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Zoo to You: Springing Ahead

The reaction to Daylight Saving Time will typically be a grumble due to the morning starting earlier, or cheers for extra time in the sun in the evening. Ultimately, this change has mostly minor impacts on our daily life, but for wildlife, the sun's presence and duration each day is an important tool for survival.

Most plants and animals have the ability to measure day length and identify the time of year through a process known as photoperiodism. This ability is integral to survival because certain adaptations must occur at a specific time of the year for wildlife to survive. For example, some mammals need to grow thicker fur for winter. Being able to identify that the seasons are changing, and fur growth appropriately adjusting will ensure that the mammal will have the best chance of surviving. Photoperiodism requires two pieces of information to be utilized successfully; the ability to sense how long the day is and identify if the daylight available is increasing or decreasing. For most wildlife, this process occurs without them even contemplating it because of the effect of day light on light receptors and hormones. Ultimately, the change in the light period that is occurring around our Daylight Saving Time means far more to wildlife than to us.

Many of the birds in Kansas migrate based on photoperiodism. For example, bald eagles move south and can be found in Kansas each year due to information gathered in their summer residence of Alaska or other northern habitats. As the day length shortens with the approach of winter, the bird identifies that conditions will become more difficult and their body knows to journey south for a milder winter. Songbirds that had moved south for our winter will sense the shortening daylight as fall arrives in their South American habitats and feel the urge to fly north to access the best resources during spring and summer in North America.

Another behavior triggered by photoperiodism is breeding. Creating and raising offspring requires the investment of a lot of energy. To be able to invest energy into breeding wildlife must find more food to sustain this intensive period of life. Using photoperiodism animals identify when spring is coming so breeding behavior can coincide with an abundance of

food in spring or summer. Migration and reproduction are just some of the many examples demonstrating how photoperiodism is tied to wildlife's ability to survive.

The ability to sense and change with the different day lengths is necessary for survival. We can each do our part to watch out for wildlife moving through Kansas. When you are traveling, take into consideration that wildlife might be on the move to find better resources or to access a mate. Make sure to use your peripheral vision to observe any potential animal movement at the side of the road. If an animal does cross in front of your car, adjust your speed or position in your lane if it is safe to do so. We can each strive to look out for wildlife on the move and do our best to avoid them when they are crossing the road.