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Out in the Field

A NEW LGBTQ+ INITIATIVE TAKES SHAPE WITHIN THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY

By Colleen Olfenbuttel, Travis Booms, Claire Crow, Katherine O'Donnell

The future is hard to predict, but we scientists love to try anyway. We use probability and models to make sense of data and project the future, and we use those predictions to calculate our actions. Sometimes, though, the best action is to ignore the calculations and allow your instinct to decide.

Travis Booms did just that when he decided to come out in his article “[I Am One of You](#),” which appeared in *The Wildlife Professional* March/April 2019 issue. He never expected his article to spark an initiative in The Wildlife Society that would bring together five strangers to hatch a plan, cause a room to overflow with wildlifers and lead TWS CEO Ed Thompson, TWS President Gary White and other TWS leaders to stand up and eloquently voice their support for the LGBTQ+ wildlifer community.

Travis’ article sparked what has come to be known as the “Out in the Field” initiative, a new effort that began when four TWS members contacted Travis after his article was published to find out how they could answer his call to build a community for LGBTQ+ wildlifers in TWS.

Out in the Field has three simple goals: (1) to increase visibility of LGBTQ+ wildlifers in TWS; (2) to build a community of LGBTQ+ wildlifers; and (3) to identify ways to support LGBTQ+ wildlifery, including students, in the wildlife profession.

Being out and open

Why is there a need? North American wildlife agencies, which are entrusted with the management and conservation of the wildlife resource on behalf of the public, are increasingly faced with a public that is far more diverse than the wildlife profession itself. Some agencies and organizations have recognized the need to better represent their diverse stakeholders, includ-



Credit: Katie O'Donnell

▲ Supporters of the Out in the Field initiative wore rainbow lapel pins at the 2019 AFS-TWS Joint Conference in Reno, Nevada.

ing re-examining their organizations’ values to ensure a diverse and supportive work environment. The Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies asserts these [core values](#) for their staff and organization, which represents all state and provincial wildlife agencies in North America: “We value people and treat them with respect and dignity” and “We value different opinions, backgrounds, and perspectives. We are not afraid to have difficult conversations and maintain our professionalism throughout.”

As Travis pointed out in his article, many LGBTQ+ students and professionals still feel they can’t be fully open with their colleagues, while others still face repercussions for being out or being outed by a colleague. But being out and open is an important component in building relationships with your colleagues, as strong relationships result in collaboration, trust and teambuilding — all which feed into one’s career success.

We wildlifery spend a lot of time with each other due to the nature of our work — long drives to field sites, remote camping for weeks, early mornings sitting in duck blinds, hours in planes for telemetry flights, late nights mist-netting for bats. Naturally, we bond during these times, and not just over discussions about the wildlife we study.

Our non-LGBTQ+ colleagues openly talk about their personal lives — their kids, spouses, families and friends. They readily thank their spouses at award banquets and retirement parties. They bring their significant others over for dinner with their graduate advisor.

Our LGBTQ+ colleagues, however, often hesitate to do the same. In writing “[I Am One of You](#)”, Travis wanted his fellow wildlifery to know that



we LGBTQ+ wildlifers want to participate in these important, interpersonal discussions around the water cooler and not worry that doing so may lead to ostracism or harassment, slower career advancement or losing our jobs. Though such consequences are happily on the decline in many places, they continue to persist elsewhere. Our worries are very real and grounded in our lived experiences.

Becoming visible

The 2019 AFS-TWS Joint Conference in Reno, Nevada, served as the kickoff for this new initiative, which is housed under TWS' Ethnic and Gender Diversity Working Group. The organizers were Travis Booms, Claire Crow, Katie O'Donnell and Colleen Olfenbittel — all LGBTQ+ wildlifers — along with Tad Theimer, an outspoken and key ally. We realized there was a need to let LGBTQ+ wildlife students and professionals know that they too are welcome in TWS' family and that they are not alone — that, just like their straight colleagues and friends, they can be open and truthful about who they are without fear of repercussions or being marginalized.

As Travis wrote, while being LGBTQ+ doesn't affect our ability to do our jobs, being open and out can put our careers, families, financial wellbeing and possibly our physical wellbeing at risk. And, unlike most other underrepresented groups, LGBTQ+ wildlifers are not easily identifiable, so we often don't even know who else identifies as LGBTQ+ when we're in the workplace, the field or at conferences. Further, TWS has lacked visible LGBTQ+ leaders who can provide important examples and role models.

The Out in the Field initiative is our attempt to change this. We want to make ourselves more visible so that we can support and mentor each other and work with our allies to foster a more inclusive, welcoming culture where diversity of all kinds is clearly embraced.

Our kickoff event in Reno was months in the making. Through hundreds of emails among us five strangers, we hatched plans for the upcoming conference. We quickly realized we needed both financial and logistical support. Several organizations (EGDWG,

What does LGBTQ+ mean? Just as many organizations and agencies use initials to readily and easily identify themselves, LGBTQ+ is a shorthand way to represent a diversity of sexual and gender identities. LGBTQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and related identities. These letters, and the language used to discuss these identities, have expanded over time to be inclusive and representative of a variety of identities.

the Southwest Section of TWS, the Student Development Working Group, the Early Career Professionals Working Group and the International Wildlife Management Working Group) and individuals responded generously to our requests for help.

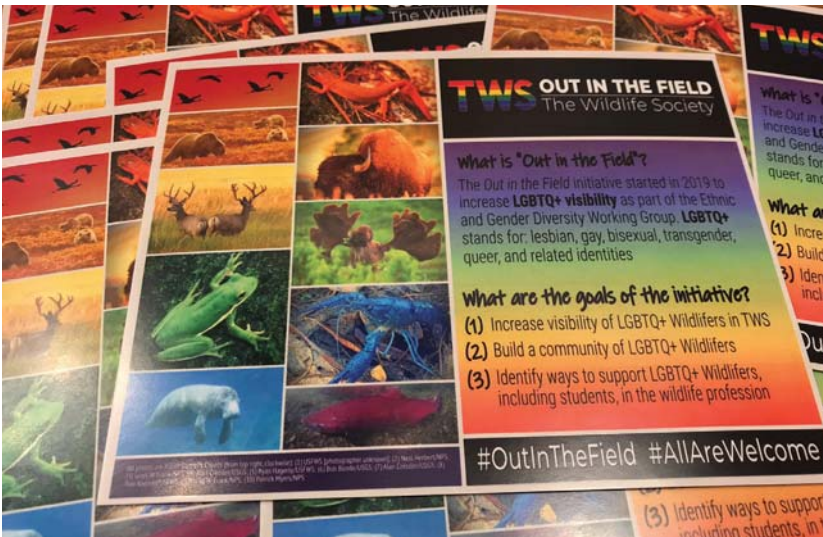
To help fulfill the first goal of Out in the Field, we created rainbow TWS pins, so that both LGBTQ+ wildlifers and allies alike could visibly show their support. We also decided to create "LGBTQ+ Ambassador" name badge ribbons that we and other out LGBTQ+ TWS members could wear to identify ourselves. These ribbons increased our visibility to each other and to conference attendees.

Wearers of the ribbons handed out the TWS rainbow pins, ally pledge cards and LGBTQ+ informational cards. Because ambassadors self-identified as LGBTQ+, other LGBTQ+ wildlifers could confide in them to share their personal stories and experiences. Meanwhile, TWS Council initiated its own effort to visibly support diversity at the conference, creating

▼ Over dinner, organizers Travis Booms, Claire Crow, Katie O'Donnell (left to right) and Colleen Olfenbittel (not pictured) meet for the first time to prepare Out in the Field pledge cards with attached TWS rainbow pins to distribute during the conference.



Credit: Colleen Olfenbittel



Credit: Katie O'Donnell

▲ Postcards provided information on the Out in the Field initiative and events, the significance of wearing the TWS rainbow pin, the ally pledge and additional resources.

▼ An overflow crowd attends the inaugural Out in the Field luncheon, a gathering for LGBTQ+ wildlifers and their allies, at the 2019 AFS-TWS Joint Conference in Reno, Nevada.



Credit: Katie O'Donnell

and encouraging conference attendees to wear an “All Are Welcome” pin. The synergy of these efforts demonstrated to LGBTQ+ wildlifers that they are welcome and supported in the TWS family.

An overflow crowd

The big event was the inaugural Out in the Field luncheon for both LGBTQ+ members and allies. We planned the luncheon for the first full day of the conference so that attendees knew early on about the initiative and what the pins and ribbons meant. We also hoped to jumpstart discussions on how to accomplish the three goals of the initiative, help LGBTQ+ attendees start to get to know each other and demonstrate that there are allies within many levels at TWS.

However, the morning of the luncheon, we found ourselves unnervingly anxious. We wondered if we had made a huge mistake — ordering food and setting places for 40 people. What if only a half-dozen people showed up? What would we do? Sit uncomfortably, looking at each other’s name tags trying to think of things to say?

Thankfully, what others had been saying all along happened. People showed up. They started appearing 30 minutes early. So many people showed up, our allies started bringing in more chairs to the luncheon. And still, people were overflowing into the hallway. During the luncheon, Thompson returned a second time to the podium to announce that he had tripled our food order on the spot, asked for tables and chairs to be set up outside in the hallway and warmly embraced what we all were witnessing — the start of a new, energetic, positive movement in TWS that quite literally overflowed a room.

Straight and queer; men, women, and nonbinary; young and old; student and professional; cisgender and transgender; tattooed and not; tall and short; council members and regular members; and people of all colors showed up. The diversity in the room was beautiful. Standing in front of the room while Colleen spoke about this new initiative, looking out at allies and LGBTQ+ members alike, we felt moved. And honored. And incredibly grateful.

Throughout the conference, we were approached by LGBTQ+ students and professionals, many with personal stories about their experiences in the wildlife profession. And while both LGBTQ+ and allied students expressed gratitude that the initiative demonstrated that TWS is a welcoming place for all, many fellow LGBTQ+ professionals expressed astonishment at how far we have come — that TWS would make such a point of welcoming them at all, let alone support the initiative.

Where do we go from here?

Those perspectives from our fellow wildlifers stem from a not-too-distant past when they felt ostracized and unwelcome in our profession, and they show that many still perceive the wildlife field as close-minded regarding gender and sexual minorities. Out in the Field hopes to remove that perception — or in some cases, reality — permanently.

Out in the Field is a long-term initiative, and plans are already underway for the 2020 TWS Conference



in Louisville, Kentucky. And yes, a luncheon on the first day with free food is part of that plan! If you attended the luncheon in Reno and signed up for our email list, we hopefully have already been in touch with you, so you can help us start planning. If you are interested in helping to plan for 2020 and beyond, or financially supporting these efforts, please feel free to reach out to any of the authors.

Ultimately, we feel that Out in the Field will make TWS, and the wildlife profession, stronger by recruiting and retaining the best of the best, which includes LGBTQ+ wildlifers. Diversity strengthens and enriches a system, be it the wildlife that we manage or the organization to which we belong.

With the myriad challenges facing our natural resources — climate change, rapid development, declines in hunters, habitat loss and limited funding to adequately address any of them — the wildlife profession cannot afford to have the next generation of wildlife professionals, with new perspectives and different ideas, leave this field because it is perceived as — or actually is — unwelcoming or discriminatory. This initiative was designed to show our fellow wildlifers that “We are some of you” and we are here to support our LGBTQ+ colleagues.

TWS’ mission is “to inspire, empower, and enable wildlife professionals to sustain wildlife populations and habitats through science-based management and conservation.” We hope that Out in the Field will inspire, empower and enable our fellow wildlifers, allies and LGBTQ+ alike, to contribute to our profession for the benefit of the wildlife resources we seek to conserve.

As past-president Gary Potts stated during his tenure “We are The Wildlife Society!” ■



TWS MEMBER **Colleen Olfenbuttel, MS, CWB®**, is the black bear and furbearer biologist for the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, past-president of the North Carolina Chapter of TWS, at-large board member of *The Wildlife Professional* Editorial Advisory Board and former chair of the SEAFWA Furbearer Working Group.



Travis Booms, PhD, is a regional wildlife biologist for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.



Claire Crow, MS, works for a federal agency, represents the Ethnic and Gender Diversity Working Group on the Editorial Advisory Board of *The Wildlife Professional* and is newsletter editor for the International Wildlife Management Working Group.



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