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Book Review: *The Land Where the Sky Begins: North America's Endangered Tall Grass Prairie and Aspen Parkland* Photography by Dennis Fast. Text by Barbara Huck

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The Land Where the Sky Begins: North America's Endangered Tall Grass Prairie and Aspen Parkland. Photography by Dennis Fast. Text by Barbara Huck. Winnipeg, MB: Heartland Associates Inc., 2007. 160 pp. Photographs, maps. C\$29.95 cloth.

The Land Where the Sky Begins is a small coffee-table book, elegantly illustrated with photographs and a few drawings of the critically endangered tallgrass prairie, and the more extensive neighboring aspen parkland. It covers, in surprising detail given its diminutive size, the evolution of grasslands and aspen parkland and describes, primarily by season, a number of typical plant and animal species that inhabit these systems.

The photographs are absolutely exquisite and far more than simply a backdrop to the lyrical text. They are really responsible for developing the images of the complex habitats described. The photos are beautifully composed and displayed, providing a captivating image of prairies and parklands, yet are not so taken with their own aesthetic as to obscure an accurate reflection of the nature of these ecosystems.

The text is generally accurate, comprehensive, and engagingly detailed. It is liltingly written and sprinkled with enough descriptions of individual species to develop the reader's rapport with these habitats. Even prairie ecologists are likely to learn some new trivia about particular species, or perhaps pick up an enticing recipe or two. The

conservation message, succinctly embedded in the text, is clear without being overwhelming.

Deviations from accuracy are generally only a minor annoyance (for example, the “common” flicker should be more appropriately called a northern flicker), or *almost* reach the point of exaggeration. For example, big bluestem is described as “stretch[ing] skyward until it is as tall as a man on horseback” While historical records suggest that, strictly speaking, big bluestem could reach this height under ideal growing conditions, it is misleading to imply that it generally does so today; under normal growing conditions in the northern portions of its range, for example, I would expect big bluestem to be quite a bit shorter than a rather small man on a rather small pony.

Although the maps provided are useful and interesting, I found myself frustrated that there was no detailed map of the locations referred to in the text. For instance, it seems unreasonable for anyone but local Manitobans to know where Birds Hill and Grand Beach are; readers’ understanding of the development of the prairies would be significantly improved with the addition of a detailed map.

The only significant disappointment in the book is the chapter on the people of the prairies. Mislabeled in the table of contents, the chapter is disorganized, Eurocentric, and hard to follow, in sharp contrast with the fluent and fluid chapters that focus on natural history. At the very least, a basic description of the historical Native American cultures that inhabited the tallgrass and aspen parkland systems would seem to be in order, but is lacking.

Despite this disappointment, *The Land Where the Sky Begins* is an engaging tribute to two diverse and underappreciated ecological systems. It is likely to be lightly informative to even prairie ecologists, and of significant interest to the general public. I am currently debating which of my family members will get copies for gifts . . . probably the most telling recommendation of all. **Nicola Koper**, *Natural Resources Institute, University of Manitoba*.