

THE  
LAST  
PRAIRIE

*A Sandhills Journal*

STEPHEN R. JONES

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# INTRODUCTION

AN ARAPAHO story tells of a peaceful land just beyond a distant hill. When we feel death approaching, we make our way up the hill. From the crest we gaze down on a shimmering valley where the grass grows thick and green. A broad river flows there. Children and wild horses frolic in the sparkling current. The way down is easy, but the people on the living side of the hill hold onto us with all their will, begging us to turn back. The decision to continue or return is the toughest and most painful challenge we ever face, but we must go on. As we walk down into the valley, people from all the generations gather to welcome us. Mother Earth holds us in her heart and soothes our sorrow.

For years, I've been haunted by that story. I've longed for the sense of peace in nature and acceptance of fate that the legend evokes, and I've searched for a living version of that peaceful valley beyond that distant hill.

I grew up among sprawling suburbs south of San Francisco, a few miles from the majestic oak savannas and redwood forests of the Pacific Coast Range. I daydreamed my way through school, frequently imagining I was somewhere "out there," fishing with my father or flushing mule deer and bobcats from the chaparral.

After completing college in 1970, I migrated to Boulder, Colorado, a quiet university town encircled by mountains,

grasslands, and farms. I made my way in Boulder as a school-teacher and naturalist, taking advantage of the miles of hiking trails and open space that surround our community.

But the more I learned about nature, the more painful it became to live in Boulder as our local population exploded and the burgeoning Denver suburbs closed in. I saw golden eagles chased off their nests by rock climbers and watched terrified mule deer flee from packs of domestic dogs. I felt my stomach tighten as prairie dog colonies and farm-land vanished under a relentless tide of subdivisions and shopping malls. Even our mountains—crowded with off-road vehicles, scarred by ski areas and condominiums—felt claustrophobic.

Then I discovered the prairie, and a slow healing began. I fell in love with the fiery sunrises, supple grasses waving in the wind, the abundant wildlife and boundless space. I spent idyllic mornings searching for arrowheads in the grass, exploring old homesteads, conversing with farmers and ranchers whose families had worked the same land for more than a century.

One morning I found some fossilized clam shells lying in the buffalo grass and the entire skeleton of a pronghorn antelope embedded in the chalky bank of a dry ravine. Later, I walked through an isolated grove of limber pines, a last relict of the coniferous forests that covered the plains 15,000 years ago. I began to understand that the grass around me, the limber pines, the clams and 80-million-year-

old ocean that spawned them, and I were all made from the same stuff, our lives woven together by the same currents of time and place. I felt comforted and liberated.

I traveled from Texas to North Dakota searching for an expanse of prairie, a natural grassland stretching from horizon to horizon. One ethereal May evening I chanced upon Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge, in the western Sandhills. I watched the sun settle down into a sea of grassy hills and knew I'd found the place.

I continue to live and work in Boulder, but I spend several weeks each year in the Sandhills camping alone, walking under the stars, *immersing myself in local history and Plains Indian creation stories*. My love for the Sandhills has grown to a passion, and so have my fears that the forces that drove me to this place of sanctuary will eventually destroy it.

Recently, I stood on a wind-sculpted ridge with a friend, a Native American holy man, admiring the surrounding countryside and reflecting on its hypnotic appeal. "The Sandhills," he said, "is the most sacred of all places. It's where our spirit goes to rest when we die."

As we stood there with the wind whipping through our hair and nothing visible but grass, water, and sky, I knew his words were true.

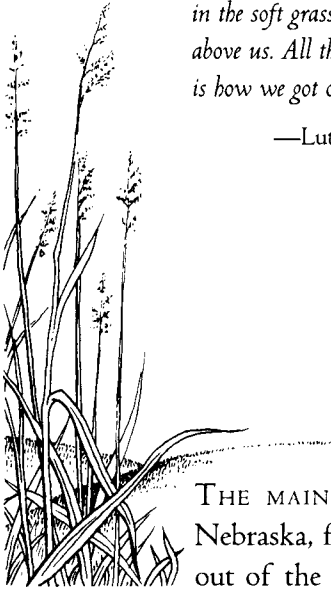
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# LANDMARKS

*We could feel the peace and power of the Great Mystery in the soft grass under our feet and in the blue sky above us. All this made deep feeling within us, and this is how we got our religion.*

—Luther Standing Bear, *My Indian Boyhood*



THE MAIN highway north from Oshkosh, Nebraska, feels eerily deserted as I drive up out of the Platte River Valley and ease my way into the Sandhills. I meet no vehicles along the narrow roadway. No humans stir in the meadows and hills.

The road winds past abandoned farmhouses with tumbleweeds stacked three deep on their front porches, over sparsely vegetated knolls where curlews and horned larks scatter in the wind, and down into luxuriant valleys flecked with shallow lakes and ponds. A herd of mule deer watches from a ridge top. Kangaroo rats and cottontails scamper across the cracked asphalt. As the high cirrus



clouds drift slowly eastward and Swainson's hawks circle overhead, the sky stretches out and the hills roll away toward infinity.

For miles the road runs unfettered over the grasslands, with no fences on either side and not a highway sign or settlement in sight. I cruise past meadows of ripening hay and thread my way through herds of sleepy cattle, stopping briefly to brush up on my Hereford and to photograph an eastern kingbird perched on a yucca stalk. As always when driving this empty stretch, I'm tempted to take a hard right and disappear completely into the sea of sweet green grass, cool hollows, and sun-washed dunes.

There are plenty of Sandhills to get lost in. Encompassing about one-fourth of the state of Nebraska, they are the largest area of grass-stabilized dunes in the Western Hemisphere. The Sandhills stretch two hundred miles from west to east and one hundred miles from south to north, from the Platte River in central Nebraska to the Niobrara River near the South Dakota border.

The dunes are covered almost entirely with native grasses: big bluestem, sand bluestem, little bluestem, prairie sandreed, switchgrass. This Sandhills prairie, with its unique mosaic of grasses, wildflowers, shallow lakes, and spring-fed streams, is the largest remaining relict of the boundless grasslands that once extended from the Missouri River to the Rocky Mountains.

The Sandhills support more pelicans than people. The human population, which rose briefly during the early years

of white settlement, has declined steadily since the 1920s and currently stands at about one inhabitant per square mile. Tourists are scarcer than the few pronghorn antelope that wander among the hills.

Sandhills residents, mostly ranchers, interact quietly with nature every day. A typical Sandhills ranch covers from 2,000 to 100,000 acres. Some ranchers use airplanes and helicopters to keep track of their herds. Sandhills residents may drive thirty miles or more to “town”—sometimes a gas station and general store, a post office, and a handful of weather-beaten frame houses. Blizzards can leave ranches isolated for days or weeks.

City dwellers who visit the region quickly become unnerved by the near absence of trees, the vast distance between settlements, and the sameness of the rolling landscape. Some find the quiet disquieting. During my first few visits I experienced a persistent ringing in the ears as my hearing adjusted to the absence of background noise—the roar of cars, airplanes, and machinery that has become a subliminal part of our daily lives.

This morning, as I admire the June-green grasses along the road, the ringing in my ears has subsided, and I notice sounds that barely registered before, like the “click . . . click” of grasshoppers in the little bluestem and the whir of ducks’ wings on a distant lake. At dawn this morning, when swallowtails clung to glistening grasses and the valley fog turned gold in the sunlight, I could just make out the grunts and bellows of bison lumbering along the ridge tops

and the laughing of Cheyenne, Lakota, and Pawnee children playing in sunflower meadows.



BY THE TIME the Oshkosh–Lakeside road reaches Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge, twenty-eight miles north of Oshkosh, it has degenerated into a one-lane “oil road,” a thin layer of soft asphalt mixed from sand and oil and plastered onto the landscape. Steeply crowned, with chunks of asphalt sloughing off on either side like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, the pothole-strewn highway rattles across alkali flats and bounces over narrow cattle guards framed by giant truck tires. With no conventional landmarks visible and a confusion of hills rolling and tumbling in every direction, time and distance are marked by the lakes, several hundred of them within a few miles of the roadway.

Schoonover Lake, Floyd Lake, Old Woman Lake, Peter Long Lake; Sand Beach, Swan, and Alkali Lakes; Black Steer Lake, Wild Horse Lake, and Bean Can Lake. Long-time Sandhills residents can recite the history of the region through the names of its lakes and valleys. In Custer County folks tell how Richard Greenland, one of the founders of Purdum, came across a Pawnee skull while out hunting. The location of this rather modest 110-year-old discovery is emblazoned on the map as Skull Lake. Residents of Sheridan County know that Elk Valley was christened in 1888 when two hunters from Omaha slaughtered the last elk ever seen in the region, and that Alkali Lake was

where Joseph Adkins had to dig five feet down in 1880 to find water for coffee.

Today I set out to explore as many of these romantically named spots as I can locate. The attractions generally consist of a wild, empty landscape with a weathered signboard or two pointing to the nearest ranch. But it's reassuring to discover places that have hardly changed since the day they were named.

At Island Lake I find eared grebes hunkered down on floating nests; at Black Lake, a baby pronghorn and a pair of trumpeter swans; at Goose Lake, a two-foot-long snapping turtle waddling through a patch of honey-scented sand verbenas. I encounter no humans and few human footprints.

I stop for lunch at Wood Lake, a briny pond surrounded by mudflats and sedge-rush meadows—and the site of an avocet convention. Several dozen of the blue-legged, rufous-necked shorebirds wade in the shallows, swishing their upturned beaks back and forth to seine invertebrates from the water.

I flatten out in the moist grass and slither down toward shore to photograph a couple of young avocets. Within seconds a score of adults have me surrounded. They strut back and forth, bleating obstreperously, and skitter across the salt flats, feigning injury. Two particularly audacious birds come charging forward, screaming bloody murder and snapping their wings menacingly.

I apologize and shuffle back to the car. A box turtle has parked in the shade under the front bumper. I pick him up, set him gently on the shoulder, and watch as he gingerly

pokes his wizened, greenish yellow head out from his ornate carapace. He blinks a grain of sand from a moist eye, slowly extends his neck, and plods off into the long grass.

A sandy two-track road winds toward Crane Lake, a blue oasis among soft green hills. The “cranes” turn out to be a colony of great blue herons. The adults perch atop a dozen bulky stick nests in a small grove of half-dead cottonwoods. The herons fuss and squawk as I approach along a cattle trail framed by swaying stalks of switchgrass and sand bluestem.

An adult flies in with a carp flopping in its bill. Two gaping, orange-tinged beaks appear above the edge of one nest, and the squawking rises in a crescendo. The parent stuffs pieces of carp into the youngsters’ throats, pushes off, and flaps away toward the lakeshore.

At dusk I sit on a hillside as crickets begin their rhythmic chirruping and nighthawks swoop overhead. A pair of coyotes amble down the cattle trail, stopping every few yards to lap up a grasshopper or two. A pelican squadron glides over the rookery, skims across the water, and splashes down against the far shore. Curlews wail their approval.

As I walk away from the lake, I feel the wild sounds and calming space of the prairie drawing me back. This would be a fine night to hide out in the long grass, bed down with the mule deer, maybe den up with a coyote or two.

My first howl elicits a response. They’re somewhere off beyond the water, lost in the dwindling light. The whole family yips in concert, calling up the moon, stars, and kindred spirits while I listen and wait.

# ANCIENT VOICES



ON A CRISP, late October morning, I pack my rucksack and head down the sand trail to Lower Harrison Lake, near the western edge of Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge. It's one of those sumptuous fall days—its dazzle heightened by the proximity of winter—with not a hint of wind, not a speck of cloud in the cobalt sky. The hills bask in amber light, and deep shadows linger in the hollows.

Swarms of red-winged blackbirds swirl over the marshes, mixing with swift-flying flocks of Canada geese, redheads, and shovelers. A pheasant bolts from the tall grass, crowing and cackling frantically. Two marsh hawks cruise by, tilting

their wings from side to side, listening, while scurrying meadow voles send shivers through the ripening grasses and brittle cattails.

My destination is a group of nearly conical hills pock-marked with blowouts, craterlike depressions carved out by the wind. Blowouts support one of Nebraska's rarest and most striking plants, the lavender-colored, vanilla-scented Hayden's blowout penstemon. Badgers and coyotes den in the steep banks, and deer mice and beetles create a frieze of artfully etched tracks. These sand craters also provide great sunbathing, with fine, clean sand like a tropical beach. A secluded blowout seems the perfect place to spend the last warm day of the season.

The hills lie on the far side of a wet meadow where the switchgrass and big bluestem grow head high. I swish through the grass, unable to see the ground, reassuring myself that rattlesnakes avoid moist areas. A huge animal explodes from the grass, almost knocking me over. I catch my balance as a four-point whitetail buck rockets across the meadow, stops at the edge, then bounds up into the hills. The last sight of him is his snow-white tail, held high in alarm, bobbing up and down against the azure horizon.

Once into the hills, I find a steep-walled crater about fifty feet across, take off most of my clothes, and settle into the cool sand. Lying in the blowout is like being in an observatory, with a circle of sky overhead. Way up there, a pair of ferruginous hawks float back and forth, their underwings and breasts sparkling white in the sunlight, as I drift off to sleep.

A faint, rhythmic trilling ripples the still air. I open my eyes and scan the sky. Nothing but blue. But the trilling grows louder, becoming an insistent, pulsating rattle. I begin to recognize the sound, just as almost anyone would know the buzz of a rattlesnake or the hoot of an owl. But I can't put a name to it right away. It registers only as something old, familiar, and wild.

Finally a hundred or more silvery specks come into view straight overhead. Sandhill cranes. They're visible for just an instant before being swallowed up in the blue. A few seconds later the cranes materialize again as they wheel around and the sun reflects off their steel-blue feathers. The show repeats itself over and over, the cranes vanishing and reappearing, circling higher and higher on the thermals rising over the dunes. After a few minutes their vocalizations become more urgent, and they sail off south.

For the next several hours the cranes come in wave after wave. I count hundreds, then tens of thousands. Some pass so close I can see their crimson crests. Others fly so high I can only hear them.

This migration flight originated north of the Arctic Circle, in northern Canada, Alaska, and eastern Siberia, where most of these cranes spent the summer raising their young. The flocks are bound for Texas and the Gulf Coast, where family groups will pass the winter feeding on crabs, snails, and other invertebrates in estuaries and foraging for grain in the adjacent fields. Tonight they'll sleep on the Platte, roosting on islands or in shallows safe from preda-



tors. Within a few days they'll continue south toward the Arkansas and Republican Rivers.

Sandhill cranes have been making this migration for eons. The fossil record in Nebraska goes back about 9 million years. They are among the most ancient of North American birds. Their voices trumpeted across this part of North America long before the Sandhills came into being.

Three million years ago, cranes migrating over what is now western Nebraska looked down on a landscape of humid forests, swamps, and open meadows populated by stegomastodons, camels, zebra-like horses, giant beavers, and tortoises. Sabertooth cats stalked the forest clearings, and enormous ground sloths ambled through dense, mossy thickets.

Thirty thousand years ago, migrating cranes rested on sandbars in the middle of several shallow, braided rivers that flowed over sandy plains. Bison, pronghorn, elk, and bighorn sheep mixed in with the camels, horses, and mammoths that grazed in savannas and pine forests bordering the water. Giant prairie lions hunted among these mixed herds, while chill breezes blew off of glaciers that extended southward within a few hundred miles of present-day western Nebraska. The modern Platte and Niobrara River Valleys had not yet formed, nor had the Sandhills.

About 10,000 to 15,000 years ago, toward the end of the last ice age, migrating cranes encountered Clovis hunters, nomadic people who followed the mammoths, mastodons, and sloths, possibly hunting them to extinction. It was then, as the climate warmed, that fierce northwesterly