

# TALLGRASS

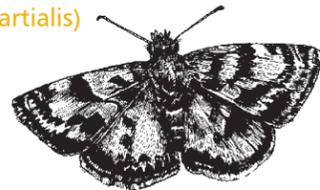
FACTSHEET 3

O N T A R I O

Ontario Tallgrass Prairie and Savanna Association

## Mottled Duskywing

(*Erynnis martialis*)



This small butterfly has a wingspan of 2.9 - 4.2 cm (1 1/8 - 1 5/8 in). The upperside of the wings are brown with irregular dark bands that give it a mottled appearance. The caterpillars feed almost exclusively on New Jersey tea while the adults take nectar from plants such as hoary vervain and gromwell. It is found in savannas, open woodlands, prairie hills and open brushy fields. This butterfly is considered very rare in Ontario.

## Northern Bobwhite

(*Colinus virginianus*)

This small, rotund member of the quail family was once a common bird in rural Ontario, living in prairies, savannas, farms, brushy open areas and along the

edges of woodlands. Today, the only relatively stable population occurs on Walpole Island. This ground-dwelling bird is about 20 cm (8 in) in size with a short dark tail. The male has a conspicuous white throat and white brow stripe while in the female, these are buff coloured. It sings *Bob-white!* or *Poor, Bob-whoit!* It feeds primarily on seeds.

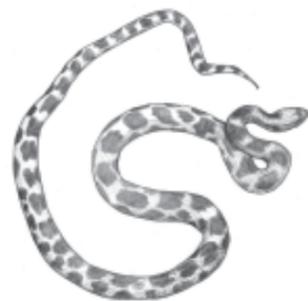
Efforts to re-introduce the bobwhite to Ontario are ongoing.



## Eastern Fox Snake

(*Elaphe vulpina gloydi*)

Fox snakes range from 91 - 183 cm (3 - 6 ft) in length when mature. They are yellowish in colour with dark brown blotches along their back and sides. The head can be brown to reddish, while the belly is yellow and checkered with black. It feeds primarily on small mammals, frogs, and birds. These snakes are docile and harmless but are often killed by people who mistake them for the venomous copperhead snake which does not occur in Ontario. The eastern fox snake lives in oak savannas and prairies and lakeside marshes within the Great Lakes basin. It is a threatened species in Ontario.



## Identifying Tallgrass Prairie Species

Whether you are interested in planting a tallgrass prairie garden, preserving a remnant savanna or just visiting a nearby tallgrass nature reserve, learning some of the key or indicator plants will make it more enjoyable and rewarding.

Ontario's prairies and savannas contain many plants and animals you are unlikely to encounter elsewhere. This factsheet outlines 10 plant and four animal species that rely to some degree on tallgrass prairie and savanna habitats.

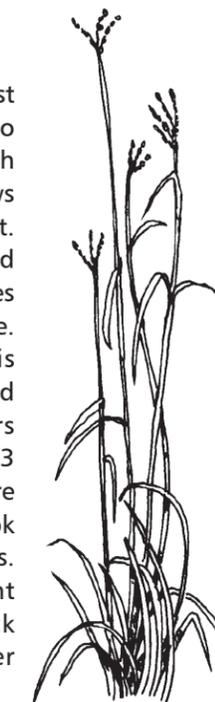
- Big Bluestem
- Little Bluestem
- Indian Grass
- Switchgrass
- Black Oak
- Showy Tick-trefoil
- Round-head Bush-clover
- Butterfly Milkweed
- New Jersey Tea
- American Badger
- Mottled Duskywing
- Northern Bobwhite
- Eastern Fox Snake
- Slender Blazingstar



## Big Bluestem

(*Andropogon gerardii*)

Big bluestem is one of the most dominant grasses of Ontario prairies. It is at home in both moist and dry sites and grows to 2.5 metres (8.2 ft) in height. The leaves are long, dull, and the whole plant turns shades of red, brown and deep purple. The common name for this grass is turkey foot, so called because the flower clusters (racemes) are arranged in 2-3 short spikes. These 'feet' are easy to pick out when you look across a span of prairie grasses. Big bluestem is an excellent forage plant and livestock choose it over many other species.



## Round-head Bush-clover

(*Lespedeza capitata*)

This attractive little plant has creamy-white flowers with purple spots that bloom in summer or fall. The roundish flowers grow in dense clusters at the top of the hairy stem or in the upper leaf axils. This plant is relatively short at 0.6 - 1.5 m (2-5 ft) and prefers dry, sandy soils. The leaflets are long, narrow and downy beneath. The seed pods have a single oval or roundish joint and are not sticky or clinging. Like other members of the pea or legume family, the roots of the round-head bush-clover contain nitrogen-fixing bacteria that convert nitrogen to usable forms.

## Recommended Reading

Rodger, Lindsay. 1998. *Tallgrass Communities of Southern Ontario: A Recovery Plan*. Ministry of Natural Resources and World Wildlife Fund.

The Peterson Field Guide Series. Available in most bookstores.

Brown, Lauren. 1979. *Grasses: An Identification Guide*. Sponsored by the Roger Tory Peterson Institute. Houghton Mifflin Co.

## For More Information

For more information on tallgrass prairies and savannas and conservation efforts, contact:

### Head Office:

**Tallgrass Ontario**  
1095 Wonderland Rd. S  
Box 21034 RPO Wonderland S.  
London, ON  
N6K 0C7

[www.tallgrassontario.org](http://www.tallgrassontario.org)  
[info@tallgrassontario.org](mailto:info@tallgrassontario.org)

The production of this factsheet has been supported in part by:

The Donner  
Canadian  
Foundation



© 1986 Panda Symbol WWF  
© WWF Registered Trademark

© Tallgrass Ontario, 2001; 2018  
Second Printing, 2004.

This factsheet is one in a series about Ontario's tallgrass prairie and savanna communities. Some of these include:

- #1 Get up, get out and see some tallgrass
- #2 Fire and the prairie
- #3 Identifying tallgrass prairie species
- #4 An owner's guide to managing tallgrass prairie and savanna
- #5 Looking for help?

Illustrations by Judie Shore.



Burnie the Badger

## Tallgrass Facts

Percentage Tree Cover	Prairie Makeup
Prairie <10%	Grasses 50-70%
Savanna 10-35%	Flowers 30-50%
Woodland 35-60%	

### Indian Grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*)



Indian grass is another dominant grass of Ontario prairies. This tall handsome plant is drought tolerant and grows to 2 metres (6.6 ft). It flowers in late summer to early autumn and the inflorescence is strikingly yellow. When mature, the golden coloured, thick seed head tends to bend or droop under its weight, hence the Latin name, *nutans*, to nod. Indian grass is host to the larvae of the wood satyr and common wood nymph butterflies. This grass is also very nutritious for livestock.

### Switch Grass (*Panicum virgatum*)

Switch grass is another core species of the tallgrass prairie. It grows in big leafy



clumps up to 2.1 m (7 ft) in height and on a range of soil types. The flowers are purple in colour but fade to tan. The inflorescence (assemblage of flowers on the stem) is sparse and delicate as the thin, wiry branches are naked for most of their length. Overall, the seed head has a diamond shape in profile. The Latin name *virgatum*, means wand-like. In the winter, switch grass is yellow or straw coloured, providing a touch of brightness on dark days. This grass is also a good forage plant for cattle.

### Little Bluestem

(*Schizachyrium scoparium*)

Little bluestem is one of the shorter grasses in a prairie, growing to only 0.7 metres (2.2 ft). The flowering part of the plant (inflorescence) has a feathery appearance, hence its Latin name, *scoparius*, meaning broom. The young shoots are blue-green in colour, but the plant turns a rich mixture of tan, brown and wine-red in late summer and autumn. Little bluestem begins its growth late in the season and remains vigorous even in the extreme drought of late summer. The larval stages of many butterflies feed on its leaf blades including crossline, dusted, Indian and Leonards skipper.



### Butterfly Milkweed

(*Asclepias tuberosa*)

This showy milkweed has brilliant orange flowers arranged in a flat-topped cluster at the top of a rough, hairy stem. As the name suggests, the shooting-star shaped flowers attract many species of butterflies, notably the monarch. Butterfly milkweed is a small plant, growing to 0.6 m (2 ft) in height, with narrow leaves that grow alternately on the stem. The seed pods are spindle-shaped, 10-13 cm (4-5 in) long, and inside the flat brown seeds are attached to silky hairs. Unlike other milkweeds, the juice is watery and colourless, not milky. This attractive wildflower is very popular with gardeners.



### Showy Tick-trefoil

(*Desmodium canadense*)

This member of the pea family has large 1 cm (1/2 inch) rose-purple flowers arranged in dense racemes at the top of a hairy, leafy stem. Like many other prairie wildflowers, showy tick-trefoil depend on bees and other insects for pollination. Tall and robust, it reaches 1.8 m (6 ft) in height, almost as tall as some of the grasses it grows with. The leaves are clover-like and divided into three leaflets, the middle one with a long stalk. The seed pods have 3-5 joints and are very sticky when mature, clinging easily to clothing or fur.



### Black Oak (*Quercus velutina*)



Black oak is the dominant tree of southern Ontario savannas, and grows in characteristic open stands in full sunlight. A small tree, it can reach 20 m in height. As the name implies, the bark is almost black in colour and deeply furrowed into squarish ridges. Black oak hybridizes with red and pin oak and so its characteristics are variable. The 15 cm long leaves are shiny dark green above and yellowish-brown below with tiny hairs along the veins. There are five to seven lobes that end in sharp bristles while the lobes are separated by deep U-shaped notches. The acorns are small, 12-20 mm long, with a thin, scaly cap that covers about half of the nut. Acorns are an important food for many small mammals, especially rodents.

### Slender or Cylindrical Blazing-star

(*Liatrix cylindracea*)

The slender blazing-star has striking rose-purple, button-like flowers that grow along the stem in long spikes. Each plant has only one or a few flowering heads, and each head contains 20-50 florets. Sharp pointed bracts form a tight cylinder around the base of each flower, hence the name. It blooms in mid to late summer but, unlike most spiked flowers, the flowers open from the top

downwards. The narrow leaves grow along the length of the stem. Blazing-stars attract an array of adult stage butterflies and their corms (root-like structure) are food for a variety of rodents. It grows to 75 cm (2.5 ft) in height.



### New Jersey Tea

(*Ceanothus americanus*)

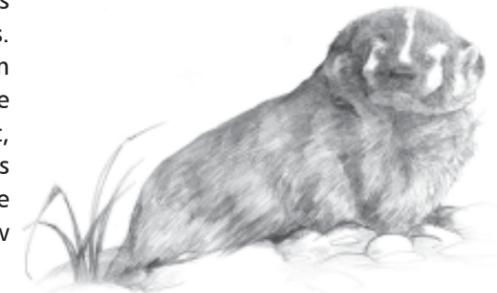
New Jersey tea is one of only a few shrubs common to Ontario prairies and savannas. This attractive low shrub grows to 1.2 m (4 ft) and is woody only near its base. The tiny five-petaled flowers grow in short, dense clusters at the tips of long stalks and bloom in summer. The leaves are finely toothed and egg-shaped and grow



alternately on the stem. True to its name, an excellent tea can be made from the dried leaves. It is the host plant of the rare mottled duskywing butterfly.

### American Badger (*Taxidea taxus*)

Badgers are relatively large members of the weasel family. They measure 52 - 88 cm (2-3 ft) from head to tail. Short and stocky legs support a somewhat flattened body. The fur on the back and flanks ranges from grayish to reddish. A distinguishing white stripe extends over the back of the head from the upturned snout to the rump. In northern populations the stripe ends near the shoulders. This seldom-seen, nocturnal animal lives in sandy areas where it uses its powerful forelimbs to tunnel for food, primarily burrowing rodents.



## Number of vascular plant species associated with Tallgrass Prairie and Savanna in Ontario

Grasses	31	Trees	7
Rushes and Sedges	28	Shrubs and Vines	10
Flowers	133		

(Source: Natural Heritage Information Centre)