

# A Song for the Unsung Prairie

BY BEN LONG

*S*ometimes affection blooms in surprising places. I trace my fondness for the Montana prairie, for example, to childhood tedium—a bored boy in the back seat of an overheated Travelall rolling down I-90.

“How much farther?” I whined. Dad handed me a notepad and suggested I count pronghorns to pass the time. As I tallied, I

noticed other creatures: a coyote pacing along a fence line, a golden eagle dipping below the horizon, a bull snake sunning itself on the shoulder. They sparked a slow burn in my imagination.

Montana’s mountains get the glory, the calendars, the postcards, the national parks, even the state’s name. But the prettiest girl at the dance ain’t necessarily the one you want to marry.





CHUCK HANEY

Larry McMurtry wrote: “To those not attuned to their subtleties, the plains are merely monotonous emptiness. But to those who love them, the plains are endlessly fascinating, a place where the constant interplay of land and sky is always dramatic; gloomy sometimes, but more often uplifting.”

*There is a better way to learn the prairie than by speeding past*

*in a vehicle. Walk into the dusk with a sleeping bag. Kick a spot free of dried cow flops and prickly pear. Stretch out and stare into the stars. Fall asleep amidst it all. Wake up with the dawn.*

*Some skittish creature will be on the move at daybreak. Then sunlight will ripple across the texture of the land, revealing coulees, draws, sills, folds, breaks, washes. Every clump of bunch-*

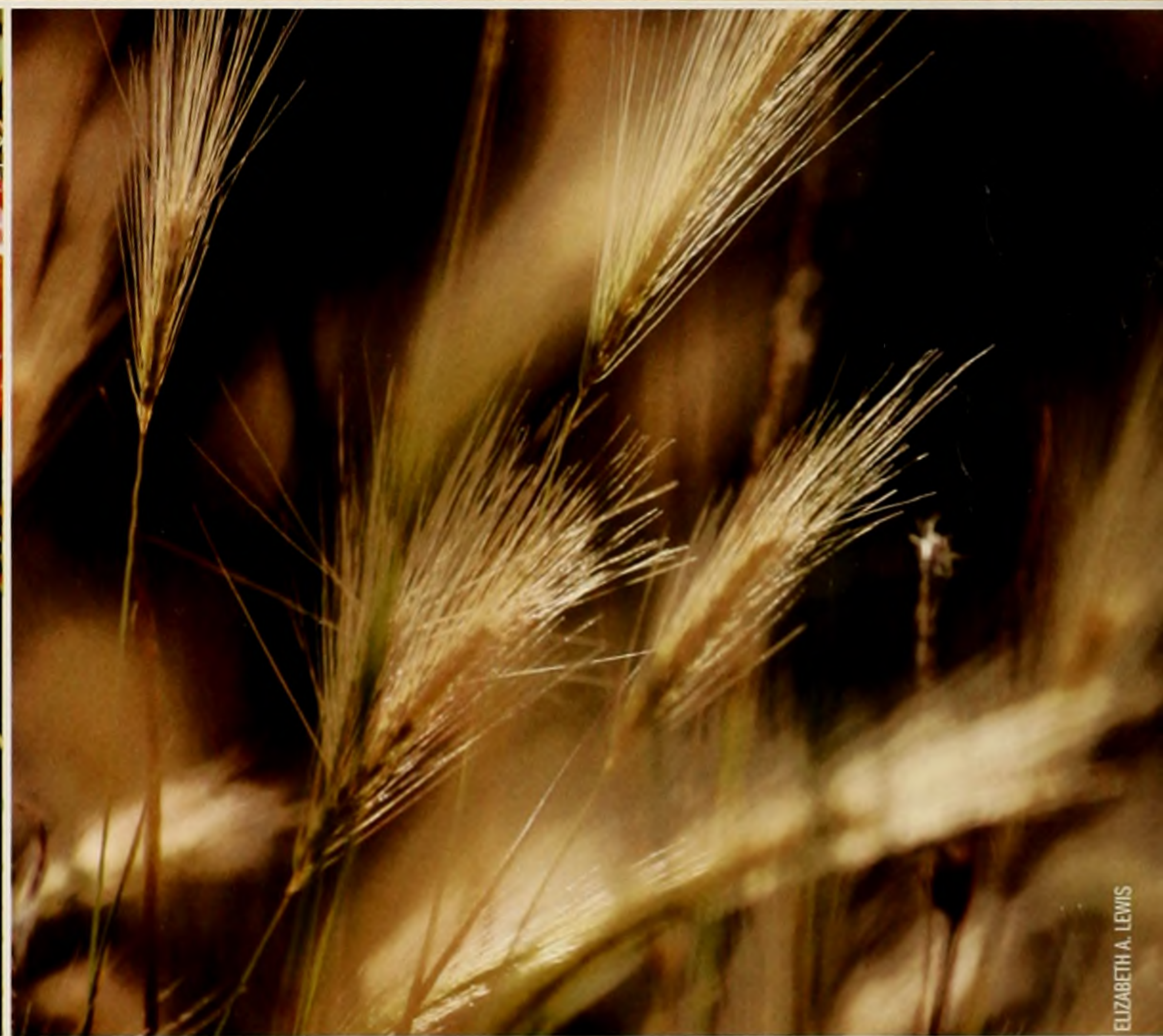




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*grass will stand distinct in its own shadow. Even if you don't fall in love with it, you'll never think of the prairie as "flatlands" again.*

*In the prairie, you can hold time in your hand and blow off the dust. Old homesteads stand like tombstones to broken dreams. Bison bones date to nomadic days when dogs, not horses, were the beasts of burden. Pleistocene ice sheets rerouted the*

*Missouri River from Hudson Bay to the Gulf of Mexico, leaving oxbow lakes where no river runs today. Fossils will take you even deeper in time, to the Cretaceous, when the belly of North America was under salt water and herds of duck-billed dinosaurs roamed the Montana coastline.*

*During the Ice Age, North American cheetahs challenged*





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*ancestral pronghorns to what was perhaps the fastest foot race ever. Pronghorns are the prairie champion, far more native than, say, bison. These days we take pronghorns for granted, but a century ago they were an endangered species. Thanks to modern wildlife management, eastern Montana produces more pronghorns, harvested in a sustainable fashion every year, than existed*

*in the whole world a century ago—though even today's plenitude is a fraction of what Lewis and Clark encountered. Other prairie creatures are ghostly rumors. I should live long enough to spy a swift fox or a black-footed ferret. Meanwhile, I will be satisfied with the occasional bobcat. The prairie exacts a price for its rewards. July's ball-peen ham-*





mer sun is one. And winter! Hi-Line cattle, tails and ears stubbed by frostbite, carry the evidence all the way to the slaughterhouse.

In any season, a fierce prairie wind may topple an empty grain silo, or just drive you batty as you try to sleep in a flapping tent; and gumbo mud will turn any four-wheel-drive into a no-wheel-drive. A prairie rattlesnake probably won't kill you, but it will

make you jump clear to next Thursday should the two of you plan a midday nap in the same patch of shade.

Then there's the prickly pear—so lovely in flower, so painful underfoot. Here's a tip if you plan to hunt on the prairie, which often requires crawling across the needle-sharp landscape: leather shoes, leather gloves, and kneepads like basketball players wear.





CHUCK HANEY

*These luxuries allow you to spend evenings with a beer in your hand instead of a tweezers. Put the kneepads under your jeans so the locals don't think you're goofy.*

*In boyhood, I killed bucketsful of "gophers," but I no longer consider prairie dogs vermin. "Dog towns" are the prairie's supermarkets and apartment complexes. The burrows provide cool, shady*

*hiding places for a host of other species, and prairie dogs themselves are on the shopping lists of predators, both four-footed and winged.*

*The prairie glamour birds are the white pelicans and the sandhill cranes flying almost imperceptibly high as they migrate between distant water bodies, and the long-billed curlews, singing as they descend. Sharp-tailed grouse, their habitat virtually gone*





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*in western Montana, are still abundant east of the Divide.*

*Hard-core bird watchers will drive hours to catch sight of Sprague's pipits, Baird's sparrows, chestnut-collared longspurs, or piping plovers. On my list of prairie birds, I am especially fond of the common lark bunting, patterned like a miniaturized magpie. I envy the grace and speed of avian hunters: the kestrel*

*and prairie falcon; ferruginous hawk, in Latin called *Buteo regalis*, or "regal hawk"; and Swainson's hawk, which lives in constant summer, migrating between Montana and Argentina. The burrowing owl shares old burrows with badgers and ferrets. When cornered, the tiny owl buzzes like a rattlesnake to deter predators from following it underground.*





*Prairie people are friendly—by nature and necessity. Towns and homes cluster like cottonwood galleries along the Yellowstone, Missouri, and Milk rivers or along the Hi-Line. In between lies precious little but precious little.*

*For the first time in history, most of humanity lives in cities. Billions of people will never gaze into a prairie night, never feel*

*their hair tousled by a clean prairie wind, never see pronghorns flush across the land like flocks of low-flying birds. Today, an unbroken horizon is a rare commodity.*

*How much farther? A little ways yet. Just a bit more.*

—Ben Long is a freelance writer in Kalispell.