Q&A with Trevor Herriot, Author of *The Economy of Sparrows* (Thistledown Press, 2023)

By Jessica Sims

For Nell Rowan, a university-educated biologist who chose janitorial work over field work, coming home to her century-old family farm in rural Saskatchewan is bittersweet. The land has changed, as complex prairie ecosystems that have existed for thousands of years have succumbed to the demand for wheat and canola fields. The people are complacent—all except a teenage foster kid who claims she can read the thoughts of animals. Like so many of us who love nature and are pained to see it devoured by "progress", Nell is torn between pessimism and a stubborn hope that her actions might still make some kind of difference.

When author Trevor Herriot first thought of writing a book about naturalist William Spreadborough, he wanted to focus on Spreadborough's career and his many expeditions collecting ornithological specimens in the West between 1888 and 1920. (Most of these specimens became part of Canada's national collections.) But after several drafts, Herriot realized a contemporary narrative was needed, and Nell Rowan's story was born. The Economy of Sparrows *is a meditation on legacy, from the continent-spanning environmental and historical legacies that haunt everyone's collective futures, to the familial legacies that can shape one person's life.*

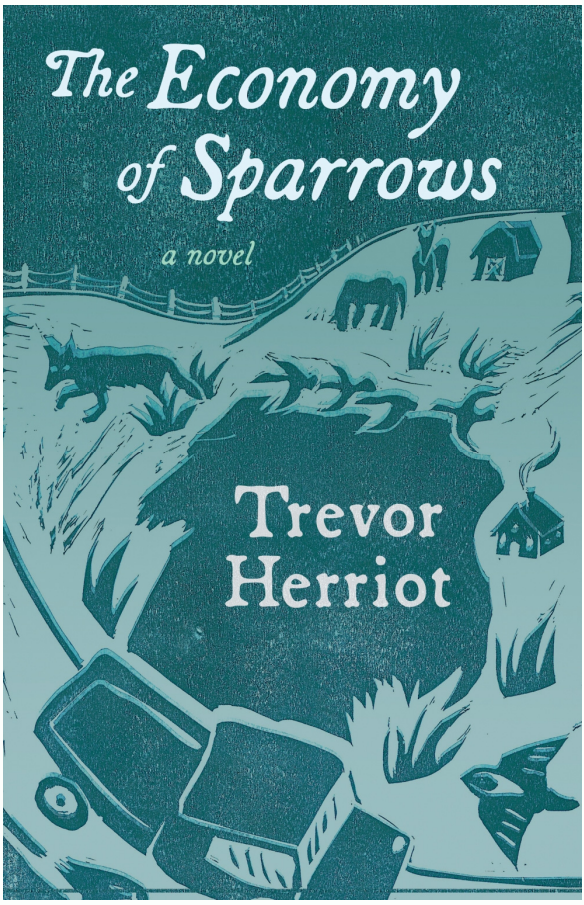
In addition to being a writer, Herriot is a naturalist and grassland conservationist who has spent his life roaming the prairies around his home in Regina, Saskatchewan. We talked about the 19th-century mindsets that still permeate 21st century environmental policy, the unique challenges of trying to save prairie habitats and why birds should not be named after people.

J: *You've written seven other books, but this is your first work of fiction. Why did you decide to tell this story with a novel?*

T: I've been hammering away at these topics for twenty-some years with nonfiction. I've reached a certain audience that way, and I've been happy with that. But I wanted to try to get readers who are fiction readers, as well. Most of the women in my life read fiction more than nonfiction. I thought this book might appeal to rural women

who are going through some of the same things as the main character [Nell]. In my experience, the people in rural Canada who really see and are concerned about what's happening to our farming landscapes, prairie landscapes and wetlands tend to be women, at least the ones who are more vocal and willing to express their concerns. The men are often the ones involved in agriculture, directly or indirectly supporting it. They see the economic side more, and they're willing to turn a blind eye to some of the costs of an intensifying agricultural system.

So that was part of it. I had in mind several specific women that I know, who see what's happening to our prairie habitat in rural Canada. And I had them in mind when I decided to write the narrative this way.



J: *Why anchor the story in the present through the perspective of Nell looking back on the naturalists of the 19th century?*
T: I wanted readers to be thinking about history this way. In all my books, history isn't just something that happened in the past and is contained in dusty old volumes. What's happened in the past determines what we are experiencing right now. A lot of the social and environmental issues we see come from those events in the 19th century—the clearing of the plains, the intentional removal of bison, and then the very rapid homesteading with white-skinned European people. I very much feel that today is the result of the fairly recent past. I wanted that to come through in the narrative, connecting the 19th century through those natural history surveyors like [John] Macoun and Spreadborough to what we're seeing on the landscape today.

J: *Was there anything that surprised you about the process of writing fiction as opposed to nonfiction?*
T: Fiction allowed me to create this other narrative that would stitch together what's happening today through the lens of a person's life and their emotional responses, and their sense of eco-anxiety and fears about the future, climate change and biodiversity collapse that a lot of us are experiencing.

Part of the difference was in the editing. You can just completely change the plot, which I did many times. I added characters. As you're editing you can move the whole plot around and make it more complicated and nuanced. That was completely new for me.

J: *How many drafts did you go through?*
T: Oh God. I'd say 10 major drafts, but there was just a lot of revising. It took eight years—this all started in about 2015. A fellow who had read one of my other books called *Grass, Sky, Song* saw that I had mentioned William Spreadborough. He sent me an email saying that Spreadborough was his great-uncle and he was interested to know more about him.

[Spreadborough] is a fascinating character, partly because he wasn't a typical "gentleman's naturalist". He wasn't a well-educated fellow who collected things and then analysed them in his study, smoking a pipe, sitting in his leather chair. He wasn't like so many other North American amateur or professional naturalists. He was really just a guy who was from the bush, who knew how to make a fire and set up camp and could shoot and identify a few birds. He was interesting to me that way.

J: *How did your passion for writing about natural history develop?*
T: As a kid, I had a dad who took us hunting and fishing and on little canoe trips—nothing terribly ambitious or out of the ordinary for a prairie boy. I had an uncle who was a naturalist and lived north of Ottawa in Deep River. He would take us for walks on his land just across the border in Quebec and show us the flora and fauna of the area. I was probably 12 years old and that had a real effect on me.

As a young man, I lost my interest in hunting and took up birdwatching. Finding the prairie birds around Regina back then was pretty easy. I could find Burrowing Owls right on the edge of the city in 1985. By 1992 they were all gone. As soon as I started to notice the birds, I started to notice that they were in decline. I wrote my first magazine article about that. It was a cover story for the 1989 issue of *Canadian Geographic* on the decline of the Burrowing Owl.

I was reading a lot of what I think of as bioregional writing, mostly from American authors—Wendell Berry, especially Barry Lopez, Peter Matthiessen—those naturalist writers who understood how history, culture and agriculture have affected life on this continent, and how that has played into the decimation of Indigenous people's cultures over the last couple centuries. I started to put those [themes] all together in my first book, *River in a Dry Land* [Stoddart, 2000].

J: *The CBC had a recent article about the Nature Conservancy of Canada trying to raise money to protect over 5000 square kilometres of prairie grasslands. In the article, a spokesperson called it "Canada's most endangered ecosystem." Do you agree with that?*
T: That's something we commonly say, "most endangered, least protected." It's just the truth. The statistics bear that out. In prairie ecosystems, we've lost more than 80 percent—in some areas 90 percent—of our native grassland cover. So, in the

prairie ecoregions—from southwestern Manitoba through Saskatchewan into southeastern Alberta—there's very little native grassland left. Our wetlands are being drained and ditched at a ferocious rate. We've lost as much as 80 percent in most regions. It is a biome in crisis. The Nature Conservancy was the first organization to really start talking about it that way, using that phrase. It helps people wake up and realize that canola field is not a natural ecosystem.

J: *Why is it so endangered? Is it purely due to agricultural interests?*
T: Yes, that's pretty well the whole story. Farmers will sometimes point at urban sprawl, which may be a problem in Calgary. But really it's minimal compared to the footprint from intensifying agriculture.

Again, it's a part of the historical underpinnings of what happens when you clear away the bison and the Indigenous people who were managing the prairie with fire and hunting, and then turn the land over entirely to private ownership. [Prairie grasslands] are not just the most endangered landscapes, but they are also one of the most privatized landscapes, and there's an equivalency there, right? We know that it's harder to protect land if it's in private hands than it is if it's in public hands. In southern Saskatchewan, south of the boreal forest, more than 75 percent of the land is privately owned or privately managed. [The owners] are entitled to strip away the old-growth prairie that's thousands of years old anytime they want. If the economics justify ploughing under a 10,000-year-old prairie, you can do it. It's much easier to destroy than a forest.

J: *I can imagine, too, that a grassland that has been turned into a wheat field is less visually dramatic than a forest that has been clearcut. People might look at the grassland and the wheat field and not know the difference between the two.*
T: Or they'll think that all you have to do is get rid of the wheat and plant some grass again. But that doesn't work either, because any grass you plant is going to be a non-native species. Even if you plant the native species, it's very hard to get them to resist all the weeds and invasive plant species that have come in. So, restoring native grasslands is very, very difficult. The Nature Conservancy has tried at a few of their properties. They might have 10 or 12 species of grass where there used to be 30 species. It's just not the same. It's better than nothing, don't get me wrong. It will support a certain amount of diversity in insect and bird life, but it really is nothing like the old-growth prairie.

J: *The word "economy" is in your novel's title. You also begin each chapter with notes from Percy Taverner's* Birds of Western Canada *[Canada Department of Mines and Victoria Memorial Museum, 1926] on the economic status of a bird species. For example, this one on Song Sparrow:*

> *"The great numbers of the Song Sparrow render it most important to the agriculturalist. An analysis of its food shows that only 2 per cent is composed of useful insects and 18 per cent of harmful ones. Waste grain constitutes 4 per cent and weed seeds 50 per cent" (p. 86).*

Why did you want these notes to be at the forefront of the reader's mind as they started each chapter?

T: The use of the word "economy" throughout the book is intended to make people think about how we value nature. Do you have to have an economic value to justify its protection or its existence? By using that 19th century mindset of looking at the stomach contents of birds to see whether they are friend or foe, it points to the vanities and foolishness of seeing nature from an economic perspective. Nature has its own economy, which is of course a much more sustainable economy. We need our economy to be more confluent with natural economies. Instead, we are trying to fit nature into an economic system that is ultimately self-destructive.

J: *It sounds like at the heart of the matter our perspective hasn't changed much from the 19th century, even though that was 200 years ago.*
T: That's the point I'm trying to make. There are a couple of points in the novel where these questions on economic perspective come up and it's pretty clear that we're still thinking that way.

Indigenous people don't. I think that's one of the things we're missing. Scientists and conservationists will pay lip service to listening to Indigenous voices about traditional ecological knowledge, but are we really listening? Do we really listen to their way of regarding nature and their relationships with it? It's just completely different how they manage forests or grasslands to the way we do our forestry and agriculture.

J: *Throughout the book Nell seems to really struggle with whether the information she's collecting about local birds actually helps to protect them. I noticed that data collection seems to be an ongoing theme in the book, and that your characters argue both for and against its effectiveness. At one point Nell says:*

> *"Nature is still just a place we go to extract data so we can cook up some cost-benefit analysis that will make it look like we are acting responsibly when we approve new pesticides or peat-mining" (p.67).*

But, later in the book another character talks about the importance of bird surveys:

> *"I don't do this to save birds. I do it to save the truth … If people like us stop keeping records … no one will know what's changed or been lost" (p. 174).*

Tell me a bit about where this back and forth came from. Does it echo some of your own beliefs?
T: Completely. I swing back and forth myself. Sometimes I just get so fed up, because I work and volunteer in the grassland advocacy world. I get frustrated when I hear government scientists say, "We need to do more research, we need more data." Well, your shelves are filled with all the data we need. What we need is good policies. We need to start protecting prairie landscapes and wetlands. We don't need any more data. But at the same time, I enjoy going out birding and recording data. I participate in Christmas bird counts. Every summer, I do a breeding bird survey. I use eBird when I travel, and at home especially I will make eBird reports. There are moments when I despair. Is it helping birds? But ultimately, if I have one perspective, it's that sentence "I do it to save the truth" [p.174]. This is how bad things are. We need to know that Upland Sandpipers are disappearing from this region. We need to know that now we only have 50 or 60 pairs of Burrowing Owls when there used to be 2000 in this province. That truth needs to be kept.

J: *I think there's a sense of helplessness that a lot of people feel right now. So, you get tools like eBird where people can say "I'm doing something" just by keeping records.*
T: I tell people when they are feeling really discouraged to not expect big victories. That we have to look for the small ones that are out there, and they are there. Through organizations like the Nature Conservancy, Nature Saskatchewan, or Nature Canada we've managed to hold onto, protect, or restore little bits of habitat, sometimes large pieces, and we have to celebrate those [victories] and recognize them. We stopped a big wind energy project that was going to be entirely on native grassland, and it was moved and put on cropland. We stopped another local grassland from being chewed up and becoming a golf course a couple years ago. But, you're going to lose things too. There are big pieces of prairie being ploughed up every year, but you can't let that get you down so you just completely give up.

J: *In the decades that you've spent observing prairie ecosystems, what changes have you noticed? You mentioned the decline of the Burrowing Owl population.*
T: There are about 25 species of concern on native grasslands. A lot of them are birds, and I've watched most of their ranges in Canada shrink very quickly. I used to be able to leave my home in Regina and within a few miles of the city, I could see Burrowing Owls, Chestnut-collared Longspurs, McCown's Longspurs [Thick-billed Longspurs], Upland Sandpipers, Baird's Sparrows, sometimes Long-billed Curlews, even Ferruginous Hawks. I now have to travel a couple of hours away from Regina to see the edge [of their ranges]. Some of them, like McCown's Longspur, I have to travel four or five hours. Bird decline has been dramatic and anyone who's been paying attention to birds here can tell you that.

But over that same period, we've had the Nature Conservancy [receive] a lot more funding than they've ever had. They've picked up slack from the federal and provincial governments.

J: *At one point in the novel, Nell refers to a scrapbook where she lists some of the birds named for naturalists who were slave owners or committed atrocities against Indigenous peoples. Why do you think it's important to highlight this darker side of scientific history?*
T: There are points throughout the novel where I try—I think relatively gently, but you could go harder on this—to make the connection between the natural sciences and colonization. It's something I think we need to be aware of. It's just like any other part of the colonial-settler culture, they were oblivious to the rights of Indigenous people at the time. And some of them were more than oblivious; some of them were outright white supremacists. Unfortunately, some of our birds have been named for those people. I agree with the Bird Names for Birds movement. There's really no good reason for any bird to have a person's name attached to it. I get that there's a value in honouring some people, but maybe we need to do that in other ways. I like bird names that are descriptive, that are meaningful for the way the bird looks, moves, acts, behaves, or sounds. Some of the best names—like Kildeer or Chickadee—imitate the sound of the bird.

A big part of the book is how the colonial project was in part shaped by people like John Macoun and others who worked for the Geological Survey [of Canada]. That was their task, to go forth and find ways to justify the settlement, surveying and subdividing of the West. And look what has happened since then. All of the negative consequences that you and I have been talking about have cascaded from those events in the 19th century and the surveys.

J: I didn't know about the Bird Names for Birds movement. Is it recent?
T: Yes. There was the usual resistance from the ornithological union of course, not wanting to change. But they're making headway. They've had a lot of support. And the stories are hard to argue with. If you look at the things that some of those naturalists did—Audobon especially, the graverobbing—it's pretty bad.

J: *I'd like to end on what I think is a very beautiful quote from you. It's from a feature you wrote in* Canadian Geographic *on the soundscape of Grasslands National Park [Saskatchewan]:*

> *"It takes a place like Grasslands to remind us that natural sounds, though all around us, are like the stars at noon, lost in the man-made blare that fills our ears most of the time."*

I assume most naturalists who write about nature do so with the hope that people will pay more attention to nature. What idea or understanding do you wish for most people to take from their encounters with the natural world?
T: I love taking people out for walks and showing them the plants and birds that they have lived amongst for most of their lives, but they have never really paid attention to. I take great joy in doing that. If I had to come up with a mission for why I write—why I spend time doing this—it's to try to open people's hearts and minds to the more-than-human world around them. To see that it has an intrinsic life that is every bit as valuable as our own, and that it needs to be protected, honoured, celebrated. That we should, in many ways, be in awe of it and try to learn from it.

To purchase The Economy of Sparrows *visit https://thistledownpress.com/product/the-economy-of-sparrows/ or your local bookstore.*

For more about the Bird Names for Birds *initiative visit https://birdnamesforbirds.wordpress.com/.*

References and Further Reading

Derworiz, C. 2023. Nature Conservancy of Canada touts plan to protect 5,000 square km of Prairie grasslands. CBC News. Accessed January 31, 2024. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/conservancy-canada-nature-grasslands-protection-plan-1.6865595.

Herriot, T. 2012. Learning to listen. Canadian Geographic. Accessed January 31, 2024. https://canadiangeographic.ca/articles/the-sounds-of-silence/.

Taverner, P.A. William Spreadborough—Collector, 1856-1931 [Obituary]. 1933. Canadian Field-Naturalist 47: 39-41. https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/28034591. https://doi.org/10.5962/p.339449