



a black & white ISSUE?

Is racism the reason there's not more birders from ethnic minorities? The Urban Birder, David Lindo, thinks it's more complicated than that...

Photography by Tom Bailey

David Lindo has been watching his local Wormwood Scrubs nature reserve for over 15 years.



IT'S A RATHER WARM AFTERNOON, AND I'M nervously pacing around in an ill-furnished room. I'm in prison – the notorious HMP Wormwood Scrubs. No, I am not serving time, I'm about to give a talk to convicted murderers, thieves and illegal immigrants about the birdlife that thrives just yards outside their prison windows.

As the motley crew, replete with tattoos, crooked grins and flying expletives, file into the room, I notice a young black guy standing in the doorway looking disbelievingly at the poster advertising the talk. When he realises that I am giving the talk he shoots me an incredulous look and exclaims: "Birds? Birds? But you're black!"

Although funny, the comment did hit home, immediately making me think – is it so weird to be black and into birds?

That old record suddenly started up again – it's a tune that I knew so well but hadn't heard in a while. When was the last time I saw another black or Asian birdwatcher while birding in Britain? In fact, how many other ethnic minority birders do I actually know? How many non-white birders do my birding friends know, apart from me? Why are there so few ethnic minority birders?

To try to get some answers, my first step was to look back at my own life.

I grew up in Wembley in north west London. Back then it was an English neighbourhood with a newly arrived black and Irish contingent. Nobody I knew in my area had even the remotest interest in wildlife, my parents included.

While a pupil at my local primary school, I used to lead 'tours' in the small wood that existed within the grounds, showing my fellow schoolmates Dunnocks and Blue Tits. In those early days I was often ridiculed for my growing birding obsession. I was called Bird Brain and accused by some of the black kids of being 'English' and a 'coconut' (black on the outside and white on the inside). My reaction was to sometimes play down my interest for fear of victimisation. At home, my mum was totally supportive,

despite not having a clue why her son was so into birds. She bought me my first pair of binoculars when I was eight.

As a teenager, I experienced the standard racism that existed during the 1970s. It was abuse that also affected a large number of the other black kids I knew. This took the form of name-calling, disparaging remarks and, very occasionally, the odd bottle or globule of phlegm aimed in my general direction.

Interestingly, the only other black British birder that I know personally had a similar story to tell concerning his formative birding years spent in Acton, west London.

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As you can imagine, all those early experiences had an effect on me. I remember my first visit to Scotland on a youth hostelling holiday back in 1977. I was birding in the Cairngorms with a white birding schoolmate and was stared at continually by the locals, presumably for being the only black face for miles around. It made me feel very self-conscious. Recalling it now, though, it may have been because I was wearing a bright yellow cagoule and the most enormous heavy binoculars!

Being a black kid into birding at this time was a weird experience, and looking back now I can see why it would have been difficult for any ethnic urban kid to foster an interest in wildlife. Bird spotting, as it was termed then, was perceived as the preserve of old, country-dwelling middle-class English nerds in tweed jackets and stalking hats, carrying walking sticks. Why take up an interest not befitting your surroundings and make yourself a target when you can just be another anonymous and accepted face in the crowd?

Having said that, I feel there was probably more of a connection with wildlife in those days than there is today. Kids used to play outside in back gardens, parks, derelict land and on the streets



David has received more than his share of strange looks while out birdwatching.

where there were grass verges – remember them? In some of these areas it was normal to encounter wildlife, be it hunting for sticklebacks, looking for frogspawn, and dare I say, egging.

For example, back at my primary school the playground currency was Matchbox cars, marbles, conkers and Ladybirds! One summer there was a major influx of several species of ladybird and we collected them by the tin-full to trade on the playing field. Red ones were commonplace, and you could swap 20-plus reds for the much sought-after yellow ones. I can't imagine this happening now.

Somewhere along the line as a society, we have disconnected with nature. We live surrounded by instant gratification. People expect everything pre-packaged, beautified and on a plate – now.

Kids used to be encouraged to have hobbies. I knew plenty of

“Somewhere along the line, we have disconnected with nature.”

stamp collectors, toy-soldier and railway-set enthusiasts – kids with the sort of interests that in today's world would probably cause parents to be concerned and peers to jeer. Nowadays, city kids rarely, of their own accord, engage in outdoor pastimes that involve connecting with wildlife.

When my parents' generation first arrived on these shores, a lot of them came from rural backgrounds, and they had a strong relationship with their respective native flora and fauna. Once in Britain's cities, other priorities soon kicked in. The most important thing was to settle in a strange and sometimes hostile environment, get rooves over heads and food on tables. Any leisure time was spent bonding with rum and dominoes while dancing to the latest ska tune.

Add to that scenario the fear and trepidation many ethnic immigrants had when it came to the thought of venturing outside London. Having a house party was a far more likely activity than

a stroll in the countryside to take in the rural chorus of Yellowhammers and Sky Larks.

I truly feel that in those days, newly-arrived immigrants were convinced that if they did end up in a quaint village they would have been gawped at, racially abused and chased out of town by the locals. These beliefs were fuelled by the images of British life as portrayed by the media at the time. You can see why they sought safety in numbers by grouping together within selected areas of the cities.

Forty years and a couple generations on, things have changed quite considerably. We have become a much more integrated and accepting society. But, I also think that despite everything, there is still a fear – certainly within the black community – of stepping out into the countryside. The perceptions that existed in my parents' day still persist, now under the guise of: “The countryside's too boring – what am I going to do there?”

I have taken city schoolkids of all races on urban nature walks, and I am still horrified when some of them admit to having never seen a real cow standing in a rural field, or having never been by the sea to watch the waves crashing onto a beach. It makes me desperately sad, especially when you can see that these kids are genuinely interested in nature. The problem is that they have no mentors to drive their interest.

But all is not lost. Perhaps global warming holds the answer. The threat of colossal climate change has galvanised people into energy-saving action and raised their awareness of the need to conserve nature. There must be very few kids that don't know about man's devastating effect on the environment. This will have a profound effect on the new generation coming through and maybe, just maybe, one or two of them will develop a deeper interest in the environment that surrounds them.

So what is the answer to the question: “Why are there so few ethnic minority birders?” Well, it's a very complex one, with no simple answer, but I don't think it's about race any more. It's a culture thing. What do you think?

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