



Current Issue  
October 2015  
[Table of Contents »](#)

# NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

ngm.com

Search

[HOME](#) [FEATURES](#) [PHOTOGRAPHY](#) [INSTAGRAM](#) [PROOF](#) [FOUND](#) [PHENOMENA](#) [YOUR SHOT](#) [PUZZLES](#) [VIDEO](#) [ARCHIVES](#) [SUBSCRIBE](#)

[Feature Article](#) | [Risk Takers](#) | [Risk Taking Hub](#) | [125 Years of Exploration](#)

## THE NEW AGE OF > EXPLORATION

[f Like](#) 223 [t Tweet](#) [+1](#) 1 [✉](#) [+](#) [More »](#)

### < **Flying in the Face of Peril** >

**ÇAĞAN ŞEKERCIOĞLU** is an ornithologist who works to document and prevent bird extinctions. He's also a professor in the U.S. who runs an award-winning conservation group in his native Turkey. All those pursuits require juggling—and each entails big risks.

#### **Why do you do what you do? Who inspired you?**

I've always been drawn to nature. When other kids were playing soccer, I was bringing home insects and other animals. My mom took me to a child psychiatrist! But my beloved dad is my biggest inspiration. During tough economic times he left a safe accounting job to start Turkey's first model-airplane company. It lasted 30 years.

#### **What are the physical hazards of your work?**

A whole range, from the mundane to the exotic. While surveying birds I've been charged by a grizzly bear in Alaska and an elephant in Tanzania. I've tangled with a poisonous puff adder in Uganda. I've been caught between the military and terrorists, mistaken for a spy, held at gunpoint, carjacked in Ethiopia, and attacked by a machete-wielding mob in Costa Rica. Honestly, I'm often more afraid of people and traffic than I am of wildlife.

#### **Is it politically tricky to be an environmentalist in Turkey?**

It is when I criticize the institutions that grant my research permits. But it's my duty as a scientist to tell the truth. The government talks about conservation, but its priority is to convert nature into cash. So it uses doublespeak. They are reforesting while cutting down old-growth forests. Virtually every river is dammed, and the organization building those dams is responsible for regulating them. I'm trying to stop one that will destroy the Aras River wetlands, where half of Turkey's bird species live. Yet if I speak out too much, I'll be punished for a seemingly official, legal reason. Retaliation in Turkey is usually indirect.

#### **You spend many hours on advocacy. Does that hurt your academic career?**

Some academics see it as a distraction. So far my school, the University of Utah, has been very understanding and appreciative. But I have to walk a fine line.

#### **Do you ever feel daunted by all the risks you face?**

Well, I don't actively seek risk. But I don't avoid it either. Taking a risk means you can fail. But if you fail, at least you tried. And that's all I can do. If I fail in the end, I fail fighting.

