



GRAZING ON NATURAL AREAS

- Grasslands evolved with grazers such as bison and prairie dogs. Livestock grazing is now used as a tool to help manage vegetation and provide wildlife habitat.
- Bison have been removed from the prairie as the dominant grazer and the remaining wildlife grazers (pronghorn, elk, mule deer, prairie dogs) do not graze enough to provide the same effects.
- Grazing is beneficial to the shortgrass prairie. It increases productivity of the plants; the hooves of grazers help to break up the soil and walking helps to incorporate seeds into the soil; grazing reduces litter accumulation which in excessive amounts can choke out new growth.
- A variety of grazing intensities is natural—some areas are grazed very heavily and others are grazed sparsely. This creates a mosaic of habitat and many wildlife species are dependent on grazing in different intensities. For example, some grassland bird species, such as mountain plover and McCown’s longspur, nest on very short grass; species such as Chestnut Collared longspur and Cassin’s sparrow prefer in taller grass.
- The Natural Areas Program works to ensure that wildlife forage needs are considered first. The number of livestock allowed to graze on natural areas is adjusted based on rainfall, grass conditions, water availability, etc. to ensure that adequate forage remains for wildlife.
- Livestock infrastructure is modified to be wildlife-friendly. Changes in traditional fencing allow wildlife passage while keeping livestock contained (top and/or bottom wire is removed; barbed wire is replaced with smooth wire). Stock tanks have escape ladders to enable small wildlife to climb out.
- Cows are rotated through pastures on Soapstone Prairie Natural Area June-October so that they are not on the same pasture for the entire season.
- Sheep graze on various natural areas (one at a time) May-August for about two-three months. There are usually 250-1,000 animals depending on the size of the target area.
- Sheep prefer to forage on broadleaf herbs or forbs and are generally considered an excellent species to use in a prescriptive grazing program to control invasive weeds such as Dalmation toadflax.
- Sheep may also be used in select corridors to help lighten fuel loads.
- Professional herders stay on site with the sheep at all times. Herding dogs are kept with the sheep but do not protect them from predators. Sheep are confined in small temporary pens at night to control movement and provide protection.