

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY NEWSROOM |

Prairie Exploration Play-by-Play

National Geographic Emerging Explorer Gregg Treinish and his team at [Adventurers and Scientists for Conservation](#) bring us stories from around the world about adventuring with purpose. What's it like living out on the prairie, tracking wildlife and helping to discover the workings of the land as wild nature is given a chance to reclaim some territory? See...



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What's it like living out on the prairie, tracking wildlife and helping to discover the workings of the land as wild nature is given a chance to reclaim some territory? See for yourself, as ecologist and educator, Caroline Hedin, takes you through a day in the life of an [Adventurers and Scientists for Conservation](#) volunteer at the [American Prairie Reserve](#).

By Caroline Hedin

0600: The alarm rings. It's still dark. Snooze.

0605: More tolerant of early mornings, teammate Ryan and I stumble into the kitchen to prepare a group breakfast. The house is sleepy and quiet.

0700: Aromas of coffee and French toast waft down the hall, drawing the crew to the table. Soft light glows from the horizon. Another day begins on the American Prairie Reserve.

0735: We divide in to teams, with two pairs walking separate 10-mile wildlife transects and the remaining two stationed in our trusty Toyota Sequoia as base camp. GPS devices, binoculars, radios, and tablets are tucked into packs. Mud scraped off boots. Gators snugged.



A moment of spring emerges mid-winter on the prairie. (Photo by Elisabeth Shapiro)

0800: Somehow we find the truck under all the mud, and we are now on our way to the field. We slide, swerve, and bounce down the network of gumbo roads to the trailhead. There are more than a few white knuckles in the vehicle.

Equal parts mud and bison. (Photo by Caroline Hedin)

0903: Truck doors slam after collective encouragement to enjoy our respective adventures and make good choices. The truck winds into the distance, leaving Zach and me on the roadside prepping for our hike. I pause to take in my surroundings: a wide expanse of sagebrush and delicate grasses in all directions. We set the GPS and head north.

0956: We ease our way down an embankment slick with mud. The sweet and smoky smell of sage bursts into the air with each tentative step. A stream awaits us at the bottom of a coulee. We hop from one grassy tussock to another to keep our toes dry. Whew! Made it ... this time.

1015: Bison. Zach spots him to the north, wearily gazing in our direction. He stays still, hoping to go unnoticed. But it can be hard to hide in grassland—especially if you're a bison. Pulling out the camera and tablet, we document his position, behavior, and health. Through the binoculars I see him lazily licking his nostril.

1127: I'm on the ground, following my pack under an electric fence. We found a semi-dry spot to crawl under, but the earth still smells of heavy wet clay. Our wildlife camera is on the other side of the fence. We pull the memory card, excited to see what gems are captured on film. Coyotes pouncing? Elk licking the camera? A bobcat darting under the wire? We'll find out soon when we load our data onto our laptops. Oh, the suspense!



The American Prairie Reserve herd is 450-strong.
(Photo by Elisabeth Shapiro)

1203: We crest the edge of the hills we've meandered through all morning and pause. Before us stretches a wide valley, teeming with hundreds of bison. We share a thermos of tea and a Clif Bar as we watch them wallow, graze, and play. Some of them look like more mud than buffalo.

1317: Our boots feel 10 pounds heavier with all the mud caked on their soles. We develop a step-and-shake cadence to our stride.

1320: Up on the ridge of a neighboring hill, three mule deer stand silhouetted against the sky. Their ears flick in our direction. This time, we are the ones trying to stay unnoticed. The deer aren't fooled; they glide over the summit and out of sight.

1423: The truck. We see it boldly parked on the horizon—our chariot

awaits. This is one of my last transects, so I slow a little to commit as much to memory as I can. Sun glinting off shallow pools of melt water. Heart-shaped pronghorn tracks at my feet. Polished stones of purple, olive, sienna. My aching legs ...

1434: I fling open the door, greeted by five dirty, sun-beaten, smiling faces. Elisabeth boasts about her new confidence driving on slick two-track roads. Ryan and Amber excitedly recount meetings with birds of prey, while Hannah offers a bagful of trail mix. Rocky Raccoon blasts over the radio as we bumble our way home. We bury our faces into our packs, lean against the dirty windows, or settle on each other's shoulders and fall into a warm snooze. Ahhhhhhhh.

1541: Boots get left in a muddy heap on the front porch. We race for the first shower. There must be so much dirt in that drain.

1645: We pull the campfire chairs to the deck to soak in the last rays of the afternoon. It's January, but we embrace the spring-like weather. Toes wiggle with joy, free of boots. Soon the whole crew is basking in the warmth. A guitar appears, requests made for group sing-a-longs. We run through our list: Bon Iver, John Prine, the Beatles. We're starting to sound pretty good after weeks of practice. Should we be getting tired of hanging out with the same people for a month straight?



1730: The sun ignites the sky with auburn and gold. We savor the beauty of the sunset each night, and tonight is no exception. We felt this entire day go by, saw the sun move all the way across the horizon. Each day is so full of life. The passage of time perfectly synced with experience.

2004: People look at their watches and yawn. Dinner dishes have been put away, and the dishwasher hums. Ryan and Zach recruit for a board game, Hannah cuddles with the local barn cat, Elisabeth curls around a book, and Amber does her daily stretching regimen. I'm exhausted but happy. I try not to think about leaving in the next couple of days. My world at home feels so impossibly far away.

2237: Set the alarm for tomorrow. Dive under the blankets. Good night, prairie stars.

Born and raised in Calgary, Alberta, Caroline Hedin has an addiction to the prairie. With a degree in Ecology and Geography from Quest University, she has spent the last three years leading the education team at Elk Island National Park, Alberta.

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