Northern Great Plains Network

Inventory and Monitoring Monthly Report

December 2004

FY05 Budget: Still no official word on what the budget will be for the Network I&M Program in FY05, but the unofficial word is that we will get a $75k increase in Vital Signs funding (not the originally scheduled $700k, but better than nothing), plus we will get the scheduled $81k in Water Resources Division funding. These funds bump our base funding to $306k which keeps us in the black and gives us some operating funds.

Final Reports for Field Inventories: The final reports for the field inventories are starting to arrive. I recently received final reports for the multi-park herpetofauna inventory, the plant inventory at Fort Union Trading Post NHS, the butterfly studies at Mount Rushmore NMEM and Jewel Cave NM, Agate Fossil Beds NM and Scotts Bluff NM, and Fort Union Trading Post NHS and Knife River Indian Villages NHS. The final report for the multi-park mammal inventory is at the printer and we should see final reports soon for the multi-park bird inventory and the plant inventories at Fort Laramie NHS and Missouri NRR.

Outreach Efforts: One of the objectives of the I&M Program is to see that information gets out to the scientific community and the public. We've made some progress on that. For example, the recent issue of the Wyoming Native Plant Society (December 2004, 23:4) has an article on the plant inventory at Fort Laramie NHS. Early in 2004 we also had an article in The Primary Source (Spring 2004), a publication of the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory. In addition, Amy Symstad and Dan Licht co-authored a poster at the Ecological Society of America conference and Dan gave a talk at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln in September. Hopefully we can expand these efforts in 2005.

Missing Charismatic Mega-fauna: The Great Plains are renowned for many things, but did you know that the region has lost more native carnivores and ungulates than any other biome in North America, according to a recent article in BioScience (for the full article go to http://www1.nature.nps.gov/im/units/ngpn/Pages/publicationsArchive.htm). A partial list of species lost from all or significant parts of the region—including many Network parks—includes the gray wolf, black bear, grizzly bear, swift fox, mountain lion, lynx, river otter, fisher, wolverine, bison, pronghorn, elk, and bighorn sheep. Although NPS Management Policies generally encourage the restoration of these species, our parks are generally too small to contemplate such actions. However, we do need to be cognizant of the effects of these absences (i.e., missing "cogs") on the health of park ecosystems. For example, wolves were historically the top predator in the Northern Great Plains and coyotes were extremely rare and/or absent. However, with the extirpation of the wolf we now have an abundance—more accurately, overabundance—of coyotes, and perhaps other mid-size species that may have been "controlled" by wolves (e.g., raccoons). The unnaturally high levels of these mid-size carnivores can have a deleterious trickle down effect on swift fox, black-footed ferrets, ferruginous hawks, and many other grassland species that evolved and flourished in a wolf-rich and coyote-poor Northern Great Plains.