A hunter expresses gratitude for grasslands.

I paused panting on the prairie.

Despite cold fingers, numb where they gripped the old shotgun, my steamed eyeglasses and a wet spot between my shoulder blades revealed the heat of my exertion.

I had caught up to my black lab, Wigeon, where she'd disappeared into cattails bunched along the edge of a frozen pothole, and marked her progress by the whipping tops of cattails scattering their downy seed pods. There was no hearing her over the sucking of my own breath. After the pause, I too stepped into the wall of cattails.

In that instant the prairie that had seemed so empty of all but the dog and me erupted into a confusion of life. A white-tailed deer burst from where it had been crouching to avoid the dog, so near to me that had I extended my shotgun I could have touched it. Snow, scattered from the cattails, hung momentarily in the air, each crystal glittering in the lowering sun. Had I time, I'd have paused to admire it. But the chase was still on.

PHEASANT BY DANIEL J. COX

The dog traded directions, and as she did, pheasants flew from the far end of the marsh. A great wave of birds launched into the sky, every one of them out of shotgun range, the roosters snubbing me with their cackling laugh. Wigeon surged into an opening before me, her tongue lolling and red with exertion, her face clouded by snow and cattail down. I called her to my side and calmed her before we scoured the rest of the marsh. Of the pheasants there was naught but their three-toed tracks and enough scent to drug the dog. Beaten, we walked wearily back toward the truck through the skiff of snow. On a rise, I turned to the slough and silently saluted the birds that had so handily eluded us.

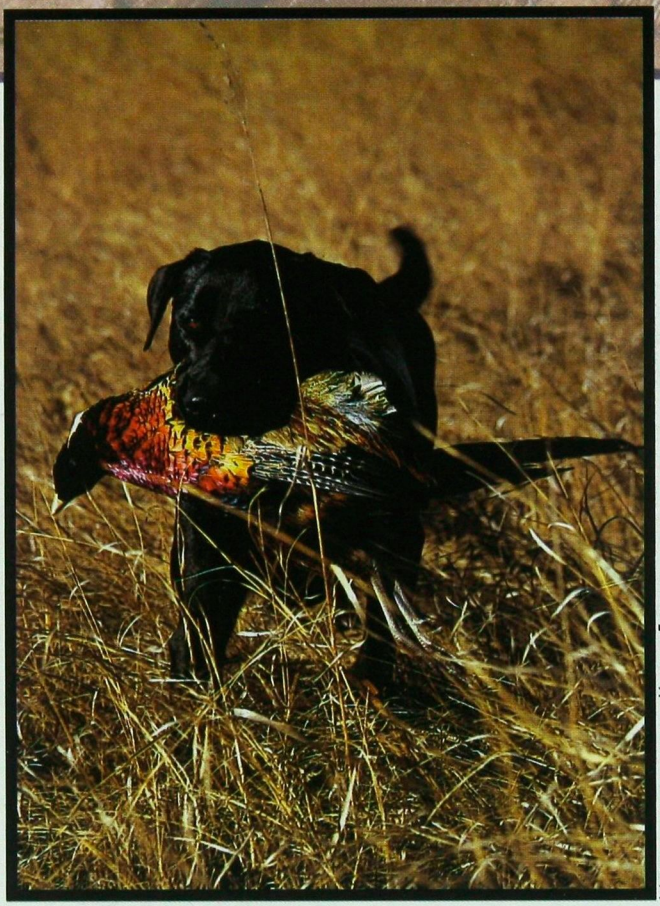
From the knoll I scanned the horizon. The island of grass through which we had labored, so full of life, ended but a quarter

GIVING THANKS on the PRAIRIE

By MICHAEL FURTMAN

mile away. Beyond, an ocean of black earth swept to the end of our sight, interrupted only by a few trees and some distant farm buildings. Roads diced the country into mile-sized squares—an immense checkerboard. This well-ordered world we saw—well-ordered if you are a farmer—struck me then, as it always does, as a melancholy place, manipulated within an inch of its life.

Yet I love it here. Late in the year, when the sun never seems to rise much above half-mast, when thin gray clouds hinting of winter scud across the endless sky and cold winds hiss through the grass, I come to these grasslands to chase pheasants.



Wigeon with prey/art by Michael Furtman

At least that's the excuse.

A creature of the North Woods, I am nonetheless drawn to prairie Minnesota by its remnant wildness. Each autumn I long to walk where the horizon is unbounded, to feel the tug of tall grass at my boots, to listen to the geese and cranes pass overhead, and to

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watch the never-ceasing quartering of a fine dog as it is dragged along by the intoxicating scent of a pheasant. I drive past the ubiquitous No Trespassing signs—including a huge, hand-painted one (Don't Even Think of Hunting Here) that guards a barrens of dirt and stubble where, even if I had hunted, I would have had a hard time finding a field mouse. And when I pull up to a yellow Wildlife Management Area sign, or a green one proclaiming Waterfowl Production Area, I feel a huge sense of welcome and a debt of thanks to those who created these public lands.

But if the pheasants and the dog work are the public excuses for these visits, there are private reasons as well. I love to walk deep into these public oases, especially those that form a bowl, because from their centers, with the horizon formed by a grassy rim, I can almost believe that we are walking the untamed prairie, that part of Minnesota now more vanquished and vanished than any other. And when I sink to the ground to take a rest amid the Indian grass and side-oats grama, I can let my imagination run, and when it gallops, I believe I hear the pounding and groaning of great seething herds of bison, hear the calliope-call of the prairie elk. I imagine that when I top the next rise I will look down and see, not my waiting pickup truck or a farmstead, but the smoking spires of the Lakotas' teepees, hear their children laughing and the dogs barking, and watch as the men leap to their ponies to chase buffalo across the plains.

Once, this land was as rich with wildlife as it is today lush with corn. The Great Plains had been called the Serengeti of North America, and Minnesota's portion was no less verdant. Grass unbroken from our western border east to where it met the oak savanna, it was dotted with uncountable, glistening wetlands, which spawned huge autumn clouds of waterfowl. And instead of pheasants lurking in the big bluestem and porcupine-grass, prairie chickens chuckled as they flew, once so numerous they were routinely found for sale in local markets.

As evidence of how many large animals once lived on the prairie

were the bone pickers, who, for years after the last bison and elk were killed, labored to pick the prairie clean to sell the skeletons to fertilizer factories. In 1878 St. Paul bone-entrepreneur E.F. Warner found enough buffalo bones, elk skeletons and antlers, and pronghorn antelope horns in Rock County (around present-day Luverne) to gross $78,000 in a single year. So profitable was the business that a B.W. Hicks—"Dealer of Buffalo Bones," according to his letterhead—set up shop on busy Nicollet Avenue in Minneapolis to handle the incoming trade.

This testimony to change on a gargantuan scale is no indictment of farmers, who perform a vital task. But as I drive the miles of roads, see the fence-row-to-fence-row farms, tick off the seemingly endless miles of drainage ditches, I cannot help but wish we had been as farsighted in protecting prairie as we had been in reserving forests.

No greater champion of these prairies ever existed than Richard Dorer, who—as state supervisor of game—dreamed of preserving prairie wetlands and uplands at a time when their destruction was rampant. Part preacher, part field general, Dorer talked in coffee shops and at meetings to all who would listen of his Save the Wetlands plan for a surcharge on small-game licenses to purchase some 200,000 acres of prairie lands and waters.

Despite his energy, the struggle must have been disheartening for this beefy man. With the post–World War II boom in full swing, he had to know he was working against an unrelenting headwind of contrary goals. Beginning in the late 1940s, as he wound his way across the state to preach, surely he saw yet more prairie plowed and watched draglines drain thousands of wetlands that vanished during the years it took for his dream to become law.

What sustains such dreams? Did he ever get angry as he drove the country roads trying to organize the state's then-unorganized hunters? If the prairie is a miracle of creation, so too is the will of a

person so bent on its preservation that he can snatch thousands of acres away from the plow.

"Conservation is the militant defense of natural resources," Dorer wrote. The use of "militant" might today brand him as some kind of extremist. And in the 1950s, saving wetlands and grass might have labeled him as an oddball. But it took the organization of a military campaign to create his program, and though it then may have seemed odd, today it is clear that his plan to save prairie and wetlands was truly farsighted.

I could not help but think of Dorer as we trudged through the big bluestem toward the truck, weary but happy from hours of hiking. As we walked, Wigeon startled a prairie falcon from the grass. The handsome bird launched first downwind, flashing in the sun, then swung wide to our left, stroked into the breeze, and landed in a lone, bare-limbed cottonwood on the marsh's edge. It folded its wings delicately and watched us, waiting; and as we went forward, we saw why.

In the grass was a bowl of tossed feathers. In the bowl of feathers was the torn carcass of a pheasant. We had disrupted the falcon's meal, and I wondered if we hadn't even unknowingly helped provide it when we flushed the pheasants from the marsh.

Wigeon nosed it. I called the dog away and smiled.

At least one hunter in this little wild place had been successful. And at least there was this little wild place left in which it could be successful.

We hurried on so that the falcon might return to finish its meal. It knew nothing of the struggle to preserve such a place for it—and me—to hunt. But I knew.

As we closed in on the truck, we walked past the little sign that declared this to be public land. I paused, and thought of the giant of a man who made this all possible.

I turned to the grassland once more, and taking my hat from my head, said aloud something I felt needed saying.

"Thank you, Richard Dorer."