MPR News | Minnesota Now Road trip to Moorhead: Birds, bugs and flowers thrive in tallgrass prairie 01KT7D5VYGPZEYBHBW6G8HKJ1H

NINA MOINI: Time now for another audio postcard from our road trip to Moorhead. We took scenic highway 10 from St. Paul to learn more about our state from the road. And this week we're airing stories from the stops we made along the way. Today, we'll drop into one of Minnesota's oldest and most recognizable landscapes, the tall grass prairie.

The Nature Conservancy acquired nearly 2,000 acres of prairie land to protect in Clay County. Their goal is to conserve the plants and create habitat for prairie chickens and pollinators. It's one of just a few slivers of prairie in a state that used to be covered in tall grass. Another of those slivers nearby is the Bluestem Prairie. It's also protected by the Nature Conservancy. I met with Liz Beery, Associate Director of Grasslands, for a walk there.

There's just so many vibrant sounds, the birds, the wind. Tell us a little bit about just where we're standing.

LIZ BEERY: We're currently in the Bluestem Prairie Complex, and it is several thousand acres. It's majority owned by the Nature Conservancy. And this very cool habitat is home to the greater prairie chicken, hundreds of different insect and pollinator species. It's a fantastic nesting area for many grassland nesting birds. And many of those species are in decline because there's not that much prairie and grassland left in Minnesota. And this is a pretty unique area because over 5,000 acres of habitat in one big block. I just heard a pheasant in the background, too.

[LAUGHS]

NINA MOINI: I was surprised to learn, and I wonder if others would be surprised to learn, that there did used to be so much more prairie land, and that something like only around 1% of it is still in existence. That blows me away.

LIZ BEERY: Minnesota used to have 18 million acres of prairie. Now we only have about 1% of that left, about 250,000 acres left in the state, which is mind boggling, when you think of what things looked like 150 years ago, 200 years ago, where every single animal had full reign of this prairie part of the state. The prairie and wetland complexes were just beautiful and provided abundant resources for many wildlife species, and now many of them are fragmented.

Some areas like this are still in large complexes, which is amazing, and we work hard to try and protect and preserve areas like this as the Nature Conservancy. So spring is all about looking down on the prairie. You end up seeing so many cool little pops of color. But if you were to just look straight out, you'd just see tan. So it's very fun to walk out in the prairie.

I see some dogbane. Whoops! I found a hole. That's normal too. You develop very strong ankles working in the prairie.

[LAUGHS]

Here's harebell, these very cute little purple flowers. They're all-- oh, wow, there's a lot of harebell in here. Holy moly. Some sunflower leaves coming up.

I'm just a plant nerd, so I'm just going to get all excited about plants now. Also, something that people don't think about very often is that deer actually really like grasslands. So sometimes we'll find little deer beds, out in the middle of the prairie these flat and little two-foot wide circles.

You look at a prairie, especially when you're just driving down the road, you often just see the grass. But there's hundreds of species of wildflowers and sedges, and a lot of them are teeny tiny. Like this time of the year, you have to walk out in the prairie, and you'll see all of these small flowering plants because they're getting abundant sunlight while the tall grass plants haven't really taken off yet. They start really growing vigorously and getting into June and July. But this time of year, a lot of those little, small-stature plants are coming up.

There's a lot of diversity out there. And those are really important plants to support pollinators. And pollinators help support grassland birds. And the seeds from those plants also support all the small mammals and birds later in the season, too. So all of those things connect together.

Well, when we lose these prairies, we're losing a significant part of the culture of Minnesota. A lot of people came to these areas thousands of years ago because it was full of abundant wildlife. People also discovered, in more recent centuries, that it has very, very rich soils. And that's when conversion to farmland, in patches, started occurring.

And there was still an excellent balance of people using the land for food production and then also wildlife habitat. And then it continued and continued. And it's harder and harder for farmers to make a living. So they're trying to make bigger fields and try to use their land as best as they can to survive as well. So it's a challenge trying to find that balance.

NINA MOINI: I wonder, too, when you're talking about the delicate new life that's all across this prairie, how do you conserve that? What does conservation look like on a day-to-day basis? Are you minding and making sure that things are able to grow, or do you let nature take its course?

LIZ BEERY: That's a good question. We do both. We do monitor these plant communities. We use different vegetation monitoring techniques in order to gauge diversity. It's never just one static plant community. After a controlled burn or after grazing, you'll see a different response in the species that are showing up in a prairie.

And we use those tools because prairie is a very dynamic ecosystem, and it needs disturbance. Otherwise it will succeed into shrubland or forest land. Implementing things like controlled burns, conservation grazing are very important. We also do some invasive species management here and there. We'll also do some tree and brush management as well.

We have multiple tools in our so-called toolbox, our management toolbox, where we use controlled burns. We use grazing, brush management. And all of those things help us retain the diversity in the prairie that we're looking for.

NINA MOINI: What would you want Minnesotans to about just the status of our prairie lands, and what needs to happen to make sure they're continuing to thrive well into the future?

LIZ BEERY: We need to continue investing in conservation efforts. Conservation isn't a one-time event or opportunity. Yes, we can invest money to protect a given land or protect a given conservation area, but we need to continue investing in future management in order to have the best success long term, to keep that ecosystem in good condition and ensure that it's there for the next generation or the next three generations.

NINA MOINI: How close would it be to the point that it used to be, say, maybe 100 years ago? Is that an attainable goal again or not really?

LIZ BEERY: That would be really challenging to implement. Our goal really focusing on key prairie landscapes throughout the state. We call them prairie core areas. And in those prairie core areas, places like Bluestem, places further north in the Blazingstar Complex, that we just protected, those areas we have an interest in trying to create these bigger complexes and protecting a larger percentage of prairie in those areas. And then we also recognize on the other side of things that there's also a really fertile soils and really profitable farmland in other parts of the state, where it just wouldn't be feasible for us to go in and protect land and restore it at the scale that we would love to see to bring back prairie at the same way we saw it 100 years ago.

But we just have to find that balance. And another thing that helps to create habitat, even in short-term windows, is things like the Conservation Reserve program, where farmers are able to put some farmland into habitat for 10 or 15 years. Those things go a long way towards just adding some temporary habitat on the landscape for migratory birds and just creating some soil stability.

And in the conservation world, there's always been the topic of preservation versus conservation. And preservation has always been the idea that we just want to keep things exactly as they are. And often in many parts of the country, it's don't touch. Especially in forested parts of the country, it's just, protect those 40 acres of trees and leave them alone for 100 years, and they'll be just the way they are.

But conservation is often the term that we use more so in a more active management. Things change. Different species come into play. We are monitoring these areas and determining if there's something we need to do differently in order to achieve our longterm goals for retaining plant diversity, wildlife diversity.

NINA MOINI: Thanks so much for your work and for telling us about this beautiful land. We really appreciate it.

LIZ BEERY: Yeah, definitely.

NINA MOINI: So fun.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

That was Liz Beery, Associate Director of Grasslands with the Nature Conservancy. It was the last stop on our audio road trip to Morehead. You can hear our entire show from Morehead tomorrow at noon.

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