

Save our endangered tallgrass prairie

By The Kansas City Star Editorial Board

Missouri's prairie chicken population is down to 96. Before the 20th century, the birds were seen as an inexhaustible resource, feeding hungry millions packing East Coast cities.

By 1907, though, hunting prairie chickens in Missouri was banned as their population began plummeting.

Their near-demise should serve as a vivid reminder of what's been lost in Missouri, Kansas and throughout the Midwest. Kansas City used to sit in the middle of what was one of the world's most vibrant, diverse and expansive ecosystems, the tallgrass prairie. Once, this was the American Serengeti.

Imagine it: Millions of acres filled with a mix of grasses such as big bluestem and Indiangrass, wild rye, prairie brome and dropseed, six feet high at times, and rolling to the horizon, dotted with volleyball-sized blooms.

Then imagine this landscape isn't empty, but crawling with vast herds of grazing animals. The tallgrass was home to as many as 60 million American bison, tens of millions of elk, millions of deer (white tail and mule) and antelope.

Above, and sometimes scurrying through the tall grass, were some of the hundreds of millions of birds, prairie chickens and quail, as well as the now extinct Carolina parakeets and passenger pigeons.

And pursuing these: vast armies of predators, hundreds of thousands of wolves and grizzlies, cougars and coyotes.

This prairie stretched through the Dakotas into Canada on the north, into Texas in the south, as far east as Indiana and the western edge was right around the Kansas Flint Hills. The National Park Service estimates it once covered 140 million acres. Today, less than 4 percent remains.

"And it vanished in the blink of eye," says **Bob Hamilton**, who manages the 36,000-acre Nature Conservancy Tallgrass Prairie Preserve in Osage County, Okla., the largest remaining publicly accessible piece of the prairie.

Nearer to home, in the Kansas Flint Hills, there's the 11,000-acre Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve. Smithville Lake in the Kansas City area is surrounded by 2,200 acres.

These are important reminders of the area's heritage. But they're small pieces of what used to be the whole, a plain almost 20 times the modern boundaries of the Serengeti. That world-renowned area in Africa remains home to millions of animals.

Yet our great prairie has been mocked and discounted for decades. In the 19th century, it was known as the Great American Desert. Today, it's often called simply "flyover country."

Evidence of just how small the tallgrass lands are today can be found in the decline of the prairie chicken in Missouri. They don't fare well outside the prairie. They fear the vertical world, often refusing to cross the path of power poles and lines. There's so little natural prairie grass left in Missouri that females can't find places to nest.

Fortunately, in Kansas, the prairie chicken's future is far better. The largest remaining expanse of the tallgrass is in the Flint Hills. There, prairie chickens remain.

But the Missouri disappearance is a further sign that more must be done to save this essential part of the past. Missouri Department of Conservation's Prairie Chicken Recovery leader notes: "We've got to rebuild habitat."

That requires both public and private lands. Ranchers who have switched pastures to fescue could return to native grasses which can be just as productive for livestock, some experts insist. Public areas, especially open areas of 10,000 acres or more, should be turned into natural prairie. Every bit helps.

The tallgrass prairie is even more endangered than the better-known ecosystems many fret about. It's more endangered than wetlands, and more endangered than the rain forests. It's a native American ecosystem, probably the most important native American ecosystem. Its cultivation led to the great nation we now live in. It defined who we are, as a region and nation.

It's too important to simply let disappear. Tallgrass prairie is one of Earth's most efficient carbon trapping ecosystems, needed now to help counter global warming. It's a no-maintenance system, perfect for the climate of the region.

The vanishing Missouri prairie chicken reminds us that its demise might not be far off — unless more land is permitted to return to its great prairie heritage for future generations to experience.

To visit the Tallgrass

The Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve near Cottonwood Falls, Kan. is open year-round for hiking from dawn to dusk. Free guided tours run from the last weekend in April until the last weekend in October.