

Backgrounder

Conservation leaders join forces on largest private grassland project in Canadian history

In brief

The Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) and Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC) have launched a monumental campaign to establish one of the largest conservation easements in Canada.

Once completed, this easement on the McIntyre Ranch will conserve over 22,000 hectares of an intact landscape composed of prairie grasslands and wetlands south of Lethbridge, AB.

Conservation values

The McIntyre Ranch boasts one of the largest uninterrupted tracts of grasslands remaining in Canada — and many of those that do remain are not formally protected. Its fescue and mixed grasslands, as well as its wetlands are in exemplary condition, thanks to sustainable land stewardship practices.

Environmental benefits of the McIntyre Ranch:

- The grasslands and wetlands of the ranch provide important ecological services, including erosion prevention, soil health, water purification and groundwater recharge, pollination and biodiversity — all of which are essential to our environmental and economic wellbeing.
- The McIntyre Ranch supports significant populations of wildlife. Surveys of the ranch from 2002 documented over 150 plant and wildlife species including birds, mammals, amphibians, reptiles, fish and butterflies. Of those, 13 are designated as species at risk by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada.
- Over 1,000 hectares of wetlands, ranging from small, ephemeral wetlands to large permanent basins, provide habitat for many species, including large populations of waterfowl.
- [Recognized as an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area](#), the McIntyre Ranch is a nationally significant and critical refuge for grassland and wetland birds. Grassland birds are among the fastest declining groups of birds in North America. In just over five decades, Canada has lost 60 per cent of its grassland birds—a significant biodiversity loss.
- The ranch's expansive and uninterrupted tract of high-quality native grassland supports habitat and movement routes for roaming mammals such as elk, deer and pronghorn.
- Conservation of the McIntyre Ranch will build upon already conserved areas adjacent to the ranch to the south, including Ross Lake Natural Area and Sandstone Ranch. This will result in a single conserved area of almost 27,000 hectares.

How the McIntyre Ranch is being conserved

- The McIntyre Ranch is being conserved through a conservation easement between McIntyre Ranching Co. Ltd. (owned by the Thrall family) and NCC and DUC.
- Conservation easements are legal mechanisms that protect the natural value of land through a voluntary agreement restricting certain land uses in perpetuity. In this case, the conservation easement will prevent cultivation of native prairie grasslands and will limit subdivision and development (e.g., buildings, wind/solar farms, game farms and feedlots).
- Conservation easements are proven and robust mechanisms for conservation in Alberta and in other jurisdictions.

McIntyre Ranch: A legacy of sustainable stewardship

- Not only is the McIntyre Ranch important for its ecological value, but it is also a shining example of western ranching culture and sustainable land stewardship.
- McIntyre Ranch was founded in 1894 by W.H. McIntyre. The property was purchased by Ralph Thrall in 1948. Today, it is owned by his four grandchildren and managed by his grandson, Ralph Thrall III.
- The ranch is one of the largest deeded properties in Canada and remains a working cattle ranch. It continues to be stewarded under the philosophy of 'the balance with nature' to maintain and enhance the condition of its natural rangeland. This involves rotational grazing systems and setting stocking rates to benefit the land and sustainable livestock production.
- Sustainable grazing by cattle is essential to grassland ecosystem health, as it increases biodiversity by creating a mosaic of different habitats throughout the landscape, keeps dominant plant species from crowding out other species and limits growth of woody plants such as shrubs.

Why conserving the McIntyre Ranch is critical

- Temperate grasslands like those found on the McIntyre Ranch are one of the most at-risk ecosystems on the planet, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature World Commission on Protected Areas.
- Across the Canadian Prairies, it is estimated only about 20 per cent of prairie grasslands remain.
- While the bulk of grassland conversion occurred around the time of European settlement in the late 1800s and early 1900s, grasslands continue to be lost at a rate far outpacing conservation.
- As grasslands have declined, so too have their native species. About two thirds of Alberta's species at risk are found in the grasslands natural area, with many more in decline.
- Conserving areas of high biodiversity means taking care of the places that clean our water, purify our air, absorb and store carbon, support food security and provide for our health and well-being. When we do this at scale, like with the McIntyre Ranch, we conserve entire natural systems, leaving nature to deliver the essential services that support life.

Additional species information

- Many bird species listed under Canada's *Species at Risk Act* (SARA) have been documented at McIntyre Ranch, including: bank swallow (threatened), barn swallow (threatened), chestnut-collared longspur (threatened), Sprague's pipit (threatened), Baird's sparrow (special concern), common nighthawk (special concern), long-billed curlew (special concern), horned grebe (special concern) and short-eared owl (special concern).
- Other SARA-listed species documented at McIntyre Ranch include little brown myotis bat (endangered), hare-footed locoweed (threatened), and American badger (special concern).
- Sharp-tailed grouse, a sensitive species in Alberta, have several breeding grounds (known as "leks") on the ranch. These birds show high fidelity to these sites, which are sensitive to disturbance, by returning to them year after year.
- The intact grasslands provide habitat and movement corridors (pathways) for pronghorn, a sensitive species in Alberta that undertakes seasonal long-distance migrations.

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