

Tallgrass Ontario*

Lindsay Rodger and Don Gordon
Ontario Tallgrass Prairie and Savanna Association,
659 Exeter Road, London, Ontario N6E 1L3

Abstract

Tallgrass Ontario has been formed by concerned individuals, conservation organizations and government agencies to implement Tallgrass Communities of Southern Ontario—A Recovery Plan (Rodger 1998). Tallgrass prairies and savannas are some of the most endangered ecological communities in Canada with approximately one percent of their original extent remaining (Bakowsky 1999, Rodger 1998, Joyce and Morgan 1989). Tallgrass communities once covered a significant part of southern Ontario's landscape. Owing to degradation and destruction through urban development, agriculture, pollution and mismanagement, less than three percent of the original extent remains in the region, with most existing in small, isolated patches (Bakowsky 1993, 1999). As these highly diverse communities themselves are rare and threatened, so too are many of the wildlife species which depend on these communities for their survival.

Interest in conserving and restoring Ontario's tallgrass communities and their resident wildlife is on the rise in Ontario. However, many initiatives to date have generally been uncoordinated and piecemeal. There is a need for greater coordinated leadership, communication and consolidated information to help direct current and to incite new involvement. To make significant strides toward recovering tallgrass communities region-wide, a larger, more coordinated and strategic approach is required.

Tallgrass Communities of Southern Ontario—A Recovery Plan

A species-by-species approach to recovering tallgrass communities is unrealistic for the task at hand. Because of this, this Recovery Plan deals with recovering tallgrass communities as a whole across their range in Ontario. The overall goal of this Recovery Plan is to recover, reconstruct and conserve a representative network of tallgrass communities, and to recover and protect the full complement of plant and animal life that makes up these diverse ecological communities. To do this on a region-wide scale in a strategic and comprehensive manner, the following eight goals for recovery provide key direction:

1. Improve communication, coordination and information-sharing among those involved in tallgrass community conservation.
2. Amass complete information regarding all tallgrass community remnants in southern Ontario.
3. Establish and expand a network of protected tallgrass community remnants.
4. Encourage protection of tallgrass remnants through sound management.
5. Encourage restoration and habitat creation initiatives where appropriate to enlarge existing remnants, make linkages and create new habitat.
6. Raise public awareness and appreciation of tallgrass communities.

* This paper arises from a poster paper at the 1999 Annual Meeting at the Parks Research Forum of Ontario

7. Reduce significantly the number of tallgrass community species at risk.
8. Encourage basic and applied research relevant to tallgrass community conservation.

The Recovery Plan lists objectives and specific action items necessary to achieve each of the eight goals. These action items are laid out in a five-year implementation schedule. This implementation schedule should be used to gauge progress toward the overall goal of securing tallgrass communities across southern Ontario, and reducing significantly the number of tallgrass species at risk. Annual progress reports should be prepared, and the findings used to shape the next year's work plans for participating organizations. The Recovery Plan should be revised and updated after five years.

Key to the successful implementation of the Recovery Plan is the development of a Tallgrass Prairie and Savanna Association, which will provide leadership and support for the recovery of tallgrass communities across the region. This association will be instrumental in coordinating the completion of the Recovery Plan actions, and will develop a region-wide communications network.

The writing of this Recovery Plan is an important first step toward recovering southern Ontario's tallgrass communities – it provides a basis for action and will help to lay out specific tasks. However, success will not be realized unless the Plan is implemented. This will require the efforts of many people, all cooperating to complete necessary actions. All sectors – all levels of government, non-governmental organizations large and small, private landowners, businesses and industries – have a part to play. It is vital both to coordinate the organizations and individuals already engaging in recovery activities and to “expand the circle” by getting others involved. Leadership, monetary and other resources, as well as cooperation, creativity and commitment are all needed to achieve the goals.

Ontario Tallgrass Prairie and Savanna Association (Tallgrass Ontario)

A recovery plan for the tallgrass communities has been developed by the World Wildlife Fund and the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (Rodger 1998). A key recommendation called for the establishment of an Ontario Tallgrass Prairie and Savanna Association to spearhead the recovery efforts. Tallgrass Ontario has been formed by representatives of local and national conservation organizations, government agencies, municipalities, Conservation Authorities and academics. Many of the key practitioners of tallgrass research, restoration and protection are involved to realize the mission:

To achieve the identification, conservation, management and restoration of tallgrass prairie, savanna and related ecological communities in Ontario.

We believe that by coordinating efforts through an association we can achieve far more significant results than we can working independently. The purpose of Tallgrass Ontario is to coordinate recovery efforts, promote scientific research, build partnerships, raise public awareness and to develop and transfer information about conservation and restoration of tallgrass communities.

Among our constituents are: local conservation groups that have labour, money and land but need access to expertise and seed to undertake restoration projects; land management agencies like Conservation Authorities that need the results of scientific inquiries to improve their management techniques; academics who need to connect with the practitioners of tallgrass restoration to establish research priorities; and, national and provincial agencies that need to connect with grassroots groups in order to support local conservation efforts. Tallgrass is a globally threatened ecosystem and experts, agencies and landowners have formed Tallgrass Ontario in the firm belief that it offers the best hope for conserving this threatened component of Canada's biodiversity.

Problem Statement

It is really little wonder that the tallgrass prairie and savanna is so much reduced from its original extent as it was so hospitable to early settlement. In sharp contrast to the daunting climax forests of the rest of Carolinian Canada, the prairies invited settlement and the plough, and early accounts extol the beauty of the "park-like" barrens or savannas (Bakowsky and Riley 1994, Bakowsky 1993, Catling *et al.* 1992). The native inhabitants of this region also favoured the open spaces of the tallgrass but their cultural practices co-evolved in harmony with the landscape by making use of the native vegetation and maintaining the open character through the use of fire (Pyne 1982). Arguably the finest remnant of tallgrass prairie is found on Walpole Island as a consequence of countless generations of stewardship by its First Nations occupants.

The tallgrass communities are on the brink of slipping away. With them will go a piece of our bio-regional identity and a host of species associated with the tallgrass. Some species such as the greater prairie chicken or the karner blue butterfly have already disappeared from Ontario, others have experienced a drastic decline including 23 species of wildlife considered nationally at risk (COSEWIC 1998) and more than 150 species of provincially rare plants (Rodger 1998). This treasure trove of biodiversity can be protected but we will need to greatly increase awareness of the value of this habitat. Tallgrass has been described as the unknown ecosystem and this has led to some poor management choices such as the reforestation of previously unforested areas, and the conversion of prairie areas even within parks to such incompatible land uses as sports fields or golf courses.

Within Carolinian Canada we have three broad categories of natural communities: forests; wetlands; and, grasslands. In recent years we have witnessed changes in planning and land use regulation that have increased the protection available to forests and wetlands. In addition conservation groups have undertaken projects relating to both of these community types. Not so for the tallgrass prairie and savannas which have remained under-appreciated and largely unprotected. With the completion of the Tallgrass Recovery Plan and the establishment of Tallgrass Ontario we are now in a position stem the loss of habitat and to begin the process of restoring and recreating previous losses.

Methods

Tallgrass Ontario has adopted a flexible, action-oriented structure in which volunteer working groups carry out the association activities supported by a communications hub operated by a half time staff person. So far four working groups have

been established. As the need arises others may be created and the present groups, having accomplished their objectives, will be dissolved. The structure of the association will evolve over time to reflect its ongoing functions. For the present, the association shares an office and the services of a program coordinator with the Carolinian Canada Coalition. Friends of the Ojibway Prairie, a registered charitable corporation, acts as the trustee for funds directed towards association activities.

The Working Groups are each led by a member of the management committee but reach out beyond that to involve a wide variety of interested parties. By this means the association "expands the circle" and brings more volunteer resources to bear on our goals. Table 1 lists and describes the proposed activities of each working group. Some activities will be ongoing while others will be completed within a short period of time, all of these activities are to be initiated during the first year of opera-

| Working Group Leader | Proposed Activities |
|--|--|
| <p>Tallgrass Restoration and Creation <i>Mary Gartshore</i>, a biologist specializing in native plantings, and co-owner and operator of a native plant nursery.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • guidelines for tallgrass community restoration and creation • ethical and ecologically sound restoration practices • coordinate with the Society for Ecological Restoration • native plant material sources identified and encouraged • "ask an expert" advice to community groups/agencies undertaking restoration and creation • identify and encourage funding for projects—introduce grassroots groups to community funding programs such as Shell, Canada Trust and CWIP |
| <p>Research <i>Wayne MacMillan</i>, Supervisor of Land Resources for the Grand River Conservation Authority, specializing in managing prairie in conservation areas.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • working group to contact institutions to encourage research and to lend support to funding applications • Prairie/Savanna Institute within an academic institution • develop list of research needs—what do practitioners want to know? • Coordinate research with practitioners and distribute results of research broadly • conservation genetics and seed bank • modelling of ranges and community types |
| <p>Tallgrass Management <i>Lindsay Rodger</i>, Species Recovery Manager for the World Wildlife Fund and author of the Recovery Plan.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • annotated bibliography • information gathering, literature search • re-packaging of technical information for community users—content for website and factsheets, etc. • determine user needs for information • encourage prescribed burns, promote understanding • methodology for monitoring and assessing progress • preparation of annual "report card" • database of tallgrass projects |
| <p>Priorities <i>Paul Smith</i>, Natural Heritage Coordinator, Ontario Heritage Foundation. Paul also has responsibility for the new OHF program of prairie acquisition and stewardship.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • existing inventories released and circulated • naturalist clubs enlisted for ongoing inventory/monitoring work • mapping and liaison with Carolinian Canada "Big Picture Project" • identify priority sites • landowner contact activities—needs assessment and strategy • encourage acquisition |

Table 1: Tallgrass Ontario Working Groups

tion of Tallgrass Ontario. Each year through an annual forum and an annual report we will re-examine our working groups altering the workplan as required to further our progress.

All of the activities of Tallgrass Ontario are facilitated by the communications and secretariat function of the Tallgrass Ontario Program Coordinator, Don Gordon. The responsibilities of the Program Coordinator include:

- preparing the Tallgrass Ontario brochure;
- developing a website and electronic versions of all publications;
- publishing a newsletter, three to four times annually;
- organizing an annual forum and regional/thematic workshops;
- preparing factsheets and slide and video presentations;
- providing secretariat function for working groups;
- liaising with other organizations; and,
- responding to public inquiries.

References

- Bakowsky, W.D. 1999. Rare vegetation of Ontario: tallgrass prairie and savannah. *Natural Heritage Information Centre Newsletter*. 5(1):3-6.
- Bakowsky, W.D. 1993. *A review and assessment of prairie, oak savannah and woodland in Site Regions 7 and 6 (southern region)*. Unpublished report (draft) by Gore and Storrie Ltd. for Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, Southern Region, Aurora.
- Bakowsky, W. and J. Riley. 1994. A survey of the prairies and savannas of southern Ontario. In *Proceedings of the Thirteenth North American Prairie Conference: Spirit of the Land, Our Prairie Legacy*. R. Wickett, P. Dolan Lewis, A. Woodliffe, and P. Pratt, eds. August 6-9, 1992. Windsor, ON: Corporation of the City of Windsor, 7-16.
- Catling, P.M., W.R. Catling and S.M. McKay-Kuja. 1992. The extent, floristic composition and maintenance of the Rice Lake Plains, Ontario, based on historical records. *Canadian Field-Naturalist*.
- COSEWIC 1998. *List of Canadian Species at Risk, April 1998*. Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada.
- Joyce, J. and J.P. Morgan. 1989. Manitoba's Tall-grass Prairie Conservation Project. In *Prairie Pioneers: Ecology, History and Culture*. T.B. Bragg and J. Stubbendieck, eds. Proceedings of the Eleventh North American Prairie Conference, held August 7 - 11, 1988. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Printing.
- Pyne, S.J. 1982. *Fire in America: A cultural history of wildland and rural fire*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Rodger, L. 1998. *Tallgrass Communities of Southern Ontario: A Recovery Plan*. Report prepared for World Wildlife Fund Canada and Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources.