



Prairie Pod Podcast Transcript

Episode 2: Walking into that Prairie (Walk-in access program)

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

Transcript:

[sounds of birds chirping and wind blowing]

Jess: Hello. How are you doing today, Megan?

Megan: Hi Jess. I'm doing great. How are you doing?

Jess: I'm well. Very well.

Megan: That's good. Are you excited we're in the recording studio again for our second episode of the prairie pod? I'm pumped. You pumped?

Jess: Very much so.

Megan: Oh my gosh. So we should probably since this is only our second episode make sure that y'all know who we are. Jess, who are you?

Jess: I'm the prairie habitat research scientist with Minnesota DNR, and yep, I'm a scientist. I love it. I love being a scientist.

Megan: I like that you're a scientist. You make me a better scientist every day. I said that at a meeting the other day and then you made fun of me for it and I immediately regretted it.

Jess: I'm sorry.

Megan: Never give you compliments. That's the problem. So, I'm Megan. I'm a regional ecologist with the Department of Natural Resources and I just basically play all over 32 counties in southwest Minnesota building habitat trying to make this place better.

Jess: Yep.

Megan: Functional

Jess: Functional. We have some guests.

Megan: We do have some guests and I'm really, really excited about it. So our first guest that we have today is Scott Roemhildt, and he is the former grasslands program coordinator for the DNR. Now he's been upgraded to the regional director, and you may

not know this about Scott, I will let him speak, but I just want to preface this by saying, Scott has the best mustaches in the DNR. I say mustaches plural because for Scott I feel like he needs to have mustaches.

Scott: Wow. That's quite a compliment-- there's a lot of mustaches in the DNR.

Megan: That's so accurate.

Scott: I'm thrilled to be here.

Megan: We are excited to have you here. Who better to talk Walk-In Access (WIA) with us than the pro?

Scott: It's been a lot of fun being a part of the program. It kicked off in 2011, and I've been involved in one way or another since Day One.

Megan: We also have another guest.

Jess: We do.

Megan: We have two Megan's. It's gonna get real.

Jess: Megan H. and Megan B.

Megan: I haven't been Megan B. since third grade, when we had three Megan's, you know? We got Megan B. We got Megan M. We got Megan S. Actually, it was Jessie's. There weren't any other Megan's. It was Jessie B., Jessie H., I just didn't want you to feel bad about it. So, we have Megan Howell with us... the second Megan on the podcast, but in no order of importance here, and she's a farm bill biologist with Pheasants Forever. Hey, Megan, how are you?

Megan Howell: Good. I'm a farm bill biologist for Pheasants Forever out of Murray County. My job is to work on conservation programs like CRP, CREP and Walk-In Access. So, I'm happy to be here.

Megan Benage: We're excited to have you. You just had an awesome article in the Star-Tribune, did you not?

Howell: I did. Yes.

Benage: So, we got a celebrity here!

Scott: Not just an article. It was a full-page article. A six-inch by nine-inch photo.

Benage: I know! I actually asked somebody if they could get me that paper, because I wanted to put an arrow on it and be like 'I know her' and get Megan to sign it for me, and just wallpaper my office with it.

Howell: Guess what? I can make that happen for you.

Benage: Big deals happening on the Prairie Pod today! That's what I like to hear. We've got the best mustaches, we've got celebrities! This is going to be a good day while we get into this topic. So Jess, do you want to jump into this topic?

Jess: Well, Megan included a couple acronyms that people might not be aware of. We use a lot of acronyms around here and so can you explain a little bit about CREP and CRP? What it what just what they stand for we use a lot of acronyms.

Scott: And do it A-S-A-P, OK? [Laughter]

Benage: Nerd jokes.

Howell: Okay, so CRP is conservation reserve program and CREP is the conservation reserve enhancement program; and then walk in access or WIA.

Benage: And that last acronym is a great segue into what we're going to talk about today. We're going to talk about a fabulous program that's housed by the DNR and it is called the walk-in access program, and we have the professionals here to walk us through this, because Jess and I, while we may be scientists, we don't know it all. It's shocking. We need help. So, we brought in help.

Scott: We don't have walk-in access scientist.

Jess: We're available.

Benage: We're moonlighting.

Scott: Maybe you could be contributing scientists.

Benage: Yes, I like that. We could do that.

Jess: Equal opportunity grassland scientists. So tell us a little bit about it? How does this walk in access area differ from a wildlife management area? What's it all about?

Scott: Just to back-up a little bit. Walk-in access is a really basic, simple program, where we pay landowners to provide hunting access on their land. And, the reason it got started is because when I was a kid, you could jump on your bicycle, put your .22 across the handlebars, pedal down the gravel road, and stop at Mrs. Kottke's or Mr. Priem's, ask for permission to hunt, and go hunt. It's not like that anymore. Land is leased. Liability insurance has people pretty freaked out, and you can't just knock on a door and hunt. And, in fact, nationally, access to hunting lands listed as one of the reasons people get out of hunting. Because they just don't have access to that land.

Benage: That's sad.

Scott: We're fortunate in Minnesota because we've got a lot of public hunting land. But, there's still a need for more. So, that's how Walk in access was born. It started in 2011 and we're a little uncertain about it, because Walk In programs west of the Mississippi generally have worked because it's big tracts of land east of the Mississippi it had not. Minnesota was sitting right in between. With production agriculture, dwindling CRP numbers, we didn't know how it would go, but every year, walk in access has grown in terms of acres of land, hunter participation and so coming in to our eighth year, it's been two thumbs up.

Benage: That's awesome. So, why do you think it didn't work east before? Or why do you think it's working now?

Scott: With Eastern states generally smaller tracts of land. And, people own those hunting tracts, well there you go, they own those tracts for their own hunting. You get into Western states, there's sections and sections of land and the landowners can generate some extra money on those lands by enrolling in voluntary public access program. Most of our land enrolled is in western Minnesota, but we go all the way to Owatonna on the east side, we go to the South Dakota border, and then all the way north to Bemidji. And so we cover 46 counties now.

Benage: So is it fair to say with that description, that most of the walk in access program acres are in the prairie parts of the state? Their running right up the prairie corridor from southwest Minnesota up to northwest.

Scott: Yeah, in fact, when the program kicked off, it was a grassland program. And, with our current grant period that we've got right now, we expanded it a little bit so that we could continue to add acres. Although it's primarily grassland, we've also got great turkey habitat, great deer habitat, and some of those wooded areas.

Benage: Does the landowner have to automatically be open to all kinds of hunting, like the landowner can't say 'I only want you to hunt all pheasants here and reserve these rights for deer or turkey or what have you. Is it just automatically, sign up as landowner whatever hunting season there is, is fair game?

Scott: That's a good question, because some of the Western states it is broken down by hunting season. In Minnesota it's open to hunting from September 1 to May 31 so it covers any hunting seasons within that time. And our landowner can't say, why, I'm going to retain it for myself during deer hunting. But, we haven't had any issues and the reason that this program has worked is because the hunters have been so cool. They've been very respectful way of the land. They haven't dumped garbage, and because of that, landowners are willing to re-enroll.

Jess: So you mentioned incentives, can you talk a little bit more about how this all works how do people find you? How do people get enrolled? What are the benefits to them?

Scott: Yeah, that's where Megan (Howell) comes in, is that we work through the county soil and water conservation district offices, so the landowner comes into the office, which they're used to going into for Ag programs, and they can get more information or sign up for Walk-In Access. We pay based on the number of acres enrolled, the length of time enrolled, and proximity to other public land. So it's a minimum of \$10/acre, a maximum of \$13/acre. Maximum of three year contract, so there's no long-term commitments to the landowner.

Jess: It's a great incentive.

Scott: Yeah a couple other things – they're automatically covered over Minnesota recreational statutes, which means liability insurance. So, they don't have to worry about liability during those hunting seasons. Add to that, we have a habitat enhancement program, so if a landowner wants to do a prescribed burn, invasive tree removal, enhanced native seeding, we'll pay up to \$20,000 per landowner to improve that habitat.

Benage: My word. That's amazing.

Jess: I had no idea. This is actually one of my questions that I had for you today: how does long-term management of these habitats work? You answered it. It's awesome. I had no idea.

Benage: It's great. One of the problems we have in the prairie part of the state is cedar trees invading the prairie, which they are a native tree, but they basically make clonal populations, so they make more of each other and then they take over the prairie they shade it out and there is no prairie without management. Now if you got a fire in there every seven years you can keep those cedar trees out, but you know to ask an individual landowner to do fire on their own will a: That's unsafe on your own – should not happen. Just don't light a match out there people and then B: there is a cost involved so there's enhancement dollars that gotta be a big deal. Does that change some landowner's minds? Is that kind of the tipping thing now? Like 'Yeah, I Think I'll take that Easter egg?'

Scott: Well it does because if you say \$10 to \$13 an acre and they go well that's all right, but then you add on up to \$20,000 extra dollars over 3 years then say on 200 Acres that adds a lot to the payment and it's not automatically \$20,000 price of prescribed burn might be a couple hundred grand but that still does not come out of the landowners pocket so it ups the ante.

Benage: So, I think you said the program has been around since 2011? Is that right?

Scott: Right.

Benage: So, what does the future look like? We're seeing that there's kind of a squeeze on conservation dollars. It always sort of feels like we're asked to do more with less.

What's it look like because it seems like the program is growing-- it's popular-- there's things in there that landowners are liking. What do you think? Forecast this for me Scott.

Scott: There's two real sides you mentioned one is you've got landowners increasing participation. We've got Hunters increasing participation. Enrollment rates are off the charts. But we're at the end of a Federal Grant period at the end of September and that has been funded by the Farm Bill. The likelihood of it being funded through a future Farm Bill is pretty slim because there are lots of cuts going on. And that doesn't just affect Minnesota. There are 22 states that get money through voluntary Public Access and in States like Kansas, walk-in access makes up the vast majority of their public landholding. So we've all got a lot to potentially lose if this isn't funded.

Benage: So, that would be a huge blow. I know, I, myself moved here from Indiana where most of the hunting land is privately owned. There's not the same amount of public ownership as in Minnesota so it's been really fun for me during turkey season, other seasons to know that I can basically look at the DNR Rec compass, which shows me all of my public land holdings and I can pretty much hunt within 30 minutes of where I live. And I mean I live in New Ulm so that's saying something that I can kind of scout it out because I don't want to drive you know an hour or two hours. I will but let's be honest, I'm a lazy hunter, like I don't like to get up early. I like it when I'm out there, but it's a struggle. The struggle is real that early in the morning. That's a huge blow to know that we could lose that much of our public land.

Scott: We do have a lot of great public hunting land in Minnesota. In the southern part of the state, 2%. I often ask people when I'm talking to a group what percent of land in our County do you think is enrolled in public land? And they'll guess 5 to 10% and then I ask so if we were at 5% would you be happy? And then they say yeah but not over 5%. Usually we're at 1.5 to a maximum of 2%. We've got a lot of great hunting land, but percentage wise it's pretty small in southern Minnesota. For Walk-In Access the landowner retains ownership and it allows public hunting so I think it's a win for both sides.

Jess: So, Megan mentioned that we can find these sites on DNR rec compass. We also have in almost all the DNR offices, you know we have these brochures--really nice booklets that were put together that show all the land. There's maps in the back and contact information and places we can find out more about how to access these lands. And any other details you might want!

Scott: Yeah and if you drive by you can't miss the signs because they're kind of a lime-yellow fluorescent stop-sign shape thing that says Walk-In Access. Wherever you see those signs, you don't need to go up and ask permission. You can just automatically go hunt. And that's one thing landowners like too because people are not knocking on their doors. They don't have to give preference to a neighbor versus a friend. It just is public access.

Benage: Or a frenemy. That could be real awkward, real fast. Now are the boundaries marked? Like is every boundary marked with those lime-green signs? The last thing any hunter ever wants to do is trespass by accident. That's the last thing we want to do. So, I know the boundaries are marked when you go to the DNR Rec Compass and you can see the map, which basically functions like a google maps kind of application. It's very similar. You just see an aerial image and you can see the outline, but are the boundaries actually physically marked so that I would know as a hunter, uh oh now I am on the neighbor's property?

Scott: Yeah there is no mistaking it. The signs are a maximum of 500' apart. Closer in most cases. And if there is a building site, we put a 500' buffer around those building sites so people don't have to have concerns about hunters in their backyards and those are also marked with signs. You can't get confused.

Jess: That's great. Well, I'm so excited to learn so much more about WIA. I would like to get Megan's perspective as a hunter. What do you like about these?

Megan Howell: Absolutely. Well, my first experience with WIA was actually through my job as a farm bill biologist. I had my first WIA sign-up last year and I signed up 105 acre site and I was super pumped about it. I'm a nerd when it comes to public hunting so I was excited to be a part of it. And as soon as I found out that they had signed up and all the boundaries were posted, I drove out there and I remember pulling up and seeing these bright yellow signs. It was overlooking this site that I had just signed up. And I remember feeling so excited and thinking about how much of a unique opportunity it is to take a private landowner and have them enroll their land into a program that allows public hunting. I was looking over the area and I was like man, I need to hunt this when hunting season comes around. I had just moved to Minnesota and I hadn't gotten my first Minnesota rooster yet and I'm a big pheasant hunter so I was really excited. I knew I had to come back and do it on this WIA area. So, hunting season came around and I actually had a coworker in the office that hadn't done a lot of pheasant hunting at all and was interested in learning how. So, I took him out there and we were walking and walking. I had seen a ton of birds on this piece before hunting season so I was just really hoping we would see some stuff. And we walked and walked and walked and didn't see anything. Then we turned around to come back and all of a sudden this rooster gets up. And it was a long shot. But, it gets up over by me. So, Ben didn't have a chance to take a shot at it. I pulled up my gun and I shot and to my surprise, I actually hit it. [Laughter and cheering]. I was super pumped and then I realized I may have just winged it. It was just dropping into the thickest patch of reed canarygrass I could ever think of. My dog is running over there and I mark it and I'm running over there and I'm just hoping I find it. And Ben makes it over there and the dog is working. She buries herself in the grass and she comes out with the bird and I am just excited. I love it. I have tear in my eyes with the bird in my hand. I'm just super excited. I was pumped. You can't recreate memories like that. So, I was sitting there with the bird in my hand looking up at Ben and I was like, this is what it's all about. WIA creating public land. Making opportunities for people with their families and friends to go out and hunt. And getting people into the sport. That's ultimately why I love WIA. But, that being said, I'm a

little crazy passionate about it. If you take away my job and why I do what I do and if I just think about why I love WIA as purely a hunter, I think I would say I'm primarily a WIA hunter, honestly. I don't like to hit the big Wildlife Management Areas (WMA's) in my county because a lot of the locals know them and hunt them regularly.

Benage: There's competition.

Howell: Yeah, Exactly. I hunt solo a lot. I like hunting alone. I don't want to be on top of other people or their parties while hunting. So, I find these WIA spots in my county and most of the time there is less pressure. There's such a variety of sites out there. In my County, there's plenty of sites where you could spend all hunting season. You could get pheasants, turkey, deer, ducks, goose, squirrel, rabbits. Whatever you want to do, you can do it on these sites. It's just a unique opportunity and I'm very thankful to be a part of it--to be able to hunt it.

Benage: That's an incredible story. I'm going to ask the question that everybody probably wants to know. What kind of dog?

Howell: This always comes up.

Benage: You know there's a huge debate out there. There's a huge debate out there about what kind of dog you pheasant hunt with.

Howell: I have a Braque du Bourbonnais, which is a French pointing dog.

Jess: Never heard of it. That's a new one.

Benage: Oh wow, that doesn't solve the age old debate.

Scott: Just brings another one into the debate!

Benage: Lab vs. GSP (German Shorthaired Pointer). We're not going to solve that today.

Scott: I'd mention that the program works because of hunters. The heroes of the program are the people working in the SWCD (Soil and Water Conservation District) offices. Can you imagine being a landowner and coming in and having Megan sell you the program?

Jess: Sign me up!

Benage: Sign me up right now. I wish I owned land so I could just hand it to you. Sign me up for the program! You're so passionate. I mean that's what I love about getting to do this Podcast and being with you wonderful folks and getting to spend a little bit of time just hearing your experiences. That is what it's all about in this conservation

community in Minnesota. I had a coworker tell me once that conservation isn't a career, it's a lifestyle.

Howell: It is!

Benage: And just hearing your story. That's what it is. It IS a lifestyle!

Howell: That's funny, I was thinking about that earlier. I was driving and it was early in the morning when I was driving. I was going to work and I was like you know what? I'm going to go talk about conservation and work on conservation programs. It is a lifestyle. I love it.

Benage: There's nothing better that we can do for the state or the people of this state than have the right people in the right jobs who are passionate about it and care about these resources.

Jess: These are great stories.

Benage: I kind of wish we could take the rest of the day off and go hunting now. It's not allowed. We need to do some actual work.

Scott: Maybe we could take a field trip to some WIA sites.

Benage: To round out this WIA discussion before we switch gears here. Where can people find some of the information? We mentioned the DNR Rec Compass and I just want to talk a little bit about what that is and give a name to the brochure that Jess was mentioning earlier. So, the DNR Rec Compass if you just put that into the old Google or whatever search engine you use. You just type it in and it will pop-up. It's a really handy tool that has a mobile version as well. I use it all the time when I'm out because you can search by unit name or by the map for where you are right now. You can zoom in and out to different units and you can get a feel for where you want to go. You can strategize this way. It also gives you a lat/long and my favorite part is it gives you the Conservation Officer for that area as well. So if you were to run into any troubles or have any problems of any kind--you automatically have your contact right in the (DNR) Rec Compass. I actually use it at work all the time when people ask me to design a restoration for them and they indicate it's on this unit of this Wildlife Management Area. It's just faster than ArcMap or other tools that we use. I can pull it right up to see where they're talking about.

Scott: It's easy to use as you mentioned. Not enough people know about it. When I'm working at game fair or Farmfest or any other show that's one thing I do is I've got my phone out and I show people how to use (DNR) Rec compass. Whether you're a hunter, a conservationist, or a recreationist it is something you should have in part of your toolkit.

Jess: It has everything on it. USFWS land on it. It has DNR land on it. It has everything.

Benage: It has your public lands on it. The lat/long is handy too because if your map skills are poor and you're not real sure where you're going, you can copy that lat/long and put it into whatever map application you use and it will navigate you right there. That's nice too because you can navigate if you're not real good at reading a map.

Howell: Is there an app for the (DNR) Rec compass?

Benage: There's not an app. There is just a mobile-friendly version of it so if you access it through the web on your phone it will display right. Instead of you having to scroll over and pinch out and pinch in and be like, what am I looking at?!

Scott: As of this spring, it's even easier to use because we made some changes to our website to make it more mobile-friendly. It worked before and it works better now.

Benage: I've noticed that actually. I love it. I use it all the time. Not as a DNR employee. But, as a personal private citizen.

Scott: Just in case you're in an area with no phone service, we also produce Walk-In Access atlases. You can pick those up at any DNR office, or license agents, or you can have one sent to you by calling DNR.

Howell: I think a lot of SWCD offices have them too.

Jess: Scott has been very good at getting these out to all the DNR offices--even to our lonely, Madelia office.

Benage: The lonely Madelia office. Not even a sign on the road.

Jess: These are everywhere! There's a sign on the gravel road.

Benage: You gotta know where you're going to get to the Madelia office.

Jess: A lot of people do.

Howell: I think Google Maps actually takes you to the wrong place when you enter in the Madelia office.

Benage: Sometimes. You end up in the middle of a field. It's disheartening. "Jess, where are you?!" That happened last summer when I tried to find it.

Scott: But, (DNR) Rec Compass would take you to the right spot.

Benage: Bringing it home, I like it. Megan, Scott, we're not done here today, but I just want to say a major thank you for all the work you do with this program and for being here today. I'm rejuvenated. I want to go get my gun and scout some turkeys.

Scott: Can we stick around for the rest?

Benage: Absolutely. You all may have things you need to say to us. Keep me and Jess in line.

Jess: It's time.

Benage: What time is it? Is it time to...?

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

Jess: This is my favorite part of course.

Benage: We've reached Jess's favorite part of the podcast.

Jess: Not at all to detract from any of the other discussions we've had. So, this is the part of the podcast where we talk about the literature. Today, I'm going to give a couple suggestions about a paper, a project that's ongoing in Iowa, and a book. I have a couple things to talk about today. One is this paper from 2015 by Ryan Drum and a whole bunch of other authors. This was in PLOSOne. The title is: Strategic Grassland Bird Conservation throughout the Annual Cycle: Linking Policy Alternatives, Landowner Decisions, and Biological Population Outcomes. So, that's a long title. It's a really interesting paper and very accessible. It's a free paper online accessed for anybody. One of these open-access journals. Anyone can go on and read it. Some of their conclusions are really important to this discussion we're having today about private land. Their results of this study suggests that large-scale farmers hold the most sway in determining grassland bird population outcomes. Although WIA, maybe these aren't all farmers. Sometimes they are. These are all different kinds of folks. With approximately 85% of the remaining grasslands in the US being privately-owned--it's this huge holding, right? That's important to manage as Scott mentioned. So, impacting these large-scale farmer's decisions to participate in conservation programs may be one of the most effective strategies that we can have to positively impact grassland birds. So, that was the conclusion from this paper by Ryan Drum and others. So, it's really important and programs like this (WIA) and others have the capacity to do that here in Minnesota. Do you have any comments about that Megan?

Benage: No, that was a lot. I don't have anything to say.

Jess: The reason I bring this up is because it supports what's going on with WIA.

Scott: And conservation and agriculture a lot of times are seen as polarizing issues. And it doesn't need to be that way.

Benage: No, it doesn't.

Scott: The paper that you talk about--WIA--those are things that really talk about bringing those together.

Jess: Yes, they don't live in isolation. None of us are working in isolation. There's all these interconnected factors. So, the Iowa STRIPS project is another example of a really cool project that is going on in Iowa. This is where farmers enroll in this program and they create strips of prairie habitat. There are incentives for these. STRIPS stands for science-based trials of row-crops integrated with prairie strips. So, they take as little as 10% of a crop field at the catchment--where the water is coming down--and they replant it to prairie. So, it's a pretty small strip only 10%, but they find that that prairie strip can reduce soil erosion, retain nutrients, and provide habitat for wildlife without impacting the per acre crop yield. So, not only are there things on our grasslands in private land that we can be doing, but also in agriculture. It's this whole idea of everybody working together. This brings me to the last philosophical thing that I'd like to bring up. Everyone loves the Sand County Almanac by Aldo Leopold.

Benage: How do you not? This is the Conservation Bible.

Jess: Yes. When I was thinking about this topic of private land and conservation and how we can all work together, I immediately thought of the Land Ethic. Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic was just that. We're all part of this community. Everybody. Even people who don't care about conservation are part of it because they drink the water. Everyone is involved.

Benage: And we breathe the air too and we need the soil.

Jess: Yes, we are all part of this community. So, I will just read a quote here from the Land Ethic. This is part of a section called the community concept. And that is what it's talking about is that we are all part of this community. "All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts." We're all part of it. Everybody. That's all. That's all I have to say.

Benage: I thought you were going to keep going. You were so passionate...there's more to say here.

Jess: We can't do this alone. None of us can do it alone. So, we all have to work together. Including public and private landowners.

Benage: For those of you who don't know who Aldo Leopold is, he is often referred to as the Father of Conservation and for good reason. Back in the day he wrote A Sand County Almanac and a lot of the stuff that he lays out in that book still holds true today. I had somebody tell me in college that if you read the Sand County Almanac and it doesn't resonate with you or you can't find a single quote that you like than maybe you should switch jobs. That's what they said.

Howell: I would agree.

Benage: I was pretty offended at the time because at the time it was an assignment.

Scott: You're going to like this.

Benage: Automatically just the kind of person I am, I don't like when people tell me what I'm going to like. So, I read it and my mindset when I read it was real confrontational against Aldo. I was trying to find things I didn't like about it and that I could disagree with because I just didn't like the idea that I HAD to like it. And I'll tell you what, shame on me because it's a fantastic piece of literature. A lot of the stuff that he says holds true today. It certainly shaped my career. I won't go as far to say that you just have to like it because you can have an opinion too. But it is the foundation of all the things we do in conservation. It's worth a read.

Howell: It is eye opening.

Benage: It is eye opening and it holds true.

Jess: It is timeless.

Scott: There's many people that if they didn't go to school in conservation, they may not have had a chance to read it and I highly recommend that anybody with that conservation feel or ethic, find a copy, and give it a read. No matter what age you are or what background.

Benage: Absolutely and I reread it again sometimes. Not the whole thing, but there are certain chapters that I like better than others. It is not written like a science-y book. It's not dry. It is really a collection of stories and his thoughts about the world through his observation of nature. So, the things that he talks about can resonate with lots of people even if you're not in the conservation field. Just as a person who lives in Minnesota. Our ethic in this state tends to be that we value natural resources. I think it's worth the read.

Jess: Awesome. Take a hike.

Benage: I feel like I should. I should take a hike.

Jess: It'd be wonderful today to take a hike.

Benage: Wouldn't it? It'd be wonderful to take a hike today. It's a really nice today. This is the part of the podcast where we are going to recommend some places where we think you, myself, Jess, Scott, and 'other Megan' should take a hike. [Laughter]. Megan #2. Normally, I sort of handle this section and we highlight really fantastic tracts of land that are can't miss opportunities. But, I'm going to turn it over to 'other Megan' for this section because she is going to highlight, rightfully so, some WIA sites that she really likes and we think you'll like too.

Howell: Alright. Thank you. Even though I'm Megan #2. Arguably, Megan #1.

Benage: We can't all be #1.

Howell: For the Walk-In Access program, Lincoln County actually has the most Walk-In Access sites. It has 44 sites and that's 15% of the program. However, that is not my County. I don't work in Lincoln County. I love Lincoln County and I like to hunt there, but I work in Murray County so I'm going to take you to two sites there. So, Murray County comes in second with 16 sites and over 1500 acres of Walk-In Access ground. The first site I will take you to is Murray WIA Site #149. It's 152 acres, northeast of Curry, MN. My first experience with this WIA was through the program that Scott was talking about earlier, the WIA habitat enhancement program. I love that program. I love the opportunity that the landowners can come in and get some habitat enhancements done. So, this landowner had called me and asked if I could go out and look at her site and recommend any habitat enhancements that might improve her cover. So, this site is 152 acres so it's a big site. It has a grove of trees on it and it has nice wetland and upland areas. It has it all. I started walking in the grove and within 10 minutes, I had kicked up a turkey and two deer. I was like, wow, that's pretty impressive. There's not a lot of trees around where the site is and turkeys aren't as easy to find. I'm from Iowa and turkeys were everywhere in Iowa. So, super excited to see a turkey in Minnesota. So, then I went out of the grove and walked up the upland area and there were pheasants getting up left and right. I saw two bald eagles flying around. There was just wildlife everywhere. I was super impressed. So, I walked around the whole site and ended up back towards the truck where the wetland is and there were geese and ducks getting up everywhere. When I got done with the walk over, I called the landowner and I was like wow, I am super impressed with this site. There is so much wildlife. You could hunt ducks, turkey, geese, pheasants, whatever you wanted to there. It's one of my favorite sites. We're actually going to be doing a prescribed burn there this spring, followed by some grazing to revitalize the prairie and help control some of the cool-season grasses there. I'm super pumped to see what it will look like this fall. There should be some good hunting.

Howell: And the next site that I will take you to is my favorite site where I got my first bird. It is Murray County WIA Site #397. It's 105 acres—just north of Slayton, 4 miles. I love this site because when you pull up to it, it sits in a valley. Late season like this year late-season hunting it was -15 degrees and there was wind, but because the site is in a valley there is not wind down there. So, I was able to hunt all the way through the season. You pull up to the site and you're looking over this entire site and it has got the most beautiful stand of native grasses that I've seen in Murray County. This is not me being biased, it is a beautiful stand of grass. It holds a ton of birds. [Laughter].

Benage: [Joking]. Quick Caveat.

Howell: This is seriously my favorite spot to hunt because there are always birds there. No matter what! You will get a pheasant and you will see a pheasants at least if you go there, I guarantee it. There is a drainage ditch that runs right through it and there are

always a few ducks sitting in there. So, if you are sneaky enough, you can sneak up and hunt some ducks there too. At the back end of this site it is actually connected to Engebretson WMA, which runs along Beaver Creek and also has great turkey, squirrel, rabbit, and deer hunting opportunities. You could spend all day at that site and get whatever you want to hunt there.

Jess: That's awesome.

Howell: I love that site.

Benage: You can tell Megan is definitely passionate and she is a generous hunter because most hunters would not divulge their favorite spot on the podcast.
[Laughter].

Howell: I know it breaks my heart, but it's so nice!

Scott: Can we go back and erase that part?

Benage: She just gave you her favorite hunting spot.

Howell: It is my favorite spot to hunt.

Benage: So, not only does she care, but she's willing to share folks!

Scott: Megan is a WIA warrior. I mean just through and through.

Benage: I love that.

Scott: I also need to mention Randy Kraus because he is in Lincoln County and he does the same thing as Megan, but in Lincoln County. Another WIA Warrior. Between the two of them, they've got 25% of the entire program in those two counties.

Jess: Number 1 and Number 2. That's awesome.

Benage: Holding strong! That's fantastic. I also like that you said if you're a sneaky enough hunter. That's always my goal as a hunter to be "sneaky enough."
[Laughter].

Howell: Ducks can be hard. You have to be careful when you're sneaking up on ducks.

Jess: You have to be a good predator.

Benage: Yeah, I'm not the sneakiest hunter so that's why I get seated before anything else is awake so I can keep my "sneak" contained. Man, this has been a great day, right Jess?

Jess: It really has.

Benage: I've learned a lot. Have you learned a lot?

Jess: I really did. I really, really did.

Benage: Big thanks to Megan, WIA warrior (#WIAWarrior), for being here. I just love your passion and enthusiasm. You know you don't have the same kind of mustachios that Scott does, but you're still just as awesome as he is.

Scott: Thank Goodness.

Benage: Yes, be grateful that you don't. But we just had to bring it up. Scott, Also thank you for always being so knowledgeable and giving us the good facts and information. I really appreciate you.

Scott: Hey, anytime I have the chance to come back to Prairie Podcast, you let me know!

Jess: Alright!

Benage: Absolutely! We got to talk about that in private to see if we'll let you come back. [Laughter]. So, we are going to wrap-up for the day. That's Jess and Megan here on Prairie Tuesday on the Prairie Pod. We will catch you next week and hopefully, this next episode will be just as enjoyable as this one was.

Jess: It's going to be great. I'm, so excited. This is wonderful!

Benage: I know, it was.

Jess: Have a great day!

Benage: Yeah, you guys have a great day!

[sounds of birds chirping and wind blowing]