

## THE WILD LIFE OF A Prairie Photographer

■ Chris Helzer is the Nebraska director of science for The Nature Conservancy and writes about prairie ecology, restoration, and management on his blog, *The Prairie Ecologist*. In 2018, he launched the Square Meter Photography Project—a yearlong project to photograph the plant and animal life within a 1-square-meter plot of land. The resulting images were turned into both a book and a museum exhibit.

- **How did you choose your plot?**

I chose the prairie just a mile from my house. There are lots of prairies like it all throughout the Midwest and Great Plains. I thought that was going to be really important—to show people that they could do a project like this or see that same kind of diversity and dynamism.

- **What sort of routine did you maintain?**

I didn't have a set schedule; it was more driven by the light and the

wind. There were days when I was there for 10 or 15 minutes, and there were days when I was there for well over an hour just staring at this little tiny space. If you just spend time, if you really get down on your hands and knees and look, you keep finding more and more stuff.

I ended up photographing 113 species, but there were way more than that in the plot at one time or another; I just didn't get a chance to see them.



- **What do you hope people take away from your work?**

It's this idea that prairies are interesting, diverse, and dynamic, even at a small scale. I'm hoping that I can introduce people to the organisms that live in a prairie on more of a personal basis, so that

rather than thinking about these sort of bland areas that are flat places they have to drive through to get to something interesting, they think about katydids or spiders catching ants.

It also has just been about paying attention to what's around

you, and taking the time to sit quietly and look. You can do that in your backyard, and you can do it in the local park. You can do it anywhere there's anything green or alive. ■

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