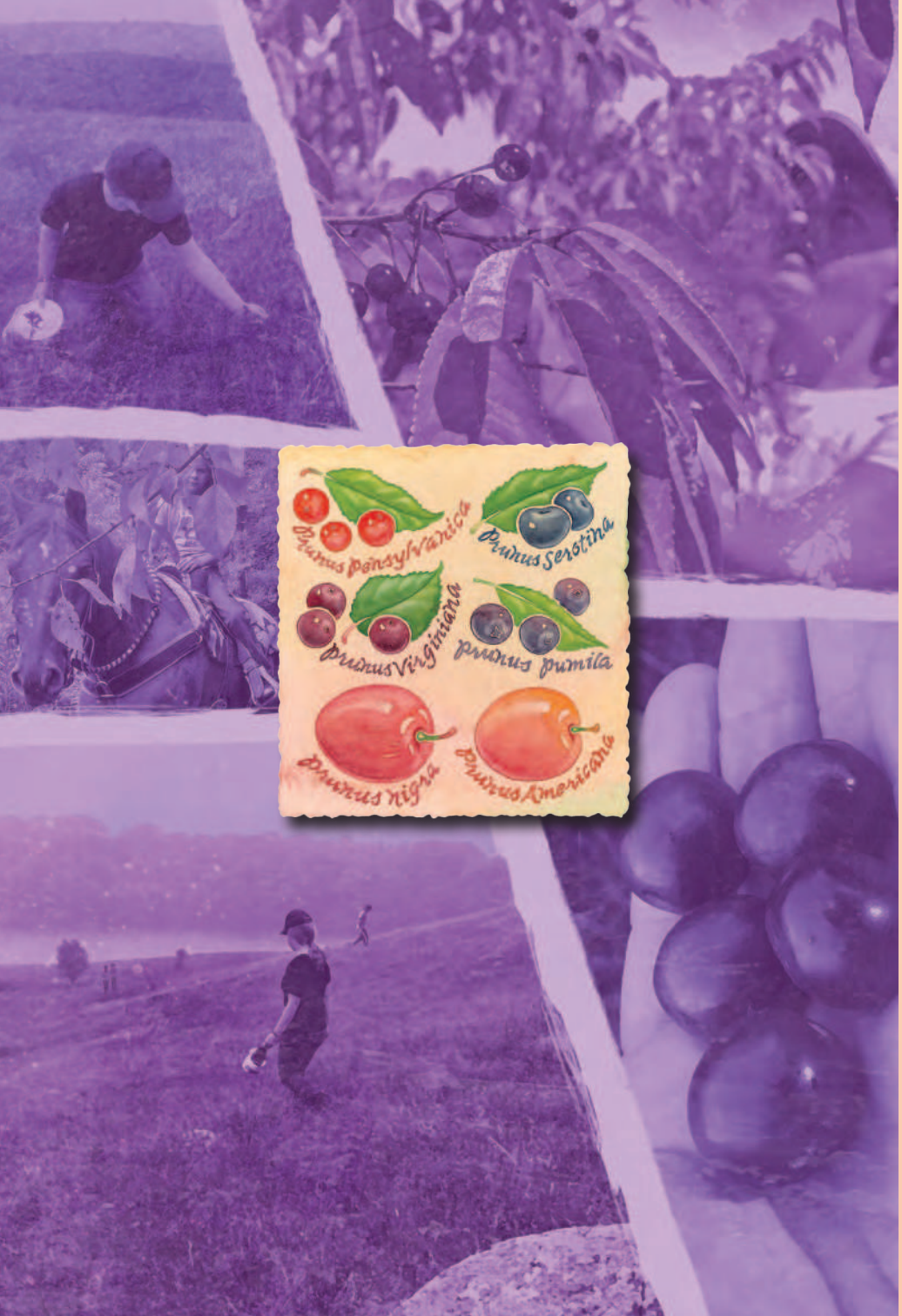

Collage source photos by Roy Heilman

Illustrations by Bill Reynolds

The Prunus Grand Slam

I set out to find all of Minnesota's native plums and cherries in one season.

by Roy Heilman

I like to keep things fresh. The spirit of discovery has always spurred me as a hunter and angler to try new things. It makes sense, then, that since I took up foraging, the greatest joys have come from going new places and finding different things to eat.

A couple years ago, the discovery of Canada plums (*Prunus nigra*) near the family cabin sparked a curiosity that grew into something much bigger. I soon came to know that there are six *Prunus* species native to Minnesota: Canada plum, American plum (*P. americana*), chokecherry (*P. virginiana*), black cherry (*P. serotina*), pin cherry (*P. pensylvanica*), and sand cherry (*P. pumila*). How neat it would be, I thought, to harvest and eat all six, on public lands, in one foraging season.

Perhaps it was pandemic restlessness, but 2021 felt like the right year to attempt the "Prunus Grand Slam." Little could I know how challenging it would be.

Cherry-Picking Information. With the knowledge that not every year is ideal for every fruit, nut, or mushroom, I worked in late spring to hedge my bets for a successful season. In May and June I combed through online databases like iNaturalist and the Bell Museum Biodiversity Atlas, gleaning insight into habitats and regions of the state where plums and cherries might be found. I reviewed photos and notes from earlier foraging outings to refresh my memory of locations of previous harvests. My notebook grew fat with helpful information that ushered in the season with a sense of optimism.

In early July, it was time to start the search. According to the usual rhythms of summer, pin cherries would ripen first. I took my kids to a dry, open clear-cut in General C.C. Andrews State Forest near Willow River where we'd encountered them before. A year ago, trees there had been heavy with cherries. The branches were as red as they were green, and we had quickly gathered enough to make pin cherry jelly.

Not this year. The timing was right, but most trees had zero cherries to offer. Some had literally one or two. While the kids collected some blueberries, I crisscrossed the area, hoping for a *pumila* sighting.

It didn't take long to find sand cherry shrubs, which were surprisingly abundant. Most were puny, though, and only a few bore fruit. The cherries were far from ripe, so I saved the coordinates as a "safety net" in case we couldn't find a good harvest elsewhere.

As we were walking out, one pin cherry tree beckoned with far more fruit than any of the others. We wasted no time in taking what we could reach. The first one tickled the tongue with a tart cherry zing. The grand total was less than a cup. Paltry, but sufficient to work with.

That tree saved the day. It was clearly doing its own thing, out of sync with others of its kind. I've come to think of a tree or bush like that as a rogue. Many a time have rogues saved me from coming home empty-handed. At that point, the entire state was in various stages of drought. I began to wonder if the success of my grand slam summer would hinge on rogues and other chance encounters.

Chokecherries and "Sandies." Soon it was time to look for chokecherries. They are usually ripe in the Twin Cities area in July. The edges of hardwood groves in Vermillion Highlands Wildlife Management Area near Hastings seemed like a good starting place.

Bergamot, compass plant, ox eyes, and Culver's root were all blooming that humid, hazy day. I hiked far in enjoyable surroundings but did little picking. Chokecherry trees were not as common as expected, and I managed to find only a couple of cups' worth. American plum shrubs were easier to come by. But few revealed developing fruit, so I eliminated Vermillion Highlands from the list of places for a viable plum harvest in August.

At the end of the month, my daughter Ruby and I set out for Glacial Lakes State Park to track down sand cherries. That park, near Starbuck in west-central Minnesota, is home to hundreds of acres of remnant and restored prairie in a formation called the Leaf Hills, a veritable gift from the ice age.

In the dramatic hills of the eastern park, the first *pumila* colony peeked out from the little bluestem—but yielded no cherries. This scenario played out countless times, despite the hours and miles we put in that day.

The next morning we headed to Buffalo River State Park near Fargo, which is known for its large tract of remnant tallgrass prairie. The sand cherry bushes there, also growing upland, were the biggest and most robust of any we'd encountered. But not even one rogue bush offered a token harvest.

At midday, it was clear that sand cherries were in a slump in that part of the state. There was enough time to make it back to C.C. Andrews, where we'd seen them growing just weeks prior. We made a dash for it. Several hours in the car had me on edge when we arrived.

The first few bushes were bare. Ruby, though, soon found the first sand cherry: a single, shiny, burgundy beauty. We high-fived and cheered.

Anxieties melted away and we continued picking "sandies." In the end we came away with a few dozen—not a major harvest, but a harvest nonetheless.

Halfway to the goal at that point, I expected to feel good about my progress on the journey. The truth is, all I felt was anxiety. It was unclear if the next three fruits would be as hard or even harder to find than the first three. Their normal seasons were still weeks away. Rainfall was far behind normal, and the summer would end as the second warmest on record.

More Fickle Fruits. When it was time to seek black cherries, the drought had only deepened. I expected pickings could be slim. The Driftless region seemed a good choice as it had seen more rain, and Richard J. Dorer Memorial Hardwood State Forest is a black cherry haven.

I chose a trail that ascended steadily toward a ridge top, expecting to find black cherry trees along the path and around the mar-

gins of a soybean field. I've learned that sun-exposed locations are a good bet for young, fruiting *serotina*, but not a single cherry could be found.

Most American plum were also bare, as had been the case all summer. There was one nice surprise, however, in a low spot where the field drained off. Several bushes were loaded with fruit, some of it perfectly ripe. The first was a classic American plum: sweet and juicy, with a bit of tartness in the skin. That thicket was good for a few pounds of ripe plums; it was a relief to know *P. americana* was in hand.

Nowhere along the rest of that trail did I find any black cherries. Nor along the creek, or anywhere else in that corner of the woods.

But near another parking area I came to the bottom of a goat prairie, a native but increasingly uncommon bluffside clearing. I've always been fascinated with goat prairies and stopped to gaze at it. A few *serotina* trees were scattered up there, encroaching on the opening. I began to climb excitedly.

As I wound my way from tree to tree, it was hard not to notice ladies' tresses and cylindric blazing stars, two prairie flowers I'd never seen in person. A small burrow served as a reminder that goat prairies are prime rattlesnake habitat. I slowed my pace.

One of the last trees on the hillside boasted the day's big prize: two plump black cherries. I pulled the branch down and claimed them. The first was sealed in a container for safekeeping. The other went straight into my mouth. Having reached full ripeness, it wasn't very bitter. Somewhere in the aftertaste was a hint of black cherry flavor—and victory.

The Elusive Plum. At that point the quest was almost complete. The last of the grand slam—and the one that literally kept me up

at night—was Canada plum.

Following a decent lead, I headed for Savanna Portage State Park near McGregor on a bright, breezy morning. It didn't take long to find the first young plum bush, but it bore no fruit, and despite miles of hiking all I found was another young Canada plum and a mystery plum that appeared to be a survivor on a former farm site. The choice was clear: Keep moving.

My next destination was deep in Itasca County, in Chippewa National Forest—the first place I'd ever found Canada plums. That roadside colony of large, prolific bushes has been good to me for several seasons. I needed a rogue on my side more than ever.

When I arrived at the thicket, there were no bright red fruits anywhere among the leaves. I scanned branches at all levels and on both sides of the road. I stood there, too stunned to feel defeated.

What if they've already ripened and fallen off?

Willing to claim anything at that point, I began to work backward, scouring the ground.

Then I saw it. Farther back from the road,

nearer the swamp, something rosy languished in the dirt. I scrambled through thorns and over logs to inspect it: a single plum skin, left by some animal or bird. I looked up in desperate hope and spied five plums still clinging to a bush I'd overlooked. The blessed rogue gave them up with a little shaking.

I slept well that night.

Syrup, Jams, and Other Treats. The next week we began to make the most of the season's diminutive harvest. Chokecherries provided more than enough juice to make chokecherry syrup for our wild blueberry pancakes, as well as chokecherry vinaigrette and chokecherry lemonade. The rest was set aside.

American plum pulp was second in volume, and some was combined with a little pin cherry juice for a microbatch of jam. It turned out well, yielding plum texture and flavor with sour cherry aftertaste.

After that, the remaining pulp from both plums was combined with juices from all four cherries to make a microbatch of what we call "Pan-Prunus" jam. Unfortunately, the flavors from lesser components were obscured. But overall it is good, with a beautiful deep purple color, texture of plum, and flavors of plum, cherry, and berry.

Preserved Memories. Reflecting on the grand slam journey, a couple of lessons have emerged that will endure long past the memory of this year's climatic hardship. First, foraging is best as a use-what-you-find endeavor. Setting a goal like mine turns that notion on its head and reverses the effort-to-reward ratio.

Second, the best moments from this summer did not come from fruit. I will long remember standing atop windblown Glacial Lakes ridges with my daughter, surveying sweeping prairie views as apocalyptic wildfire smoke filled our nostrils. The same goes for pausing to take in an idyllic beaver pond in Savanna Portage, or turning around at the top of the goat prairie and gasping at an unexpected vista. As with fishing and hunting, the foraging harvest should be secondary to the experience.

Lately I've been reliving those experiences with each taste of our preserved creations. And it occurs to me that this six-part *Prunus* concoction I've been enjoying on my toast might well be the first of its kind.

How's that for keeping it fresh?