



Bits of the Wilderness™

Into the Open

Color Supplement

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The Many Faces of the Plains

Into the Open

Where is “the open?” Usually, where the adventurers are taller than the plants. That eliminates almost all forests. Ecologists recognize several non-forested land ecosystems; grasslands, tundra, and desert are the primary examples of this type of ecosystem. This book was written mainly about grasslands. The central United States; southern South America; eastern Russia; western Asia; large sections of Africa; and much of Australia were grasslands before settlement. Much of it still is because corn, rice, wheat, and sorghum are all cultivated grasses. These regions are characterized by a community of plants that are herbs (that is, not woody, neither trees nor shrubs) and that die back to the ground each winter. In particular, the dominant plants are grasses. Tundra and desert are open areas too; some of these descriptions will apply to tundra in midsummer and some to desert, especially after the brief rainy season, but mostly we were imagining grasslands when we wrote these descriptions.

About Grasses

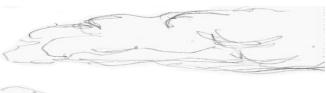
Grasslands are open because they lack trees. Many grassland regions are too dry for trees to

survive, but other historic grasslands have plenty of rain for trees; they become treeless because of wild fires. Grasslands share periods of drought (not necessarily long ones) in which everything dries out and wildfires sweep across the land. Grasses usually have leaves that begin at or under the ground (which is why mowing a lawn has to be done so often!); while trees, shrubs and most herbs grow from growing points (meristems) in the air. Consequently, if a fire burns a shrub or tree, the plant is set back substantially. The grass blade’s growing point is rarely burned and so continues to grow. Therefore if a prairie burns during the growing season, in a week it looks like a well-tended golf course.



are often small and low, posing no barrier to a wind-driven fire. Only really big rivers, such as the Mississippi in North America, are broad enough that a prairie fire cannot jump over them.

Grasslands, then, occur where it is either too dry for trees or where fire keeps trees out. They



may also occur where for some reason the soil is too shallow to support trees. This is the usual explanation of meadows within forested regions.

While they do have things in common, not all grasslands are the same. Wet ones burn frequently (every three to five years in what is



now the Corn Belt) while dry ones rarely have enough fuel to carry a fire. Some grasslands are host to many large, bright-colored wildflowers, some are almost entirely of grass. (Grasses have flowers but they are inconspicuous. Many spring grassland flowers are from bulbs, which are technically members of the grass family.) In



areas of lower rainfall or shorter growing seasons (for example, higher elevations) the height of the grassland plants gets shorter and shorter and distance between plants greater and greater, until it is a desert. In the driest grasslands, the plants

are never taller than a well-maintained lawn. The non-grasses in dry grasslands are often well protected from grazing animals by thorns or spines (cacti make a good American example).

Animals of the Open

With leaves readily accessible near the ground, grasslands have abundant food for herbivores in the growing season. Vast herds form and big predators follow them. Whether cheetahs, wolves, lions, dragons, or rocs, the big herds provide lots of prey. The open conditions allow big winged animals to take off and land safely, and to pursue their prey until they catch it.

Animals in open areas are exposed. Their enemies can see them from far away. Conversely, they can see their enemies. Animals of open communities have good eyesight. They are also fleet of foot, with excellent stamina. Grasslands are good places for running from danger, but you may have to go miles before you are out of sight. Animals of the open tend to travel in groups: many eyes watching are much more effective than just two.



Animals of open lands that do not run well must have some other form of protection from their predators. One simple defense is to be big and tough, like buffalo and musk oxen. For animals that are smaller, such as hares, camouflage and the ability to dart under the grass may work. Anything larger needs additional defenses: they must fly or hide in burrows in the ground or be inedible because they are spiny or poisonous.





Invertebrates

Open area insects, spiders, ticks, and parasitic worms are usually minor items for travelers. Exceptions to that include grasshopper outbreaks. These occur periodically in most grasslands. When the outbreaks do happen, the grasshoppers eat everything edible and gnaw on most of the rest, so that there is no forage for other animals, including the horses of adventurers. Under these conditions, grasshoppers will bite people; they taste whatever they land on. Real grasshoppers can bite hard enough to draw blood, fantasy grasshoppers...you decide.

Mosquitoes are rarely a problem by day but can be numerous and aggressive at night. Biting flies, from stable flies to horse flies, are generally common only around livestock, including the great wild herds. Ticks and chiggers lurk in the grass most of the time. The usual internal parasites are found in these communities and since everyone drinks from the same pools, infections are easily transmitted. Spiders with toxic bites lurk in odd places rather than building great webs. Any insect can be extremely annoying if it is very common. Small bees that gather sweat off warm travelers will sting if disturbed: one bee is tolerable, 25 a hazard. Butterflies flying in front of you are pretty, until you cannot see where you are going for the butterflies.

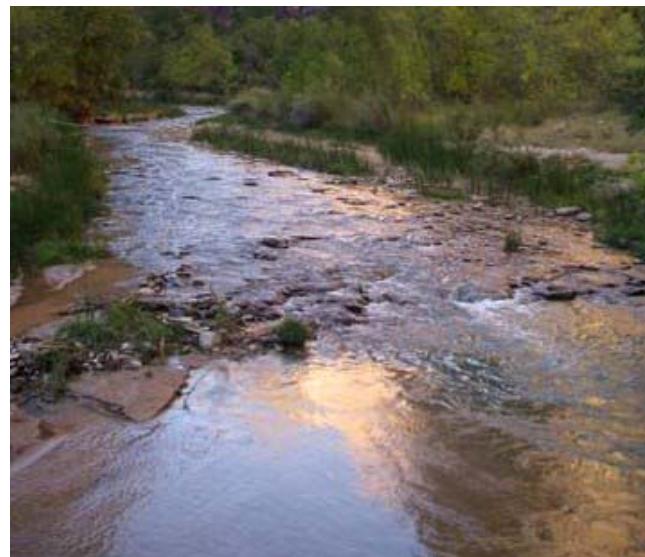
Water and Weather

A Dry and Thirsty Land

There are few open communities where there is an excess of water like in marshes and bogs. In grasslands, tundra, and deserts, water is often in short supply. Open water is rare, clean water rarer. Trails and trade routes often follow rivers and streams so that travelers have access to water. The adventurers will have to be careful about water. On horseback, they will need abundant water for their horses.



Afoot, it takes longer to get to the next water source. In either case, water is heavy to carry in adequate amounts. This makes it easy for bandits, brigands, and other humanoids such as orcs to anticipate where they might find their victims. A party that does not keep extra watch when at a known campsite is foolish indeed.



Because water is necessary for life and is uncommon in some places on the plains, all the animals of the region are attracted to the few rivers, streams and ponds that are found there. The grazers find lush plants to eat and water to drink while the predators come to hunt the grazers, as well as to drink.

Seasonal Patterns:

In mid-continent temperate grasslands, the seasons change rapidly. Severe cold gives way to warm and then very hot temperatures, and then it cools again. The plants grow rapidly, flower, go to seed, and lie dormant during the winter. Animals migrate in to eat the plants and must move out (or go underground, hibernating or living on stored food) when it is cold and there is nothing to eat.





People of Open Lands

Historically many of the human groups of open lands were migratory, following the herds and hunting as teams. In some places they could settle because the topography brought game to them, for example along a river or a natural feature forcing animals together. Often though, the winter in the open grassland was too difficult with poor hunting, little fuel for fires, and a lack of cover from wind, cold and snow; so they moved to forests or mountain valleys, or south (north) to warmer weather, to return in the spring.

In some grasslands there is neither usable timber nor stone for building, so if people settled



there they had to build their homes from grasses, hides, bones, sod or even dig underground. Other open areas do have useable stone, and of course, building materials can be imported.

In a game people might come to the open areas seeking minerals, rare plants for medicine or dye, or food for a gourmet market. Other people, in small groups or alone, might hunt game for medicine or specialty foods, for hides and furs or for the sheer challenge of it. Local recluses and crazies will still need access to water and some kind of shelter in winter.

All of these comments would apply equally to races like gnomes, to organized humanoids like goblins, and groups of intelligent animals.

Grassland Regions

The Americas, Europe, Asia, Australia, and Africa

These areas share the general patterns of open areas. The animals of course differ: horses, cattle and saiga grazed the plains of Europe and Asia, kangaroos and wallabies in Australia. Most of Africa's and South America's grasslands are tropical, not temperate, but there are diverse antelope, as well as zebra, giraffe, elephants, and ostriches. American grasslands were as diverse as modern African grasslands a million years ago: camels, horses, gomphotheres, ground sloth, antelope, oxen, and numerous other species that have gone extinct in the Americas since then. A fantasy grassland can be quite reasonably populated with all manner of big and small animals.

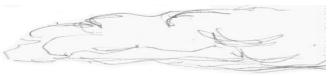
Coastal Grasslands

Where weather patterns drive water away from an area, or the soil is very shallow (due to an impermeable rock or clay layer), grasslands can occur in such places as the shores of big lakes or the ocean. The seasons, however, will reflect the rest of the area, as will the plants and animals. If the grassland is extensive, there will be characteristic fast-running animals with good eyesight, and wildfires are likely.

Settled Areas as Open Spaces

Most crops are relatively low plants grown as annuals, so fields can be open areas. When people settle in forested areas, cultivating land creates open areas and when they settle in grasslands, the area stays open. Cattle and other domesticated animals grazing in a forest will still be in a forest, but where the land is too dry or too rocky to farm, raising livestock is an important occupation. Continual grazing will keep the vegetation short and the region very open. People





raising crops must be protected from raiders or war, and people with only horses or feet for travel will live close to their fields. Given the rate of travel afoot or a-horse, the adventurers may spend days amid fields before reaching the city or wilder country.



Monsters for the Grassland

Adding fantasy animals or monsters to a grassland region is easily done. Your dragons or other monsters should, however, be able to take off from flat land and be able to stay warm in the winter.

Adventuring in the Open

Here are some things to consider:

- ✓ Water is in short supply.
- ✓ Summer in many open areas is hot enough to be life threatening, especially if water is short.
- ✓ Winter in many open lands is life-threateningly cold.
- ✓ There is no protection from the elements. The adventurers and their horses are taller than most of the plants, so the rain, hail, winds, snow or sun hit them. There is rarely anything to get under or into to get out of the normal weather, let alone provide protection in blizzards, lightning strikes, or tornados.

✓ Anywhere that you cannot see mountains or other great landmarks are easy places to get lost. The terrain of grasslands is remarkably uniform.

✓ There is no fuel. The evening campfire in a grassland region has nothing to burn. Grass leaves burn up almost instantly. It was due to a lack of any other fuel source that American pioneers gathered and burned dry buffalo droppings ('buffalo chips').

✓ At the same time, during most seasons and in most places the grass easily catches fire to become a wildfire.





Open Kits

Mixed Prairie

In this region the grass never gets more than about three feet tall and there are open spaces where you can see the ground between plants. The plants are mostly grasses with some wildflowers of many colors scattered among them. In places you find desert plants like yucca and cacti. Trees are rare, found mainly along the few permanent rivers. The wild fires occur frequently but often burn out after a few miles for lack of fuel. It is windy. It is dry in summer. The rain storms are infrequent but often violent with hail, lightning and tornados. Summers are hot (to 102°F, 40°C), and winters are cold (to -30°F, -34°C). This is good country for finding big herds of grazers, such as buffalo. Other mammals likely to be seen in moderate to large herds are elk, pronghorns, and mule deer. The predators are wolves, grizzly bears, coyotes, foxes, mountain lions, weasels, and badgers. Common smaller animals are hares, rats including packrats, and various mice. Prairie dog towns extend for miles. They have associated species like burrowing owls and black-footed ferrets which are rarely encountered except in prairie dog towns. Birds of this region include eagles, hawks, vultures, grouse and wild chickens, crows and ravens, many sparrows, swallows, and larks. Ducks, geese, cranes, sandpipers, and plovers live in wet areas, their numbers augmented by great migratory flocks in spring and fall. The reptiles and amphibians found here are small lizards, snakes, turtles/tortoises, frogs/toads, and salamanders and some dry-land species such as horned lizards and desert snakes. Fish in the streams are tiny since the streams often dry out. This dry region has no really big rivers—most rivers are shallow with braided channels among sandbars, going nearly dry by late summer. Insects are few and inoffensive most of the time, but any group can have a particularly good year and reach high densities. There may be settlements along the riverbeds but the region is generally empty with the few resident people migrating as hunters following the herds.

Settled Land

Close to the castle — which typically sits on a relative high spot — are numerous, carefully tended orchards of apple, peach, plum, and pear trees. Walnut and almond trees are grown there, too. Beyond them is a large area of well-trimmed grape vines growing along arbors. Small villages nestle within an hour's walk of the castle in all directions. Around them are cultivated fields. The fields are usually fenced by stone walls made from irregularly shaped stones, but sometimes with rough wood fences. The fields are long and narrow and planted with peas, beans, onions, turnips, beets, parsnips, or carrots. The largest and best fields are growing grains—oats and wheat especially, but also barley and rye. People plow behind an ox or a horse. They scatter and cover the seeds and hoe the weeds by hand. These fields surround the party for many miles as one village's lands are replaced by another's. As you get farther from the castle, there is more and more uncultivated land. On some of it, cattle, sheep, goats, or geese graze, in small herds watched over by boys, or in slightly larger herds guarded by herdsmen with dogs. Out beyond the last village, the open lands are grazed short by livestock in roving herds protected by herdsmen. Finally, several days walk out beyond the castle, the land seems wild and barely touched by the livestock or people from the villages.





Moist Grassland

In a moist grassland during midsummer the grasses are as tall as corn and as dense as a wheat field. Other plants (non-grassy herbs and a few native shrubs) are present but very scattered. Fires, started by lightning but also by people, sweep the land frequently (about once every four years), sometimes burning a dozen counties in a single fire. It is windy. It is dry in summer. Rain usually comes in a fierce thunderstorm preceded by hail or a tornado, with strong winds and dangerous lightning. Summers are hot (to 100°F, 38°C) and winters are cold (to -30°F, -34°C). Trees grow where they are protected from the fires. Big herds (for example, buffalo) come here to eat the new grasses but avoid the area when the grass is tall. Other mammals you might see in moderate to large herds are elk and mule deer. Predators following the herds are wolves, coyotes, foxes, weasels, badgers, mountain lions, and grizzly bears. The smaller animals are hares, ground squirrels and other rodents including various rats and mice, and moles. Beaver, muskrats, skunks, white-tailed deer, and raccoons occur in the forested areas along rivers and streams. Birds include eagles, hawks, vultures and owls, crows and ravens, grouse and wild chickens, many sparrows, swallows, and larks. Ducks, geese, cranes, sandpipers and plovers can be found in wet areas. Great flocks of birds fly through seasonally (spring and fall). The reptiles and amphibians in these grasslands are generally small lizards, snakes, turtles/tortoises, frogs/toads, and salamanders. Fish in most rivers and streams are small since the streams often dry out. The big rivers (the size of the Mississippi) have really big fish. Some of the resident people farm along the rivers, others follow the herds nomadically. The latter are more aggressive than the former.

Sagebrush Prairie

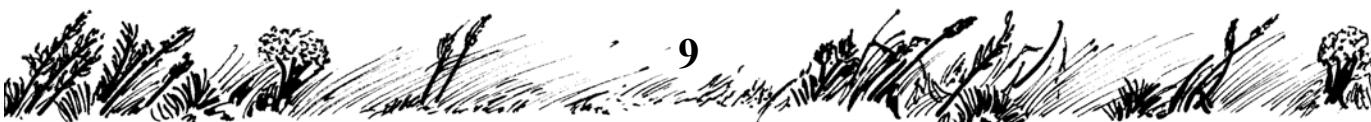
Sagebrush is the dominant plant in this region. The landscape seems totally monotonous with nothing but these short rounded bushes with gray-green leaves. The leaves smell like turpentine, especially after a rain or if they are bruised. In between the sagebrush plants are smaller plants, including bunch grasses (which grow in discrete clumps) and herbs which, briefly, have bright-colored flowers. Small herds of pronghorn antelope, deer and elk, which eat a mixed diet of shrubs, herbs and grasses, wander this region. (There are no big herds of grass-eating animals such as buffalo because of the dry conditions and low amount of grasses.) Prairie dog towns can be very large. Predators include bears, wolves, mountain lions, bobcats, coyotes, badgers, and weasels. Other animals include diverse mice, various rats and skunks. None are common: this country is relatively empty because the main thing to eat is sagebrush which is unhealthy in large quantities. Birds include eagles, owls and hawks, vultures, crows and ravens, larks, sparrows, grouse and swallows. There are also snakes, including poisonous ones, lizards, tortoises and toads, and in wet areas, frogs, salamanders and small turtles. Permanent water is uncommon and the fish are few and small. Insects flourish in the spring, then decrease in number as the summer dries out. It is too dry and unproductive for most people to live here. They mainly hunt here, and the hunting is not particularly good.





Shortgrass Steppe

This dry grassland has desert-like characteristics. The important grasses never grow taller than a lawn. Two or three short grasses make up most of the vegetation. One of them (buffalo grass) is nutritious green or dry, fresh or frozen, so it supports herds of buffalo and other grazers all year. The plants between the grasses are either ephemeral, appearing only briefly after it rains (usually in the spring) or inedible, with spines (cacti) or toxins (locoweeds). It is windy. It is dry most of the time. Rain comes as violent thunderstorms, with hail, lightning, strong winds, and sometimes tornados. Summers are hot (to 102°F, 40°C), and winters are cold (to -30°F, -34°C). Nights are cooler and moister than days, so lots of animals sleep through the day and are active at twilight or during the night. Buffalo migrate through this region annually, usually going to moister prairies in spring and summer for the greater forage. Severe drought is common, and then both forage and water run out and grazing animals migrate away. Other mammals of dry grasslands are elk, pronghorn antelopes, mule deer, and peccary (wild pigs). The predators are wolves, grizzly bears, coyotes, foxes, weasels, mountain lions, and badgers. The smaller animals are hares, rats including packrats, various mice, prairie dogs, and desert rodents like jumping rats and mice (kangaroo rats). Birds include eagles, hawks, vultures, burrowing owls, larks, wild chickens and quail, swallows and many sparrows. Extensive flocks of birds fly through seasonally and ducks, geese, cranes, sandpipers and plovers can be found in wet areas at least briefly. Reptiles and amphibians are more diverse than in wetter prairies: increasingly large lizards, more species and sizes of snakes, various tortoises, and desert toads, as well as frogs and salamanders in the few ponds and streams. Fish are few because of the frequency with which even big rivers dry up. There is not enough water for people to live here except beside a spring (of course, a spring and dwarf village could be underground). Most people simply hunt this country in the summer and spend the rest of the year elsewhere.





Coastal Grasslands

(Modeled after California's grasslands) This grassland region is the product of a seasonal climate, with all the rain falling in the six winter months, so that the drought stress in the other half of the year is too severe for most trees. Even the grasses go dormant by midsummer, so the land is green when it is raining but brown most of the rest of the year as the plants dry up and die. Summers are hot. Winters are mild, with frost and snow in midwinter, but not severe cold so plants do grow despite the regular frosts. In summer, these grasslands are hazardous to adventurers because the miles of dry grass will burn easily and once burned, there will be no forage until the next rainy season. Water is likewise hard to find because without rain, the streams mostly dry up.

The plants of this grassland are quite diverse with different species growing separately from each other, on upper slopes versus lower slopes, facing south versus facing north, on deep rich soils versus shallow rocky spots, etc. Bright flowers produce huge swaths of color at the end of the rainy season (March to May) in reds, oranges and yellows, blues and whites; some blooms are tiny (like nemophila), some rather large (like the California poppy). Though they have low productivity, these grasslands host elk, pronghorn, gophers, black-tailed deer, ground squirrels, jack rabbits, and many species of mouse and rat. Predators include grizzly bears, coyotes, foxes, and badgers. The grazers are rarely numerous. (Animal numbers are kept low because the animals must move away most summers when the water runs out.) Bird numbers and diversity are greater since birds can fly to water or away from fires. Common birds are hawks, eagles, condors, vultures, owls, quail, magpies, jays, crows, swallows, sparrows of many kinds, and hummingbirds. Reptiles include snakes, some poisonous, lizards, and turtles. Toads might be found anywhere but frogs and salamanders are confined to the rare areas with permanent water. The insects bloom with the plants, many of them having highly seasonal, very short life cycles that match the rainfall. Briefly there are many bees, butterflies, flies, moths, grasshoppers, crickets, etc. As the dry season continues, these animals vanish. Only very deep permanent waters have fish or aquatic animals. People come seasonally, just like the animals. They might harvest valuable plants for dyes and medicines or hunt game, but when the plants have dried up, they too leave.