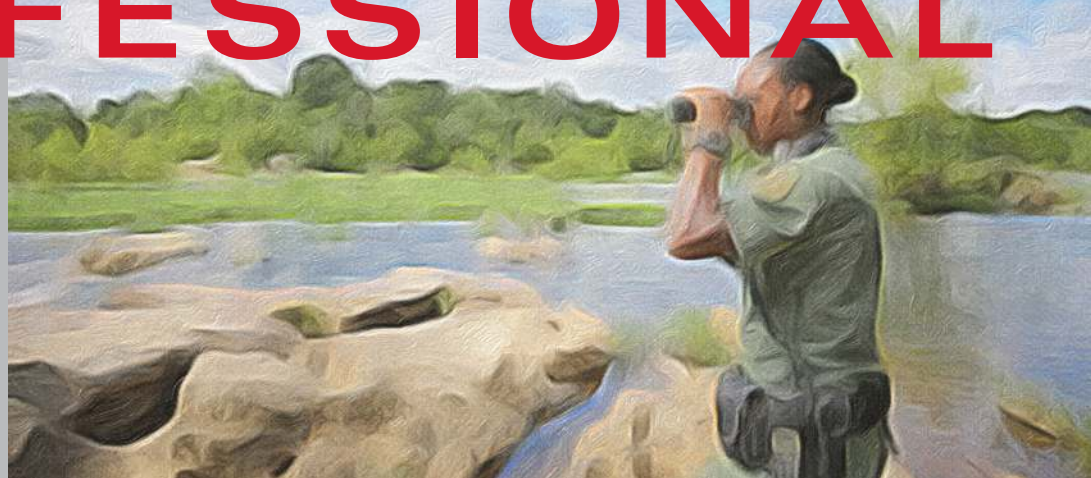
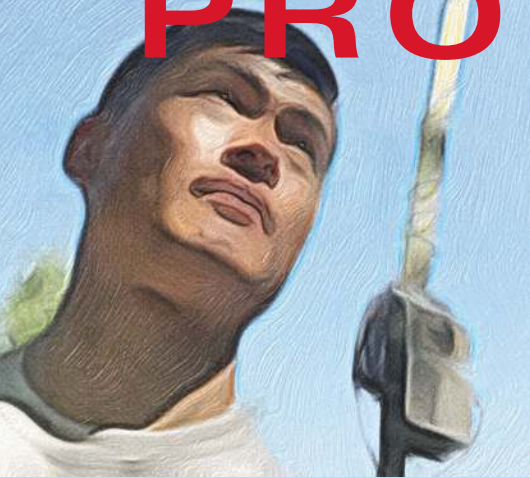
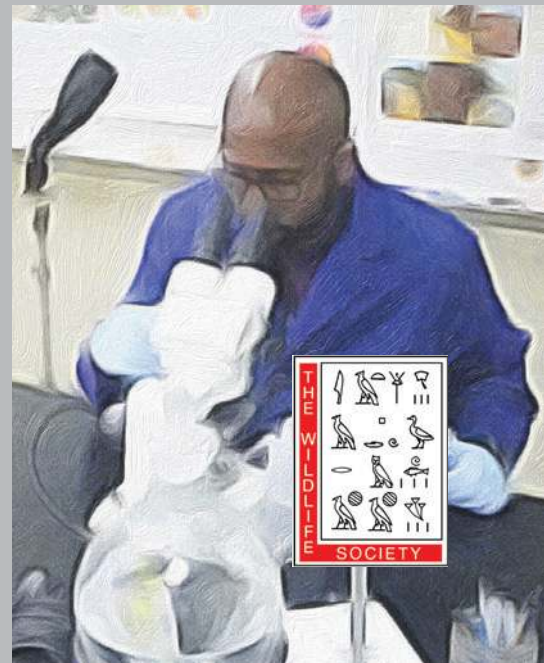


THE WILDLIFE PROFESSIONAL



Diversity in the Field

The push for diversity, equity and inclusion in the wildlife profession





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From Bee-eaters to Bats

EXPLORING THE DIVERSITY OF THE LGBTQ+ EXPERIENCE AMONG WILDLIFE PROFESSIONALS

By Adam Janke, Silas Fischer, Colleen Olfenbittel and Andrew Tri

Ask any room of wildlife biologists to name their favorite species and a lively debate is sure to ensue. There will be game people and nongame people, team bird and team mammal, herp lovers and international wildlife fans. We all share a passion for wild things and wild places, but when it comes to agreeing on how these wild things rank, we hold strong opinions.

It was no different last October during a conference social hour in which members of The Wildlife Society identifying with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and other LGBTQ+ communities gathered to network as part of TWS' growing Out in The Field initiative. At the onset, they were asked to share one wildlife species they felt best embodied the "queer experience." Predictably, the opinions were as diverse as the participants were.

A few themes emerged, though. Some chose species without color differences or other sexually dimorphic traits, like ocellated turkeys (*Meleagris*

ocellata) or caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*). Others picked animals with striking coloration or ornamentation, like prairie chickens, poison dart frogs and the "drag queen bird"—more commonly known as the European bee-eater (*Merops apiaster*). Unique behaviors, like the long-tailed manakin's (*Chiroxiphia linearis*) courtship display or the shape shifting of octopuses, spoke to some. Subtle beauty was important for others, as seen in California condors (*Gymnogyps californicus*) or the hidden beauty of chameleons.

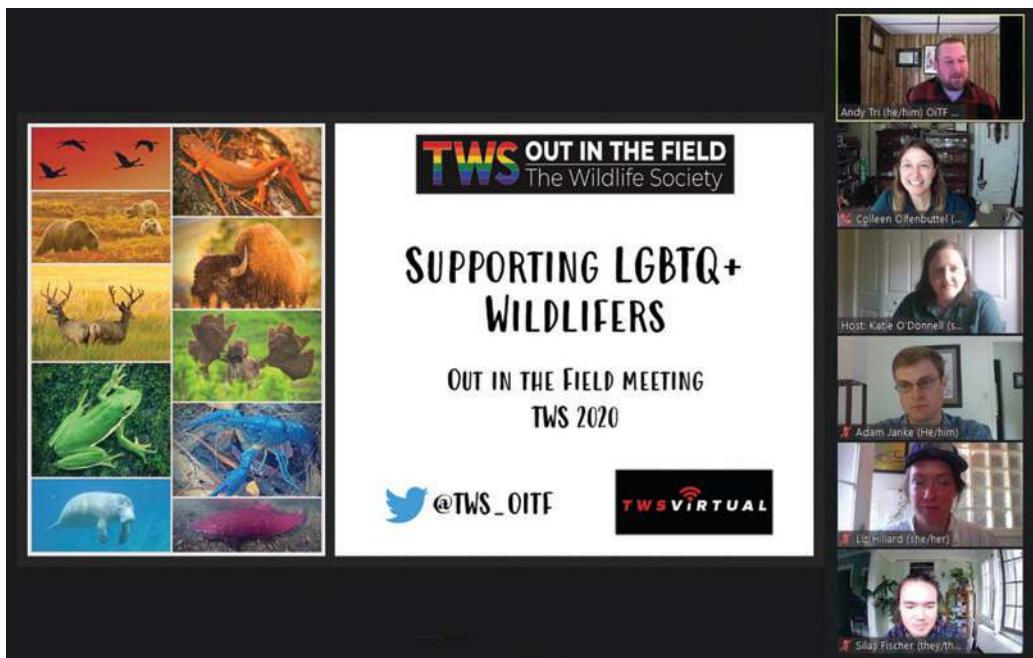
For some, ubiquitous species like raccoons (*Procyon lotor*) or frogs embodied queerness. Gender-defying organisms like agave plants and sea horses fit for others. Some saw their experience in the resilient lives of penguins, who according to one participant, "find love despite living in rugged landscapes." Misunderstood species, like wolves (*Canis lupus*), struck a chord for others. One participant saw their experience in the life of the Blanding's turtle (*Emydoidea blandingii*)—beautiful and striking when they stick

their neck out but willing to retreat to the safety and comfort of their shell when threatened. In the end, the nearly 30 wildlife biologists from 19 states and three provinces agreed on perhaps only one thing: the queer experience is as varied and remarkable as the wildlife diversity we all admire.

Defining LGBTQ+ diversity

Diversity within the LGBTQ+ community comes from two characteristics all people hold: gender identity and sexuality. These characteristics, along with others like age, physical ability, race and ethnicity, are what social scientists call "internal dimensions of diversity"—characteristics of a person's central identity that we do not choose. As pop star Lady Gaga

▼ The Out in The Field initiative of TWS held a public forum and discussion at the 2020 TWS virtual conference (pictured here), as well as a virtual social for wildlifers in the LGBTQ+ community.



Courtesy Adam Janke



reminds us, “Baby, [we’re] born this way.” Diversity also includes external dimensions that we do choose—career, marital status, religion, place of residence—which can be dynamic over time.

We need to understand and acknowledge both the external and internal dimensions of diversity because both enrich workplaces, build stronger teams and help people solve challenges, including those we face in the wildlife profession. Internal dimensions are most central to people’s identities, though, and often, they are the most overtly oppressed in society.

That is why it is critical for professionals to understand the complexity of these internal dimensions of diversity and how they intersect with one another to form the identities of the people with whom we work. Wildlife biologists strive to protect and enhance biodiversity for ecosystem resiliency. We can apply that same thinking to understand our colleagues and ourselves better, improving the resilience and relevance of our professional community and our professional organizations.

Key terms

The terms gender and sex are often inappropriately used interchangeably, an issue widespread in wildlife research and literature. Confusing the terms obscures the important distinction between sex—a label assigned at birth based on morphological or chromosomal characteristics (i.e., male, female, or intersex)—and gender, which is a more complex concept defined as a person’s self-assessed identity as male, female, both or neither.

Gender identity is the term used to describe how a person identifies as a man, a woman, a blend of both (i.e., nonbinary or gender queer) or neither (i.e., agender). It is a person’s internal sense of their gender and can either differ from their sex assigned at birth (i.e., transgender, nonbinary and agender) or not (i.e., cisgender).

Sexual orientation is a term used to categorize a person’s emotional or physical attraction to others. Categories include gay, lesbian, bisexual, straight, asexual and pansexual or omniseual—those who are attracted to people regardless of sex or gender. These categories can help define a core identity relating to sexual orientation, but they can also obscure the spectrum of attraction found among many people, from strictly same-sex attraction (homosexual) to strictly opposite-sex attraction



Credit: Pierre Dalous

(heterosexual) or entirely outside of this gradient, as found among asexual people.

Understanding how people identify can be complicated. There are no reliable external indicators of how a person identifies, and how they express their identity may change over time. This introduces another important concept. Gender expression is how an individual presents their gender identity. Sometimes that is through voice, behavior, clothing or hairstyle. Sometimes it is for personal reasons. Other times, it is part of a pragmatic strategy to exist safely in a society where certain identities are oppressed, or in some cultures, explicitly persecuted.

We tend to see more diverse manifestations of these identities among people who identify with the LGBTQ+ community. Because these diverse manifestations of gender or sexuality are less common, they are often misunderstood. As a result, LGBTQ+ people are more likely to face discrimination, physical harm or suffer from mental health issues. Additional internal dimensions of diversity, such as race and physical ability, can also intersect with LGBTQ+ identities to influence experiences with discrimination and violence. Transgender women of color, for example, are victims of hate crimes at higher rates than white transgender women.

Widely held stereotypes of what it means to be male or female in a mostly cisgender, heterosexual

▲ European bee-eaters were among about 20 species of wildlife reported to embody the queer experience among LGBTQ+ wildlifers at the 2020 TWS conference.



culture further constrain expression and acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities. Breaking down these stereotypes and accepting people for the complicated and fascinating individuals they are is critical.

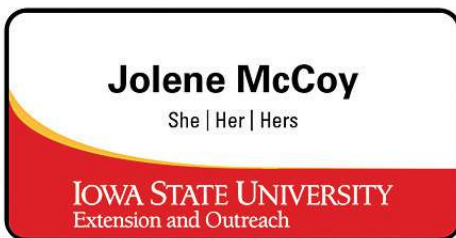
Making space

How can we —as wildlife professionals —make use of all these concepts to be inclusive at work, in the classroom or in the field? First, keep in mind these identities fundamentally define us as people. Every person has a gender identity, sexual orientation and gender expression.

TWS' Out in the Field initiative is working to elevate the visibility of LGBTQ+ wildlifers and build a community to ensure all wildlifers are embraced and accepted for who they are (Olfenbittel et al. 2020). Last December, we held our second virtual happy hour for LGBTQ+ wildlifers in support of this goal. Like our first social, about 30 people showed up from approximately 20 states and provinces.

Students, early-career professionals and seasoned professionals from positions as varied as industry biologists, private consultants, state or federal biologists and university educators joined. After some informal networking, we asked this group

what they wished their non-LGBTQ+ wildlife colleagues knew. Here we present the highlights from these discussions as tools for all wildlife professionals to apply to build a more inclusive and equitable profession.



▲ Including pronouns on business cards, name badges, email signatures and more can normalize the practice and build a more inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ people.

Learn the language: For many, there is a language to learn when seeking to understand the LGBTQ+ community. Many of us in the community, including each of the authors of this article, admit that the more we listen to the experience of others, the more we learn about the complexities of our own community. Complex identities are hidden in the shadows in many cultures —often oppressed or overtly persecuted. Historically, these identities have not been taught in schools or discussed openly.

Fortunately, that is changing in many cultures. Increased visibility of diverse gender and sexual identities is improving people's understanding and opening minds, leading to further expression and acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities and opening a path to more learning as a result. For people new to the language, articles like this one can

help. Learning new languages is complex. People will make mistakes, which should be treated as learning opportunities. When learners slip, it is best to listen, offer a polite correction and some constructive feedback as we all learn the language of inclusion together.

Understand and recognize intersectionality:

An identity within the LGBTQ+ community represents just one dimension of how a person identifies. Their identity also may include other dimensions of diversity, a concept social scientists call intersectionality. Recognizing intersectionality helps us better understand the range of experiences among our colleagues, and it advances important conversations about equity and inclusion. For example, LGBTQ+ people of color can face additional discrimination due to race or ethnicity, whereas white LGBTQ+ wildlifers may not. These additional aspects can add further challenges to finding acceptance, understanding and inclusivity for people with intersecting, historically oppressed identities.

It is critical for wildlife professionals to understand the complexity among all dimensions of diversity to understand themselves and their colleagues better. This understanding will enable us all to ultimately advocate for inclusive spaces in classrooms, workspaces and the field. Meaningful advocacy involves acknowledgment of the plurality of diverse voices and championing efforts to create equity.

Create safe working environments in the office, lab and field:

Discussions at our recent event often centered on the feeling that LGBTQ+ wildlifers cannot always bring their full selves to work (Booms 2019). Rather, many LGBTQ+ wildlifers worry about whether universities, agencies, organizations and field sites are free from prejudice against LGBTQ+ identities, are physically unsafe or are otherwise unwelcoming. As a result, many make decisions about their species of study, areas in which they will work and organizations they will work for based on concerns for their well-being.

Supervisors can strive to establish a workplace culture that ensures an inclusive and safe environment for all by rejecting homophobic or transphobic language or actions, speaking out when witnessing bullying or harassment, being visible in embracing diversity and listening to the needs and experiences of all employees. Supervisors can ensure gender-neutral restrooms and housing options are available in workplaces and the field, set expectations of staff



and field crews that they will treat each other equitably and with respect, have staff work in pairs to assure safety in the field and be familiar with social and cultural conditions at field sites.

Above all else, strong leaders and LGBTQ+ allies are good listeners. They are receptive instead of dismissive, and they ask genuine, noninvasive questions instead of making assumptions.

Signal acceptance and inclusion: One critical way to build more affirming spaces is to use reliable and visible symbols of acceptance and inclusion. Allies can incorporate statements of inclusiveness in institutional documentation, post signage in office spaces and highlight actions taken to create an inclusive environment. Allies can also share their personal pronouns (e.g., he/him, she/her) in email signatures, conference nametags and conversations as a means to normalize and accept a range of pronouns used by people in the LGBTQ+ community (e.g., they/ them, xe/ xem).

These simple steps can signal acceptance to transgender and gender-nonconforming people and reduce incidences of misgendering, in which someone is referred to with gender pronouns with which they do not identify. In this way, the use of pronouns by cisgendered people becomes a reliable symbol of a welcome environment for all.

What it means to be LGBTQ+

Toward the end of our inaugural Out in the Field social at the virtual TWS conference in October 2020, we attempted to arrive at a favorite species or taxon that best embodied the queer experience among the myriad options. Predictably, we did not reach a clear consensus, but one kept coming up —bats.

Participants found in bats a number of common themes that resonate across the community. Bats are one of the most diverse taxa and are found across the globe in a wide variety of ecosystems. They occupy a breadth of ecological niches and have evolved to thrive in a variety of challenging contexts. Bats are widely misunderstood, and are often the subject of myths and misunderstandings. To many people, the sight of a bat is unnerving, but among those who study them or admire their diversity and resiliency, their beauty is obvious. They often go unseen, living among people but carrying out their lives in the shadows or privacy of natural places. They are often persecuted from hatred born of ignorance of their value in ecosystems.



Credit: Ann Froschauer/U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

In these ways and more, the experience of bats is not unlike the experience of many queer people. Despite their ubiquity, they are often misunderstood, unseen or persecuted. The work to champion the lives of these critical organisms is not unlike the work needed to value LGBTQ+ wildlifers. We need to learn to see them, appreciate them and allow them to be their true selves. By doing so, we benefit the wildlife we manage and the organizations we belong to, as diversity strengthens and enriches us all. ■

▲ **Bats often live in the shadows, play critical roles in ecosystems and are persecuted out of misunderstanding. Many of these characteristics align with the experience of LGBTQ+ people.**



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