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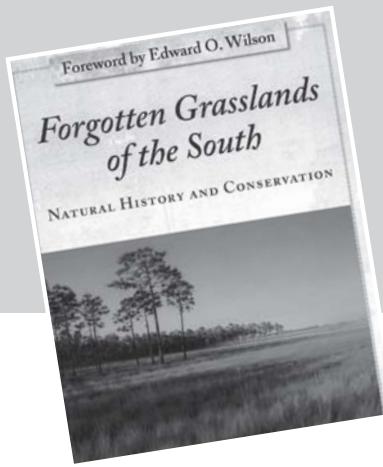
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Palmetto



The Inky Story of the Dinky Oak Gall • A Native Celebration • The Rebirth of Cape Florida



Forgotten Grasslands of the South: Natural History and Conservation

Reed Noss

Published by Island Press. 336 pages. ISBN-10: 159726489X

Review by Ginny Stibolt

Reading Reed Noss' excellent book is like being on an extended field trip throughout the southeastern United States, accompanied by the region's best field biologists and ecologists. The book is so dense with details that I know I'll be rereading it to absorb more important information.

E. O. Wilson, who wrote the foreword to this book, stated, "To understand, cherish, and preserve the great natural heritage of the South Grassland Biome should be a priority goal in America's environmental movement. Reed Noss' book provides a valuable map to that end."

This book covers many types of previously unrecognized grasslands including the pine flatwoods and dry prairies of Florida, the grassy balds of the southern Appalachians, the cedar glades of Tennessee, and the blackland prairies of Mississippi. While Noss includes charts with data of fossil records and population analyses, this is not an ivory tower book. He takes us into the field with experts of their local ecosystems. Over the course of four years of fieldwork across the region we look over his shoulder as we learn secrets and shared insights of interesting plants and animals and the ecosystems needed for their survival.

When most people think of grasslands in the United States, they most likely focus on the Great Plains and in many textbooks it is stated that grasslands occur where there is too much rain for desert, but not enough rain to support a forest. Obviously here in Florida and the rest of the southeastern states, there is enough precipitation to support forests, so our grasslands are explained by their natural history – including a long history of fire and large herbivore predation. While some people think that these ecologies were recently created and maintained by Native Americans' use of fire, Noss claims that they are ancient and authentic because of the enormous number of grassland species and their narrow distribution. He proves his point by comparing several genera of grassland plants. Take for example big bluestem (*Andropogon* sp.) – in the Great Plains there are two

species, but there are 19 species in Florida, 16 in North Carolina, and 11 in Louisiana. If these were recently created systems, the number of species would be much lower and there wouldn't be so many endemics.

Only a few human generations ago grasslands were abundant, but now they have been replaced by development, agriculture, tree farms, and heavily-forested areas where fire has been suppressed. We have lost more grasslands in the southeast than the Great Plains. They are the most imperiled because most people have forgotten our grasslands even existed. This book fills that void with its in-depth discussion of the origins and natural history.

Noss provides various conservation strategies for making sure that grasslands are recognized as being worth saving. He advises us that conservation is not comparable to triage where we can "write off" some sites as being too small or too insignificant to be worth saving. When we do this, "we effectively preclude further consideration of them even if more money or new technologies become available, or if species new to science are discovered in an area that previously was written off as unimportant." He is encouraged by some specific examples of small sites that became important for one reason or another.

Noss states, "My intent is to provide an accessible, engaging, and yet scholarly account of southern grasslands that will be comprehensible to the educated general reader interested in ecology, natural history, or conservation. I want people to be aware of how biologically amazing and enchanting southern grasslands are." In my opinion, he has accomplished his goal with a master's touch. I think this book belongs on the bookshelves of FNPS members who are interested in preserving the forgotten grasslands in "The Real Florida."

About the Author

Ginny Stibolt earned a master's degree in botany at the University of Maryland and has written *Sustainable Gardening for Florida* and *Organic Methods for Vegetable Gardening in Florida* – both published by University Press of Florida. In addition Ginny has been a lead blogger for FNPS since 2010.