

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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