and develop staffing and funding sources for implementation of conservation actions beyond state boundaries.

Tier I At-risk Species

Plants:

Blowout Penstemon
 Gordon's Wild Buckwheat³
 Large-spike Prairie-clover

Animals:

Swift Fox
 Brewer's Sparrow
 Burrowing Owl
 Ferruginous Hawk
 Loggerhead Shrike
 Long-billed Curlew
 Chestnut-collared Longspur³
 McCown's Longspur³
 Nine-spotted Ladybird Beetle¹
 Regal Fritillary
 Finescale Dace
 Northern Redbelly Dace

Plains Topminnow

Sagebrush Lizard²

Aquatic Communities:

Headwater, Warm Water Stream

Terrestrial Communities:

Pine-Juniper Scarp Woodland

Rocky Mountain Juniper Woodland

Buckbrush Shrubland

Buffaloberry Shrubland

Chokecherry-Plum Shrub Thicket

Freshwater Seep

Western Alkaline Meadow

Western Sedge Wet Meadow*

Cattail Shallow Marsh

Sandsage Prairie

Western Sand Prairie*

Threadleaf Sedge Western Mixed-grass Prairie*

Wheatgrass Western Mixed-grass Prairie*

Western Floodplain Terrace Grassland

Rock Outcrop*

* Priority for conservation in this BUL

¹ This is the only BUL where the species is known to occur

² Known to occur in only one other BUL

³ Known to occur in only two other BULs

⁴ Known to occur in only three other BULs