Prairie Pod Transcript

Season 6, Episode 59: Seasonal Stories Bonus Episode

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Guest(s): Megan Benage, Jaime Edwards, Fred Harris, Jessica Petersen Dan Ruiter, and Mike Worland (Minnesota Department of Natural Resources); Marissa Ahlering (The Nature Conservancy), Ferin Davis-Anderson (Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community), Diane Larson (U.S. Geological Survey), Sara Vacek (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service), and Gwen Westerman (Minnesota State University, Mankato).

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

Transcript:

((cheery, holiday music))

Megan: Hey Prairie Pod listeners, we are delighted to be here with you again during this holiday season and season of reflection, joy, and, most importantly, hope. We're closing out season 6 with our final episode of the Prairie Pod. We know endings can be hard, and we want you to know how much joy this special project has given us, sharing our love of the prairie with all of you. But don't get too sad because while this is one sunset, the sun rises again tomorrow and there are lots of Prairie Pod episodes to go back and listen to!

Mike: Megan, Sara, and Marissa, it's so nice to be here with all of you today. I was just thinking if we could all talk for a minute and summarize some things we've learned from the podcast over the years. So, for me, one thing that's really been driven home to be through the podcast is that there is so much mystery about the prairie. There's so much

that we don't know. The same could be said, I know, of all ecosystems, but prairie to me seems to be a little bit special in that regard. Quite often just the very basic question of why it even exists is kind of a mystery. To me, it creates challenges, of course, when we're talking about the management of conservation, but I see it as something that we can exploit. That is something that can be used for bringing people into our effort to conserve prairie. It's exciting, it's good not to know everything. Prairie, I think, really embodies that mystery and I'm going to stop babbling. What do you think of that?

Sara: One of my mentors told me, I remember early in my career, that we're never going to know everything about prairies. And that's ok because it keeps us humble, and it's also exciting. It keeps it exciting because there is always something new to learn. I like that, Mike. I think it's definitely a good take-home.

Marissa: Yeah. Maybe that is one of the reasons why I love the prairie so much is because I love learning new things and there's so much out there still to learn. There are always new ways to go about it. I would say for sure one of the things that's been driven home for me being part of this and listening to all of the episodes over the years is also the sheer amount of people and work that's happening across our prairies. There are so many good people out there doing so much good work, and you know, it's been such a joy to get to talk to some of them and learn about what they're doing. Part of it is learning about what they're doing, but also learning about all the people that are out there doing the work and why they're doing it, what their motivations are, and what they're bringing to the table in terms of the work to conserve the prairies.

Megan: I agree with that. I feel like we just started scratching the surface of all of the people and all of the good work that they're doing. I also think for me, and this is not going to be surprising to Mike or anybody else who listens to the podcast—I'm not going to say diversity, but DIVERSITY! We've learned that that's still so, so, so important. I also think that you can be a great scientist or a great promoter for the prairie, but unless you're a strong communicator, you're going to be missing a big piece of that. I feel so strongly that it's important to translate what we know in a really accessible way and make science fun as it should be. I think it's really important that we don't covet knowledge only for ourselves and that we continue to share it. This has been a great platform to share knowledge with each other, with all of you. That information sharing, and knowledge holding and sharing doesn't stop here. And it doesn't stop today.

Mike: Yeah. Well said.

Sara: Hopefully, we've had lots of people make good connections with new ideas and new ways of appreciating the prairie. Yeah, Megan, I think that's a fantastic idea that hopefully can carry through. A seed that was planted with this whole effort.

Megan: I know, right? Scientists as communicators! What?

((laughter))

Megan: But we have to be, and we need to be. Or else we're missing a big part of what makes science so cool.

Marissa: Yeah and Important. That is like the critical piece. Otherwise, we all start to keep learning the same things over and over again if we can't share our knowledge.

Mike: Should we move on to all of our amazing guests today?

Megan: I think so, Mike. I think so.

Mike: OK, I just wanted to make sure everybody had said their piece. So, this podcast is a little different from most of our prior podcasts, where we have a group of guests that we interview at the same time. We've got a bunch. I forget how many. It's a bunch, including yours truly and all of us hosts. We're each telling our own story. We gave our guests a theme, what drew them or what continues to draw them to the prairie. We thought this would be a really great way to end the podcast and give further inspiration to our listeners. There's some amazing stuff here.

((sounds of prairie birds, insects and wind))

Megan: It's sunrise on the prairie. The red and pink sun is just cresting the horizon, dappling the prairie in light and illuminating purples, whites, golds, yellows, and greens in front of my feet. The grass is wet, covered in dewdrops that blend together, bathing me in prairie water. I take a deep breath, and I exhale with peace. The birds and insects are waking up as I cautiously disturb their home. There's the zzzz zzz zzz of a Clay-Colored Sparrow and the quiet clangs of a Henslow's Sparrow in the thicker grass. Off in the distance, a Dickcissel cries from the tallest shrub. Dick dick sss sss sss sss. Heralding the prairie is his for all who are listening. There are rustles at my feet and whispers in the grass. There is life here on this land. This prairie is alive.

((sounds of prairie birds, insects and wind))

Jessica Petersen: Hi, my name is Jessica Petersen. I'm an invertebrate ecologist with the Minnesota Biological Survey. It's a program at the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. I want to tell you a story today about what drew me to the prairie. So, this was around 2000, I think, when during the summer, I took a class at Iowa Lakeside Labs. It's an outdoor ecological laboratory that's owned by three different state universities in Iowa. I was a student at the University of Iowa at the time. So, I drove up all the way to Iowa Lakeside Labs in the far northwest corner of Iowa. I had no idea what I was getting myself into. I was scheduled to take a prairie ecology class, and the instructor was Dr. Daryl Smith, the man of the prairie. He was a legend. I just had no idea what I was getting myself into. So, I signed up for this class. It was a month-long, and every day, we would do a little bit of instruction in the morning of the class period that Daryl would call "talking the prairie dry." Right, so, if you've been in the prairie, you know that in the morning, there is dew. If you walk in the prairie in the morning, your feet are going to get wet. Daryl didn't want his feet to get wet. So, we talked the prairie dry until about 10:00 o'clock. We would go into these prairies in northwest Iowa that were

just outstanding. I had no experience prior to this with prairies. We would learn our prairie plants over and over and over again. An entire four-week class of just immersion in the prairie. Learning about fire, learning about grazing, learning about the ecology of the prairie, learning how to monitor prairie plants—but almost every day, we would have a quiz. This was intense. We had to learn all of our prairie plants—over 100 species we had to learn throughout the course of this class. So, every day we would come back to our cabins. They were these beautiful cabins at Iowa Lakeside Labs. We would scribble down all that we learned onto these little notecards, and we would then memorize them. Every day I would just fail. Completely fail the test. Because we had to know not only the identity of the plant but also the family it was in, the Latin name as well as the common name. I just did terrible. But in the end, I learned it all, and I retained it for years and years and years. So, once, after I left the prairie for a number of years and came back recently when we moved back to Minnesota, I was astounded at how much I had remembered. My love of the prairie definitely came from this class and came from Daryl's love of the prairie. He told us everything he knew. I still remember it today, and every time I go out in the field, I think of little stories that Daryl told about various plants, and he definitely instilled this love of prairie in me.

Megan: I love it.

Mike: Hey, I want to go back in time and take that class. Finally, I would have retained some plants. I always have trouble retaining plants.

Megan: I love it too, Jess because you turned your failure into opportunity. I read this the other day where somebody said we have a flawed relationship with failure where we're constantly afraid of it and we're always looking at it as the worst thing that could happen, but instead, if we looked at our failure as opportunities for improvement and information that we're getting from that about what our next step needs to be then, maybe we wouldn't be so afraid to fail. It's always an opportunity to improve the next time. I just thought that was so smart! And you already knew that! In college! Look at you!

Mike: Right.

Jess: Perseverance.

Mike: Also, "talking the prairie dry," I'm going to try that next time I go out for a bird survey in the morning.

Jess: That's not going to work for you.

Mike: I'm going to talk it dry. I don't know who I will talk to.

Jess: You don't have that option.

Sara: I love the legacies that we have too. Because that just made me start—as you were telling your story Jess—I started thinking about the professors that I had in grad

school that had done some foundational prairie research and prescribed fire work. It's cool to see those generational connections. Professional generational connections.

Mike: Thank you for that, Jess.

((sounds of prairie birds, insects and wind))

Ferin Davis Anderson: ((speaking Anishinaabe)) Boozhoo indinawemaaganidog, aaniin. Ferin Davis Anderson nindizhinikaaz. Mikinaakwajiw indoonjiba. Siipiising indooji. What I said there was hello, my relatives, my name is Ferin Davis Anderson. I am an enrolled citizen of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Ojibwe Anishinaabe Mitchifs. I currently work for the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community's Land and Natural Resources Department as the Supervisor of Environmental Sciences. We're responsible for a lot of different things, but mostly for stewarding and restoring local habitats within the community. Our team likes to use a holistic approach by weaving traditional knowledge into our conservation practices. We try to provide access to culturally significant plants by listening to the community and their needs. So, throughout the years, I've gotten a lot of feedback about what the community members would like to see more of on the landscape. I really appreciate this knowledge and try to bring back these plants where it makes sense most ecologically. To bring them back where they want them and where they need them. We also try to address climate change by creating a diverse, resilient habitat hear a lot about that in contemporary, western science. In our restorations, we try to bring back a suite of species that fill different ecological niches. We're also working to protect not only native plant communities but also wildlife populations. It's been awesome to see a lot of the wildlife that has come back—especially certain grassland species. And other cool animals, like otters. We've seen a lot of otters in our local wetlands and lakes, so that's been exciting. We also want to make sure that the next seven generations here can also experience and have access to these spaces.

Now, I'll tell you about my prairie story. That begins in Belcourt, North Dakota, on the Turtle Mountain Reservation. That's where I grew up. That's in north-central North Dakota, along the Canadian border. It's one of the only forested areas in the state, which is kind of unique and special to me. But it also transitions into a prairie to the south of the reservation. This is where my dad's barn is. So, we lived there in this area until I was about five years old. I had a prairie or 'mashkode', which means 'prairie' in Anishinaabemowin—that's the Anishinaabe or Ojibwe language. So, I had access to that prairie and at that age, I didn't know that I had access to one of the most endangered habitats in the United States. I just liked to be outside and be outside with my sisters. I think we spent most of our time, you know, running around outside. One of the things that I remember when I was that age, which is kind of crazy because I don't remember a lot of stuff from that age, but I remember seeing a plant that caught my eye. It was the prairie lily. I think in Minnesota, most people call it the wood lily or *Lilium philadelphicum*. I thought that it was really pretty and it just struck me. I remember really liking that plant. At that time, I didn't know it was a prairie, it was just something that I

saw while I was playing outside. And now that I know what I know as an ecologist, that's pretty cool because I don't get to see that plant very often anymore. That's something that's always just stuck with me and a plant that I've always really appreciated. I think another reason that I'm drawn to prairies is because they are so undervalued by society in general. And so, I guess, I don't know if anybody has ever heard of the term plant blindness, but that's the inability of people to notice plants. I think this happens very often in prairies because sometimes you have to really get in there to see some of those showy plants like the prairie lily. And I learned more about this term from a friend and mentor who recently earned her Ph.D. Her name is Dr. Stacie Blue. Her research was about plant blindness and how that can lead to a loss of generational knowledge and cultural identity in indigenous communities. So, in her research, she surveyed over 200 people from our home community, and she found that participants were able to identify forest and wetland plants best. But they struggled with prairie plants. Older individuals were able to identify more plants than younger individuals, which isn't really surprising, but it's upsetting. Because our people are losing that part of their culture and identity. So, we need to be able to recognize plants or be able to identify them if we're going to acknowledge and know their gifts. These plants are part of our ceremonies, and they can be used as medicines. Something that I think about all the time is something that an elder told me. Her name is Hope Flanagan, and she works for Dream of Wild Health in the Twin Cities Area. She's very knowledgeable and really generous with her teachings. She said that if we don't acknowledge these plants, they're going to think that we don't need them anymore, so that's something that I think about and why I continue to do what I do and why I find such value in restoring these areas and valuing the prairies because they provide a lot of gifts. So, we want others to have access to these areas too. Having access allows you to appreciate and acknowledge the importance of these spaces, so I think that's really important in our work and one of the reasons that I want to continue to do what I do and, hopefully, we'll decrease plant blindness and help people appreciate the prairies a little bit more. And that's my story.

Megan: I love that, Ferin. I especially love what you said that the prairie and the plants that are growing there are giving us gifts and we need to acknowledge those gifts. I think that's super important, and I talk to the plants when I'm in the prairies--

Mike: I've heard her.

Megan: So hopefully, the work that's happening, hopefully, they're hearing I'm that lady who is out there being like, "Good morning! Hello! How are you today?"

Mike: You said a lot of interesting things there Ferin. That was really good. Some really interesting perspectives that I think I will get a lot of benefit from if I can start moving in that direction. Appreciating them, and if they think that we don't need them, that might impact them in a way, right?

Ferin: Mm-hmm.

Mike: The best way to let them know that we need them is to get out here and appreciate them, right?

Ferin: Mm-hmm. We just have to appreciate them more.

Megan: We do, we have to appreciate them more. Thank you for everything you do to teach us every day and thank you for letting the plants know that you're here and you appreciate them.

((sounds of prairie birds, insects and wind))

Diane Larson: My name is Diane Larson, and I work for the U.S. Geological Survey, Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center. This is my prairie story. Prairies remind me of those little nesting Matryoshka dolls. Each doll conceals a new, smaller doll within it. Every time I look at prairies, I find new things that were formerly concealed by other things. When I first began working in North Dakota, having spent most of my life among mountains, I thought the prairies were as flat as a pancake. But when I actually got out there and started walking around on them, they revealed their deceptive topography. My truck mysteriously disappeared, and I got lost—temporarily. With more exploration, I began to see the inadequacy of the term prairie. There are so many different plant communities subsumed within that simple name. And then as I began to understand that different communities exist in this beautiful complex mosaic, I found that this mosaic hides endlessly varying soil nutrients, texture, and moisture relationships. Not only that, but a whole new world of fungi, bacteria, and arthropods further hides among and within the roots of the prairie plants--even linking different plants to one another underground. So, mutualistic interactions have been termed the architecture of biodiversity, and this really resonates in prairies. The give and take between plants and pollinators is one of the signature prairie motifs. Everyone has a role to play. Monarchs nectaring on their beloved Liatris. Sunflower bees wallow in composite flower pollen. Bumble Bees game for any flower big enough to hold them and even a few that aren't. Syrphid flies delicately land in the middle of asters. And then, as a result of these plant-pollinator mutualisms, plant-seed disperser interactions emerge. Not all of these are mutualistic. The wild licorice that sticks to fur and clothing waiting to be groomed off and a place to put down roots is more nuisance than mutualist. But a few plants produce nutritious arils or elaiosomes that reward animals that carry the seeds away from the mother plant. Plants are a major beneficiary of nutritious lysosomes, but the plants often gain a nurturing place for the seeds to sprout. The wind is a friend to many prairie plants spreading the seeds and pollen far and wide. I will leave it to the poets to speculate on what the wind gets in return for this service. I once concluded a presentation with this sentiment, ask not what your ecosystem can do for you, ask what you can do for your ecosystem with props to JFK. I think these are words to live by for those of us who love the prairie. Prairie is vulnerable. On the one hand, to conversion to row crop agriculture and on the other to benign neglect. Returning a landscape of corn and soybeans to any semblance of the prairie is a long and difficult process and one that we're still learning how to do properly. While we're still learning to restore prairie, more acres are being

plowed under. It's a constant game of catch-up, and so far, we're not staying even. Add to this the seemingly unstoppable invasion of non-native grasses in remnant as well as restored prairies, and the picture can look pretty grim. But again, on closer inspection, stars shine through. Few ecosystems enjoy the dedicated following inspired by prairies. Members of civic and friend groups volunteer their time to help maintain select tracts of prairie. Municipal, county, state, and federal agencies work hard to manage and restore prairies. Non-profits keep the big picture in mind as they foster conservation at a landscape scale. Prairie birds, mammals, and even some charismatic invertebrates have long had advocates promoting their well-being. Science sheds light on all these efforts with research design to improve stewardship and restoration. So, as I look beneath the surface, I am encouraged and optimistic that prairie will persist.

Megan: I like it.

Sara: That was so beautiful, Diane, Thank you.

Megan: It was beautiful. You covered all the parts and pieces and left us with hope.

Diane: I had to come around to that hope bit.

((sounds of prairie birds, insects and wind))

Jaime Edwards: I'm Jaime Edwards. I'm the manager of the Whitewater Wildlife Management Area. What continues to draw me to the prairie is the constant change. It's a beautiful landscape, and to be able to see it change over time and see the diversity of plants that continue to express themselves—especially as you manage these sites and see them develop over time. Right now, with the fall weather, seeing how beautiful it is in the context of a forested edge that we have in southeast Minnesota, that's what draws me. The different plants that you see and the wildlife species that respond to them as you manage these sites and see them through time.

Mike: Yeah, I think that's a really good point, Jaime. And one that we don't appreciate often enough is the change. We talk so much about diversity and that diversity happens through time as well.

Jaime: Yeah. Right. Especially as we're restoring some of these sites that have been really overgrown with brush. To see it go from buckthorn or even some of the native brush with no grass or flower understory—just dirt or sometimes moss—to see the grass come back and the flowers come back and then to see that diversity each year you go there's different plants. Even if you had an area that was fairly well intact, still being able to see the difference over time that you see new plants coming in or the season changes. It's a drought, and you have some that do well in drought and others that do well in wetter conditions. Being able to see all of that is what continues to draw me and pull me in. It reminds me that it's such a rewarding habitat to work in. That's what I love about it.

Mike: Pretty cool.

Marissa: Yeah, that resonates with me so much. How dynamic the prairies were, I think is also one of the reasons that once I discovered grasslands--that really drew me to it. Because it's seeing how those processes interact. The fire and the grazing and then the interactions that all of the different species have to create the larger whole. And the beauty that we see in that diversity. I agree that the dynamic nature of the prairie is inspiring.

Jaime: I also like that you can see different prairies. Everybody thinks that a prairie is a prairie. But it's not. You've got a prairie in southeast Minnesota that may have pretty similar species, but you go to southwest Minnesota and see it in a completely different context. It would be these wide open expanses that you can see, whereas in southeast Minnesota, it's more these pocket prairies. But also, just seeing different species that we don't have, and it's still a prairie. It's just rewarding. Or seeing a wet prairie. There are just so many different types and the diversity of them all. It's just always something new to discover every time you're out there.

Megan: I love that. We've joked a little bit on the podcast that there's one constant on the prairie, and that's change. That it will always change. And we get into our minds this idea of what a prairie is or should be, and that's the most trapping thought we can have because our job as steward to the prairie is that we allow that change, that we allow that flux to happen.

Jaime: Yeah. Recognizing it, too, is also important. Because sometimes we try to manage a certain way or make things happen a certain way. Being able to be flexible ourselves—and sometimes, I think the prairie helps teach us that we also have to have flexibility in how we look at things and appreciate the change.

Mike: The prairie teaches us. There you go.

Jaime: Yeah.

Mike: Thank you, Jaime.

((sounds of prairie birds, insects and wind))

Fred Harris: My name is Fred Harris. I'm a prairie ecologist with the Minnesota Biological Survey. I've been working here for almost 30 years. For most of my career, it's been about locating, evaluating, and documenting significant areas of native prairie in Minnesota. I've worked in western Minnesota from Iowa up to Canada and then down into the southeastern part of Minnesota as well. It's been really an incredible ride to be able to go out and find out cool places that are left out there. Document what's there and actually get paid for it! It's pretty amazing. I will relate how I got started with working on prairies. It's kind of a story of several little bits that led me to this place. It involves different professors and different academic institutions that got me oriented toward native prairies. When I grew up as a kid in Ohio, I was really a birdwatcher, and I was very interested in birds. By the time I went to college, I was really motivated to work on protecting natural areas. That was something that was a goal in my head. I went to

Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, in the late 1970s. I immediately got caught up in a lot of ferment about native prairies that was going on in the 70s. The main source was my major advisor, the ecology professor Paul Jensen, who had, in the 60s, persuaded the college to purchase a 33-acre prairie located a few miles east of Northfield called McKnight Prairie. At the time, in the 60's, they purchased it for $7,000 for 33 acres. He got a lot of his students involved in managing this prairie and documenting and mapping what was there. There was a lot of enthusiasm and awareness being awakened about how rare prairies are. That's how special it was. Wandering around McKnight and seeing the diversity of plants was really kind of, eye-opening. I was still a bird guy, but it was my first exposure to that. That whole world. Then, after college, I ended up in the Peace Corps in Africa for three years. I came back from the Peace Corps in the early 1980s during a really heavy-duty economic recession. I was still wanting to work in natural areas conservation. I was trying to find jobs. Whatever jobs were open--internships, seasonal positions. I remember applying for a seasonal position at The Nature Conservancy which was to monitor a Peregrine Falcon hack site at Weaver Dunes. They were releasing Peregrine Falcon babies there, and they needed somebody on hand to watch the Peregrine Falcon babies and shoo away Great Horned Owls that were preying on Peregrine Falcon babies. They wouldn't hire me. I was told I needed to go to graduate school. I was like, you need to go to grad school to scare Great Horned Owls? Anyway, there was a lot of competition for those jobs because, as I said, it was a really serious economic recession, and I was competing with a lot of people coming out of graduate school. That got me back to the University of Minnesota, thinking about doing graduate school and taking some classes that filled in the background that I needed for graduate school. Things like organic chemistry that I had managed to avoid as an undergraduate. I realized that I didn't want to take only organic chemistry, so I ended up in Gerald Ownbey's last Flora of Minnesota class. He was a long-term manager of the Herbarium. That was really eye-opening. We'd go on field trips, and he had about a dozen students writing down everything he was saying and totally blissed out about trying to identify all the plants that we saw. It was a lot of emphasis on prairies and the rarity of prairies. I remember seeing a prairie shooting star, which I think was at Kasota Prairie, but it's never been recorded there before. I also had a class on ecological plant geography, which was from Ed Cushing who was another legendary professor at the University of Minnesota. He really inspired a lot of people to work in conservation and ecology. He focused my interest on plant communities, plant geography, why they occur where they are, and other things like that. I ended up going to graduate school at the University of Kansas to study botany. Once I was finishing grad school, I was very fortunate to get hired by Brian Winter at The Nature Conservancy for a year as an intern in the Minnesota Field Office. My job was to map prospective natural areas and coordinate volunteers for prairie seed production and restoration. That led to getting hired in the Biological Survey in 1992 by Carmen Converse. I was recruited to start documenting prairie sites in counties in northwestern Minnesota under the tutelage of Robert Dana. My main county at that time was Pennington County. There was one really extraordinary site that was at

the time called Goose Lake Swamp. It is not a swamp. It's a huge site that's several miles long of native prairie. It really is an extraordinary site with a range of different prairie communities and different microhabitats. I documented about 15 different rare plant species including a new population of western prairie fringed orchid. That was the place that really cemented my love of and my focus on native prairies. I was really fortunate in the Biological Survey to be able to go and check out potential new native prairie sites every day for the field season. As you keep doing that, you get to know and recognize the full diversity of species that are out there. It's a great rush to find a new place that nobody knew about that is important for conservation.

Mike: Fred, that was great. I sure hope you're proud of all the prairie that you found and all the work you've done. You are a legend.

Fred: I think probably some of the highest highlights of my career have been finding places that could be protected for conservation and playing a role in nominating them for conservation either by the DNR or by The Nature Conservancy. Actually, having several of them make it to being preserves because they had landowners who were willing to protect those places. I think those are among my proudest moments.

Marissa: Yeah, I have to say thank you for all of the work you've done over the years and the guidance you've given me, too. I love your story and it's incredible the gift you've given to conservation and all the years you've put into being out on our prairies and documenting that diversity. And I also have to say that I loved the vision of you potentially chasing Great Horned Owls across the prairies as well.

Megan: Yeah, my takeaway from this is the only reason why Fred's a prairie biologist is that some smart person earlier in his career decided he could not shoo owls away. That is quite the trajectory change. No sir, you may not do that. You are destined to become a prairie ecologist instead.

((laughter))

Mike: Oh man. Thanks so much, Fred.

Fred: I really appreciate this opportunity to talk about my story so thank you very much.

((sounds of prairie birds, insects and wind))

Megan: This format is a little bit different because we're going to do it with the guest because he's been our behind-the-scenes go-to guy for every episode of the podcast to date. And if you're one of the listeners who listens to the very end of the podcast all the way to the credits, then his name will sound familiar to you. We're very excited to welcome Dan Ruiter to the pod.

Mike: Woohoo

Dan Ruiter: Thanks for having me. It's a little bit of a different role for me being on this side of the production, but it's a cool experience, nonetheless.

Megan: Oh, but Dan, you are so familiar with media. Being on the mic is not unfamiliar to you. You know all about being in front of the camera and telling the story.

Mike: You were a news anchor!

Megan: Although, our listeners won't see the camera part of this.

((laughter))

Dan: Lucky for them. Yeah, I worked in the news industry for 20 years and then came to the DNR mid-career, and I was really excited to join the DNR back in 2016 because I was a lifelong hunter and angler and really enjoyed our state parks and our state trails. What I learned when I joined the DNR was that was just really scratching the surface of what DNR does. There's so much more to what the Department of Natural Resources does and I'm constantly learning, which makes the job great.

Mike: Dan, you sound like a proud Minnesotan. I've heard you say it many times, you've never hidden the fact that you grew up in southwest Minnesota.

Dan: Yep, Murray County. Grew up in the foothills of Buffalo Ridge in the small town of Lake Wilson. It was kind of interesting when I joined the DNR because a lot of people knew where I grew up. I wasn't used to that. Dealing with a lot of folks from other parts of the state or other states, too; they weren't as familiar with southwest Minnesota as a lot of my colleagues are here in the DNR. The first part of my childhood was on Grandpa's farm. We lived on Grandpa's farm. It was surrounded by Wildlife Management Area on three sides. There were wetlands surrounding it. If you're really into wildlife, it was paradise. Muskrats, beavers, cranes—it was just really something. I grew up hunting deer, hunting pheasants, and fishing, and I just thought that was normal. Then we moved into town on the banks of Lake Wilson and from there paddling and fishing, swimming. It was just really being regularly outdoors. It was a great way to grow up.

Megan: Well, it sounds like you found yourself right at home here at DNR as an Information Officer who proudly and efficiently edits the podcast for us. Make sure that it all sounds seamless at the end, which is work that we have greatly appreciated you doing over the years.

Dan: Well, thank you. It is one aspect of my job. As a DNR Information Officer, I handle media matters, write news releases, help with social media, and edit the Prairie Pod. My job also includes extensive work with the annual Minnesota Governor's Pheasant Opener. That's an event that highlights conservation work in the pheasant range, but it's also something that provides our smaller rural communities the opportunity to be in the spotlight and showcase what they have to offer. For me, what brought everything home was the work that I was doing in Luverne ahead of the 2018 Minnesota Governor's Pheasant Hunting Opener. One of the resources that was highlighted was Touch-the-Sky Prairie. Along with the work of famed photographer, Jim Brandenburg. Jim grew up in Luverne and loves the prairie. His photos just really spoke to me in a way that I didn't

expect. When I found myself out at Touch-the-Sky Prairie, I felt like I'd come home. It was all there. The wind, the sun, the birds, the butterflies, how the grass touched the horizon. I was really struck by how all of this beauty could have been here all around me without me noticing. It really hit home for me, and I guess the other time was when I was out in the field with you, Megan. Out on the prairie coteau near Lake Benton if we're going to be specific. The hills there are just so familiar or similar, I should say, to the hills just outside my grandparent's home in Chandler, Minnesota. The familiarity, the topography. I'd grown up hunting deer in those hills and I underestimated the feeling I would get by being back in that environment. It's home.

Megan: The prairie is home.

Mike: That's a very simple and true statement for us, I think, and many of our listeners, most of them I'd imagine. Dan, I'm so happy the listeners are getting to hear from you. Megan, mostly, gets all the glory because of the hard work that she puts in. ((laughter))

Megan: There's no resentment from Mike there.

Mike: Us hosts, you know, we hear back from people. People in general, though, don't realize how important your role has been in the podcast over the years. Thank you for that. You have been super important, and we couldn't have done it without you.

Dan: I appreciate that. It's really been a privilege. I mean that. There's a ton of hard work involved by everyone. To the untrained ear, perhaps, maybe it's just a couple of people turning on microphones and just talking.

Mike: That's what we aim for right?

Dan: We all know, there's so much more to it than just that.

Mike: Right.

Dan: You have to do a lot of research into the topic ahead of time There's a lot of homework that goes on behind the scenes before we ever get to record day. I feel we've put out a pretty darn good product, and that was the aim all along, and I think we did that. I feel fortunate to be a part of that, partially because I love being a part of a successful project, but also because I learned. I learned from the two of you so much! And from the guests as well. Some of the challenges made me a better editor and a more skilled communicator on behalf of the DNR. Really, what I learned about the prairie and the people I've gotten to meet through the two of you and my friendship with the two of you is priceless. It really is. Truly, thank you for the past six seasons. Really.

Mike: Thank you, Dan.

Megan: Thank you!

((sounds of prairie birds, insects and wind))

Sara Vacek: I'm Sara Vacek, one of your Prairie Pod hosts and a biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Morris, Minnesota. This is my story about what draws me to the prairie. Like a lot of prairie enthusiasts, I kind of stumbled into my love affair with prairies. Early on, I was really drawn more to aquatic ecosystems—especially wetlands. That's where I played as a kid. We spent a lot of time catching turtles and frogs. Wetlands were the focus of my research when I was in college and graduate school. I still really love wetlands, and I don't think it's a mistake that we ended up settling in the Prairie Pothole region, where we get to spend our time working and playing in both prairies and wetlands. The first time I was really exposed to a prairie was on a family camping trip to Blue Mounds State Park in southwestern Minnesota. I think it was the summer after my first year of college. My parents, my sister, and myself. Before that, all of our camping trips and wilderness adventures had been pretty focused on the lakes and forests of northern Minnesota. Any prairies I had really seen otherwise had just been something you had to drive through to get to someplace else that was cool. I don't remember a ton of details about that trip to Blue Mounds. I remember being initially a little disappointed that our cart-in campsite that we had didn't have any trees. That felt weird to me. I also remember being really surprised when we got to the campsite that all of the grass was tall enough to make us feel totally isolated from the other campsites. I'd never seen grass that tall. Although we still wish for some shade because it was a really hot summer weekend. It was also my first exposure to the prairie sun—the power of the prairie sun. I remember seeing the tall grasses waving in the wind and hearing the sounds of birds and insects. I remember climbing on the rock outcrops there and even finding a cactus. I had no idea we had cactus in Minnesota. I remember watching the bison herd and marveling that they could look so content and comfortable in that hot sun. We were struggling so much with the heat, and there they were with their huge, dark brown bodies in the full sun, just as happy as can be. I think the strongest memory that I have of that trip, actually, is more kind of a feeling that lodged itself inside of me. It was this sense of how open it was. On all of our previous camping trips in the forest, I had really come to value the sense of remoteness and connection with nature that I had experienced. Somehow being able to see the whole sky at once made that connection and that remoteness feel magnified. It was bigger somehow. I'd say that big, open vista, open sky is what drew me to the prairie originally, but it's still one of my favorite things about the prairie today. We have the best sunrises and sunsets. People marvel at that whenever they visit us and see the sunsets from our porch. We have cloud formations in the sky that will rival any majestic mountain range, and I actually feel a little claustrophobic when I'm in a forest now. Especially if there's bad weather coming because I can't see the clouds and which way they're moving. After 20 years of living and working on the prairie, I think that openness is still what really makes it feel like home to me.

Mike: that was great, Sara. I love how you equate the clouds to the mountains.

Sara: Uh huh.

Mike: It's legit, and I'm glad you made that comparison. I've experienced so much of the same kind of feelings you had coming from the forest. I totally agree that openness is super important.

Sara: I remember talking to people about it and thinking it was kind of silly. How can it really matter that much? But I totally get it now.

Marissa: I get it too. So much of that resonates with me. The wide open space. The clouds.

Mike: Yeah.

Mike: Yeah. Thanks, Sara.

((sounds of prairie birds, insects and wind))

Mike Worland: I'm Mike Worland. I'm a biologist with the Nongame Wildlife Program for the Minnesota DNR. Also, co-host along with these other fabulous people on the podcast. My story, Sara stole my thunder already when she told her story, assuming everybody heard that. One of the main things that has drawn me to the prairie is its openness and the space that you have there. I'll try not to say too many of the same things that Sara said. But I'll point out some things that I think are important in addition to what she said. Like Sara, I came from the forest. I think maybe even Marissa mentioned it. I don't know if it was during the recording or not, but you can get a little claustrophobic in the forest. That is legit. There are a couple of times—you know you spend all day under a dense canopy of northern hardwoods forest, especially the mature stuff, and you can get a little claustrophobic. You don't see anything except a little sliver of the sky here and there. I don't mean it as a knock on forests. I love forests and it kind of gives you this cozy, comfortable feeling, right? So, I got hired to work here in Minnesota, and literally within a day, I went from the forest in northern Wisconsin to the wide-open prairie. It happened in one day. Immediately, I was drawn to that openness. That sky. All that space. It felt like such a huge luxury. I've found since then that it's really useful for me to look at the sky if I'm really wanting to think about something. Think carefully and slowly and really focus on something I will look at the sky while I'm doing that. Prairie is a great place to do that of course. I was thinking about how openness and space, in theory, you can get that in a parking lot. In fact, I have experienced it in a parking lot. For example, in Hutchinson, that's where I was first hired in southern Minnesota, there's a big strip of parking lots along Highway 15 going through town. They are really big parking lots—a continuous strip of them. You can see a big chunk of most of the sky from there. I'd go to the grocery store; I'd come out and see this amazing cloud formation or sunset. I noticed that a number of times, but it's not the same as the prairie. For reasons that go without saying. It's hard to articulate the reasons for it, but there is a definite difference. Prairie and the sky have this symbiotic relationship where it's hard to think about one without thinking about the other—at least for me. I looked at the photos I've taken in the prairie, and I think almost all of them or all of the ones I looked at were my favorites; the prairie is featured along with the sky. I

never just took a photo of the sky when I was in the prairie. The two were always together. That says something I think about the importance of both of those components. The other thing when talking about openness or space in the prairie, me, as a wildlife biologist, that I really value, and that's the ability to see wildlife. Again, compared to the forest. I did a lot of bird surveys in the forest, and I think well over 90 percent of those detections in the forest were vocalizations only. I never saw the bird. They're up in the canopy somewhere, and there's a lot of vegetation between me and that bird. In prairie, it's much different, I think. I'm guessing again, roughly, that easily a quarter of the birds I detect in prairie I actually see them. It will be interesting to hear if others agree with that. As a biologist, that's a big plus, but for anybody who loves viewing wildlife, the prairie offers so much value, I think, because you can see the wildlife. Again, not a knock against forests because I love forests. There's lots of great wildlife in the forests. You get to see more in prairie, just to be fair. I just want to throw that out there. That's my story. That's what draws me to the prairie.

Marissa: That's great, Mike. I think being able to see the animals is definitely a plus. Particularly for my kiddos, I think. For kids and getting them excited about things. I was also thinking about your statement, many of us have talked about how we are drawn to prairie with the wide open space, and you started talking about photos, and I realized that is one of the things that I have struggled with in terms of how to—I would love to put prairies on my walls in pictures. A photo never does the wide—you cannot capture that feeling of wide open space with a picture.

Mike: It doesn't do it justice.

Marissa: You look at it, and you're like, this is a really boring picture of, like, some sky and some grass. But this was an amazing view, and this picture makes it look so boring. This is maybe one of the reasons why you really have to get into a prairie, and once you get into a prairie and you experience that, it changes your relationship. Because it seems like it's so hard to capture with photos.

Mike: That's well put. Whenever I do see a photo of prairie and sky, it really reinforces that experience. Then I know I'm dealing with a very good photographer. And it's kind of rare.

Marissa: true. It could also be my photography skills—or lack thereof.

Sara: It's hard to capture a feeling, for sure. And that's what it is, a feeling of openness.

Mike: Mm Hmm.

((sounds of prairie birds, insects and wind))

Marissa Ahlering: Hi, I'm Marissa Ahlering, one of your Prairie Pod hosts and Director of Science for The Nature Conservancy in Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota. I would say the ocean brought me to the prairie, which is kind of a funny statement. It's really true because I grew up in Missouri, but I spent a lot of time on the coast in

southern California because that's where my dad was from, and my grandparents were out there. I had a lot of time and opportunities to snorkel and over the years, would love to go to aquariums with my parents. I just loved watching all of the tiny creatures and diversity that you can see when you can float by a coral reef or stand in an aquarium and watch all the tiny little fish and corals. I could stand there forever and watch all of that diversity. I thought I wanted to be a marine biologist. But I grew up in Missouri and then I went to school in Nebraska for college. I would say, to be fair, they had a marine ecologist there, and I did take marine ecology. But I also got involved with undergraduate research with an entomology professor. I was surveying butterflies in tallgrass prairie, restored prairies, and remnant prairies. It was my first exposure to being out in the middle of a prairie. I discovered the incredible, also tiny diversity that exists right here in the middle of the U.S. where very few people are looking. I grew up in Missouri, not far from prairies, but I would only ever see them from a distance. Once I got out in one, I loved standing there looking in the grasses and seeing all the little flowers, insects, critters, creatures, and beings that were just right there, hiding almost from view from a distance. I loved my days out on the prairie, getting to observe all of those cool plants and animals that are really hidden from the average passerby. That's really what keeps bringing me back to the prairie. It's why I wanted to become a champion for this incredible ecosystem because it's so often overlooked. I love discovering the diversity of many of the tiny beings that are on the prairie and experiencing the wide open space of the large, intact prairies that we have up here in particular. Because in Nebraska and Missouri, where I had my first exposure to prairies, they are a lot smaller. But the wide open spaces up in the northern prairies are just incredible. Watching those cloud formations roll across the sky—I wanted others to have that opportunity to see and appreciate the beauty that we have in this world. And right here in our backyards.

Mike: I was thinking a few times now since I've been on the podcast Megan and I—I think I usually initiated it, talked about some parallel between the ocean and prairie. It's very fitting. Usually, she made fun of me whenever I brought it up, but it's very fitting, and I am glad you brought it up again in this final episode. That was very appropriate. That was a great story.

Marissa: Yeah. People often talk about oceans of grass, but I think the parallels go beyond the wide open space of the ocean and the wide open space of the prairie.

Mike: They do.

Marissa: There's that level of tiny diversity. Really digging deep to see it is pretty cool.

((sounds of prairie birds, insects and wind))

Megan Benage: Hi, my name is Megan Benage. I think you're used to hearing my voice on here. I'm a regional ecologist with Minnesota DNR. I've been thinking about this a lot, you know, what drew or what draws me to the prairie. I'm not sure it was love at first sight for me, but I know, without a doubt, that it has grown into an everlasting kind of

love for me and the prairie. This land, this place, it's home. Somewhere in my soul, I always knew that was the case. It wasn't one moment, but you know, a lifetime of collected moments cascading across my memory and building a deep connection to the prairie. I think one of the most pivotal moments that really cemented this love for me and drew me to the prairie was when I was in graduate school. I had my cool overalls on and my fanny pack filled with small mammal processing supplies. I had this awesome study where I was trying to learn a lot about the prairie. We were basically comparing populations in a pre-restored prairie vs. a restored prairie of these different animal groups to try to understand a little bit more about diversity and how well we were doing with our reconstructions. One of those animal groups was small mammals. So, I covered one of the prairie restorations at the Purdue Wildlife Area with small, live animal Sherman box traps. They have this little trapdoor that comes down and clicks in. And in the back of the trap, you put some kind of bait to lure the tiny animals in. When you catch them, you go through your processing. So, you give them an ear tag that's unique to that animal, you weigh them, you check their vitals, their health. What you're really trying to do is get a measure of abundance and recapture based on how many times you see that particular animal again. You know, this is the thing about science: you can design a study to do a specific thing, and nature will always throw surprises your way. I can't tell you how many times I would open the trap, and a bird would fly out! Of course, right at your face! And then other times, you would lift the trap up, and it would feel so heavy. And inside, you just knew that there was something in there. There is something in here, and it's big. The traps are pretty small, so it's something that has really stuffed itself into this tiny Sherman trap. Of course, inside, it's a rat or a chipmunk. Chipmunks are cute. I really like chipmunks. But they are, arguably, the worst animal to catch in a trap because they do not like it one little bit. So, it is very difficult to process the feisty chipmunks, weigh them, and collect all the data that you need without getting a few scars along the way.

I'll never forget this one day, I approached one of my traps, and there had been a lot of empties, which makes for fast sampling, but it is always a little disappointing. I lift up the trap, and it's light. So, light. I got to reset it and cautiously opened the door to peek inside, thinking there wasn't something in there, and lo and behold, just sitting calmly, her face smeared with peanut butter, was a tiger salamander. I was pretty new to the prairie, and I was honestly surprised that an amphibian was in the prairie habitat and that peanut butter, oats, and seeds that I used as bait would've lured her in. I set her on her way, kind of laughing to myself a little because she just looked so cute with her little non-existent amphibian lips smeared with peanut butter. The next day I caught her again. Same trap, same peanut butter-smeared lips. And the next day again. And the next, again. Each time I'd set her free wondering. I started to read more about tiger salamander habitat. I started to think about the prairie as one connected landscape. I started visualizing the Purdue Wildlife Area and thinking about all of the connections across this space. Where was she traveling from? Where were the wetlands? How far did she walk to get here? Why does she like peanut butter so much? Then, the prevailing thought, as I walked transects on those fall days with the deepening hues of

the prairie changing to red and gold and bronze, have I done enough? How good is this prairie restoration? Does it have everything it needs to support her life and the lives of so many others who call it home? How connected is it? And how can we make it more connected? Diversity and connection—the two pillars that hold our world together, constantly swirling in my mind. Constantly a common frame of reference as I think about the work that I've done and if it is going to make a difference for the prairie. There came a time when I didn't catch her again. I felt this sense of loss. My secret friendship with this small, spotted friend was at an end. My kinship with her persists. I haven't stopped thinking about her. All these years later, I still ask myself the question I asked myself that fall day on the prairie, have I done enough?

((sounds of prairie birds, insects and wind))

Gwen Westerman: ((Speaking Dakota)) Haŋ mitakuyapi. Hello, my relatives. My name is Gwen Westerman, and I am the poet laureate of Minnesota and a life-long lover of the prairie. I want to start with a poem, and it's called 'Early Freeze' since we're at the end of October and the beginning of November. I thought it was a good choice for you to hear.

Early Freeze

I watch the moon creep
up beyond the trees.

Through the yellow glitter
of cottonwood leaves,

it slips into the darkened
palm of the sky.

As the horizon bleeds into dusk,

I run my hand
across the nap of the land
and feel frozen cornstalks
bristle across my palm.

Trying to piece together
what is left,

fingers numbed by a bitter cold
and unprepared for the sting,

I let the wind take my breath.

My earliest memories are of the prairie. I grew up in Kansas and Oklahoma and made my way north to Minnesota. And can't imagine being anywhere else where I could see the horizon no matter what direction I looked and hear the wind coming across the prairie. It's part of my cellular makeup, I think, as a Dakota person especially. This land

really calls out to me. This past summer, I finally got a chance to stop at the Tallgrass National Prairie in Kansas and stood at the summit. I guess prairies have summits. The tallest place, the highest place at the Tallgrass Prairie, where there was a 360-degree unobstructed view of grass and rolling hills for as far as we could see. It was one of the most inspiring moments I think I've ever experienced. Similar to our special place here in southwestern Minnesota, Minneopa State Park, where we have the bison herd, the Tallgrass National Prairie also has a bison herd. So, to be able to know that they roam from that place in Kansas all the way up into Manitoba following that same shape of the land that was shaped by an inland sea from beyond memory just made me feel connected to something much, much bigger than myself. It's hard to explain sometimes to other people why I love the open prairie. Sometimes they'll say, "Well, there's nothing to see." And my response is ((laughs)) "Oh yes, there is a lot to see." You have to be still and open your eyes, open your ears, and open your heart, and you'd be amazed at all of the varieties of birds and grasses and flowers. The way the seasons change and how that affects the land. For me, the tallgrass prairie is the most beautiful place on earth. And that kind of connection, I think, is something that we could all benefit from.

I can't imagine living in a large city where my feet would only touch concrete no matter where I went and have limited places within those concrete cities where there was actually grass and trees. No horizon, no music of birds and wind and trees and leaves and grass blowing. That's just how deep I think my genetic connection is to the prairie. Generations beyond generations of my family on both sides have been connected to this space. Coming to Minnesota was coming home for me. Even though I was raised in Kansas and Oklahoma, Minnesota is the place that shaped my identity into what it was meant to be. I know that probably sounds kind of strange, but this is the place where I finally felt like I was at home. So, I'm going to share another poem with you. It's called 'Below the Surface.' This is about coming back to Minnesota.

Below the Surface

A blackbird calls
as I round the last bend,

familiar melody in
its song.

Ishta ohedee.

Nothing knocks down
the dust in my throat

kicked up along the road
I used to know well.

Ishta ohedee.

Fleeting shadows
among trees,
along creeks and bluffs,

carry names filled with
more than history.

In a landscape shaped
by shifting rivers and roads,

stories surface like stone tools
along riverbanks after
a heavy rain.

Off the highway
marked with red and yellow
on an abandoned map

I can hear the song.

Istha ohedee.

Whispers of mourning doves
echo across
the ravine like evening
prayers.

I am thirsty and
I know the way home.

Wopida ota. Wopida ota. Many, many thanks to you.

Megan: Many thanks to you, Gwen. That is beautiful as always, and your way of weaving words together, we just wanted to give it the pause for everybody, to let it resonate in a way that it should resonate with people. That finding your way home to the prairie. That's just so powerful.

Mike: Thank you Gwen, that was wonderful.

Gwen: Thank you for the opportunity and for this wonderful podcast.

((sounds of prairie birds, insects and wind))

Megan: Gwen is such an amazing storyteller. It's hard to follow her with our final story--a description of a prairie sunset, but we'll do our best.

The sun is sinking lower on the horizon. The sky is shifting every several minutes as the clouds dress themselves in red, then gold, then pink. And finally choosing a soft purple-blue to fade into night. The prairie is changing too. The wildness of the morning as life awoke is quieting down as the daytime wildlife changes hands to the nighttime crew. The wind, not to be ignored, blows through the plants growing here. Whispering bedtime stories that only they can hear. The prairie is edged with subtle shapes, gone blurry as day fades to night. And I am here, part of this land. Watching the shifting and shading with great delight.

Mike: Megan, that was really nice. It really was beautiful. I liked the sunrise-sunset metaphor, it worked really well. I agree Gwen's poetry is amazing and also a really nice way to finish things off here on the podcast.

Marissa: Yes, very inspiring. It also struck me that she mentioned some of the same things that others have mentioned. Common themes about what draws you, what drew me to the prairie, what's drawn others to the prairie, the diversity, and the wide-open space; that is the feeling that you get out there. Her poetry captures that just beautifully.

Mike: Yeah. Hey, I think there were at least four stories that involved openness and space and those kinds of things in the prairie. It was at least touched on, including Sara and me, I know. That is valuable, clearly.

Sara: Don't you just feel like this whole episode echoes what Marissa was saying at the beginning about how there are so many different ways to be interested in prairie and so many different things to be—like different kinds of people and different interests that can draw people to the prairie. It's not just scientists or not just a poet. There are so many different avenues to fall in love with the prairie. I think all of our storytellers really brought that home.

Megan: It amazes me that no matter how much we learn about the prairie, it almost always comes back to diversity and connection. Always.

Marissa: I was just going to say that, Megan. That exemplifies the diversity theme, right? I think if there's anything that I keep learning in life is that diversity is just so important to so many different aspects of life. The prairie, life in general and how we approach it, how we go about connection.

Megan: And how we're connected to each other is going to determine the fate of the prairie because of how much we share and know and learn with people that we never anticipated that we would talk to or speak with or learn with. To me, I think that's going to shape the future for what happens next.

Sara: Thank you so much for giving us the chance to be a part of this podcast and co-hosting with you these last couple of seasons. It's been such a joy and really fun to get to be part of making some of those connections.

Marissa: Yes. I am incredibly grateful for that opportunity and the opportunity to be here with you all and talk with all the people we've been able to talk with and learn all the things as well as help get out the message. It's so important.

Megan: You guys are going to make Mike cry.

Mike: Hey, the listeners—it's always possible. I want the listeners to know that this has really been a group effort, obviously, but Megan has been the energy behind this.

Sara: I don't think that will surprise anyone that Megan was the energy.

((laughter))

Megan: I'm giving Mike a look right now. All the best things we do together, we do in partnership with each other. There wouldn't be a podcast without all of you listening, these fabulous co-hosts, without all the people behind the scenes who make it happen, and without all of our amazing guests who took the time to share with all of us all of their learning their energy, and their unique ways of knowing. From production to fact-checking to website design and audio engineering to listening to this while you're driving somewhere, this podcast happened because of the dedication that you have to the prairie. We want to make sure before we close it out to say a big thank you to Jessica Petersen, one of the founding members of the podcast, Dan Ruiter, Jed Becher, Bobby Boos, Kelly Randall. Thank you to all of the guests over the years. We can't wait to see what you do next. And like we said at the beginning, one sunset is always followed by another sunrise.

As always you can find all of the resources we talked about today on our website at mndnr.gov/prairie pod.

While this is one ending, the heart song of the prairie lives on in all of you. The journey doesn't stop here. The partnership and efforts for the protection of the prairie will absolutely continue. Just remember, every choice you make has the potential to make a difference even if it feels like a very small choice. And I know, sometimes they do feel small and insubstantial, but every choice you make matters. From a small pollinator prairie garden to thousands of acres of connected habitat to telling a friend that you think the prairie is neat—it's the math that makes it work. All these small decisions add up—they do--and they contribute to the survival of the prairie.

Thank you for spending this time with us. Listening to our passion, our joy and how wonderful it is when you finally discover the prairie.