



Prairie Pod Transcript

Season 5, Episode 44: Let's Go Explore; Prairie Tour of Minnesota's State Parks

Hosts: Megan Benage, Regional Ecologist and Sara Vacek, Wildlife Biologist U.S. Fish Wildlife Service.

Guests: Grace Vacek; Jake Glaster, Park Manager, Frontenac State Park; Scott Kudelka, Area Naturalist, Minneopa State Park; Emily Albin, Assistant Manager, Upper Sioux Agency State Park; Chris Ingebretsen, Park Manager, Blue Mounds State Park; Ben Eckhoff, Area Naturalist, Lake Carlos State Park; Paula Comeau, Naturalist, Buffalo River State Park

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

Transcript:

((music playing, sounds of birds chirping and wind blowing))

Megan: Hey Prairie Pod listeners, I'm Megan Benage, regional ecologist with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

Marissa Ahlering: And I'm Dr. Marissa Ahlering, lead scientist with the Nature Conservancy in Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota.

Sara Vacek: I'm Sara Vacek, wildlife biologist with the U.S. Fish Wildlife Service, based out of the Morris Wetland Management District.

Mike Worland: And I'm Mike Worland. I'm a wildlife biologist with the Minnesota DNR Nongame Wildlife Program.

Megan: We are part of the Minnesota Prairie Conservation Partnership and we are here to help you discover the prairie.

Marissa: Discover the prairie.

Sara: Discover the prairie.

Mike: Discover the prairie.

((music playing and sounds of birds chirping))

Megan: Hey, welcome back to the Prairie Pod. I'm Megan Benage, which you just heard in our intro, so I don't know why I felt the need to introduce myself again, but I did. Sara! You're here.

Sara: Hi Megan! How ya doing?

Megan: I am so great and you have a super special guest with you today. Who's that?

Sara: I do. I'm so excited.

Grace: (Giggling.) I'm Grace, I'm Sara's daughter.

Megan: She's representing our youth contingent and she's here today as a very special guest correction order-host for all of our Prairie Pod listeners. Woo hoo! Yay Grace! (Laughter.) I'm very excited about it. Sara's very excited about it. Grace are you ready to be a star?

Grace: Yes, I am. (Laughs)

Megan: I guess I shouldn't say ready. You already are a star, but I mean it's just gonna get brighter right now. The dog was affirming everything I'm saying, so you're set. So we are super pumped because today, we are hosting a non-traditional Prairie Pod episode and when I say non-traditional, I mean special. It is gonna be awesome. We are taking you on a tour of Minnesota state parks and trails. Yay! So everybody is, you know, silently clapping. So trust me, trust me, their microphones were off but they were silently clapping, so it's gonna be great. We are joined today by six (6) very special people, park managers and naturalists to share the special prairie places in the parks that they and we hope you love. Do you all want to introduce yourselves? We're going to start with Jake.

Jake: Sure, my name's Jake, I am the manager at Frontenac State Park.

Megan: Beautiful. Scott?

Scott: And I'm Scott Kudelka, I'm the Minneopa Area Naturalist.

Megan: Emily.

Emily: I am Emily Albin. I'm the assistant manager at Upper Sioux Agency State Park.

Megan: And Chris.

Chris: Chris Ingebretsen, I'm the park manager at Blue Mounds State Park.

Megan: Ben.

Ben: Ben Eckhoff, area naturalist at Lake Carlos State Park.

Megan: Paula.

Paula: Hi, I'm Paula Comeau, I am the SNA Region 1 naturalist for the northwest region and I am stationed out of Buffalo River State Park.

Megan: All right, we have an awesome group of folks here today. I am so excited. Sara and Grace, are you guys as excited as I am?

Grace: Yes.

Sara: We are, Megan.

Megan: Great. We're going to have to work on how excited you sound. (Laughter)

Sara: This is going to be great. It's like one giant Take a Hike episode. I'm really excited to chat with everybody about all these different great places in Minnesota.

Megan: I know, and I can't think of a better way to do that than right when we're in the middle of summer and you're trying to think about where you want to go next, what places you want to explore, and what better places to explore than not only the prairie but in a Minnesota state park. Woo hoo! So let's just get started. We have a lot to get through. We've got a lot of places to hike. I've got my backpack full of snacks, Sara packed me some extra snacks, Grace doesn't know it yet but she going to give me her snacks, and so it's going to be a really, really good day. Grace, I won't take your snacks.

Grace: Okay, thank you.

Megan: I won't really do it. Okay. We're going to get started and Jake, I got to tell you, I've never been here, so I'm pumped to learn all about Frontenac State Park.

Jake: I am glad to hear it.

Megan: Thank you. I had to practice saying it three times just to make sure it sounded right.

Jake: Frontenac State Park, yes. You got it correct. Good job.

Megan: Thank you so much.

Jake: So, Frontenac State Park. Beautiful gem of a state park located between Red Wing and Lake City in Minnesota's bluffs along the Mississippi State River. So we're about seven, eight, seven miles or so north of Lake City and I don't know, 10, 15 miles south of Red Wing. It's just an absolutely beautiful state park. We have 3,000 acres of mixed bluff top prairie, bluff side forest, bottomland savannah right at the headwaters of Lake Pepin. It was created, became a state park in 1957. It's named for the town of Old Frontenac after a fun fact let's see the governor of New France in the mid-1600s Louis de Buade de Frontenac. So yeah, absolutely beautiful state park full of lovely prairies to come and explore.

Megan: Awesome. You told us a little bit about the history there and you told us there's some beautiful prairie, but tell us a little bit about the role prairie, well, I can't even talk 'cause it's an alliteration. Tell us about the role that prairie plays in the park. Do you see that alliteration? It's nice.

Jake: That was, that was impressive. Uh so uh prairie makes up the bulk of the parkland. The bottomland prairies or the oak, it's oak savannah, actually, to be

technical, but it's for those two of you who may not know a savannah is a prairie that has some woody tree cover. Ours is predominantly oak. Role that it plays, let me see. I don't know why that's such a tricky question.

Megan: Because it probably could play many roles, depending on.

Jake: And it's beautiful. We have much of our trails go through the prairie. It plays a habitat for many of our native species of, I mean, animals, there's a lot of different plants, Frontenac is the premier birding park in all of Minnesota, over 260 species of birds have been observed within the state park boundaries themselves. Actually, if you compared us to national parks, we would be ranked eight for the number of species observed within the park compared with all national parks in the US, which I think is pretty awesome. But a lot of our birds like these open areas and they forage and find food and they, they nest in those areas.

Sara: Okay, so I actually have gone to Frontenac with my grandparents but I don't know much about the history, so would you be willing to tell me about that?

Jake: Absolutely, so I am not much of a historian, but I know enough of it, so the area was, you know, before, before Europeans came and colonized, there's a rich history that is dating back to as earlier as we can find 300 to 400 BCE with members of the Hopewellian culture being found along the shores of the Mississippi River. It has a rich history of indigenous peoples living here up through the colonization by European settlers, which happened in about the late 1700s, early 1800s, and that has, the starting down the history has become more well-defined. There is a few forts, Fort Beauharnois, which was somewhere along this stretch of the Mississippi River, though archaeologists have been unable to locate actual any remains of the fort, it was a Jesuit trading colony. Then in the mid-1800s, a man by the name of Israel Gerard founded the town, township of Frontenac along the Mississippi. Kept it off of the rail lines or kept it as kind of this resort leisure town, and it's, you know, the township still exists today. It's this beautiful little town nestled within the state park itself, and yeah, the park was pushed be formed in the 1930s but it actually become a park in 1957 and we've been growing ever since. We actually added 200 acres to the park in 2020 even.

Megan: Beautiful. More prairie places to explore and discover. So tell us a little bit about some of the special places or things to see. You already mentioned the birds. You mentioned some of the different types of habitats, savannah, that's one we don't always often get to see because much of our savannah is gone in Minnesota. So tell us a little bit more about some special places in the park.

Jake: So the park has several really unique sections of prairie. The prairie loop is a large section of prairie right across from the park office. Most of our prairies are restored prairie, so they were used to be farmland and they were restored to prairie using tools, seed planting, prescribed fire, mechanical work, you know, all the standard tools of prairie restoration. Something unique to Frontenac that you're not going to find I don't think in any of these other parks but I've not listened to the podcast yet, so I don't know if that's the case, is actual goat prairie or bluff prairie. It's areas, which are actually remnant pieces of prairie that haven't been disturbed by farming due to the fact that they're on such, such steep slopes that they weren't arable or tillable land. They're

called goat prairies sometimes as well because goats would use them and goats were the only ones who can actually make it up and down such steep areas. So even at the entrance to the park, there's two formidable bluffs right behind the ranger station. Both of those are remnant bluff prairies. Our bluff top prairies as well are beautiful, they're nestled on, you know, bluffs 300, 400 feet above the Mississippi River and Lake Pepin, so you can actually be walking through a prairie and end up with a really cool view over a valley, which I don't think many places will have.

Sara: I haven't been to your park. That was one of the things that Grace mentioned when she came home from that trip was standing up sitting up on that looking over Lake Pepin and what a beautiful view it was.

Jake: It's absolutely gorgeous. You should really listen to your daughter more. She knows what's up.

Sara: She is a smart kid, I'll give her that. (Laughter.)

Megan: That was recorded, Grace! You're welcome. (Laughter)

Jake: One of the places in the park that not many people know about is because it is off the map but we do have a section of the prairie that overlooks Rattlesnake Bluff. Rattlesnake Bluff is a 200-foot cliff face along Highway 61 towards Red Wing, and you can get there along a gravel road running next to the park and so again, all this is off map, you probably should talk to a park ranger just to make sure you don't get lost, but it's about a mile and a half hike out and then you can actually sit on top of the cliffs overlooking the beautiful valley, the Mississippi River Valley, and a Valley on Highway 61. My favorite place in the park growing up.

Sara: Sounds amazing. Jake, I'm wondering if you have any special stories or memories from your time at Frontenac that you'd like to share with us.

Jake: One of the things that I think is really cool that you won't really see unless you come camping here, because it requires you to be in the park overnight and, you know, as we all know, parks are only open from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. unless you're an overnight visitor. But through hiking through the prairie at about 11:00 at night in mid-June, when the lightning bugs and the fireflies are in abundance underneath a full moon, it's, it's magical, it's, it's silent, and you're just surrounded by shimmering lights. It feels like you're in a fairy forest. And, you know, I can be at the park at that time and so come camp with us and go hiking in the prairie. It's, it's absolutely gorgeous.

Megan: Hey, I just learned about so I don't know why this sparked in my mind but I just learned about the camouflage looper, which is a caterpillar that as it feeds on different wildflowers, it takes bits of the wildflower and sticks it to its back, so that it's less obvious to its prey, so I was thinking if we have like, you know, a fairy prairie program you could try to think about how you might use different, different prairie plants in a big - like the camouflage looper. I don't know. - -

Jake: Camouflage looper.

Megan: If you never heard of that particular caterpillar, you got to look it up. There is in addition to the park stories that we're telling you today, there's always a prairie story not

that far away near you that's happening that we may not even be aware of, and so it's exciting when we get to see them and make ourselves part of that conversation and part of the story. So I'm sure the camouflage looper didn't care that people were observing it and looking, but it was pretty neat to see it sticking little bits of flower to itself.

Jake: It's very cool.

Megan: Oh, gosh. It is super cool. Thanks so much for sharing all about your park. We're going to move west to Minneopa State Park with the fantastic Scott Kudelka. Scott, tell us a little bit about Minneopa State Park. And those of you I know you can't see Scott, he's got his bison t-shirt on today, representing.

(Laughter)

Scott: All right. Minneopa is just down the road from Mankato south on 169, just a few miles, and we are actually the third oldest state park in Minnesota. It's been a state park since 1905, but really when you look at the history of this area, all we have to do is look at our title. Minneopa is a Dakota word and the reason for establishing the park back then was the waterfall. And so, it's been translated into waterfaling twice, and we know from our archeology surveys that have been done that people have been really coming to this place for hundreds, if not thousands, of years, and I think we should recognize that this has been really important, significant place for many people for many years.

Sara: Scott, tell us a little bit about the, the role of prairie in the park.

Scott: Yeah, you know, I like to say that the prairie actually saved Minneopa. It, it may not seem strange but, you know, at one point we were 110 acres. In the 1960s, the Department of Conservation, which is the predecessor to the DNR, said, you know, you're really not big enough to be a state park, you don't have a campground and so we might give you to the county or to the city. And the city of Mankato people said no, no, we want as a state park and there was this chunk of land along the Minnesota River that had never really been broken up. And if you drive through the bison range, you're going to find out why it was never broken up. And it was owned by the two Seppmann brothers and so it was an easy purchase. They were ready to sell just about 1,000 acres, and that really was what kept Minneopa as a state park was that purchase of that prairie land mostly prairie. And then today, you know, we are really a top 10 state park, and the reason is again to that prairie, and it's bringing bison here in 2015 and we weren't the only park that they were looking at and the fact that we had this unbroken prairie that needed some attention, and I think again that prairie has really served Minneopa State Park really well.

Megan: Scott, tell us a little bit about what it's been like to have bison at the state park and how the park might have changed through time, like in terms of how you see people enjoying the park or the types of folks who come to the park to visit. How has it changed the dynamic there at the park with bison now as part of, as part of the prairie as they once were and are?

Scott: You know, I think it's a great way to show people that you really can't have a true prairie without bison and you really can't have true wild bison without prairie, and I think that's really evident as you come into Minneopa. And, you know, again, we were in the

middle of the pack for visitation as a state park in Minnesota, and now we are easily top 10, if not a top 5, and what's interesting is people came here to see the bison and then fell in love with the rest of the park, including the prairie. And we - - able to walk all the way around the bison range so you can experience not only the prairie, but this really great oak savannah that also looks down on the Minnesota River, and I just see the excitement whether they're 75 years old or 5 years old that bison just brings out something in people. They get really excited, they'll tell you they've seen it 1000 times, but as soon as they see one, they're just like, you know, like they've never seen one before. And, you know, we just brought out a group from Mankato East, and again, this connection to a really iconic North American animal I think really has changed Minneopa in that way and also because just the history that we have here with the US Dakota War and what's happened, we see people coming to us and thanking us for bringing the bison here because they feel like it is a great way to reconcile what had happened many years ago.

Grace: So I also went to Minneopa and I saw the, we went on the bison drive, and saw the old mill building, which I really enjoyed. But I was wondering if there was any other special places at the park that aren't as well-known.

Scott: Yeah. I think, you know, the, the really special part is our bluff land trail because that's a trail that will lead you along between the prairie and the Minnesota River. And we know from archeology evidence that indigenous people were actually setting temporary camps on here, and we think that they were looking down on the river and they were making arrowheads and spearpoints and waiting what we pretty sure were for the bison herds to move around. So I think it's really a great connection to this really long history of people finding this a very special place.

Megan: Scott, tell me a little bit, so I have a lot of special memories at Minneopa mostly because it's one of the closest state parks to me. So if we need, so if we need a little break or a brain break or a prairie reboot, a prairie recharge, it's just a 30-minute drive away, and I also enjoy that I can drive on the bison drive and I don't even have to get out of my car to see nature, so that's just an enjoyable part sometimes of my day when it's been a long, hard day. Let me restate this. It's very nice to be able to go to a park and to be able to have an experience with nature where I can be in my car and be with nature from my vehicle. And if I want to get out and hike and get up, up much closer with the prairie, I can have that opportunity to. So tell me a little bit about some of the special story or a memory that you have about Minneopa that you'd like to share?

Scott: Well, I think, you know, my memory is actually the memories of people that come there, and because they come up and they talk about how they saw a calf for the first time or that a bison in the winter came up and started licking their car. Of course, it was, they had the salt on it. Or they took a walk, you know, around the range and saw, you know, the bison moving. So I think my special memories is what people, their experience and how excited they get, there is a wetland that's near the Seppmann Mill and two years ago, I guess it was probably last year the whole herd was in that wetland, and all the yearlings and the older cows were in the water like they were at the beach, and then the moms and the calves were up on the upper land. So it was like the whole herd went to the beach and you had some swimming and some just hanging out on

there, and so just hearing people that experience they got and luckily, we have a photo of it, is just to me I think what makes special about Minneopa.

Sara: Scott, Scott, thanks for that great overview of Minneopa and all the fun things we can see and do there. It sounds like a great spot. We are going to travel up the Minnesota River Valley now to the Upper Sioux Agency State Park and Emily is going to give us a great picture of, of this park.

Emily: Thanks. Well, I think Upper Sioux Agency is the best park in the state, but I might be slightly biased. Upper Sioux Agency State Park is located eight miles southeast of Granite Falls, which is about halfway between Marshall and Willmar, for those who don't know where Granite Falls is. Or we're about two and a half hours nearly due west of the Twin Cities and not far south of Highway 212. So I know a lot of people think that Western Minnesota is extremely boring and flat, but they have not been to the Minnesota River Valley, especially by Granite. There is something magical coming over to over on 212 and you hit Granite Falls, and the river valley opens up and we have topography. There's lots of it out here. Maybe not as much as Frontenac, but we do get about a 200 to 300-foot elevation change from the river bottom up to the bluff lands. So we do actually have some pretty strenuous hiking. Geologically, this was formed by glaciers and the glacier river warn, so there's a lot of granite in the area but you won't actually find any at Upper Sioux Agency State Park because we are all glacial till. It's amazing to stand on our overlook or at the top of our sledding hill and look out over the Minnesota River Valley and realize that that is the footprint, the footprint of the glacial river warn. And when you look at it, you go that was one big river that, that when I moved out here and that realization of what the Minnesota River is in this area, it kind of blew my mind. So like the other parks that you're hearing about, all state parks were, were made to preserve important ecological and archeological areas for the citizens of Minnesota, and Upper Sioux Agency is no different. We have plenty of both, we have archeological sites dating back 10,000 years, and as the more recent history site of the US Dakota War of 1862, as our name says, we this area was the site of the Upper Sioux Agency, which was a government outpost for the handing out of annuities and food that were part of the, the treaties that were signed with the Dakota. The agency site is actually owned and operated by the Minnesota Historical Society, but it's located within the park. They have amazing really informational signs that you can walk around and, and look at. But the best part of the park is by far the prairie. We also have these bluff lands that haven't been tilled because of how steep they are, so we have quite a few remnant prairies, and they are gorgeous. And when I have days where I'm ready to get away from the computer and I need to find my Zen, I head out to the overlook area and I walk out in the prairie, and when the wind is blowing, it's such a cleansing feeling, it's probably my favorite spot in the park.

Megan: And I love Upper Sioux Agency State Park and as I love all of these Minnesota state parks, we're really lucky and blessed in Minnesota that we have such a fabulous park system. I have to say the prairie at Upper Sioux is pretty special place, so tell me a little bit and you kind of alluded to it but walk me through a little bit the role that prairie plays in the park. I know you've done a tremendous amount of work in the restorations there, I know you also have remnant prairie, you have some big bur oaks on the bluff there. Talk to me a little bit about what prairie means to the park or in the park.

Emily: It is, well, beyond being beautiful; it's really an interesting spot. I don't have any proof, but I, my gut instinct in the looking at the different species that are growing in the remnant sections, it's that we, it was actually shortgrass, and there's a lot of really neat species that are found in there, and we, gathering my thoughts, we, it's our primary resource. We do have the, the, the great, big, old 150, 200-year-old bur oaks, which are fantastic. Love the silhouettes. In fact, one of the bur oaks actually came down in a storm in 2016 and we turned it into a nature play area, so you can climb around on it and that's located in our Yellow Medicine Campground. We have bottle gentian that are found in little patches. One of my favorite species besides pasqueflowers is I almost have to put on cleats and kind of gingerly work my way down the side of the rather steep bluff, but we have pail penstemon, which is so pretty and unexpected, and delicate looking. We spend a lot of time working on the resource cleaning out the invasive species, doing prescribed fires. We actually just did one this week. So fire is a friend to the prairie and, and, you know, it's just, it's peaceful. That's my favorite part of it is it's so peaceful to go walk around.

Grace: Okay, so I know when me and my mom went to Upper Sioux, we watched the sunset. We found a nice hill to watch the sunset over the river, the Yellow Medicine River. So I have a special place at that park, but I was wondering if you had any special places at the park.

Emily: You know, I have a couple. So another special thing about the, about this park is we're actually flanked by two rivers, the Minnesota River is to the north and the Yellow Medicine River is to the south but it loops around and has its confluence with the Yellow Medicine River right on the edge of the park. So my, my favorite spot is probably is from the overlook, we have a little foot path that goes out to the very edge of the valley. And when I say edge of the valley, it's not like a sheer cliff, it's a gentle roll down, but you stand out there, the wind is blowing, you can see the campground from above, and it's really neat because you can actually see we have three rental teepees in our campground. You can see those from up high. You can see the confluence of the Yellow Medicine River to the Minnesota. It's this big, open space and you can, you, you truly understand why humans have been using this location for 10,000 years. My second favorite spot is, is overlooking the Yellow Medicine River from across from where the visitor center is. There's this neat little meadow, little bowl in the valley, and it's this beautiful picturesque, winding section of the Yellow Medicine, and right there almost four years before I took this position, that's where I had my wedding photos taken was overlooking that. And so it's pretty cool to have my wedding photos in my office that show these awesome views of the park before I even worked here, so it was very fortuitous, I think.

Megan: I think so, too. It sounds like it was meant to be.

Emily: It is. It's a great park.

Megan: I don't know if you can top this, but my next question was going to be if you had any special stories or memories that you'd like to share about your park. That's a pretty fabulous though I think.

Emily: That, that is kind of my, my big story from the park. Like, like Jake at Frontenac, his is out in the prairie, ours is actually in the floodplains. So if you come and camp with us at the Yellow Medicine Campground, at night after the sun sets, you can walk out into the floodplain of the confluence area of the Yellow Medicine and the Minnesota Rivers. It's this big, wide, open floodplain, and there are thousands, maybe tens of thousands of fireflies. And there's very little light because Granite Falls is the closest town and it's a pretty little town, so there's not a whole lot of light pollution, and it's like you're standing in a snow globe of fireflies. They're just, they're everywhere and it's really magical, and it's my favorite park of working night security 'cause I make sure that I'm down in that area when, when everything goes pitch black and, and the fireflies start waking up. It's a great, it's a great spot. I do want to mention to anyone who's thinking about coming out to Upper Sioux Agency, it's really important to know before you go when traveling to this park. Please plan your route prior to leaving your house because Highway 67, which bisects the park, is actually closed due to, due to geology and roads not getting along. Come find me, I'll give you the whole spiel on what's happening with the highway. But you cannot get through Highway 67 anymore. So there is now a 20-mile detour between the park office and the main campground, so make sure you're planning your route before you head this way. Our webpage is a great place to go and look for visitor alerts on, on the detour, a route to get here, how to get around the park map has good information. We've, we've rerouted it and have detour information. So yeah, just make sure you know before you go when heading out to a state park.

Megan: Awesome pro tips. And we should mention 'cause you're just segueing right into it before we get to our next state park that all campsites in Minnesota state parks and recreation areas require a reservation before they can be occupied, and that's year round. So it's best practice if you make that reservation before you leave home because sometimes at our state parks because they are wild, amazing places and spaces, there's not great cell phone coverage or Wi-Fi, so and our parks are popular. You want to make sure that you get that spot and so it's best to try to plan your reservation through our Minnesota State Parks reservation system on our website, and we'll post that link online so you guys can access it. We are going to just move down south a little bit. We're still in Western Minnesota but we're going to move further south and we're going to head on over to Blue Mound State Park. Chris, tell us a little bit about your park.

Chris: Oh, thank you. Well, Blue Mound State Park is located way down in the southwestern corner of Minnesota about as far southwest as you can go without falling into Iowa or South Dakota. We're about five miles north of Laverne, 25 miles south of Pipestone, Highway 75, the King of Trails is running north and south right along our, our western edge and yeah, you can access the park off of Highway 75. It's a really unique landscape, really, really unique park. We've got a large campground for camping, 14 miles of hiking trails, bicycle trail that connects into the city of Laverne and Rock County Bike Trail System, and probably most famously known for our bison herd right now with about 65 head of adult and last count I had is 12 calves, could be more today actually, and, and more coming in the next few weeks.

Megan: And those bison, just like Scott was mentioning too, right, they're all part of our Minnesota Bison Conservation Herd, so they're actually sometimes we, we move bison

around across the Minnesota Conservation Herd, so that way we're getting good genetics and the herd stays healthy and all of those things.

Chris: Yeah, that's correct. We've got some really, really unique genetics. There's a, I wasn't planning on going this direction but, but I guess we can. There's some new research, we've been operating under the idea that we were free of cattle genetics, which is, which is very rare in bison in North America, and most recent research that's come out has said that there are no bison, including proven genetically last year at Blue Mound, there are no bison that don't have cattle genetics mixed in and, and we're still trying to wrap our head around that, but it's been kind of a fun, fun experience just to, to think you understand science and then find out that hey, we, we got to rethink this. It's really interesting where that, that's going, but we do have the opportunity here to have a lot of the subspecies of bison that existed at one time in North America represented in the herd, and in, in across the Minnesota Bison Conservation Herd, and by moving her animals around between us and Minneopa and now we're bringing County Park in Dakota County onboard as well with some of these partners, we're able to, to really tease out those rare genetics and make sure that we can preserve all of them.

Sara: We're trying to avoid talking about favorite parks, but Blue Mounds is definitely at the top of my list personally because when I was in high school, it was one of our first prairie parks that we ever camped in as a family, and I, I credit Blue Mounds for really being my introduction to prairie and helping me kind of fall in love with it as a kid that grew up in the, in the woods in the forested part of Minnesota, so just a little side note, but so just speaking of that, I wonder, Chris, would you tell us a little bit about the, the role that prairie plays in, at Blue Mounds?

Chris: Yeah, you know, when I think of Blue Mounds and a few of the other prairie parks across our state, I, I grew up actually in Northwestern Minnesota just a stone's throw away from Buffalo River State Park where Paula was talking about earlier, but, but these are landscape parks. You know, I've wondered all around our state park system and oh, gosh. It's fun to get into the and down into the lakes and, and but I've noticed how you get that real closed in feeling when you're in those, in those ecosystems and, and this is landscape. You can get out and, and really see things when you're thinking and, and you've got those sightlines that don't exist other places and, and I just to me it feels like it feels like a gateway to the American West and, and, you know, we're able to, to stand on top of the prairie and experience that where, where other places can't.

Grace: Okay, so I did also visit this park with my mom and we kind of got rained out in our last day there, but so I didn't get to like visit all the places we wanted to, so I was wondering if you could tell me about the history of this park.

Chris: Yeah, you know, I know we're, we're here to talk about prairie today but you, you really can't talk about Blue Mound's history or prairie at Blue Mound without talking about its geological history, which is really kind of fascinating. The, the park when you drive in or, or approaching it, you can see it's a big uprising of rock, and that rock is actually a, a sort of a fossil evidence of an ancient river that flowed over this area. It was coursing its way across Minnesota and South Dakota and Iowa winding around and, and as it was flowing, all those sounds in the bottom of the river dropped down, of course, like they do and, and sorry I'm waving my hands on a podcast, drop down like

they do and, and, and sat in that river bottom and over time, it metamorphosized into quartzite and that, that quartzite is evidence of that, that ancient riverbed. And it forms a feature in, in Southwestern Minnesota and Iowa and South Dakota called the Buffalo Ridge and you'll, you'll just see remnants of that, that quartzite ridge making its way around. It's very prominent here at Blue Mound and it's actually over 500 feet thick here. So it's a big, massive bedrock slab that the park sits on and that slab is actually the savior of some really nice prairie. The, the rest of Rock County we're, we're surrounded is just fantastic farmland was plowed under but it, this rock was, was unable for that to happen. They couldn't get a two bottom plow through it and neither could the glaciers. They just couldn't, couldn't touch this bedrock and so anyway, the prairie is here because of that. It's growing on top and in 1937 the park was originally established as a Work Projects Administration project called Mound Spring Recreational Area. There's little veins in the quartzite and the water runs off the edges of it and it formed a series of springs along the north end of the park and then it was originally called Mound Spring Recreation Area. Was actually just a few hundred feet wide of Mound Creek on either side, which flows through the north edge of the park, and the WPA said about building two dams to create some water recreation at that time. But more recently, 1960, the city of Laverne actually sent citizens over to St. Paul and requested that they purchase 50 acres of the prairie that was sitting on top of the mound and also to establish a bison herd. And that happened by 1961, we switched over from our recreation area to Blue Mound State Park, and three bison were brought in from Fort Niobara National Wildlife Refuge. The following year we managed to get a few more head from city of Mankato, and so first Mankato sent bison to us, and later we returned the favor by sending some back to Minneopa, but that was the bones of, of a bison program here that's last well over 60 years now.

Megan: That's fascinating. So obviously, some of the special things to see at your park just like at Minneopa are the bison, right? But tell us, tell us more special places that we can see when we go to Blue Mound. What are some of your favorite parts of the park?

Chris: Well that, that, the nature of prairie and geology is, is what I absolutely love about it. The, the mound itself, you know, it, it rises almost 150 feet above the surrounding landscape in places, and it's got some real sharp edges along the sides of it and, and on the, on the east side of the park, there's a cliff that runs almost two miles long north to south. In one location, it's over 90 feet high. Big kind of rosy pink rock and it's great for rock climbing. I am not a great rock climber myself, more of a scrambler and a, and a crawler when I'm on the bedrock, but very few places in Minnesota allow for rock climbing and we're one of them, and, and it's just a great place for that. Up on top of the mound, there's a big boulder called Eagle Rock. It sits about 12 feet high and it's just, it's about the extent of my rock climbing. I can get on top of Eagle Rock if I try, I try not to huff and puff, but I do a little bit. But when you're up on top, you can, you can supposedly see Iowa and South Dakota and despite its name Eagle Rock, you might see an eagle there, but far more likely to see just a massive amount of turkey vultures that are catching thermals off of the edge of the mound and soaring around and just a, just a great place to visit. I, I've always liked snakes, I'm not a, not a, I don't dislike snakes, I guess, but Blue Mound is probably the snakiest place in the world. There's just a lot, a lot of snakes here. We've got a really rare species of snake called a lined

snake. It's not a threatened as far as I know, it's not threatened in the rest of the United States but we're at the very north edge of its range here, and so it's the only place known in Minnesota that has lined snakes, and that, that edge features of our quartzite really provides nice hibernaculum for snakes or places for them to hibernate, and so there's just, they flourish here as a population. Also, western fox snakes are real prevalent here, and occasionally you have to, have to move them away from people, people get nervous about them, and I, I always think they're just amazing because they're, they're really not an aggressive snake, but they can, they can open their mouth, I'm pantomiming in a podcast again, sorry, they can open their mouth wider than most snakes do, so they'll, they'll show, throw up their mouth in this really impressive display that looks just really scary but their bite strength is like minimal. And I've had, you know, a bite from a garter snake is far worse than a fox snake, and so I'm always telling people, you know, you don't really need to worry about those fox snakes. And you're really kind of fortunate to see one because they're, they're not real common.

Sara: That's really cool. Well, let's see, could you share with us do you have any special stories or memories about Blue Mound personally that you'd like to share?

Chris: Well, I feel obligated **to** throw in a firefly story at this point. (Laughter) Actually, what was planning on talking about another night hike that seems like that's prevalent among naturalists and park managers here, but just a couple of weeks ago, I was taking a hike out on the prairie here I was hiking the did a nice little loop on the Mound trail and the Upper Cliff Line Trail and we had probably two weeks of really miserable weather. Nobody's mentioned prairie wind on the podcast today yet, but boy, was it showing what it can do the last two weeks. It's really been windy and, and we have a break in the wind a couple of weeks ago and I headed out, it was a full moon, and I just, I, I really find that, that hiking on the prairie is a great way to, great way to deal with stress and burn off some energy, but I was listening to a podcast, sorry, I wasn't listening to the Prairie Podcast, I should have been, but listening to a different one and I promise I'm getting somewhere with this. It was listening to this news story about Twins game that had happened recently against the Brooklyn Dodgers now, sorry, the LA Dodgers, I'm not a sports guy, so anyway, Dodgers and Twins are playing and the pitcher was throwing a perfect game and got yanked in the eighth inning, even though he wasn't showing any signs of stopping, and the guy who was hosting the podcast was kind of an old curmudgeon and, and he was waxing poetic about this unique, oh, display of, of individual exceptionalism versus team exceptionalism, and, and I was really getting drawn into it and the battery quit on my phone, and just dropped like that. And I thought oh, good grief, now what. And I, I expected as I pulled my earbuds out to, you know, hike home in silence in the dark and the sound was immediately replaced by a gentle breeze blowing through the, the bluegrass, this was through the bluestem, sorry, and there's coyotes howling and Mound Creek was about a quarter mile away and the geese were just kind of settling in for the night and I can hear that soft honking and I thought why in the world were they listening to that when I could have been listening to this, and I just remember walking off of the mound that night with my dog Arlo and Ryan the hunter was low on the horizon sitting right over some bison and it was just fantastic.

Megan: You guys are so good at storytelling. You're like conjuring up all of these moments that I want to have right now at a Minnesota state park. Thanks so much,

Chris. I really appreciate it. Okay. Now we're going to hear from Paula at Buffalo River State Park. Paula, tell us a little bit about your park and all the amazing prairie spaces there.

Paula: Hi Megan, thanks. So Buffalo River State Park is located about 13 miles from Dilworth or about five to seven miles from Glyndon, Minnesota. And it is a fabulous park that is connected to several other stakeholders' lands that are all either restored or native prairie. Buffalo River State Park was created as part of a WPA program in the 1930s, late 1930s as a response to the Great Depression, and so we have a lot of historical buildings that are actually historical landmarks. Our campground is actually a historical landmark, but very fortunately, our shower building is not a historical landmark, which allowed us to be updated from the 19 like '60s version that we had to a brand-new, shiny, fabulous shower building. Definitely worth the trip to the park.

Megan: It sounds amazing. I want to stop you really quick to make sure that everybody understands what a WPA is. What's that?

Paula: So WPA program was a workers' program that the government issued and I'm going to completely mind gap on what the acronym stands for. But eventually, what it did was it charged municipi- municipalities, wow, edit that into the correct pronunciation of the word, to come up with projects and then submit it for federal funding, and so it was up to the townships and the communities to think of programs and potential ways of bringing the local workers back into the workforce. And so originally they were going to build a huge dam and create this water source for Buffalo River State Park currently is, but they decided that they would have to demolish too many trees to do that, which is ironic because Buffalo River is definitely one of the largest prairie parks in our region of Minnesota. But for the love of trees, they decided not to build a large dam. So then they decided that they would build like a series of dams and create like these swimming holes. In the end, we ended up with one dam that is no longer standing, but the remnants are still there. You can still see the original stonework. And decided that since there were so many trees, it made a wonderful recreational area, and it also happened to be right along the railroad tracks, and back in the 1930s, it was commonplace for people from Fargo, Moorhead, or anywhere along the railroad to hop on the railroad cars and ride out to various areas along the track. So it was both on Highway 10 and on the railway, so it was an easily accessible location for a lot of people at that point in time. And so the project was presented, it was funded, and people from the local community served on the WPA team, and built our park as it stands, finished in I think it was fully completed in 1940.

Megan: I looked it up, it's the Work Progress Administration, so it's funny when you first said it, I was like what does a waterfowl production area have to do with this, and I saw Sara's face too working for the, for the US Fish and Wildlife Service, we were both like I don't get it. What did the ducks do?

Paula: Yep, that's where my brain goes instantly too, which is why - -

Sara: I think it's okay, there's too many acronyms.

Paula: - - we can never keep those acronyms straight.

Megan: For those listening, TMA. So tell us a little bit more I'm fascinated by how you described the dams and, you know, saving the trees, but tell me a little bit more about this beautiful prairie at your park. What makes it special? What's going on there? What can people see or expect to see when they come to visit?

Paula: Well depending on the time of the year, right now when you first enter the park since it's early spring, it might not be the most exciting, but we have some of the best pasqueflower viewing areas in our region. So if you're someone who really likes to see those early flowers, you can't find a much better spot than, than Buffalo River, especially on our south side of the park, which butts up right next to the Bluestem Prairie Scientific and Natural Area, which is one of the largest remnants of native prairie left in Minnesota. And the south side of our park has just been relatively protected because prior to it being a state park when it was still owned by private landowners, it was actually a pasture for race horses and purebred horses and what they call blooded cattle kind of fancy cows. We're seeing it--

Megan: I was going to ask you what that was, but I like how you called it fancy cows.

Paula: Fancy cows like a Hereford or Angus, you know, we would just name them by their, their breed or but they called them blooded cattle in our, in our historic literature, and that, they were all grazed on the south side of our park and what's now bluestem prairie. So a lot of that because of that grazing disturbance for much of the history even after European settlement has stayed really pristine and really nice, and so early spring is a great time to see some of those early blooming flowers on bluestem because we still have a lot of those native and traditional species. As you get later into the summer, that's when our restorations, which are primarily on the north side of the river, in the north side of the park and into the border that we share with the MSUM Regional Science Center, and you can start seeing some of our, our tallgrasses and our more charismatic prairie species, like our echinaceas, our purple prairie clovers, our purple - or our yellow heavy coneflowers. Those start popping up. They come a lot, become a lot more common even on our, on a dirt road that connects Buffalo River State Park to the MSUM Regional Science Center. You find the whole pathway is lined with our maximilian sunflowers and our clovers and our echinaceas, our purple coneflowers, and it's really kind of a, a fun, pretty drive if you know what you're looking at. You, if you can appreciate those true native flowers that it's, it's truly stunning. And then once we get into later fall, if you know where to look, if you're, if you like going a little bit off the beaten path, you can begin finding some bottle gentians. We also have just other varieties of gentians along our, our trails on the bluestem side of the complex within Buffalo River State Park we see a little bit more of the, the less rare prairie flowers in the later season, but we still see a lot of I'm trying to think off the top of my head here, our leadplant comes into bloom and it's pretty impressive, it goes to seed. It's beautiful, and the best part about the fall at Buffalo River is that we get the painted lady butterflies that migrate through just about every year, and after one event every Labor Day weekend, I try and leave the tallgrass prairie meditation, where we go, we lay down in the tallgrass, and we just chill out before the start of the fall season. And the last year we were able to do that was fall 2019, and we did a follow-up kind of meditative walk afterwards, and participants described it as a butterfly snow globe because they were so numerous and just everywhere. It was absolutely stunning and fabulous, and I need to find a way to

pay those butterflies because they definitely made it worth the price of admission that day. So the fall is a great time throughout the year, we have monarchs, regal fritillaries because we have violets, which are key parts of the regal fritillary lifecycle, and it's just a fabulous place for a butterfly enthusiast along with floral (inaudible, two speaking at once...) - -

Megan: You know you pay them in prairie, that's what you're doing. That's how they like to be paid.

Sara: Paid them with food.

Paula: Exactly.

Megan: You have so much enthusiasm for your park. I love hearing all of your descriptions of the flowers and everything, and that was such a great story with the butterfly snow globe. I was just wondering if you have any other special stories or memories about, about the prairie there about that park that you'd like to share with us.

Paula: So I actually got tied into Buffalo River State Park as a college student. I started working as an education specialist for MSUM's Regional Science Center as an outreach person to help with school groups. And like at that point in time, I was, I was a farm girl that was now finding herself in the big city, and it was a really hard transition. I only did my last two years of my undergrad in Fargo, so I'd come from a relative strong connection to rural outdoors and whatnot, and moving to Fargo was a bit of a culture shock and it was really challenging, and then once I got this position at the MSUM Regional Science Center and then through them various opportunities to work at Buffalo River State Park even before I was the naturalist stationed there, it really became a place of just sanity for me. It was a touchstone and it is I have a very strong connection to that park. I have had a few times where people have tried to talk me into leaving, and I just can't. Like, it's so much a part of my growth and kind of how I got to where I am today that I, I just can't leave it and part of that was what has morphed into my tallgrass prairie meditation. Anyone who's survived college and grad school knows that your sanity is pushed to its limits, and so there were many times especially in the fall of the year where I would go out to Buffalo River and I would just find a place in the tallgrass and just sit down and just allow myself to feel very small because all the insects fly by you, the tallgrasses like rise you up. It's kind of like being in the redwoods as long as you're laying down and it's not a drought. But it was just a place to really recenter myself and allow everything to just settle so that I could come out feeling more refreshed, and, you know, through my programming, I really tried to create opportunities for others to experience that same joy, that same connection to prairie, and feel that sense of peace that a prairie can bring. You don't have to be in a forest to find nature.

Megan: Truer words were never spoken. We are going to move to, to Glacial Lakes State Park and we're going to hear from Ben and for those of you who have not heard of mine and Jessica Peterson's experience at Glacial Lakes State Park, I encourage you to harken back to season one, our eighth episode of the podcast, Pheasants Feathers and Guns, where at very end of the podcast you'll get to hear our fabulous story about camping at Glacial Lakes State Park, which does have fishers in the state of

Minnesota that have been expanding their range, and I'm not going to say any more about that because I don't want to steal any of Ben's thunder. Ben, tell us all about it.

Ben: Thanks, Megan. Glacial Lakes State Park is five miles south of Starbuck, Minnesota, with its entrance off of Pope County 41, and you come in and you know when you're at Glacial Lakes State Park way before you actually get there just by the drastic change in landscape, which is a pretty common theme talking about the rest of the folks on the podcast today, but it definitely sticks out. And so we're, you know, a five-minute drive from Starbuck, a 40-minute drive from Alexandria, or about a two and a half hour drive from the Twin Cities, depending on which way you go.

Sara: Ben, tell us a little more about the role that prairie plays at Glacial Lakes State Park. It's just some fantastic, unique prairie in Minnesota. I love it.

Ben: Yeah, the prairie plays a big role in the park, not only its history, but in the while the park was created about what's happening there today as well. The park really starts back with being created in a time in 1963 with many other parks in the Ominous Act where there's supposed to be 14 parks but ended up being 12 that are really kind of got going. Glacial Lakes happened to be one of those parks and those acreage were set aside because of that roaming glacial topography that many others have mentioned, and it is stark, stark in the sense that you can be a few miles away and be low in the lake of down in Lake Minnewaska and you come up to this hill and you are, you know, hundreds of feet above that lake that sits down below. But the prairie itself provides this kind of everlasting landscape across the, the horizon as far as you can really see, even when you can see past the border, much of the land that is around or adjacent to the park is either in Nature Conservancy land or is being grazed for cattle, so many of those prairie species that you're seeing on the landscape at Glacial Lakes are continuing on to private property as well. But the prairie is a big draw and it's a draw for not just for, you know, everyday visitors but the people are coming from college students are coming from universities to study the prairie there, we also have folks coming to look at the glacial topography as well. And the remnant prairie that is left on top of those high hills was never touched like many others by the plow, so there's, you know, just vast amounts of species that we're seeing there that we're not finding in some of our other locations in the park. And it's just really fun to see year after year what's there. And I think one visitor honestly says, said it best working on the office one day, they told us every time I come here, it just looks a little different, and I can't put my finger on it but something's always changing when I come in. And I think that's the, the thing about prairie in general, not just at Glacial Lakes but anywhere is that not only that the prairie flowers and grasses look different and depending on the moisture levels and how things change year to year or even season to season that you just don't know what you're going to get when you, when you show up to the park. Is it going to be a sea of kind of dull mauve color from the prairie smoke or is it going to be this bright yellow and purple from echinaceas, what, what it might be, and then the other piece of that is our resource crews do so much work in the prairies at Glacial Lakes to really enhance. This is remnant prairie in many cases, and so they're not row crop fields that are placing, it's just enhancement and adding some more of those species that are found in places on those hills and adding them to other places within the park, and resource does such a

great job that it is true. You never know even from me who gets to go there all the time. Almost every time I show up, something's changed.

Megan: We always say that there's one thing that's constant on a prairie and that's change. So I like that you brought it up.

Sara: That is one of my favorite things about it too is just being able to go out every week and see something just a little different, yeah. I love that. And what about the, the history? I guess I actually don't even know what the history of Glacial Lakes State Park is, even though it's just down the road from my office.

Ben: Well, it's very fitting that Chris from Blue Mound went before me because they wanted to name Glacial Lakes State Park Blue Mound State Park, but that can't be because Blue Mound already existed at the time. But.

Megan: You don't think it would have been a smart idea to be like Blue Mounds 2?

Ben: Probably not.

Megan: Probably not? Okay. (Laughing)

Ben: No, probably not. The, it's Glacial Lakes State Park sits within Blue Mound Township, and at the time many of our state parks are named after those townships, and so it made sense until they started thinking that Blue Mound already existed. And so a county committee went through lots of different name changes and things while they were, this was being set aside and finally after thinking they're going to settle on Signalness Hills State Park, which is the name of the lake, Signalness Lake, the main lake found within the park, they actually changed it in January of 1963 upon its creation to Glacial Lakes State Park. It's fitting because there are many glacial lakes or kettle lakes, which is a geological formation. There's many of those lakes found within the park features as well as canes, kettles, and other things, which is why it was really created and set aside in 1963 was to protect those landforms and to protect the prairie, and Signalness Lake itself is, has its watershed entirely within the lake, or sorry, entirely within the state park boundaries, so that lake is pristine, all the water that's coming in there is, you know, being washed through the prairie through the oak trees, whatever it might be that's surrounding the lake and in, into it. So it's a great place to swim, a great place to fish, and, and spend time, any, any season really.

Megan: So tell me a little bit about some of the special places that you love at the park. And I will say I know we keep talking about that we don't want to list our favorites, but I feel obliged since Mike Worland is not here with us today, one of our cohosts, that this is one of his favorite state parks. And beauty of Minnesota state parks is that everybody really truly does have a favorite. And so we're encouraging you to explore so that maybe you can add a whole bunch of favorites into your repertoire. So tell us a little bit about some of the special places in Glacial Lakes.

Ben: Sure, Megan. Tying back in, you know, it was really Glacial Lakes even back in 1963 was really recognized as a wildflower park, you know, whether it's from that first pasqueflower to the goldenrods and last asters of fall and it is true that is, you know, anywhere you really go in a prairie year to year, as we mentioned, there's not a bad

spot, let's be honest, to see flowers, to see the grasses, but it's really beyond that. It's the invertebrates, the small things, the bees, the dragonflies, the plethora of butterflies and moths that are out there, and then the large things like the birds that are, you know, using the grass for nesting or feed, and feeding on those insects. So there's not a bad spot, but I do have a couple favorites. And probably the favorites of those that have been to Glacial Lakes State Park because they're that good, and that is the overlook or the high point out on the prairie. You're walking from the campground, the Oak Ridge campground out kind of to the east, southeast along rolling grassy hill through a little bit of a low area, and then back up on top of that glacial ridge through oak, oak savannah, and then up under the prairie knob. And where you're out over expanses of prairie for as far as you can see, whether it's Kettle Lake, Baby Lake down below, it, it really provides a view of that glacial topography, and then of just a variety of other landscapes from that rolling prairie to kind of that low mesic or wet prairie, and then the oak savannah. My favorite time to be out there is really in the evening. It's a sunset spot, it kind of faces west that slope faces kind of west southwest, and so it's a great spot to watch the sunset. I have many fond memories from sitting up there in the evening. And then another favorite spot related to prairie of mine is walking out to Baby Lake through the horse camp, you really are immersed in the prairie. You can't see the trees, you're out in that open space, and you are literally surrounded by the prairie, the singing of clay colored sparrows, and buzzing of bees, and other insects. You really get the feel like you are stepping back into the way things should have been or the way things should probably be in much of this part of the state in that kind of prairie oak savannah. And so it's a great spot to be and there's lots of flowers and things to, to look at along the way. But Baby Lake itself is kind of a destination for me again with a spot to kind of stop halfway through my loop and just enjoy the view.

Grace: Okay. So I have a, I have a pretty special story from this park. It was actually five years ago is the park where I made the goal to visit all of the state parks before I graduate. So it's pretty much one of my favorite state parks because I have that story. But I was wondering if you have any special stories of this park.

Ben: Sure. So I've spent a lot of time there and while I live further away now, when I lived closer, I spent many evenings down there, usually by myself, and evenings are again are or as a common theme. I think it's because we're spending so much time during the day working that it's the only time we really have to ourselves is in the evening. But that high point is one of those special places and I have a special story from there. I love birds and I love the fall and the smell in the air, and fall in the prairie is a magical as is a theme, and so I was out on that high point, sun was setting, thunderstorm from the southwest is kind of rolling in the background kind of half shading the sunset, and thousands upon thousands of geese are coming from the west out in front of that storm coming back to roost for the evening on the water. So the air was loud with that honking of geese for a while. I was sitting up on that high point. And as that kind of subsided and that storm was getting closer, off in the distance I saw a fox, a red fox pop up over the stop knob of this hill way off in the distance, and it clearly saw me right away because it stopped and looked and sat down on its back end and watched me for a while. And I just sat there and it disappeared and it would pop up a little bit closer, and it just kept working as it was hunting until it got about 30 yards from

me and sat down and looked at me for a while again, and then kind of just went on its way. But just it really made me feel like I was a part of the ecosystem and part of the prairie, and it, there's that sense of comfort. Somebody else mentioned this. When we're in the trees, we lose a little bit our bodies I feel like change and when you're out in the prairie, you're kind of, you feel comfortable, you can see everything around you, see what's coming, and just an awesome experience.

Megan: It's an open vista. We say the word vista a lot on Prairie Pod but it's because it's so, it's so apt, if you've ever been in these big prairie spaces that make you remember what the state of Minnesota used to look like, right? With a third of the state covered in, in tallgrass prairie systems. It's majestic and it harkens back to your soul in a way that not many other things do, and you are a part of the ecosystem. We all are. We're deeply connected to it. And Grace is certainly a part of our Minnesota State Parks system as a superstar user of Minnesota State Parks. I think she's been more in Minnesota State Parks than I have been to, so I feel like we need to give Grace like a round of applause for being a superstar high school explorer of our Minnesota State Parks. We're all, you can't hear us clapping but people are clapping, I promise. Grace, what made you decide that you wanted to visit all of Minnesota State Parks?

Grace: So when I was at Glacial Lakes, we were at a Bio Blitz is what it's called, and we were in the shop and I saw this passport club travel log thing, and some guy had just finished visiting all of the state parks, and he had the books. I was like I want to get one of those. So I got one and then we were talking and I made the goal to visit all 66 state parks before I graduate. And so far, we visited 38 in five years, so we're almost there.

Megan: Good job. And Emily, you have something you want to say.

Emily: I am so impressed. I was sitting here making notes, so Grace, you've been to Frontenac.

Grace: Yes.

Emily: You've been to Minneopa.

Grace: Yes.

Emily: You've been to Upper Sioux Agency.

Grace: Yes.

Emily: You've been to Blue Mounds.

Grace: Yes.

Emily: You've been to Glacial Lakes.

Grace: Yes.

Emily: You've been to Buffalo River.

Grace: Uh-huh.

Emily: Megan, I think you're out of a job.

Megan: I know. She's been everywhere, man. That's a song. Grace, you are a Minnesota State Parks champion. I was going to ask you if Ben was like if there was like some sort of ceremony for that person that finished the park book, like if Ben came out and had a crown of bluestem that he bestowed upon the park visitors, something, but no, the way you described it was just the simple joy of having, getting the passport, do you get a stamp or is it checked off? How does it work?

Grace: Yes. There's like a, there's like a travel log where you can like fill out a sheet of like what you did at each park, and then there's an actual passport book where you put the stamps in. But I also made the goal to do all the geocaching at each park, so I've done that, so I have like three multiple things that I have to do at each state park.

Megan: I love it.

Megan and Sara together: She's a girl who likes a list

Megan: Did you see we said that at the exact same time?!

Sara: We may spend too much time together.

Megan: We did not practice that. That randomly happened. I'm really proud of us. And the reason we - -

Ben: If you're going, you might as well do all three, Grace.

Grace: Yeah, exactly.

Megan: If you're going, you might as well get the most out of it.

Sara: Led to some really fun adventures for us doing the geocaching and seeing different parts of the park that we might not have otherwise, and I think that's a, a really fabulous way that some of our, our parks staff have, have, you know, maybe brought some different people in to exploring in parks that the geocaching program. I mean, it's, you know, something I wouldn't have necessarily thought of as being a draw but the kids loved it when they were little and that, that helped kind of keep things going for her here, so.

Megan: I love it.

Grace: Mm-hmm. We have 3 years to finish it, so hopefully we can make it.

Megan: Hopefully we can make it. Well, you're halfway done.

Grace: Yeah.

Megan: Sara, get on this.

Sara: We have some big road trips ahead of us because we've done everything that's within an easy weekend distance of west central Minnesota where we live and, and now it's the, the epic trips, so.

Grace: The three-hour drives.

Sara: The three-hour drives.

Megan: Well, that's foundational for any prairie lover out there. I think if we were to spend another couple hours on the podcast talking, and some of you today talked about this but talking about why prairie speaks to us and how we got involved and why we're in the jobs that we're in, I guarantee you that somewhere along the way there's a state or a national park that played a role in the shaping of our conservation ethic. I have no doubt in my mind that that is true. So we just want to thank all of you for your amazing service and all of the things that you do so that the people of Minnesota can enjoy Minnesota State Parks, and now I feel like I need to explore all of these parks at nighttime 'cause everybody's story was about how wonderful they all are at night, so I'm going to have to book a camping reservation. As always, I could spend all of my time just chatting about these amazing state parks but we are out of time for today. We will put links up to these amazing places so that you can check them out on our website at mndnr.gov/prairiepod. Next week we're going to be right back here basking in the amazingness of an emerging prairie partnership between sheep, solar, and hopefully, satisfied pollinators. The solar industry is booming in Minnesota. We're leading the way in forging new partnerships to deliver stackable benefits. Stackable benefits, what's that mean? We're talking about things like improved soil health, water retention and infiltration, habitat for pollinators, songbirds, and other wildlife, forage for grazers and of course, energy production to name a few. You're not going to want to miss a moment as we cover all of the basics of how we can get connectivity across the landscape in these unique and innovative ways.

This episode was produced by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources' Southern Region under the MN Prairie Conservation Partnership. It was edited by Dan Ruitter, and engineered by the fabulous Jed Becher. And before we sign off, I should also mention that all of these amazing prairie state parks are connected throughout the prairie landscape and they form important pivotal connection points for our Minnesota Prairie Conservation Plan. So, prairie is connecting us across the landscape at places we love and we didn't even know it was happening. How great is that? This is so great. I love learning about all of our Minnesota state parks. Thank you all so much for being here today. This is just like I know where I'm hiking to. Sara, you, me, and Grace road trip. We--

Sara: Road trip.

Megan: We know what to do and you all may not have noticed but we did this in a special order today so that you went from southeast Minnesota, moved west across southern Minnesota and then up the prairie corridor through northwest Minnesota and so you could just make this into a whole great Minnesota state parks prairie road trip and there are many, many more places in our Minnesota state parks where you can see prairie, so you know, this, we were just giving you a little bit of a teaser with some special prairie places, but there, we encourage you to go to our park finder map and check out all the other Minnesota state parks where you can visit and you can be like Grace and complete the quest. Okay, let's sign off and say yay Minnesota state parks. Okay, ready? 1, 2, 3.

Everyone: Yay, Minnesota state parks.

(Laughter)

Megan: Oh gosh, we're so silly.

Jake: See ya later. It was fun, invite me, if you want me on the Podcast [again]. This is, this is a hoot. (Laughs)

((sounds of birds chirping and wind blowing))