



## Prairie Pod Transcript

### Season 2, Holiday Bonus Episode: Stories from the Field

Podcast audio can be found online at [mndnr.gov/prairiepod](http://mndnr.gov/prairiepod)

#### Transcript:

((sounds of birds chirping and wind blowing intermingled with holiday music))

Megan: Hey Jess

Jess: Hey Megan

Megan: Oh my goodness. What are we doing?

Jess: I'm so excited!

Megan: I'm so excited too, I can't wait. BONUS EPISODE—Prairie Pod.

Jess: Yeah you need a little Prairie Pod in the dead of winter. Things are getting chilly.

Megan: It's a nice time. The days get shorter, my mosquito bites have faded, and I'm getting that kinda hankering I get this time of year for gluten-full snacks.

Jess: Cheese.

Megan: Some cheese. Oh gosh, I love me some cheese.

Jess: And dreaming about the prairie.

Megan: You know when the days get shorter like this I do tend to think back to a warmer time. And that warmer time that I think back to is Field season. Jess, what do you think about field season?

Jess: Well, people who don't have field seasons may not realize how big of a deal it is. To spend so much time out on the prairie. And at the end of the field season, you always come away with loads of stories.

Megan: Lots of stories. I sometimes think that it's my best and worst moments at work. And sometimes those happen on the same exact day.

Jess: True.

Megan: True. But as much as we complain about it, we also enjoy it tremendously. So, in honor of that glorious season, we're releasing a bonus episode to highlight the work we do for prairie conservation. So, those stories that Jess was mentioning, sit back and enjoy because we're taking you back to Minnesota's golden season.

2. Megan: Early in my career I felt like when I would talk to people about this idea of recreating the land and doing restoration that sometimes people would get hung up on this idea that they had to do it at this certain fixed point in time. Like they were going to recreate this prairie and they were going to mimic an 1800's prairie. I have never found much sense in that. No matter what we do, we aren't going back to 1820. And thank goodness, because that indoor toilet is amazing. But, there are lessons to be learned from a prairie landscape that was whole that can be applied today. I am always striving to think about all the past experiences a piece of land has had in the context of what makes sense for the now. It's all about balance and diversity. I no more want to take an eraser and wipe farms off the Minnesota landscape than I do my house that was built in 1910. There's a legacy there. There's families and memories and home. But, I do desperately want to find a way to connect people to the prairie so it can persist. Because it sustains us just as it has sustained native peoples and settlers through time. It also has a legacy that needs to be borne forward. That legacy creeps up on me when I am standing on a rare prairie site where all I see are hills of undulating grasses and wildflowers blowing in the wind. It's not often that the stamp of settlement is obscured. Often the view is broken by a windmill, a house, or a road. And that's ok because that is part of the landscape we live in, but our job is to make sure there's balance. It's a humbling feeling to stand on a prairie and wonder if what I'm seeing is what Laura Ingalls Wilder saw. To take you to what it feels like when you see that unbroken landscape, here's Mike Worland talking about his first encounter with what makes prairie vistas so special.

Mike Story 1: Ok so, my first story is not humorous. It had an emotional impact on me. It was an important event for me in my career here in Minnesota. I had just started, I don't know how long I had been on...were' talking a few weeks. We had a local technical team meeting. So, local technical teams implement the Minnesota Prairie Conservation Plan. This one was in Sunburg, MN. It was the Glacial Lakes Team. We had the meeting and I had some time leftover in the day so I thought I would go out and explore a little bit. So, you know Sunburg is just west of Sibley State Park. Is it Sibley Lake State Park or Sibley State Park?

Megan: Sibley.

Mike: Sibley, Ok. That's on Highway 9 so if you take Highway 9 west and just west of—I said Sanburg. Is it Sanburg or Sunburg? It's a real metropolis.

Megan: I don't know. You're telling this story ((laughter)). There's a Sunburg and Sanborn. Sunburg is probably closer.

Mike: Just west of that town. You go north on Hwy 104 and that's going towards The Nature Conservancy's Ordway prairie up there. So, I had not been exposed to big Minnesota prairie

yet. I had seen small prairies kind of in the eastern part of the state. But, what happens when you drive north on 104 is just a mile or 2 north of highway 9, you come over the lip of a hill, and before you is this landscape full of grass. And it includes Ordway, it includes some wildlife management areas, it includes some prairie bank easement properties. It is all grass and I pulled over. I didn't like start crying or anything, but I was probably just like a step away from that. It was such a beautiful landscape and you know, I felt like I should be seeing some bison out there and maybe a couple of covered wagons.

Megan: Did you feel like you needed to be eating a grass-fed beef burger so you were giving back to grassland birds and enjoying this moment on the prairie?

Mike: At that point, no. I hadn't made that connection yet. What I did want to do is go run through the prairie and I didn't do that because I'm getting older and bigger and I might have sprained an ankle ((laughter)). But, I did walk briskly through the prairie. I went to Ordway. That was my first experience with big Minnesota prairie. And you know this was like 5 or 4 years ago. And it was just like, BAM, all at once. I drove over the lip of that hill and saw that prairie before me and it was pretty stunning. So, I recommend people try that—that route that I'm talking about. West on highway 9 out of Sibley State Park, north on 104. Can't remember what time of year it was. It was probably around now and yeah, it was beautiful.

Jess: Mike's story reminded me of my first time arriving at the beautiful landscape surrounding Ordway Prairie, the rolling and bending hills and valleys are really beautiful. There is little that compares to being able to take in an entire prairie landscape as far as you can see. Not only are these landscapes beautiful from a distance, but also super fun to explore up close. Sometimes what we find catches us off guard, even when we are acutely aware of the possibilities. Here's Mike Worland again to tell us about an encounter with wildlife that was a little too close for comfort.

Mike's Story 2: It happened just a few weeks ago actually. Well, several weeks ago. One of the hosts of the Prairie Pod was with me and that host was Jessica Petersen. We were out surveying for Leonard's skippers and this is in southeast Minnesota. Southeast Minnesota is something I don't think you guys have covered a whole lot on the Prairie Pod. It's not really often recognized as prairie country. But, it is. It's just prairies on a much smaller scale. All these little bluff tops are prime opportunities for managing for prairie because they are way too steep to farm with anything but goat grazing. Goat grazing works well. Certainly no corn or beans or anything. Anyway we were on one of these bluff prairies looking for Leonard's skippers. Jessica was there. We knew that there were timber rattlesnakes on this bluff somewhere.

Megan: Oh boy!

Mike: Yeah. And so, I take pride in myself as a wildlife biologist. I love snakes. I love everything that's creepy and crawly that many people get a little freaked out about. So, I've always taken pride in handling snakes and not being afraid of them. But, I've only been around a few timber rattlesnakes. Usually I've just seen them from a distance like hiding underneath a rock. So, here

we know there are timber rattlesnakes here and I'm walking around looking for them quite carefully while I'm searching for these Leonard skippers. Jess loves timber rattlesnakes as well ((laughter)). I think she does really.

Jess: If I had the opportunity to see them from a distance like you had, I would appreciate them.

Mike: I'm blaming her partially for this. I think she heightened my anxiety a little bit because of the stress that she was giving off ((laughter)). This is my lame excuse ahead of time. So, anyway, I step on this rock. I had looked at it and looked it over carefully for a timber rattlesnake and saw nothing. I stepped on it and I heard a rattle basically right at my feet. You know, like I said, I'm getting older. I'm getting heavier. My athleticism has declined steeply since my youth ((laughter)). Michael Jordan had nothing on me when that snake rattled its tail. I levitated a little bit. I did the Scooby Doo thing when your feet are rotating and you're sitting in one place kicking and spinning. I did that. Bottom line I am ashamed at my reaction to that timber rattlesnake. That rattle that that snake has evolved to scare away potential predators, works really well. After I got a little ways away from it, several feet, then I admired it. We laughed and Jess made fun of me.

Jess: I did. I kept trying to figure out why Mike was falling uphill.

Mike: Oh right.

Jess: In my brain, it didn't compute. Well he's falling—that's normal on a bluff. Wait a minute, he's going up. And then I very slowly put it all together. Rattlesnake noise....falling....OH! There was a rattlesnake down there. Ok. Fears confirmed ((laughter)).

Megan: Mike, I have to know. When I worked in the south, and I encountered a hognose snake, which they can mimic cobras and stand up and do some pretty freaky stuff that even though they are nonvenomous. They refer to something called the snake shakes. That anytime you have an encounter with a snake where you just cannot physically stop shaking and I just have to know, did you get the snake shakes?

Mike: I did not get the snake shakes, no. I have at least that much to say. I should reiterate, while we're talking about timber rattlesnakes that they are very docile animals. This is a prime example of what they do. They rattle. It wanted nothing to do with me. It rattled to let me know it was there and then it hid under a rock. They are super docile. And, their bites are very rare in Minnesota. Actually, timber rattlesnakes, their bites are pretty rare everywhere. I just want to reiterate that the danger level is certainly there, but it's low.

Megan: Awareness is just key.

Mike: Awareness is key. It's ok if you're afraid of rattlesnakes. There's nothing wrong with that. Apparently, I am, deep down.

Megan: #healthyrespectforwildlife

Mike: Healthy respect. There ya go.

Jess: While this story highlights the spook we got, there were many other wonderful things I remember from that day in the field with Mike including beautiful (albeit tall and slanty) bluffs, finding Leonard's skippers for my first time, sharing time in the field with colleagues, and being surrounded by blooming blazing star. The fright was certainly a reminder that we all need to practice safety in the field because you never know when something unexpected might happen. Encounters with wildlife can also be incredibly positive. Listen as Lisa Gelvin-Innvaer, Nongame biologist, talks to us about her encounter with a different snake species on the prairie.

Lisa's Story 1: These field stories are one of the big reasons why we're so passionate about what we do. The one I want to tell you today, you know, I and others have been involved with tracking bull snakes. I had handled them before. I tracked a lot of them. They all have, dare I say, their own personalities. But, I never actually just captured one for the very first time, all by myself, one that had never been tracked before. So, this was a couple of years ago. This was the very end of the field season and we're tracking to the last bit, when they're heading to their burrows to overwinter. I had been tracking all day. It was towards the end of the day. And all of a sudden I keep going back to this one burrow because we know this is a place the snakes like to go for overwintering. And all of a sudden I saw it. There's one! And it's basking. I'm between it and the burrow. And, I'm checking. I'm going through all the frequencies. This is not one that has been radioed before. Here's my chance. The problem is I got all this stuff. I got the antennae that I'm tracking with. I've got my backpack and a waist pack and this is not something you want to have on when you're going to be diving for a snake. So, I'm like ok I don't want this guy making a mad dash for the hole. Ok, you just stay right there and I'm going to watch you while I set this stuff down here. It's watching me and I'm watching it. It's like ok, who's going to make the first move. So, finally I make a mad dash and I grab it around the middle like Jeff LeClere, MBS herpetologist said to do. I grab it and I got it! Now, of course it did tag me. Of course, it's scared, this big hand came out of the sky and grabbed it. I didn't even really feel it. It was like 2 microscopic pinpricks. I've had paper cuts worse than this. Cacti are worse than this. I grab it and I get control of the head and it's like OK. I had an opportunity then to look at it and my heart's pumping—how beautiful this thing is. I mean its head is like this intricately beaded design. It was just amazing. I look at the datasheet and I've got to do measurements. I am not a big person. This is a very big snake. And you have to run the measuring tape down its body while trying to get an accurate reading. I get about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the way and it would wrap its tail around my arm. You know we have to do this again. So, we do it again and we do it again and again. If I had been it, I would have bitten me. But it didn't and in fact during the process of measuring and weighing and taking samples, I lost track of its head a whole lot of times. And it really could have bitten me, but really it was either just trying to get away or it was curious kind of winding around [my arm]. You know it's like a lot of species, Every time I study something new, I fall in love with that critter. And I loved the bull snakes before, but this one was really special because it was my first one and I did it all by myself. I could do it and I got up close and personal. When it was done, I released it where I had found it

basking in the sunlight and I got video of it as it just slowly made its way. It was just the perfect cap to the end of that field season and the end of October.

Megan: Hearing Lisa talk about the beauty of that snake and her joy at having a safe and successful handling and release reminds me of something I had a coworker tell me once: He said, "Conservation isn't just a career, it's a lifestyle." The more I learn each year, the more I understand what he meant. This job is not just a job--it speaks to our identity including our ethics, our relationship to the land, things we like to do for fun, our choices, and our values. We're in these jobs because we care. We care about conservation, about wildlife, and about the future of the prairie landscape. Sometimes that caring can take us to the next level where we get to have an encounter that deeply touches us. Listen as Plant Ecologist, Fred Harris talks about his experience with an American Kestrel that has stuck with him through the years, although our hope is that the scars haven't.

Fred Story: So, my story is about the time I was doing surveys of prairies early in my career in 1993 up in Polk County, Minnesota. It's a really spectacular place to do surveys of prairies. A lot of our biggest and best prairies are out there. And I don't know if you remember, but there was a catastrophic volcano that erupted in 1991 in the Philippines. I think it's considered to have been the largest volcanic eruption of the century. It affected the weather for several years. Up there, in northern Minnesota, we had these series of cool, rainy, cloudy summers in 1992 and in 1993. We were wearing our rubber boots every day and it's just clouds and clouds of mosquitoes and rain. So, I had this amazing encounter one early evening in '93. It was after the rain had stopped and the clouds were clearing and there was yellow light coming at an angle in early to late evening. I finally got to go and walk in this place after the rains had stopped. I was at Maple Meadows WMA (Wildlife Management Area). It's a large prairie in western Polk County. So, I'm walking into this place along a narrow trail through these prairies and I'm taking field notes about what kind of prairie is there and what condition it is in. I come across this Kestrel in the middle of the path, lying on its back, feet straight up in the air, and its wings are splayed out. Its eyes are closed. It was absolutely soaked, wet. I looked at and I picked it up and it opened its eyes. I'm like, it's ALIVE! It absolutely wasn't moving. It just couldn't move at all. It was lying on its back in my hand. But, it opened its eyes and I'm like, holy cow! It was obviously completely soaked and cold. So, I picked up this bird and it just lay in my hand and I tried to warm it up. Nothing was happening so I turned around and went back to the car. I thought I'll try to help this bird out back in the car. So, I hiked back. It must've been quite some distance, like a mile though this prairie going back to the car. The bird had folded up its wings and I have it in my hand and it's just watching me. Absolutely not moving. Not moving a thing except its eyes were open. So, I go into the car and I start it up. And, I thought, ok, maybe it has some hypothermia or something. So, I'm just going to try to warm up this bird. I got the car going and the heater blowing hot air and I start blow drying the bird with the heater vent in the car. So, I've got the bird upside down and I'm doing its head feathers and then I pull out one wing and put one wing one way. The bird is absolutely motionless in my hand, but it's watching me. So, I pull out another wing and blow dry that one. As I'm getting it a little warm, it's kind of turning

its head and keeping its eyes on me, but otherwise absolutely not moving. So, I flipped it over and lifted its tail and blow-dried its butt feathers. I spread out the tail and I'm turning it upside down, this way and that way, until I got it all blow-dried off. It's moving its head more and his eyes are just fixed on me. But [still] absolutely not moving. Then I wanted to see whether it would respond to me if I touched it. So I held it up and put my finger right on its beak and tapped on its beak. It's looking at me and it took a second then it just chomped on my finger ((laughter)).

Jess: Of course it did.

Fred: Of course it did. It just chomped on my finger. It was very painful ((laughter)). OW! So, it seemed like it had revived. So, I open the car door and the bird is sitting in my hand looking left and right, sitting there for a while. And then, boom! It just took off from my hand and zoomed up into the air, through the trees that were along the road. And it was gone. It was really an amazing experience. I've never rescued an animal like that before. It looked to me like it must've had hypothermia and I can't imagine it would have survived otherwise.

Megan: I love that Fred tested the reflexes of the Kestrel before he released it. When he first told me the story I was imagining him with a tiny hammer tapping it on the knee like at a doctor's check-up. I feel really lucky that I get to work with people like Fred who in addition to their deep knowledge of the prairie ecosystem, they also care just as deeply about all of the parts and pieces that make that ecosystem so incredible to study and live in. One of those pieces is grassland birds. Grassland birds are some of the Minnesota prairies' most iconic symbols. They announce their presence and help fill the prairie with life. In fact birdwatching is a big industry that pulls folks from all over the Country once the rare bird alert signal goes out. It's kind of like the bat symbol except instead of getting people in capes, you get them with lists, binoculars, scopes, cotton-wrapped birding guides with a little strap making them easy to carry when you're on the hunt for that next lifer on your list. While you may or may not be a birder, you probably haven't ever thought that you would get to go birding with David Sibley. Phil Doll, Private lands biologist for Becker soil and water conservation district, got that opportunity. Listen while he takes Dave on a tour of the Glacial Lakes Core prairie area.

Phil's story: Alright, so in Detroit Lakes there's a festival of birds. This was a couple years ago. I think it was their 20<sup>th</sup> season, 20<sup>th</sup> year of doing it. David Sibley was in town as the keynote speaker.

Megan: Like, THE David Sibley?

Phil: Yes, THE David Sibley. The rock-star at birding. So, on Sunday after his speech, he needed a ride back to Fargo to go to the airport. So, me, being the expert landscape viewer that I'm known for, all the festival speakers and organizers were busy so they asked me to drive David back to the airport. But, David wanted to be picked up early and then go birdwatching. So, I picked him up at the hotel here in DL [Detroit Lakes]. It's 6:00 in the morning bright and early and we took off on a little adventure through Becker, Mahnomen, Norman, and Clay Counties.

He had a list of birds he wanted to see, but it was really kind of a drizzly day. Not great for birdwatching. So, I took him to some spots where I knew we'd find some birds. It was pretty amazing to just be with him when he was birdwatching because everyone watches birds differently. We stopped at a marsh that was flooded and was being restored so there was a lot of activity. There were birds everywhere—ducks and songbirds. You know, I had put my binoculars up and I looked around for a few minutes and then I was kind of done. But, he's out there listening and watching and then he turns to me and he starts telling me all the species that are singing that he can hear and he's pointing in the different directions. And I, I had no clue. I couldn't hear one species from the next. So, that was pretty incredible.

Megan: Did you feel like maybe he was just snowballing you?

Phil: you know that could've been because at another spot, another wetland restoration, there was a big flock of shorebirds. I thought they were all some sort of sandpiper or something. But, he's looking at them with his binoculars and he turns to me and he goes yeah there's one Ruddy Turnstone in there. I'm just like, what? Yeah, it was incredible. He really wanted to see a Red-tailed Hawk. I thought, what? You want to see a Red-tailed Hawk? That's so common. What's so unique about that? But, he was trying to compare the different color morphs or phases between the different populations. I thought for sure we'd bounce into a Red-tailed Hawk at random so I didn't even think about it, but we went the whole 3 or 4 hours and we didn't see a single one. I felt like a pretty poor tour guide. The one thing that stood out to me is when we were between spots, I drove him up to Mahnomen County to look at some prairie chickens because I knew where they were booming. He thought that was cool. Then we had to make a trip through some poor birding areas to get to some better habitat in Norman County. As we're driving on a back road, kind of a back quiet tar road. You know I'm going 60mph in my car and these birds are on the side of the road. I don't know exactly what they were. Some sort of sparrow. And the flock as you approach, you know they often just flutter away and no big deal. They took a bad angle and flew up and one of them just booms and bounces real hard off the windshield. You know I can probably count on my one hand how many times I've killed a bird, a small sparrow like that, in my life. Here I am driving David Sibley around and I kill a bird right in front of our eyeballs. I turned to him and it was so awkward because obviously a bird died so what do you say. I said, well, I think we got that one. He just nodded. I really wonder what he was thinking at that moment like who's this guy from Minnesota, driving me around and killing birds. It was very interesting the species that he wanted to stop and look at. We saw some Trumpeter Swans. He stopped and we watched and listened to them for like ½ an hour. He got all of these gadgets out of his bag and started recording them. They were making a lot of vocalizations. That was interesting just to observe him while he was observing the birds. He also wanted me to stop for a Sandhill Crane. He was making note of the coloration of the Cranes. Something to do with how the colors change during migration and the different theories behind that. That was interesting. Meadowlarks, Prairie Chickens. We saw a big flock of Prairie Chickens right on the gravel road and they got up and flew and he really thought that was cool—just watching them fly, their wingbeats, and then they would glide. He really enjoyed

that. It was quite the experience. Like I said, it was misty raining and at one point, we were driving down a gravel road that was really wet and we're driving and I start fishtailing a little bit. I don't think he'd spent a lot of time in vehicles that are fish-tailing on gravel roads because he was really grabbing on, white-knuckled. I think he was a little scared for his life.

Megan: He was probably worried you were going to plow through some rare bird after that first time.

Phil: Yeah. I felt out of place I guess with the world's most expert birdwatcher. I did ask him a few questions. He didn't have a favorite bird, but his favorite group of birds is warblers. I asked him if he had seen every bird in the world and of course he said yes. Kind of like a "duh." It was pretty cool. I dropped him off in Fargo and away he went. I guess we haven't been in touch since, but maybe he'll pick up the phone and call me one of these days if he wants to go birdwatching again.

Jess: I just love picturing the awkward silence in the car and being awestruck by Sibley's ability to capture differences in birds that go unnoticed to many of us. Phil's story reminds me of a recent theme that I've been thinking a lot about and that is our relative level of awareness. David Sibley was able to notice that the one duck was different from all the rest, or that the coloration differs based on geography or timing. That's because he has such vast experiences with noticing birds. People often ask me why they just started noticing some insect. My answer is always the same; it's because you were open to looking for what has been there all along. There are amazing things in the prairie, big and small, and if we all spend a bit more time noticing, we'll see a whole awful lot. Insects are a perfect example of this. They are everywhere, all the time, you just have to look. This next story by Lisa Gelvin-Innvaer is about noticing bumble bees in the prairie.

Lisa's story 2: So, I had the opportunity this last summer to go out doing pollinator surveys with my good buddy, Jess Petersen. And, you know, I'm a newbie when it comes to learning my prairie butterflies and bees. It was just so fun that sense of discovery. The fact that it's starting to stick and I'm starting to be able to identify some of these. I know that Jess would tell me if I wasn't [getting it]. It makes me feel good about myself, but also that wonder of the diversity that's out there. Making the connections between these little creatures that are so important to the conservation of the prairie. My one story I want to add is towards the end of one day, Jess was pointing out the differences between the male and female bumble bees and how the males don't have stingers. They can't sting. She very gently showed me how I could pick up the male bumble bee and how it wouldn't sting, but it gives off a little bitty vibration on your fingertips. I don't know. It's that sense of wonder. I just wish that everyone could get that sense of wonder and to know why it is that I care so much about the wildlife in our region.

Jessica: I'm so thankful for Lisa in all her hard work learning how to identify butterflies and bumble bees. She's an inspiration to me to take on learning a new group of insects. All of this effort of keeping tabs on the critters we love takes a village. It seems that some folks are

intimidated to learn how to identify a new group of plants or animals. But if you have a willing interest to learn, it can happen. Our next story comes to us from the tallgrass aspen parklands of northwestern Minnesota, where prairie chickens abound. Alex Wardwell, a prairie project manager with Audubon, tells us about her first experience in a prairie chicken blind on Glacial Ridge National Wildlife Refuge. A word of clarification before the story in the event that you are as equally unfamiliar with the bird world as I am, IBA stands for important bird areas.

Alex story: It's hard to pick a favorite story, but I think probably one of my favorite experiences since I've lived and worked in northwest Minnesota has probably been the first time I was in a Prairie Chicken blind. So, the first Prairie Chicken blind I was ever in was out on Glacial Ridge National Wildlife Refuge, which is pretty close to my office so that's a bonus. We do a lot of work out there because it's a globally important IBA [Important Bird Area] and it's a Prairie Plan core area as well, as well as being the largest contiguous wetland restoration in the Country. It's a good place to be to see all things wildlife. One morning I got up really early and drove to Glacial Ridge with a friend. We got into the blind super early and we just had an awesome day. The Prairie Chickens got there just after we did. I'd say there were probably around 17 or 18 Prairie Chickens displaying and then there were additional females skirting around the edges. It was just kind of an amazing experience. If you've never experienced a Prairie Chicken lek close-up like that, there is just something sort of powerful about it. The sounds of the lek are sort of hard to describe unless you've heard it for yourself. It's just really quite loud actually. I didn't expect it to be quite as noisy as it actually was. There were just whoops and hums and cackles and laughter. All sorts of noises that you don't necessarily associate with birds. It was one of those experiences that is almost like something straight out of National Geographic, but it's right in your own backyard. We were out there for a couple of hours and had a great time. We were starting to watch different birds and see what they were doing and how they were interacting with each other. The only bad part about being in a Prairie Chicken blind is that you can't drink as much coffee as you might want to. Since, it's really early when you get to the Prairie Chicken blind and you don't want to have to leave the blind. You either don't drink as much coffee or you drink very little coffee so you don't have to leave the blind and scare the birds away. Other than that, it's a first rate wildlife experience. When we were coming out of the blind, it was late-April, and we were coming out. It was a pretty warm April and we were walking back to the parking area. We were just chatting and looking around and I just happened to glance up and look to my left. I saw just these huge ears and at first I looked back and I didn't really think much of it and then I did a double-take. I looked again and there was a moose cow that was staring right at us, but her head was down low and she was half in a shrub row so you could only see her ears and the top of her head over the shrubs. At first I just nudged my friend and we just stared in awe at this moose that was probably only 75 feet from us. So, we were really close. I wasn't sure what to do. Moose can be dangerous so should back up. Should we go back to the blind? What should we do? We just stayed there and we didn't move and the cow moose raised her head, took a step back, and stayed there watching us while we were watching her. She finally took off slowly, trotting up, the closest thing to a hill the Tallgrass Aspen

Parklands has. It was a little high ridge spot. There aren't a lot of hills in the Tallgrass Aspen Parklands. She stopped and looked back at us as we were watching her and then she trotted off for good. It was just really cool with the combination of the Prairie Chickens and my first blind experience combined with my first Minnesota moose encounter. It was an epic wildlife day. I'd seen moose in Alaska before. In certain areas they are kind of like deer because they're just so common, but I hadn't seen one in Minnesota before. That was kind of special. Since then, of course, I've seen lots more moose. We have quite a few moose out here in northwest Minnesota. That was the first of many cool moose encounters.

Megan: Listening to Alex's story takes me back to the joy and excitement that prairies provide. They offer a frontier where you get to explore new things, view wildlife, and immerse yourself in the discovery. That's what prairies are, a place to discover. It's probably why I find them so fascinating and spend much of my time trying to recreate prairie habitat so that we can buffer the 2% we have left and have this landscape for years to come. Sometimes it feels like a fool's errand that a person could think they would be capable of recreating something that took thousands of years to make, has an equal number of complex connections, and was made, let's be honest, perfect the first time. When I'm trying to reconstruct a prairie, I think about what it needs. What are the elements that I have control of and the ones I don't. I think about how the prairie was connected in ages long past and how I can give it what it needs to survive in the landscape as it is now. One of the things that is so fascinating about prairies and really draws me to them is that they need disturbance to persist. A cycle of wildfires and grazing animals like deer, elk, and bison renew the prairie and create microhabitats that are nutrient rich or nutrient poor, which in turn encourages diversity because these conditions are necessary for certain species to thrive in these patchy, what I like to call, mini ecosystems. Prescribed burning nowadays is a tricky science and a perfect example of where the weather conditions, which are certainly out of our control, have to be just right, in order for us to burn safely. It takes partnership and persistence. Two things that prairies and those who work in the prairie landscape are definitely no stranger to. Listen as Pheasants Forever Biologist, Megan Howell, tells her story about getting to participate in a prescribed burn this year. It just might light a fire in you.

Megan H story: So, the best thing that happened to me this year was being able to do a prescribed burn with the native prairie bank [program]. I've done a few burns when I worked with the Iowa DNR and I was really looking for more opportunities to get back into it and get more experience. I got the opportunity to do that when I attended one of the Prairie Coteau Conservation Focus Area meetings. Rhett Johnson with the native prairie bank [program] had mentioned that they were short-staffed for the burn season and they may not be able to get as many burns done as they wanted to or needed to. So, every year I set goals for myself personally and professionally. This year my goals were to set out to volunteer more and also to get on a few burns because I had been missing it and I wanted to get more comfortable with it. SO, the opportunity was just right up my alley. I hopped on the volunteer list with a few good friends and colleagues of mine. It seemed like as soon as we signed up everything was working

against us to get the burns done. AS everyone knows, the weather was not conducive to burning. We got signed on for volunteering late and almost didn't have a class to get certified and to do the pack test. SO, that was a challenge. To make matters worse, a week or so before the pack tests, which I had worked pretty hard getting into shape for, I was bringing a plate of venison out for my Easter dinner on the fire and my flip flop rolled under my foot and I fell down the stairs. Don't worry, I saved the meat, but I sacrificed my foot. I thought it would be maybe a day or two of pain, but it ended up being weeks. I had to take that pack test with an injured foot, but I luckily managed to pass. So, after all of that, the stars aligned and the weather was right for a fire. We went down to Jackson County to a native prairie bank easement and I got to run the [drip] torch and work the line. It was a beautiful day. We got the fire done and everything went well. The best part about that day was that everyone involved benefitted from it. The native prairie bank [program] got to do a burn that they may not have been able to do, which helped out the land and the landowner. I got to burn with a good friend of mine and colleagues. I also got to fulfill my personal and professional goals of volunteering and gaining more experience with prescribed fire. I guess the reason I wanted to share this story is because I think it's super important: 1) to set goals for yourself 2) don't just attend meetings. There's so much you can get out of them. Immerse yourself in them. I guess I encourage people to contribute to the meetings, but also use the meetings to network. You never know what opportunities are out there to do more. You just never know what can come out of it. That's the best thing that happened to me all field season. It was a great day and a great opportunity and I look forward to hopefully having more in the future.

Megan: That Megan Howell. She is so good. I love that she's always so excited whenever she's talking about stuff and opportunities and partnership. She's so right, it takes a village. Right, Jess?

Jess: I really enjoyed her comments about volunteering. I thought that it was fabulous. I thought it was spot on. Perfect recommendation or people that might want to move forward in DNR or their career or whatever they want to do. It's the perfect opportunity.

Megan: Yeah, you have to make things happen. They are not always—stuff isn't always paid. Nobody's in this field for the dollar, dollar bills, y'all. We're in this because we love it. I just thought that everybody who had stories, they had such good stories. For me, it really brings forward everything that's going on under the MN Prairie Conservation Partnership. I just hope this joy that everybody's sharing—I felt like every single story had this joy and exuberance and excitement about prairie—and that makes me excited because—alright, we're going to get sappy here, Jess. When I return to the roots of the prairie as dust, it makes me feel good because someone long after me is going to have these opportunities to puzzle over how complex prairie is and bask in the wonder. I like it.

Jess: That's pretty good. I liked the New Year's Resolution aspect of Megan's comments too. Think about what you might want to accomplish over the next year,

Megan: And that ties it all together with this special bonus episode around the holiday time. You know there's no doubt that the work we do is incredibly rewarding and fascinating. To do this and work for the people of MN and to work for our natural resources, right? The work we do is complex. It can be difficult. It can be challenging. So, before we close out this episode and wish everybody a Happy New Year and a transition into 2020, we want to make two dedications. So, on the hard days. I don't know about you, Jess, but I really look forward to coming home to my space. To our families and especially to our furry friends. Your furry friend is staring at me right now, it's very distracting ((laughter)). My furry friend is crashed out asleep on her bed. For the last 14 year and 10 months I've been greeted at the door by a coonhound who now has increasingly gray whiskers. I don't know about you, but her happy dance has changed over the years, now it's not so much a race around the yard, it's just a small hop and a light jog around the yard, but it doesn't really matter because every time I come home and I see that long nose and wagging tail, whatever kind of day I had just melts away. In your case, Jessica, you are greeted by a much younger, more boisterous presence one could say. I like to think of him as an elephant in golden retriever form who just about knocks you over with his exuberant happy dance. He cannot believe that you came home to him and that you're his person. So, before we close out, we just want to say that this episode is dedicated to them Savannah and Domino and all the furry companions no matter what form they take. And as a special dedication—Jess didn't know I was going to do this, but it's happening. This episode is also for my cohost, Jessica Petersen. I'm looking at you right now with big eyeballs. It really is an honor to be your friend, to be your colleague, and to be a partner on this podcast. We met on the prairie, I don't even know how many years ago, and even though you were warned that I'm absolutely bananas, we still just formed this great friendship. This has transitioned into our work where we get to work on these fun projects together and I'm so glad that I got to go on this journey with you. Thanks for being willing to always try new things with me and help spread our joy of the prairie. Next year is a New Year and as you transition to new work responsibilities, I know your impact on the prairie and particularly on my life will continue. With the New Year, comes a new beginning.

Jess: Thanks Megan. That was really sweet. We are good friends and we have a lot of fun on the prairie and we've had a lot of fun on the Prairie Podcast. Now it's time to bring in some fresh energy, some fun stuff, from our favorite person—Mike Worland. We love you Mike. It's gonna be great.

Mike: Hey you two.

Jess: It's going to be awesome. So, I'm handing you the baton, Mike. Mike's going to take over my role, keep Megan in line as Season 3 continues next year ((laughter)).

Mike: No. No, I can't do that. But, I am so honored and so excited about being on this podcast.

Megan: I mean I just have a couple quick caveats here: is Mike really everybody's favorite person? I don't know. I have some questions about that ((laughter)).

Jess: Welllll—

Mike: Well, that is an erroneous statement there's no doubt.

Jess: I don't know. You guys are all great.

Megan: We can get into it in Season 3. I'm excited as well. Jess, I will miss you more than I can even begin to possibly say, but I also think it will be fun to go on this journey with Mike. He's like a brother to me. We have sort of a frenemy type relationship. It's good.

Mike: It is kind of a brother-sister sort of thing.

Megan: It is very much a brother-sister relationship. It's a little bit frightening sometimes.

Mike: I enjoy pointing out when I think you're wrong. And usually, I'm wrong when I do that.

Megan: Yep, that's accurate.

Mike: It's fun anyway.

Megan: I'm glad that this is being recorded so forever I can point to this now always. Remember that time when you said that I'm always right? Ok, let's just play Bonus Episode, Season 2. So, thanks for being on this journey with us. We can't wait to roll out Season 3. Lots of things happening in the New Year. Lots of changes. We hope things are going great for you. As always, you can find episode details and more information on our website at [mndnr.gov/prairiepod](http://mndnr.gov/prairiepod) You guys ready?

Jess: Ready

Megan: We're going to wish you a safe and peaceful holiday season while you're watching the prairie grasses lodge with snow.

All together: Happy New Year! Happy New Year!

Megan: Ok, so many. Dan, insert kazoos.

((sounds of birds chirping and wind blowing intermingled with holiday music))

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