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I Am One of You

A GAY WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST'S PERSPECTIVE ON OUR PROFESSION

By Travis Booms

I'm in the back seat of a Super Cub flying wildlife surveys near the Yukon River in northern Alaska. It's late November and I'm focused on counting the species of the day from my window while trying to keep the hose that delivers heat

from the engine of the drafty little plane pointed at my feet. It's -20 degrees Fahrenheit and the cold is seeping through my bunny boots.

The pilot and I are making small talk to pass the time between wildlife sightings, so he starts telling jokes. Pretty soon I realize where this is leading. Yup, he just cracked a gay joke. It wasn't unusually crude or graphic, but its message — even if unintentional — was crystal clear.

You're not one of us.

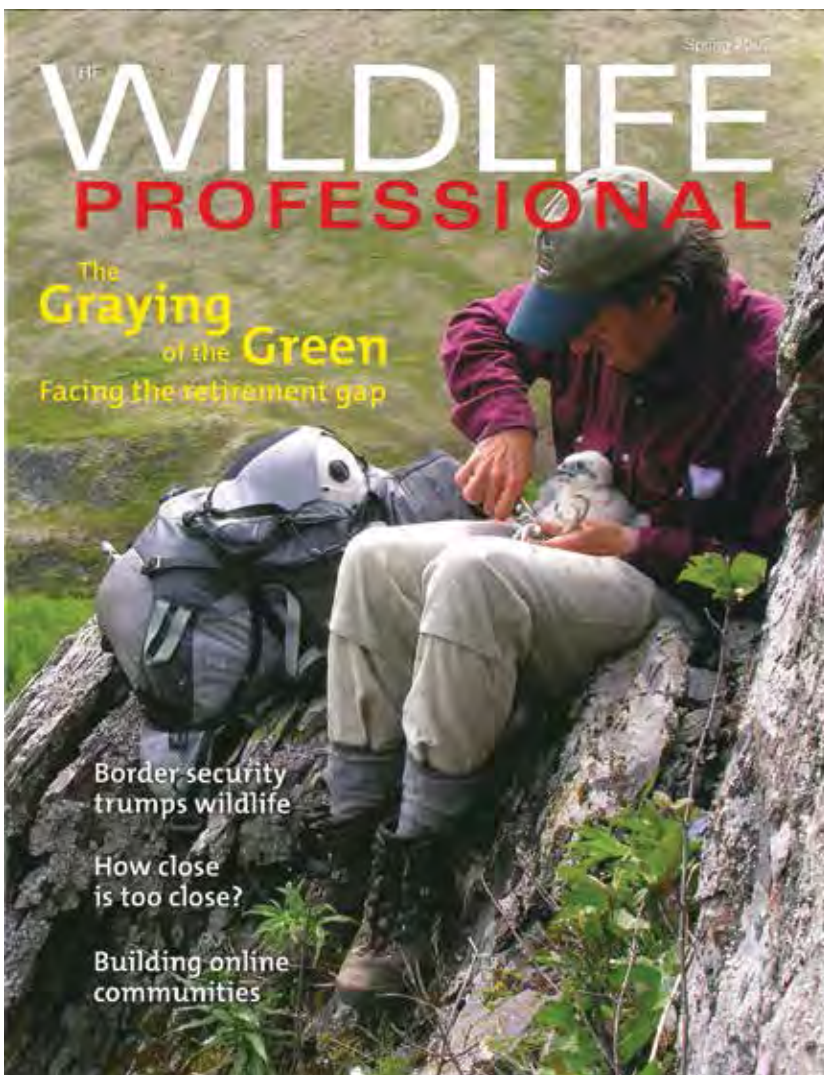
Like any gay man, I have been through this routine before. You laugh it off and move on. It's not worth making a scene over, especially with one of five guys with whom you will be sharing a one-room bunkhouse later that night in a remote Alaskan village. But it lingers in my mind, even if only subconsciously.

You're not one of us.

Though I have been through this countless times before, it still gets my blood pressure up because, dang it, I *am* one of you! I have worked just as hard, taken the same classes, built the same general skill set and climbed the same ladder as most of you, progressing from nearly useless volunteer tagalong neophyte to president of a student chapter of The Wildlife Society to a professional biologist employed by a state agency.

And like many of you, TWS has played a significant role in my professional development. What's more — like many of you — being a wildlife professional isn't just a career to me; it's an inherent part of who I am.

I commend TWS and other professional organizations for making major and tangible progress toward gender equality and diversity in the wildlife field. I'm encouraged to know that although women are still underrepresented in our field and are still subjected to sexist remarks, innuendoes and far



Credit: Nick Dunlop

▲ The first issue of *The Wildlife Professional* featured Travis Booms on the cover, a striking example of how invisible LGBTQ professionals are in the wildlife field. They are part of our wildlife professional community but typically remain silent about their sexuality out of fear of discrimination.



worse, discussions and symposia on gender equality have become the norm.

Women in the wildlife profession is no longer an unknown, quiet topic; it's a proud movement with substantial and growing support. Anyone who questions this need only attend one of the Women of Wildlife events at a TWS conference to know gender equality is on the march in the wildlife field. And that is awesome.

But what is not yet the norm at this point is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) biologists stepping forward as role models for the many who are only partially out or still professionally closeted.

Depending on the statistics you choose, 500 to 800 TWS members likely identify as LGBTQ. The actual percentage is probably lower than that of the general population, however, because stigmas and discrimination present in the wildlife profession have discouraged LGBTQ students from entering the field. In fact, some of my friends who displayed tremendous potential as young wildlife biologists and who were highly involved in TWS entered other fields because of the homophobia they perceived in our profession.

Nevertheless, statistics strongly suggest that at least one of the next 15 wildlife professionals you speak to identifies as LGBTQ. Seriously, stop and think about that. Write down the names of the next 15 biologists you speak to. We are one of you!

But unlike women and people of color, LGBTQ biologists are not outwardly identifiable in a crowd. We are silent observers. I can wander through large gatherings of my peers at conferences and yet can't find a single gay person in the crowd. It's not because we aren't there; we are. Too often, however, we choose to remain in the shadow of heteronormativity. And for those of us from the 27 states that do not prohibit LGBTQ discrimination in the workplace by statute, we remain closeted for very good reason.

Honestly, I've been a bit baffled on what to do and how to make my fellow LGBTQ biologists feel less marginalized. Being gay doesn't define me or my work. It has no relevance to my ability to complete my job. I can spot a gyrfalcon sitting on a nest ledge just as well as the next biologist. Hence, I

don't make it a discussion topic in my day-to-day life; but, maybe I should.

I'm fortunate to work for a fish and game agency that, at least in my experience, is largely welcoming to openly gay and lesbian biologists. The agency also prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation. Biologists in most of the United States, as well as non-state employees in Alaska, are not afforded such protections. This is why coming out in the wildlife profession is more than an act of social bravery. To most of us, disclosing our sexual orientation puts our careers, families, financial wellbeing and possibly even our physical wellbeing at risk.

My goal in this essay is really quite simple. It is to say that I *am* one of you and that LGBTQ biologists work in every agency, every region and every state. And we are also sitting in every undergraduate and graduate wildlife biology class. If you take statistical probability seriously — and I presume that 100 percent of you do — essentially every person reading this commentary knows at least one, and likely many more, LGBTQ wildlife professionals. If you don't, we simply are not out to you.

To my fellow LGBTQ biologists — and especially students considering this field as a profession — know that you will not be the only one at the next TWS or other professional society social mixer. If you see me at a conference, please introduce yourself and your peers to me. Let's build a community where none currently exists. Better yet, introduce me to the community that I've hopefully just been missing.

Lastly, to anyone reading this who remains skeptical about how quietly integrated into the wildlife profession LGBTQ biologist are, take a look at the cover of the inaugural issue of *The Wildlife Professional* from the spring of 2007. I find it heartening to know that a gay wildlife biologist is featured on the very first cover. ■

