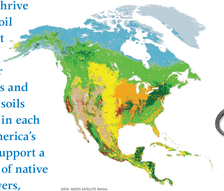
Mima Mounds: A Special Prairie

What Makes a Prairie?

Grasslands thrive where dry soil and frequent drought or fires limit or exclude trees and shrubs. The soils and climate in each of North America's grasslands support a unique mix of native grasses, flowers, and other plants.



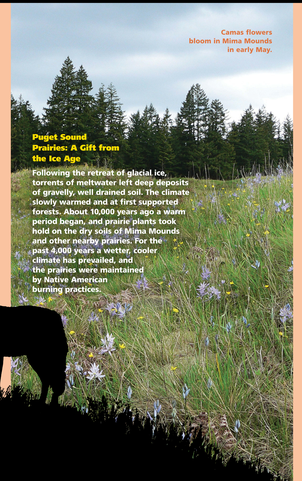
DATA: MODIS SATELLITE IMAGE

What Does the Word "Prairie" Mean?

Prairie is the word used to describe level or gently rolling grasslands in North America. The name probably comes from early French explorers—**prairie** means **meadow** in French.

Puget Sound Prairies Are Unique

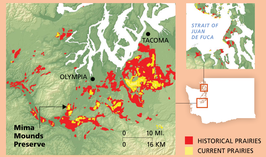
The west side of the Cascade Mountains is known for forests, rivers, lakes and saltwater bays. Prairies and oak woodlands are found in this landscape in areas of dry soil. They are threatened by invasive species and development. Grassland plants and oak trees provide food for insects, birds and animals that can't live in other habitats. They are important to Washington's biodiversity — its "web of life."



Camas flowers bloom in Mima Mounds in early May.

Puget Sound Prairies: A Gift from the Ice Age

Following the retreat of glacial ice, torrents of meltwater left deep deposits of gravelly, well drained soil. The climate slowly warmed and at first supported forests. About 10,000 years ago a warm period began, and prairie plants took hold on the dry soils of Mima Mounds and other nearby prairies. For the past 4,000 years a wetter, cooler climate has prevailed, and the prairies were maintained by Native American burning practices.



Where Are Prairies Found?

Prairies once covered about 180,000 acres in western Washington. High quality native prairies cover only about three percent of this area today. Red areas on the map show glacial outwash soils. These areas were once covered with prairie vegetation. Only the areas shown in yellow remain as prairies.

1 Western meadowlark
2 Northern alligator lizard
3 Coyote
4 Anise swallowtail caterpillar
5 Common black ground beetle
6 Fine-leaved desert parsley
7 Ant
8 Northern harrier
9 Carolina locust grasshopper
10 Columbia black-tailed deer
11 Red-tailed hawk
12 Roemer's fescue
13 Savannah sparrow
14 Turkey vulture
15 American kestrel
16 Early blue violet
17 Zerene fritillary
18 Western terrestrial garter snake
19 Townsend's meadow vole
20 White-tailed kite
21 Ochre ringlet
22 Oregon white oak
23 White-crowned sparrow
24 White-top aster
25 Puget Sound fritillary
26 Golden northern bumble bee
27 Western bluebird

Ecological Connections

Grasses, flowers and other plants support the food web of prairies. Butterflies thrive on flower nectar and may use just one plant species to host their caterpillars. Bees pollinate the flowers. Ground-nesting birds hide their nests among the grasses and forage for plentiful bugs. Townsend's voles feast on prairie plants and insects, and build runways in the soil duff. The abundance of small mammals, birds and insects draws predators like hawks, falcons and coyotes.