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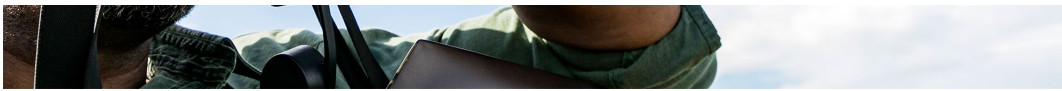
“How Am I Going to Be Perceived as a Black Man With Binoculars?”: J. Drew Lanham on Christian Cooper and Rules for the Black Birdwatcher

The ecologist and writer discusses the viral Central Park video, and how the hobby is only an escape for some.

BY DAN ADLER

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Drew Lanham in Clemson, South Carolina. BY PETER FRANK EDWARDS/REDUX.

In 2013, the writer, ecologist, and birder **J. Drew Lanham** published his “9 Rules for the Black Birdwatcher” in *Orion* magazine. “You’ll need the binoculars to pick that tufted duck out of the flock of scaup and ring-necks,” he wrote. “You’ll need the photo ID to convince the cops, FBI, Homeland Security, and the flashlight-toting security guard that you’re not a terrorist or escaped convict.”

In addition to his duties as a professor of wildlife ecology at Clemson University, Lanham has continued to write on race and birding, including in his 2016 memoir, *The Home Place: Memoirs of a Colored Man's Love Affair With Nature*. This past Saturday, partly in response to the killing of Ahmaud Arbery by two white men in February, he wrote an update to his 2013 list, which *Vanity Fair* is publishing today.

On Monday in Central Park, another black birder, **Christian Cooper**, asked **Amy Cooper**, a white woman, to leash her dog in the Ramble, as required by the park and as needed to protect the birds there. Christian Cooper recorded her incensed reaction: Amy Cooper frantically shouted at him, called the police, lied about being threatened, and repeatedly emphasized on the phone that he was African American. Christian Cooper’s video went viral, and it was a stark illustration of Lanham’s work.

Reached by phone on Tuesday, Lanham discussed the video, his birding, and his writing.

***Vanity Fair*: Have people been reaching out to you about the 2013 piece?**

J. Drew Lanham: Yeah, they have. I was actually in a patch up near the mountains. I have a little tiny house up there, and I go up there to escape and socially distance, and I can get good birds up there and just kind of chill. And I came back on the grid and my phone was blowing up.

I post a lot on my Facebook page. It’s everything from pretty bird pictures and watching birds in my backyard during quarantine to social commentary about Ahmaud and Breonna [Taylor]. And so last night was just—man, it was this next straw on this broken camel’s back, of being black. It just hit hard. So I got up this morning, and I’d actually posted last night but then I made it private, and this morning got up and just changed the settings. I feel like it’s important to speak up, to have a voice, to let others know not only how you feel, but maybe give them some sense of indignation, because I think there are a lot of people who are sort of in silent denial that these things happen. You sometimes have people who want some kind of evidence, and there it is. There’s the evidence of everything that happened,

of someone essentially threatening you with police as if the police were the weapon.

And that's the way these things are. You try not to dwell in them, but you end up dwelling in them. Even when I escape to watch birds, that's part of the question. Am I in a safe place? Are others watching me as I watch birds? How am I going to be perceived as a black man with binoculars, in a place where people might not want me to be?

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Birding is often described as a kind of escape, and your work shows where that's not the case—where human problems are mirrored in birding.

Having the assumption that it's an escape is really a privilege. As many assumptions are.

On many days it can be. But there is a different tenor and attention that you must pay to your surroundings, to your space, if you are black and birding. It would be naive to assume that you can just wander anywhere and be accepted.

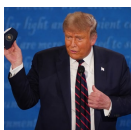
I bird with friends from time to time, but I really found the time that I get to spend alone with the birds, it's a communion of sorts. So it's this constant internal battle that you do. Should I go there? Should I not go there? Do I pass through quickly, or do I go slowly? You find yourself sometimes almost psychologically bowing to show that you're not being aggressive or that you have no ill intent, and so it's this game, this internal gaming that is tiresome. That came to a pretty ripe boiling head last night.

How common is this type of work in your field?

There are people who are studying some of these issues writ large. I have some colleagues at Clemson who just **published a paper** today, coincidentally, on play and race in public space. [The article was led by Clemson researchers **Harrison Pinckney** and **Corliss Outley**.] And it's not something that a lot of people think about. If you go to so much of the work, and you look at issues of, for example, *Last Child in the Woods*, and what that means—it means different things for different people, obviously, based upon social condition, or where they live, rural versus urban, but so much turns on race, and it's a critical thing. Some people have the freedom to go where they want and with impunity be and act how they want to act. Black folks can't. We don't have that freedom. Or if we take that liberty then there's

a risk that may come at our very lives, that we transgressed somehow someone's perception. And that's really what it comes down to: It's the transgression of a perception of who we should be. And black people should not be birders, or in some spaces, is some of what we're fighting here. And that we've been fighting.

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You've estimated that birding is 90% white. And this news would seem to make it worse.

It's very white. It's sort of a homogenized hobby. But my gosh, most of the people that I know as birders are white, and we hear so much that brings us together, and I think about all of those times that I've spent with people who are different from me culturally, ethnically, in many life experiences both good and bad. But then we can gather around birds in a way that transcends everything for the moment. But then there's a terror when someone decides, Oh, well, let's go into this neighborhood and

bird, or let's go here, or let's go there. I may have some knowledge of that place that says, No, I don't think so. You know, I don't think I'm gonna walk the streets of that neighborhood with my binoculars after dark or at dusk looking for nightjars. I'm not going to go into that place where I saw an abundance of Confederate flags or "Don't Tread on Me" flags or, hell, Trump flags. Honestly. Those are all signals for me, man.

What prompted you to write that piece in that form in 2013?

I got a call from the *Orion* magazine poetry editor. And I've had a relationship with *Orion* for a while; they were very courageous in publishing one of my first pieces about race and birding and Africa. It was really sort of the nexus for my voice and being more outspoken about what I was seeing and feeling. But I got this call one night, and she asked if I would be interested in doing an **enumeration piece**. I'd always enjoyed those enumeration pieces, and I never thought of writing one, and she said, "Well, you know, you could write something about birding and maybe your experiences as a black birder—just run with it. Wherever you feel like going with it." And there we were in 2013, fresh off of Trayvon Martin. And I sat, and within 45 minutes to an hour, maybe an hour and a half at most, I was sending copy back to her. She'd given me two weeks. I try not to tell too many editors that, because they think I'm gonna turn stuff around that fast.

The few black birder friends that I have, we sort of share war stories. I've been at one of these birding festivals with another black birder, and, my god, there'd be thousands of people there and five or six black people at most. I remember being on a bus and these people calling me by this other black birder's name. I mean, I'm

6'3", 250 pounds; this guy was 5'10", 160. And people who could tell the differences between these birds, who for most of the public would look the same, were not taking the time to notice the difference between these black people. So all of those things that I wrote in 2013 were things that I'd lived and thought about. That's the best writing to me as a nonfiction writer. I know my data the best. I have to research it very little because it's always there. It flew off my fingers.

And this last Saturday, I was back up at the same spot, and I was watching this bird called a hooded warbler, this beautiful little citrine yellow bird with this olive green back. But the distinctive part of a hooded warbler is its hood. The male has this black hood that circles this yellow face and this push-button dot of an eye, and it just has this ringing song that's instantly recognizable. And it took me a while to find the bird and I finally found it, and there it was, back in the shadows just singing its guts out. An amazing, amazing bird, and I was thinking about the trials and tribulations of being a bird, how this thing had flown 1,000 miles, probably, by the time it got to where I was. And I'm watching it sing and I thought, You know, it would be pretty cool to be this bird because it can wear a hood and not be threatened or persecuted

or profiled for wearing it. It can be perfectly at home where it is being who it is, without, in my mind, worrying about being a bird. It's fully being itself in its habitat now. So there was this Zen moment of thinking, and it led to some other of these rules that I've now refreshed. It's a new nine rules essentially, but they're really sort of these revelations that I struggle with as a black man in this country sitting in my backyard watching birds, but even wondering if I'm safe in my backyard after Breonna Taylor was killed in her home.

I go back to Ahmaud, and a citizen's arrest was the claim that these people had: that they were following him, and this man was suspicious, and that they were stopping him, and that they shot him because he resisted their vigilante arrest. Well, what I understand that Christian did was, Hey, lady, you know your dog's breaking the rules? You can take him over here, and your dog can be perfectly happy in this space where it's supposed to be. And she decided that she would threaten him with the police because he was black.

Looking at some of the responses online to what I posted, it said, Oh, my god, that was terrible, and did you see that poor dog? And I'm a dog lover. We have dogs in our home. I responded to this one woman and I said, "Yeah, and she would've just as soon as strangled or had this man hanging from a tree. She was that angry. She was trying to weaponize the police against a black man, knowing full well what she was doing."

I can honestly say I'm less fearful walking in forests and in places where I know there are four-legged predators that can kill and eat me—I am less fearful in those situations than when I recognize the lights of a police cruiser trailing me for no reason. And I can pick those lights out, whether it's an old Crown Vic or a new Dodge Charger. They ride differently. Those predators, those sharks, swim differently in the water.

So for someone to say, "I'm gonna call the police on you, black man, and tell them that you are assaulting me, or that you have offended me"—there's a good chance, based upon our news stream, there's a good chance you'd have the police knocking on your door asking you to prove that you didn't do what someone else said you did.

In that instance the birds sort of become kind of a distant memory that I have to return to because that's part of what grounds me and gives me some relative peace, as long as I'm in a place where I feel like I can mostly concentrate on them without someone tailing me or watching me or questioning my intent.

You're a poet, essayist, and memoirist, and this piece melded all those forms. What do you think made this form so powerful for you?

I don't even know why nine rules, why not 10, 13, there could've been more. But I got to nine and I sort of exhaled. I felt like in writing it that I held my breath. There

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are times in writing it any that you feel like you're not breathing, and you feel like if you take a breath, you'll lose the thought, you'll lose the words, you'll lose the flow. That's what happened there: I didn't want to lose the flow. I've been asked before about that nine—was there something magical you were thinking, something numerological? No. There were nine. And I didn't need any more. I wanted in that process to then be able to exhale. And that's when I did.

Was the process on Saturday similar? Did you feel that exhale?

Yeah. I feel sometimes like I have to remind myself to breathe. And in the midst of COVID, that's no small thing. But I sort of inhale deeply, just deep belly breaths with birds that help me be in that place, so to focus on one bird for a long time is an important thing for me now. Not just counting lots of birds, to be still in a bird, and to watch it, and to understand it. To write stories about it in my head that sometimes I use later on; other times they're just stories to help me be in that place to exhale with that bird.

When I was watching that hooded warbler, I didn't want to breathe. I was trying to take a picture of it deep in these shadows. I was afraid that it would fly off at any moment. And I wanted to hold my breath with—I mean, I was absorbing every note of that bird's song. That was important to me, that one bird. You know, not to be trite, but that one bird's life matters in a way to me that my life matters. Should matter. I didn't want to see 100 hooded warblers at that point in time, I wanted to focus solely on that one hooded warbler. And then [with] that focusing, and the sort of holding my breath as I focused on that bird, literally and figuratively, there was this transcendent moment. And after I had taken so many snaps of the bird—and it was in shadows, the light wasn't good—I felt like I had absorbed that bird. And I breathed. I exhaled. In a different way than I can with almost anything else.

This interview has been condensed and edited.

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