

Enjoy the Subtle Beauty of the Prairie

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

It's sometimes funny how a series of events will come along and how they will impact you. A few days ago a friend of a friend sort of connection commented that they were driving across Kansas and were complaining about how boring and dull it was. Hmm. A few days later I was driving back from Topeka on I-70 thinking to myself how absolutely beautiful it was.

I grew up on a farm in east central Nebraska and then moved to Kansas after college. Except for a summer in college when I lived and worked in Washington, D.C., I have always lived in the Great Plains. This is the part of the country that elitists from the coasts refer to as fly over country. I have traveled throughout the United States over the years. I've been coast to coast to coast and from the top of the Rockies to below sea level. There certainly are some amazing things to see in this country.

But growing up on the plains and prairie, you learn a lot about the world around you and about people. Many people love the mountains and the oceans. They can't understand why I prefer to live where I do. The mountains and the oceans are both large and majestic. They slap you in the face, figuratively speaking. They make you notice them. It's nearly impossible NOT to notice them.

But the prairie is different. The prairie is subtle and far too many people don't understand subtle. Subtle requires you to get out of your car and walk. You may have to get down on your hands and knees and get close and personal to appreciate the prairie. As Jimmy Buffett said in the song "Trouble on the Horizon", "you have to taste the weather, you've got to touch the storm."

The prairie is like that, you have to appreciate it multi-sensually. If you drive along the interstate at 75 mph, and are expecting to get slapped in the face, like the mountains do, you will miss it completely. You have to look for little things. You need to walk through the prairie and look down at all the different types of plants that are growing there. You need to hear the many different insects and birds and occasionally mammals, amphibians and reptiles.

You need to be out where you can smell the prairie. Walk through the grasslands in late September where you can pluck a stem of sweet everlasting, crush the blossoms between your fingers and enjoy that deliciously sweet smell that reminds you of pancakes and maple syrup. You need to walk the prairie in the spring, when the pussy-toes are just starting to bloom, and touch the flower buds that will remind you of a kitten's foot. There's no way to see, smell or feel all of this at freeway speeds.

The prairie is made up of over 60 grass species and over 300 species of forbs, or wildflowers. Through the course of the year over 300 species of birds will be found living or migrating through the tallgrass prairie not to mention all the permanent critters and insects that live there. Nothing to see? People have to learn to see! Right now the prairie is in transition. It is slowly going dormant as it prepares to "sleep" through the winter. But there is so much beauty out there still to enjoy.

If you aren't willing to stop and get out of your car and walk through these grasslands, please don't tell me there's nothing to see. That simply means that you don't know. If you aren't willing to stop and see the subtleties of the prairie, then it is probably just as well that you keep going. But when you are willing to slow down, stop, experience and learn, just come on back. The prairie will still be here and will still be willing to teach you about being subtle.