

National African American History Month

February is a time to celebrate the innumerable contributions of African American people to our nation's history and identity, and to honor the generations of African Americans who struggled with adversity to achieve full citizenship in American society. It is also a time to recognize the continued struggles of African Americans in all aspects of American society. We hope this article triggers discussion in our community.

The United State of Birding

After a racist encounter in the field, a birder reflects on the disturbing incident and the community that helped lift him back up.

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I owe birds my life in so many ways. And while I no longer keep lists of the birds I see, I can still recall each and every species that I've seen and where I saw it first or, perhaps most memorably, with whom I saw it. There's not just the visual memory; so many birds trip other sensory triggers—the sulfur stink of pluff mud and the beak clatter of a phalanx of Wood Storks feeding in a Low Country salt marsh, or the short-breathed bite of high altitude and sweet aroma of Ponderosa pine while watching White-headed Woodpeckers in eastern Oregon.



After all the time in the field is done, the memories of the birds and bird-filled places remain, and the people I've met lie deep within, too. My encounters with others “out there,” birders and non-birders alike, are overwhelmingly positive. However, my life as a birder of a different hue is sometimes challenged.

A recent unpleasant experience with a farmer whose land, not so far from my southern Piedmont homeplace, harbors breeding Barn Owls and a flock of wintering White-crowned Sparrows acted as a kind of birding reset for me. On an overcast autumn Sunday morning, as I stood on a public road admiring the sweet song of a gorgeous male White-crowned skulking in a hedgerow, an elderly man approached me in a pickup truck. He seemed suspicious, and I quickly and politely introduced myself as one of the local birders who admired his farm and its birds. Thinking it would be a bridge to some commonality, the old man seemed initially pleasant but then launched into a recounting of “the good old days” of cotton farming when “niggers picked the cotton” and “everyone knew their place.”

The whistled songs of the sparrow soured in the racist revelation. If there were any doubt beyond the racial epithets about his disdain for me and wishfulness for the ways of the past, his casual mentioning of the gun in his truck sealed it. I was shocked, frightened, and angry.

Just minutes before the encounter, I'd spoken with my birding friend George, exchanging our observations of the morning and opining about the current state of world affairs and how birds bring some semblance of peace in the midst of it all. George and I have regular “meetings” as we haunt the same local patch. We sidle up—his Jeep to my truck—and time flies as both good birds and good words pass between us. I've known him for barely a year now, but it feels like much longer. The collision of all that came from both conversations—the happiness with George and the horror with the old man—happened within a span of a half hour, and all occurred as I sought the birds that bring me bliss.

I thought about the encounter with the farmer for a few weeks. I've probably spent hundreds of hours cruising the fence lines in that patch. It was my sparrow spot. Along with the White-crowns, there were Vesper, White-throated, Field, Savannah, Song, and House Sparrows. I'd sit and just watch and listen—absorbing all the thickety sparrow-ness. That one encounter with that one person changed my range map, though. Just as birds must often find more accepting and hospitable environs when displaced by some disturbance, after the incident happened, I migrated. I found a Loggerhead Shrike in my new contracted range and absorbed it for a week. But all the while I obsessed over my butcherbird, I questioned many things—the farmer's hate, my response to his hate, and whether I should return to the public road to reclaim some sense of my own free will and right to be. I also wondered how my birder friends would react to the incident. I felt alone and isolated in the intolerance that I'd stumbled onto.

Birding calms me. No matter what transpires negatively in my life, things with wings lift me. And in the psychological sink of the White-crowned Sparrow affair, I turned more intently to that buoyancy. The influx of winter birds was a welcome salve. Word of a rare upstate South Carolina Short-eared Owl was a huge dose of potential goodness. As I was cruising through my Townville patch looking for it a couple of weeks back, the possibilities for the owl rose as the day waned and I was hopeful that the giant moth-of-a-bird might emerge over the expanses of fields and pastures. As I rounded the first curve of the familiar circuit—McAdams Road to Dobbins Road to Royster Road—I saw my friends Imtiaz Haque and Linda Montgomery, binoculars and cameras in hand. They were in quest, too.

We traded observations and wished aloud for the owl to reveal itself. It was the usual exchange, but then things turned heartward when my friends asked me about my encounter with the old farmer, which I'd shared on social media. Both were appalled and concerned about what I'd experienced. And then Imtiaz, who's president of the local bird club, told me that he'd asked members to stop visiting the sparrow spot. "It's not right," Imtiaz said. "I won't go back there, and I will encourage others to do the same." Linda agreed and told me that she'd not been back there either. It was an amazing show of solidarity and friendship that I'd really not expected.

A few days later on another Short-eared search, two more birder friends, another Linda and her mother Mary Anne, voiced their shock and support as well. Although the Short-eared never showed itself, lots of other birds did. As I stood in the company of good friends sharing specklebellies (Greater White-fronted Geese), Ross's and blue-phase Snow Geese, with flocks of American Pipits and song-tinkling Horned Larks serenading us overhead, we shared much more than birds. There was the deep feeling of kinship and community that came from knowing that listing a Barn Owl or a White-crowned Sparrow wasn't as important as doing the right thing by a friend. In the moments of that understanding that seem to happen more and more frequently in my life, birding becomes more than just a hobby. It's a necessity for my sanity and well-being.

When I stopped listing birds a few years ago, I started absorbing them instead. It's an exercise in intensity for me as my relationships with individuals have become paramount. It's not a dismissal of those who do list; it's just my way of concentrating care on the beauty and wonder I see in the birds I encounter. In that concentration, I've found that I know birds better and in knowing them better can teach conservation to students and other birders better. I don't really know how many birds there are on my life list now, but I can tell you things about the time, places, and people with whom I may have seen each bird. That's what it's all about for me.

I've begun to keep a different kind of tally now. My list of birding friends is expansive. I can count people in almost every state and many countries around the world who share my passion for wild birds and wild places. I've met a relatively small fraction of them, but I feel enlarged when I meet a good soul who loves the goodness of nature the way I do. When I posted the white-supremacist-White-crowned Sparrow affair on Facebook, hundreds responded in care and concern. Many of the responses came from birding friends from all over the country and even from a couple of places abroad.

That portal of kinship comes in large part because of birds. I, for one, need that connection more than ever. I have a feeling that many of us do. It's a uniting that I'm grateful for, and one we all could use.