

Added to the Arkansas System of Natural Areas in 1983, Cherokee Prairie is a 566-acre tract of tallgrass prairie, the largest remnant of prairie in Arkansas.

Located in the Arkansas River Valley just north of Charleston in Franklin County, Cherokee Prairie offers a rare glimpse at the scenery and ecosystem that sustained Native Americans for centuries and amazed Europeans upon their arrival.

Stewardship of Cherokee Prairie is by the Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission.

The Arkansas General Assembly created the Natural Heritage Commission in 1973. The agency's job is 1) to identify those lands and waters that retain the state's most valuable biological resources, 2) to acquire tracts of such lands for inclusion in the system of natural areas, and 3) to manage those resources for the benefit of future generations while promoting their appreciation and beneficial use.

For more information on the Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission, write to 1500 Tower Building, 323 Center Street, Little Rock, AR 72201; call (501) 324-9619; or e-mail info@DAH.state.ar.us and check out our Web site at <http://www.heritage.state.ar.us/nhc/>



Cherokee Prairie Natural Area is part of the Arkansas System of Natural Areas.



The Arkansas System of Natural Areas is administered by the Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission, a state agency within the Department of Arkansas Heritage.

Cherokee Prairie

NATURAL AREA



Visit Arkansas's largest
remnant of tallgrass
prairie, located just
east of Fort Smith.

(photo by Larry Higgins)



prairie wildflowers
(photo by Wayne Van Buren)

Just north of Charleston, Arkansas, is a 566-acre tract of tallgrass prairie, the largest contiguous remnant in Arkansas. When Betty Bumpers, wife of Arkansas Senator Dale Bumpers, insisted that the Natural Heritage Commission send staff members to inventory the area in 1976, the distinctive nature of this tract quickly became apparent. The plant and animal species living there show that little disturbance has affected the site's natural history.

More than 99 percent of Arkansas's original grasslands have been cultivated. Turning the soil alters it permanently and allows weeds to invade. Once plowed under, native plants often disappear from the landscape. With few exceptions, only the tracts of land that were set aside for raising hay retained their original flora and soil structure. We call these tracts "prairies," borrowing a word the pioneers used for "grazing land."

Plant life in a grassland community is very sensitive to subtle variations in soil moisture, chemistry, and texture, and that accounts for the many different grasses and flowering plants that grow here. Almost any given acre of native grassland can be shown to support up to 150 different species of native plants.

Cherokee Prairie's most noticeable plants are the impressive tall grasses. Among these is big bluestem, which must have been what pioneers were referring to when they reported riding through grass as high as a man on horseback. Prized as a forage plant, this native perennial held the prairie soil in place with its thick root structure and provided food for grazing animals.

Very few prairie streams remain in Arkansas, but a mile of Prairie Creek runs through Cherokee Prairie. A prairie stream is significant because of the unique blend of flooding,

drying, water flow and light found at and around such streams.

Also significant are the "prairie mounds," domes that rise up to 3 feet high and 35 to 50 feet wide. Most prairies in Arkansas have such mounds, which are visible evidence that they never have been plowed and leveled.

Some say that the prairie mounds originated with glacial melting north of Arkansas, but no one is certain how the mounds occurred. We do know that they were not created by "gas bubbles" or by the New Madrid earthquake.

Cherokee Prairie is held in public trust to maintain its unique and rare natural features. Access is limited to foot traffic from either side of Arkansas Highway 60.

When visiting this or any other Arkansas Natural Area, please remember to leave nothing but footprints and take nothing but photographs, with the exception of legally taken game and fish. Please limit travel within natural areas to foot traffic only. Motorized vehicles, horses, camping and construction of permanent hunting stands are prohibited in Arkansas Natural Areas.



Passerina ciris
(Painted Bunting)
(photo by Robert Lashley)