
JUNIOR NATURALISTS

Wow, listen to the music," said Mark Magpie. I didn't know the prairie was supposed to sound like this."

Phillipa Fox and Mark Magpie stood in a wide open place. The whole world seemed to be made of grass, sky, wind and water. Thousands of birds were singing.

"Will will willet! Will will willet!" called one bird as he flew right overhead. His wings showed a flashy black and white pattern, but when he landed next to the two friends they were surprised to see he was a plain brown bird.

"Well well welcome!" he called.

"Thankyou," said Phillipa Fox. "You must be Will Willet, our guide here at Last Mountain Lake National Wildlife Area."

"Right, you're right," he said.

"I'm glad to be here to see a place where there is still open prairie," said Phillipa Fox. "It's beautiful, all birdsong and wildflowers. Am I ever glad this piece of wild prairie was saved."

"Yes, yes, and of course, the lake, too," agreed Will. "We Last Mountain Lake birds live in the oldest established wildlife refuge in North America. It was 100 years old last year. It is also considered to have international importance. You see there are so few good places left for birds to rest and eat and

nest. Birds from 27 countries stop here. Prince Philip of England, himself, came last year to join our centennial celebration. It's definitely a quality establishment."

"Well then lets celebrate!" yelled Mark and took off low over some cattail rushes.

"My, my, I wouldn't fly there if I were him," said Will.

Sure enough, a second later Mark Magpie came tearing back towards his friends. Two Yellow-headed Blackbirds were diving at him and pecking his back.

"Ow! Stop it!" yelled Mark. "I'm not after your babies. Leave me be! Ouch!"

"It's much better not to disturb nesting birds. They may take exception to your presence. Young birds are so easily injured," said Will, as Mark disappeared from view with the blackbirds after him.

"I wish some people I know would learn that," said Phillipa Fox. Suddenly she put her nose in the air and sniffed hard. "Fire! I smell fire. It's no barbecue either. We'd better find Mark."

Soon Phillipa Fox and Will Willet were traveling through swirling clouds of smoke. Sparks and bits of burning grass blew by. It was hard to breathe. Their eyes hurt. The fire roared towards them. It sounded like a freight train.

Phillipa dodged into the lake and lay low in the water. Will flew high into the air. In a few minutes the fire had gone by. Everything looked black and dead.

Phillipa climbed out of the water and shook herself. It was very quiet. Here and there a stick or clumps of grass still smoldered.

"Will!" she called "Will Willet!" There was no answer. "Mark Magpie, where are you?" She started to run through the ashes. "Will! Mark! Mark Magpie!" Soon her wet fur was covered in ashes. The hot ground hurt her feet.

"Hey Phillipa, Phillipa! We're ok, ok?" yelled Mark, flying right over her head. "Don't push the panic button. Will Willet and I are right here, just fine and dandy."

"Oh, Mark, I thought you were dead, and you too, Will. Am I ever glad to see you," cried Phillipa. "But this is terrible. The prairie is all ruined!"

"No, no, not at all. Please compose yourself. All is not lost," said Will Willet.

"What do you mean?" asked Phillipa. Just look at it!"

"It may not look like it, but fire is actually quite good for the prairie. It's made for fire so to speak. The wild prairie grasses renew themselves better with fire. Very little has been hurt. The gophers hid safely in their holes. The larger animals escaped as you did. The birds flew to safety."

"Anyway," said Mark "it wasn't very big. I vote we get out of these ashes. You're filthy Philip. I've got a question for you. How does a Red Fox get clean?"

"How?" asked Will Willet.

"She writes on herself so she can be read all over" said Mark. "Read, red, get it?"

"That's a terrible joke," groaned Phillipa Fox.

"Well, let's get out of the ashes then and enjoy this place," said Mark. "I saw Canada Geese on the lake. There's cormorants and gulls on the islands, Vesper Sparrows in the grass, and kingbirds in the trees. Let's go and look."

"Capital idea!" agreed Will Willet.

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