

Moose Podcast #449

Moose Peterson Howdy folks and welcome to Moose Podcast number 449, the tubby chicken-like bird. Trust you guys are doing well. Had a good week. I guess you got all your questions out the week prior. I did hear some thank yous and I'm very grateful for the equipment podcast of last week. Hey, and more of you are over there asking questions on Spotify. So everything was grand all the way around. I was out in Custer, the Black Hills of South Dakota. Had just a marvelous time out there. Got lots of shooting in and I hope you did as well. This episode is being recorded in the, with the Adobe podcast AI voice. Keep in mind that you can see photographs I talk about in the podcast. Links all there on the blog post of our website. But you can listen to the podcast wherever you enjoy listening to podcasts. Spotify is where you can also, if you so want to, click and leave comments or ask questions. Slowly getting more and more over there on Spotify. I appreciate the interaction. You guys are the best. Well, if you didn't hear, last week we had our first goring in Yellowstone. Yep, another person got too close and uh, whoops, got the wrong end of a horn. Now these guys, these bison, I talk about them here a few times. You know, I'm not sure what it is about them that people think they should go up and pet them or get a selfie with them, but man. That guy did not do well with that goring. So, hey, use a little common sense out there. It will get you a long, long ways with photography, let alone life. Want to thank my good friends at Bedford's Camera, bedfords.com. They've got a whole lot of savings going on a whole lot of items in different brands. Nikon's got some Savings on mirrorless, which includes some instant savings, as in when you purchase, you actually see the savings right then and there. Nothing to come to you later. And of course, if you mention moi, after you check out, you'll see 5% coming back. No matter what you are doing and if you are taking advantage of a sale and savings, you still get the moose discount on top of that. Now Bedford's has got lots of great stores, lots of great classes, great personnel, killer inventory and prices, and it's a home of the Moose discount. And they're very grateful to sponsor the Moose podcast. So when you call them up, head to the website, go into the store, make sure you say hello for me, thank them for sponsoring the Moose Podcast and all they do for all photographers, including myself, Thank you, Bedifords. Appreciate it. Well, this book reference, uh, recommendation I have this episode. Ties in what I'm going to be talking about. The Grouse of the World by Paul A. Johnsgaard. It was published back in 1983. It was, especially in its day, one hefty price book. It's a, it's, it's, it's a big book. It is packed, you know, 400 pages. And on the cover is a bird that has been on my list forever, the black grouse over in Europe. But it is a great resource of information. That, man, when you have that in the back of your head and you see these birds do some of the really crazy things they do, It's, it's, it's really helpful to know some of the, the basics behind it so you can kind of predict What's going to happen? Not only safeguard the species, but kind of have a little insight so you get the shot you're looking for. They are an amazing group of birds. That in many cases are not doing well. So if you get out a chance to, to be with them, you're going to want to have that knowledge of John, Paul, John Gerd's, The Grouse of the World. Uh, one of the nice things about this is that you can find used copies. Abe Books, ABE Books is a great place for finding these, these books. On biology, and they have lots of used, great condition, killer prices. So that's The Grouse of the World by Paul A. Johnsgaard. Out there in the Black Hills. It's right on the edge of the, the prairie. Badlands are just, you can see the

badlands from a top of one of the hills and it's just flat as can be and then you've got the black hills. It's right on the edge of the habitat for the chubby chicken-like bird. We were there for sunrise, some of the best sunrises, just gorgeous. Looking out, and we could hear grouse on the lek, sharp-tailed grouse on the lek. Very distinctive sounds. Now, I've spent many years in a plywood box in Nebraska in the Sandhills photographing the sharp-tailed grouse. I love grouse. I just love, I love most grouse. Ground birds, but uh, I love the grouse. They've got this crazy dance and call and all this they do just to try to find a female. So shooting sunrise and hearing off in the distance. Grouse performing, and it's no way I can imitate it, but you know, they fill up the air sacs, they let the cell out, and then they You know, they do their little dance on the ground, which is amazing how far that resonates. It's just, there's something about it. It just, it just screams America West. So, for mornings, they're out there doing it while we're having, doing Sunrise. Then the last morning, and we're literally in our vehicle, we're not outside, we're in our vehicle, and photographing, what were we photographing? I guess we were photographing Western Meadowlarks at the time. And all of a sudden, off on the right-hand side of the road was this one single sharp-tailed grouse. And I was like, well, that's a sharp-tailed grouse. And I hadn't photographed one since 2021, my favorite location to go photograph them. They're in the sand hills. Like so many things, um, COVID came and they, uh, Of course, couldn't have a bunch of people in plywood boxes during COVID and they just have not reopened simply because they were doing Other things, and hopefully in the future we'll be able to go back there. So having this individual, uh, just right there outside the vehicle was just like, wow, wow. So I had the, uh, the Z18600 with a 1.4 on my lap and I took a couple clicks and watched it and we figured it was just gonna go up over this little rise. So we're in a, uh, A truck and the rise was just at windowsill height. So it got some nice shot, a little bit backlight, thought it was gonna go, go back and just keep on going because that's normally what they do. And this, uh, crazy male started dancing right there, point blank range. We were just, I was flabbergasted. I totally even forgot to hit the show release. Well, the sharp-tailed grouse, uh, it, it has a, had, had an incredible range, uh, from Alaska Um, all the way south to California and then over to New Mexico and then kind of east to Cabo. Quebec, they had this very huge range where the habitat was what they needed, which is in the broadest terms, grassland prairies. Not necessarily tall grass, but just grassland prairies. Uh, Today, you know, they are extinct in California, Kansas, Nevada, New Mexico, Iowa, Illinois, as in gone. Now, even though they're not really a critter of Concern. And in many places they're still hunted. They are not what you're going to say are common. Now, I love that little, you know, a lot of people call him a tubby chicken-like bird. They're about the size of a crow. About that size. And they got their name of sharp-tailed grouse and Uh, because the, they have two tail feathers that are longer than the rest of its tail, kind of squared off, and when they are, um, Looking their best for the ladies. That tail flares up and those two feathers stick up and so got its name, Sharptail Grouse. Now, they, um, they come together for a short period each spring. And spring, um, you know, is a little bit, um, Well, it's not a prescribed set of time. I was really surprised to hear this particular lek in the Black Hills going, uh, the first week of May. That seemed a little, little early, um, for normal. But, um, for, oh, maybe a total of, you could say three weeks, maybe four weeks, they come to a lek. And a lek is just a piece of ground if you look at it. But, uh, It tends to be for the, the, uh, sharp-tailed grouse. A little bit of a, a little ridge to it. It's not so much of a bowl like prairie chickens would use. A little bit of a ridge. And, uh, it's

typically, uh, Really kind of short, uh, flat kind of vegetation. It's not real, uh, it's, it looks like it's been mowed. Um, they might, like, use places that have been recently burned or grazed by, by bison because that short kind of vegetation. And then they, they, they come together and like I mentioned, they, they have these air sacs and they're kind of deep purple, uh, on the side of their, their neck, which you don't see unless they are actually, uh, performing. And they inflate those and they let them out and they make a goofy noise. And then they, they do their little dance. They, they will take their wings. They, they open them up all the way. Flare out their primaries and they do this little dance that's like, oh, you know, twenty thirty uh, beats per, uh, per minute kind of thing. You know, and they go at it. And, uh, it's just a phenomenal thing to be able to see and enjoy. Now, the dancing that they do, uh, just... For a point of reference, if you ever see, and I hope you get the chance to go out, there's lots of places that you can go and see and photograph sharp-tailed grouse. Montana and North South Dakota, Nebraska being probably the, um, the, the hub of where they are, kind of centralized. And there are many of the fish and game departments in those four states actually publish where you can go and see these guys perform. Uh, if you want to photograph them, let me get, kind of get close, get to that here in a second. But, um, they, um, they come together and they either are foraging, you'll see them all year long in the grasslands, and then sometimes you'll see them In trees when they first start to bud in the spring, eating those little spreads. And, uh, they're just... They are just an absolute wonder to watch. And they are goofy as can be. I'll give you an example. So we're there in the, uh. In the Black Hills, and I mentioned we had this one individual. And I was wondering what the hay was going on. When I was going through my images, I noticed that I had photographed a female Just prior to this mail showing up, and it was on the left side of the vehicle, I was in the vehicle, and it just went by, and I took a couple clicks. It was so brief an encounter, it did not even register. Well, that one female had to be why this male came to his little rise on the right-hand side of the vehicle. It wasn't a lek. It wasn't anything. It was just a little spot in why it started to perform. And they, they come to the lek, um, in the, in the, I wouldn't even say the wee hours of the morning. They come to the lek when it's dark. You actually sometimes at sunset see them flying into the general area of the lek getting ready for the next morning. They, they start going before the sun comes up. You can hear them kind of. It's almost like they're kind of like deciding, okay, John, you're going to take this corner and Harry will take that corner and Tom, you get the middle. They're kind of like, sound like they're kind of like strategizing how they're going to go about Attracting a female. And of course, the end goal is flying off to Lek and copulating and then coming back to Lek to find the next female. Because then, as they kind of... Morning kind of goes on and we're talking just minutes here unfolding. They're, they're, they're kind of calm. You know, you hear a little boom, boom about there. And then all of a sudden you'll hear this one. Part of the, of the lek start to come to life. You hear the little, you know, they start doing their dancing. And that was probably one of the best parts being in that plywood box is seeing that light slowly come up. And then you hear the sounds. You can't see anything. Then you see in the very, very twinkling of light these little ghostly figures moving around kind of almost effortlessly in the grasses. And boy, until the D5 came out, you couldn't get any shots. Then the D5 came with its autofocus and would grab onto things in that darkness. And then you can start seeing the whole, all of it unfold. And these males are all there just together. There's never more than really. Maybe two dozen and, you know, they, they, sometimes in certain places like in the

Sandhills, they would, the sharp-heeled grouse would have leks within eyesight of another lek, but no one lek just had A gazillion birds that like prairie chickens or sage grouse. And they're mixing and going around and they're kind of calm and then all of a sudden a female will show up. And all hell breaks loose. They get crazy. The drumming of the feet is just, is just nonstop. They start coming up to each other and they kind of do these mock fights and they're, they're just, and they're just going around just, Just nutso. And the female, I swear to Pete, nine times out of ten, if not more often, they just go keep going, they go right by these males. And I don't know what they're looking for. I don't know if the females know what they're looking for. And these poor males are just, just beating their hearts out trying to get this female's attention who won't give them the time of day. Um, that's what happened there in Custer. I mean, this little guy was just going crazy on the right hand side of the car and I never saw that female again. Now, it's very possible, more than likely, that he saw her somewhere in the grasses because that's, he's kind of like meant to see them and if they're hiding, we're not. But That's the whole idea and if the male does whatever the female needs, okay, whatever that happens to be, they go off and copulate. Now they can lay a lot of eggs, um, twelve sometimes up to eighteen And that's because they're kind of the M&Ms out there. They're, they're, they're meant to be munched to eat. They're not the, it's, that's how it kind of works. So, how do you photograph these guys, whether you have one or a lack of them? Well, if you get to a lack, well, let's just start right off the bat with lenses, okay? Um, This time I shot with the Z180-600 with a 1.4 for this one individual for, I guess we had him for about forty minutes. Maybe a little bit less. And the one thing that's, that's kind of important is some flexibility. Where a lot of birds you could kind of like pre-focus on a perch and when they come there you get the shot and you're good. Grouse, these sharp-tailed grouse, they're just, they're like billiard balls, like bumper pool as they bounce around and go far away. They come right up to you. And when I was in a hide, a blind, man, they come so close. I couldn't focus on them. You know, the 600F4, the Z60F4TC with its, you know, fourteen plus minimum focusing distance. This chubby chicken-like bird would come up often right within feet. So the Z18600 with its, you know, a little bit over, a little bit shy, eight foot minimum focus distance. It was great, and with the 1.4 at 840, you know, I could zoom back and forth with the lens, and it was perfect. So the lens selection, you got to think about that minimum focusing distance. You need to have a camera that shoots a lot. Um, these guys are moving and dancing. So you're probably gonna have the ISO up to 1600, 3200 probably, uh, for the very simple reason of trying to stop This motion, I like to get the feet out of focus at all possible, but I want the eyes and the wings as sharp as possible. Lens is going to be wide open and shooting twenty frames per second, you might sometimes get a video out of it, but the small nuances in the final photograph you select, you'll be glad you had those twenty frames per second. Now, after all this, there's one key thing that you should think about, and that is when you have anything on the ground, be it prairie dogs or shorebirds or grouse on a lack, Your best vantage point is eye level. Getting down where they are really makes all the difference on the world because The first thing you'll see is the background behind them becomes this beautiful kind of watercolor painting. So then you have set the stage for this crazy dance and you can't help but see it because you got to realize... That world they live in with all that little short grass and forbs, it's a really busy place. Visually, it can be really kind of, man, really just distracting as hell if you're shooting at eye level down on them. You know, anything that you shoot high level down on it in that grassy world, you're gonna see every one

of those blades of grass. So. Not that difficult to go out and experience these guys this time of the year. Just take a little homework, find where you can Get in a hide, which is really your best scenario. Because those hides will be set up on a lake where the birds come. You get in the hide, the general rule of thumb is you get in the hide in total darkness. You don't leave the hide until the last bird leaves the leek. And then you just, while you're in there, you just shoot like crazy. And boy, you'll come back with so many great stories and photographs. You'll be hooked on the tubby chicken-like bird. You folks have a marvelous week as spring seems to be flying by like most of the year. You got any questions or need help, head to Spotify. I'm here for you or send me an email on the website. Keep sharing those images and remember to make every click your story.