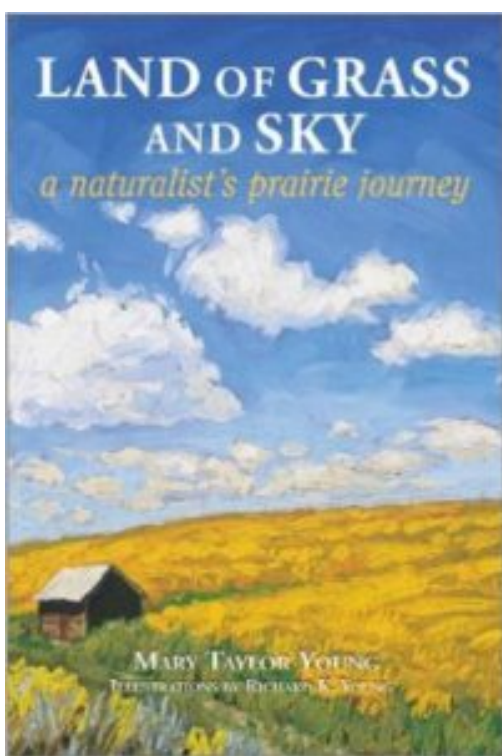


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Land of Grass and Sky: A Naturalist's Prairie Journey – Evergreen Audubon

5-7 minutes



Land of Grass and Sky: A naturalist's prairie journey by Mary Taylor Young

Mary Taylor Young is perhaps best known for her *Colorado Wildlife Viewing Guide* and her history of *Rocky Mountain National Park: The First 100 Years*. Yet, her newly revised tale of her love for our state's short-grass prairie reveals much about her as a naturalist and as an individual. The first edition was published in 2002, the second in 2016. If you love the prairie as I

do, you will enjoy reading her account. If you don't already love the prairie, Young's story will help you understand what makes the prairie so compelling.

Young's very first experience with the short-grass prairie was far from positive. In the early 60s, her father drove the family in an un-airconditioned car from San Antonio to her grandparents' cabin near Rocky Mountain National Park. The trip for her was miserable, trapped in a hot car, wedged between her two sisters in the back seat—all she really saw was “boring brown land.”

A change of mind happened after Young moved to Denver. One morning, free of other responsibilities, she drove westward along what was likely County Line Road south of Littleton, before it was surrounded by new development. She met a band of pronghorns that kept pace effortlessly with her sports car, speeding along at 47 miles per hour. When they turned in front of her to cross the road, she nearly collided with them, stopping just in time, and then they vanished. Her experience and understanding of the prairie was beginning to change and grow.

Each chapter of *Land of Grass and Sky* focuses on a different prairie experience. We find detailed accounts of Plains Cottonwood, Buffalo Grass, Prairie Dogs, Tumbleweeds, Longspurs, and Blue Grama, among others. I was especially taken by her description of picking chokecherries and making chokecherry wine. If you've ever picked and eaten a chokecherry, you know they are about 90% pit. They are also bitter, astringent, and unpalatable. But if you crush and simmer them in water, they render, she tells us, “the most pure, the most wonderful, the most truly wild cherry flavoring imaginable.”



Chokecherries

She picks chokecherries from the lower branches of the bushes around her house, leaving the upper branches for the Robins and the Cedar Waxwings who love them too. She makes them into wine, following a recipe from Euell Gibbons' *Stalking the Wild Asparagus*. She also harvests wild currants and wild plums. She learns how to use rose hips and mariposa lilies. Finally, she decides to buy and cook bison and make bison jerky. She is learning to use the bounty offered discretely by the prairie.

Young provides a nearly opposite view of the short-grass prairie by recounting the stories told her by her mother about the Dust Bowl. Her grandfather drove the family each summer from eastern Kansas to Estes Park. One trip was like no other. In an un-airconditioned car again, the family endured the dust coming in the open windows, soon coating everyone with grit. She tells us "theirs was usually the only car on the highway and meeting another vehicle was an event." Her mother remembered that the worse part were the ghost towns; once thriving farm communities completely abandoned except for the tumbleweeds. The few people they encountered were barely surviving.

That year, once the family crossed into Colorado near Burlington,

now on I70, they saw “something dark and ominous heading towards them.” Her Granddad floored the gas pedal, racing to make it to Burlington before the dust storm engulfed them. At the Burlington hotel, they jumped out of the car just as the dust descended on them. The hotel owner was waiting, holding the door open for them as they raced inside. They put damp towels over their faces and sat in dim candlelight as the world turned pitch dark outside.

Young ends her own account with a trip to the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge in the chapter, Blue Grama. As you know, the Arsenal is one of the most contaminated sites on earth and is now a Superfund cleanup site. But because it has been mostly an unoccupied area, wildlife began to find refuge on the Arsenal land, including Bald Eagles, Mule deer, Coyotes, Jackrabbits, Badgers, Burrowing Owls, and more. After the Arsenal became a wildlife refuge, it has become the largest prairie restoration project in the West.

No true prairie, Young explains, exists now. Even the remnants lack a critical ingredient, the bison herds. But the scientists at the Arsenal are doing their best, nurturing the Blue Grama Grass. On her trip to the Arsenal with Carl Mackey, the plant ecologist, she finds Blue Grama, Purple Spiderwort, Sand Verbena, and even a native thistle, called “wavy-leaf” (*Cirsium undulatum*).





Blue grama grass

At the end of the Blue Grama chapter, Young remarks: “It is so easy to travel the open country and see nothing but emptiness. ... A prairie is not empty, but its vitality projects downward into the earth instead of up. ... The prairie turns its life force inward. To look beyond the open space, to truly know a prairie and its secrets, I must look inward also, see with other than my eyes. I must look with my spirit. In this lies the prairie’s greatest lesson.”

If you love the short-grass prairie, you will revel in the stories Young tells and the science she recounts. If you don’t as yet, her stories will help you learn their lessons.

EarthTales Press, 2016.