Prairie Pod Transcript

Season 4, Episode 30: Tȟan tataŋkaȟca kiŋ hdipi (When the Bison came home)

Hosts: Megan Benage, Regional Ecologist and Mike Worland, Nongame Wildlife Biologist

Guests: Scott Kudelka, Molly Tranel (DNR); Glenn Wasicuna (Minnesota State University-Mankato), Gwen Westerman (Minnesota State University-Mankato)

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

Transcript:

((sounds of birds chirping and wind blowing))

Megan: All right, welcome back to Prairie Pod. It's Megan here and I'm here with Mike and so many fabulous wonderful guests that we are so grateful to have. This is the most people we have ever had recording a podcast remotely, so going to be a fun day for everybody, I can just tell you that.

Mike: We should be a party, you know. This is awesome, it is a lot of fun. I think, well, we haven't started yet.

Megan: It's a prairie party and we're just going to jump right in. So today's episode we're talking about when the bison came home, and so this is a very, very exciting episode, and we have lots, like we said, special guests with us today. So it's a really special story and one of the reasons why it's very special is because it happened just right here in Southern Minnesota just to the east of where I'm physically located in the City of Mankato, it's a story of healing, it's a story of Dakota history, ecology, restoration of a landscape, oh, my gosh. It's everything all rolled into one. It's going to be a herd of fun, I tell you what, a herd of buffalo fun is what it's going to be.

Mike: The puns right now, oh the puns.

Megan: Mike, just go with it. Trample with me, Mike, through the prairie. Create some hoof action and share this knowledge (laughs). Okay, let's introduce our guests. We're going to start out, Scott, why don't you introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about who you are and what you do.

Scott: All right. I'm Scott Kudelka. I am the Minneopa area naturalist. I always say my job is to help educate people about the natural and historical resources that are found in our various state parks and state water trails.

Megan: And you do a fantastic job at that. - -

Scott: Thank you.

Megan: So now I'm going to pass it off to Molly. Go ahead and introduce yourself.

Molly: Hi, I am Molly Tranel Nelson, I am the regional resource specialist here in the Southern Region for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, so my job is to help protect and manage the natural and cultural resources in state parks, state trails, and public water access sites, and that includes helping manage our two bison herds.

Megan: Wonderful. Gwen, we are so honored that you're with us today. Would you mind introduce yourself?

Gwen: [speaking in Dakota] Haŋ mitakuyapi (Hello my relatives). Gwen Westerman, Gwen Westerman emakiyapi ye, my name is Gwen Westerman, I'm a professor of English at Minnesota State University Mankato and also the director of the humanities program there. And I was involved early on when the prairie was being restored to plan and prepare for the arrival of our bison relatives.

Megan: I love that. Glenn, we're also honored that you're here with us today too. Will you go ahead and introduce yourself?

Glenn: Oh, my name is Glenn Wasicuna. I live in Good Thunder. I teach at MSU. I teach the Dakota language there and we don't only teach the language, we talk a lot about Dakota history and culture and tradition and a lot of our students are really interested in it when the bison came to Minneopa and they've been going over there constantly and they come back and they talk about the bison, so the bison have done a lot of work.

Mike: It's wonderful to have all you guys on today. This is awesome.

Megan: Yeah. I'm really excited and I'm really honored that we have everybody with us today to tell a much better, more complete story of when the bison came home because I think, I hope, my hope is what you're going to get is a broader cultural understanding today also, because we tend to tell stories in our own perspective and our own narrow viewpoints, and so I'm really excited that we can tell a better story today with the depth and breadth of everybody. So Scott, do you want to go ahead and kick us off and give us just a little quick history of bison in Minnesota and maybe even the US?

Scott: Yeah. At one time, you know, we talked that there were 30, maybe 60 million bison. So if you can imagine the number that was here. And as Euro-American settlement pushed farther west, really the slaughter of this iconic noble, you know, North America's largest mammal took place. You know, they used to shoot bison out of trains as they traveled across the country and a lot of times bison were just shot and left to lie in the prairie. And by 1890, numbers ranged from 1,000 down to 350, which is where we put that number to be, so if you can just think about the slaughter of those animals and, you know, really humans are good at slaughtering animals. You think about like the

passenger pigeon, so the fact that we still have bison here today I think is pretty amazing. And at that point, you know, they were spread across zoos, some ranchers were raising bison, and I think it was at that point people started to realize that that we needed to save this animal. And today we say we have about a half a million but out of that half a million, you know, only about 20,000 is managed or raised as a wild animal, meaning that they're raised as bison, compared to the rest that are raised for agriculture purposes. Here in Minnesota, bison were pretty much gone, you know, Joseph Nicollet and George [William] Featherstonhaugh talked about seeing traces of what had been the bison like paths and stuff, but didn't see the animal, so by 1830s, we weren't seeing them here, but we know that Le Sueur, who paddled up the Minnesota River in 1700 and established Fort L'Huillier, they killed 400 bison to survive the winter. So we know there were quite a few animals here. The last sightings in the area we say happened in 1863 in New Ulm and I think there were six bison at that time.

Megan: Goodness.

Mike: Can we talk a little bit, Scott, about the importance of bison and the prairie ecology, their role in remnant prairie or I guess traditional role and what the role is now I guess would be.

Scott: Yeah, I mean Molly is going to be able to talk more about it as the resource specialist but the one thing that I always try to stress when I'm talking about bison and prairie is that really you can't have bison without prairie, right? They're a grass eating animal, that's what they mostly eat, and you really can't have prairie without bison, you know. We've seen this at Minneopa where woody vegetation slowly took over, and so we do prescribe burning, do other methods of treating that woody vegetation to keep it off but really the bison and prairie I think really go hand in hand. You got to have one, you can't have one or the other, I think you really need both, and to just see them the way they move across the prairie and how they eat, you know, they'll stop, they'll take a bite, they move, they stop, they take a bite, it's really just fascinating to see how much they will move in a couple hours, and so I think they are, the prairie and bison are made for each other, they need each other.

Megan: I love that. I love saying it that was you, they're made for each other. They're like soulmates, I like. And one of the questions I thought of while you were describing this great history, Scott, and it is so succinctly like way more succinctly than I could ever be, it's just shocking to me like the numbers of bison, like the amount of bison that were on the land and then just reduced. And I guess I want to hear part of the history from Gwen and Glenn's perspective, you know, that's kind of like Scott gave a really nice overview but I'm just curious from your all's perspective, you know, what is the history of bison and how might it differ or be the same as kind of what Scott was describing? Is he missing pieces of the history that we really need to know to better understand?

Glenn: Well as Dakota people, we have a close connection to the bison. In the community growing up, the old people used to say were buffalo people. They used to say we are Tataŋka Oyate. That's what they said and it didn't really sink in until later on what they really mean that they really did have a tremendous connection to this animal, and when they talk about the buffalo like they're people, they're just like persons. That, when Scott was saying what happened to the buffalo, to us, it meant that these people

were slaughtered. We view them, we think about them as people and why were we slaughtered? Like all those questions come in and it doesn't make sense to us as Dakota people.

Megan: I love what you said. I mean, it's just, I'm just overwhelmed with all the like, so history is always told from you know the perspective of the victor or like kind of a narrowed lens of one perspective and I just love, like I just feel so humbled and honored that you're both here to give us this broader understanding 'cause even listening to you describe, you know, bison as people and that you were buffalo people, what does that really mean? So does that mean that like they are just like you and me? Like their person and they're part of your everyday life?

Glenn: They understand things that we understand and sometimes even beyond. They cry, they talk, and they understand a lot of things, so that's why they're just like people. We have a connection to that.

Megan: I love that.

Glenn: For example, when they first came to Minneopa Park, the media was there, television stations were there and these cameramen were there carrying those big cameras, and one of the cameramen were started joking and I don't know what exactly he said but he was saying well what the – do you want me to sing a song to welcome like he was talking like that, sort of making a joke of the whole thing, and then shortly afterwards, shortly afterwards, this cameraman, his camera fell to the ground.

Mike: Really. (laughter)

Glenn: Now cameraman his number one thing is to take care of that camera, take care of it you know, his camera fell on the ground. To me that meant that the buffalo were at work, they were teaching, they were showing that they're people, that they are real, and they understand what's going on. And that's how we view these animals, and it goes that far.

Scott: Can I just add something here, Megan? Just something that just my relationship with Glenn and Gwen, you know, when we talk about the bison, you know, you hear people say they disappeared and, you know, what they told me and I think that really hurt me was they just didn't disappear or they weren't just reduced, they were slaughtered. And I think that's really what we need to tell. It's a really sad and tragic story but it's something that needs to be said, and then the other thing when Glenn was talking about them being of a person, you know, yesterday I was driving through and they recognized our pickup, and they know, they know, and they come running when they see it and they are very intelligent animal. It's just to me every time I see them up close, I'm just really, when you look into their eyes, it's just something about to me, just a totally different type of animal than I really ever experienced before.

Mike: I'm really admiring what I'm hearing here is that, you know, the Dakotas culture depended so heavily on bison to live and yet there's not this exploitative kind of relationship, there's this relationship where they really admire and respect them and that is something.

Megan: And are one of them.

Mike: Yeah, and are one of them, right, so to me, that's something we could all learn a lot from when it comes to other wildlife and other just, you know, natural ecosystems that.

Megan: Oh, absolutely. I love what you said about exploitive, that tends to be sort of our model, what is it doing for me, how is it, how does this matter for me, and it's just a very different thing. Also now I know from Glenn I'm never going to cross one of those bison because I don't want to lose a camera, I don't want to lose an arm, I don't want to lose anything. I'm going to treat them very respectfully because if they can do that to a cameraman, I'm on notice.

Gwen: And they remember your face too, Megan.

Megan: I know that's why I'm going to be, there's going to be some bowing and scraping at Minneopa, and they are a magnificent, magnificent creature like there's, I can't tell you how many times we drive to Minneopa, one because it's convenient and close, but also because every time we see something new when we're there with the bison and I learn something new, and I think we've been parked on the side of that gravel road there for an hour or two hours just watching them. And I know it sounds, might sound strange to some of our listeners like what are you doing, it's just like a cow, like why are you just watching them for two hours? But they're not. They're just fascinating to watch because the whole time there's a social interaction going on and there's different dynamics in their own cultural identity of each other, and I just find that really fascinating to watch and sometimes I actually feel like I should apologize to the bison like I'm sorry that I'm just staring at you, apologize. No, I really truly feel that way, like sometimes I'm like is it okay that I'm looking at you? And I think they mess with me because whenever I'm feeling that way, then they get very close to my car, and I really understand what you're saying, Glenn, because I think they know, they're like oh, you want to watch me? Watch me get right up next to your rearview mirror or your side mirror, so.

Mike: And I've seen your car. Those bison would crush your car.

Megan: I have a picture with them right next to my car and all I could think was I love you, everything's fine here, will you let me pass 'cause they're as big as my car, so yeah, definitely.

Scott: There are people that will drive out to Minneopa just about every day.

Mike: Glenn, go ahead.

Glenn: I want to share how close this relationship is between the Dakota and the buffalo.

Mike: Please.

Glenn: Whenever, whenever the Dakota want to go on a buffalo hunt, there are certain prayers and songs that are used that's specifically just for that. And those buffalo hunters, Dakota buffalo hunters, they weren't just ordinary guys, they were born to hunt.

So they have this connection right away. And there's procedure, like I said, there's songs and prayers that go with it, so when these songs and prayers are said, the buffalo hear that, they know, they understand, they know that there's going to be hunters coming, and you've seen these well Scott mentioned how many buffalo were, there's thousands, like in a herd, how do you think those riders ride in among those buffalo, how? When they're hunting buffalo like that, they're greeting each other, they're having fun, it's a challenge. It's a sport. And they don't injure each other. So that's the way we look at that buffalo hunt, it's not a random thing, it's all planned out.

Megan: It sounds to me the way you're describing it, it's almost like a dance, a partnership dance a little bit, like the bison know that these hunters are coming and the hunters are telling them that they're coming, and then it's like a dance together as they're, you know, in the chase, in the hunt basically.

Glenn: Yeah. I think somebody said respect, there's a lot of respect there.

Mike: Sounds like it.

Glenn: Yeah.

Megan: Definitely. Molly, give us an overview of the Minnesota Bison Conservation Herd, tell us a little bit how that started, you know, what are the goals, and then where, like so how it started and where you're at now.

Molly: Sure. So it all started, gosh, I think back in about 2013, the Minnesota DNR, Department of Natural Resources, went into a partnership with the Minnesota Zoo, and we, the original goal was let's protect prairie species and work on prairie conservation, and the way this played out is they had a small herd of bison at the zoo, you know, they just weren't the greatest example of a young, healthy bison herd, so they wanted to work with us and we already had a herd at Blue Mounds, and they wanted to, you know, partner with us on conservation. So once that partnership started, we started genetically testing the herd at Blue Mounds, and we realized that we had some very diverse genetics, which surprised us, and so we realized we could play a part in national bison conservation, and that kind of got the wheels rolling and we started, you know, planning, it was years and years of planning, and we said okay, what is our goal to have a conservation herd, and we looked at the data and the science was telling us we would need a herd of about 500 animals in prairies throughout Minnesota that we could manage as one herd, meaning we'd move animals in between them, we might have five or six locations but we'd manage it as one herd. And so we had Blue Mounds as a herd and then we had the small number at Minnesota Zoo and we decided we need another location, and so we started a lot of planning and we ended up narrowing it down to Minneopa, and while Minneopa didn't have the largest number of animals compared to some of the other grasslands that are publicly owned, it had the best chance for people to see the bison and see them up close, so that's kind of what won out with Minneopa. And so we really started working then to convince people that this was a good idea because a lot of people didn't think it was in the beginning, we had to convince people to fund it, and we had to go through just a lot of planning, you know, what if a bison hurts someone, is there legal requirements there, how do you get fencing out there, what do you do if they escape, all these sorts of planning, so years of planning went into

it before we finally got to the actual goal of bison at Minneopa. And so that's where we ended up now that we are there, we determined we could have up to 35 or 40 bison as a herd out there at Minneopa, and we managed them with the Blue Mounds and Minnesota Zoo herd, and we're also adding new partnerships and adding hopefully new herds in the future, so.

Megan: Molly, you said something there that I want to make sure that everybody listening understands, so I'm going to have you explain it a little bit. So you said something about how when you first started testing the bison, you were surprised that they had such strong bison genetics. Now to a lot of people listening to that, they might be thinking duh, they're bison. So explain a little bit what do you mean that they, you know, I don't think people necessarily understand that as in addition to slaughtering bison, then they were also intentionally crossed with cattle DNA, and so if you could just walk us through a little bit of that to explain kind of.

Molly: Scott might know the history better than I do but when the ranchers started gathering bison, you know, in an effort to save the bison, they thought it might be a good idea to cross them with domestic cattle and try to create this beefalo, as some people call them, and so what happened is cattle genes got bred into the bison herds, and many of the federal herds throughout the United States now have cattle genes in those herds, and sometimes it's very obvious, you could see a bison with a white stripe on its face, like a whole steam cattle, or sometimes they just look exactly normal like a bison and you would never know the difference. Science has shown that they tend to be smaller when they have cattle genetics, and we assume that they would be a little bit less robust, so what we really want is to protect those bison genetics and get rid of the cattle genes, so when we tested our herd, we found, we did have some cattle integration, but we were able to kind of limit that and get rid of it by kind of limiting those animals and not allowing them to breed the few cows that did have those genes, so we were really surprised at that, and not only that, but we had diversity, and those are the things that when you have millions of animals and you go down to just a few thousand, that's called a bottleneck and your gene flow really is limited, and oftentimes that's what happens on why populations go extinct because those animals can't better prepare themselves for, you know, changes in their environment, so we really wanted to protect that.

Megan: Thank you, Molly. You explained that really well.

Scott: Yeah, Molly's right. The other thing is you have to recognize that a lot of our federal herds come from three ranchers, and so when you're ranching, you're trying to produce animals, you know, for food, and so I think what they were looking at is one, cattle being more the appetite, especially Euro-Americans, and then something that would be able to survive, a hardier survivor, so I think that was two of the things that they were looking at, but like Molly said, it didn't work out fortunately.

Mike: Molly, can we talk a little bit more about how bison affect prairie? Scott was saying, you know, prairie and bison go hand in hand, you can't have one without the other.

Molly: Yeah.

Mike: What have you seen so far in Minneopa? How are they impacting the prairie there or how are they benefitting it?

Molly: Well, with Minneopa's prairie, we started with a prairie that had historically been grazed by cows and sheep, so we kind of were already starting with a grazing history, and that prairie has some remnant and then also some what we would call old brome fields and restorations, so we've seen different things but I will just say Scott is completely right in that they just fit out there, you know, the second day they were out there, I forgot they were out there because they just blend in and they just belong out there, and it's like kind of like oh, yeah, that's right, there's bison here now, because they're supposed to be there. And it's still early in the terms of measuring an ecosystem function. The bison have only been there a snapshot in time in evolutionary terms. You know, to us, it may seem like a long time has been five years now, Scott, or.

Scott: Well, 2015, so yeah.

Molly: Okay, so a little longer than that, yeah. So we started doing monitoring before the bison came out because first of all, we wanted to know how much food was out there for them, so we measured the forage, that would be a forage estimate, and basically go out, clip all the grass, and weigh it, and see how much there is to eat. That helped us determine how many bison we can have out there without using all that prairie grass. We wanted plenty of that there for structure, for grassland birds, for other animals like deer and little gophers that would be out there eating. So that was the first thing we did, and we also looked at what different plants were out there, what was the composition, so that we could monitor over time how the bison are changing things. The one thing that we did not account for is a different big change that came along, and that is climate change. You know, the first, we did two years of pre-bison monitoring, the first year was a drought, the second year was a flood, so since then, we've pretty much had flood years. When we first started monitoring out there, there were no wetlands and we decided we were going to have to drill watering hole and make a watering hole for the bison, and now when you drive out there, you see a lot of wetlands, and that's just a change within eight years, so we're seeing in the Minneopa area looking at the climate data, they've increased over one inch of rain per decade, and most of that has been within the last 20-30 years, so we're seeing a huge change in our vegetation at that range but we don't know how much is from the precipitation and how much is from the bison grazing, so it's making it a little difficult, but we do know a few different things that we're seeing is that they do create wallows but they don't create a lot of bare ground. You know, we were kind of worried are we going to have these cattle trails everywhere, is it going to look like a grazed field, we feel like we're hitting the right balance, we have the wallows that they create, but those areas are actually kind of a nice little diversity spot, you know, ground nesting bees can use those, annual plants that like disturbance, they colonize them once the bison stop using them, so it creates a little microcosm of new plants. And so we're seeing that, you know, areas that started weedy at Minneopa because of its grazing history, they're still weedy, the bison haven't gotten rid of those weeds unfortunately. But, you know, they have increased more of the low growing forbs and the one that comes to mind is longleaf bluet, they're small, little delicate plant, and I had never seen them out there at Minneopa before and now you can find them out there quite easily, and that's probably because they've grazed the grass around it and

allowed those plants to come up a little more. Maybe they were always there, we just couldn't see them, but now you can really notice them, so also like any of the forbs that really like disturbance and like to come in after the ground is shaken up, those tend to do well in the wallow areas. They really love to eat prairie dropseed, that's like candy to them, and unfortunately, I like to seed collect out there and I never get any now because they always eat it down to the ground. They also like sedges. We have a beautiful little sedge meadow in the middle of the range and you often find them there. We're finding more orchids out there and we think that probably is more to do with the hydrology, but that could also be opening up that layer of grass so the orchids could grow better. They do rub on trees as well as the rocks out there, but we haven't found that they're really decreasing the amount of trees. Now you will see a lot fewer trees out there because Scott's crew and the park staff have really been working to open it up.

Mike: Different mammal out, a different mammal at work there.

Megan: Yeah, they've been busy.

Molly: Yeah, exactly. His horn is a chainsaw, right? So the bison aren't really changing the tree cover out there or the shrub cover. The patch burn grazing that we're doing seems to be working, so what we do is we burn an area, a little patch usually 40 acres, and then those bison will come in behind that and as soon as it starts to green up, they start grazing on that. And once they do, they'll stay on that until it's not the nice little succulent green stuff anymore and then they move to the next patch. So that seems to be working for us out there, to move them around the range.

Megan: Nice, thank you for that. We're finally to the part that I've been anxiously awaiting, Glenn gave us a teaser and then all of this history and this ecology dynamics are leading up to this moment. This is the moment where, and I think we'll start with Gwen because we haven't, Gwen, we just haven't heard from you yet because we've been too busy monopolizing the mic, and so I want each of you sort of from your own perspective to tell this story of when the bison came home to Minneopa. All right, Gwen, go ahead.

Gwen: Early on when we talked with Scott and others about the importance of the bison to us as our relatives, and we talked about restoration and preservation and conservation and how those processes all work together, those processes are related, but so are the plants. The trees, the water, the animals that are there, I was really interested to know that the ground nesting bees move into the buffalo wallows after they're done, and that all represents that idea that we're all related and we talk mitakuyapi owasiŋ (Dakota) not just people, human beings, but the plants and the animals and the birds and the water, so it was important for us as Dakota people to stress that relationship, those relationships. And we talked a lot about how we wanted to bring them home, that it would be with prayer and it would be with song and it would be with recognition of them as our relatives and all of the people who helped make that possible were part of that process, so after the first group were released at the park, we fed everybody, we fed the truck drivers, the veterinarians, the park staff, everybody who was there and involved to thank them for helping bring our relatives home.

Megan: Oh, my gosh. I'm getting like emotional while you're telling this story because everybody knows 2020 was a very hard year for many reasons, right? And I'm just thinking back to last year and I'm thinking about, you know, getting to see my mom again, like getting to see my family again, getting to see somebody other than the one person who I see every single, who I'm very grateful for, but you know, just that as you're describing it like actually getting to see our relatives, our family again, and it makes me like emotional as you're describing this story, and I'm going to be quiet and let Glenn keep going with it.

Glenn: I view the ambassadorship as the other way around, the bison is the ambassador, he's come home, and thank you for all the people that took care of them health-wise, food-wise, shelter to show that they were appreciative of what took place at Minneopa, this is what they did. Last spring we were over there, we were sitting in the car looking as the mother, the biggest one there, the mother, we saw her in the distance, she was past this little hill but she was walking towards us and she was walking in such a way that she was thank you, here I am, look at me, this is who I am, this is who we are, we're relatives, and you know what she did? She turned into a woman, a human form, and she stood on top of that hill to show us that that relationship is still there. She stood there and then she started to walk again, and she turned back into her form. So that's the kind of relationship that we as Dakota people have with them, it's real, and I'm really glad it's still there. How much do I learn? What do I feel? Everything's in there. I can't just say oh, it's a wonderful thing, like it goes beyond that. I don't know how to describe that relationship when it's beyond this world, and it's real, it's a real relationship, so every time we go over there we see all these things, we learn, and we see, and we understand some more, this relationship.

Mike: Well this is why I'm so happy that Glenn, you and Gwen are in this show is for this perspective, you know. That's wonderful.

Megan: It's a little humbling isn't it, right, like it's pretty humbling to hear this because we are one piece of the whole interconnected relationship and the ecology and the ecosystem and the whole, and it's not about us, it's about how all of everything is connected together, and so it's just really good to hear this.

Molly: Megan, what Glenn just described we actually felt out there when the bison, when the hoofs came out onto the prairie, I had been planning for this day for years and all the logistics, and it was work, you know. I looked at it from a biologist's perspective and I grew up on a black angus beef cattle farm, so I was viewing them from that angle, you know, get these animals out there, how are we going to feed them, how are we going to water them, what's the fence going to look like, and humbling is the right way to describe it but when Glenn and Gwen were there, they brought a new perspective and when those bison came out, I started crying, and I looked over and everyone in the DNR was crying, and because we did not expect, we were looking at it as we're going to put this animal back on the prairie but we didn't understand what it really meant, I think, but we felt it, even though we didn't understand it, we felt what it meant, so I don't know how to describe it other that but it was a really special moment.

Megan: Well you guys are making me cry right now just, I wasn't even there. And I feel like I was just listening to the story. My nose is getting red, and my eyes are-- I'm trying to blink a lot over here, so you don't know it's happening, so, Scott go ahead.

Molly: You could turn your video off.

Scott: Well you know I agree with Molly. I think the way we as an agency people view things different, including what happens at state parks, and I think that Glenn and Gwen reminded us that these state parks are for everybody. We are just really the caretakers of trying to make sure that our ecosystem stays as intact as possible, but without the citizens being part of this, it doesn't mean the same thing, and you know, I didn't really have anything to do with bringing the bison there. You know, my role started afterwards, but the one thing that I like to always point out about bringing bison back to Minneopa is that we've actually been trying to do it since 1972 or actually 1970, and that's kind of the cool connection is that there were, you know, six bison at what they call the Sibley Zoo that were given to us and given or transported to Blue Mounds with the idea that we'd bring back bison at some point. And so it took us 40-some years but we got them back and I think it really shows how well the community of Mankato have embraced the bison and we can see in the amount of visitors and like I said before, people will come up to Minneopa just about every day and we also know that they name them, that people actually have a name for every bison that's out there.

Megan: But do they have the right name for them? How many are named Scott Kudelka, that's what I want.

Scott: Well, we try to stress that we shouldn't name them at all.

Mike: Megan and Mike here, quick fact check update.

Megan: Yeah, so we apologize for breaking into the program but we just wanted to clarify what Scott is saying here. So when he says we try to stress that we shouldn't name them at all, what he means is that the DNR is managing the herd as a population, so we are managing.

Mike: As a herd, it's right in the name, Megan.

Megan: Right in the name. Minnesota Bison Conservation Herd. So we are managing them as a whole and their benefits to the prairie systems that we so love and that they are desperately important for. So Scott said it best earlier in the pod, Minnesota State Parks are for everyone and we are just the caretakers. I think what you're going to hear next is a really good point, counterpoint that kind of gets into what bison and what the prairie mean to each of us, and that's okay because state parks are for all of us.

Mike: Well put.

Megan: Megan and Mike fact check update out.

Scott: But even in our staff, I hear, you know, and it's not hard, our breed bull came from Teddy Roosevelt, so he's in fact become Teddy and he does look like a Teddy. I have to admit he's just, he's a bull that was not, didn't look like much of a bull when he arrived

but man, he's really becoming and looking like a bull, especially now. Sorry Glenn, I talked over you.

Glenn: No.

Gwen: And the lead cow was the first girl, the first female out of the trailer and she didn't have a calf, she wasn't pregnant, and she took charge of everything, so we called her Winoona, which is first girl, first daughter in Dakota, and we started calling her that and then Scott would remind us they're not supposed to have names. We nodded our heads and said okay, we understand, and we just started calling her Winoona.

Megan: Did you tell Scott he's not allowed to tell you how you address your family, so that's not his business?

[Laughter]

Gwen: Oh, I didn't think about that.

Megan: You'll call your relatives whatever you want to call them, that's not Scott's, you know, none of his never mind.

Scott: I'm just blaming it on when you grow up on a farm, you were never told to name any of the animals because you knew what was eventually going to happen to them, so that's what I'm blaming that on. And I'm also saying that it's just the relationship that Gwen and I have.

Megan: Well, that's a little bit of sassing going on there. Well I hate to end the story there because it's just, it's a beautiful story and not only is it a story, but I think it's, what do I want to say here, Mike? Like it's a profound point in how we better understand prairie and how we better understand public lands, you know, what Scott said, this state park is for everyone and in order for it to truly be for everyone, we have to better understand all of our collective different cultures and identities so that it can be for everyone, and so that we're not just viewing it through one lens and setting things in place so that it's just for one particular group of people or another particular group of people, and so.

Mike: That's well put, yeah, we could apply it, this is just a, sorry Megan, I didn't mean to compliment you there.

Megan: Did you just compliment me? It's recorded, so it happened.

Mike: It's an example of what we can do in other ways that I'm having trouble coming up with here on the spot, for our public lands, this is just a small example of other, you know, we should be doing something like this everywhere, not necessarily bison but.

Molly: I think we should put bison everywhere.

Scott: Well I also think when you're talking about that, Mike, I think again, as fellow DNR employees, we get paid to do what we do, we love our job, that's nothing against that, but also it's the passion that Gwen and Glenn bring to this and other visitors.

Mike: Sure.

Megan: And the perspective, I would say passion and perspective.

Scott: The two Ps.

Megan: The two Ps in prairie, passion and perspective, prairie, people, okay sorry, I'm getting carried away. We, I hate to end this part of the podcast but we have to move on into our next section.

(Music)

LET'S SCIENCE, TO THE LITERATURE.

Science!

This is the part of the podcast where we recommend a book, a blog or a paper, and we're going to start with Gwen. Gwen, I am going to let you pronounce this because you're going to do it the right way, so.

Gwen: And then you will hear it and you will do it right way.

Megan: I will. Actually, I've been waiting for this moment because I would almost ask Scott for your number so I could call you and practice, but so now I'm going to let, we'll just do it in real time and that's okay.

Gwen: So repeat after me. Mni.

Megan: Mni.

Gwen: Sota.

Megan: Sota.

Gwen: Makoce.

Megan: Makoce.

Gwen: Mni Sota Makoce.

Megan: Mni Sota Makoce.

Gwen: There you go, The Land of the Dakota. Yes.

Megan: That's beautiful. Tell us a little bit about this book, Gwen.

Gwen: Mni Sota Makoce, The Land of the Dakota, is a history of our presence on this land in this place, and it begins with our creation stories woven together in a way from multiple sources into a single narrative about how we were placed on this land and prospered, grew, flourished, and our language still marks the land of the state of Minnesota, and we talk about how culture changed, how culture was preserved through the interactions with the American, well the French, the British, and the Americans who came here, and we talk about the importance of that relationship to the land, and in Dakota language, the word for our mother and the earth are the same, Ina and it was important for us to tell that story from our perspective so that people would have a better understanding of our relationship to this place.

Megan: Thank you for describing it and thank you for writing it and doing that. I, for everybody listening, I'm going to recommend another podcast, I know, but I'm just going to do it, so if you haven't, if you want to get a better understanding of the true story of history of this place where we live, you should listen to This American Life: Little War on the Prairie. It features Gwen and Scott told me about it, and so then I listened to it before this episode, and I knew very little, I'm not from Minnesota originally and so I knew very little of the history of this place where I live, which is almost like a shameful thing to admit out loud, I don't know anything about where I live, I'm just studying the ecology of it. And it's very fascinating, it is eye-opening and it is worth a listen to understand the true story, which again, the true story is when you get all the sides, because history tends to put that narrowed lens on it, and it's just everything that we sort of take for granted, it's going to upend all of it. And so I highly recommend you listen to that.

Mike: I agree, yeah.

Gwen: The podcast was put together by John Biewen and his crew. We worked on that for about 18 months and John Biewen grew up in Mankato.

Megan: It's very, very good. It tells the history, like we said, of this land and then the US-Dakota War and it tells it much more fully than I feel like any perspective I've gotten in a history book.

Gwen: Thank you.

Megan: And probably much more accurately is something that I should say too.

Mike: Glenn, did you have a book or something to recommend in this section?

Glenn: Well not really a book but since Minneopa opened up and word got out, it seemed like more and more students were going over there to visit and they come back to class and they talk about the bison, what they learned, and I really think they have a better understanding of history and I'm sort of relying on them, these young people to start writing a different narrative of what happened in history. They understand what happened now because we talked about it. They only knew one version of what happened to the bison but now they know and I'm expecting a whole lot of information to come from these young people in the future. So really encourage you, I encourage those young people to start talking about these, about history, accurate history. There's a lot of them out there to willing to do that, so I'm really encouraged by that, so that way I'm really looking forward to reading something different.

Megan: Glenn, you did something no one has ever done on the podcast before. For your book, you recommended one that has yet to be written, and that I have to applaud you for because that was masterfully done, I have to say. The book that I'm going to recommend is the one that's going to be written by my students, well done. And yeah, it's a book you predicted the future is what he did there, Scott, so and the second thing that he said and I hope everybody heard this, is that forget the book, go to Minneopa and learn the history for yourself, read the land is what I took from that also, so there are two things you did there. One is you predicted the future, amazing, and then two, you said just go to the prairie and that is your book, you will learn from the land and our

relatives that are there, so that's pretty, that was good, that was well done. Go ahead, Scott, yeah, follow that.

Scott: I'm just going to jump into it because there's really not much I can say except applaud Glenn for his wise words and just the friendship that I've been able to develop with both him and Gwen, especially as they become, they've helped us out in so many ways, I can't, we'll never be able to actively describe. So I picked an article called Caught Up in Success and I did it for a couple reasons. One selfishly because I'm North Dakotan native, that's where I grew up, and so it actually starts out with bison herd at Cross Ranch Nature Preserve, which I'm very well familiar with and was actually there when they brought the bison to that area in 1988, my brother-in-law managed the state park that was next door. And as you can always tell a fellow North Dakotan because of how we pronounce bison. We say it with a z, not with an s, and so I had to get that out there. The other reason I picked it is because it offers various perspectives, and I think when we tell the story about bison, it's a very complex story in many ways. You can go off in many different directions on what's happening, whether historically or genetic-wise or even bringing back the bison, and that's really, it's a story that you really have to dig into, and there's many ways to do that and I think Gwen is exactly right that people come into Minneopa and learning the story and hopefully they will write the book that talks about these animals. There, I tied it all up in one piece.

Mike: Well done.

Megan: And you plugged North Dakota at the same time. Nicely done, Scott. We knew you could do it. Molly, you're next.

Molly: All right. So since I'm the biologist of the group, I picked a scientific peer reviewed paper from Environmental Entomology. It's called Bison Grazing Increases Arthropod Abundance and Diversity of a Tallgrass Prairie. And basically what it shows is that when bison are out there on the landscape creating wallows, eating the grass, and then pooping in the grass, and cycling those nutrients back into that system, they're affecting everything, even the tiniest little creatures out there, and I thought it just tied in how bison are ecosystem engineers and how they just kind of bring that whole prairie together with that nutrient cycling, and in the case of this study, they increased the arthropods, the little bitty insects, both in abundance and the diversity, so I found it very fascinating.

Megan: Nice. Hey Mike.

Mike: Hey Megan.

Megan: Yeah Mike?

Mike: Why don't you take a hike?

Megan: I think I will take a hike, Mike. I just now realize that take a hike, Mike rhymes, as long as we were in the podcast together and it rhymes. Okay. We are to the part of the podcast where we are going to feature your public lands and so places that you can visit prairie and as we, are tradition on the podcast, we've asked our guests to pick our favorite places, it's not going to come as a shock what they choose, but they have

different reasons for it, so we're going to go through those. Scott, what is your pick for your place where we are hiking?

Scott: Well, you know, Minneopa is a great place and I'm based out of there but I'm going to go to Fort Ridgely, so that's, you know, about an hour to the west, and the reason that I picked Fort Ridgely is it really is a place that very few people know about, even though we have seen an increase in visitation, but I think it's what we're doing to the landscape there, we're taking what was a very intensely manufactured ecosystem and reverting it back to prairie, and I think to be able to see that process as it is happening shows how hard work it is but then how gratifying it is eventually to see, you know, hundreds of plants hopefully coming back to the landscape and then bringing back some of that wildlife and that's part of that whole ecosystem.

Megan: Molly.

Molly: So I picked Sibley State Park, which is up by New London, and the reason I picked it is because it's in this wonderful part of the state that has kind of the rolling hills with the prairie potholes or the little, the bottom of the hills have little wetlands, and you can just see almost how the glaciers had moved across that landscape and formed it, and you know, the most popular trail there is the Mount Tom trail where you go to the top and you can see for really long ways and you can see prairie and oak savannah and woods but my favorite part of the park is the big open prairie to the eastern side. Very few people hike that trail and if you go out there during the summer, you can see all sorts of butterflies and birds and wildlife and it's just amazing.

Mike: We're monitoring that prairie in the Nongame Program.

Molly: That's right, Mike's been out there.

Mike: Actually I have not. I will.

Molly: Oh, you made somebody else do it.

Megan: I was about to say how many did you find, Mike, but now I know the answer. All right. Gwen.

Gwen: My pick for taking a hike is Minneopa, and it has to be my favorite place because that's where Glenn and I got married.

Mike: Oh, there you go.

Megan: I love it. Glenn, now you know you also have to say Minneopa. I don't want you to, I just want to set you up for success here.

Glenn: Originally I was going to say Minneopa but now I remember something. I went to a conference where there were elders from right across the country that were talking about everything but the bottom line after it is all said and done was they told us to walk on the land, walk on the land. The land has power, the land is sacred, and if we want to be healthy spiritually, mentally, walk on the land and say thank you. Everything you need to see is there. So I'm going to say that. Walk on the land.

Megan: I love that. See, you're just shattering all of our categories and coming up with much wiser words and better, man.

Molly: They were smart putting him last on that one.

Scott: I do not want to follow him.

[Laughter}

Megan: I learned from earlier, I was trying to help us all out. Well it has been an absolute joy to have all of you on today. The time just flew by, I'm not ashamed to say I got emotional through most of it, I feel like my perspective has been broadened. Mike, did you - -

Mike: Me too. I loved it. I agree. The episode flew by. Yeah, it was amazing. My eyes have been opened for multiple reasons. Yep.

Megan: Absolutely, and we are very grateful to all of you taking the time and being here with us to share this with everybody who is going to listen, and so next week the fun is not over, join us again for another fun-filled Prairie Tuesday, and we're not done talking grazing goodness. We're not done with it. We're going to be talking to Kent Solberg with the Sustainable Farming Association and DNR wildlife manager Amber Knudsen, and we are going to be talking about adaptive management grazing, another way to think about how to bring animals back on to the land that aren't necessarily native but how do we incorporate that important grazing piece into our prairie ecosystems and make sure that we can start uncovering even more mysteries and there's a favorite phrase that Kent's going to share with us, it's called the how, not the cow, and you're going to learn what that means next week. So as always, you can find all of the resources that we talked about today on our website and then like Glenn said, if you can't find the resource on the web, go walk on the land because everything you need to know is right there. Those are very wise, profound words, he said it best, so this episode was produced by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources Southern Region under the Minnesota Prairie Conservation Partnership. It was edited by the amazing Dan Ruiter and it was engineered by fabulous Jed Becher. I just, is there a farewell that we should say like Gwen, you're going to have to teach me more words. How do I say goodbye?

Gwen: Tokśta ake (Sp?) 67:07.

Glenn: I can sing you a song.

Megan: Okay, teach me a song, I'm ready.

Mike: You can sing a song, yeah.

Glenn: Hey Gwen, go, Gwen.

Gwen and Glenn singing together: Okay. Tokśta ake waciyaŋkapi kte (We will see you all again!)

Megan: I feel like I know this song. Sound of Music. [laughter]. Singing “Goodbye, farewell.” [laughter]

Gwen: There you go.

Megan: Oh, that is wonderful. I love it so much. Thank you all. What a great way to end this episode.

Scott: Thank you.

Mike: Thank you.

((sounds of birds chirping and wind blowing))