**Rackeb Tesfaye**

Hello, everyone.

**Alyssa Favreau**

Hello and welcome to week seven of Audio Distancing, the Broad Science minisode series about communicating inclusive science in the time of COVID-19.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

We're your hosts. I'm Rackeb Tesfaye.

**Alyssa Favreau**

And I'm Alyssa Favreau.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

So this has been a very long week. We hope that you were all taking care of yourselves and staying safe, first and foremost. All over the world we are seeing protests against police brutality, and we're seeing another pandemic, racism, take center stage. For those allies, we hope you are using your voice not only to speak out against anti-Black racism, but to further reflect on ways in which you have benefited from white supremacy, and systemic changes you can make around you to dismantle this rigged and oppressive system.

**Alyssa Favreau**

As we touched on in last week's show, there have been a series of racist incidents that over the past few weeks and days have ignited these worldwide protests. Of course, the senseless murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, who would have celebrated her 27th birthday this weekend, Tony McDade, Chantel Moore, and Regis Korchinski-Paquet. Another headline that sparked worldwide anger was what happened to Christian Cooper, a Black birder who asked a white woman to put a leash on her dog, as per park regulations, only to have her call the police and falsely claim that he was threatening her life. Knowing full well that that phone call could have ended his life, like it often as so many others.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

But for many Black birders this racist and sinister interaction did not come as a surprise, expressing that these incidents have always occurred within their community and that there has always been concerned for the safety of Black individuals in the spaces where they enjoy birding.

**Alyssa Favreau**

Amidst all this, a group of the next generation of birders decided it was time to reclaim their stories, and celebrate the often hidden presence, contributions, and community of Black birders.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

A much needed celebration indeed, what started last week on Twitter asking people to post stories and photos of being #BlackinNature turned into an organized week-long event with events like #PostaBird, #AskaBlackBirder, #BlackWomenWhoBird, #BirdingWhileBlack... Many, many hashtags, and thousands for the first time were seeing how vast the representation of Black birders is. They were learning and getting excited about birds and hearing about the lived experiences of birding while Black, the joys and the barriers.

**Alyssa Favreau**

It was amazing to witness. And this Audio Distancing series has until now been about coronavirus science and how to communicate that. But we thought that it was equally important to talk about how other types of science are being communicated in these extraordinary times. It's a time of isolation and experiencing collective trauma on many levels. But this week has shown the power of mobilization and using social media despite the pandemic to bring people together and communicate inclusive science.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

And we want to celebrate that, especially, especially right now. So we spoke to Corina Newsome, a science communicator who is well known to thousands of her social media followers as @hood\_naturalist. She is also a graduate student in biology and an avian conservationist at Georgia Southern University and one of the organizers of the Black Birders Week.

And like I mentioned I've been following you for a little while now, and without fail every time I see your posts I laugh out loud, I have a smile on my face, I tear up. Whether it's you getting excited about bird migration—I've never seen someone so excited about bird migration that I get excited about bird migration. You having tears in your eyes while you're talking about getting an owl to trust you, interacting with Cardi B and her—I don't know, I don't know if she couldn't fall asleep, but she asked "Do ants poop?" And you let her know that they do. I mean, it's incredible. And so I'm wondering, where does that passion come from? As you mentioned, you're born and raised in Philadelphia. I was going to make a Fresh Prince joke and I'm not gonna do it.

**Alyssa Favreau**

Thank you.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

I was ashamed of myself. Was there a moment or person that inspired you?

**Corina Newsome**

So my love for wildlife actually came from books, well magazines, National Geographic specifically. My grandmother subscribed to National Geographic. And so after she finished reading them, once she had got to about twenty that she went through, she would mail them to my house, and I would just keep them forever and read them all over and over again. And I became fascinated with the diversity of wildlife and the diversity of people around the planet. And I wrote a note to myself actually, when I was five, and I said—everything's spelled incorrectly but I said—"When I I grow up, I want to be a scientist and I want to be a scientist on bugs and animals," is what the note said. And so from that age, I knew that I really wanted to be able to look up close at the natural world, even though my neighborhood did not afford me the opportunity because it was pretty depleted of wildlife. But even still having that passion, I didn't know what that translated to, to a career. So I was like, "Well, I like animals. So I guess I'll be a veterinarian." And so that's kind of what I pursued through my senior year of high school even. Then one day I was volunteering at an animal hospital that I had been at for five years, I passed out during a surgery and couldn't look at blood again, just out of nowhere.

**Alyssa Favreau**

Oh no.

**Corina Newsome**

So I was kind of panicking. Veterinary science is the only thing I can even conceptualize as a career because that's all I've heard of. A family friend had heard about my peril, and she was actually a Black zookeeper at the Philadelphia Zoo, the lead carnivore keeper. And she reached out to me and was like, "Hey, you should do an internship at the Philadelphia Zoo and come see me behind the scenes so I can show you what I do." And I'd never been to the zoo, actually. And I was like, "I'm not going to the zoo. That's corny. That's like an animal torture theme park. I'm not going there." I had all kinds of misconceptions. And then I ended up doing it out of desperation, and I fell in love with it. But it wasn't until—her name is Michelle Jamison—she took me behind the scenes to show me what she does. At that point I realized, "Oh, this is something that I can do too."

So kind of at the same time, I was getting exposure to a wide variety of careers and wildlife because even at the zoo you can be a zookeeper, you can be a zoo vet, you can be a nutritional specialist, you can be an institute researcher. And so I was getting exposed to all these careers and at the same time I saw Black women doing it, which was revolutionary and that is exactly, that was the moment, that was the summer that essentially springboarded me into my current career.

**Alyssa Favreau**

Your colleagues at @BlackAFinSTEM on Twitter organized a one-week event called Black Birders Week in celebration of folks who are Black in nature, and can you tell us: How did that start?

**Corina Newsome**

Jason Ward, who's a friend of mine who I actually met on Twitter originally, he decided to make a group chat. And since then, about a year ago I guess you could say, there have joined about 100 people into this group chat who are Black in STEM. Black AF in STEM, specifically. And so in that group chat, we kind of use that space to decompress, to find community, to be uplifted by one another as we weather our own experiences as Black people in our spaces. And then after the incident last week with Christian in Central Park, one of the members of the group—who's actually, I think, the only one who's not a biologist. She's an economist, so she's in the math side of STEM—she said we need to do something to celebrate Black birders.

That's kind of where it started, and within 48 hours, we came up with this entire plan and produced what we now have as Black Birders Week, which we're really excited to be doing. The reason why it's important is because the incident that Christian had in New York was not an experience that was foreign to us. But it was the first time that it seemed like the media, and the country, and the world even, was paying attention to this particular issue. So we thought, "This is the perfect time to make sure people know this is not an isolated incident, and this is actually just the fruit of a deeply rooted tree of white supremacy that has been impacting the way Black people experience the outdoors for as long as Black people have been on this continent." And so we decided that now was the time to act.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

Absolutely. And it was—it is, it's still ongoing—incredible to see the Black Twitter family, the black Twitter fam, show up like they have. It is unreal. And I, as a Black scientist and as you mentioned you met Jason Ward on Twitter. I have made friends with Black scientists, [and] the first black scientist I'd ever met [was] on Twitter as well. And so it's just... Who knew that there were so many Black folks in nature and Black scientists. I think many of us are just flabbergasted. The hashtag #BlackBirdersWeek is trending on social media, there have been thousands of interactions with the posts of photos and stories of Black people, Black scientists in nature. Did you expect this reaction? What do you make of it at all?

**Corina Newsome**

I honestly did not expect a reaction of this magnitude. I did expect that our reach would be pretty far because as I said the people in the group are all over the country: North, west, east, south... Why did I say it that way? All around the country. So our networks, the people who follow us, the people who are paying attention to us who we know, are really spread out. So we figured we'd have a broad reach but we didn't think it would be this broad, and that so many news networks and organizations would promote our work. Even governmental agencies have been promoting our work, like the US Fish and Wildlife Service, which I didn't even think would, whatever happened... They have been tirelessly reposting, retweeting, sharing what we've been sharing. The National Audubon Society of course, American Birding Association, Cornell Lab of Ornithology, all the birding associations, and then even zoos like Columbus Zoo and Aquarium— which is the ranked number one zoo in the United States. And having press opportunities in all kinds of networks like NPR and PBS and CNN, and just an amount of support that I could not have possibly imagined. And because of that we've grown a platform, a massive platform, very quickly.

So how did this happen? It blows my mind. So now we're trying to think, "Okay, we have this unexpected platform. So now we need to capitalize on this." So we're now brainstorming into the near future. How official do we want this group to be? What do we want our initiatives to be? How do we want to contribute to professional development for Black youth and other people who are in STEM or interested in STEM.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

The representation that you are promoting and amplifying on these platforms is so powerful, and just a few stories that have stuck out to me that I've read on Twitter—and I'm going to just read this verbatim because it's really just stuck with me for the past day—is Dudley Edmonson said, "In forty years of birding I never thought I would see the day when I wasn't the only Black birder I knew."

**Corina Newsome**

Oh my gosh. I'm tearing up.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

It made me bawl the first time I read it.

**Corina Newsome**

I literally have tears streaming down my face. Oh my gosh. Oh Dudley.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

And another woman who had said, she never thought—and I don't have her name, I'm going to find it and put it in our show notes—that she would ever see another Black Muslim woman with a hijab birding.

**Corina Newsome**

Wow.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

First time that she had seen a photo and the impact of this platform...

**Alyssa Favreau**

Now I'm gonna cry.

**Corina Newsome**

My face is wet.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

Oh God, we're all crying. The representation is incredibly powerful. There's no question there. I just wanted to talk about the incredible, incredible impact that this is going to have.

**Corina Newsome**

Yeah, and the crazy thing was on Sunday, that first day with the #BlackinNature hashtag. What happened this week and starting on Sunday, I was so blown away. I was in my room crying looking at all these pictures of children, Black children outside birding. City kids, you know, birding. Adults, people of all ages, just outdoors. I'm just like... it's unfortunate that we're separated by so much physical distance, but the power of the Internet has really worked in our favour on this one. It's beautiful.

**Alyssa Favreau**

And it's not just people who are already on Twitter. One of the things that's most interesting to see is how many new black Birders are getting onto Twitter for the first time just to participate. What do you think is so compelling that people who aren't usually even on social media really wanted to join in?

**Corina Newsome**

I think because it really is lonely, and you do maybe get used to it—not that it never isn't uncomfortable— but you kind of get used to being the only one, the only Black person in a lot of these spaces. I honestly just expected that to be the case for my entire career. That's just the expectation that I had. And so if I was not on Twitter, I would be on Twitter. Just seeing pictures is enough, to see someone like you. I can't even describe the feeling. It feels like you're not the outsider. You're no longer the oddball. You're not the the weirdo, you're not the whatever. You're not the person that's always looked at as, "Why are you here? Huh? What brings you out here?" It's like, "Oh, this is normal and this is okay. And there is actually a community of people here." There is no feeling like that feeling, and so I'm not surprised that people would want to participate even though they weren't initially on social media.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

Yeah, and for me and my friends—and we're talking about the Twitter friends that I made, and those who are commenting online, who are Black scientists and just generally enthusiasts about nature—this platform has been a refuge for us from the trauma of this past week, but the trauma in our general lives that we face as Black folks. [Of] not being seen and heard in places that we love and being depicted as deficits in the media. We are finding joy in this space. And one of the lines that really spoke to me was from your colleague and co-organizer, Tykee James, who said, "The Black experience is not one of only trauma. It is one of joy and it is one of pride and it is one of strength."

**Corina Newsome**

Yeah. Yes.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

Can you talk a little bit more about creating this space of joy and empowerment for the Black community? And how that is?

**Corina Newsome**

Yeah, I think that the wonderful thing here is that we are seeing immediate benefits of creating this initiative. It's almost like in the act of Black Birders Week existing, we are getting hope. Simply by people participating, whether it's posting a picture, writing a tweet, anything, it's becoming a refuge because simply our existence here is so beautiful and so life giving. I think that it's been basically a wonderful tool for disrupting the whiteness and the homogeneity of outdoor exploration and birding, because it simultaneously gives us hope at the same time that it is disrupting what is perceived to be the norm of whiteness here.

**Alyssa Favreau**

Mm hmm. And so talking about the work that you do more broadly, your name on social media is @hood\_naturalist, and I'm curious where that name came from.

**Corina Newsome**

I'm from Philadelphia, I'm from the hood. I grew up in Germantown. When I made that username I really wasn't thinking super deeply necessarily, but what I was thinking about was I don't want people to see me, people who don't know me of course, to see me and be like, "Oh, she must be doing this kind of work or she must be a scientist or she must be working with wildlife because she's had some sort of exceptional upbringing that placed her in that environment." No, I'm from the hood. I'm from the city and that's a very important part of my story, because I think that typically urban demographics tend to be pretty isolated from the natural world compared to other folks. I believe that it's important that people see that it's possible, that you can come from the city and be in a concrete jungle growing up, and still end up loving and participating [in] and studying the natural world. The problem is that usually when you think of conservation you think of a white person, usually [an] older white man. How do we conserve birds that are migrating through the hood? What is the best way to utilize the natural patches of spaces in the city? What are the best ways to engage local communities in assisting with conservation? Because conservation, especially at this point, is a group effort that involves not just career specialists and career scientists in wildlife conservation, but it involves the cooperation of the general public—both at the legislative level, like having people vote in favour of certain conservation funding and action, as well as the personal behaviours of people, having people assist with caring for natural spaces and maintaining natural spaces, and being conscious of the way they consume resources and dispose of resources. It requires the cooperation of every kind of person. So if you only have white people at the table, white people who grew up familiar with the natural world, who didn't grow up in the inner city, who are from a privileged background, middle to upper socioeconomic status, you have such a limited capacity to brainstorm and to be creative, compared to if you had Black voices at the table, and as many voices at the table as you possibly can. Every every culture, every kind of person, people from every kind of place, are necessary to have at the table in order to most effectively and most creatively conserve birds now and into the future.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

There are many folks who are now inspired to be new birders and there are now Black birders who are more invigorated to go out and do what they love to do. But the joys of being in nature also comes with issues of safety for Black folks. Listening to the Instagram Live yesterday, and really enjoying it, it was mentioned that [there are] concerns of binoculars being dark and potentially being mistaken for another object, or [that there are] the risks of being alone in nature and sometimes you're in a remote area. I saw a mom on Twitter mention that she has her son pin drop her a location so she can trace where he is. So how can Black individuals whose bodies are already inherently at risk when stepping outside, enjoy nature and be safe?

**Corina Newsome**

I think that, when it comes to the threats to Black safety, that is on the part of the people causing the threat, which are people who are not Black, so white people who have been indoctrinated with the idea that Black bodies are threatening, people who have been conditioned to think that only a certain kind of person is the normal to see outside. It is up to people, white people in particular, holding other white people accountable for their biases and for their racism, to protect the lives of Black people.

Now when it comes to Black people enjoying nature despite the context in which we live and the opinions we already know that people might have about us, I think that if you can be part of a birding community, that always makes birding more fun. Not only for safety, but it's fun to enjoy what you're seeing with other people because it's infectious. It's very infectious. And not only is one's joy for birding, my joy for birding the main... More than any information I could share with anyone about a bird that I'm seeing, the joy that I have about it is why people tend to be interested in birding. I think that when you can share that joy with other people, it's encouraging to them, it's encouraging to you. It makes the experience so much more fun when you can share with other people.

And I would encourage you to get other Black people out there with you. Because again, it's a wonderful thing for us to be able to see each other in nature, as well as to normalize having Black faces... [For] other people who are not Black seeing Black faces in the outdoors. To enjoy it to its fullest capacity, do it with as many people as you can, because exploring the outdoors with others is incredible. Encourage the people around you, the white people around you, all people around you, to hold people accountable for racism that they have. For racist opinions they have. For biases they have. And normalize the expectation that everyone is being held accountable. That goes for everyone, especially for white people, because it is not fair to anyone. It's not fair to Black people to have to walk on eggshells in order to just be safe or to feel safe. So everyone needs to participate in normalizing the culture of expectation, and normalizing the elimination of neutrality, because neutrality in the birding world is aiding oppression. And you have to be actively antiracist to eliminate the impacts of racism. So I encourage everyone listening to do that in as many capacities as they can.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

Yeah, thank you.

**Alyssa Favreau**

Mm hmm, it's always important to recenter that responsibility and put it exactly where it needs to be. So at the time of this conversation, we're halfway through Black Birders Week and I think it's already safe to say that it's been a huge success. How are you hoping to build on that momentum? Where does it go from here?

**Corina Newsome**

That's a good question. So we certainly will continue to have an annual Black Birders Week. That was the first thing we decided. But as the platform has grown to where it is now, we've had offers from people like, "Hey, how can we financially support your efforts?" And it's like okay, so we have resources and reach at our disposal that we didn't necessarily expect. So now we are already in the process of planning how to participate in official capacities in birding events—like the Biggest Week in American Birding, which happens in Ohio every year and it's a massive, massive birding event—how we can participate in official capacities in other events and initiatives that have been hosted by mostly white communities for a long time in the birding world. And to start our own. And to be able to offer resources of knowledge and resources of finances to, as I mentioned earlier on, to Black people who are in the sciences or interested in the sciences. We already have been—as part of Black Birders Week we participated in a fundraiser to purchase as many binocular as possible to give to Black birders who need it.

So we are specifically targeting Black people and inviting them into the birding world, with our faces, inviting them and telling them that we're here and we want you here. We intend to continue finding new ways to invite Black people into birding and into the natural world, and offer the skills that we have individually—whether it be as scientists or as explorers or as communicators, whatever it may be. We are going to be offering our expertise with young Black people interested in the field, whether it be through Zoom calls, however this pandemic plays out, using the resources we have to offer what we have already know, our resources, to as many Black people as we can.

**Alyssa Favreau**

That all sounds so exciting.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

I've already signed up for my first bird watching experience with friends on Twitter. So when this thing is over, I will be out there. We will be posting a link for that GoFundMe page that you had mentioned about supporting the purchasing of binoculars for Black birders. And I will say that the amount raised is amazing. It is at $33,000 right now, and the initial goal, I believe, was $15,000.

**Corina Newsome**

People have been so generous, yeah.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

Yes. And I think a call to some of those more professional companies that are making these binoculars, hint hint, get involved. Is there anything that you feel that we have not touched on, that you want to talk about? That you want to promote, that you would like to have out there?

**Corina Newsome**

In the biological sciences we understand that diversity is important for health of—whether it's an organism, a community of organisms, an ecosystem, the globe. If you think about genetics, if you have a population of say, cheetahs, and they are all genetically identical, if a stressor comes around that one is susceptible to, they're all susceptible, and it will wipe the entire population out. If you have an ecosystem that is overwhelmed with raccoons, right, that's going to collapse pretty quickly. But if you have a representative of every ecosystem service: The pollinator, the seed disperser, the top predators, the scavengers, everybody, all these different ecosystem services. A diversity of services are keeping an ecosystem stable. The same way that diversity is required for rigor, for vigor, for health and resilience in the natural world, it's required for communities of people as well. So think about the importance of diversity when you go outside, and how we understand that and apply it. I would encourage you to apply it to spaces in which you have to make challenging decisions and respond to stressors, which all of us have to do now and our whole lives. That's part of life. And diversity always makes us more capable of finding answers.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

This is just me out of curiosity, if you had to pick a bird that best represented you and your personality, what would that be?

**Corina Newsome**

Oh, I've never been asked that before. Personality. personality. I feel like, oh, Blue Jays is my answer to everything because I love Blue Jays. And they were like my spark bird. But a lot of people think that Blue Jays are like buttholes. You know what I mean? But it's like, no they just do what they gotta do. They tend to kick other birds off the feeder, and they monopolize entire spaces and no other birds can come in. So actually, I'm not going to say Blue Jay because that's not totally accurate. I say Blue Jay because they're very charismatic birds, both in appearance with all the different shades of blue and all the colors, as well as in personality, in my opinion. They they are very inquisitive. They're very curious animals. They mimic other birds and other sounds. They're just unexpected. You just keep finding new things out about Blue Jays.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

I'm gonna be biased. [I'm] from Toronto. I think they're a great sports team, so.

**Corina Newsome**

Mm.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

Oh no.

**Corina Newsome**

I'm kidding, I'm kidding.

**Alyssa Favreau**

Oh this was going so well.

**Corina Newsome**

You can have the Blue Jays. Yes, for sure. But Blue Jays are in some ways, not in all the ways, but in many ways, birds I want to at least exemplify in my life.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

Thank you so much to Corina Newsome who took time out of her very, very busy week to talk to us. And I hope she's now getting that nap that she deserves. You can find her on Twitter @hood\_naturalist.

**Alyssa Favreau**

A few updates now that Black Birders Week is over. The National Wildlife Association said that because of the event, they will be expanding their conservation and intern programs to create opportunities dedicated to young biologists of colour and to help launch the careers of #BlackBirders. Which is amazing.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

Whoo, such great news.

**Alyssa Favreau**

Uh huh.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

Keep it coming. Keep it coming. And you can watch the live discussions that they streamed last week. We'll post links on our show notes, including a discussion with Christian Cooper who has been birding for over 40 years.

**Alyssa Favreau**

Oh my god.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

Incredible.

**Alyssa Favreau**

Yeah.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

And this conversation happened with the next generation of Black birders discussing their experiences and love for birding, and what needs to change in the community. It's powerful. And please, please do watch it when you get the chance.

**Alyssa Favreau**

We'll also be sharing resources for how you can continue helping in our show notes. There is a GoFundMe set up to buy binoculars for young Black birders. We encourage you to donate to that.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

And with that said, the success of this week was made possible by the hard and free—emphasis free—work of Black bird enthusiasts, and they deserve to be paid. There are various PayPal and Venmos. Venmos really mean nothing in Canada, but you can find ways to support this community monetarily and we will post those links. So if you can contribute and you have the means, yes, yes, yes. Do so.

**Alyssa Favreau**

And lastly, we have noticed an increase in our followers this past week. We want to welcome you but also be cognizant of and recognize that this is a direct result of racism and Black bodies being murdered. It's therefore a conflicted feeling. We're an organization that was started by Rackeb, sparked by discussions with her graduate student friends about the lack of diverse voices in science and the media.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

And we will continue to be a space that breaks down this isolation so many of us face, to amplify the stories that we need to be hearing in our communities, and to lift up and support the next generation of youth. So please, take the time to go to our website, broadscience.org, to see the amazing things that we do. Which is also unpaid, as much of this work is, and think about how you can help amplify and support it. Listening to this podcast is only a first step, and we thank you.

**Alyssa Favreau**

Yes, thank you. You can also find us on Twitter at @science\_broads, and anywhere podcasts can be listened to: iTunes, SoundCloud, Spotify, Stitcher. Like, subscribe, review, if you can.

**Rackeb Tesfaye**

This episode was edited and mixed by the wonderful Ryan McFarlane. In partnership with CKUT 90.3 FM, as always.

**Alyssa Favreau**

Please take care of yourselves and we'll see you next week.