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OPINION
GUEST ESSAY

Three Years After a Fateful Day in Central Park, Birding Continues to Change My Life

By Christian Cooper
The author of the forthcoming book "Better Living Through Birding: Notes From a Black Man in the Natural World," from which this essay is adapted.

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Early in the morning of May 25, 2020, I biked from my apartment on Manhattan's Lower East Side to Central Park to go birding in the Ramble. Despite the uncertainties of the time — New Yorkers were living in a hot spot of the raging Covid pandemic, with no vaccine in sight — I strove to start this warm, sunlit Memorial Day on a happy note by wandering my favorite urban woodlands in search of migrating songbirds.

I was focused on the end-of-season hunt for a mourning warbler, a small yellow and gray skulking bird that's difficult to spot and relatively rare. I hadn't yet seen one that year.

Visiting the park in the morning to look for birds has long been a springtime routine for me. I wake before sunrise and grab my Swarovski binoculars — a 50th-birthday present from my father — and head out the door.

On that particular day, just as I approached some ideal mourning warbler habitat, a noise shattered the tranquillity, making me wince. The sound was loud, strident and unmistakable: a person calling after a dog.

This is not terribly unusual; Central Park is full of dogs. But the dog in question was running around unleashed, and the Ramble is a protected area where dogs are required to be leashed at all times.

Of course, some owners have always flouted the rules and let their pets run amok, but in the spring of 2020, the off-leash situation had become something of an epidemic. In the more than 30 years I have been birding in the Ramble, I had never seen it so bad. Dogs were routinely left to run roughshod over sensitive areas, tearing up turf, destroying plantings and disturbing wildlife, including migrants in desperate need of rest.

So I asked the woman calling the dog, in a voice just loud enough for her to hear me over the 20 or so feet between us, to please leash her pup.

If you were paying attention to the news that day — and probably even if you weren't — you already know what happened next.

The woman refused my request, and as our interaction got heated, I pulled out my phone to record her scofflaw behavior. In the video I captured, she threatens to call the cops and then, as a white woman, takes our rather quotidian conflict to a racially explosive place, by picking up her phone and saying, "I'm going to tell them that there's an African American man threatening my life."

Little did I know that those 14 words would reverberate across the nation and alter the course of my life.

But then again, birding has changed my life many times over.

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I have been interested in birds ever since I was a young boy. As a Black kid growing up on Long Island in the 1970s, I was rarer than an ivory-billed woodpecker in the white suburban world of birding. I was also queer and nerdy and not particularly popular. I was suffocating in the closet, and birding offered me a way to escape.

I'd watch American robins hop on lawns looking for worm sign, fire-truck-red cardinals adorn backyard shrubs, mockingbirds take to TV antennas (cable wouldn't arrive into most homes for a few more years) to belt out medleys punctuated with leaps into the air, feathers of gray and white flashing against an Ansel Adams sky. For a moment, my Long Island rooftop would be as boundless as the West.

Transported, even just in my backyard, I connected to something deep within myself. The youthful myopia that registered only my woes and the limitations of my life fell away for a little while. Suddenly, I could breathe again.

My spark bird — the birding community's term for the bird that ignited my interest in all things feathered — was the red-winged blackbird. When I was 9 years old, my parents, perhaps hoping it would butch me up, enrolled me in a summer woodworking class. When faced with the choice of building a footstool or a bird feeder, I picked the feeder. And no sooner was it up in our backyard than the cracked corn it dispensed lured in a nearly all-black bird with a bright red patch on its wing.

I had never seen a bird like that before and thought, with elation, that I had discovered a species of crow. But it didn't take long for me to learn the bird's true identity or for my disappointment that I hadn't accomplished a preteen scientific triumph to be replaced by a singular fondness for the species.

Over the years, the red-winged blackbird's raucous territorial cry would become like the voice of a familiar friend. To this day, that sound — which signals the males' return after being away all winter — is, for me, the first harbinger of spring.

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Spring is by far the most exciting time for a birder. Every year, as the weather grows warm, everything else in my life — work, exercise, food, sleep, friends, romance — becomes secondary to my search for birds. I reorganize my days so that I can rise each morning at 4:20 to commune with scarlet tanagers, indigo buntings, subtle lincoln's sparrows, fire-throated blackburnian warblers.

Consigned to a limited assortment of mostly ordinary birds for most of the year, Central Park becomes a migrant trap during the spring and fall, creating a haven for avian and human tourists alike. And since, unlike the fall, the spring features males in beautiful breeding plumage, New York's unparalleled spring songbird migration, lasting about six weeks, is my holy season.

And while I may be a fanatic, I'm not alone.

On any given morning, a few other Central Park regulars and I might form an impromptu posse. Together, we pass a few hours in quiet wonder before racing off to work. Over the years, I have learned a lot about my fellow birders and their lives beyond the park — their careers and families, their worries and ambitions — but whatever else we bonded over, the main thing we shared was a profound love of birds. Our passion was the only passport for entry.

One of the things I love most about birding is how it shifts your perceptions, adding layers of meaning and brokering connections — between sounds and seasons, across far-flung places and between who we are as people and a wild world that both transcends and embraces us. In my life, it has been a window into the wondrous, and I feel excited and grateful to get to share that wonder with others.

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Of course, the freedom to explore and appreciate the joys of the natural world is not shared equally by all. When I was a child and my parents took us from Maine to California to Canada to go camping, we were always among the few brown-skinned people we saw. And

to this day, Black people visit national parks — perhaps the most spectacular public spaces on the planet — at a depressingly low rate.

An understanding of the racial as well as physical geography of our country is often top of mind for Black birders and outdoor enthusiasts. We write our own sort of "Green Book" — the segregation-era travel guide that listed establishments where Black people on the road could hope to find safe lodgings and a meal — keeping a mental map of where we do and don't feel we can bird, camp, hike, climb or simply exist safely.

Even in my beloved Central Park, even before that now-infamous encounter, a part of me was always keenly aware that for me, as a Black man, stalking behind a shrub with a black metal object in my hands would most likely be interpreted far differently — dangerously differently — from a white birder doing the very same thing and holding the same pair of binoculars.

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If you don't give one whit about birds (though, of course, I hope by the end of this, you will) and have never held a pair of binoculars in your life, allow me to welcome you to a different world.

If you've never seen a male scarlet tanager in full breeding plumage — a bird of such incandescent hue, set off by jet-black wings and tail, that it makes a stoplight look dim — then a knock-your-socks-off experience awaits you. And that's just the beginning of the show, from the gaudy, Technicolor riot of a painted bunting to the serene, pristine grace of a great egret, from the effortlessly soaring majesty of a golden eagle to the fierce frenzy of a hummingbird, from the bold color blocks of a red-headed woodpecker to the exquisite nuance of pattern and muted tones of a Lincoln's sparrow.

What makes birding such a phenomenon? Why — of all the spectacular creatures with which we share this planet — do birds captivate as no others can? You don't hear about mammaling or insecting enthusiasts, though certainly those creatures have their admirers, as the thousands who visit Africa on safari or who catalog butterflies can attest. And in fact, there's a large degree of overlap among all these obsessions, because once you tune in to one aspect of nature, you eventually become aware of the whole connected network of life around us.

Birding, however, offers things those other passions do not. It's accessible. No matter where you are around the globe or what kind of environment you're in — city, suburb, country, mountains, woodland, field, swamp, shore or sea — the presence and variety of birds are astonishing. With birds, no matter the time of year, there's always something to see. Plus,

birds communicate in the same ways we do, through sight and sound. They've evolved a stunning range of patterns and colors and, among the songbirds, an astonishing musical repertoire, and we humans are equipped to revel in it.

But beyond all that, we love birds for a simple reason: They can fly. We see them launch themselves effortlessly up into a medium with no boundaries while we remain earthbound, and we are inspired to dream. Imagine watching land and sea unfold beneath you not through the windows of an airplane but under your own power.

The things that you've left behind recede to insignificance, put into new perspective by a towering vantage point. What it must be like to hang suspended on the wind, how radically different to conceive of movement not in two dimensions, not just as backward and forward, left and right, but in three — always infinite possibilities of direction, the body rising and falling at will. We lift our gaze skyward to the birds and see what it means to be free.

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Of the many disorienting twists in the aftermath of the Central Park incident, one of the most unexpected is that my voice is now amplified in matters about which I have always spoken out, including preaching the gospel of birding.

In 2021, National Geographic invited me to host a television show on birding, "Extraordinary Birder," and I said yes. The result is that I now find myself living an absolute dream. I spend my time crisscrossing the continent in pursuit of iconic species, having close encounters with the rarest birds (it doesn't get any closer than peering via endoscope inside the body of a Puerto Rican parrot, or iguaca, to check on its testicles) and having the privilege of telling the harrowing and inspiring stories of these birds' conservation — and of the farmers, biologists and truly extraordinary birders dedicated to these efforts — in front of the camera to a mass audience.

Over the past three years, I've worked to make it clear that birds know no boundaries and belong to no one but are for everyone — of every shape, size, color, gender and orientation — to enjoy. And I've been thrilled to see the numbers of birders, including Black and brown birders, who remain underrepresented, continue to surge.

I hope to be a part of that change, underscoring the need for safe and equal access to public spaces and natural places and inspiring those who might not have otherwise felt inclined to step outside and give birding a try.

The strangeness of this outcome — that the incident in Central Park inadvertently opened the door to this — is not lost on me.

But then we birders are a strange breed. We have feathered dreams, dreams that have filled my head from earliest youth. Birding served as a refuge as I struggled with being a queer kid in an unwelcoming world. It compounded my Black outsider status but also set my complete and utter nerdiness in concrete.

Birding put me on the path to the life I live today — one that has had greater impact than I ever imagined. These feathered dreams have carried me across the globe on adventures, in search of birds in faraway places.

I believe that birds in the wild are meant to inspire such passions in us all. The wonders they offer are always available, freely given, to anyone willing to partake. All we have to do is step outside, look and listen.

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