Imagine you are a time traveler and have the opportunity to visit this area 25,000 years ago. You would recognize the Rocky Mountains to the west. The igneous and heavily glaciated Sweetgrass Hills loom on the horizon far to the north. The last of the great continental glaciers had retreated, leaving behind a hummocky grassland with ponds, swamps, and erratic boulders. The grasslands support an abundance of animal life, much of which would be recognizable as still inhabiting the northern Great Plains today. However, there would also be many animals that have long been extinct. Almost all of them would be much larger and adapted to a colder post-glacial climate.

Great herds of horses, pronghorn antelope, elk, camels, and giant bison would be a common site on the plains. They milled around with groups of blond-haired Shasta ground sloths, and shaggy Musk and Shrub oxen. Columbian mammoths with long, curving tusks roamed the plains in small groups. Dire and Gray wolves and short-faced bears followed the herds in search of easy meals. At 10-feet in length and more than 2,000 pounds, the bears dwarfed today’s Grizzlies in size and ferocity. Perhaps the most famous of all Pleistocene predators were the fearsome saber-toothed cats. Relatively small and compact, the cats may have ambushed their prey and slashed at them with their 7-inch long canine teeth. Perhaps even more deadly, however, was the long-legged American Lion, a killing machine bigger than the Bengal tiger. Climatic changes, limited food supplies, and, possibly, over-hunting by paleo-Indians caused many species once common to the northern Great Plains to become extinct about 11,000 years ago. The American bison, gray wolf, elk, and pronghorn antelope are descendants of that primeval ecology.