ON THE WICHITAS

Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge, Oklahoma

The Mixed-grass Prairie

"I believe it taught me to understand the sea. I began to feel that the vastness, the bulk, the overwhelming power of the prairie is the same in its immensity as the sea — only the sea is changeless, and the plains, as I knew, were passing . . ."

Down through the history of this country, settlers have steadily reduced the size of the prairie — largely by turning it into farmland. At Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge, however, some of the original prairie — a special kind called the mixed-grass prairie — still exists. The mixed-grass prairie is a crossroad where species of plants and animals from the north, south, east, and west overlap.

As you move through the refuge, you will notice tallgrasses, midgrasses, and shortgrasses. The dominant tallgrass is the big bluestem; the dominant midgrass is the little bluestem; and the dominant shortgrass is the hairy grama.

- The big bluestem can attain a height of 8 feet and thrust roots 6 feet into the ground. You find it in dense stands.
- If you hike through the prairie uplands, where the wind and sun keep the moisture low, you will see the little bluestem. This midgrass attains a height of 2 to 4 feet.
- The hairy grama, never more than 16 inches high, competes well where you find grazing and even drier conditions. Note how each flower stalk bears two or three right-angled spikes.

Although the prairie has dwindled, you can enjoy it here in its native state at Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge.

Big Bluestem

Little Bluestem

Hairy Grama