Thanks to generous funding from the Association of Zoos and Aquariums Conservation Grants Fund and the Disney Conservation Fund, the Grassland Butterfly Conservation Program at Assiniboine Park Zoo in Winnipeg, Manitoba, has expanded its capacity and facilities.

The program is focused on the recovery of at-risk skipperlings, specifically the endangered Poweshiek skipperling. This small butterfly was once found in tall grass prairie habitat across the Midwestern United States and central Canada, but has now been reduced to only three small isolated locations in Manitoba, Michigan, and Wisconsin. Assiniboine Park Zoo is leading a Canadian headstarting program with the goal of increasing their numbers in the wild by rearing them through the most vulnerable life stages. The Minnesota Zoo in Apple Valley, Minn., is a close collaborator on the project and the headquarters for captive rearing Poweshiek skipperlings and Dakota skippers in the U.S.

The rearing program is a labor-intensive process. In June, females are caught and brought back to the Zoo to lay eggs for up to 72 hours before being released back into the wild. Their eggs hatch in the Zoo and caterpillars are then reared on native prairie grasses throughout the summer. In the fall, the larvae go into diapause and are kept frozen over the winter. In the spring they will be placed on grasses again to grow and pupate. The pupa are then taken to field sites and released when they emerge as adults. Last year was the first year of collection, so the summer of 2018 will be the first time that raised Poweshiek skipperlings will be released into suitable habitats at the Tall Grass Prairie Preserve in southern Manitoba.

The AZA and Disney funding helped to build two specialized structures for captive rearing butterflies in natural but protected environments that mimic conditions in the field. This helps butterflies in the program to synchronize development with the wild populations. The funds also supported hiring two summer student positions to help care for and monitor the growing caterpillars. This program in Canada and efforts in the U.S. at other AZA-accredited facilities not only help endangered species, but also raise awareness about other prairie species in need of conservation.

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