



Amidst the challenges of learning and perfecting a new skill, researching a key piece of equipment, and planning your next shooting excursion, it can be easy to lose sight of what drew you to wildlife photography in the first place. That draw is probably a little different for each photographer reading this. Maybe you started out with landscape photography and got bored with the static subject

matter. Maybe you began as a hunter and decided you'd rather snare your quarry with a camera and let it go on alive after your encounter. Maybe you simply wanted to capture some memorable moments during a trip and got hooked. In any case, whether you shoot professionally or as a hobby, I'm guessing you find animals interesting and have concern for their welfare.

Timely articles like Alyce Bender's *Species of Special Concern* column in this issue, "Dawn's Prairie Dancers," can help bring your attention back to the big picture. She writes about the lesser prairie chicken, a grouse species with a nondescript name but some of the most intriguing animal behavior in North America. Each spring as day breaks, the males perform a percussive mating dance where they stomp their feet more than 21 times a second, accompanying their movements with a ululating song punctuated by pops and laughing sounds. It's a fascinating display, and it has inspired a number of

traditional human dances among the Native American people who have witnessed this spectacle for centuries.

Unfortunately, the lesser prairie chicken has suffered the same fate from our influence as far too many other species before it. Its population, which numbered more than a million in the 1800s, has plummeted to fewer than 30,000 individuals due to agricultural and industrial development that has overtaken much of its native habitat. In addition to its intrinsic value, the lesser prairie chicken also plays a key role in the ecosystem where it resides, and its decline has caused a ripple effect up and down the food chain. Since the late 1990s, the United States Department of the Interior has considered this species for protection multiple times under the Endangered Species Act, but bureaucratic delays and opposition from oil interests have left the species waiting again and again, its numbers dwindling as time goes on.

Most recently, the United States Fish & Wildlife Service said it would make a final determination about listing the lesser prairie chicken for protection under the Endangered Species Act by June 2022. That deadline has come and gone with no decision from the agency, and in late October, a conservation organization known as the Center for Biological Diversity sued the USFWS for its failure to protect this species in need of intervention.

This is conservation in action, and it's happening right now. You may not have known about the lesser prairie chicken or its precarious status before reading about it here, but I hope that learning about it will encourage you to look into ways you can

help. Bender does a great job of explaining how you can observe and photograph the birds yourself and then use those images to educate and influence others on the prairie chickens' behalf.

I'll add one suggestion to her list: If you live in the United States, particularly if you live in Kansas, Oklahoma, Colorado, New Mexico, or Texas, contact your elected officials using the information at usa.gov/elected-officials and make sure they know about the situation. Officials in these states down to the local levels have a lot of influence but may not even realize there's a problem. Even if you live elsewhere in the U.S., your senators and representatives can still act on the federal level to put pressure where it's needed to make things happen.

Other columns in this issue include an overview of harpy eagles by Joe McDonald, tried-and-true advice from Ruth Hoyt about making perches for bird photography when you're out on the road, and Gregory Basco's insights on hard and soft light and how you can use both to your advantage. This issue also includes a feature article by award-winning wildlife photographer Tamara Blazquez Haik, her second for the *Journal*, on photographing nocturnal urban wildlife. We're excited to have her start writing for us more regularly and particularly welcome her expertise on the role wildlife photography can play in conservation education.

Our *Community Capture* section highlights a beautiful juxtaposition of soft baby owls in a spiky saguaro cactus, shot by DJ Brooks and accompanied by his story on how he found and captured this scene. At the end of the issue, *Did You Know?* takes a look at the American bison and an annual opportunity to photograph them en masse as they were once seen across the American West. Lastly, we can't forget the winners of our Backyard Wildlife Photo Contest, whose images can be found on the cover and on page 11.

I got into this line of work to inspire people to develop a conservation ethic that will shape the choices they make that affect the world around them. We have a responsibility to nature and especially to the species that have suffered due to our influence, and photography is one of the best tools we have available to showcase why these species matter and make change happen.

To your photographic success,



Danielle Phillippi
Managing Editor

