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Inside an **Eagle Scout's** decades-long quest to photograph every single animal species in the world.

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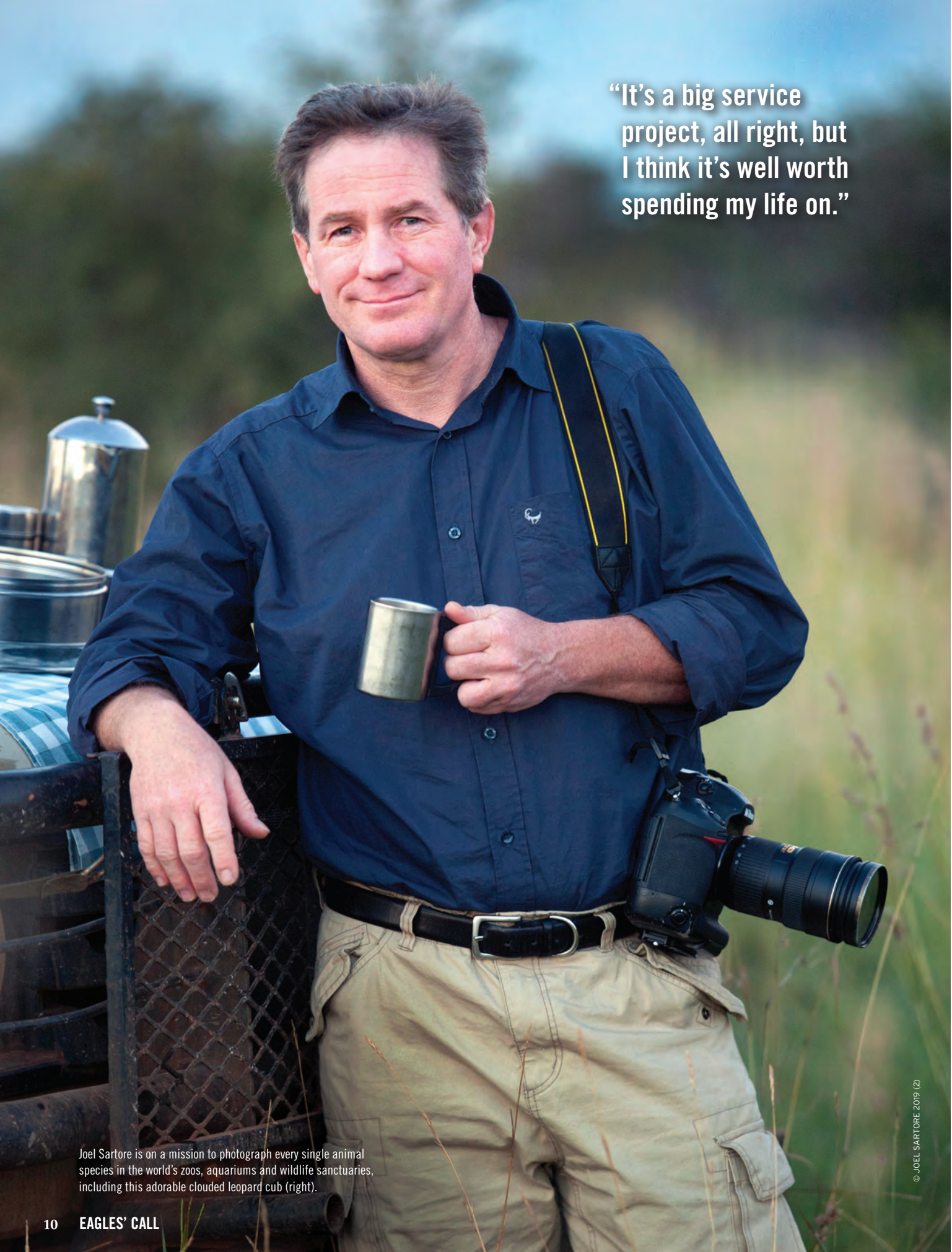
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“It’s a big service project, all right, but I think it’s well worth spending my life on.”

Joel Sartore is on a mission to photograph every single animal species in the world’s zoos, aquariums and wildlife sanctuaries, including this adorable clouded leopard cub (right).

By Mark Ray

ALL ABOARD THE PHOTO ARK

This **Eagle Scout** is working to save the planet one species at a time.

Joel Sartore (Eagle Class of 1977) is an overachiever. Like most concerned citizens, he wants to save the whales and the giant pandas. But he also wants to save the Florida grasshopper sparrow. And the Colombian spider monkey. And the hellbender. And even the homely Sunda pangolin, which looks like a dinosaur that didn't get the memo about extinction.

To help save these and thousands of other birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, insects, crustaceans and fish, the Nebraska-based photographer is on a decades-long crusade called the National Geographic Photo Ark. He began the project in 2006 and plans to photograph every single animal species in the world's zoos, aquariums and wildlife sanctuaries. He expects to hit the 10,000 mark this fall and figures he has another 2,000-5,000 species to go.

"By the time I'm done, it'll be about 25 to 30 years," he says.

Sartore's subjects range from the familiar to the exceedingly rare, and many have never been professionally photographed before. Regardless of the species, he creates a stunning portrait that lets the animal's natural beauty shine through. A tiny Madagascar tree frog perches on a human thumb. A pygmy slow loris casts a baleful look at the viewer. A 5-month-old mandrill covers its mouth as if it just let a bad word slip.



In each portrait, a single species fills the frame, standing out dramatically against a solid white or black background.

"There is no size comparison, so a minnow is every bit as important as a polar bear or an elephant," Sartore says.

FROM AWARENESS TO ACTION

The Photo Ark photos appear on Sartore's website (joelsartore.com), on the project's website (nationalgeographic.org/projects/photo-ark) and in a series of books. (The latest of these, *Vanishing: The World's Most Vulnerable Animals*, has just been published.) But their biggest impact may well be on Instagram, where the National Geographic Society reaches an audience of more than 100 million. When Photo Ark images appear there, they're accompanied by captions describing the animals, their status and

the organizations that champion them.

"It's very simple, straightforward, reads quickly," Sartore says. "And hopefully once in a while we get people into the camp of conservation."

That was certainly the case with the Florida grasshopper sparrow. Before Sartore's photos of the critically endangered bird illustrated a 2013 *Audubon* magazine story, the federal government was spending \$20,000-\$30,000 a year to basically track the bird's path to extinction. The *Audubon* story, Sartore says, "helped put pressure on the government to fund it properly so it wouldn't go extinct. In the following year, they allocated nearly \$1.3 million to do captive breeding of the bird, and that's been done successfully."

The Florida grasshopper sparrow is just one species that faces an uncertain future. According to the International Union for Conservation, more than 27,000 species — fully a quarter of all assessed species — are now threatened with extinction.

"It's really folly to think that we could doom so many other species to extinction and think that people will be just fine," Sartore says. "It's not gonna work out that way."

DISCOVERING BIODIVERSITY

Sartore's interest in biodiversity stems from childhood, when his mother gave him a



Au
 Staying
 This cute new
 ancient North
 called Opal
 it's telling us
 warming is



Sartore has photographed all kinds of animals, such as (top row, left to right) the golden snub-nosed monkey, the Fiji banded iguana, and a koala bear and her joeys, along with (second row) a gentoo penguin colony on Danco Island, Antarctica, and a cluster of monarch butterflies. Sartore wisely kept a bear trainer between himself and a bear (third row) but showed no fear while photographing a caiman. A pair of jaguarundi (below) didn't seem to mind him being there at all.

THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC PHOTO ARK'S IMPACT

In addition to motivating people to care about biodiversity, the Photo Ark generates funding for fellowships that support early-career conservationist biologists and wildlife managers who work with specific evolutionary distinct and globally endangered species. (The program is a joint effort of the National Geographic Society and the Zoological Society of London.) EDGE Fellows receive extensive training in both conservation and science storytelling, and then spend two years working in the field. The third cohort of fellows, representing Africa, will be named in October.



© JOEL SARTORE 2019 (9)



Sartore's time in Troop 77 helped develop his love for nature. His skill as a photographer has resulted in some of those striking animal photos you find in *National Geographic* magazine.

copy of a picture book called *The Birds*; among the birds he saw there was one of the very last of some 3 billion passenger pigeons. (Dubbed Martha, she was stuffed and on display at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History.)

Later, as a member of Troop 77 in Ralston, Neb., Sartore made an amazing discovery. During a campout in a farm pasture, he and a fellow Scout used a seine to sample the aquatic life in a stream and found a large array of marine creatures.

"It was very exciting," he says. "It was a hidden world."

Math and chemistry derailed his plans to study biology in college, so he opted for journalism instead. (He'd first picked up a camera in an unsuccessful attempt to impress a high school cheerleader.) After several years at a Wichita newspaper, he finally got his first *National Geographic* assignment — on bald eagles — in 1992. Since then, he has illustrated more than three dozen stories, often spending weeks on assignment all over the world.

Sartore's travels came to a screeching halt in 2005, when his wife, Kathy, was diagnosed with breast cancer. She would eventually recover, but for more than a year, Joel stayed close to home. Feeling at loose ends, he asked friends at the Lincoln Children's Zoo if he could come shoot portraits of the zoo's residents. When he ran out of subjects in Lincoln, he headed down the road to Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo and

Aquarium and then to other facilities in the center of the country. Once Kathy's health improved, he returned to the road, working with *National Geographic* editors to come up with just the right magazine assignments.

"They made sure that I got assignments that would take me to parts of the world where they knew I would be shooting for the Photo Ark, as well as shooting pictures in the field," he says.

GOING ALL IN

Today, Sartore works on nothing but the Photo Ark, thanks in large part to the National Geographic Society's financial support.

"That's greatly appreciated because it takes the pressure off of having to search for funds, and I can just concentrate on getting the work done wherever the animals are in the world," he says.

Once, for example, he traveled 30 hours to reach the Himalayan Nature Park in Kufri, India, to photograph an endangered western tragopan because it was the only such bird in the world that had been hand-raised and was calm enough to pose. More often, however, he tries to be more efficient, both to save time and to reduce his carbon footprint.

"Each trip, we usually have some target, core, very important species we need to get," he says. "But then we stop at a lot of wildlife rehab centers along the way, as well as other zoos or aquariums, to make it really worthwhile."

Not surprisingly, there's a lot of planning involved. These days, Sartore spends about half his time on the road and about half his time at home, where he reviews species lists, co-authors captions and plans future trips.

"I work seven days a week on this project," he says. "There's always something to do."

For his Eagle project in the 1970s, Sartore put up bird and squirrel houses in a city park. But the Photo Ark is perhaps his real Eagle project.

"It's a big service project, all right, but I think it's well worth spending my life on," he says. 🐦

LESSONS FROM SCOUTING

The biography on Joel Sartore's website identifies him as an award-winning photographer, the 2018 National Geographic Explorer of the Year and an Eagle Scout. He says Scouting was the perfect program for him to join, because he was "a pretty nerdy kid that really cared about nature."

But Scouting did more than just let him explore nature. The advancement program fed his need to challenge himself to achieve lofty goals.

"I like to set goals for myself, and becoming Eagle was something I really aspired to," he says.

The Scout motto — "Be Prepared" — continues to guide his life.

"In many of the countries I go to, there's no Nikon shop to get a spare camera or spare battery, so I have backup systems to backup systems to make sure that I'm prepared," he says. "The *Geographic* cannot publish my excuses."