



Prairie Pod Podcast Transcript

Episode 4: A Legacy of Conservation at Lac qui Parle

Podcast audio can be found online at mndnr.gov/prairiepod

Transcript:

((sounds of birds chirping and wind blowing))

Megan: Alright. Welcome back to the MN Department of Natural Resources Prairie Pod. It's time for Episode 4 today 'A Legacy of Conservation at Lac qui Parle'. The voice you're listening to is Megan Benage, Regional Ecologist with the DNR. I'm super excited to be here!

Jess: Me too. I'm Jessica Petersen. I'm the Prairie Habitat Research Scientist with the DNR and we're sitting here in our lovely New Ulm recording studio with Dave Trauba. Dave do you want to introduce yourself?

Dave: Yes, I'm Dave Trauba the Regional Wildlife Manager for the Division of Fish and Wildlife in the Southern Region. Happy to be here today.

Megan: We're happy you're here too, Dave! We've already been sharing a lot of laughs and ridiculous things that we had to scrub out of the podcast, but don't worry they'll be more of it to listen to during this. So, we are taking a little different tack during today's podcast. Instead of featuring a prairie necessarily or specific aspect of restoration, today we're going to feature a very special conservationist. Woot! Woot! And that conservationist is Dave Trauba. Just in case there was any suspense there, we just wanted to make sure you knew why we invited Dave here today. Dave has a long legacy here with the DNR. Dave has worked for the Lac qui Parle Wildlife Management Area as the manager for 24 years. That's a long time! Throughout that time he gained a lot of knowledge and we're going to hopefully tap into that today. So, we're just going to jump right into this. Are you ready?

Dave: Yes, I'm ready.

Megan: Are you excited?

Dave: Yes, I am.

Megan: He's got his Ducks Unlimited vest on. I'm not sure how I feel about that with this being a DNR recording, but we are all about partnership on the prairie-- that's how we roll.

Jess: And a PF mug.

Megan: Yes, and he has a Pheasant's Forever mug. Really it's not the DNR talking to you today it's the suite so if you feel left out--because we can't name all of our partners now--just know that you're here in solidarity with us.

Dave: Well, I could be wearing my prairie chicken society hat and my sharp-tailed, So it's partnership!

Jess: Demonstrates the importance of partnership!

Megan: He's basically wearing the prairie plan right now.

Dave: That's right.

Megan: So Dave, jump right in and tell us about you. Who are you?

Dave: I grew up in SE Wisconsin, so go Packers, that's ingrained in you, you don't get that out. I'll just say that right now.

Megan: Oh boy.

Dave: Pretty typical, grew up in a very rural area--classic Wisconsin. Where I grew up it was red dairy barns and milk cows, alfalfa and corn. I did not know what a soybean was until I moved to MN. I kid you not, it was all alfalfa and corn. People milking 45 head dairy farms, but long story short, I grew up next to the Horicon Marsh and Theresa Marsh. Back in that day, Horicon Marsh was like Lac qui Parle. Over 500,000 geese-- a lot of waterfowl. I grew up in a family of hunting tradition. My fondest memories will be with my grandpa, dad, and brothers hunting waterfowl and the abundance we had. I'm probably one of the few people, because when I was a sophomore in High School I knew what I wanted to be, a wildlife manager. What really sold it for me was there was a poster of UW Steven's Point of a person holding two bear cubs and I looked at that and said 'that's what I want to do'. When I was a sophomore I was reading Elk of North America, white-tailed deer or anything with ecology. Then one of our science teachers, who later worked for the US Fish and Wildlife Service, would take us on trips and we'd see a flock of whatever and he would take out his notebook and write it down. He was also a mentor too. But I did live the dream, I went to UW Steven's Point and I ended up doing my master's degree on black bears. In 5-6 years later, I was holding bear cubs just like in the photo.

Megan: They then swapped out the picture, right?

Dave: That's right. I was living the dream. I wanted to be a Northern Forest Wildlife Manager, which is interesting as I ended up on the prairie. I will talk about that transition later.

Megan: How many bear cubs have you held at Lac qui Parle?

Dave: None. But then I spent the year working with the foresters up in Ely, MN. Really living the dream doing research with bears. I was again 'wow I want to be a Northern Forest Wildlife Manager'. So how I got to Lac qui Parle prairie was because my wife basically said 'Dave we're poor and get a real job!'

Megan & Jess: (laughter)

Dave: So that's what I did. I actually turned down a number of DNR jobs and interviews because I was going to stay up there and work for the Forest Service for another year. But my wife said no, we're really poor and my son was two and I was making \$7.25/hour and we're 10 hours away from any family support. Again, I was living the dream; I worked 7 days a week and she was home with our two year old.

(More laughter from Megan & Jess)

Dave: I'd like to say I landed at Lac qui Parle by design and I knew everything about it. But, I came to that interview cold, I couldn't even tell you if there was any geese at Lac qui Parle when I applied. So, I still wake up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat thinking how lucky I was to end up at Lac qui Parle. So now I think we probably want to talk about how do you pronounce Lac qui Parle?

Megan: Yes, we sure do. So this is like the thing in the DNR, everybody that you talk to has a different way of saying it. Some people will say have you been down to Lac key Parle and some people say parlay, which I'm pretty sure is real wrong. Other people say Lac QA Parle. Some people say Lack and some say Lock. So we want to get from the real expert here, how do you really say Lac qui Parle?

Dave: There have been books written on this.

(More laughter from Megan and Jess)

Dave: There is a small q and you will get in fights in the Lac qui Parle area if you don't do that. Now I say Lac qua Parle, it's a French word.

Megan: You say qua?

Dave: I think the French would be qwee would be correct too. I would say maybe Parlee is correct too.

Jess: In preparation for today, I went on the Google and we always know that the Google is right. And I asked Google "how do you pronounce Lac qui Parle?" and it was Lac qwee Parle. So it's French. So, what does it mean?

Dave: Lake that speaks. So now if you were to talk to the locals today they would say a lake that speaks because of all the geese and all their honking, the noise they make. Wrong, it has nothing to do with that. In the 1800's there were no geese at Lac qui Parle. It had to do with the actual white sand. Think of this, white sand at Lac qui Parle and when the waves would crash upon it, it made this vibrating, musical sound. That's how the lake got its name. You won't find white sand at Lac qui Parle today, but that's another podcast for another day.

Megan: Oh my gosh, I can already tell we are going to run long!

(Laughter by all)

Jess: White sand podcast. Add it to our list.

Megan: White sand podcast...the beaches of Lac qui Parle that are never more. Sorry, I'm going off-script here.

Jess: So tell us a little bit more or give us a picture of the landscape of Lac qui Parle. What does it look like? Paint us a beautiful picture.

Dave: Sure, it's the headwaters of the Upper Minnesota River Valley. So the defining feature when we say Lac qui Parle, we're talking about the Lac qui Parle WMA (Wildlife Management Area) it is the glacial terrace alongside Lac qui Parle Lake and Marsh Lake. Today the unit is 33,000 acres in size. Then when you add in the Big Stone National Wildlife Refuge, roughly around 55,000 acres of public land. If you add in the scattering of the WMAs & Waterfowls Production Areas and SNAs (Scientific and Natural Areas) nearby you have over 80,000 acres of public land within an hour of the refuge headquarters. When you think of 7 regions, that's pretty phenomenal when you get them all working in concert. The main features of the unit are Lac qui Parle Lake and Marsh Lake and those where historic lakes prior to the WPAs (work project administration) coming and putting dams in. Also you have very dramatic shallow lake systems, very functional, but we came in the 30's and made them into deeper waterbodies. But they are still the main features. Then you have prairie extending out from those lakes and stuff. What makes it unique today is we have broad stretches of true native prairie. Like Chippewa Prairie, for example, where you can walk 6 miles and never hit a road and still be on native sod the entire way. That's pretty rare. The wildlife, the birds and migration it's a great place for that.

Jess: That was one of the first prairies I went to when I came to Minnesota and that's where I met Megan--was at Chippewa Prairie.

Megan: We did meet at Chippewa Prairie. That was the unfortunate rock incident. And we camped at Lac qui Parle.

Jess: Yes, we did.

Megan: That was the beginning of Megan & Jess! The friendship that just...

Jess: Beautiful campsite that overlooks the lake.

Megan: Dave actually recommended the campsite. Dave, you had a fundamental role in starting my friendship with Jess.

Dave: Well the fact that you had a rock experience is very fitting because that's what saved Lac qui Parle prairie, is all those rocks from those boulders sent down by glaciers. It was too rocky to farm so it stayed in hay or grazing land.

Megan: Where were you last year when you could have written that on my DNR incident report for the underside of my vehicle?

Dave: Well some of us are just smart enough not to drive through a prairie-- we stay on the trail.

Megan: This was on a designated road.

Jess: Yes, this was on a road with 2 tracks.

Dave: That's why we drive 4x4's with high clearance.

Megan: Some Divisions don't have the luxury like the Division of Fish and Wildlife is accustomed to (sarcasm).

Megan: So you talked about this a little bit what makes Lac qui Parle special is the wildlife there. So we want to know a little bit more in detail. I want to talk to you about geese, but I also want to talk to you about pelicans and other featured wildlife. Give me the gamut here about the wildlife highlights.

Dave: I would say geese built Lac qui Parle in many ways.

Megan: With their bare feet?

Dave: No, It was the reason that we had our employees, our infrastructures all developed around Canada geese. So, in 1957-- what happened was the flood control project in the 1930's, the state of Minnesota actually went out and condemned land up to a certain elevation around both Lac qui Parle and Marsh Lakes. Those lands stayed in federal ownership until the 1950's when that land was transferred over to the State of Minnesota to be developed as a wildlife area. So that was in 1957 and in 1958 we start a Lac qui Parle Canada Goose Management Project with game refuge order through 1974. I'm serious it was the number of hunters that came out there and the restoration of Giant Canada geese that made Lac qui Parle known for what it is. We had support to acquire land and had the staff to go out and do the management we did. So it all started when restoration of Canada geese started at Lac qui Parle and Talcot Lake. We actually brought in wing-clipped Canada geese. We thought Giant Canada geese were extirpated—extinct actually-- from the state at that time. So we had pens down on Rosemoen Island, which is a sanctuary, which is off limits. So they wing-clipped those birds for 3 years. Eventually allowing the young to fly off and come back. We actually had a hay loft, and I kid you not a person would be in the hay loft and if they saw a flock of Canada geese they played a record. We actually have the record of geese honking. (Megan and Jess laughing). [We were] Trying to get geese to land. Our goal was to restore Giant Canada geese back to Minnesota. Number 2 was to provide a stop-over for when migratory geese were coming out of Canada. So the first year we had 500 migratory geese, the second year we had 2,000 and then we had 5,000 then 10,000 and eventually 100,000, 150,000 over 12,000 hunters coming through our controlled hunting zone blinds to hunt Canada geese. It was back in that day that you could not hunt Canada geese elsewhere in Minnesota. Either you went to Thief Lake, Talcot Lake or Lac qui Parle. We could go into the more detail of challenges of having a large goose flock, etcetera, and with that mallards the whole gamut of waterfowl coming through and you mentioned pelicans. Another thing we're famous for, will kind of go back and forth with Chase Lake, North Dakota for largest breeding pair of white pelicans. But like Canada geese, white pelicans were nearly extirpated from Minnesota. Then Al Grewe, Professor at St. Cloud State University, banded the first 2 pelicans at Marsh Lake. That was the first breeding pair, so we went from 1 pair to up to 15,000 breeding pairs.

Megan: Wow

Dave: So that's the power of getting DDT and other chemicals out of the environment just like for the bald eagles. That's what really allowed pelicans to be restored. They're not habitat limited they were more limited by chemicals in the environment. We could have 45 minutes talking about geese, I'd be happy to.

Megan: (Laughing) I know, I think that one of my favorite days that I've ever seen you at work, because it's so often now, so for those of you who don't know Dave is the Regional Manager for the Division of Fish and Wildlife which means that he is often desk bound, unfortunately (Dave agrees) because he really misses that field time. But one of my favorite days, I think that you escaped back to Lac qui Parle - we let you out of the Regional Office. I was out there for a meeting or something and I remember you came in from the field and the wind was blowing like 50 mph or something ridiculous, it was a chilly day probably like 35 degrees and there is Dave. His hair-- on the sides of his head-- flying (laugh) rosy cheeks and wearing all his field gear and he's 'like man what a day out at the refuge, what a day!' I was just looking at him thinking that's a wildlife biologist folks right there, no mistaking him when he's in his Khaki pants at the office. There he is tried and true. That being said all that little sentimental story here. So you talked about how they changed in terms of the numbers increasing, what about now? So we started in 1957 and how has the area changed through time and during your tenure as Wildlife Manager? Where are we at today, both in terms of the landscape and our wildlife population?

Dave: We'll stay on geese then we will get to prairie. The biggest change I had was when you say legacy of conservation I'm going to give credit to all the managers that were there. When you have Arlen Anderson there from 1958 all the way through 1980's. He was there when they were putting geese in pens. Then you had Ken Bonnema. I just followed their work and picked up where they left off. Walt Gessler is the Area Wildlife Manager now. He is the 4th manager since 1958. People would tend to come to Lac qui Parle they tend to stay there for a long time. Back in Arlen Anderson's day, he would say that the 13th of September was when the first migratory geese would arrive on the refuge coming out of Canada. It was like clockwork, even when I arrived the 13th of September geese would land. It was scary at how predictable it was.

Megan: Set your watch by it!

Dave: Yes, set your watch. In the mid 90's, on the 13th of September very few geese. Now it's becoming mid-October before we would see migratory geese arriving on the refuge. We'd still get big numbers--150,000 Canada geese, but starting to arrive in Mid-October. Big numbers in November and then they would depart on [to] Missouri. By the time I left, migratory geese weren't leaving Canada until almost Thanksgiving and then arriving at Lac qui Parle. So you pretty much pushed that whole migration back a month and a half to two months from what it was historically. Really our tradition of goose use and the goose hunters were no longer coinciding with geese [migration]. Then in later years, our peak numbers at the refuge now are 22,000 geese. Those birds are staying in Canada or they're just spread out migrating everywhere. The same thing has happened at Horicon Marsh back in Wisconsin. When you go back home they don't have geese. The geese are just staying north longer, then when they do migrate they

migrate in a much broader area. Some other day we can talk about why that is going on.

Megan: Dave it sounds like you're trying to set yourself up for like a whole Dave Trauba podcast series.

Dave: We can talk a lot.

Megan: He's like next time and then next time...

Dave: I only have 45 minutes. My theories take time, Megan.

Megan: Four different episodes that would focus on Dave Trauba.

Dave: Migration would be a good one. How does the refuge change, your next question. Our work has changed. When Arlen and others even when I first started there was not the focus on prairie like there is today. We were just busy with other things. Back in the 50's and 60's you had more prairie to begin with. I think as the science evolved, really our restoration ecology evolved, more of our attention started going on managing landscapes and prairie as part of that so that's where we saw changes as well. Which we will talk about in more detail.

Jess: So tell us a little more about that. What kinds of things do you think you and other managers are doing differently today than you did in the past in terms of restoration and management? What's changed?

Dave: Well, I look back to managers like Brad Olson, he just retired 2 years ago, and Steve Merchant retired a few years ago. Brad Olson, I remember they were planting one species grass mixes-- that was switchgrass which came from Nebraska. We still have some of those fields on the unit. That was cutting edge at one time. Wow we're no longer going to seed brome and alfalfa, now we're going to seed true natives or switchgrass. And then a big change was wow we're going to go to 5 species now. We're getting there and look how tall it is. When I first came to Lac qui Parle I thought the taller it is the better and that's totally wrong. True prairie was maybe knee high and that's why prairie grouse are flyers and not runners. But we digress.

Jess: So what was the reasoning behind that, that feeling that you're growing a really great stand of grass? Or why did you want it that tall?

Dave: Well it's what we knew. We didn't have the variety of species that we have today, no one even thought of planting wildflowers until later on. So we were doing what we were and growing it tall was what we thought our pheasant hunters would want and that's what we thought deer would want. I think our understanding of the whole realm of prairie wildlife species and different vegetative heights has come along. We're talking about it a lot more. We went from 5 species and at Lac qui Parle we did have true native prairie we could harvest from. There again we had Brad Olson who would combine and harvest prairie seed. So that was a step ahead too. And then you're starting to get a fall prairie when you're thinking of our harvesting we're combining in the fall so what did you get; you're getting stuff that was setting seed in the fall. But again that was like wow now you've got 25 species in the mix about the time I was midway through my career then all of a sudden there was other funding available to all the managers to augment

your species mix. We didn't have ecologists like you and Megan on staff to say well we should be looking at these species as they bloom early and no one heard of the word 'pollinator' until maybe 5 years ago. That wasn't in the vocabulary, we just weren't thinking of the pollinators. We knew about the invertebrates and don't burn everything and this and that. But earlier in my career, I'd take that drip torch and if that interior did not burn, darn it all, I'm going to turn it all black and strip that sucker out better. (Giggles from Jess and Megan). We don't do that today, don't worry about that if it [fire] goes out that patchiness is what we desire.

Jess: Yes, restoration ecology in general is a really young field. It's hard! It's hard to study it and there are so many variables that affect these things, we're always learning even as we're trying to push the needle. We're all learning at the same time.

Megan: Oh yeah. Even the stuff I did 16,17,18 years ago when I was still in school is way different than what we do now we still were pushing real tall thick dense stands back then and now I'm like 'hey let's have 5 lbs. of grass maybe maximum'. But diversity that's where it's at. You guys hear that on the podcast all the time.

Dave: And I'll just add into this, it's getting harder because prairie is a very fragmented landscape nowadays. And I tell people we talk about prairie quite a bit and I would try to educate a 5th grade [class at a] school day. I'd take them out by the office there and it's just a little knob of prairie so 'how do you instill [in them] what prairie once was that is mostly gone'. So really you're in love with a ghost. Something that no longer exists. That's really one of the challenges of prairie conservation is how do you have people fall in love with a landscape that you really can't take them out there and say 'here it is'. We got a few spots where you can do that. So that's a challenge of prairie conservation in Minnesota.

Jess: We need a billboard that tugs on those heart strings with the little bears.

Dave: And you can appreciate this to really develop an appreciation for prairie, you have to know how all the cogs and parts are related together. If you take someone out there to look at they may think oh well, that's just grass. No, it's not. It's everything working in concert, but that's a challenge.

Jess: Yes, it is.

Megan: I just learned I'm in love with a ghost. Like deeply in love with it. I might need to go to therapy for this.

Jess: I got real sad.

Megan: Jess got real sad. There were a lot of sad faces all around. I mean I feel like I'm in love with a real tangible thing, Dave. I agree with you, it's not the landscape it once was, but I will say this just as a counterpoint to that. Coming from a different state where our remnant prairie exists in cemeteries pretty much alone and areas that are rocky or flooded historically. To come to a state like Minnesota and while yes, we only have about 1% of our prairie left, we're still pretty blessed. We're more blessed than some other states that have lost so much more. I feel like being here, I get to be a better ecologist, a better prairie ecologist because I actually do have more public lands where I

get to go look at and see prairie. Much, much more than my previous state, which shall remain unnamed, Indiana. Indiana is a beautiful state and they have a lot of things going for them, but gosh in Minnesota I can drive 30 minutes and go to public lands and see prairie. So, I just feel a little differently having that comparison point I guess. There's still lots of work to do. I counterpointed you, Dave.

Dave: Very good. Point taken.

Jess: So, Dave tell us what's the weirdest thing that's happened to you while you were on your job?

Dave: I had to think real hard on that one. I struggled on that one. I don't know. Back when we were doing the controlled hunt station and everybody had to bring their geese back in and we would weigh and measure them—every measurement you can think of on geese. We would weigh them too. I remember there would be some days where I would never leave the scales. We'd have over 100 geese taken out of state-blinds alone, which is pretty incredible. There was a guy standing in line with a cormorant. (All laughing). Pretty clueless. You know we didn't write him a ticket, we just weighed it and said, enjoy! I think that was it. And then we actually had an outhouse, a true outhouse there and my job was to clean it. That was the most disgusting part of my job. I'd rather pick-up disease outbreaks and deal with that than clean an outhouse.

Megan: Did you ever find anybody in the bottom of it? This is like my worst fear. This is one of my traumatizing fears that you go to sit down in a port-a-potty or an outhouse and there's somebody below you that reaches up and hits you. This is my worst fear.

Dave: You did mention that you might have to see a therapist and I would recommend it.

(All laughing)

Megan: We just learned life skills on the podcast. My other fear is that there will be a snake down there and it will come up and bite you. I don't know something about outhouses really freaks me out. Now you guys know. Jess is afraid of fishers. I'm afraid of outhouses. Oh boy. So, transitioning here. Tell us some of the most important things you've learned on your job? I know that's episode 5 of your podcast series, but really, what are some of the most important things? I feel like as you go through your career, if you're doing it right, you just get smarter because you are enriched by the people around you and you learn more and more and more. You're not afraid to try things and you're not afraid to fail—failing is good within boundaries—because it helps you learn. I am a much better ecologist now than I ever was and I hope I can say that 15 more years out in my career. I just have to imagine at this point that you have learned so much and you're super-duper smart now.

Dave: You might be disappointed because I struggled on this one. You know what I would say for young managers, don't be afraid to take risks. Try new techniques. Try to learn from them and document. Take risks. I think looking at management, someone had to say darn it I'm going to take a risk and I'm going to plant switchgrass. That was a risk because we could've been real comfortable just doing a standard dense cover of brome and alfalfa and what have you. Experiment the best you can. I could talk a lot

about other mentoring and that type of stuff, but really just sticking on the habitat stuff, work hard at it. Take pride in your work and take risks. Try to blend as much variation as you can into your management as well. I think we're going to maybe talk about that later, but here's a good segue. Our management in Minnesota for better or worse is spring fire, 15 April to 15 May. Not always. Sometimes we push the boundaries to go a little bit later, but it's not how the true prairie functioned. We need to integrate our fire management and haying into the rotation. We need to intermix grazing. Fire and grazing and all those things—try to mix it up the best you can on any given parcel. I think that's our challenge for managers is to look at all of those different management techniques and integrate them and then make it so it becomes common, just part of what we do and not a special activity. Like oh, we're going to go out and graze this or hay it or [do] fire management in the fall no, these are just things we now do. Develop a thick skin because you are going to get criticized for any management action you do. People are going to come back and say you shouldn't be doing this or you shouldn't be doing that. Be prepared to defend what you do. Think those talking points out ahead of time. Because invariably if you do a prescribed fire in the fall, someone is going to write you an email and say, 'I went out to my favorite hunting spot and it was burned.' Or we hear it about haying or grazing, 'I went out there and the grass was short because of grazing.' Well, then you need to describe the big picture and how we are putting those disturbances on throughout the areas. Yeah, your one WMA (Wildlife Management Area) was grazed, but most likely 5 miles away, there was a unit that wasn't. That type of stuff.

Megan: Don't you think that those criticisms lend itself to you being a better manager overall because you really have to be able to explain why you made the choice you did? We should be able to do that anyway. We should always know why we're doing what we're doing. We shouldn't just be like you know what would be fun? We went out to this prairie and threw a match out there to just see what would happen! We should always be thinking through what the consequences of our actions are. So, I kind of like some of the criticism and some of them are also amusing. Some of the acronyms for the DNR are particularly amusing. I think it's helpful because it makes you a better manager,

Dave: It can, but it can also take a toll on a person too after a while when you constantly have that. Then it becomes real easy to say, well I don't need that because we all have plenty of work to do. So, you could say well, I don't need that fight and stress and then you don't choose that as a management [tool]. So, in the long run, I think the resource suffers. So, we need to have the support for our staff to go out there and do the good work. That's where as a Regional Manager I come in and I can try to take some of that heat away. I can do some of the talking and let the managers focus on getting the work done in the field.

Megan: Dave, if you had to make a poster of yourself as the Regional Manager. Would you say that you're the wildlife biologist and the managers are the baby bears in each hand that you're holding? Is that fair?

Dave: No. Everybody's cringing. I'm cringing. The managers are cringing.

Megan: I can picture it clearly. I can picture in one hand, Nicholas Trauba and in the other hand... (laughter). Ok, sorry that made me laugh at least.

Jess: Dave, so you've accomplished a lot in your career? What's your most favorite accomplishment or one that you're most proud of?

Dave: Probably the one that we failed at. That was the prairie chicken restoration project. I'm always haunted by it. We need to write it up better than what we had. Just a lot of abstracts out there. Steve Merchant was a visionary in the Department on prairie management and he did his work on prairie chickens. We got to talking, saying hey, what about restoring prairie chickens to Lac qui Parle at some point. I felt we had the landscape and it just so happened that Dr. John Toepfer was just finishing a trap and transplant program up in North Dakota. Moving prairie chickens from Minnesota into habitat up west of Fargo countryside—where there's lots of CRP (Conservation Reserve Program). And he was successful. They built that and he had it down where you actually moved the males in first at the booming grounds then you bring the hens in and supplement. We did that at Lac qui Parle and I tell you what, at one time we had 11 different booming grounds. We had over 100 male prairie chickens on 11 different booming grounds. Things were looking up. We actually had connectivity with birds in the northwest. There was a little postage stamp TNC (The Nature Conservancy) property up in the middle of Traverse County. We went up there and we had radioed birds there and we actually had unmarked birds, which is telling us that those were birds from the northwest. People may not realize that we had 568 prairie chickens that we translocated over 9 years. They were all radioed. We went into every nest—over 100 nests. John Wollenberg and I-- that was our volunteer work. There would be times we'd run up and get prairie chickens on our own time—Saturday and Sunday. Bring them down and let them go then be at work Monday morning. We also had to schedule people. They're doing it now with sharp-tails (Sharp-tailed Grouse) into Wisconsin. That pales in comparison to what we did with prairie chickens. It [prairie chicken project] was probably one of the largest efforts. We gave it a try, things were looking up. Parasitism with pheasants was an issue. I think there were some other things going on that we learned too. Ultimately, it was a little bit painful because once we stopped moving birds in and bringing in the hen component, we just watched things slowly decline. I think I watched the last booming male—Hamerstrom talks about the last booming male in Wisconsin. There's been a lot of famous literature on that from Hamerstrom and prairie chickens. I digress, but I watched it slowly go down from a 100 males to slowly contract where I was out there with the last prairie chicken. Sharp-tails came in on their own so now we have sharp-tails. Maybe you can look in hindsight and say that was the better grouse because we have them over in the Coteau so they've always been coming into Minnesota. They're at a different status than prairie chickens are though. But really what that project did, it really got us, looking around and saying look at all these trees! We don't have a prairie horizon. That's what really started the tree removal effort in Minnesota. Nobody was removing trees on the prairie. Really, honestly before we started the [prairie] chicken project. We started in a big way then other managers started. Pretty soon it started throughout the whole western part of Minnesota. I will really give that credit to the prairie chicken project. We're going to bring prairie chickens in here and look at all the trees we have. Nonetheless, meadowlark and upland sandpipers—everything that needs a prairie horizon [benefits]. So, the tree removal that we have at Lac qui Parle—we have some fabulous prairie horizons due to

management. They were treating close prairies and now you can open up and see for 5-10 miles of prairie horizon. That's pretty special.

Megan: That's one of my favorite parts about that area. That gives us a perfect segue to our next section.

Jess: It does.

Megan: Jess, what time is it?

Megan and Jess together: Let's Science! To the literature!

(Dave laughing)

Jess: That was a perfect segue. This is the section where we talk about science and how it relates to what we're talking about today, which is Lac qui Parle. So, we want to highlight several different papers. One is one that Dave Trauba was an author on with what was her first name? Justine?

Dave: Jackie.

Jess: Jackie Augustine. That's where I was getting the "istine." This paper was in the Journal of Ethology, which refers to behavior, really. Ethology. The title is: Potential for behavioral reproductive isolation between greater prairie-chickens and sharp-tailed grouse in west-central Minnesota. This was published in 2015. Were there still prairie chickens there in 2015?

Dave: No. By that time, No. Sharp-tails, but [prairie] chickens had blinked out. We did that work and I'm going to give Jackie the credit. I was the field person and did a lot of counts and booming ground counts and stuff that I fed into that paper, but that would've been done in the late '90's and early 2000's. Jackie was a professor at Marshall at the time at the University there.

Jess: So, prairie chickens and sharp-tailed grouse for those that don't know, hybridize. This paper shows that hybrids made up about 8% of the population, which apparently is relatively large where these two species co-occur. That 8% is higher than usual. What I found really cool, I don't know very much about prairie chickens and sharp-tailed grouse, but the foot stomping behavior of the intermediates or the hybrids foot-stomped faster than their parents, which is just super cool. This may provide some reproductive isolation if their foot-stomping is faster than their parents because they're not going to continue to hybridize. The fact that they were really small [original] population sizes likely led to the increased hybridization.

Dave: Yeah, Exactly. We started a project and Dr. John Toepfer he said, "Dave when we start bringing prairie chickens in, you're going to start seeing sharp-tailed grouse showing up." He was absolutely right because prairie grouse find prairie grouse. I don't know how it is. You will never go out and find one lone prairie chicken or one lone sharp-tailed. There is going to be a flock out there. So, it was a few years into the prairie chicken project and all of a sudden we have sharp-tails showing up on our booming grounds. Sharp-tails dominate chickens. They will run up and just pound chickens. They don't fight fair. Sharp-tails fight differently than prairie chickens. When people came in,

interestingly, they said pheasants, cock pheasants would come into the booming grounds and beat up on the prairie chickens. That happened in Illinois, which is also an isolated population. At Lac qui Parle we never had that. We would have male pheasants on the edge of the booming ground, but they never came in. My theory was because we had so many hen pheasants so that rooster is calling his harem hens in and he didn't need to go out and look. In Illinois, you had a much lower pheasant density. So, I think there you had frustrated male pheasants who would go and take out their frustrations on prairie chickens, which they thought were female. Again, that's another podcast where we can talk more about prairie grouse—podcast number 6.

Megan: Dave Trauba's Prairie Pod.

Jess: Dave is going to have to start his own podcast. He's liking this so much today.

Dave: Yeah. (Laughter).

Jess: So, this second and final paper gets back to this idea of tree removal. This is a Johnson and Temple paper from 1990 where they were working out at Chippewa [prairie] I gather from the paper. They were looking at: Nest Predation and Brood Parasitism of Tallgrass Prairie Birds. What I call grassland birds. This is from the Journal of Wildlife Management. And they found, just as you were saying Dave, that the nest predation was lower on larger pieces, which there are a lot of in the Lac qui Parle area. Away from forest edges—they're going to have greater nest success, and on recently burned prairies. I thought that was interesting. Maybe it's providing this heterogeneity that increases diversity of birds. So, that really ties in well with what you were saying about this move to get rid of the trees or cut down the trees and make more of a prairie landscape. It provides that habitat for grassland birds.

Dave: For listeners, there's a wealth of information on interior species, fragmentation, large blocks, small blocks. Back when I was really on the woody cover literature, there's some great [literature] where they would go up, I think it was in North Dakota, where they would have shelterbelts, these linear tree plantings, where they would go out and do bird transects. They would find that your more prairie interior species were further away from the tree row. They went out there and actually mechanically removed the tree row. Then when they went back out [to survey] they could see that the interior species were throughout the area. So, that really, there is science behind the tree removal aspect.

Jess: Definitely.

Dave: And that's a challenge in Minnesota because from an early age when we talk about it, if you're going to do something for conservation, you plant a tree. That's our legacy. Conservation was planting a tree. So, when you come out and you're removing trees that really comes in with what people have heard for a long time. Sort of like with Smokey the Bear—that's neither here nor there. But, fire is an important part of our ecology.

Megan: I'm going to have to correct you. It's Smokey Bear.

Jess: Right it is Smokey Bear.

Dave: Smokey Bear, Ok.

Jess: She's right. Now, we have grassland month and we can support grasslands in that way. No more planting trees! Just kidding. Planting trees is important too, but planting prairies is equally important.

Megan: [Referring to tree planting] In the right spot. Not in the prairie.

Jess: Hey, Megan.

Megan: Yeah, Jess.

Jess: Take a hike.

Megan: I think I will! Now, this is the part of the podcast where we're going to highlight some of your amazing public land. It would just be insanity if we didn't feature the Lac qui Parle refuge that we've been talking about. We're not going to go into more details about that [too much] because we've already hit it in the beginning of the podcast. 80,000 plus acres in the general vicinity of the refuge that you can go and visit. They've got ducks, they've got geese, they've got pelicans, and they used to have one cormorant.

Dave: That's great.

Megan: We asked Dave to pick some of his favorite units that you should definitely visit. So, we're going to ask him to highlight some of them. Now, keep in mind, these are just Dave's Faves. I just came up with that, #Dave'sFaves. There are some other ones, obviously, that you can go and visit. There's a wealth of your public lands in this area. Dave, tell us some of your faves.

Dave: Well, the Wildlife Area is 28 miles long. I'm going to start at the south end, kind of the southeast corner and work our way up. So, if you're listening, the refuge is actually 8,000 acres in size. Now, that focus would be if you're into waterfowl migration, I would recommend that in November. Migrations are coming later. Or in the spring, March or April, depending on when ice-out is. You can sit there and the migration of waterfowl is tremendous. In the refuge portion you are going to have just smaller prairie and more planted prairie. So, to get the real prairie vista then I would encourage people to go to that part of the Wildlife Area that is north and west of Hwy 40. Hwy 40 bisects Lac qui Parle Lake in half. On the north side is what we call the Chippewa prairie. That's a big block of grassland that exists between Hwy 40 running northwest up to Hwy 119. That's mesic prairie mostly. Not too wet and not too dry. It's right in the middle.

Jess: There might be some rocks around. (Laughter).

Dave: And that's what makes it cool.

Megan: Yup, there's lots of rocks there.

Dave: There's a big bluff line that you can get on and you have a fabulous view of a wet prairie, cattail marshes, and then transitioning into Lac qui Parle Lake. Then you have all those boulder erratics. A lot of rocks. Get out there early in the morning. The other one that I would go to would be what we call the Plover Prairie landscape and that's

probably my favorite. It's wet prairie. It exists west of Marsh Lake, east of Hwy 75 on the south side of the Minnesota River. Go west of Marsh Lake, east of Hwy 75 on the south side of the Minnesota River and that's a large combination of Nature Conservancy Land, WMA lands. I call that our Serengeti if you will. You get out there early in the morning and it is just loud with bird life. It's wet prairie and I've been out here when the white lady slippers are doing their thing and there are thousands of them. It's really neat. There are a lot of rock outcrops too.

Jess: Wow.

Megan: That's awesome, Dave. I just want you guys to know because you can't see us. We tend to do the podcast with notes just so that we stay on track, which we did a real great job of doing today, but Dave just has so much to share with us that we get into it because we want to share so much with all of you. I just want you to know while Dave is giving you those directions, he is literally looking at nothing. Those are coming from his brain. I actually just checked his notes page 6 times while he was giving you those and he is so in love with Lac qui Parle that he has a road map [in his mind] of every unit out there of your public lands. So, get out there because if you don't Dave will and we can't let him have all the fun. That's the truth. Truer words were never spoken. So, like always don't forget to check out all of these public lands on the DNR Recreation Compass. You can go on there and just type in the unit name and it will pull it up where it is. You can get right to it. One thing I will note is some of the prairies that we mentioned are Nature Conservancy properties and you will not find those in the DNR Rec Compass. You can use the Google search and The Nature Conservancy does a really fabulous job of highlighting all of their units and giving you a nice overview of what you can see there—complete with maps and how to get there. They do a real nice job of that. Well, that's about it. What do you think?

Jess: It was wonderful.

Megan: Yeah, Dave thank you so much.

Jess: I learned so much.

Dave: Well, thank you.

Megan: I had a really good time. This is where we just say, "No, thank you". "Thank you". Over and over again. So, we'll be back and apparently Dave will be back! (Laughter).

Dave: We've got 6 podcasts going.

Megan: Apparently, Dave's coming back 7 more times if you enjoyed this, don't worry there's 7 more times to see Dave Trauba, Conservationist Extraordinaire. No, I always learn stuff when I'm with Dave. I remember the first time I met him, I was like this guy knows things. I better attach myself to him. (Laughter). In a work way. So, next time we're going to talk about my favorite topic of all time.

Jess: I think we need to bring in some flour and some eggs. We're going to make a cake.

Megan: We're making a cake! So, our next podcast is on building a seed mix. What goes in the mix, makes the cake. As you all know, don't forget the sugar, which is the diversity. We'll catch you next time on the Prairie Pod.

((sounds of birds chirping and wind blowing))