promise of the prairie

Oregon's Zumwalt Prairie holds lessons in conservation for future generations.

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It's easy to imagine what the pioneers felt when surrounded by the vastness of the Zumwalt Prairie.

The Zumwalt Prairie is a place of overwhelming beauty.

It is vast and isolated, about 200 square miles of uncultivated land ringed by mountains, valleys and river gorges. Rolling hills of grass stretch beneath dramatic skies, and wildlife abounds here.

Located in northeastern Oregon at the southernmost tip of the Palouse region, the Zumwalt is one of the last native grasslands remaining in the United States. And it has the highest concentration of buteo hawks, a genus with broad wings and short tails, in North America. The soil is rich beneath lush meadows that have sustained cattle operations for generations.

"When I first came to study the Zumwalt in 1979, nobody really knew much about it," says Marcy Houle, a wildlife biologist whose book *The Prairie Keepers: Secrets of the Grasslands* showed the world how special this place is.

Marcy, then a graduate student at Oregon State University, was hired by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to solve a mystery: Why were there so many buteo hawks on the prairie? It was uncommon to see such dense populations of these birds in one place. Marcy's job was to find buteo nests and count the hawks. At first she expected to find the prairie in poor condition, given that it was also rangeland. At least, that was the prevailing notion in the west: grazing cattle damage grasslands.

But Marcy discovered the opposite. Working with range scientists and soil conservationists, Zumwalt ranchers rotated their grazing herds each season, giving the grasslands time to recover and regenerate. They limited the numbers of cows to what the land could sustain. Practicing good range management, they were careful not to overgraze the prairie. At the same time, their practices helped the hawks. Cutting back the grass left prey such as red-digger squirrels, which compete with the cows for grass, out in the open and vulnerable to the hawks. In fact, rancher Larry Hadley told Marcy that the hawks were sacred: "They're the best red-digger control we've got."

"It's a wonderful symbiotic relationship," says Marcy, who spent more than two years exploring the Zumwalt in search of buteo nests. She got to know local ranchers, who nicknamed her "the bird girl." In 1995, she recounted her adventures, which included climbing trees and outrunning bulls, in her book.

"I was part of the community," Marcy says. " 'Bird girl' followed me wherever I went. Over my years of living there, I came to fall in love with the people, their sense of independence and hard work."

In the decades following Marcy's study, efforts to preserve the Zumwalt continued. By 2006, the Nature Conservancy had purchased 33,000 acres of the Zumwalt and created a preserve. That land is managed in cooperation with local ranchers. And, when OSU repeated Marcy's study decades later, they found the number of hawks on the prairie to be unchanged, which was phenomenal.

"I wonder what this land will be like in 20 or 50 more years," Marcy says. "Will the sons, daughters, grandsons and granddaughters of the ranchers still be here? Will their way of life and the native grasses and wildlife that depend on their good stewardship continue? Ranchers have an enormous responsibility ahead of them, and it's not theirs alone. It belongs to all of us."

Marcy Houle's study of buteo hawks uncovered the Zumwalt's uniqueness.

Generations of ranchers have grazed cattle on these lush lands.

Photographer's Notebook

Every time I travel the gravel roads into the Zumwalt Prairie I find countless vistas around every turn.

Wildlife abounds here, and it is not uncommon to see a wide variety in one day—deer, elk, and several species of hawks.

Along with the beautiful rolling prairie grasses, skies can be dramatic over the Zumwalt. When storm clouds roll in, the sky becomes quite sensational, providing mottled light to emphasize parts of the landscape. You might be lucky enough to experience a horizon-to-horizon rainbow or a lightning show.

Sunrises and sunsets are spectacular with the snow-covered Wallowa or Seven Devil Mountains in the background. There are also several historic cabins, barns and fence lines to put into a composition.

Driving across the Zumwalt Prairie can take hours, as frequent points of interest compel you to pull over and explore. Trails have been established in a few places to take you more deeply into the verdant hills, but it is equally breathtaking just to drive through the Zumwalt, stopping when something grabs you.

June is my favorite time here. The third week usually is optimal for wildflowers, but of course the timing varies depending on the year's rainfall. In a good year, carpets of many kinds of flowers cover the hillsides. The Zumwalt is truly an area that must be preserved.

—Dennis Frates