

A Birding Interview with Dudley Edmondson

For the past 15 years, Dudley Edmondson of Duluth, Minnesota, has been making a name for himself as one of the nation's most exciting young wildlife photographers. With knowledge, patience, and passion, Edmondson has captured thousands of images from the wild—including birds—and presented his work in numerous publications and on his website <www.raptorworks.com>. To encourage people of color to participate in outdoor activities, Edmondson presented photos and stories of 20 African Americans in his groundbreaking 2006 book, *Black and Brown Faces in America's Wild Places: African Americans Making Nature and the Environment a Part of Their Everyday Lives*.

Birding invited Edmondson to share his thoughts on the challenges and benefits of connecting with nature—not just for people of color, but for all of us.

— Noah K. Strycker

Birding: How do you compose a bird photograph?

Dudley Edmondson: It's art. Photography to me, regardless of the subject, has always been an artistic endeavor. As with Arthur Morris's *Birds as Art*, color, shape, and perspective have always been the driving forces in my photographic work.

Birding: What are your favorite birds to photograph?

DE: Raptors. They are not easy to get. To get a good raptor image, you have to be able to get close enough to the bird without it seeing you. Raptors, as we know, have very keen vision, so it is always a challenge—and that's what makes it fun.

Birding: Why did you switch from photographing nature to photographing people in natural places?

DE: Funny thing is, there was a time when I told people, "I photograph everything in the outdoors except people." I was pretty adamant about it. I

said the only way you will ever get me to take a picture of people in the outdoors is if they put on paper bird wings and climbed up a tree branch and flapped their arms! I was just a bit antisocial at the time and thought foolishly that nature was mine and that I did not have to share it. I could not have been more wrong. Nature is for everyone, and now I devote much of my time to trying to convince minorities of that conviction, trying to encourage them with my photography and my activities.

Birding: How do people of color see themselves in nature?

DE: See, that is the problem. I don't think we do anymore. The traditions in the outdoors, at least for African Americans, never made it past the Mason-Dixon line once they began to migrate out of the South in the early 20th century in search of work and life with dignity. Once that transformation started to take hold, those ways in the outdoors fell out of the upbringing of African American children. It was a little different from the outdoor skills most kids learn today mostly as recreational activities. Back then, black parents taught their children outdoor skills out of necessity, not for recreation. I don't think African Americans really ever had much of an outdoor recreational past in this country. So the next generation was taught to hunt, grow crops, tend livestock, and forage for medicinal and edible plants for their survival. That was primarily the extent of African Americans' connection to nature in this country, even though we come from much deeper connections than that—if you go all the way back to our African roots. Today, I think some African Americans see any connection to nature as something beneath their dignity, almost to say, "I am a civilized, educated person and I am too good to go and spend time in nature. That is what poor black folks did way back when in the South to survive—not me, I have arrived."

Birding: What can we do to create a more diverse birding community?

DE: Well, education is key, there is no doubt. You do what Kenn Kaufman did, creating a Spanish version of his field guide. You do what I did with my book, *Black and Brown Faces in America's Wild Places*. With these publications, we are trying to engage and educate people of color about the wonders of the natural world from *their* perspective. Another way is by helping to make connections between those who already have an interest and those who've simply not been exposed to the outdoors and birding in a recreational way. I feel that when the people sending the message look like the people you are trying to reach, then the message is more likely to get through. Working with people of color who have already formed some sort of conservation or birding program in a community would be the best way to grow diversity in the outdoors.

Birding: What happens when people of any color disconnect from nature?

DE: I think you lose perspective of your place in the world around you. It's like falling in a hole in the ground and discovering that most of what you need in life is conveniently down there with you. So you convince yourself that you've lost little as a result of your predicament. The problem is that so much of what's outside that hole can have a significant effect on you even though you are seemingly unaffected by it in your little world in the ground. Modern technology and modern culture seem to me to have done that to humans.

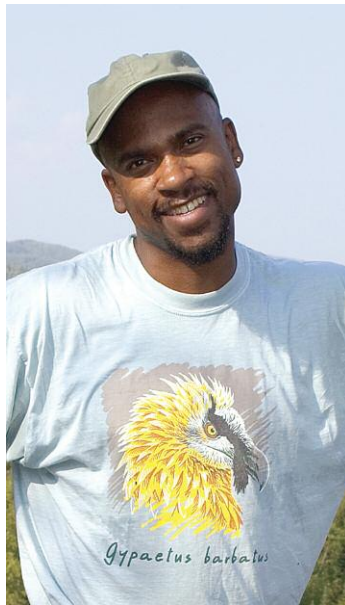
The manmade world, as I like to call it, is that hole in the ground, while the real world, as I see it, is every other living breathing beast around us, every natural process that has gone on for millions of years and makes it possible for human culture to thrive. Blot out the sun for a year or lose the use of insects to pollinate crops on a mass scale, and what type of effect would this have on humans? What would be more devastating: the stock market crashing or, say, losing the CO₂ for oxygen exchange that trees give us that makes it possible for all oxygen-requiring life forms to breathe? The manmade technological world lulls us all into believing that we could somehow survive without nature, but the reality is the complete opposite. When you think about it, does the earth really need human beings for its

survival? Probably not. Our dominance in the world again lulls us into a false sense of power and immortality. A modern human without technology is no match for Mother Nature. Without it, we are just another animal on the planet trying to survive. That is the realistic perspective modern humans seem to have lost.

Birding: What's next for Dudley Edmondson?

DE: I want to continue to try to raise awareness in communities of color about the benefits of spending time in the outdoors. I believe it is the key to better mental and physical health and self-respect. I believe there are so many opportunities for personal growth for people who spend time connected to nature. In that space, if you are brave enough, you have an opportunity to challenge yourself at so many levels. I think that all persons on this planet need to challenge themselves in ways that make them psychologically and physically uncomfortable. I know that sounds extreme and unnecessary, but in that space, in that friction, people can grow and achieve things they never thought they were capable of.

For my book, I interviewed a woman who said that in that space of uncertainty she feels the most alive. So physical and mental challenges presented by nature and outdoor adventure activities have such positive effects on a person. I say from time to time that challenging another person on a court or field of play in traditional sports is relatively easy, but taking on yourself as an opponent can be the battle of all battles. I mean putting yourself in situations that make you ask yourself: What am I made of? Am I brave enough and do I have enough strength to climb to the summit of this mountain in these sub-zero temperatures and thinning air? Can I hold it together mentally and cycle another 40 miles to the finish in this cold, driving rain? In both of these situations it would be so easy to give up. Those are the fertile grounds of personal growth, where a person can become new again. It is exciting. Overcoming the challenges from Mother Nature while dealing a fatal blow to the demons of doubt, which live inside of all of us, is where a victory is sweetest and makes you feel as though you've tapped the energy released in a supernova—creating a shock wave that reverberates through the rest of your life. These are the opportunities I want to bring to more people of color.



Dudley Edmondson.