
FIELD NOTES FROM THE EDITOR

by Mark A. Gonzalez



Season's Greetings



With each passing evening, Orion's stars sank a little farther into the southern horizon. Each day, more ducks and geese passed overhead on their migration north. Icehouses had been pulled from area lakes. Sage Grouse were displaying on their leks, and Sharptail Grouse were performing their sunrise jig. These occurrences all confirmed that winter was waning and spring was waxing. The start of a new field season was imminent.

Long, northern winters are tough on field geologists. The feet get tender and soft, the skin turns pasty, and the entire body grows pudgy in the absence of long traverses in the field and when unfettered by heavy loads in the rucksack. The only thing to grow a callous is the behind—calloused from over use in a cushy office chair. Many hours of crunching data and writing reports in front of a computer screen lead to lower back pain, eyestrain, and a litany of ailments related to a sedentary life and poor ergonomics. There is only one proven cure for such ailments—fieldwork.

With great anticipation, I watched weather forecasts throughout March and April for conditions that would prove favorable for fieldwork. I shook the spiders out of my field boots and impregnated them with a generous coat of oil, replenished supplies in my first-aid kit, stuffed a new notebook in my field vest, and packed my rucksack with staples—sunscreen, sunglasses, water bottles, whistle, compass, snake-bite kit, map case, film, camera, binos, raingear, and my favorite bird-identification guide. All

systems go.

At last, nothing could confine me to my office any longer, and that first day of fieldwork arrived. A couple hours west of Bismarck, I arrived at my field site. As I parked the car, checked my map, and set out on my first traverse of the year, I couldn't help but notice some old friends. Male Mountain Bluebirds were sporting their powder blue suit, displaying its brilliance in the morning sun for all female Bluebirds to admire. The song of the Western Meadowlark drifted gently across the sun-drenched prairie. As the sun crept higher, the fuzzy buds of Pasque flowers burst open and splashed color on the drab, desiccated prairie hillsides. First one, then two, a dozen, a score, soon hundreds. By noon, the prairie sod was carpeted with the radiant blooms of tens of thousands of Pasque flowers. No canvas could be more beautiful after a long winter.

We may curse our seasons from time to time. Dakota winters are long and sometimes pretty cold. Springs are a bit breezy. Summers can be scorchers. But aside from these mild inconveniences, the extremes of each season cause us to admire both the ferociousness and splendor of nature. If summers wouldn't have their infernal dogs days, then the first frosts of fall would not be such welcome relief. If winters would not be cantankerously obstinate, then I could not relish that first spring day of fieldwork as much as I do.

I'm a simple person who derives great pleasure from simple things. I'll endure any winter nature can dish out, knowing that spring brings a new field season with the dawn dance of the Sharptail, the ebullient song of the Meadowlark, and the glorious bloom of the Pasque flower. Here's hoping you all pulled through the winter well and are enjoying the long days of spring.