

Common Ground; oil on canvas, 6 ft. x 10 ft.

Common Ground

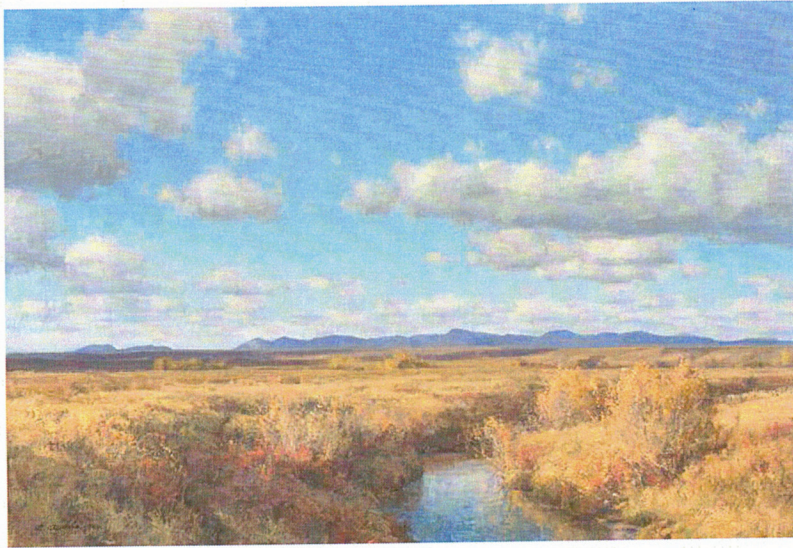
Artist's Statement by Clyde Aspevig

The glaciated plains of northern Montana represent one of the few remaining ecosystems of its kind left in the world today. This beguiling landscape with its harsh weather, silhouettes of distant mountain ranges, never ending horizons, and big dramatic skies is where I grew up.

As a young boy I learned to operate a 1940s-era tractor, an anemic machine with no radio that left me breathing dirt and baking in the sun for 10 or 12 hours a day. The best part of those days was watching the birds and wildlife going about their business with little regard for me or the noisy tractor. Raptors and gulls swooped for mice disrupted by the plow. Badgers came around, as did foxes with their curious kits. Coyotes stalked gophers and rabbits on the field edges while antelope watched from a distance and upland game birds exploded from cover.

Occasionally an elk or moose would wander through and while summer fallowing at night near the Milk River on the Canadian border, the first wolf and mountain lion I ever saw appeared in the tractor lights.

At the end of the day, with the tractor silent, the glorious sounds of prairie songbirds pierced through the ringing in my ears. In the cool and quiet evening light, I could smell the sweet clover and damp earth while the rich colors of sky and earth etched themselves in my memory to later become paint on canvas.



The best part about driving a tractor was getting off of it, exploring the unplowed coulees and pastures where native prairie still thrived, engaging my senses, uninterrupted by the noise and weight of mechanized humanity. It gave me a sense of freedom. **I felt truly alive.**

Sent out on horseback to fix fence or help my bother check cows, I'd often end up looking for tipi rings or wildlife in the brushy coulees and draws, or checking the scattered cottonwoods where the hawks nested. It often felt like discovering something new every day. It still feels that way, examining the texture and beauty of plants, watching the small creatures and insects that make their home within this complex environment, a place once laid flat under ancient shallow seas, then uplifted by deep volcanic shifts, then ground and chewed by glaciers.

The stones those glaciers dropped were the same ones I picked from fields my homesteading grandfathers had cracked open with horses and sweat. Native Americans had used those stones to anchor their tipis, create weapons and tools.

I have been painting the prairie landscape for more than fifty years now, and it never fails to seduce me with the depths of its moods, both beautiful and terrifying. Nature humbles me and exposes my vulnerabilities, but the prairie seems to do it in a unique way. Perhaps it's the vastness, the subtle nuances that mysteriously appear, or the fact that there are few places to hide. **I am simply in awe of the prairie's physical and spiritual power. It is a marvelous gift to feel as though you are part of it.**

This is why I support the movement to both restore and protect a relatively small portion of this prairie landscape in a way that includes all the original wildlife and plant species, to let it provide a better understanding both of our world and ourselves. It takes discipline, courage, pride and foresight.

Landscapes frame our emotions and experiences. This is why we love the land and it becomes sacred for many of us. It's understandable when people want to keep it the same, to seek security and familiarity. And it is understandable that some would like to return at least a portion of it to what it was a few hundred years ago, with no fences and abundant wildlife.



My hope is that this painting will inspire a sense of common ground. I hope we, as a people from many different perspectives, can leave our biases and preconceived ideas behind and look for solutions that honor our willingness to learn and understand each other's goals and objectives in our effort to conserve this sacred land we share together. I truly believe that under our big sky, in the twenty-two million acres that comprises northeastern Montana, there is enough room for all our dreams to be realized.

I have included in the lower left corner of the painting a harbinger of hope for the future health of this landscape we all love. Every time I visit this spot with my wife Carol, one of these resilient amphibians, who knows what is going on in this neighborhood of native plants and tipi rings, is there to greet us. And it puts a smile on our faces.

