

# Looking Back

*By Lorraine Manz*

It has been almost twenty years since I joined the North Dakota Geological Survey, and now here I am, on the brink of retirement. It's a natural time for reflection, and when I look back over those years and the memories they have given me, I thought I would share a few of my favorites in this, my last newsletter article.

Field work is one of the reasons a lot of people become geologists, and I was no exception. No two days are ever the same and each one brings something new. Best of all, you're outdoors, and in North Dakota, more often than not, out of town, at least that's how it was for me, and I loved it. I worked mostly in the eastern half of the state, where I mapped the surface geology – mostly glacial deposits from the last ice age – and usually alone. Yet I was never lonely. I was captivated by the wide-open spaces and big skies, and the amazing variety of flora – especially the wildflowers. The wildlife, and the domesticated animals, I met at the homes, farms and, ranches I visited were a constant source of delight and entertainment.

If you've ever wondered what complete silence sounds like, wait for one of those rare North Dakota days when the wind isn't blowing and the air is still. On one such day last summer, I was hand-augering on the summit of a high upland more than 80 feet above the surrounding landscape. The sun was shining, and the view was spectacular. When I stopped to rest for a moment and drink some water, I heard – nothing. Nothing at all. No traffic; no machinery; no sounds, human or animal; nothing. In the 90-degree heat, even the birds and insects were silent, as if time itself was holding its breath. It was glorious, and I was only 30 miles from Bismarck.

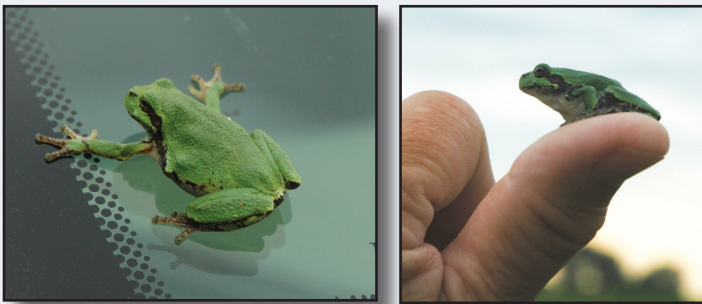
My encounters with North Dakota wildlife were always benign, but then I have never had cause to disturb the inhabitants of old woodpiles or take on feral cats (Murphy, 2008). Most were transitory, and rarely close, yet so many of those fleeting moments have stuck in my memory. Sandhill cranes heading south for the winter, so high in the sky they were barely visible, their harsh



A sampling of the hundreds of species of wildflowers that grow in North Dakota. From left to right: blanket flower, blue flax, aster, prairie rose, wood lily. Background: prairie coneflower. A lot of North Dakota's native wildflowers are grown as perennials by gardeners throughout the country.

voices muted by height to a soft trill. A stunning aerobatic display by two bald eagles as they circled each other, coming together and spinning as one as their claws locked briefly before separating and repeating the performance over and over again. Clouds of small blue and brown butterflies rising from the grass as I walked across a pasture. Mule deer on Sibley Butte, a moose grazing peacefully in the wetland by the side of the road.

The tiny green frog that plopped on to the windshield from an overhanging tree as I negotiated an overgrown right-of-way somewhere in Walsh County was not described in any of my books on North Dakota wildlife. Sandra Johnson, a conservation biologist at the North Dakota Game and Fish Department identified it as either a gray treefrog (*Hyla versicolor*) or a Cope's gray treefrog (*Hyla chrysoscelis*) both quite rare in North Dakota. So much so that Ms. Johnson asked if she could use some of my photos to illustrate a brochure on reptiles and amphibians that she was working on. The brochure is available for free on the North Dakota Game and Fish website at <https://gf.nd.gov/sites/default/files/publications/amphibian-reptile-brochure.pdf>.



The tree frog that dropped onto my windshield from an overhanging tree on a backroad in Walsh County. From nose to tail end it measured about 0.75 inches (1.9 cm).

I like country churches. If there was one in my field area, I would sometimes step inside for a few minutes to enjoy the quiet solitude. One day that calm was interrupted by a sound from the basement. There was no-else around, so I eased open the basement door and listened. The noise came again, and I realized it was the flapping of wings. When I reached the bottom of the stairs, I saw that a grackle had somehow found its way into the room and couldn't get out. The panic-stricken bird was flying madly around its prison from one window to another, beating its wings against the glass in a desperate attempt to escape. There was no telling how long it had been doing this but sooner or later it was probably going to die of exhaustion because all the windows were tightly closed. Fortunately, there was a door at the top of the basement stairs that opened to the outside. As the light streamed in, the bird shot up the stairwell and into the fresh air. I closed all the doors and left the church, grateful that I'd stopped by.

Among domestic animals I have learned that horses are nosy and, given the opportunity, will shamelessly rummage around in your backpack in search of food or whatever it is they are hoping

to find. Cows are curious but faint-hearted. An entire herd will follow you across a pasture but will head for the hills if you turn and take so much as a single step towards it. All out-of-town dogs bark a lot, but most want to be your friend. Some show up in unexpected places.

One morning as I drove out to my mapping area, I noticed a small dog sitting on the railroad that ran alongside the highway. Nearby, some equipment and a pile of concrete ties indicated that the tracks were under repair. I thought that one of the maintenance crew must have brought their dog to work, but then it dawned on me that there were no vehicles around and the animal appeared to be alone. Feeling a little concerned, I turned and drove back. As I got out of the truck, the dog stood and began whining piteously, clearly very pleased to see me, but seemed reluctant to approach. I quickly discovered the reason for this was that the end of his lead, a length of chain fastened to a scruffy collar, was wrapped around one of the spikes – the large nails that hold the rails and railroad ties together. How and why did this happen? I could think of only two explanations: either this little fellow had run away from somewhere and the chain had snagged accidentally, or he'd been abandoned. I didn't want to believe the latter, but either way this friendly creature, barely more than a puppy, tired, and wet with dew – which made me think he'd been there all night – needed help.



Cattle are curious but faint-hearted. These animals were content to gaze at me from behind the safety of a fence.

The chain came loose easily enough, and I had no trouble persuading the dog to get into the truck. As I got in after him, he climbed onto my lap and immediately fell asleep. He really was an engaging little thing even though he was just a mutt. Black with white paws, a white-tipped tail, black-and-white-speckled muzzle, and soft, silky ears. One of his eyes was a soulful brown, the other pale sky blue – a startling combination! It was only a few miles to the nearest small town, which was on my route anyway, and I pulled into a gas station where the sympathetic owner kindly agreed to make some calls and find out if anyone was missing a dog. She was also willing to help with his board and lodging until his owner was found, and so I could get to work. Driving away, I

glanced back and was saddened to see the poor animal frantically lapping dew off a patch of grass and wondered again what his story was.

I stopped by the gas station at lunchtime and the news was disappointing. No-one had claimed the lost dog, and as far as I know, no-one ever did. It was beginning to look as if he had been abandoned after all and was going to have to be taken to an animal shelter. It never came to that, however: I found out later that the station owner's daughter, who had been instantly charmed by the pup when I brought him in, had persuaded her mother to give him a permanent home. The following Christmas I received a card with some photos enclosed of an obviously happy and well-cared for, black-and-white, brown/blue-eyed young dog. And all because three women with soft hearts were in the right place at the right time. (Note: Animals are not allowed in state vehicles, but I made this an exception out of concern for the safety and welfare of the dog.)

Farm cats are like cats anywhere – aloof and indifferent – with a few notable exceptions, including one I met that likes to hitch rides on four-wheelers.

While mapping near Valley City several years ago, I stopped at a farm to ask permission to do some work on the property. As the landowner and I stood chatting in the yard, five kittens came scampering out of a nearby shed. The smallest, without doubt the runt of the litter, immediately broke away from the group, clearly on a mission. He ran straight at me and without slowing scrambled up my back and onto my shoulder. The landowner lifted him off and put him gently on the ground but, within seconds he was back on his perch, and I had the overwhelming impression that this little guy was trying to tell me something.



The farm cat that convinced me to take him home.

Before I had time to think, I was asking if the kitten was in need of a home and was told he was mine if I wanted him. I returned to the farm that weekend and took him home. A trip to the vet took care of some minor health problems and he never looked back. That kitten is an elderly cat now, and lord of our household, but he still sits on my shoulder whenever he gets the chance.

#### Reference

Murphy, E.C., 2008, Where the wild things are – recollections from the field: DMR Newsletter v. 35, no. 1, p. 13-16.

