

Prairie Ecology (nonfiction)

The prairie is a natural ecosystem. Eco means house. An environment is a home. System is a word that comes from another word meaning place together. An ecosystem is a place where plants and animals fit together. The Tallgrass Prairie is a special kind of ecosystem. Read about ways three animals live in the Tallgrass Prairie to understand more about how things fit together there.

Above the prairie, you will see the skipper butterfly, a special butterfly. It depends on the plants here in the prairie throughout its entire life. Butterflies begin life as an egg. The female butterfly lays eggs on a plant; she lays them inside a shell in order to protect them. The larva of a butterfly then eats through that shell. Larva looks like a hairy worm. The outside of the larva is flexible, but very tough and it does not have any wings. Another name for it is a caterpillar. The larva eats the plant leaves and, as it eats, the larva grows very quickly. Afterwards the larva molts, which means it sheds its outer layer of skin. It does that because it needs to grow, and the old skin is too tight. After some time, the larva makes a pupa. A pupa is a kind of shell that turns into a butterfly with wings.

The butterfly starts out with wings that are damp from being inside the pupa. Since they have been crumpled inside the pupa, the first thing the butterfly does is spread its wings. It takes the butterfly about twenty minutes to spread its wings and let them dry. Then, approximately two hours later, the butterfly is ready to fly. The skipper flies away because it wants to find food in the Tallgrass prairie.

On the ground and below it, you will find ground squirrels. This animal is roughly one foot long and lives in large families. It has a brown coat in order to camouflage it when it moves along the ground. Animals use the color of their fur, hair, or scales to blend into the environment around them. This is called camouflage. It protects them because other animals can't see them very easily. The ground squirrel is an herbivore, which means it only eats plants. It has a lot of food on the prairie because it eats grass. Occasionally it also eats insects. In the winter, the ground squirrel sleeps in a hole in the ground to stay warm.

On the ground in the past you would have also seen bison. This big herbivore ate many plants. The bison was like a gardener for the prairie. It ate weeds—plants that are not native to an environment. When weeds would start to grow in the prairie, the bison would get rid of them. Without the bison, the weeds might take over the land that the prairie plants needed. The bison helped the prairie to maintain balance. A balanced environment is a place where both the plants and animals have what they need to survive.

EXPLAIN WHAT YOU LEARNED

1. Underline the most important information in each paragraph.
2. Write a short summary that tells what the passage explains. Include only the most important information.
3. Then decide what the central idea of the passage is. Use that as the title of your summary.