

Changing the Prairie (nonfiction)

There is a change in nature called succession. That means filling the place of another. In many environments, these changes take place over time. One kind of plant starts to grow. Then they get bigger. Then woody plants come. The woody plants take over. Woody plants are trees. The environment becomes a forest. That is the last stage of succession. That happens in many places.

But fires burn trees. So Illinois environments used to stay the same. They would stay grassland. In summer the grass would get dry. Lightning would cause fires. Any trees would burn. The grass had roots under the ground. The grass would grow back. So for a long time much of Illinois stayed a prairie.

The animals that live in the prairie needed all that prairie to live. You can understand that when you look at one bird. The meadowlark is bird that nests in the prairie. It gets its food there, too. In summer, it eats insects. In winter, it eats seeds. To stay alive, the meadowlark needs at least 20 acres of prairie land. If 100 meadowlarks live in one prairie, they need a 2,000 acre prairie.

That's just one bird. The Henslow sparrow needs 80 acres to live. It needs all that grass. It needs that big a habitat. Some small farms are 80 acres. They grow a lot of food for the farm family. The family sells food to people in other places. What if the family buys another 80 acres of prairie to make their farm bigger. They will grow more food. At least one sparrow and four meadowlarks will lose their habitat.

After the invention of the steel plow, farmers turned more prairie into cornfields. People built more homes and roads. Over time, what was left of the natural prairies were small. Birds could not nest there. The seeds that the wind blew from the prairie plants fell on highways, in backyards, and in cornfields. Weeds began to move in.

What was left of the prairie was in small patches, called remnants. People use the word remnant to talk about leftover pieces of cloth. When people make clothing, some cloth is left. People may use that cloth to patch clothing. But it's big good enough to make clothes. Each year, there were fewer and fewer acres of prairie. In time only remnants of prairie remained in Illinois, the prairie state. Today, only tiny pieces of the Illinois prairie are left.

What is the central idea of this reading?

Underline the parts of the reading that support your conclusion.