

Relative Prevalence of African Americans Among Bird Watchers¹

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Abstract

The demographics of bird watchers have recently become a topic of increased interest. Race or nationality is one demographic parameter that has been discussed in some depth. This paper further quantifies the relative prevalence of African Americans among U.S. bird watchers and identifies potential barriers that may prevent African Americans from becoming bird watchers. Two questionnaires (one for bird watchers and one for African Americans) were developed and distributed from August 2000 to June 2001. One-third of the 322 respondents to the bird watching questionnaire had never met an African American bird watcher. Results indicate that the average bird watcher will meet no more than two or three African-American bird watchers over a 20-year period. The two greatest barriers to becoming a bird watcher identified by African Americans were “No interest in birds” and “No friends to teach me how to study birds.” Only ten (27 percent) of the 37 African Americans who identified themselves as non-bird watchers had ever met someone who was a bird watcher, and two-thirds of all African Americans responding to the questionnaire had never met a bird watcher. The results of this study were compared with demographic data collected through the National Survey on Recreation and the Environment and with U.S. Census Bureau population growth projections. The proportion of African Americans who participate in bird watching is smaller than the proportion of African Americans in the U.S. population. The importance of these findings in light of our society’s increasing cultural diversity is highlighted. Recommendations are provided for future studies on this topic.

Key words: African American, bird watcher, cultural diversity, demographics, recreation barrier.

Introduction

The demographics of bird watchers have become a topic of increased interest in recent years. Race or nationality is one demographic parameter that has been

discussed in some depth. For example, in the February 1999 and October 1999 issues of *Birding* magazine, a number of letters to the editor were written on this very topic (Baicich 1999a, 1999b).

The discussions centering around the race or nationality of bird watchers is but a subset of a larger concern currently being expressed about the race or nationality of people who develop an interest in the environment and its natural resources, both within and outside of North America. For example, discussions similar to the ones voiced in the 1999 issues of *Birding* magazine have been documented within the National Audubon Society (Flicker 1999), the National Park Service (Wilkinson 2000), the North American Butterfly Association (Glassberg 2000), and a birding and ornithological organization in Australia called “Birds Australia” (Harrington 2001).

One theme that is consistent across many of these discussions is recognition of the increasing cultural diversity of our society. It has been estimated by some demographers that nine out of every ten people added to the U.S. population by 2050 will be of a nonwhite nationality (Murdock 1995, Wilkinson 2000). It has been found that recreational preferences and environmental opinions held by individuals in our society differ substantively between social strata. Moreover, these society-wide demands and attitudes will fluctuate as proportions of our national population shift among these social strata over time (Cordell et al. 2002). Recognizing the political influence that nonwhites will have in the not-too-distant future is critical to understanding why more attention should be focused now on understanding what nonwhites’ views of the environment and our natural resources are.

Except for American Indians, all four nonwhite demographic groups (Black, Hispanic, American Indian, and Asian) are under-represented among bird watchers compared to their respective representation among the 2000-2001 U.S. population that was sampled by the National Survey on Recreation and the Environment (NSRE 2000-2002). The objectives of this paper are to further quantify the relative prevalence of African Americans among U.S. bird watchers and to identify potential barriers that may prevent African Americans from becoming bird watchers. Information gleaned from this study may be applicable to other nonwhite groups (e.g., Hispanics, American Indians, and Asians) and/or other resource or recreational areas besides birds and bird watching.

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Materials and Methods

In the fall of 2000, two questionnaires were developed. Bird watchers comprised the intended audience for the first questionnaire (*fig. 1*), which will henceforth be called the “Bird Watcher Questionnaire”. This questionnaire was designed to have the respondent identify how many African American birders she or he had met and in what state(s) or Canadian provinces those encounters took place. From August 2000 through June 2001, this questionnaire was taken to birding festivals and local National Audubon Society chapter meetings, where it was distributed to bird watchers. In addition, the American Birding Association posted the questionnaire on its web site, where it was available from November 2000 through May 2001 for bird watchers to download and fill out. All completed questionnaires were returned to the author. No attempt was made to identify in advance whether each recipient of this questionnaire had ever met an African American bird watcher.

Also, in the fall of 2000, a second questionnaire (*fig. 2*) designed exclusively for African Americans was developed for the purpose of validating the assumption that relatively few African Americans participate in the outdoor recreational activity known as bird watching. This questionnaire (hereafter “African American Questionnaire”) was distributed by postal mail and e-mail to a limited number of African Americans between October 2000 and May 2001. Respondents to this second questionnaire did not necessarily have to be bird watchers, and in fact no attempt was made to identify in advance whether each recipient of this questionnaire was a bird watcher. Each African American was asked to identify a) whether she considered herself a bird watcher; b) any barriers that may have precluded her from becoming a bird watcher; and c) the level of interest she had in the outdoors and the environment, biology, and birds. Note that the term “bird watcher,” as used in this study, is defined as “someone who spends approximately 3-5 d each mo watching birds with a pair of binoculars and a bird field identification guide.”

All data from these two convenience samples were entered into a Microsoft Access database for purposes of analysis. During the analysis, we compared the results from these questionnaires with the larger data sets developed by the National Survey on Recreation and the Environment project (NSRE 2000-2002). For both questionnaires, response rates were not measured and non-respondent checks were not conducted.

Results

Bird Watcher Questionnaire

A total of 322 respondents returned the Bird Watcher Questionnaire. Responses were received from 36 states, the District of Columbia, and Ontario province in Canada.

The average number of years spent bird watching by the 322 respondents was 20.57 and ranged from 1 to 74 years (*table 1*). Of the 322 respondents, 111 (34 percent) of them had never met an African American birder. The average number of African American bird watchers met by the 322 respondents was 2.38, and ranged from 0 to 19, with one outlying record of 120 African American bird watchers met by one individual (*table 1*).

Table 2 displays information about encounters bird watchers had with African Americans who were also bird watchers. Of the 757 encounters, 197 (26 percent) of them took place in California, and 116 (15 percent) of them took place in the District of Columbia. Twenty five (3 percent) of these encounters took place somewhere outside of North America. Eighteen (2 percent) of these encounters took place within North America at locations that could not be remembered by the respondents.

Table 1— *Number of years respondents have spent bird watching and number of African American bird watchers encountered*

	Number of years spent bird watching	Number of African American bird watchers encountered
Average (<i>N</i>)	20.57 (322)	2.38 (322)
Standard deviation (variance)	14.63 (214.09)	7.14 (50.99)
Range	1 - 74	0 - 19 (one record of 120)

African American Bird Watchers – Robinson

How many years have you been birdwatching? _____

What is your state (or Province) of residence? _____ (If you live outside of North America, simply list your country of residence)

Have you ever met a black (African American) bird watcher? _____ Yes _____ No

If Yes, approximately how many black birders have you met? _____

If Yes, of the total listed above (and to the best of your memory), please indicate below how many black birders you have met in the following states or Canadian provinces (*enter your #'s to the left of the state designations!*):

_____ Alberta _____ AK _____ AL _____ AR _____ AZ _____ British Columbia _____ CA _____ CO _____ CT
_____ DE _____ FL _____ GA _____ HI _____ IA _____ ID _____ IL _____ IN _____ KS _____ KY _____ LA
_____ MA _____ Manitoba _____ MD _____ ME _____ MI _____ MN _____ MO _____ MS _____ MT
_____ New Brunswick _____ NC _____ ND _____ NE _____ Newfoundland _____ NH _____ NJ _____ NM
_____ Nova Scotia _____ NV _____ Northwest Territories _____ NY _____ OH _____ OK _____ Ontario
_____ OR _____ PA _____ Prince Edward Island _____ Quebec _____ RI _____ Saskatchewan _____ SC
_____ SD _____ TN _____ TX _____ UT _____ VA _____ VT _____ WA _____ WI _____ WV _____ WY
_____ Yukon Territory

Have you ever met one or more other minority birders in North America? _____ Yes _____ No

If so, please indicate the race/national origin of other minority birders you have met (you may check more than one):

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian or Pacific Islander
- Hispanic
- Other. Please specify: _____

Your comments are welcome! If you have any comments, you may record them here:

OPTIONAL:

Your Name: _____ Phone Number: _____

Mailing Address: _____

E-mail Address: _____

Figure 1— Bird Watcher Questionnaire

Official Author Research Form

What is your educational background? *Please check one*
 12 Years or Less 13-16 Years 17-20 Years More than 20 Years

What is your income range? *Please check one*
 Less than \$10,000.00 \$10,001.00 - \$20,000.00 per year
 \$20,001.00 - \$30,000.00 per year \$30,001.00 - \$40,000.00 per year
 \$40,001.00 - \$50,000.00 per year \$50,001.00 - \$60,000.00 per year
 \$60,001.00 - \$70,000.00 per year \$70,001.00 or more per year

What State or Province do you live in? _____ What is your sex? F M
What is your age? _____

How would you define your occupation?
 Professional, Technical, or Managerial Occupation
 Clerical and/or Sales Occupations
 Service-oriented Operations
 Agricultural, Fishery, Forestry, and Related Occupations
 Processing and/or Refining Wood, Metal, Food, Ore, or Other Products
 Machinist/Machine Operator
 Product Fabrication, Assembly, and Repair
 Construction, Electrical Assembly & Repair, and Painting
 Student
 Other. **Please Specify:** _____

Do you have a membership in a local birding club or organization? Yes No
If Yes, please print the name of the club or organization: _____

Do you have a membership in a national conservation society (e.g., the Audubon Society, or the National Wildlife Federation)? Yes No
If Yes, please print the name of the conservation society: _____

How many different birds do you know by name? 1-5 6-10 11-20 21 or more
Do you feed birds with a bird feeder? Yes No
On average, how many visits to state parks, national parks, or wildlife refuges do you make each year? _____
On average, how many days do you spend camping each year? _____

How would you describe your interest in the **outdoors and the environment**?
 Low Low-Medium Medium Medium-High High

How would you describe your interest in **biology**?
 Low Low-Medium Medium Medium-High High

How would you describe your interest in **birds**?
 Low Low-Medium Medium Medium-High High

(Note: a bird watcher is someone who spends approximately 3-5 days each month watching birds with a pair of binoculars and a bird field identification guide)

Do you classify yourself as a bird watcher? Yes No
If not, what do you feel has been the **greatest** barrier to your becoming a bird watcher (check one)?
 No interest in birds
 No friends to teach me how to study birds
 I don't understand why one would want to study birds
 Lack of interest in the outdoors and the environment
 Other. **Please specify:** _____

Have you ever met a bird watcher? Yes No
If Yes, how many have you met? 1-5 6-10 11-20 21 or more

Figure 2— Questionnaire for African Americans

Table 2— Number of encounters with African American bird watchers reported by birders who filled out the bird watcher questionnaire.

Name of state where encounter took place	Number of African American bird watchers met
California	197
District of Columbia	116
Texas	36
Florida	34
Pennsylvania	33
Illinois	29
Outside of North America	25
Arizona, Maryland	23
New Jersey, New York	22
Unknown	18
Virginia, Washington	17
Massachusetts, Indiana	13
North Carolina	12
Wisconsin	11
South Carolina	10
Missouri	9
Colorado	9
Delaware	7
Minnesota, Michigan	6
Oregon, Louisiana, Ontario, Ohio	5
New Mexico, Tennessee, Georgia	4
Arkansas	3
Kansas, British Columbia, West Virginia	2
Connecticut, Utah, Nebraska, Kentucky, Manitoba, Alaska, Oklahoma, New Hampshire, Nevada	1

African American Questionnaire

There were 42 respondents to the African American Questionnaire; 31 were female, 11 were male. Four (9 percent) reported membership in a local birding club or organization; six (14 percent) reported membership in a national conservation society. Two (4.7 percent) respondents stated that they knew no birds by name, while the majority of respondents (71 percent) stated that they could recognize between one and ten birds by name (table 3). Of the six who stated that they could recognize 21 or more birds by name, 4 identified themselves as bird watchers.

Table 3— Number of birds that respondents to the African American Questionnaire could identify by name.

Number of birds respondents knew by name	Number of respondents
Zero	2
One to Five	19
Six to Ten	11
Eleven to Twenty	4
Twenty-one or More	6

African Americans’ views of the outdoors and the environment, biology, and birds, as sampled by this study, are displayed. Nearly half of the African Americans expressed a “medium-high” or “high” level of interest in the outdoors and the environment. However, only 30 percent of African Americans expressed a medium-high or high interest in biology, and even fewer (26 percent) expressed such an interest in birds. Over 50 percent of the respondents reported a low or low-medium level of interest in birds (table 4). Of the 42 respondents, 28 (67 percent) African Americans have never met a bird watcher (table 5). Only 5 (11.9 percent) respondents had met 21 or more bird watchers. Four of the 5 respondents who had met 21 or more bird watchers also identified themselves as being a bird watcher (the fifth respondent identified “time” as being the greatest barrier to his becoming a bird watcher). Only 2 African Americans claimed to have met between 6 and 20 bird watchers; both of these individuals identified themselves as not being bird watchers.

Periodically, several Federal agencies, professional associations, private organizations, and industries collaborate to conduct a survey of the recreational interests of the American people; this survey has become known as the National Survey on Recreation and the Environment (NSRE). The two most recent NSRE surveys occurred in 1994-1995 and 2000-2001 (NSRE 2000-2002). Seventeen thousand people were involved in the 1994-1995 survey, and up to 50,000 people were surveyed in the 2000-2001 survey. One focus of the NSRE surveys is the growing popularity of birding. Note that a bird watcher in the NSRE study is defined as a person who has participated in out-of-doors birding (regardless of the level of dedication to the activity) at least once during the preceding 12 mo covered by each of the surveys.

The NSRE (NSRE 2000-2002) found that 8.4 percent of bird watchers were African Americans in 1994-1995 and that 8.2 percent of bird watchers were African Americans in 2000-2001. In contrast, the proportion of the U.S. population (based on the 1990 and 2000 census) comprised of African Americans was much higher, ranging from 11.7 percent in 1990 to 12.3 percent in 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau 1990 and U.S. Census Bureau 2000a); moreover, the percentage of bird watchers who were

Table 4— African Americans’ range of interest in the outdoors and the environment, biology, and birds.

Interest category	Number of respondents				
	Low	Low-medium	Medium	Medium-high	High
Outdoors and the Environment	8	5	11	10	8
Biology	8	9	12	9	4
Birds	14	8	9	7	4

Table 5— Number of bird watchers met by African Americans

Number of bird watchers met	Number of respondents (Number of respondents who are bird watchers)
Zero	28 (1)
One to Five	7 (0)
Six to Ten	1 (0)
Eleven to Twenty	1 (0)
Twenty-one or More	5 (4)

African American actually dropped between 1995 and 2001, even while the proportion of African Americans in the general population increased over the 1990-2000 period.

By way of comparison, 86.3 percent of bird watchers were Caucasian in 1994-1995, and 77.4 percent of bird watchers were Caucasian in 2000-2001 (NSRE 2000-2002). In contrast, the proportion of the U.S. population (based on the 1990 and 2000 census) comprised of Caucasians was lower, ranging from 75.6 percent in 1990 to 69.8 percent in 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau 1990 and U.S. Census Bureau 2000a); moreover, the percentage of bird watchers who were Caucasian declined between 1995 and 2001, consistent with a decrease in the proportion of Caucasians in the general population over the 1990-2000 period.

Discussion

Based on the results displayed above, it is pertinent to examine what bird watchers are telling us and what African Americans are telling us. Only then will we be able to see what society as a whole is telling us, and that will show us where we go next.

What Are Bird Watchers Telling Us?

Only two-thirds of the bird-watching respondents in this study had ever met one or more African American bird watchers. The author, himself an African American bird watcher, could only recall meeting three other African American bird watchers between 1979 and 2000, prior to the initiation of this study. Eight respondents reported they had been bird watching for 60 or more years and had a

total of 509 years of bird watching experience among them; however, these eight respondents, collectively, could only remember having met 23 African American bird watchers, which is the equivalent of meeting one African American bird watcher every 22.1 years. One respondent estimates that of the 30,000 bird watchers he has met in North America, only about 12 have been African Americans. Another respondent who has led more than 600 birding tours has met only 2 African American bird watchers out of the 2,700 birders who participated on his tours. On average, based on the results of this study, most birders who remain active in bird watching for 20 years or more will meet fewer than three African American bird watchers during that time period (*table 1*).

The majority (over 89 percent) of African Americans in the United States reside in the southeastern or northeastern regions of the country, especially the area extending from eastern Texas to New York city (Cordell et al. 2002). Given this fact, one may ask if there are any locations in the United States where one is more likely to find African American bird watchers. The sampling size and sampling methodology used in this study is admittedly a convenience sample and is not considered robust enough to definitively answer this question; however, what data we do have indicates that California, the eastern section, and the southern section of the United States are where most encounters with African American bird watchers took place. However, the large number of encounters reported from California (*table 2*) is due in part to the correspondingly large sample (99 responses) received from that state and may not indicate that proportionately more African American bird watchers reside in California or travel to California as a birding destination.

Respondents had the opportunity to provide comments on their completed questionnaire. Of the 322 respondents, 159 provided detailed comments. These comments broadly fall into three categories:

What’s the Point?

Commenters in this category essentially feel that bird watching is simply something that African Americans do not do, or that there is no significance to the apparent lack of participation by African Americans in bird watching. Many commenters in this category feel it is “futile and insulting ... to fret and scheme about the present.”

Barriers are the Explanation

Commenters in this category recognize the lack of participation by African Americans in bird watching and attempt to explain this phenomenon. Barriers that are identified by these individuals include social and economic pressures or the lack of a role model. One respondent writes, "... once a Black ... person admits to being a 'birder,' they have broken with the image they are expected to maintain to belong to the Black [subculture], ... and have instead aligned themselves with the white majority. Being unique in a group you are otherwise expected to belong to is very difficult." Another respondent states the insufficient number of role models is "the most important factor" that would explain the relative absence of African Americans among bird watchers. To visualize the impact of role models, one need only look at the game of golf, where the number of African American fans of that sport increased between 1995 and 2001 by as much as 221.9 percent—more than any other ethnic group. This is likely the result of Tiger Woods' popularity, which has escalated by 177 percent over the 4-year period ending in 2001 (Beckwith 2001).

Call to Action

Commenters in this category not only recognize the lack of participation by African Americans in bird watching, but they also feel there is a compelling reason to initiate outreach programs to encourage more Blacks and other minorities to participate in bird watching. One respondent writes that conservationists "expend so much effort trying to expose the majority of our population to wildlife/wilderness experiences in the hopes they will want to preserve it." Another respondent states that, "It's so much that I would like to encourage more minorities to bird. I think further inclusion and engagement in conservation is key to truly creating sustainable communities."

The comment categories listed above are not unlike the comments made by readers in the February and October 1999 issues of *Birding* (Baicich 1999a and Baicich 1999b). For example, Martin Reid (*Birding* 31[1]:12) identifies a call to action when he writes, "in some parts of our country, to leave minorities from our 'club' is to alienate the local majority who will decide the fate of that which we love." In contrast, Jim Vardaman (*Birding* 31[5]:406) expressed amazement at the idea that birders have a responsibility to assure that others participate in bird watching; Mr. Vardaman believes that, "Persons choose a hobby because something fascinates them. It is impossible to instill this fascination in anyone else." Lamar Gore (*Birding* 31[5]:406), himself an African American birder, offered a list of some barriers he has seen or experienced that explain the relative lack of African Americans among bird watchers. Mr. Gore felt that "The market has to make a conscious decision to seek

out and court other groups A change in advertising and possible programs scheduled in the right areas, along with support from Blacks who back this effort, can change everything."

What Are African Americans Telling Us?

At its most basic level, bird watching is a social event. By that we mean that one often becomes a bird watcher by virtue of having met others who also watch birds. While it is true that numerous bird watchers prefer to watch and study birds in solitude, many of these individuals most likely got started in birding as a result of having been introduced to it by someone else.

Based on the NSRE studies (NSRE 2000-2002), it has already been documented that the proportion of African Americans who participate in bird watching is smaller than the proportion of African Americans in the U.S. population. As a result, the small sample (N=42) of African Americans included in this study was used primarily to provide an initial barometer of African American's views of the outdoors and the environment, especially birding. It is believed that with a greater understanding of these issues, we can begin to identify the barriers that preclude African Americans from participating in bird watching and even begin to effect some solutions.

In general, based on the results of this study, it appears that African Americans are victims of a "Don't Loop" phenomenon with respect to their level of participation in bird watching. The Don't Loop works as follows: if you don't meet others who are engaged in a particular activity, the odds are you will not take interest in that activity yourself. For example, membership in local or national birding clubs or conservation organizations was one question that African Americans responded to on the questionnaire. Less than 15 percent of the respondents reported any ties to a national conservation organization, and less than 10 percent of the respondents had a membership in a local organization. Because people do not usually become active in bird watching unless they are introduced to it by a friend or family member, the low membership rate in local and national birding and conservation organizations reported here by African Americans more than likely merits further investigation.

The Don't Loop is also evident in many of the other questions we asked on the African American Questionnaire. Two-thirds of the respondents, for example, had never met a bird watcher and only one of the respondents in this category identified himself as a bird watcher. In contrast, of the seven respondents who had met six or more bird watchers, four identified themselves as being bird watchers (*table 5*).

The Don't Loop epitomizes the barriers that African Americans face in becoming bird watchers. Over half of the respondents stated they had "No interest in birds" or did not "understand why one would want to study birds"; yet only three of these respondents had ever met a bird watcher themselves—yet another example of the Don't Loop in action (*table 6*). Seven other respondents identified lack of a friend (a.k.a., role model) as the most significant barrier to becoming a bird watcher (*table 6*).

It must be recognized that disproportionate nonparticipation by African Americans in bird watching is not a novel phenomenon. Aside from walking and outdoor team sports, African Americans are significantly underrepresented across a wide array of outdoor recreational activities ranging from swimming and hiking to downhill skiing and big game hunting (Cordell et al. 2002).

Most of the respondents in this study expressed a Medium, Medium-High, or High level of interest in the outdoors and the environment. This is consistent with the finding that most Americans are of the environmental opinion that the balance of nature is delicate and that humans are significantly impacting the natural environment (Cordell et al. 2002). However, African Americans surveyed as part of the NSRE feel more so than other groups ($P < 0.001$) that we are not approaching the limit to the number of people who can inhabit the earth and that we (humans) have a right to modify, control, and rule over nature (Cordell et al. 2002). This is but one example of how environmental opinions differ across social strata.

In the current study, the level of interest in the environment expressed by African Americans declines when we begin to focus on specific aspects of the outdoors, such as biology or birds (*table 4*). Nevertheless, given that over two-thirds of the African Americans in this study expressed a Medium, Medium-High, or High level of interest in the outdoors and the environment, the potential exists for more African Americans to express an interest in birds. Such a change in interest in birds would not be unprecedented: the NSRE (NSRE 2000-2002) documented an 8.9 percentage point increase in the proportion of bird watchers who are of Hispanic origin between 1995 and 2001; during this period, Hispanics accounted for 39.6 percent of the total growth in bird watchers across North America.

What Are Other Researchers Telling Us?

The study of racial and ethnic minority participation in leisure or recreational activities has been a focus of social scientist researchers only since about the 1960s (Floyd 1999). Bird watching is among the list of "viewing- and learning-oriented activities" that are most popular as an outdoor recreational pursuit, as measured by the number of people reporting they had participated in one or more of those types of activities (Cordell et al. 1999). In light of this statistic, is it possible to explain why apparently so few African Americans participate in bird watching as a recreational activity? A number of theories and explanations can be brought to bear on this question, and some of them are described here.

Floyd (1999), in a review of social science literature on racial and ethnic minority use of the National Park System, describes four theoretical paradigms that describe use of national parks and participation in outdoor recreation activities by minority populations.

The Marginality Hypothesis states that limited access to socioeconomic resources (e.g., income or transportation) explains the low participation rate in wildland recreation among ethnic minorities.

The idea that "racial and ethnic differences in recreation behaviors can be attributed to different norms, value systems, and socialization practices adhered to by racial and ethnic groups" is the basis for the Subcultural Hypothesis.

When the cultural characteristics of a majority population have been "acquired" by a minority population, cultural assimilation is said to have occurred. The Assimilation Hypothesis holds that individual members of an ethnic group exhibit varying degrees of cultural assimilation, which is why patterns of recreation participation differ between cultural groups.

Finally, the Discrimination Hypothesis asserts that experiences with (or perceptions of) discrimination help to explain a lower visitation rate to National Parks among racial and ethnic minorities.

Table 6—Barriers that African Americans Identified as preventing them from becoming bird watchers.

Name of barrier	Number of respondents (Number of respondents who have met a bird watcher)
No interest in birds	20 (3)
No friends to teach me how to study birds	7 (4)
Other	5 (2)
Lack of interest in the outdoors and the environment	3 (1)
I don't understand why one would want to study birds	2 (0)

It is possible that the theories described by Floyd (1999) to help explain the usage rates of National Parks by minority and ethnic groups may also have some bearing on the relative absence of African Americans among bird watchers. For example, among the comments to the Bird Watching questionnaire in this study, one can find references to discrimination and “assimilation” as possible explanations of why more African Americans are not involved with bird watching.

Johnson (1999), Hutchison (1993), and other researchers have postulated the idea that an environmental ethic may exist among some cultural and ethnic groups and that this ethic may be different from the land ethic that is the basis for resource conservation in North America; this may even be the case among people of cultural and ethnic groups who have been in the United States for several generations. In his study of a Hmong population in northern Wisconsin, Hutchison (1993) found that the Hmong undoubtedly retained an ethnic subculture that was distinctly different from the dominant culture found in American society.

Differences in cultural patterns can help explain the variance in behavioral and psychological characteristics attributed to different culture groups. Four such patterns have been identified as key descriptors that help explain the differences in leisure and environmental orientation among different cultures (Simcox 1993). These descriptors include a) World View, b) Time Orientation, c) Activity Orientation, and d) Relationship to Self and others. Simcox (1993) provides detailed explanations for each of these descriptors and concludes that Western cultural patterns (which govern the infrastructure of many recreational opportunities in the United States) are notably different from other cultural patterns and may therefore have an impact on how successfully recreational activities available in the United States will meet the needs of a diverse cultural public.

Finally, as we continue our attempts to understand the differences in participation rates for various recreational activities among various ethnic and minority groups, it behooves us not to bias our studies from the outset by assuming the activities of any one culture can be considered the norm (Floyd 1999; Gramann 1996). For example, participation by Caucasians in bird watching activities could just as easily be described as “over-representation” or “over-participation.”

Where Do We Go Next?

This study took a two-pronged approach towards investigating the relative prevalence of African Americans among bird watchers. It used one questionnaire (*fig. 1*) to sample active bird watchers across the United States in an attempt to quantify how frequently the average birder

encounters an African American bird watcher. A second questionnaire (*fig. 2*) was targeted for African Americans and attempted to ascertain the views and attitudes this social class has towards the outdoors and the environment, biology, and birds; it also focused on identifying barriers that African Americans face in becoming bird watchers.

We recognize that this study is but an initial step toward understanding the social and political contexts of this issue. It is recommended that a more robust sample of African Americans that is statistically significant and scientifically defensible be undertaken, using the same questionnaire created for this study. In addition, this more robust sample of African Americans should be supplemented by detailed interviews of selected African Americans, including those who identify themselves as bird watchers and those who do not. These efforts will result in a more focused delineation of the barriers to becoming bird watchers that African Americans face and will facilitate the identification of one or more solutions.

We also recommend that, if at all possible, a fully randomized sample of bird watchers be completed using the Bird Watcher Questionnaire (*fig. 1*) to repeat this study with increased scientific rigor. By comparing the results of this study with one that is completely randomized, we can more confidently quantify the relative prevalence of African Americans among bird watchers. For example, although the NSRE (NSRE 2000-2002) reported that currently 8.2 percent of bird watchers are African Americans, their definition of a bird watcher included anyone who had spent as few as one day watching birds over a 12 month period; thus, it was found that an even smaller percentage of African Americans participate in bird watching six or more days each year. The NSRE referred to this category of bird watcher as either *Active Birders* (who spend 6-50 days a year engaged in bird watching activities) or *Enthusiast Birders* (who spend more than 50 days birding each year). Currently, Caucasians make up a large percentage of all *Active* and *Enthusiast* birders. Indeed, the definition of *bird watcher* may influence how many respondents categorize themselves as bird watchers.

We recommend that others who initiate studies in this area must eventually expand the scope of their efforts to include other ethnic groups. For example, prior to the 2000 census, the U.S. Census Bureau (2000b) released projections of the resident U.S. population by age, sex, and race over the next 100 years. Looking at the data for just the next 60 years, the Bureau estimated that the proportion of the population made up of non-white races would increase while the proportion of whites in the U.S. population would decline over the same time period (*table 7*).

By 2061, it is expected that the proportion of the U.S. population made up of Asians will more than double in

size; the proportion of the U.S. population made up of Hispanics will also more than double in size; and that the proportion of the U.S. population made up of African Americans will increase by about 1 percent. Interestingly, the 2000 census revealed that this trend has already begun, with the proportion of Asians increasing from 2.8 percent in 1990 to 4.0 percent in 2000 in conjunction with a 5.8 percent decrease among whites. In fact, based on the 2000 census, whites are already below the 71 percent projection forecast for 2001 (table 7). If these trends continue, then the question posed by Wilkinson (2000) is an important one: “In the future, if *parks* are not relevant to people, then how relevant will they be to the lawmakers those people elect?” (Emphasis added; simply substitute “birds” for “parks” to make this question relevant to the study of birds and bird watching).

Environmental opinions held by members of our society are not static; rather, they vary over time and across social strata. One key variable affecting the shifts in environmental opinions is the rising proportion of Hispanics, Blacks, Asians, and people who are born in another country; in just 50 years, these peoples will comprise approximately 47 percent of the U.S. population (Cordell et al. 2002). This is why recognizing the political influence that nonwhites will have in the not-too-distant future is critical to understanding why more attention should be focused now on understanding what nonwhites’ views of the environment and our natural resources are.

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Table 7—U.S. population demographics, by race, for the 2000 census and projections¹ up to the year 2061

	White	African American	American Indian and Alaska Native	Asian and Pacific Islander	Hispanic
1990 Census	75.6	11.7	0.7	2.8	9.0
2000 Census	69.8	12.3	1.0	4.0	12.5
Projected 2001	71.0	12.2	0.7	4.0	12.1
Projected 2010	67.3	12.5	0.8	4.8	14.6
Projected 2031	59.7	13.0	0.8	6.8	19.7
Projected 2040	56.3	13.1	0.8	7.8	21.9
Projected 2061	49.3	13.3	0.8	9.9	26.8

Note: All figures represent percentages of the population made up of the identified demographic groups.

¹Projections shown are based on the 1 April 1990 decennial census and were released prior to the 1 April 2000 decennial census.

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