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From Game Management to Ground Squirrels, Salamanders, and Genomics: Six Decades of Research in the Publications of the Western Section of The Wildlife Society

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***Abstract.*—The publications of the Western Section of The Wildlife Society provide an unusually long record of changing interests in wildlife science and management in western North America. Publications have spanned approximately six decades beginning with the paper journals *Transactions of the California-Nevada Section [of] The Wildlife Society*, continuing through *Cal-Neva Wildlife* and the *Transactions of the Western Section of The Wildlife Society* until 2010, and the journal reemerged in 2014 as the online *Western Wildlife*. The historical online index of the paper journals contains 681 papers published from 1966 through 2010. Examination of publication frequency, representative article titles, and the modern journal archive reveals several broad changes. Earlier volumes strongly reflected applied wildlife and fisheries management, game species, agency concerns, and the relationship between wildlife management and society. Over subsequent decades, habitat alteration, conservation biology, special-status species, restoration, human impacts, and increasingly specialized research methods became more prominent. The modern journal maintains this applied conservation emphasis while also providing considerable space for natural history, including observations of predation, behavior, diet, distribution, and unusual species interactions. The history of these publications documents more than changes in a journal; it provides a window into how the questions asked by biologists have evolved while demonstrating the continuing value of descriptive natural history alongside increasingly sophisticated wildlife research.**

Key Words.—amphibians; birds; fish; California; history; mammals; publishing; reptiles; research; scientific journal; The Wildlife Society.

Introduction

Scientific journals record not only discoveries but also changing research interests. What scientists choose to study, which animals receive attention, which questions are considered important, and which methods are viewed as appropriate all change through time. Long-running publications can therefore serve as scientific time capsules. Few regional wildlife publications provide as interesting an opportunity to examine these changes as those of the Western Section of The Wildlife Society. The publication lineage began in 1966 with the *Transactions of the California-Nevada Section [of] The Wildlife Society* (Fig. 1). The publication became *Cal-Neva Wildlife* in 1970 and then the *Transactions of the Western Section of The Wildlife Society* in 1986. The *Transactions* continued through 2010. In 2014, the society began publishing *Western Wildlife* (Fig. 1). The current journal describes itself as formerly the *Transactions*, and as an open-access, peer-reviewed journal covering the ecology, natural history, management, and conservation biology of animals. The historical online archive on the website of the Western Section contains 681 articles from 1966 through 2010. Annual publication varied markedly, ranging from 28 papers in 1978 and 27 in both 1983 and 1986 to only four in 2010. *Western Wildlife* has since created a new, somewhat different record. Its volumes include papers published from 2014 through 2026 (so far) and are available through the journal website (www.wwjournal.org). Links on the website also direct readers to the *Transactions* archive, including all papers dating back to 1966. Together, these publications provide approximately 60 y of material through which to observe the evolution of wildlife science. My objective is not to identify a so-called best period of wildlife research, but rather to examine how the subjects and questions represented in these publications have changed, what has remained constant, and what this history might reveal about the development of the wildlife profession in western North America.

A Publication That Changed with the Profession

The changes in journal titles are themselves informative. The earliest title, *Transactions of the California-Nevada Section [of] The Wildlife Society*, emphasized both geography and the association of the journal with a professional organization. In 1970, the title was shortened to *Cal-Neva Wildlife*. In 1986, following the transition of the organization to the Western Section, it became the *Transactions of the Western Section of The Wildlife Society*. That publication as a paper journal continued through 2010. *Western Wildlife*, established in 2014, represents its modern successor. These changes should not be interpreted as the creation of four entirely independent journals. Rather, they represent successive chapters in the publishing history of a professional community.

Publication output also changed substantially. The online archive contains 61 papers from 1966–1969, approximately 209 during the 1970s, 206 during the 1980s, and 120 during the 1990s. The number declined further during the 2000s, with 85 papers represented in the online archive. More interesting than the number of papers, however, is what wildlife biologists chose to write about.

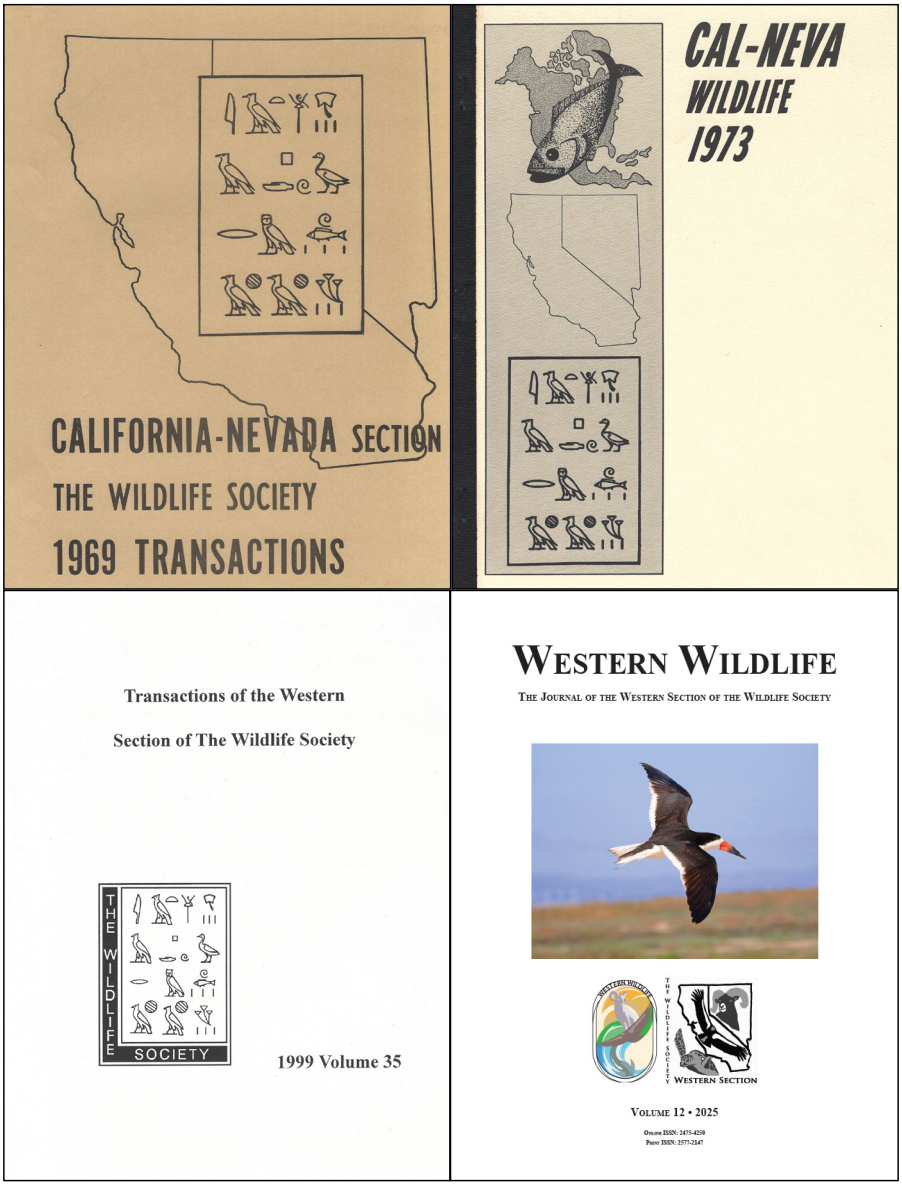


Figure 1. Covers of the journal series of the Western Section of The Wildlife Society: *Transactions of the California-Nevada Section [of] The Wildlife Society*, which spanned from 1966 to 1969; *Cal-Neva Wildlife*, which spanned from 1970 to 1985; *Transactions of the Western Section of The Wildlife Society*, which spanned from 1986 to 2010; and *Western Wildlife*, which started in 2014 and has continued to the present.

The 1960s and 1970s: Wildlife Management in a Changing West

The early decades reflected an era in which applied wildlife management was particularly prominent. Fisheries, game species, habitat improvement, wildlife administration, and agency management questions appeared alongside conservation issues that were beginning to reshape American environmental policy. The 1974 volume provides a revealing snapshot. Its 17 papers included Mixture Seeding for Wildlife (Cain 1974), Impact of Feral Burros on the Death Valley Ecosystem (Sanchez 1974), Status of the Modoc Sucker (*Catostomus microps*) Pices: Catastomidae (Moyle 1974), The Trout Fisheries of Antelope, Davis, and Frenchman Lakes (Flint 1974), California Shorebird Study (Jurek 1974), Raptor Management (Mallette 1974), and Productivity and Movement of California Valley Quail in Northeast California (Savage 1974). In taxonomic terms, recognizable animals represented by these titles included the feral Burros (*Equus asinus*), Modoc Sucker (*Catostomus microps*), and California Valley Quail (*Callipepla californica*).

Yet the same volume also contained papers titled Needed - A Broader Base for Wildlife Administration (Leopold 1974), Wildlife Conservation in a Changing Society (Griffith 1974), and The Politics of Wildlife Management in California (Connolly 1974). Wildlife

biologists were certainly concerned with populations, habitat, game species, and fisheries, but they were also thinking about the relationship of the profession with society and politics. Even in the 1970s, wildlife management clearly involved more than the study of animal populations. Taxonomic breadth was already evident. A single volume could include research on fish, reptiles, amphibians, shorebirds, raptors, quail, and ungulates. Consequently, it would be misleading to characterize the early publication simply as a game management journal. Game and fisheries management were important, but concerns about nongame wildlife, introduced species, ecosystem effects, and conservation policy were already present. Much of this breadth likely came because of the passage of the federal Endangered Species Act in 1973 (ESA 1973; 16 USC § 1531-1544, as amended) and the California Endangered Species Act in 1970 (CESA 1970; California Fish and Game Code §§ 2050–2089.25) that mandated that non-game species that were protected be considered in proposed projects. Wildlife agencies now were charged with protecting a wide array of species beyond traditional game species.

The 1980s: A Productive Transitional Period

The 1980s were among the most productive years represented in the archive. Approximately 206 papers were published during 1980–1989, including 27 papers in both 1983 and 1986 and 24 each in 1987 and 1988. This period is particularly interesting because it spans the 1986 transition from *Cal-Neva Wildlife* to the *Transactions of the Western Section of The Wildlife Society*. Journal name changes might suggest distinct breaks in scientific direction, but the research record instead points toward gradual transitions. Wildlife management remained prominent, while the ecological consequences of land management, habitat alteration, endangered species conservation, and broader landscape-level questions became increasingly relevant. The mid-1980s name change can therefore be viewed as an organizational milestone within a much longer scientific evolution.

The 1990s: Habitat and the Landscape

During the 1990s, annual publication declined, but the range of ecological and conservation questions remained broad. The archive contains 120 papers for the decade. The six-paper 1998 volume provides a useful snapshot of the subjects being addressed near the end of the decade. Papers examined bird-aircraft strikes (Kuenzi and Morrison 1998), the effects of private-property subdivision on biodiversity in North Coast Oak Woodlands (Merenlender et al. 1998), woodrat (*Neotoma* spp.) responses to prescribed fire (Vreeland and Tietje 1998), Black Bear (*Ursus americanus*) abundance (Smallwood 1998), and the influence of fire on wildlife habitat in the Great Basin Desert (Yoakum 1998). Comparing these subjects with those represented in 1974 reveals a subtle shift. The animal itself remained important, but increasingly, the research question involved the landscape surrounding it: (1) subdivision and biodiversity; (2) prescribed fire; (3) habitat; (4) land use; and (5) interactions between wildlife and human activities. This landscape perspective would become increasingly important in subsequent decades.

The 2000s: An Increasingly Complex Wildlife Profession

By the early 2000s, subjects familiar to contemporary wildlife biologists were readily apparent. Volume 40, published in 2004, contained 18 papers. It is especially revealing because it combined historical reflection with contemporary wildlife research. Papers addressed subjects including Western Pond Turtles (*Actinemys marmorata sensu lato*; Cook and Martini-Lamb 2004), bird-aircraft strikes (Cain et al. 2004), owl survey responses (O'Donnell 2004), archaeological evidence of prehistoric fish occurrence (Gobalet 2004), feral Pig (*Sus scrofa*) eradication (Wilcox 2004), California Mule Deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*; Clark 2004), and aspects of Aspen ecology and restoration (Sheppherd 2004). This assortment illustrates another recurring characteristic of the publication: it provided a forum where wildlife science, management practices, professional history, and methodological questions could coexist. The publication was documenting not only wildlife but also wildlife biologists themselves, including how the profession understood its own history and future. The historical *Transactions* ended in 2010, with the archive documenting only four articles in Volume 46 that year. *Western Wildlife* began in 2014 as an online journal. What emerged after that hiatus was not simply the old *Transactions* under a different title, but a journal explicitly designed to provide a more immediate outlet for wildlife studies and a broadened scope reflecting wildlife concerns associated with human growth and development.

The Birth of *Western Wildlife*

Western Wildlife began in 2014 with four papers. Volume 1 included studies of the California Red-legged Frog (*Rana draytonii*) and American Bullfrog (*Lithobates catesbeianus*), ectoparasites of the Giant Kangaroo Rat (*Dipodomys ingens*), literature concerning Kit Foxes (*Vulpes macrotis*) and Swift Foxes (*V. velox*), and effects of geophysical survey energy sources on kangaroo rat (*Dipodomys* spp.) abundance. Specifically, these were Cook and Currylow (2014), Clark et al. (2014), Clark (2014), and Fiehler et al. (2014). Those four papers already illustrate several characteristics that would become prominent in the modern journal: threatened and endangered species, California wildlife, applied conservation, desert ecology, and focused studies

of individual species. The years that followed expanded this range considerably. Modern papers address roads, solar development, habitat fragmentation, wildlife crossing structures, pond restoration, translocation, invasive species, disease, genetics, and emerging survey technologies. This progression reflects a wildlife profession increasingly concerned with animals living in landscapes heavily influenced by human activities.

The Rise of Conservation-Oriented Research

One of the strongest impressions from modern *Western Wildlife* titles is the prominence of conservation. Threatened and endangered species appear repeatedly, including the Blunt-nosed Leopard Lizard (*Gambelia sila*), San Joaquin Antelope Squirrel (*Ammospermophilus nelsoni*), Giant Kangaroo Rat, Tipton Kangaroo Rat (*Dipodomys nitratoides nitratoides*), Amargosa Vole (*Microtus californicus scirpensis*), Alameda Whipsnake (*Masticophis lateralis euryxanthus*), California Red-legged Frog, and San Bernardino Kangaroo Rat (*Dipodomys merriami parvus*). The latter was the subject of work by Shier et al. (2025) addressing habitat use, burrow architecture, and conservation implications.

The questions asked about these species extend beyond simply documenting their occurrence. Researchers examine habitat use, occupancy, responses to restoration, translocation, movement, reproduction, interspecific interactions, development impacts, and management implications. This represents an important evolution. Traditional wildlife management often asked questions such as: How many animals are there? Where do they occur? What limits their populations? Contemporary conservation research continues to ask these questions but frequently adds another: How can a species persist in a landscape increasingly modified by people? Highway crossings, solar energy developments, urban habitat, artificial water sources, reservoirs, restoration projects, and other human-modified environments have effectively become wildlife habitats worth studying.

Mammals Remain Important, but Reptiles and Amphibians Are Hard to Miss

Mammals remain a consistent presence throughout the modern journal. Kangaroo rats (*Dipodomys* spp.) are particularly conspicuous, joined by squirrels, voles, bats, deer, martens, shrews, rabbits, and foxes. The modern journal has been an outlet for publishing on the endangered San Joaquin Kit Fox (*Vulpes macrotis mutica*), such as determining the effects of solar plants on the species (Phillips and Cypher 2019). Yet one of the more striking characteristics of *Western Wildlife* is the visibility of reptiles and amphibians. The archive contains studies of pond turtles, California Red-legged Frogs, tiger salamanders (*Ambystoma* spp.), Alameda Whipsnakes, garter snakes (*Thamnophis* spp.), horned lizards (*Phrynosoma* spp.), whiptails, rattlesnakes, spadefoots (*Spea* spp.), and the endangered Blunt-nosed Leopard Lizard. The pattern continues through the current volume. For example, the 2026 volume includes a report by Scott and Alvarez (2026) of a large aggregation of Santa Lucia Mountains Slender Salamanders (*Batrachoseps gavilanensis*), the observation by Hernandez et al. (2026) of a Desert Kangaroo Rat (*Dipodomys deserti*) scavenging a Desert Iguana (*Dipsosaurus dorsalis*), and a note by Loc-Barragán and Castro-Bastidas (2026) of the defensive behavior in Campbell's Rattlesnake (*Crotalus campbelli*). *Western Wildlife* continues to provide an outlet for lizard natural history observations including the Blunt-nosed Leopard Lizard; examples include the probability of occurrence of Blunt-nosed Leopard Lizards on habitat patches (Bailey and Germano 2015) and predation events on the lizard by Long-nosed Snakes (*Rhinocheilus lecontei*; Germano and Saslaw 2015; Germano et al. 2015). This breadth reinforces the role of the journal as a regional wildlife publication rather than one focused narrowly on traditional game species or a particular taxonomic group within only a small part of western North America.

Birds: From Management Subjects to Ecological Participants

Birds provide another interesting thread connecting the decades. The 1974 volume included a California shorebird study, raptor management, and research on California Valley Quail. Modern *Western Wildlife* includes papers addressing nesting success, habitat use, brood parasitism, predation, range and distribution, and responses to environmental variation. Recent examples include Western Grebes (*Aechmophorus occidentalis*), Clark's Grebes (*Aechmophorus clarkii*), Black-chinned Sparrows (*Spizella atrogularis*), Loggerhead Shrikes (*Lanius ludovicianus*), Western Kingbirds (*Tyrannus verticalis*), Willow Flycatchers (*Empidonax traillii*), cormorants and herons, and Black Skimmers (*Rynchops niger*). For example, Schofield et al. (2024) documented Willow Flycatcher use of irrigation-fed wetlands in the Sierra Nevada foothills, while Riensche and Elliott (2025) examined Black Skimmer nesting-success trends along the eastern shore of San Francisco Bay. The apparent change, therefore, is not necessarily a decline in interest in birds, but rather a diversification of the questions being asked about them.

A Return to Natural History?

Perhaps the most interesting feature of contemporary *Western Wildlife* is not its technological sophistication, but its continued emphasis on careful observation. Natural history contributions remain evident in recent volumes, documenting predation, unusual diets, previously unreported behaviors, habitat

use, range extensions, species interactions, and unusual occurrences. This is consistent with the stated scope of the journal, which explicitly includes natural history and provides for short communications (notes), including peer-edited notes edited by the editors only because they involve observations that do not include speculation. The 2024 volume included observations by Kusaka et al. (2024) of Western Yellow-bellied Racer (*Coluber constrictor mormon*) predation attempts on Plateau Striped Whiptails (*Aspidoscelis velox*) and a peer-edited note by Clark and Reid (2024) of suspected Common Raven (*Corvus corax*) predation on kangaroo rats. Other natural history contributions concerned Loggerhead Shrike predation on a Horned Lark (*Eremophila alpestris*; Clark 2024) and a Western Kingbird feeding a Pacific Chorus Frog (*Pseudacris regilla*) to its fledglings (Titus 2024).

The pattern continued in 2025. Meadows et al. (2025) described ash bathing by Western Gray Squirrels (*Sciurus griseus*) and Wild Turkeys (*Meleagris gallopavo*); Clark et al. (2025) reported flea sharing between San Joaquin Antelope Squirrels and Giant Kangaroo Rats; Zimmerman et al. (2025) described social interactions involving Little Striped Whiptails (*Aspidoscelis inornatus*); Tennant et al. (2025) documented record maximum body sizes in Blunt-nosed Leopard Lizards; Livo (2025) described Colorado Checkered Whiptails (*Aspidoscelis neotesselatus*) using highway guardrails and other anthropogenic features; and Atkinson and Larsen (2025) documented the rediscovery of the Columbia Plateau Pocket Mouse (*Perognathus parvus*) at the northern extent of its range in Canada.

Published natural history papers are significant because they have sometimes been viewed as obsolete compared with hypothesis-driven experimental research, genetics, modeling, remote sensing, and increasingly large datasets. The publications in the journal suggest that this is a false choice. Detailed natural history observations and technologically sophisticated ecological studies answer different questions. Neither modern genetics nor remote technology eliminates the scientific value of a biologist being in the field at the right moment and recognizing that an unusual behavior or interaction is worth documenting. In that sense, *Western Wildlife* preserves something fundamental about wildlife biology: the discipline ultimately begins with observations. Further validation of the value of this is that other journals (e.g., *Western North American Naturalist*, *Journal of Mammalogy*, *The Wilson Journal of Ornithology*, *Herpetological Review*, *Southwestern Naturalist*) also routinely publish interesting natural history observations.

Technology Changes, but the Questions Remain Familiar

The tools available to wildlife researchers have changed enormously during the history of this publication. Contemporary papers incorporate techniques such as genetic analyses and unmanned aerial vehicles and address the effectiveness of wildlife crossing structures and other modern management interventions. Beneath these technological advances, however, are questions that a wildlife biologist from the 1970s would immediately recognize: Where does an animal live? What does it eat? How does it reproduce? What happens when humans change its environment? What can wildlife managers do about it? Technology has changed how these questions can be answered, but it has not made the questions obsolete.

From California and Nevada to the West

The geographical evolution of the journal is another notable development. Its original identity was explicitly California-Nevada. Although contemporary *Western Wildlife* remains strongly represented by California studies, its intended geographical scope is western North America, including Hawaii and Mexico, with studies from outside the region considered on a case-by-case basis. The journal has published papers and notes from Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, New Mexico, Oregon, Texas, Washington state, as well as British Columbia, Canada, and Chihuahua, Coahuila de Zaragoza, and Nayarit, Mexico, truly becoming a western (North America) wildlife journal. Thus, the evolution from the geographic California-Nevada to the western half of North America represents more than a change in organizational name. The formal scope of the journal reflects the broader geography implied by its current title.

Smaller Numbers, More Focused Papers

Another striking historical pattern involves publication volume. During the 1970s and 1980s, years containing 20 or more papers were common. This comparison requires some caution because the publications themselves changed. The historical *Transactions* publications were associated with presentations at annual meetings, whereas *Western Wildlife* is an open-access, peer-reviewed journal in which accepted articles are published online following acceptance and subsequently assembled into annual volumes. Raw counts of articles therefore reflect different publication models as well as possible changes in scientific productivity. The decline in paper numbers should not be interpreted as a decline in wildlife research. Instead, it illustrates the danger of interpreting bibliometric numbers without considering the history of the publication producing them.

What Six Decades Reveal

Looking across this publication lineage suggests several broad patterns. First, applied management has remained remarkably persistent. From habitat improvement and fisheries management in earlier

decades to endangered species translocations, restoration, roads, and solar development today, the publications have consistently emphasized science that can inform management. Second, the definition of wildlife research has broadened. Game and fisheries studies now exist alongside conservation biology, endangered species research, behavior, landscape ecology, disease, genetics, restoration, and natural history. The present journal explicitly identifies ecology, natural history, management, and conservation biology as elements of its scope. Third, human-modified habitats have become research systems in their own right. Roads, reservoirs, agricultural landscapes, energy developments, urban areas, artificial water sources, and wildlife crossings are no longer merely disturbances mentioned in passing. They have become central subjects of ecological investigation. Fourth, technological development has expanded rather than replaced traditional field biology. Genetic analysis, advanced survey techniques, and modern analytical approaches appear alongside straightforward observations of predation, behavior, diet, and unusual occurrences. Fifth, natural history remains an important component of modern wildlife research. The continued appearance of Notes and Peer-Edited Notes demonstrates that observations made by attentive field biologists retain a formal place in the scientific literature. Finally, the publication has significantly broadened its geographical scope. Although California remains prominent (probably due to its large size and large number of biologists), its formal remit now encompasses western North America.

Looking Back, and Forward

A biologist opening a volume from the 1970s would encounter a somewhat different wildlife profession from the one represented in *Western Wildlife* today. Likewise, the publications of the Western Section have repeatedly provided space for subjects that do not fit neatly into hypothesis-driven scientific categories. They include management problems, methodological studies, professional reflections, unusual observations, natural history, conservation challenges, and occasionally observations that may have begun simply because someone noticed something interesting. That diversity may be one of the greatest strengths of *Western Wildlife*.

For approximately six decades, the publications of the Western Section have recorded the evolution of western wildlife science as the landscapes, animals, technologies, and profession surrounding them have changed. The transition from the *Transactions of the California-Nevada Section [of] The Wildlife Society* to *Cal-Neva Wildlife*, the *Transactions of the Western Section of The Wildlife Society*, and ultimately *Western Wildlife* therefore represent more than a succession of journal titles. It chronicles an evolving way of understanding wildlife. The earliest researchers represented in this publication lineage could hardly have anticipated genetic identification of range extensions or wildlife surveys involving unmanned aerial vehicles. Yet they would immediately recognize the value of documenting where an uncommon animal occurred, what it ate, how it behaved, and how human activities affected it. Perhaps that continuity is the clearest lesson contained in more than half a century of publications. The tools of wildlife biology change. The importance of paying careful attention to wildlife does not.

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