

9 Rules for the Black Birder

J. Drew Lanham, 2013

1. **Be prepared to be confused with the other black birder.** Yes, there are only two of you at the bird festival. Yes, you're wearing a name tag and are six inches taller than he is. Yes, you will be called by his name at least half a dozen times by supposedly observant people who can distinguish gull molts in a blizzard.
2. **Carry your binoculars — and three forms of identification — at all times.** You'll need the binoculars to pick that tufted duck out of the flock of scaup and ring-necks. 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.
3. **Don't bird in a hoodie.** Ever.
4. **Nocturnal birding is a no-no.** Yeah, so you're chasing that once-in-a-lifetime rare owl from Outer Mongolia that's blowing up your twitter alert. You're a black man sneaking around in the nether regions of a suburban park — at dusk, with a spotting scope. Guess what? You're going to have some prolonged conversations with the authorities. Even if you look like Forest Whitaker — especially if you look like Forest Whitaker.
5. **Black birds — any black birds — are your birds.** The often-overlooked blackbirds, family Icteridae, are declining across the board. Then there are the other birds that just happen to be black — crows and their kin are among the smartest things with feathers and wings. They're largely ignored because of their ubiquity and often persecuted because of stereotype and misunderstanding. Sounds like profiling to me.
6. **The official word for an African American in cryptic clothing — camo or otherwise — is *incognito*.** You are a rare bird, easy to see but invisible just the same. Until you snap off the identification of some confusing fall warbler by chip note as it flies overhead at midnight, or a juvie molting shorebird in heavy fog, you will just be a token.
7. **Want to see the jaws of blue-blooded birders drop faster than a northern gannet into a shoal of shad?** Tell them John James Audubon, the patron saint of American ornithology, had some black blood coursing through his veins. Old JJ's mom was likely part Haitian. Hey, if we can claim Tiger Woods...
8. **Use what's left of your black-president momentum on the largely liberal birder crowd to step to the front of the spotting-scope line to view that wayward smew that wandered into U.S. waters from Eurasia.** Tell them you're down with Barack, and they'll move even more to the left to let you look at the doomed duck. After all, you stand about as much of a chance of seeing a smew again as you do of seeing another black president.
9. **You're an endangered species — extinction looms.** You know all the black birders like siblings and can count them on two hands. You're afraid to have lunch with them all because a single catastrophe could wipe the species from the face of the earth. There's talk and posturing about diversifying the hobby, but the money is not where the mouths are. People buy binoculars that would fund the economy of a small Caribbean island — where, coincidentally, lots of neotropical migratory birds winter, and where local people of color might contribute to their conservation if more birders cared about more than counting birds.



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“Black Lives and a River Road” (excerpt)

Njaimeh Njie, 2019

I live right above the Ohio River, off of a thoroughfare called the Ohio River Boulevard...For me, living so close to the Ohio River evokes mixed feelings. The river trail that I like to walk along near my apartment is scenic, yet long stretches of it are flanked by the railroad, warehouses and industrial sites on either side. At home, I drink water from a filtered pitcher because of years of elevated lead levels in Pittsburgh’s water, and I regularly learn about new water threats in the region. I feel a constant push and pull between the things that are good for me and the things that can harm me, but I know my perspective is just one of many.

...I've been thinking about water as a gateway to explore the deeper forces that shape the lives (and livelihoods) of Black people in this region. Black residents have traditionally lived close to the waterways — sometimes by choice, but often because of racist housing and land-use policies. Over the years, the proximity to water allowed access to transit, jobs, bathing, washing, fishing and leisure, but it also placed these communities at a disproportionate risk for flooding, pollution, disease and other issues caused by water.



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Njaimeh Njie is a multimedia producer and founder of the nonfiction storytelling company Eleven Stanley Productions. Njie was named the 2018 Emerging Artist of the Year by the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, and her work has been featured in outlets including CityLab, HuffPost Black Voices, and the Carnegie Museum of Art Storyboard blog. This piece was originally published in Belt Magazine as part of a series about the Ohio River.

“Go West, Young Brown Girl”

Lillian-Yvonne Bertram, 2012

In 1865 Horace Greeley said “Go west, young man...go west and grow up with the country.”

My mother never went west. No one ever said “Go west, young brown girl, and grow with the country.”

“Aren’t you frightened,” my mother asked, “traveling like that, alone?”

Maybe.

I made sure to carry bear spray and to time my footsteps just in case of snakes.

When I tell my mother that it’s much smaller and more distant looking than I ever would have

Thought, she asks if the park brochure mentions that Jefferson enslaved people.

As I went walking that ribbon of highway, and saw above me, that endless skyway, and saw below

Me that golden valley, this land was made for you and me.

Sometimes, when I feel people looking hard at me, as if they know something about where I belong

That even I don’t know, I don’t know why, but my face gets hot and I imagine that it’s turning red.

To go west and grow with the country, must have sounded like a kind of permission, a kind of freedom.

But I’m still wondering for who.



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Bertram is a 2014 recipient of an NEH Creative Writing Poetry Fellowship, among other awards. She holds degrees in creative writing from University of Utah, where she is currently managing editor of Quarterly West.