Prairie Pod Transcript

Season 5, Episode 48: Seasonal Stories Bonus Episode

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Guest(s): Allison Hart (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service), Verónica Jaralambides (MnDNR), Chris Helzer (The Nature Conservancy-Nebraska), Ferin Davis-Anderson (Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community), Scott Kudelka (MnDNR), Karin Jokela (Xerces Society), and Henry Panowitsch (Prairie Enthusiasts-Many Rivers Chapter)

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

Transcript:

((cheery, holiday music))

Megan: Hey team! It's so good to be back here altogether. Mike, Sara, Marissa—How are you?

Mike: Happy Holidays everybody!

Marissa: Yeah, Happy Holidays! It's good to be cozy. It's very wintry outside my window right now.

Mike: This is the first holiday with Marissa and Sara on as co-hosts.

Sara: As full co-hosts. Full-fledged.

Megan: Full Pod-squad members.

Mike: They were telling some good stories in prior episodes I know.

Megan: I know. It makes it feel more festive when we're all together. Because isn't that what this time of year is all about? You get a little bit of time to reflect—

Mike: Being by yourself in the snow—

Megan: No, Mike, No!

Marissa: No!

Megan: It's about togetherness!

Sara: Catching up with people who you really care about.

Marissa: Yes, gathering around the fire.

Mike: And then hanging out by yourself in your office.

Marissa: Hot chocolate.

((laughter))

Megan: Spoken like a true introvert, Mike. Ok, no matter how you celebrate the holidays, it's fine by us. We just want you to be happy and healthy and thinking about the prairie.

Marissa: Yeah, we have some great stories in this episode and I'm super excited to share them.

Megan: We sure do. We start out with this progression from early in your career to kind of reflective at the end of the season where some people are home, on their home prairies and then other folks are just thinking about why they love the prairie so much. I love the holiday episode. These seasonal stories make me so happy and so grateful for all the moments I got to have over the summer. They make me forget that it was 99 degrees out there and there was so much sweat and thorns among other things!

((laughter))

Mike: TMI.

Megan: I only remember the beauty of it. The prairie horizons. The new plant friends that I got to meet and see. And all of the fun moments with all of you.

Marissa: And it's a good reminder of the beauty of prairie in all seasons too. I think sometimes we get out in the prairie most often in the summer. The fall and the winter for sure has beauty.

Sara: Sometimes it takes a little more work to notice it. But if you get out and look there are still a wide variety of colors out there in the winter and it has its own beauty for sure.

Megan: It does. Well, let's hear some stories. Are you all ready?

Mike: Let's do it.

Sara: Yeah.

Allison Hart: So, my most memorable experiences here at the Refuge would be my first week of work. The very first day I came to work sat at my desk and my biologist Brandon and my supervisor Andy came up to me and were like, "Hey, how's it going? Nice to finally meet you!" And I'm like, "Hey guys, finally cool to meet you guys in-person." Shortly after a little meeting, I went out into the field with Brandon, and we did a 4-mile square pair count survey. I've never done anything like that before. It was very fun. During that survey, I was able to get sworn into office. How many people can say that they were sworn into office doing fieldwork? Not many, I can guarantee that. So, it

was very fun. The next day we also did the 4-mile square count, but this time it was on an airboat.

Megan: Allison, I have to ask you, what is a 4-mile square count?

Allison: Basically, you are in an area and you're just counting duck pairs. To see how many duck pairs there are in a 4-square mile area.

Megan: Any species?

Allison: Correct, all duck species. And then after we got done with the airboat, I was able to go out and fix fences. Do some maintenance work with our awesome maintenance guy. He is just an absolute gem. So, being able to work with him and also see our cows—our wonderful grazers—that was pretty cool. The following day, I was able to see goats. I had no idea we had goat on the refuge. On our auto tour road. They are also our grazers. What else did I do that week? The rest of the week it was basic paperwork, CPR, first-aid [training] getting certified for that stuff. Then, a few months later I was cutting down some trees out on our auto-tour road and it was just me by myself. When I was done cutting them down, I would have to grub the trees and stack them on a big brush pile. When I was doing that, I heard a bird. I was like what kind of bird is this? I went onto my phone onto this app and started recording the bird call. Well, the app gave me the bird's name and it was a wren. Then I decided to see what kind of call the wren was making so I found the correct call. It was just the most fun thing I've ever done while cutting trees. The bird would come close to me and then it would back away. Then it would come close to me and then it would back away. It was just great. I spent more time doing that then I really should have. But it happens. Another cool story, I was out putting up our bat detector and where the bat detector is we had a bunch of grazing cows. The cows would just moo. Ok, obviously cows moo. Sorry, while putting up the bat detector I also had to check on the cows to make sure they weren't going into the wrong areas. When I found the cows, I would moo to them, and they would moo back. It would just be this back-and-forth thing. ((laughter)) But you have to make your job interesting, right. You just can't go up to the cows and be like oh yep there's cows there and walk away. No, you got to be friends with them.

Megan: Allison, what I'm learning about you is you're a true wildlife biologist. Because as you're doing all of this work, and I'm sure Sara would agree, you're doing the stuff you're supposed to be doing out here, but you're also like look at this cool thing over here! Look, at this cool bird that I just found! And oh, cows. Hello, cows how are you ((mooing noise)).

Allison: Exactly.

Megan: Sara, don't act like you've never done that when you've seen a cow. She's trying to commune with the wildlife in their language.

Sara: They are kind of fun to talk to.

Megan: This is what I'm saying. Oh gosh. It is a joy to have you hear with us today and feel your energy and your excitement about all these amazing things you're doing as

you start out your career. Allison, what's been your all-time favorite thing that you've done so far at the refuge.

Allison: Oh my gosh. That is a loaded question. My all-time favorite thing—oh boy. I guess, I would have to say-- this is kind of quirky, but it deals with goats. So, our goats got out of their fence and me and Brandon (the biologist) had to corral them back into their designated grazing paddock. So, that would have to be the most fun thing so far. I shouldn't say the most fun thing. The most unique, quirky experience I've had to deal with.

Megan: Probably when you were in school to be a wildlife biologist you didn't think that that title would also include goat herder.

Allison: No, not at all.

((laughter))

Megan: Oh my gosh. Sara, what do you think?

Sara: I love it. I really enjoy your enthusiasm, Allison. I agree totally with Megan that it's fun to be brought back to my first job and think about what it was like when I was first out in the field and all the extra stuff like Megan was saying. It's fun to do the work itself, but also all the little extra things like finding that wren and really getting to know the refuge that you're working on. That's fantastic.

Megan: It is. Thank you for all of the work you've done and never lose that spark of enthusiasm and joy.

Allison: I will not. Thank you.

Sara: That was fun. Allison Hart spent this past field season working as a biological science technician for the US Fish and Wildlife Service, at Big Stone National Wildlife Refuge. Allison's fresh enthusiasm is just contagious. And what a great inspiration to notice and enjoy all those extra little experiences that are waiting for us out there in the prairie. We really are so fortunate to get to work and play in Minnesota's prairies and public lands. Our next guest is Verónica Jaralambides, who is a marketing consultant with the MN Department of Natural Resources Division of Parks and Trails. Verónica is another person with a contagious level of enthusiasm for prairies and outdoor spaces.

Verónica Jaralambides: Well, I am a prairie fan. For recreation. I find the prairie so relaxing and just a peaceful place. I love all of the variation you have in the prairie. Not just for elevation changes, but also for little things you can find—the tallgrass, the flowers. I just find the prairie is a magical place. Not only at parks. Actually, there is this ride I do every year in the driftless going up and down on gravel roads. You can see for miles on end. It is all open and the wind blows you sideways or backwards, which is hard when you're riding. But that feeling of being in the vast prairie is like nothing else really. For sunsets and sunrises, again nowhere like the big, open prairie. One of my favorite parks—one of my many favorite state parks for wandering around the prairie is Afton State Park. I am part of the orienteering club and I have done many meets there. The navigating gets extra challenging sometimes because it's all open. The trees that

you see in the prairie are always, in my opinion, just more special because you have the single tree, the stand of trees in the middle of the prairie. They stand out. Glendalough State Park—that park has lots of rolling hills and it can hurt your legs when hiking around, but all the pasqueflowers in the spring and the tallgrasses—wandering through there you can just see all around you. It is so, so beautiful and so special in my opinion. I remember before the bison came to Minneopa that whole expanse where the bison live now was an open prairie. I remember hiking with my then, one-year old in a backpack all the way up to the Mill tower. It was just such a beautiful experience too. So, peaceful and relacing right any time you're in the prairie. Every time we go see the bison and drive through the bison range now, I remember. I remember walking through that big expanse to climb up the hill. There's just a lot of variation in the prairie that sometimes I feel people don't see. People tend to prefer going to the woods for outdoor recreation, but the prairie really has its magic that I personally enjoy so much. Blue Mounds, another wonderful prairie park that I've enjoyed a lot. It is an interesting prairie park because you not only have the prairie and you think everything is going to be flat around you, but then you have the tall bluffs—the quartzite bluffs. Out of nowhere apparently, right? And then in the winter the prairie—I don't know if this is an actual thing, but I always feel that there is more snow accumulation in the prairie, and it makes it perfect for cross country skiing. Last year one of my favorite winter days was cross country skiing at William O'Brien with one of my best friends. We had so much fun going in and out of the woods, through the prairie, up and down. Same at Afton, one year we stayed at the yurt with my family and hiked all over out of the yurt. We did the orienteering permanent course, and it was just this beautiful memory for me walking and trampling on the snow, up and down in the prairie. Actually, the more I think about it I have lots of winter experiences in the prairie. The prairie calls me in the winter. Staying at Glendalough, same thing. Coldest day of the year with my youngest for her birthday trip. Just walking and being up and going around the lake and through the prairie, observing everything. I fell in love with that park that winter actually.

Megan: I just love it. This is like a miniature overview how you're talking about all of these special park places that we can then go visit and have some of these shared experiences. And the wind and the hills. You definitely are a prairie person because every prairie person listening knows all about the wind on the prairie and those hills.

Sara: I was nodding my head as I listened to you talk about all of that.

Megan: I know. I just love it. This was like a miniature overview of these amazing state parks where we can go visit prairie and hang out and have some fun times.

Marissa: That was an amazing story from Verónica describing so many of the things that I also love about the prairie like the incredible sunsets and sunrises and being able to see for miles. It makes my heart happy. I also love how she eloquently describes aspects of the prairie that are familiar to those of us who are already experienced prairie lovers but can be unexpected for new prairie enthusiasts like the power of the wind out there and that prairies are rarely flat places and the incredible variation that you really don't discover until you get out in it.

Verónica's story leads beautifully into our next story from a colleague of mine at The Nature Conservancy, Chris Helzer. Chris shares with us a story of a discovery of his own. I love Chris's story because it involves birds, admittedly one of my favorite taxa, and also because it highlights how just spending time in the prairie observing what is around you can lead you to find and see unexpected things.

Megan: Hey Chris, Welcome back!

Chris Helzer: Thank you. It's good to be here.

Megan: It's good to have you hear. Marissa and I are so excited to hear your story.

Chris: Well, I picked a bird story to make Marissa happy.

Marissa: Yay, bird nerds unite!

Megan: Before we got on here, Marissa was showing us all of her new bird art.

Marissa: I know.

Megan: All of her new swag she's got.

Marissa: It's all over the house. There's nothing like thinking about birds in the middle of the winter to get you excited about birds in the spring.

Megan: When you were a kid and you used to go to nature centers, and they had big posters up of everything you were going to see on the walk. Or the stuff that was in the tanks that you were going to look at. Did you ever have a thought to yourself, "Man, someday I'm going to decorate my house like this."

((laughter))

Marissa: No, I never did actually. As a kid I'm sure some people did, but that was not me. I was just excited to get out on the walk. I was not thinking about house decorations.

Megan: Oh, I definitely was thinking about it. I was like someday when I have a house, it's going to look just like this nature center. Mission accomplished.

Marissa: Yeah.

Megan: Alright Chris, on that note, we're ready we're excited.

Chris Helzer: Good. Well, I wanted to talk about birds because when I was in grad school, I studied grassland birds and that was my world for a few years. Gradually as I got into being a land manager, I moved away from birds, in some ways, into plants and insects. I joke with people that birds are easy. Basically, birds you just have to think about habitat structure and that's it right. Which is not exactly true, but it's fun to talk to bird people about that. So, now I think more about insects, but this story is about birds. It goes back to grad school and my early career. When I was in grad school, we would spend daytime counting grassland birds and measuring vegetation structure and, in the

evenings, we would go out and do something fun—usually in a prairie or a wetland. I got interested in rails. In particular, Soras just because I like the call that they make. It was one of those things where you almost never saw them, so it was a challenge to find one actually in person. So, we would do playbacks and try to get them to come close. Actually, one of the funny things that happened with that and was one of my early discoveries with Soras is we were out calling one and we heard it call back and we played it again and heard it call back. It was getting a little closer and all of a sudden, it got really loud! We figured out what it had done is it had walked into a culvert, and it was doing its call inside a metal, steel culvert, which amplified the sound. We thought this is an amazing adaptation that this bird has figured out to attract women, which is to get inside this amplification chamber. I have no idea if it worked for that bird or if it's something that other birds did, but that was really neat. The actual story I want to talk about was—I think it was my second year on the job as a land manager—we were walking around a restoration area and there were a couple of patches of wetland habitat surrounded by pretty much mowed or burned off grass, just no cover anywhere. We spooked up a Sora at our feet and watched it fly and then we watched it land in a patch of wetland habitat that was about the size of a bed, like a single person bed. I thought OK this is going to be great; we're going to go get a good look at this bird because I know exactly where it is. That's the thing with rails, usually is, that's their reputation right that they land, and they just disappear, and you can't find them. You have no idea how they're doing it, how they're disappearing. So, I was with another persona and the two of us walked up to this patch—keeping an eye on it the whole time. We could see all around it and there was no way the bird was going to leave. When we got up there, we didn't see the bird, of course. Because it wouldn't be a good story otherwise, we walked up and there was the bird. What we saw was there was vegetation that was some rushes and sedges and things scattered around and then there was a pool of water maybe the size of a bathtub or a little bit bigger. It looked like it was maybe 8-10" deep and there was a mat of algae across the type of it. We just sat there and kind of walked around and kicked around in the vegetation looking for this bird. No bird. We were there I would say at least two minutes and just getting really frustrated. We just sort of sat there staring dumbly at this scene and all of a sudden in the middle of that mat of algae a little bump appeared that was the size of a ping pong ball and it just kind of lifted up the algae in this little bump. I looked at my friend and said, "There's no way." I reached down and I pulled the algae back and this Sora head looked right at me and then disappeared back under the water again, which was the first time I'd ever heard that that was even a possibility. Nobody had told me that this was a possibility. All of a sudden it clicked for me why rails are so good at hiding and it's not that they're hiding in the vegetation always, it's that they can go underwater and apparently stay there for minutes at a time because that's how long we were standing there. So, for the next few minutes we kind of waited for it to come back up again. It did eventually come back up again, and I managed to go run and get my camera in between two of these little things. I said, "You stay here and don't let it go anywhere." I got my camera and came back. I got a picture of it the next time it popped its head up. I got a picture of this little chicken head with its yellow beak sticking up out of the water at me. I got a magazine article out of it because I had talked to some other wetland people, and they didn't know anything about this. I don't think I was the first one in the world to discover it by any means, but I

was the first person in the circle of my friends to discover that Soras could submarine in the water. It was a really quick story, but it was something that I think you know, in biology r in ecology and just being a naturalist, the fun things I think for me are the times that you discover something for the first time for yourself. It doesn't matter if it's the first time it has been discovered in the world. If it's the first time for you that makes it really exciting. This was the first time that I discovered that rails could live underwater for short periods of times.

Megan: It's like prairie hide and seek.

Chris: Yeah.

Marissa: Mm hmm.

Chris: Did you know that? Marissa, did you know that?

Megan: No, I did not know that. I had no idea.

Marissa: I did not know that. I do know that rails and waterbirds in general are super hard to find. Now I have a better idea of why. I did not know that they do that. That's pretty cool.

Chris: And you know this was more than 20 years ago and I still, I'll talk to people every once in a while, just like this and I'll say have you ever heard of this before? And they say no, which is why I decided that maybe this is the story to tell because I can pass it along to some more people. Hopefully they will have a better chance of finding rails.

Marissa: Yeah.

Megan: Well, when you pulled the algae back did you say, "Found you!"

Marissa: Tag, you're it!

((laughter))

Chris: I was pretty sure what I was going to find, but it was still really surprising even though I knew kind of what it was.

Marissa: Yeah.

Megan: I just love that moment of discovery on the prairie when you see something new that you've never seen before. There's such joy in the unexpected moments we share with all the pieces that make prairie prairie—the plants, animals, wind, water, roots, microorganisms, and more. Chris's story of discovery made me smile because at the end all he wanted to do was share that knowledge with others and after all isn't that what prairie is all about—connecting us to each other with experiences and stories. We

are very grateful and honored that the stories continue as we hear from Ferin Davis-Anderson, Supervisor of Environmental Sciences for the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community. Ferin shares a beautiful story of learning from an elder and discovering a traditional food that had been lost from their prairies for over 75 years and the effort it has taken to bring an amazing prairie plant and traditional food back to the community.

Ferin Davis-Anderson: ((speaking Ojibwe)) Boozhoo indinawemaaganidog, aaniin. Ferin Davis Anderson nindizhinikaaz. Apiichi miigwech bizindawiyeg. What I said there was hello, all my relatives, my name is Ferin Davis-Anderson. Thank you for listening to me today. I am the Supervisor of Environmental Sciences for the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community. I've been working with the community for about 7 years. I wanted to share a story about one of my favorite things that happened this summer. And that was a plant walk that we had scheduled with Hope Flanagan. Hope Flanagan is an awesome elder and knowledge holder—traditional knowledge holder. She works with the Dream of Wild Health. She does a lot of foraging and plant identification and traditional uses of plants. It was just an honor to have her out there. So, around Hoċokata Ti [ho-cho-kah-tah-tee], which is our cultural center that was just developed a few years ago, we hosted this plant walk. We've done a lot of thoughtful planning around that building and there's been a lot of different native plantings. We've restored over 35 acres of prairie around the building. Also, adjacent to the building they have different gardens with traditional plants, medicines. Basically, things for our community members to pick. When we were on this plant walk. We were walking around and just checking out different plants and to our surprise, we found a prairie turnip. So, that was awesome because it just gave us an opportunity to look at this traditional food that's been lost because at Shakopee, we haven't found that plant—a Dakota person probably hasn't harvested that plant in over 75 years, locally anyways. It was just so exciting to see that there. I went up to the plant and I was looking at it and I was like wait, is that prairie turnip?! Hope came over and she looked and she's like, "It's prairie turnip"! It was so awesome because again, we haven't seen that plant around and we've been trying to bring back these food sources. In the Dakota language prairie turnip is called Ṫípsiŋna. So, if you break that word down, I learned this from our Dakota language specialist, Will Crawford. Ṫí, it derives from tinta and that means prairie in Dakota. Psiŋ that means rice. And na is a term of endearment. So, that word in Dakota literally means rice of the prairie that I endear. Isn't that so cool? I just love that. In the Dakota language there's these—it's a very descriptive language and you can learn a lot just knowing what those words mean. And what parts of those words mean. I'm so thankful that we have our Dakota language specialist to help us out and put these things together. It was just an awesome good feeling when we were out there because you know we harvested one of them. Again, we had a bunch of youth with us too so that was special. Our elder, Cyndy Milda, who's actually the public education coordinator at Hoċokata Ti, she was the one who—she's like we have to go to South Dakota usually to harvest these! They usually harvest enough to sustain them throughout the winter. So, to be able to harvest it at Shakopee, they don't have to travel to South Dakota now because we've established a small population at Shakopee. She was able to show us how you harvest it: you offer tobacco. Then what to do with the seed head. Some people like to bury the seed head and cover it completely, but others like to put the seed

head up and just re-bury the bottom of the plant after they take the turnip part off. Usually you can braid, if you have enough of them, a braid and they dry really well. They are a really good source of nutrients. That was a really important staple in the Dakota's, historically, the Dakota's diet throughout the winter. It was just a really awesome experience to be able to see that prairie plant come back and to be a part of that. Because-- I don't know if anybody knows anything about prairie turnips, but they're very hard to establish from seed. You just can't go out and throw the seed down and expect a bunch of prairie turnips to come up. It doesn't work like that. So, we actually have a Horticultural Department and also our tribal gardens, Wozupi, and they're the ones who should be credited with bringing them back. Because they've figured out a way to get them to germinate. Now we have these little, tiny prairie turnips that we've been able to plant around the community. They're getting to a point now that we can actually harvest them. So, that was super exciting this summer and I'm just super grateful that I was able to be a part of that.

Megan: I love this story Ferin. I love thinking about prairie turnip as prairie rice that is dear to me. That is such a good descriptive term for this life-giving food that this plant is. I just love it.

Marissa Yeah, it creates a great visual in your head of the species and the plant. That's amazing.

Megan: And then also that moment where you discover something that hasn't been seen for 75 years. Oh, my word you guys had to be, I'll use my grandmother's phrase, tickled. You just had to be so excited to be like oh my gosh, there's prairie turnip!

Ferin: Yeah. We were very, very excited.

Marissa: That was just this past summer then?

Ferin: Yeah, it was this past summer. It was right by Hoċokata Ti.

Marissa: That's amazing.

Megan: So, does the plant—when you re-bury the plant after taking that tuber off, will it grow and put a new tuber out? I have so many ecology nerd questions I want to ask.

Ferin: Yeah, so that's the seed head. You're basically putting the seeds back into the soil. It's going to take a while. There's actually been studies that have been done too. People have done their thesis on this. The studies say that the populations actually thrive when there's harvesting that occurs.

Megan: Oh neat.

Ferin: Kind of like sweetgrass. Sweetgrass is the same way. It needs to be harvested and it sends up a bunch of new shoots when you do harvest it. Otherwise, it's kind of just doing its thing, but you know they've found that sweetgrass is the same way.

Marissa: That's very cool and it's amazing and very cool that you've found a way to get them to germinate and plant them all over. Do you have any idea how many years it takes before those little plants get established and they're ready for harvesting?

Ferin: So, I think that those plants that we saw they were grown to little seedlings. So, it was probably about a year and then after it had been planted, it was probably about 4 years before we saw a flower and a turnip that was big enough to actually harvest.

Marissa: Yeah, a mature plant. I just feel like sometimes there's so many things that we don't know about our prairie plants, right? How long it takes them to become mature? All of those sorts of things so that's really cool. Very cool story. Thank you for sharing.

Megan: Miigwech Ferin. This was so nice. Thank you so much for sharing this story with us.

Ferin: Thank you so much for having me. It's been awesome.

Marissa: Yes.

Mike: That is so cool how the Dakota name for Prairie Turnip translates to Rice of the Prairie That I Endear. That is just a great story, Ferin, thank you for that, and congratulations on your find. When I look at this plant—it's just a beautiful little plant—I encourage you to look it up if you haven't seen it before. I see this plant and I think about its role in native culture and to me it just provides a great example of why prairie is worth fighting for. And then at the same time it's important to remember it's just one of thousands of examples, as good as it is. Anyway, it's yet another way to think about how prairie sustains us. Next, we have another story about how prairie provides opportunities for discovery, and how there's so often tradition and history in prairie, and also how it's just an important place for making memories.

Scott Kudelka: Well, I'm Scott Kudelka, I'm the Minneopa Area Naturalist and the story I want to talk about is really how I grew up with prairie. My great grandfather had bought a piece of land along the Cheyanne River in southeastern North Dakota. It included the valley and then as the valley goes up into what would have been the prairie. I think my memories about that is how him and my grandfather never plowed this area up. It really has a very beautiful oak savanna, and all this is still here today. I can just remember my brother and I; we would always spend most of our time just exploring this prairie and playing out there. I can just think about how in many other places, these places have been plowed up. My grandfather never wanted to do it. He would of course have cattle in there, but even we'd have these woodland mounds and if you would just go down to the neighbors you would see how they had been plowing them up for years and years.

And my grandfather never did. He always wanted to keep that part intact. I think for me it just always brings back how every time I go back to the farm that's the first thing, we do is we go for a hike through the prairie. We go out to this large cottonwood tree in the back 80 of the farm where nothing has been plowed up. I was there a couple years ago with my nephew and niece and as we walk along, I run across, of all plants, a prairie onion. I was just so excited to think that I always knew it was pretty diverse even with the cattle being in there, but just the fact that suddenly I saw a plant that I had never seen before growing on this prairie again that had never been broken up. It's such a key part of our family history and how we've looked at this landscape and how we want to always protect it. This oak savanna, of course, you know he's thinned trees out over the years and actually built his house out of bur oak. If you can imagine building a house out of bur oak, it's continuing to sink all of these years. So, we have to put in metal posts to keep it up. But that house is so solidly built that there's no way that thing will ever fall apart. And it even goes into the whole idea of Christmas and winter and how we have—you know the prairie goes into the river valley and that's where we go sledding every year. So, we're sledding across the prairie that's still intact. I think just those memories and that we're bringing my nephews and nieces and having those same memories and that love of prairie. The fact that they can identify there's a wild rose over there or there is side-oats grama over there or there is little bluestem. I think that's exactly why I love the prairie is just that diversity. It's such a unique landscape.

Mike: That's a really nice story.

Megan: I love that, Scott. I love that you're sledding and you're teaching them prairie plants and then you're living in a bur oak house. I mean how many people get to live in a bur oak house?

Scott: Right.

Mike: It's not going to fall apart. It just might sink, right?

Scott: Right. It's just going to sink into the ground, but it will never fall apart.

Megan: Why is it going to sink? I'm just curious, I guess I don't know.

Scott: Because it's heavy wood.

Mike: It's heavy.

Megan: Oh!

Scott: You would never build a house out of bur oak because it's such a heavy wood.

Megan: Because it's so solid.

Mike: It's safe.

Megan: You're basically making a basement without making a basement.

Scott: Right.

Megan: I'm so glad we got to hear Scott share about spending time with his family. Thinking of prairie as a tradition is at the heart of our conservation efforts. We all work so hard together because prairie isn't just a thing that's out there on the land living, it is the reason why we live. Our spirits are deeply connected to it and prairie is a place where we belong, and our memories are shared from year to year as the moments we spend become legacies we leave. Karin's story builds on the tradition of knowing our prairie relatives and forming bonds with them at an early age.

Karin Jokela: Hi, I'm Karin Jokela. I wear a lot of hats – one of which is for the Xerces Society, where I'm a pollinator habitat specialist. In that role, I partner with NRCS to provide technical guidance to conservation staff and farmers about habitat planning in working lands.

But today I wanted to share a few "favorite prairie experiences" from my home life. So, I was going to tell you a little bit about how my family and I have been actively cultivating relationships with individual "prairie members" we could say --which, mostly means native plants and the critters they attract. I'm just hoping to paint a picture of some of the routines we have that I really cherish.

So, for a little context – my husband and I run an organic vegetable farm and small native plant nursery on the edge of the Driftless Area near Cannon Falls, in southeastern Minnesota. We are situated on land that contains small pockets of remnant sedge meadow, dry hill prairie, and oak savanna plant communities. Every year we collect a variety of native seeds from those communities and grow the plants out for sale to gardeners, as well as for my own prairie restoration plantings throughout our vegetable fields and farmstead. I'm constantly tinkering and experimenting in our backyard with different types of habitat plantings.

In the last five years, we've also been raising children. And, becoming a parent caused me to slow down, and bring my personal prairie stewardship ambitions to a smaller, toddler scale. For example, instead of working on clearing thorny invasive species in the back pasture, I have been focusing on expanding small native garden beds close to the house. When I'm working in the garden, I almost always have a small helper with me. My daughter likes to dig holes, and tuck in plants and sticks, but she equally loves coddling millipedes, worms, and crickets. And I'm always expanding my gardens – or weeding them – and therefore, we're always on hands and knees next to flowers that bring in visitors. And I just love how we are so often interrupted by delightful and

surprising wildlife encounters, like squeaking hummingbirds, sleeping bees, or suddenly apparent katydids or leaf hoppers.

Gardening like this creates a lot of room for conversation. We often talk about what and who we're seeing and sensing around us. This past summer, my daughter made up a game that always starts like this: "Mom, how about you don't know anything about plants." and then she teaches me all about her favorite plants nearby. She would feed me my lines: "Now you ask, 'what's this plant, Daughter?'" (And then I would say that) and she would say in her best teacher voice, "*Well*, this is a plant with three leaves and after the bees come to visit the flowers, we'll get little baby strawberries!" There are a lot of other plants she does this with.

No surprise - our kids' favorite native plants are the kind that bear edible fruits, but a close second is the category of some of those aromatic species, like anise hyssop, bergamot, and prairie sage. Unfortunately, my kids are not very adventurous eaters, but my daughter loves to go foraging with me to collect wild greens for our salads and soups - things like, violet leaves, nettles, and cutleaf coneflower - or some foragers know that as sochan.

So, as you can see, we are not really going on excursions to see 'The Prairie', with a capital P, we are routinely interacting with, and getting familiar with prairie community members … and throughout the year too, not just in the summer.

In addition to gardening, we collect fruits and seeds throughout the summer, and especially in the fall. Seed collecting is an especially sweet thing to do together because it's such a treasure hunt, and each of us appreciates different things on our walks. There can be so much pleasure in snapping off a stiff goldenrod seed head and shaking out all the winged seeds into the air. Or, I have to say, I have a personal fetish for collecting yellow coneflower seeds because they melt in your hand and smell so good! The seeds we collect as a family, end up decorating our living room as they are stored in paper bags clipped to a string of Christmas lights – which we have found, is a safe, rodent-free place to dry them.

Each species gets handled throughout the winter, as we crudely separate the chaff from the seeds using common kitchen utensils, like colanders and screens. We also stratify some of them in moist sand - or at least the ones that want to undergo winter-like conditions, and this always happens at the kitchen counter! Usually, we'll set up a station where I process the seeds in sand, but then we also set up a baking pan sandbox so my daughter can play next to me and participate too.

And, of course, In the spring, all of us really enjoy the routine of playing in the warm, humid greenhouse as we seed, water, and pot up individual seedlings for sale.

Beyond the nursery work and the gardening, we have also prioritized prairie stewardship as part of our routine, weekend recreation. Often the activities are *actual* chores, like moving our 10 goats to new paddocks in an oak savanna, but sometimes

the activities are kind of fun – like the occasional prescribed burn or selecting many eastern red cedars to harvest and decorate for our holiday Christmas trees.

So, I mean, I could go on. I have so many tender little memories of watching my kids coming to understand the gifts that prairie plants and animals offer, and the kinship we all share. And I have to say, I am aware that in a lot of ways I have such a privileged and unique situation out here on the farm – but I really do think that the way my family is developing relationships with the prairie could also occur in home gardens and urban communities — I mean, maybe minus the goat chores. As I said before, my family doesn't spend much time in vast prairies or natural areas like you might see in western Minnesota, but when my children eventually do visit those landscapes, I think they'll feel at ease, surrounded by familiar faces, so to speak. I hope they'll feel a sense of belonging and purpose there, too. But until they're bigger and travel off the farm becomes a little easier, it feels pretty rewarding to simply root down and care for the small bits of prairie in our own backyard.

Megan: Karin I love this story about your routines with prairie. I don't know why I was getting choked up just thinking about all of those—

Mike: I kind of was too.

Megan: --Well because they're just beautiful moments and memories. Mike, I was too ((laughter)). No, I was. I still am a little choked up just because it's so beautiful to think about prairie as a tradition.

Mike: Mm hmm.

Megan And that you're passing it on.

Mike: I learned a lot from Karin there. Thank you so much for that story. That game that Karin played with her daughter—that was possibly the cutest thing I have ever heard. Karin's story, it was just full of insights into how prairie enriches our lives, and just so nice to hear how prairie and native plants are an important part of Karin's life and her family's life. And I know we say this quite a bit on the podcast, but her story does an excellent job of driving home the point that we can enjoy and learn from prairie in our own backyard. So next we have our final story. It is probably a little different from what you might expect on this holiday episode, but I think it's wonderful. Enjoy.

Henry Panowitsch: My name is Henry Panowitsch. You might notice that I have an accent. I was born in Europe, and I used to be a German citizen. Just to give you a little background before I retired, I was a psychologist. I have a PhD from the University of Minnesota. But why I'm here on this podcast is because I was one of the people who started the Many Rivers Chapter of The Prairie Enthusiasts. The other people involved were Randy Schindle and Scott Siegfried. I would have to attribute that Randy Schindle is actually the guy who infected me with prairie. I like to warn people that you get involved with prairie and it's a love affair, it's a disease. It's probably one of the best

diseases you can find. To kind of give you a flavor of how diseased I am about prairie, one day I sat down, and I just wrote what is prairie to me. Let me just read a few.

> *Prairie remnants are the pieces where the wild heart can still be found. They're crackling fires are the bird sounds of new prairie. Prairie horizon is where the earth and the skies are stitched together. It is where my old heart remembers its early skipping days. Prairie is a place that gives sight and sound to wind. Prairie kisses the pleasure centers of my brain.*

This gives you kind of context to the extent that I'm diseased with prairie. In order, for instance with the Prairie Enthusiasts we have 3 missions. One of which is to educate the public. Second is to help people preserve prairie, but then also to start new prairies. Part of my education process is I'm involved with the Southern Minnesota Poet's Society. And they always have a meeting at my hobby farm and experience prairie. What I've done in the past is I take them all out in the tallgrass and then I tell them all to sit down, and they can't see each other. They sit for maybe 10-15 minutes with no talking. I kind of marinate them in the prairie. One thing I do also is I like to take a nap in prairies. I remember one time I laid down in the tallgrass prairie and you know everything is grass around you and only the sky is above you when you lay down like that and I actually fell asleep. And then I'm the kind of guy if I sleep for 10-15 minutes, it's like a charge, I'm ready to go again. When I woke up there were, Turkey vultures flying over me. I know all the jokes, don't stick out your tongue and don't move and all those kinds of things. But what touched me is the beauty of it and the gracefulness of it. You know vultures have such a bad reputation. People are kind of condescending of them. So, I thought I wanted to write a poem about vultures and give them a positive image. Well, the first line that came to me, which I kind of still like, but I didn't use was meals by wheels. Because that whole thing would've set me up for kind of funny, kind of condescending kind of thing. I still like that line and I might do something. But what I'd like to do is read you a poem that I wrote regarding the vulture. And I'm thinking of doing something like this for snake, skunks, and all these animals that just don't get the right press—unfair press basically. Here is my poem.

> *Bird lament*
> *Oh, what a hurt to be seen as unclean.*
> *An omen of bad endings.*
> *This rainwater mirror reflects my image, I'm a dignified bird.*
> *My body is smaller than an eagle, larger than a hawks.*
> *I have a sunset red face, strong ivory beak, almond shaped nostril.*
> *My head and neck are covered by fine, tan folded skin.*
> *My shiny feathers grow from deep brown to black, complete my formal appearance.*
> *I honor the dead by ingesting them*
> *In India, I am a sacred bird. They say that I release the soul from the body.*

My scientific name is Cathartes aura meaning purified breeze.
My family celebrates being, we ride delicate winds like feather kites together, move in spiral circles, climb air stairwells in our skies.
I never cause pain, I never take a single life, can you make such a claim?

So, as you can see as a hobby, I have become a spokesman for turkey vultures because they are wonderful, wonderful animals. What I'd like to do is read you some poems as part of the education, which is kind of interesting when you read some of these poems by other poets, I can see the influence I had on them. Not that I need that, but I find it [nice]. Here's one written by Christina Flaugher. She's my stepdaughter. This is a poem that won a prize in a poetry contest.

Grassland Lessons
You're the one who teaches me prairie.
Father, not my blood, you entered my world 30 years after my conception.
Your voice is as melodic as the rustle of wind through tall bluestem grasses.
As you guide me down the faint deer trail, one large, calloused hand reaches out and scatters pods. Neatly removes grain from stalks as you encourage new growth.
I wade through waist-high fiber in your wake. Follow your baubling beige hat like a beacon.
You turn back and patiently wait for me as I'm distracted by a flash of purple, a hint of pink, a leopard frog nestled close to the ground. Your love of this hallowed ground is infectious. Steers me to new paths as I follow you.
As we move, compass flowers spring behind us to direct those that follow how to spread fresh seed.

You know one thing about poetry is you can say something precise because you have to remember a poet is like a jeweler who builds a crown and the jeweler is very careful what color of jewels he uses and the size and so forth. Poetry is the same thing. I think I'd just like to read a poem I have written about prairie. It's hard for me to write a prairie poem actually. So, this is something that isn't—you know writing poetry is sort of like baking cookies. Sometimes you know they are not quite brown when you open the oven and you have to put them back in. This one isn't quite brown and it might have to go back into the oven of refinement. This is an attempt.

August Prairie Nuptial
Thunder stumbles east, raindrops sleep on ground.
The earth slowly exhales. We walk next to each other, hand's touching.
Cloud windows open, warm sunshine smiles. Clean wind combs big bluestem grasses.

Hungry bumble bees' crowbar into bottle gentian flower. Square-stemmed cup plant now holds water.
A meadowlark dries on the compassplant. Monarchs cluster and drink at prairie blazingstar bar. Like a new bride and groom, we look at each other. We have no need for words.

Megan: I loved it.

Henry: This gives you an example of the efforts of describing prairie poetically and educating people. Also, what I have done is the League of Minnesota Poets they have an annual contest of poetry in different categories, and I sponsor category 18, bring back the prairie award. The first prize winner gets $50 and the second $20, and the third, $10. So, you can see in poetry, you don't get rich, but it is exciting that's the big benefit like prairie. The thing is, with Megan, you know, she always talks about relationship. Because you know it's all relationship. We have to be careful that, for instance, like we use the word "spring" and there isn't such a thing as spring. What really [happens] is that the days get longer, it rains, the earth warms, seeds start opening and the trees open leaves. That whole process of relationship we summarize by the word of "spring." So, we need to be careful that the word stands for the symbol, it's never the thing itself.

Mike: Hey, I love those poems. Those are really good poems. And you know one reason why is that they immediately transported me to the prairie. They, in my brain, maybe in some other universe, like I actually went to another prairie when I heard those poems.

Megan: I know. My favorite line was "prairie is a place that gives sight and sound to the wind." I mean what imagery does that conjure up? You can just feel it. You can imagine yourself on a prairie hillside looking at the vista and feeling that wind blow the grasses and the wildflowers and you with it. Poetry is a really good way to connect us to the places that we love.

Sara: It made me think you know prairies have so much—it fills all of your senses. There are smells and there are sounds. You feel the wind on your face, and I feel like those poems really captured all of that.

Mike: You bet.

Marissa: One of the phrases I really liked and I don't remember which poem it was in is a metaphor—prairie is a metaphor for harmonious living. And I thought, you know that really captures so much of things we talk about in the podcast, right. How things work together and how the prairie works together. How we need to work together in life and how we come together at the holidays.

Sara: I also really loved how Henry talks about being infected by prairies.

Mike: Yeah.

Sara: And one of the poems he read was actually someone else talking about how his love for prairies was infectious. I just feel like all the stories we had this episode are just nice examples of how we are all infected by the prairie and how we experience it differently. It's nice diversity.

Mike: You bet.

Megan: It is nice diversity. Diversity and connection, which is what prairie is all about and it's what our lives are all about just like Marissa said. It's just beautiful to end out, round out the year with some good prairie poems and some excellent prairie stories from all of our guests.

Mike: Yeah, I really enjoyed it.

Marissa: Me too.

Sara: Lovely as always.

Marissa: Looking forward to next season.

Megan: Absolutely. There's so many more prairie stories to tell. But not right now because we've got to run and spend some time on prairies that we love and with people that we love also, and we hope love us too. So, we're going to wish you a safe and peaceful holiday season while you're watching the prairie grasses lodge with snow and the little voles scurry underneath. Wishing you many more discoveries on the prairie next year and we'll see you then.

Mike, Sara, Marissa, Megan: Happy holidays everyone!

((Sounds of instrumental cheery music))