



## **Assiniboine Park Zoo Sets New Record with Release of 47 Critically Endangered Butterflies in Expanded Effort to Save the Poweshiek Skipperling from Extinction**

**For immediate release:** Winnipeg, July 20, 2021 – After a very successful breeding and over-wintering season, the Assiniboine Park Conservancy has released 47 critically endangered Poweshiek skipperling butterflies at the Nature Conservancy of Canada’s properties located in the Tall Grass Prairie Preserve in the RM of Stuartburn in southeastern Manitoba.

The Nature Conservancy of Canada carefully manages these prairie habitats to conserve thousands of species using adaptive management, such as fire, haying and grazing, along with community-based engagement. Research and monitoring are undertaken to ensure conservation and management activities are effective at maintaining and recovering numerous rare and endangered species, including the Poweshiek skipperling.

“We are really happy with the success of the over-wintering and breeding programs and the progress made this year,” said Laura Burns, Research Conservation Specialist, Assiniboine Park Conservancy. “Our annual wild population surveys are showing signs of improvement where we have done releases, which is encouraging given that this butterfly is one of the most endangered species in Canada. This is so rewarding and really reinforces the notion that we can make a difference, that we can help the species recover, but we absolutely need to continue our efforts to rebuild the local populations and protect their habitat.”

This is the fourth annual release of Poweshiek skipperling butterflies in Manitoba. The number of adult butterflies released this year, which exceeds the total of the first three years combined, was bolstered by a breeding program introduced last year. Last summer, for the first time, butterflies were allowed to breed in a controlled setting on site at the Assiniboine Park Zoo. Eggs were collected and cared for over the winter to increase the natural survival rate. The results were so promising, plans are already in place to expand the Poweshiek breeding efforts and introduce another species at risk into the program.

“This summer, we are piloting an expansion of the program to include another endangered butterfly – the Dakota skipper – a related species found in small numbers in the Interlake and pockets of southwestern Manitoba,” said Burns. “The transfer of skills and knowledge to other species and organizations is just one of the ways modern, progressive zoos like ours can really contribute to wildlife conservation across the country and around the world.”

As an indicator species, butterflies are particularly sensitive to changes in their habitat and can tell us something about the overall health of an ecosystem. This is particularly true of very specialized ecosystems like the tall grass prairie. The loss of much of this native prairie habitat has resulted in the dramatic decline of several grassland species including the Poweshiek skipperling.

“Taking an adaptive, collaborative approach to conserving the integrity of the disturbance-driven habitats on which Poweshiek skipperling depend is key to the species’ survival,” said Melissa Grantham, Conservation Biologist, Nature Conservancy of Canada. “Multi-partner conservation initiatives including education, public engagement, and the management and restoration of habitat are interwoven with Assiniboine Park Zoo’s amazing program. Together, these efforts are vital to the continued persistence of these truly special species and places.”

### **About the Poweshiek skipperling**

The Poweshiek skipperling is a small grassland butterfly species whose historic range includes southern Manitoba and the Midwestern USA. Today, there are only two small, isolated locations where the butterfly can still be found: the Tall Grass Prairie Preserve in Manitoba and a second site near Flint, Michigan. Experts estimate there may be fewer than 500 Poweshiek skipperlings remaining, making it one of the most endangered species in the world.

### **About the Poweshiek skipperling conservation project**

The Poweshiek skipperling conservation project is a collaborative effort with the Assiniboine Park Conservancy, Nature Conservancy of Canada, Minnesota Zoo, US Fish and Wildlife Service, University of Winnipeg, and other partners in Canada and the United States. The Assiniboine Park Zoo is responsible for a head-starting program for the Manitoba population, with the aim to increase the wild population size by raising the skipperlings through their most vulnerable life stages. This is the fourth consecutive annual butterfly release in Manitoba. Last year, 19 adult butterflies were released. In 2019, 13 butterflies were released. In 2018, the inaugural year, six butterflies were released.

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