

Dakota Skipper

SD-FS-87
July 2016

What is the Dakota Skipper?

The Dakota skipper is a small butterfly with a 1-inch wingspan. Like other skippers, they have a thick body and a faster and more powerful flight than most butterflies. Dakota skipper pupae are reddish-brown and the larvae (caterpillars) are light brown with a black collar and dark brown head.

What is their “status”?

The Dakota skipper is listed as “Threatened” under the Endangered Species Act and critical habitat has been designated. Threatened species are likely to be at the brink of extinction in the near future.

The Endangered Species Act defines critical habitat as an area that contains habitat features that are essential for the survival and recovery of a listed species, which may require special management considerations or protections. The NRCS is required to consult with the USFWS on any actions that may affect critical habitat.

Where in S.D. do they call home?

This species may occur in high-quality prairie of several northeastern South Dakota counties: Brookings, Codington, Day, Deuel, Grant, Hamlin, Marshall, McPherson, Moody, and Roberts. The butterfly is present on the prairie year round.

Where am I most likely to see this butterfly?

The Dakota skipper occurs in two types of habitat. The first is relatively flat and moist bluestem prairie in which three species of wildflowers are usually present and in flower when Dakota skippers are in their adult (flight) stage. These wildflowers are the wood lily, harebell, and smooth camas.

The second habitat type is upland (dry) prairie that is often on ridges and hillsides. Bluestem grasses and needlegrasses dominate these



Photo by: Bryan E. Reynolds/www.botwf.org

habitats in which three wildflowers are typically present. These wildflowers are: pale purple coneflower, upright coneflower, and blanketflower.

What are the threats?

- Populations are isolated from one another in relatively small areas of remnant native prairie.
- Grazing that decreases plant health and increases non-native species.
- Habitat conversion to cultivated agriculture.
- Inappropriate fire management and herbicide use.
- Woody plant invasion and invasive plant species.
- Road construction, gravel mining, and, in some areas, historically high water levels.

What are the opportunities? Dakota skippers and their prairie habitat are dependent on some type of periodical disturbance; otherwise it would become shrubby or forested.

The SD NRCS provides technical and/or financial assistance to landowners to address threats to this species that may occur on their land.

Stop in and ask the local NRCS office to assist you with preparing land management plans which will achieve your objectives and help this butterfly.

Three specific actions landowners can take are:

Prescribed Burning:

Fire is a natural component of prairie habitats, but Dakota skippers are vulnerable to fire at virtually all life stages and depend on repopulation from unburned areas to persist.

Ensure that only a small proportion of their habitat is burned in any given year and only burn as frequently as is necessary to achieve specific objectives.

The NRCS can help you develop a prescribed burn plan in conjunction with a prescribed grazing system that will maintain and/or increase plant health or forage production, and prevent succession from grassland to shrubs or trees.

Maintain and Improve Healthy Grazing lands:

Grazing maintains grassland habitats. However, preferred plants may disappear if grazing does not occur in a manner that sustains the native prairie plants.

Ensure that a sustainable grazing system is developed and implemented that addresses both livestock and butterfly needs.

The NRCS can help develop a grazing system that maintains and/or increases plant health and forage production while providing butterfly habitat.

Grassland Establishment/Restoration:

Restoring prairie grassland habitats may help this butterfly. Conversion of cropland to native prairie grasses and forbs (wildflowers), the Dakota skipper prefers, provides habitat when the restoration occurs in a location and size suitable to the species needs.

Ensure that native prairie restoration is developed and implemented that addresses both livestock and the butterfly's needs.

The NRCS can help develop a prairie restoration plan that provides livestock forage and species habitat.

To learn more contact your local NRCS office, or go to www.sd.nrcs.usda.gov.