



BELONGING



A Taking Nature Black/U.S. Forest Service Photo eBook



*Alfie Chambers carrying
her daughter Matilda Machioli-Chambers*

Alfie Chambers
CEO of Temple X Schools
Soldiers Delight Natural
Environment Area

In these woods, at this point in our evolution, I am on sacred territory. To be here often is to be going beyond the encouraged mediocrity.

Matilda is in her element when we are in any remaining natural ecosystem. The smell of the damp earth; the delight in a cold stream; the crunching of leaves under our feet or the sighting of birds of prey - when I feel the most uprooted, I take us to the woods. The point is to make the life and lives of our children more possible and richer. With all the tech, this is a spatial-spiritual experience at an ancient, organic pace. It's rehoming to the mind of a people who assumably navigated this terrain as their lives depended on it. We come here to never forget that memory. We come here to sharpen it.

Photo by Benjamin Israel



Photos by Myron Fields



Tykee James
President, DC Audubon Society
 Kenilworth Park & Aquatic Gardens

When I'm outside, I think about different ways to answer the question, "How did we get here?" Whether that question is about a rare bird in a tree, a tree in the park, a park in the neighborhood, a neighborhood in the city, or anywhere there are people on the continent, the answers will take you on a journey. And thinking about this question helps me think about what to do next.

Outdoors, I can find music in the chorus of songbirds and relate it to smelling a really good dish. Certain bird calls stand out among trees the same way certain spices stand out on a plate. Going outside can feel liberating, but my enthusiasm is dampened as I hear and learn about the harming of Black people by the hands and systems of past and present white supremacy.

Any change to society's idea of what "people and nature" looks like will be a direct outcome of our investments and strategies to challenge and change the role of power in society.

Going outside has been part of my people's heritage from the very beginning. #BlackBirdersWeek reminds us that the Black experience is about joy, pride, resistance, strength, and style every day of the year and forevermore. Ultimately, outdoor activities, such as birding, should be open-ended opportunities that take you places physically and philosophically. I'm further developing what the principles of B.I.R.D.ing (Beginner-minded, Inclusive, Reflective, and Deliberate) mean to me and how they can show up for everyone on freedombirders.org.



Photos by Myron Fields

Lydia Lawrence
Fairfax NAACP Environmental and Climate Justice Chair,
Potomac Riverkeeper Network JEDI Chair
❖❖❖ **Seneca Regional Park** ❖❖❖

I grew up playing in the woods and hiking with my family. As I emerged into adulthood, life tried to disrupt that relationship through homelessness and abusive relationships. It's hard to recognize any connection to the outdoors when you're struggling for housing and food. Over time, I was able to create a relatively more secure space, and I began my journey back to the outdoors.

It started with long walks in my neighborhood that eventually led to parks and trails. I then discovered Seneca Tract and would hike for hours there in all seasons. I eventually found my way to paddle-boarding on the river and fell in love with the Potomac and all of its riparian zone.

I started spending multiple days a week on the river and in the woods. The Potomac was my muse for poetry for many years. Much of my writing is still based in nature. Every hour on the Potomac brought healing and strength back to me, both mentally and emotionally. I finally had time to process all my broken pieces and rebuild myself into something better and stronger. Even today, the river and the forest are my sanctuary, church, refuge.

A narrative has been created that Black people don't engage outdoors. Black people have a long history of connection to the outdoors, spiritually, physically, and emotionally. It is important for us to reclaim this narrative.





Photos by Benjamin Israel

Ronnie Webb
Executive Director of The Green Scheme
 Oxon Run Park

When I'm outside, I feel energized, free. Our photo shoot took place along Oxon Run as it passes behind THEARC, a combined cultural and social services campus in Washington, DC's Ward 8. Several of the photos were taken at THEARC Farm, the urban farm just in back of the main THEARC facility. I love that spot on Oxon Run because it's an actual space that we use to educate community members.

The Green Scheme was born out of my experience as a student at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, in Greensboro, NC. My major was agricultural economics, the business side. But Greensboro is in a rural area, so I was also able to see firsthand how food was produced. After college, when I returned to DC, I didn't see any of the resources to do farming like I had seen in Greensboro.

That inspired me to do projects around urban farming, health, and nutrition, but incorporating some sort of urban flair as well, making it cool to engage in this healthy, grow-your-own-food lifestyle.

We work across wards 5, 7, and 8 in DC. We do after-school programs at school gardens. We run campaigns for D.C.'s public schools regarding cafeteria food. We co-founded a coalition that addresses food procurement in prisons. I teach a nutrition entrepreneurship class at Ballou High School, which is just a few steps from Oxon Run Park. One of the most exciting things about my work is seeing kids take what they learn in the garden back to their households.



Photos by Benjamin Israel



Alex Smith
Founder of Division Street Landscaping
❖❖❖ **BLISS Meadows** ❖❖❖

The only place I have ever felt like I belonged was in the woods. Growing up, while other kids were on the playground, I was in the woods scooping up clutches of frog eggs. I would take them home and watch them hatch. Then watch them transform. I was fascinated by things like this. So fascinated that I would start to create little forests inside of jars and bowls. From there, I graduated to small clear containers that I found in the trash behind the neighborhood corner store. I would recreate the environment that I saw in the woods for my toads, frogs, newts and salamanders. I still do this ‘til this day. On the island in my kitchen, there is a fish tank that I rescued from an apartment clean-out. The stones are from the creek down the street from my house. The hide-out is this gnarly branch that I found in a client’s backyard. The frog inside came from a pond that I worked on.

As an adult, I don’t have as much time as I did as a child to play in the woods, but I always take a piece of the forest with me. It’s my place. It’s where I belong. In reality, it’s not only that Black people have a connection with nature today. It’s that, as the original people on this planet, we have always been one with nature.