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Prairie Suite: A Celebration

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Prairie Suite: A Celebration

Poems by Twyla Hansen
Drawings by Paul Johnsgard

Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center
The mission of Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center is to foster the understanding, appreciation, and conservation of Nebraska’s tallgrass prairie ecosystems by engaging people in the site’s natural and cultural resources.

Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center, owned by the National Audubon Society, is a 640-acre tallgrass prairie sanctuary located fifteen miles southwest of Lincoln, Nebraska. Miles of walking trails allow visitors to enjoy the beautiful native tallgrass prairie, ponds and wetlands, wildflowers and grasses, birds and other wildlife, peaceful surroundings, and scenic vistas. The site is listed on the National Register of Historic Places because of the presence of mid-19th century wagon ruts from the Nebraska City-Ft. Kearny Cutoff to the Oregon Trail. Education programs and volunteer opportunities are available.

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Acknowledgements

Remarkable things happen when individuals decide to make a difference.

Audubon extends sincere appreciation to Twyla Hansen for her brilliant idea and for the beautiful poems she has written for this project.

Audubon thanks Paul Johnsgard for his wonderful drawings and for choosing them especially for each poem.

We gratefully acknowledge Ron and Judy Parks, who saw the vision and made the printing of this book possible.

This amazing collection is a gift to the tallgrass prairie from Twyla, Paul, Ron, and Judy.

All proceeds support Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center.

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Twyla Hansen
Paul Johnsgard

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Dedicated
to the unspoiled places on Earth,
to their inhabitants, and
to those who recognize their importance.
Evolution

There doesn’t have to be a reason:
some grains are taken on faith or chance.
Yet each migrant has a story to tell,
each gleaming bone is an argument.
Know this: when the last glacier caught whiff
of the promise ahead, it raced backward
on the pulse of wind, left pockets of fire weed
and green song, surprising gifts of the erratic.
Sun, wind, rain, drought, fire. Travel this
frayed land where tall grass rules, learn
the buckle of deep time. Flora and fauna,
sky and soil: let them blaze the mind.
Coyote

Cold rimes the pond’s edge, exhales sharp and blue from hill to valley. Coyote, under fierce stars’ eyes, follows a small scent flaring from tallgrass shadows, its hunger reflected overhead to the sharp and restless moon.

Have you ever known such purpose, felt the true hammer of blood through your veins? Near the wallow-stone, lean coyote tilts its head, twitches its ear. Prey hunkers down its soft bones and fur. Endless prairie roots go on breathing.
Earth

Below ground is where all can happen, anchor and breakdown and bedrock, processes of gritty explosion and darkened decay, the consonant of winter and the blessing of rain. Plate and particle, the even temperatures, absence of human memory.

Is it necessary we understand? Could we simply stand on this umbrella of grass, inhale the sprawl of green dust, gasp at flattened possibilities beneath its damp, matted underside? Here’s to the unseen, the rooted, that unopened envelope yet to discover.
Frog Pond

Over the low, slippery, just-thawed silt
Come the first spring-ripples, gurgling, drifting
Over edges of black reed-wands, spent tassels
Of cattails; from beneath logs, rocks, leaf litter
We undescend, open our lids to intensified rays.

Then a shining broth, a scampering soup, the pond
Alive with our chorus—critical indicators, our permeable
Skins susceptible to the smallest downward ladder—
Creatures whose lives both provide and partake, we
Sing our racket of approval, in warming love of rain.
Prairie-Chicken

You can keep your theories: we have stalked it nearly to extinction. Yet out here in spring on rolling hills of virgin prairie, it makes its legendary ground-nest. This is wildness, silence, the crown-fire center for its courtship battleground called a lek: the male, in feather-fan and moan and air sac inflation. Oh, to possess such trembling strength, such purpose, passed down through the millennia. Glimpse this royalty, its sacred ceremony, the blended, barred spirit feather of this otherwise quiet yet diminishing bird.
Lark Sparrow

What light flickers on? What invisible filament guides them on their long migration north?

May, and already they tumble toward this cathedral green, graze on grasshoppers, the slender, uneaten seeds of the previous fall. Both blessing and burden, this trembling display, the courtship they shoulder restoring the species. Meanwhile, frail petals unfold on the forbs, rise from the thatch of last season, this noisy pond, that placid field, this dusty Earth, their rusty patches, their melodic song, singing, singing.
Sickle Moon

It could happen: this moment beneath the sickle moon with those delicate formations dotting the blue-black, the strange breath that quickens when you weave time and imagination and place, that chance ripple of the realization you are not the first one,

that you are standing in the prints and ruts of those who came before, that this rustle and effluvium have undulated toward others, these hills and valleys sampled long before. It could happen: open your face to the sky-roof, let the sink of dark in.
Meadowlark

Could there be a sweeter escape: overcast dune-sky, traversing the tallgrass geography, rounding a bend to hear the bright meadowlark, its song-pulse melodic and clear, from the nearest post its flute-notes perpendicular, so common its common name mirrors the common:

*a bird of the meadow, song like larks of Europe.*

Yet somehow its sum is greater: rifling into grass, into thatch, extracting insects, this stately bird manifold in purpose, unlike us on a day in transition, as we risk the uncommon, our escape green and sweet.
Snake

I may hesitate, tense, may swerve from the trail
when I stumble across the red stone, your sunning.
Traveler on this corner of our planet, I cannot deny
such wavering, hard-wired into my time of survival,
a thread to the past, perhaps, to make me observe.

Were you warm, dreaming of small mammal, of toad,
will this day be sufficient to restore your desert blood?
In this garden we call Earth, let us promise more edges,
consume less, allow the balance—water, sky, soil—
reject the grip of temptation for the peace of a wild thing.
Dragonfly

Call me Tiger. All day I command
the heated air, work my bright wings above
the pond, the wetland, hover flit zoom
to grab mosquitoes on the wing.
With complicated eyes I quicken
to heat and blossom, to the beckon
of reed and cattail. Summer is my season,
when grasshopper and cricket sing to the sun,
when cicada lulls us into another hot night.
Here, I’ve work to do. Touch me—if you dare.
Song of Silence

What sound could be more stirring: silence
a flawless lightning, loosening the daily rut
of despair, its seamless refrain a grace-filled refuge.

Haven’t each of us at times longed for clarity,
sought the textured path to consciousness?

Consider the leaves of grass: iron roots
sucking water and soil, blades green in sun,
unassailable, swaying, exhaling water and oxygen.

Our lives taxed, a polyrhythmic gnarl of salt and grief.
In our own warped search: we whittle, we attempt.
Lightning Bugs

What better show for mortals, bursting with rivers of free light, playing out above the darkened grass?

Night opens the blue folds of its silk. Like stars, blinking, they row awake—countless beetles—their abdomens brimming with luminescence, out from under snags and black leaves into the brief and cinnamon air.

Over pond and blade, in their appetite they bring us fire, restoring a spark of salvation to our crumpled lives,

these mysterious gatherers, these silent signalers, these copious lightning bugs of childhood delight.
Eastern Screech-Owl

Could there be a kindness more delicate, a nuzzle of feathers in the quavering dark? Like the flick of wrists, great shoulders blossom into corridors of moonlit grass, bound with success back to the oak, a tuft of silenced mammal in its clutches. What else will do such wet work, pluck from the endless parade, gift us pellets of fur and bone? Which came first, the offering or recipient? At times life is a series of whistles, lumbering; at others it is camouflage to the light of day.
Walk on the Prairie

There is mystery here, in the shapes of grass, in the dim movements of an inland sea, connections to an earlier time. Wander barefoot, hypothesize the dance of millennia, the unbearable carvings of the built environment, this ragtag escape.

Let its divine simplicity ooze into your pores. Comb the steel from your hair, blanket your tongue with orange. Your breathing will slow. Breathing slow, unbutton the child within. Give her permission to go fly a kite.
Grasshopper

Chew, chew this dense forest of grass, it’s what I do,
in open prairie, in pillars of forbs, in morning dew,
this fragile house tangling in green webs known as food,
my affectionate song echoing in wind, the deep wand
of my oboe legs merging with the sky at night.

Remember, as a child, those infinite summer days,
how you slipped out to the physical world, alone,
abandoned yourself to heat, dust, the secret life of ponds,
returning from your voyage, your spirit renewed?
Chew, chew, is what I did, day in, day out, while you grew.
Upland Sandpiper

Who knows how it came to be gathered here: slender-necked shorebird of the dry grasslands, clear indicator of high-quality habitat. That once a machine has scraped the last stalk and stone, it would vanish before the smoke has settled.

We pretend, shrug, turn a blind eye to wild shadows. Here, we can swallow past omissions, celebrate its silhouette, its distinct habit of raising its wings upon landing, as if to say this is my inner court, my summer echo, where I breathe grass, undiminished.
Monarch

Look, there, over the whitecaps
of inland summer, a flutter of bright wings
toward a nectar profusion, fountains of wildflowers
delivering, their pink-yellow-purple bounty splayed
under the sun for the awakened proboscis,
the monarch on its fleeting seasonal flights.

Who would think of danger—orange-black beauty—
bundled and poisonous to its feathered enemy?

Oh, to ride the air on such royal wings
through this temperate life, with such little fear!


Cicada

Long before the moon dangles in the dark, she crouches on clear wings in the thick of prairie—bluestem, sage, sunflower—shivers to the pulse of her mate’s irresistible buzz. Late day thunderheads build to the west: soon the thrash of wind and rain will wash each gully and furrow, settle this galaxy of dust. In the ditch she whispers a lullaby to herself, scoots the bulge of her robust body closer to dank soil where she will abandon her brood to the future. Lightning hatchets the charged air. Beyond the clouds, each star cycles on.
Great Blue Heron

At twilight it rises off the polished mirror pond, on cupped wings moves gray and steady above the ripples of grassland, circling only to circle back.

All day it stalks the dark shallows for a meal, all this orange season on stick-legs trolls to survive, sporting its feather necklace, its backward head plume.

Often we are strangers to Earth, stumbling over the thorns of our days. Here, sky sets fire to the silk sleeves of its clouds. If you love this planet, stand at attention, take only what you need, only what is rightfully yours.
Prairie: Giants in the Earth

Have we listened long enough to the chattering machine, can we redeem our losses, redirect back to timelessness?

Time was: a great plain plumed with grass, now all but gone by way of the steel plow, first in a lineage that frayed an ecosystem, fumbling downward one row at a time into dense and fibrous roots, these soils made fertile by a massive underground biomass.

Can we now attempt to learn, appreciate the unsullied breeze above this survivor, ever hope to be as well-sustained?
Red-tailed Hawk

Like a dark blur the hawk drops in a steep dive
into a small bundle of prey, commands the airwaves

with its great shoulders, its broad and lengthy wingspan;
folded in stillness, then, it perches on branch or pole.

What pools of opportunity here on the open prairie,
this island spinning with food to its electric eyes.

On the grass floor, among the rooted slender stalks, even
in dust few are safe from its sharp talon, its beak of doom.

Look, there, watch it bathe in blue air, soaring and circling,
small blotch on the mirror of pond, its rusty tail its signature.
Late Fall

All night in a stiff north wind
the tall grass hunkers down into dew—
insect, mammal, bird—without you
holds its own near root and crown,
breathes as one beneath a bowl of stars.

Now, the late-rising light scatters, as you walk
reveals blanched stalks orange-tan, red-headed
sumac, the touch-and-go tumble of seed heads.
The erratic wet rock in the sun shines red.
The heart, among such riches, leaps.
Bobcat

Out of necessity, each wild understone guards its secrets, preserves its sanctity far from the weight of unforgiving pavement.

To think: out here in the shadowy crevice or hollow it thrives, emerges solitary under the nocturnal dance of stars,

with luck and patience handed down from its predecessors undoes the inner life of a small mammal, a bird, perhaps—

this tawny relative of our lazy house pet, invoking the feral—while we gaze from our doorstep into ink at silent Dippers,

to think there might be something out there breathing the edge, bringing a chill, all instinct and tooth, tribute to claw and fur.
Northern Harrier

The eye has it, and just as often, the ear:
I sit, becoming a drowsy stone in the slow dusk,

when great wings tilt low over contours of grass,
pounce merciless with great hooks into something small.

I have stumbled into its territory, blind in this vanishing light.
Around me, voices riffle wild to the whitewash moon,

to the flurry of planets now hobbled overhead. Harrier,
from the Old English *hergian*, *to harass by hostile attacks*.

Is that the beauty of this broken world, then, to grapple with,
to understand? As I think I do; as if this is my own domain.
This Fragile, Healing Land

How fragile this land is and how healing.
That we might gather its bounty, be humbled
by its opulent and sufficient nourishment.
If we could only learn to inhale its pale breath,
abandon ourselves to its fragmented song.

See, there—water, leaf and feather—ribbons
in the wind, the sun a copper disk at sunset.
Let the wheel of your singular mind unwind,
imprint your body with each phase of the moon.
Be open to the unexpected, expect to be amazed.
About the Artists

TWYLA HANSEN is a writer and an on-going student of sustainability issues. She has served as a community volunteer for a variety of literary and environmental organizations. Among her four books of poetry is *Potato Soup*, which won the Nebraska Book Award competition for poetry in 2004.

*Earth, air, and water are essentials for all life and my writing. In this project, I envision the words and drawings as equals, as one entity, creating a tallgrass synergy. It was a pleasurable and informative experience to collaborate with Paul in honor of our prairie heritage.*

Twyla Hansen

PAUL A. JOHNSGARD is Foundation Professor Emeritus of Biological Sciences at the University of Nebraska, and a long-time advocate for wildlife and natural resources. He is the author of forty-nine books on ornithology and the natural sciences, and has received many state and national honors, including the Science Award from the National Wildlife Federation in 2005.

*It has been a pleasure to marry my drawings to Twyla’s words, and I hope each will be enhanced by the other. I thank Twyla and Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center for the opportunity to celebrate our wonderful prairie.*

Paul A. Johnsgard
Drawing Captions

Cover: Male grasshopper sparrow (*Ammodramus savannarum*), singing on dead stem of annual sunflower (*Helianthus annuus*).

1 “Evolution”: Skull of bison (*Bison bison*), among prickly-pear cactus (*Opuntia*) and dry prairie

2 “Coyote”: Coyote (*Canis latrans*), adult calling

3 “Earth”: Hibernating western harvest mouse (*Reithrodontomys megalotis*)

4 “Frog Pond”: Male striped chorus frog (*Pseudacris triseriata*), on yellow pond lily (*Nuphar advena*)

5 “Prairie-Chicken”: Male greater prairie-chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido*), in grama grass (*Bouteloua gracilis*)

6 “Lark Sparrow”: Singing male lark sparrow (*Chondestes grammacus*), on eastern red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*)

7 “Sickle Moon”: Male luna moth (*Actias luna*)

8 “Meadowlark”: Singing male western meadowlark (*Sturnella neglecta*)

9 “Snake”: Adult plains garter snake (*Thamnophis radix*)

10 “Dragonfly”: Male twelve-spot dragonfly (*Libellula pulchella*), on cattail (*Typha latifolia*)

11 “Song of Silence”: Sleeping white-footed mouse (*Peromyscus leucopus*)

12 “Lightning Bugs”: Male lightning bug (*Photinus pennsylvanicus*)

13 “Eastern Screech-Owl”: Eastern screech-owl (*Megascopsasio*), pair preening
14 “Walk on the Prairie”: Little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*, far left), big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*), switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*), and indiangrass (*Sorghastrum nutans*, far right)

15 “Grasshopper”: Haldeman’s grasshopper (*Paradalophora haldemani*), pair courting (above), and slant-faced grasshopper (*Mermiria bivittata*), on prairie sandreed (*Calamovilfa longifolia*)

16 “Upland Sandpiper”: Upland sandpiper (*Bartramia longicauda*), adult landing on a post

17 “Monarch”: Female monarch (*Danaus plexippus*), having just emerged from chrysalis, with a second chrysalis also shown (above)

18 “Summer: Night. Day. Night.”: Male yellow-headed blackbird (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*), on cattail (*Typha latifolia*)

19 “Cicada”: Annual cicada (*Tibicen line*), adult male having just emerged from nymphal exoskeleton (below)

20 “Great Blue Heron”: Great blue heron (*Ardea herodias*), adult in flight

21 “Prairie: Giants in the Earth”: Pasture sagewort (*Artemisia frigida*)

22 “Red-tailed Hawk”: Adult red-tailed hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*)

23 “Late Fall”: American tree sparrow (*Spizella arborea*), on willow (*Salix*) twig

24 “Bobcat”: Adult bobcat (*Lynx rufus*)

25 “Northern Harrier”: Northern harrier (*Circus cyaneus*), adult male in flight

26 “This Fragile, Healing Land”: Feather of short-eared owl (*Asio flammeus*)

27 Footprints of mammals occurring at Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center