

Prairie Dreaming

A bold initiative is underway to buy a huge swath of Montana -- and turn it over to Mother Nature

BY HAL HERRING

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MALTA, MONTANA, the largest town for seventy miles in any direction, is home to nineteen hundred people. It sits upon glaciated plains that were once buried in hundreds of feet of scouring ice, plains with soils too shallow and fragile for farming in the face of drought and extreme temperatures. Far to the southeast rise the Larb Hills, a dark-blue upwelling in a quiet sea of duns and silvers. Beyond them the land drops away into the breaks of the Missouri River. To the southwest the Little Rockies stand like a jumble of black stones against the sky. It is a world that seems made for the raptor's vision, and raptors are everywhere, harriers and prairie falcons, ferruginous hawks and golden eagles, red-tails and kestrels. Unfolding below them is an austere land, made more so by a century's worth of livestock grazing, and the myriad absences it produces and requires.

Biologists will tell you that there are plenty of wild animals and natural processes that do not mesh well with cattle ranching—grizzly bears, wolves, prairie dog towns. If you need the land primarily for cattle, then the dog towns have to be reduced. And if you reduce the dog towns, you reduce the swift fox, the ferruginous hawk, the mountain plover, the prairie rattlesnake, the badger, the complex web of plants and animals that evolved with them. You reduce the black-footed ferret to extinction. You have made the most common trade in our world today, an ecosystem in exchange for what you hope will be profitable land use.

Since 1990, one in ten people has left Malta and surrounding Phillips County for someplace else. Their exodus is the result of a failed 130-year-long experiment in grazing cattle in eastern Montana. A square mile of this land can support no more than six or eight cows, and that, evidently, isn't enough.

THE SPECIES-RICH GRASSLAND that once dominated central North America is almost all gone. In the United States, less than 1.5 percent of native prairie landscapes have any sort of long-term protection. The rest have been used, like grasslands all over the world, as croplands, spaces for cities and suburbs and villages, and, overwhelmingly, as grazing lands for livestock. The native species that have lost the most habitat in North America are those adapted to the grassland ecosystem. The bison was the largest mammal in what was the largest ecosystem on the continent; the prairie dog was the most populous. Both have almost vanished. Native grasslands that once displayed a diversity as complex as 190 species of grasses and forbs per square meter now have an average of twelve.

Outside Malta, however, Sean Gerrity sees something beyond the desolate expanse of hard-grazed prairie country. Not a different place, but a different time, a future that mimics an almost

forgotten past, when the silence of a prairie dedicated to cattle has become once again a landscape raucous with the cries of birds, when the north wind pours not across barren ground but through a wild tangle of native grasses and wildflowers. There was a time when these plains were far from silent. Wolves howled and buffalo thundered and bull elk crashed in autumn battle, the great noisy wheel of life and death revolving on an American prairie that no human being living today has witnessed.

Gerrity, a lean man in his late forties, walks like someone accustomed to covering a lot of ground, which he has done, literally and metaphorically, in the past twenty years. He grew up in the Montana prairie city of Great Falls, in a family devoted to wild country. He returned to the state a few years ago to apply the management skills he learned as a Silicon Valley business consultant to a very different kind of work: saving an ecosystem.

Gerrity's opportunity first raised its head in Phillips County in the late 1990s. It was born of the slow-motion collision of market forces, weather, history, declining human population, and a vanishing commodity—shortgrass prairie with many of its original species still present. Collisions like that, the kind that tear holes in the fabric of what is taken for granted, are the bread and butter of Gerrity's business, so in 2002 he took the reins of the fledgling American Prairie Foundation (APF), a conservation group based in Bozeman. The group's plan—called simply the Prairie Project—is to create one of the largest and most innovative conservation projects on Earth, a grassland reserve replete with as many native species as can be sustained. With luck and money, it eventually could be half again as big as Yellowstone National Park. Perhaps most notably, the funders and thinkers behind the Prairie Project intend to implement their vision with private, rather than government, money, and do

so now, while the window to a different future is still open.

“What we are talking about with this project is a place of vastness,” Gerrity says, “where people can find that spiritual connection to our native grasslands that’s been lost. If we can put all of this together, I can imagine this someday to be like visiting a coral reef—that kind of experience.”

On lands already purchased by American Prairie Foundation funds, a creature does not have to offer hope of profit to find a welcome. Rather than commandeering every available resource in the region to produce a single species, the Prairie Foundation and its donors—many of whom come to conservation from untraditional backgrounds, such as Silicon Valley—seek to recreate an ecology of complexity, one that includes and sustains the human beings drawn to it. If grazing is the problem, stopping grazing, at least intensive grazing by beef cattle, is part of the solution. And the structure of federal and state grazing laws, which gives private owners of ranchland de facto control over vast tracts of public land, provides the lever that may allow the APF to do this in a large way.

Phillips County is anchored at its southern border by the 1.1 million-acre Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge (which is divided by the Fort Peck Reservoir), along with two U.S. Bureau of Land Management wilderness study areas. These form the core of the Prairie Project. But the planned purchase of private ranchlands—perhaps hundreds of thousands of acres’ worth—is what makes the project very different from a typical conservation initiative. Sean Gerrity and his partners don’t really want to talk about grazing issues on the public lands, and they don’t see any reason for controversy in what they are trying to accomplish. The APF simply wants to acquire private ranchlands and their accompanying federal grazing leases, and make

conservation a priority on both. They’ll do so by paying ranchers market value for both the private land and the leases that they hold. “We don’t advocate for anything,” says Gerrity. “We have a single mission of acquiring land for conservation.”

The APF plan of buying from willing sellers (who can be found among ranchers and farmers who are tired of struggling to make ends meet) turns several traditional environmental bugaboos upside down. Unlike many conservation undertakings that depend on agreements, laws, and restrictions, the APF’s Prairie Project purchases land outright; if APF wants to welcome prairie dogs, sage grouse, even wolves, then it has that right. The increasingly hot argument over whether to retire federal grazing leases—which critics feel perpetuate abuse of fragile landscapes—can be silenced. The cattle grazing leases go with the property, and nobody involved wants those leases retired. Instead, APF works with the BLM to convert the leases to permits to graze buffalo. (According to the APF, the BLM treats buffalo as a form of livestock, but the group grazes far fewer buffalo than the number of cattle that previously were permitted by the government.) The landowner—APF—continues to pay property taxes, thus dodging the criticism that conservation purchases and easements wreck a rural county’s tax base. And the APF lands will—with some limits—be open to the public, which heads off the charge of an “elitist land grab.”

The idea of this sort of large-scale conservation effort on the Great Plains has been around since 1987, when Frank Popper, a professor of urban studies at Rutgers University, and Deborah Popper, now a geographer at CUNY’s College of Staten Island, published their landmark study “The Great Plains: From Dust to Dust.” They argued that the Great Plains is an economic wasteland that should be set aside in a national “Buffalo Commons.” Landscapes could

be rescued from the degrading effects of low-return agricultural practices and would serve as a vast public commons, replete with all the native species that had been reduced or extirpated. The idea of the Buffalo Commons spread across the plains like wildfire, infuriating residents who thought that a dangerous cabal of urban ecofreaks and the federal government was conspiring to evict them from their lands. To this day, conservation groups on the plains avoid the term “Buffalo Commons” even as they work for projects that are variations on the theme. And, since 1987, the economic and demographic indicators that spawned the Poppers’ study have almost everywhere strengthened its premise rather than weakened it. According to the U.S. census, 323 of the 478 counties located on the Great Plains had lower populations in 1996 than in 1950, even as the overall U.S. population added 118 million souls. Phillips County is one of the more extreme examples of population decline on the plains; from a boomtown high of 10,000 before the 1930s dustbowl, the population has fallen about 50 percent.

The task of preserving the last of the prairie lands is in the hands of dozens of groups, small and large, scattered from Oklahoma to Montana. They are working to locate and protect the remnants of the grasslands, be they in the never-plowed Flint Hills of Kansas, the austere Sand Hills of Nebraska, or the Staked Plains of Oklahoma, Texas, and New Mexico. The work is being done too by the National Public Lands Grazing Campaign in its pioneering efforts to present ranchers in wilderness areas and the most important watersheds with a one-time buyout of their grazing leases, and by the APF in northeastern Montana. The collective dream is that one day these lands—too marginal for profits in crops or livestock—can be assembled and linked through protected corridors.

IF THE APF SUCCEEDS in accumulating a vast land base, Malta’s fortunes

could change radically as the town becomes the logical gateway to hundreds of thousands of acres of wildlife-rich and publicly accessible prairie lands. Gerrity believes that public access could lead to the birth of a new economy here if Malta takes the opportunity to provide the infrastructure to handle hunters, campers, and new residents. The project could also create an economic domino effect for similar declining plains communities by changing the way the locals view the prairie and its possibilities.

“Very few people who live on the prairie recognize how truly unique this landscape is,” says Curt Freese, director of World Wildlife Fund’s Northern Great Plains Ecoregion Program, a partner in the Prairie Project. “They look at the Prairie Foundation and criticize us by saying, ‘You are taking the land out of production.’ But our model will produce the same taxes as traditional uses, while opening up these other opportunities. The Great Plains is at an economic and ecological crossroads. It is time to change the mindset about what a working landscape really is.”

“One reason you are seeing these initiatives is because the government is pulling the plug on anything environmental,” says conservation biologist Michael Soulé, who sits on the APF advisory council. “Nothing can be done on BLM or Forest Service lands, so the emphasis has shifted to the private sector.”

Indeed, the federal government, once the best recourse for those who wanted to preserve lands and wildlife, has gone fickle. The same swipe of a pen that created the Wilderness Act under one administration now offers wild lands to the oil and gas industry under another. The Bush administration has shown how government can undo the conservation work of generations in a very short time. The list of reverses is long, and shows clearly the ascendance of an ideology, born in the industry-funded

think-tanks of the Cato Institute, the Reason Foundation, the Hoover Institute, and many others, that maintains public lands are a “socialist” concept impeding private enterprise and free markets. The U.S. Forest Service, accordingly, saw a \$220 million cut in its proposed 2007 budget. The same budget called for the precedent-setting sale of almost 300,000 acres of public land. The National Park Service operates on an estimated 80 percent of the funds that it needs to maintain park infrastructure. Regulations that protect wild lands may continue to exist on paper, but when little or no money is allocated to enforce them, they lack power.

The collapse of the paradigm in which government is protector of the commons is as dramatic as the collapse of the ranching and agriculture experiment on the northern Great Plains. Both eras began around the same time, and both may be coming to a close now. Neither will disappear entirely; both have asked and answered key questions about who we are and what we value as a nation. Now, new questions abound, and the idea of using private donations to preserve and restore a rare ecosystem is only one of the answers.

“With private lands conservation,” Soulé says, “the devil is in the details. What is the longevity? How can we determine the future of these efforts, since they are in private hands? But with government efforts, there is always the possibility of catastrophic political shifts, and in that case, private lands conservation projects sometimes offer better guarantees. In the U.S., it’s hard to be against private lands conservation, and it is not as open to controversy. The value of private versus public lands conservation efforts is a toss-up.”

For many southern Phillips County ranchers, the idea of buying land to let it lie fallow is subversive and unwelcome. Yet those same ranchers understand why someone would be drawn to

the place.

“We like to hug our own trees around here. Plant ‘em, and then hug ‘em ourselves,” says Renee Koss, who’s running the kitchen while her husband, Wes, and her father-in-law, Edwin, are calving. The Koss ranch house sits at the crest of a roll of land that falls away to Telegraph Creek. The big windows look out onto the grazing lands, and across the road is a jumble of outbuildings: chicken house, calf shed, windbreak. The family has been here for four generations, and if there is no evidence that anybody has struck it rich, there’s no evidence that anybody has starved out, either.

When Thomas Jefferson envisioned radically independent landholding citizens, he may well have been thinking of someone like Wes Koss and his family, people willing and happy to go the distance, year after year, exchanging toil and isolation for freedom. The tree-hugging remark is more literal than derisive. Growing by the front porch is a healthy green ash tree, a rarity here on the grassland. It is the product, Renee explains, of a couple of generations of trees that they had planted and that had survived only long enough to produce a seedling or two. “That’s one that finally learned how to make it here.” She looks at me to see if I understand what she is telling me.

Wes rides up on a four-wheeler and invites me in for coffee. The classic Weeds of the West lies atop a stack of books beside the kitchen table. Renee brings in a plate of fresh-baked cinnamon rolls from the kitchen and a plate of cookies, pours more coffee. She and Wes are both lean and strong-looking, and so are their two young daughters, both of whom Renee home-schools with the help of the Internet and DVDs because there are no schools within almost forty miles.

Wes is worried that the APF can never be a good neighbor to a working cattle

ranch, concerned that the APF's buffalo will escape their fences onto his place. Less than six miles from the Koss ranch lies the Wiederrick Ranch, which the APF purchased in January of 2004. In late 2005, the APF released its first buffalo there—a concrete step in rebuilding the prairie ecosystem. Yet many of the buffalo in Yellowstone National Park and other areas are infected with brucellosis, which can cause spontaneous abortions in infected cattle. Montana currently has an international “brucellosis-free” trade certification for its cattle herds; the penalty to ranchers for losing that status would be counted in the millions of dollars of lost business. The APF has worked long to allay fears of the disease being transmitted by their buffalo, but ranchers are skeptical, sensing that someone else, not necessarily with their best interest at heart, now holds the basket with their eggs in it. “They seem like good folks, but I don't see how it could be good for us in any way,” Wes says. “If anybody benefits, I guess it'll be somebody like a tour guide. It won't be us.”

“I just don't see what they are trying to do,” Renee adds. “The grasslands here are in the best shape they've ever been in. People hunt on them, camp on them, fish the reservoirs. What are they preserving that we're not? And we hear people saying that everybody wants out of here. I can tell you that's not true. My grandparents are buried right up the road here. They made a go of it, and we're making a go of it.”

“Our cows pay,” Wes says, “and I think it is sustainable. But living expenses are just so high now. Insurance for us and for two parents in their sixties, you can't believe how high that is. Ag prices haven't kept up with that, that's for sure.”

Edwin Koss comes into the kitchen from the calving pens outside and sits down, a gun-barrel-straight man wearing very clean work clothes. For a while he just eats cinnamon rolls, not

saying anything while we talk. “The first whitetail I ever saw was in our hay meadow in 1943,” he says when he's finished eating. “And now we have them everywhere. We lost \$10,000 worth of crops to a herd of elk that came up here from the refuge. There's a lot of wildlife around.” A minute later he adds, in a good-humored way, “Those people you're talking about are doing all this with donated money. They don't produce anything. They're parasites.”

THE NEARBY WIEDERRICK RANCH comprises 4,700 acres of deeded land around its heart of older houses and outbuildings lying in the bottomlands of Telegraph Creek, which, when it runs, winds its way into the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge. When APF bought the ranch, it also bought the grazing leases the ranch controlled: 12,390 acres on Bureau of Land Management lands, and 4,360 acres on state lands. They converted these leases from cattle to buffalo, following a public environmental assessment process conducted by the BLM. The ranch's former owners had also held a grazing lease covering 26,000 acres on the wildlife refuge, which the refuge managers retired at the time of sale (as they do whenever a property with a lease on the refuge changes hands, in order to move cattle out of the wildlife refuge with minimal disruption to ranchers). Bottom line: By buying 4,700 acres, the American Prairie Foundation exerted de facto grazing control over nearly 48,000 acres altogether. What that land produces will be less tangible than a pound of beef: diversity, complexity, space. “The people we bring out here have seen a lot of the world,” says Scott Laird, APF's field director. “Most of them recognize what an extraordinary place this is, that this landscape exists intact on this scale, and they want to be part of preserving it.”

Many people devoted to conservation distrust the private sector's ability to protect wildlife and lands. No one, after all, can stop the sale of private lands by

signing a petition or calling upon legislators. But others think that is precisely the power of the model. No politician would prohibit the use of private property as roadless wilderness, or as the redoubt of endangered species. After all, it's private property.

The American Prairie Foundation will eventually place its lands under a variety of easements. “We are consulting with all the people in the easement business,” said Gerrity, “the Montana Land Reliance, The Nature Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, and a lot of others to help and to tell us what we should do. We're looking for the kind of design that, if you fast-forward fifty years, the land would be protected from things we can't even foresee.”

But there is no plan to turn the lands over to the federal government for a national park, monument, or grassland. “We are happy to have so many good people to collaborate with, the World Wildlife Fund, the BLM, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and everybody else,” Gerrity says, “but the APF board will always make the decisions. There won't be any kind of round table, like the UN, where sixty-five different people have to agree on everything before anything gets done.”

One afternoon, Scott Laird and I go driving, looking at antelope and waterfowl, raptors and old collapsed homesteads, the one-room schools at First Creek, Second Creek, and Sun Prairie, all closed now for lack of students. We pass the old Prairie Union School, a tiny fallen log cabin that dates back to the early 1900s, when the Homestead Act was encouraging settlers to try to make a living running cattle and plowing up the “gumbo,” a soil type so slick that it can be hard to walk on in a rainstorm, so cloying that if it is half dry, it can build up on a modern truck tire until it jams tight in the wheel well.

We watch a small flock of sharptail

grouse flying like bullets into the wind, wings tight to their bodies, then dropping in a whirl into a coulee that is grown up in box elder and willow. It is a healthy-looking piece of grassland, and I say so. "I'm always careful not to say that the APF wants to 'restore' the prairie, because that is extremely offensive to everybody here," Laird replies. "I think the people who've stayed here love the prairie. That is why it is still like it is."

Earlier, Gerrity had told me that he was heartened by the fact that he was receiving donations of \$50 and \$100 from individual Montana residents, people who "want somewhere they know they'll be able to take their grandchildren and show them what it was like when Lewis and Clark came up the Missouri River. There is an amazingly short window of time to do this, to create an enormous, diverse wildlife preserve out of the last of the northern grassland. If we do this right, we can create something unprecedented."