



Legumes of the Great Plains: An Illustrated Guide

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Source: Natural Areas Journal, 42(2) : 160

Published By: Natural Areas Association

URL: <https://doi.org/10.3375/0885-8608-42.2.160>

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Book Review

Reviewed by Suzanne Koptur, Professor Emerita

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Legumes of the Great Plains: An Illustrated Guide

James Stubbendieck and Jessica L. Milby. Illustrated by Bellamy Parks Jansen, Regina O. Hughes, and Keith Westover

University of Nebraska Press

414 pp., hardcover. 2021

[ISBN: 978-1-4962-1775-2]

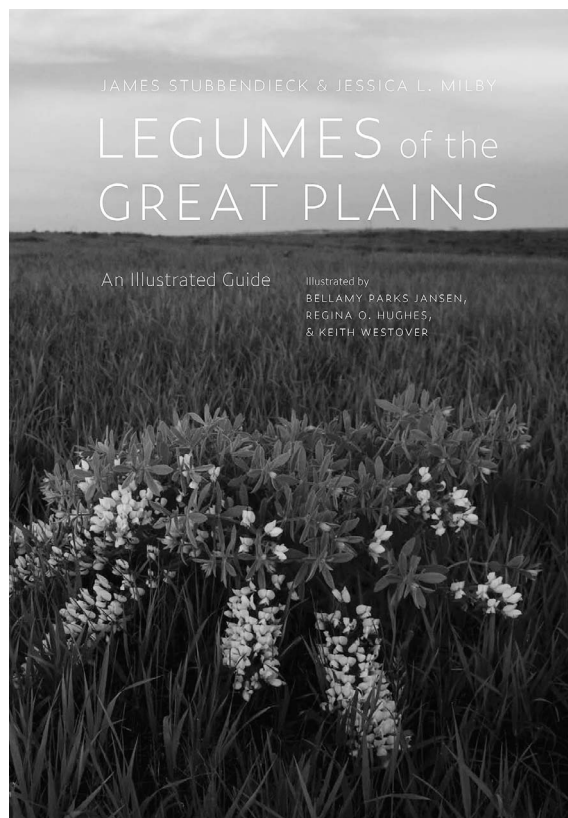
I love legumes and have studied them in many parts of the world, though never in the Great Plains. I hope to visit there someday soon, and when I do, I will certainly take this wonderful book. It not only introduces the climate, geology, and soils of the region, but also describes the prairies and how they were influenced by fire, especially prior to the ingress of European settlers and the transformation of much of the land to agriculture and grazing. The introduction also includes a review of the characteristics of legumes, with illustrations of the various terms used.

Like most keys, the dichotomous ones in this book rely on reproductive material, though vegetative characteristics are also included. The book recognizes three subfamilies (Caesalpinia-ceae, Fabaceae, and Mimosaceae), and authorities of the Latin names as well as synonymies are included. The authors also include the meanings of botanical names, adding interest for users of the volume. For each species a single common name has been selected, but other options are included in the text describing each, including names used by Great Plains Native Americans. It is useful that all the common names are included in the index, valuable for the variety of people who will use this book.

The very best thing about this book is the beautiful pen and ink illustrations of more than 100 species, including reproductive features and details of flowers. The plant portraits by Bellamy Parks Jansen (the lion's share), Regina O. Hughes, and Keith Westover are not only lovely but full of useful details, each with a distribution map in the upper corner of the page. I think that some readers might be tempted to take out their watercolors or colored pencils and embellish these drawings.

Along with the detailed descriptions of each species, including flowering dates, I think it will be possible to determine any legume encountered. Ecological information about habitat, pollinators, and ethnobotanical details including potential uses for the plants can also be found. Many pages have a lot of white space, useful for those who like to make notes in their books. Many of the genera are represented by a single species in the Great Plains, and it was interesting for me to look up familiar names to see how these species compare to the ones we have in my region, southern Florida.

The book has a very thorough and useful glossary, enabling users to understand the botanical terms, as well as ecological words and other words not commonly used. This is followed by an explanation of the abbreviations for nomenclature authorities, with a little information about the botanists as well. I learned about many botanists with whom I was not familiar, including Biago Bartolini (1746–1822), the director of the



botanical garden in Siena, Italy. The book is indexed completely, with all scientific names and common names.

When getting to know the flora of a new area, a book like this can help one learn a lot about one of the largest and most important plant families. This may be especially important to ecologists and land managers, as legumes play an important role in improving soil, and interacting with many kinds of animals. I recommend this book to any working in the Great Plains, as well as those who will visit, or want to compare the role of legumes in this region with other regions in the world.