

# **How to Speak Fluent Prairie**

*by Cindy Crosby*

“Although place-words are being lost, they are also being created. Nature is dynamic, and so is language.” –*Robert Macfarlane*

What’s in a name? The *Oxford Junior Dictionary* has eliminated some words from its children’s dictionary that name things. Acorn. Willow. Buttercup. Kingfisher—and, other words that are about nature. Adults I encounter no longer seem to have a reference point for common names of plants and other members of the natural world.



In an adult prairie ethnobotany class I taught this July, I casually mentioned the silky fluff

or *pappus* of milkweed seeds in a pod. Several of my students exchanged blank looks. “You know,” I said, pointing to the milkweed plant in bloom. “The seed pod that comes after the flower.”

A few people smiled and shook their heads. I asked for a show of hands. “How many of you know what a milkweed pod is?” There were a few nods. But, almost one third of my class did not know what a milkweed pod was. Nor had they cracked one open to sail the canoe-like pod shells on a creek. They hadn’t blown the silky seeds into the wind and watched them float off toward the horizon. The words, “milkweed pod,” and “milkweed seeds” had no meaning for them.

It got me thinking—if words like “kingfisher” are disappearing from our vocabulary in dictionaries and “milkweed pod” no longer conjures up a visual memory or experience for people, how can we return these words to use? Perhaps learning more specific words for the inhabitants of the natural world and sharing them with others in ordinary conversation is one way to keep our landscape full of rich and beautiful names.



But—are there other words we need to imagine and create for the natural world? Surely there are names we haven't yet thought of yet. Can we meet this hemorrhage of word loss by contributing our own new words for things on the prairie—descriptions, perhaps, that have not been invented yet? Let's try a few.



Is there a name for the sandpapered curve of a compass plant leaf in winter, dry and brittle?



Or a term for the color of pink that flushes the sky in a frigid, December sunrise?



**What might we call the sound of white wild indigo seed pods, rattling in the wind?**



**Is there a name for the flotsam and jetsam that blows into a coneflower seed head in winter?**



Does the voice of a prairie stream, rushing through the ice and snow, beg for a new word to describe it?



A group of coyotes is called a pack. But is there a name to describe a pair of them, picking their way

through the snow and ice, moving toward me?  
Perhaps better yet—a word to describe how I feel at  
that moment?



What do you call a clump of snow, caught in  
the stems of the figwort plant?



“Arch” seems like the wrong word to describe the Canada wild rye seeds against a winter sky. An “apostrophe of rye seed”? An “eyebrow” of wild rye? A “bristle” of rye? Or?





When wild quinine turns silver in the frost, but still emits its clean, fresh scent, what word describes it?



What do you call the sun, when it attempts to break through the wintry sky? And— is there a word for the green of plants persisting under snow? Or for a single tree, punctuating a prairie landscape?

What do you think?

To express the beauty of the prairie—and the natural world— in all its sensory appeal, we may

require a new vocabulary. Let's put one together. I have my words for all of the above. What are yours? Think of compiling this list as a good occupation for a cold winter's afternoon. Or try this—the next time you hike the prairie, what new word descriptions would you add to the prairie's dictionary and thesaurus?

Learn some new names for plants, birds, insects, and animals on the prairie. Keep names from becoming lost. Make up your own descriptions for specific things when you can't find them. Use them. We need these new words—and—we need the existing words we are losing. They help us notice the details. They remind us of the splendor of the natural world. When we use specific words and names, we invite others to appreciate the rich diversity found in tallgrass prairie.

Ready? Let's get started.

### **Notes**

British writer Robert Macfarlane's (1976-) opening quote in this essay is from *Landmarks* (2015, Random House), in which he seeks to re-wild language with specific names for what we discover in the natural world. MacFarlane's work can be dense, but

like all good things, benefits from a second look and a close paying of attention. He believes that if we lose the names for things in the natural world, we may also lose those very places and plants, critters, and landscapes that are named through a gradual lack of interest and care. Worth thinking about.

### **Photo Credits**

All photos © Cindy Crosby: p. 1—Common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*), Nachusa Grasslands, The Nature Conservancy, Franklin Grove, IL; p. 3—common milkweed pod (*Asclepias syriaca*), p. 4—compass plant (*Silphium lacinatedum*), Schulenberg Prairie, The Morton Arboretum, Lisle, IL; p. 4—December sunrise, author's prairie patch, Glen Ellyn, IL; p. 5—white wild indigo (*Baptisia alba macrophylla*) seed pods, Schulenberg Prairie, The Morton Arboretum, Lisle, IL; p. 5—pale purple coneflower (*Echinacea pallida*), Nachusa Grasslands, The Nature Conservancy, Franklin Grove, IL; p. 6—Willoway Brook, Schulenberg Prairie, The Morton Arboretum, Lisle, IL; p. 6—two coyotes (*Canis latrans*), Hidden Lake, Forest Preserve of DuPage County, Downer's Grove, IL; p. 7—figwort

(*Scrophularia marilandica*) with snow, Schulenberg Prairie, The Morton Arboretum, Lisle, IL; p. 8—Canada wild rye (*Elymus canadensis*), Nachusa Grasslands, The Nature Conservancy, Franklin Grove, IL; p. 9—wild quinine (*Parthenium integrifolium*), Nachusa; p. 10—December at Nachusa Grasslands, The Nature Conservancy, Franklin Grove, IL.

### Editor's Note

[“How to Speak Fluent Prairie”](#) first appeared, in a slightly expanded form, in Cindy Crosby’s blog [Tuesdays in the Tallgrass: Exploring exterior and interior landscapes through the tallgrass prairie](#), on December 30, 2016. An accompanying article in this issue of Konza Journal, "Speaking Prairie—Accompaniment," contains the responses in words a few Kansas poets came up with in response to Cindy's photo challenges. —Roy Beckemeyer

**Cindy Crosby** is the author, compiler, or contributor to more than 20 books. Her most recent book, [The Tallgrass Prairie: An Introduction](#), was released in April 2017 from Northwestern University

Press. One of her prairie essays is included in [\*The Tallgrass Prairie Reader\* \(University of Iowa Press, 2014\)](#). She teaches prairie ecology, prairie literature, and prairie ethnobotany in the Chicago area, and is a prairie steward who has volunteered hundreds of hours in prairie restoration. She may be reached at her website: <[www.cindycrosby.com](http://www.cindycrosby.com)>.