

Assiniboine Park Conservancy Achieves Major Milestone with Release of Captive-Reared Endangered Butterflies

For immediate release: Winnipeg, July 4, 2018 – The Assiniboine Park Conservancy Conservation and Research Department has successfully released six captive-reared Poweshiek skipperling butterflies at the Nature Conservancy of Canada’s Tall Grass Prairie Natural Area in southeastern Manitoba. The release is the culmination of a multi-year, collaborative research and conservation effort undertaken to save this endangered species.

Recent estimates suggest that there may be fewer than 100 Poweshiek skipperling remaining in Canada, making the addition of six individuals significant. The release marks the first ever release of captive-reared Poweshiek skipperlings, both in Canada and the USA.

“The Poweshiek skipperling is an important part of the biodiversity of tall grass prairie habitat and an indicator of this imperiled ecosystem’s health,” said Laura Burns, Conservation Research Specialist, Assiniboine Park Conservancy. “This is an excellent result and a very promising development in our ongoing effort to secure the future of the Poweshiek skipperling.”

The Poweshiek skipperling is a small grassland butterfly species whose historic range includes southern Manitoba and the Midwestern USA. The loss of native prairie habitat, due primarily to land conversion, has resulted in the dramatic decline of several highly specialized grassland species including the Poweshiek skipperling. Today, there are only two small, isolated locations where the butterfly can still be found: the Nature Conservancy of Canada’s Tall Grass Prairie Natural Area in Manitoba and a second site near Flint, Michigan. Current research by the Assiniboine Park Conservancy and partnering organizations is focused on assessing and mitigating other threats to this species’ recovery. These threats may include climate change, pesticide use, changes in fire and grazing patterns, and invasive species.

The Poweshiek skipperling conservation project is a collaborative effort with the Nature Conservancy of Canada, the Minnesota Zoo, US Fish and Wildlife Service, the 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. In 2016, Assiniboine Park Zoo researchers started a pilot project on Garita skipperlings, a closely related but more abundant species. After a successful year, the methods were put into action with Poweshiek in 2017. Last summer, two wild female Poweshiek were brought to the Zoo for three days to lay eggs. After laying, the females were returned to their natural habitat. Once the eggs hatched, the Zoo provided optimal growing conditions for the caterpillars, including overwintering in a climate controlled incubator.

“In the lab, we place the skipperlings in an incubator that remains a constant -4°C to simulate wild conditions, where they would normally spend the winter under the snow pack,” said Burns. “This spring we woke the caterpillars up from diapause, a dormant state similar to hibernation, and were thrilled that we had 100% survival over winter!”

The six adult butterflies were released at the Tall Grass Prairie Natural Area over the course of the past week after emerging from their chrysalises. Over the butterfly’s flight period, surveys will be conducted to monitor the health and abundance of the wild population and in the future to gauge the success of the Zoo’s head-starting program.

After the pilot year’s success, the program is being expanded this summer by increasing the wild female collection in order to raise more caterpillars for release as adults next summer.

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