

CHRISTIAN COOPER

In
birdworld

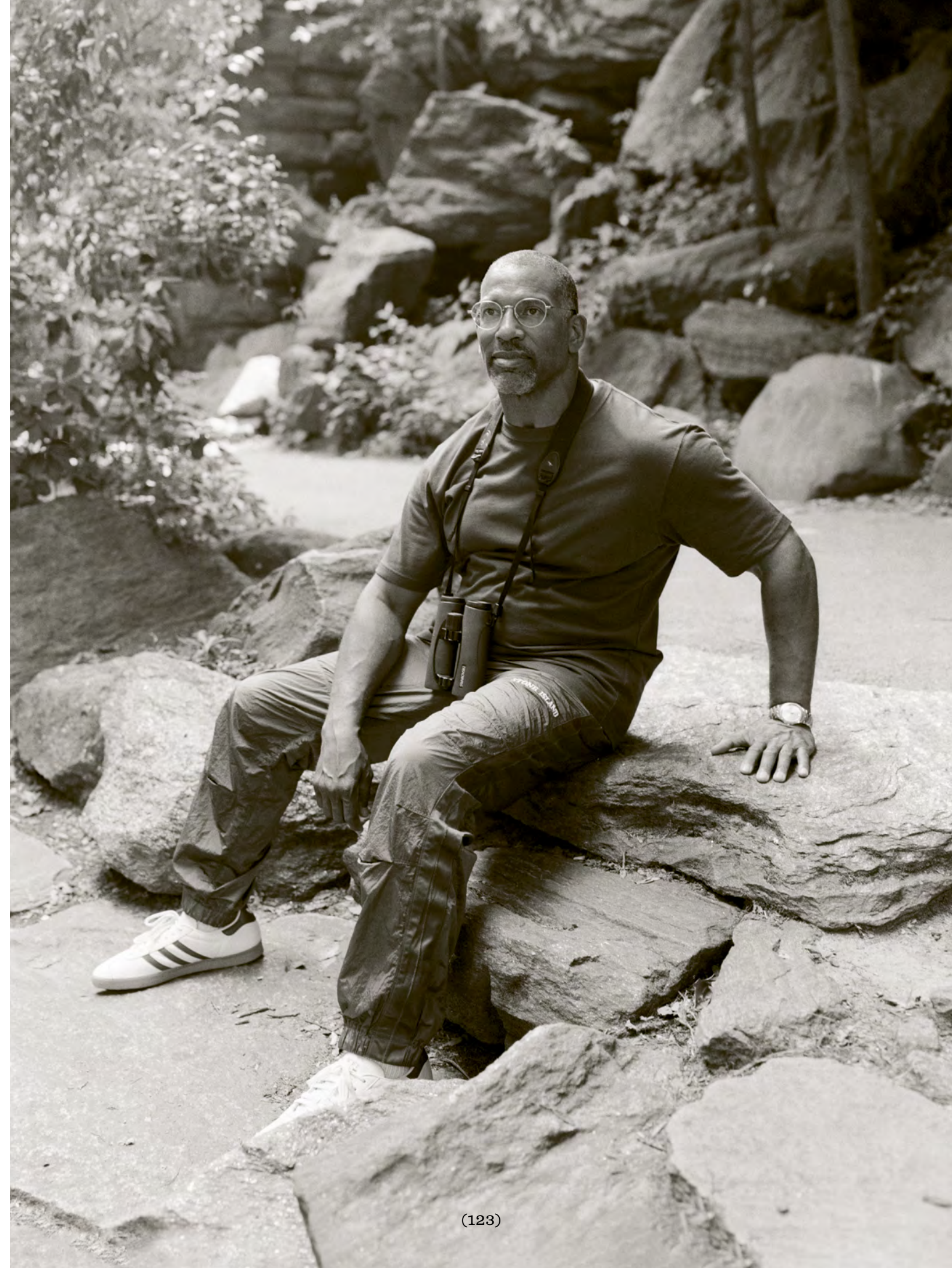
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(Christian)

→ For many years Christian Cooper led a rich but private life. He worked as a comic book editor in New York, creating some of the first openly gay characters within the Marvel universe. In his free time he pursued his lifelong passion of birdwatching. Then one day four years ago, an argument with a dog walker in Central Park escalated into a moment of shocking racism (now dubbed “The Central Park Birdwatching Incident”) that Christian caught on camera. The footage went viral and catapulted both individuals into the lime-light. Where many would have struggled with the sudden attention, Christian took it all in his stride and captured hearts and minds across the world. Now the 61-year-old

New Yorker has a best-selling memoir, an Emmy Award-winning nature documentary and is intent on using his platform to open up the often exclusive world of birding.

→ Chris was photographed within the surrounds of New York’s Central Park, an 843-acre oasis that (despite being in the middle of a sprawling metropolis) is home to over 210 species of bird throughout the year. Here and on the opening spread, he is wearing a T-shirt by Uniqlo, Stone Island trousers and Adidas trainers. The glasses, watch and binoculars are his own.



It is a warm Sunday in July and Christian Cooper, the celebrated birdwatcher, best-selling author and television presenter has invited me to join him at his favourite gay bar. Fittingly for a man who has shaped his entire life around a passion for birds, Cooper’s preferred nocturnal hang-out is the Eagle, New York City’s famous two-storey leather bar, with a popular roof deck. Passing through the dark, grimy interior, decorated floor-to-ceiling with the macho artefacts of leather culture, I arrive at the top. The incredibly muscular, strikingly handsome Cooper is easy to spot. It’s easy to make a connection between birdwatching and cruising: both activities involve nature, a hunt, beauty and visual enjoyment. In Cooper’s doctor-at-the-beach-in-Provincetown look — a logo tank top, khaki shorts and sensible black Nikes — he blends seamlessly into a sea of daddies. It’s a rare opportunity to access a side of his life normally outside public consumption. “Do people ever recognise you here?” I ask him. “Sometimes Black men do. White people only

recognise me when I’m wearing my binoculars,” he replies. He offers to buy a drink and orders a vodka tonic with lime for himself. Cooper mentions that the last time he went out was for Folsom Street East, the annual kink and fetish fair that takes place on the street outside the bar. He describes the event as “always eye-popping.” I ask him if he’s into leather. “I lean toward a more macho aesthetic,” he replies. “I work out relentlessly, so that goes hand in hand with leather. I’d say I’m leather adjacent.” At that moment, his partner of five years, John Zaia, greets us. They embrace, kissing hello, and John quickly scurries off to find his friends. We continue talking through the big news of the day: President Biden has dropped out of the presidential race. Cooper has already endorsed Kamala Harris on his Facebook page. The roof deck fills up with men; it’s hot, sticky and full of potential. Cooper excitedly recalls the time a family of ravens moved into the Eagle, in the water tower above the roof deck, a situation he describes as terribly distracting. “But don’t get me started on birds; I know you’re here to observe me in my natural habitat,” he jokes. Our eyes wander and in unison fixate on the cross-fit body standing next to us. “That boy sure does his squats,” Cooper praises. A few friends have arrived to join us for the night: a tan, bearded, white-haired man named David and a lively novelist named Blair who tells us that his forthcoming book is titled ‘The Disco Witches of Fire Island’. While David and Cooper chat about Palm Springs, Blair corners me and, without

knowing the venue for this profile, gushes, “Chris really is fantastic. He deserves everything that’s happening for him.”

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Even if you don’t remember Christian Cooper by name you already know the story. In 2020, on a sunny spring morning, an ugly, racially fuelled conflict made him world-famous. The unfortunate one-minute incident, captured on his iPhone, has now



been watched over 40 million times (on Twitter/X alone). The conflict illustrated what Cooper refers to as “the second oldest story in the Ramble,” a dense portion of Central Park famous since the ’30s as a gay cruising site. Aside from hook-ups, for years a never-ending battle has played out between rule-breaking dog owners and the birdwatching community. Birders often find their activities disrupted by free-roaming dogs in areas of the park where

leashing is mandatory. Years of frustration from ruined birdwatching sessions have led to some of them — Cooper included — occasionally adopting a pre-planned strategy: a two-part protocol that involves carrying dog treats to lure unleashed dogs, aiming to initiate a discussion with their owners. If the conversation results in leashing, the interaction ends. If not, birders take a second step: filming the offender until they comply.

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The backdrop to this notorious entanglement was the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in the United States. In that period, Americans were frustrated and scared. With normal life shut down, attention was overwhelmingly focused on the media. It is in this climate that Cooper shared his recording, first privately on his Facebook page, which he regularly used to share that morning’s sightings with his fellow birders. Once his sister saw the footage, she asked his permission to make it public on her Twitter account, and he allowed her to do so. The response was explosive. The footage gave tangible form to conversations that had been in the ether for some time. The clip showcased the unfortunate psychology of Amy Cooper, a white Canadian woman who worked in New York as a portfolio manager at an investment firm and who, in a strange twist of fate, shares the same last name as Christian. When the Coopers collided in the Ramble, Christian firmly asked Amy to adhere to park rules and leash her dog. Feeling threatened by his request, she made a series of grotesque decisions including taking off her Covid mask and lifting her dog in the air by the collar, strangling him until he yelped. The encounter culminated in Amy threatening to call the police and frantically shouting a now infamous line, “I’m going to tell them there’s an African-American man threatening my life,” before calling 911. Her jaw-dropping performance perfectly illustrated the concept of “the Karen” — an entitled, middle-aged white woman who leverages her class and race privilege to demand her own way.

For white America, the incident spotlighted what Black America already implicitly understood: it doesn’t take much for race to be weaponised. Coincidentally, on the exact same day, another video hit the mainstream that compounded their combined impact. By the end of the day, most of the country had also watched a murder — the horrific footage of a cop kneeling on George Floyd’s neck until he took his last breath. Together, the two videos offered

a bleak yin-and-yang view of American race relations, pervasive everyday racial privilege and its most extreme consequences. Since they were downloaded into our consciousness, the two films have been picked apart, examined and studied by news sources, academic institutions and activist organisations. Together, they became the starting point for a national discussion, prompting many Americans to re-examine their own relationship to race, power and privilege.

After the event the city’s district attorney was pushing Christian to press charges against Amy for her false accusations, but he declined. “We all have crappy moments. God forbid we should have them captured on video...” In the fallout from her actions, Amy Cooper had lost her job, had lost her dog, and had fled back to her homeland, Canada. Christian didn’t feel that adding to these already severe consequences with jail time was appropriate. It’s a decision that he still stands by but concedes was difficult. “The one thing that was painful for me was that so many Black people felt betrayed that I didn’t want to be involved in going after her. People in my own family were pissed off,” he says. “My life is and will never be about her, and more importantly, I’m interested in something bigger. It’s not about her. It’s about what she revealed about the state of racism in the United States.”

All this could have easily left Christian Cooper a footnote in contemporary culture, but in the media tidal wave that followed, we came to understand a complex and intriguing man who, in the face of attempted racial dehumanisation, handled himself with impressive, cool-headed calm. The liberal media has delighted in Cooper’s profile: Harvard-educated, gay, Black and, as the public was intrigued to learn, a former editor at Marvel Comics. These facts were regularly mentioned but rarely had the space to be fully unpacked. How did being a member of these distinct communities — birders, comic book fans and queer men — inform each other?

“Happily, it all worked together the day of the incident,” Cooper says. “I grew up a gay nerd who was completely into Star Trek. My hero from a very young age was Mr. Spock [the beloved half-human/half-Vulcan science fiction character who leads his crew as commanding officer of his starship]. He’s all about intellect and total emotional control because he had that pesky human side that he had to keep under lock and key in order to get through life. Well, if I was going to survive back then, I had to have that gay stuff completely under

lock and key. So, I very much identified with Mr. Spock, and to this day, I do not trust emotions. I believe in acting rationally. I make decisions based on knowledge and science and what makes sense. In that moment when she was spiralling out of control and I felt my blood pressure rising, I defaulted to my secure position, which is to go back to Spock. It doesn't always

“I grew up a gay nerd who was completely into Star Trek.”

happen. None of us are perfect. Plenty of times I've lost my cool or whatever, but happily not at that moment.” Alongside the trauma of that day came opportunities. The man who grew up in the lonely centre of a Venn diagram, at the intersection of being queer, Black, comic-book-loving, and bird-obsessed, has been able to bring his interests, passion, politics and skills together for a mainstream audience. For most birders, their passion remains a hobby. Cooper is now one of a lucky few who have managed to turn it into a career. Rather than skirt around the context of his new-found fame, he approaches it with refreshing candiness. “There is no denying that this experience opened up doors for me and I walked through them quite happily,” he says.

Skip ahead four years past the incident and I have the pleasure of joining Cooper in the middle of what is one of the most phenomenal weeks of his life. We first meet in mid-June at a time when his New York Times best-selling memoir, ‘Better Living Through Birding: Notes from a Black Man in the Natural World’, just went to paperback. He also recently appeared as a guest on ‘Democracy Now’, interviewed about his role in the campaign to rename the National Audubon Society (a non-profit organisation founded in 1905 and dedicated to the conservation of birds and their habitats) as well as the broader campaign to restore the bird population in North America. Then there was perhaps the most unlikely outcome of his unique trajectory: Cooper had just won a Daytime Emmy for hosting his National Geographic show, ‘Extraordinary Birder’. On the small screen, Cooper is dynamic and passionate, like a comic book hero. He gives off Clark Kent energy and it's easy to imagine him as a professor by day who at night fights the evil forces of climate change and pollution to rescue

endangered species. Watching just a few minutes of him in action, it's easy to understand why he took home the Emmy. Accepting the award on national television, wearing an extremely form-fitted traditional tuxedo in a room packed with celebrities, he described the full distance he has come: “This is an unexpected journey from being a closeted queer kid in the 1970s and a Black kid in the almost all-white field of birding, which makes this all the more thrilling. And I just have to say, the world has changed, happily, and no matter what anybody says or does, we are not going back!”

I find Cooper at the very top of Central Park. His publicist arranged our outing. I imagine he must be the first birder in history to have a publicist. Coincidentally, he and I are twins, wearing the exact same shade of burgundy T-shirt, navy pants and small circular glasses. As I arrive, he is talking with two white-haired ladies in their late sixties. With their familiarity with one another, it's clear that they are members of his birder community. I catch some of their spring-migration shop talk. “Just incredible!” one of the women exclaims. “Did you catch those yellow-throated warblers?” I meet him that day mostly to pick up three comics that define pivotal moments in his career. He tells me not to lose them, noting that his storage was flooded during Hurricane Sandy. He's trusting me with the only ones he owns.

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Cooper grew up in a Long Island suburb that was informally racially segregated but diverse. His mother was born in Trinidad to Guyanese parents before moving to America, where she met his father, a science teacher, who sparked his son's interest in nature at an early age. Cooper says that he knew he was gay when he was five, and he started birdwatching at ten. As a kid, he installed a feeder in his yard and became curious about the birds that were coming. A crow-like bird with a red patch on its wing captured his imagination. “I thought I'd discovered a new species, but later I found out it was a red-winged blackbird.” Together, comics and birding were his escapes from being an isolated gay boy. “Being in the closet from the age of five until 17 felt like being buried alive. I knew I was there, but nobody else knew. I'm buried in a coffin, six feet underground, pounding on the lid, begging to be let out before I suffocate, and nobody can hear me. That's what it felt like. That's why I'm now generally a happy person, because that experience was such a

→ Chris's recent book, ‘Better Living Through Birding’, has a number of useful tips for spotting our feathered friends. For example: the quickest way to spot a rare bird is to look for a large group of fellow birders! Here and on the previous page, he is wearing a Uniqlo T-shirt under a vest and jacket, both by Stone Island.





“I lean toward a more macho aesthetic.

I work out relentlessly.”



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Despite its success at the Emmy’s, Chris’s brilliant television show, ‘Extraordinary Birder’, hasn’t been renewed by for a second season. Boooo! T-shirt and jacket, both by Arket, with a V-neck vest by Margaret Howell, chinos by Canali and an Omega watch.

living hell that now I’m, like, well, whatever happens, I’m good.” Cooper excelled at high school academics and went off to Harvard to study political science. At school, he continued to make birding a priority. He recounts a symbolic moment from his freshman year when birding led him to a public cemetery. On a cloudy, ominous day, he came across “a tombstone, shaped like a chair, and written on it is ‘C Cooper’ with no dates, and I’m like, fuck me, I’m out of here.” Shortly after encountering this spooky visual manifestation of his anxieties, he successfully came out, first to his classmates (who were supportive) and then to his parents, who were only mildly upset. His father asked one question only: “Do you need to talk to someone about it?” His mother responded with the classic, “Why do you have to label yourself?” His family was almost more disappointed when he left his first job as a copy editor at celebrity entertainment magazine ‘Fame’ to join the comic book industry.

In 1990, Cooper’s teenage dream came true.

Through a chance gym friendship with Kelly Corvese, Marvel Comics’ first openly gay editor, he secured a position as an assistant editor at the publishing house. Growing up, Cooper had always identified with the X-Men series. He felt the storyline echoed his own experience and the unique trajectory of queer kids. “Here’s someone who looks like everybody else, but they have a deep, dark secret that manifests in adolescence,” Cooper explains. “It’s, like, okay, that’s what we gay people go through, embracing your specialness and making your specialness your strength and your power. It’s such an important lesson for queer people. X-Men has always been a parable about discrimination and inclusion.” He knew from his own adolescence that it wasn’t just straight nerds pining over their favourite heroes. After a few years of working his way up the comic publishing ladder, one of his first transgressive contributions to the genre was adding male characters to Marvel’s annual swimsuit issue, a controversial move that was met with limited fanfare.

Once he was more established in his career, Cooper felt it was high time to introduce queer human characters into his comic book universe. In 1992 he created Marvel’s first lesbian lead character, Victoria Montesi, in his series ‘Darkhold: Pages from the Book of Sins’. Yet his biggest breakthrough came in 1996 with ‘Star Trek: Starfleet Academy’. Longtime fans of the franchise were stunned to meet Cooper’s creation Yoshi Mishima, a gay cadet who is discriminated against by his

reptiloid alien roommate. His writing included lines that were then shocking: “It may be taboo in your culture, Halakith... but human sexuality is more fluid.” This comic garnered Cooper’s first media attention, making national news. Given Star Trek’s utopian values, Cooper found the 50/50 response from its fanbase disappointing, but he is still proud he gave them a needed push. “With Star Trek, it was deliberate. I was, like, this is ridiculous that all these stories are set in the far-flung future and they’re acting like queer people won’t be there. So, I was, like, okay, I’m going to fix that. It took a little bit of wrangling with Paramount — they owned Star Trek and had to approve everything we did — but yeah, we got to do it, and that was fabulous.” In 1999, this comic was nominated for a GLAAD Media Award. Chris went on to continue this trajectory with his online comic, a superhero soap opera titled ‘Queer Nation’.

Eventually, Cooper’s fantasy career came to an end. Layoffs at Marvel pushed him to a much more boring but much better-paying career in editing pharmaceutical advertising. The comfortable corporate job tolerated the quirky seasonal scheduling demands of an obsessed birder, who at that point had expanded his practice to running a weekly public-school programme. Cooper stayed in this role for 20 years, leaving in 2022 when he received his advance from Random House for his memoir. That same year, he also made his return to comic books, partnering with his former competitor, DC Comics, to write ‘REPRESENT!’, a fictionalised account of the Central Park incident and other experiences of growing up Black in America. The comic depicts Cooper as a suburban birdwatching teen with magic binoculars that continuously show him historic accounts of racial injustice, honouring Amadou Diallo, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd.

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On a sunny morning the week after we first meet, I join Cooper for breakfast at Veselka, the legendary East Village Ukrainian restaurant. Considering his youthful appearance, it’s hard to believe that he has just celebrated his 61st birthday. He joins me after his daily hour-and-a-half workout; today his focus was legs. I’m mesmerised equally by his stunning smile and his signature tight-fitting dad outfit. Today it’s a plaid short-sleeved shirt and khaki shorts.

With the same energy that defines him as a TV host, Cooper insists that I try his breakfast pierogis. He clearly thrives on sharing

his passions. In conversation, he answers politely, somewhat reserved. Our small talk never quite hits a stride until the topic shifts to birds and information starts to flow with comfort and ease. For Cooper, birds are the easiest gateway into a wider fascination with nature. “There’s no place you can go where you won’t find birds,” he says. “Just like us, their primary senses are sight and sound. They communicate the same way we do. They make incredible sounds. They’ve got gorgeous feathers and incredible patterns and colours. Birds just hit that sweet spot: we can relate to them and appreciate them everywhere. Plus, they’re dinosaurs, so they’re cool.”

If he had to pick one bird that he relates to the most, it would be the Blackburnian warbler, a small bird with bright plumage (“very colourful, very dynamic, very high energy; I think of them as butterflies with personality”), while if he could be reincarnated as any bird he would most like to come back as a golden eagle. “Masters of the air, apex predators,” he says. “And in ancient history, they are always associated with kings. They’re the definition of majestic.” The only time our conversation has a slight blip is when I foolishly ask him if he would ever own a bird. Cooper’s friendly tone temporarily freezes. “Would you blind Picasso? Would you cut off his arms?” he replies in a cold deadpan.

Just then, an older woman points him out to what seems to be her husband. The excitable, string bean of a man makes a beeline up to our table. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but I saw you on ‘Democracy Now’ yesterday, and I just want to say your whole perspective is excellent. You’re so balanced, so sympathetic to that woman who mistreated you, and this whole thing about birding and how birds are free. I just enjoyed it all very much. Congratulations on all your success,” he says in a fatherly tone. Cooper smiles his signature Hollywood smile, “Thank you very much.” The man notices his paperback memoir on our table. “I’ll definitely pick that up!”

I ask Cooper if he collaborated with a ghostwriter on his bestseller and he shakes his head aggressively. “No! I wrote a hundred per cent of it myself. It’s interesting how much of my comic book skills I used to create this memoir. I had never even read a memoir; it’s my least favourite genre of book. So I found other ways to tell the story, like in one passage I start off by describing the racial history of the park.” He points out a line for me to read: “Into this woeful history, tangled like poison ivy through the beauty of the park, a cocker spaniel named Henry rushed off his leash...”

“When I sent it to the editor, I got a note back on that line saying, ‘Damn, that’s good.’” The memoir’s incredible success was key in securing his host position with National Geographic, which is a position that seems tailor-made for Cooper. In each episode of ‘Extraordinary Birder’, he thrives, indulging in extreme birding. In Hawaii, he hikes through volcanic terrain and gets access to the Forest Reserves (which are generally closed). In Puerto Rico, he’s invited to peer at the testicles of an endangered parrot. In New York City, he’s allowed to scale the top of the George Washington Bridge to visit a peregrine falcon’s nest, checking in with a mother and her chicks. “Climbing up the bridge felt like being in Fritz Lang’s film ‘Metropolis,’” he says. “You look down, and hundreds of feet below you is the Hudson. You look up, and you hear her. She’s zooming around the superstructure, and the whole bridge is amplifying her voice. She’s pissed because you are near her nest. You realise you’re in her territory. This is where she has mastery. She moves around here the way we walk down the street. And you’re seeing things from her perspective, that dizzying look-down at the river. That moment was awe-inspiring.”

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Breakfast concludes, and it’s time to move on to the more important portion of the morning: birdwatching in Tompkins Square Park a few blocks from his East Village apartment. While walking to the park, he explains that now that his show has concluded, his next project is a children’s book honouring the notable owls of his hometown. (In NYC, even birds can become famous.) He mentions Flaco, the tragic Eurasian eagle-owl, an icon of freedom and resilience who emancipated himself from the Central Park Zoo and lived freely in the Manhattan skyline for over a year, only to collide into a building after ingesting rat poison last March. In his death, Flaco became so well known that even Saturday Night Live acknowledged his passing in a parody, interviewing his widow. “Flaco was great. He got a lot of people interested in birds who normally didn’t pay attention to them,” says Cooper. “I think he may be even more powerful in death, highlighting the problem of rodenticide so that we can maybe get some legislation passed that does something about it.”

Alongside education around biodiversity loss, Cooper is now using his platform to push the important matter of renaming the National Audubon Society, which is named after John James Audubon, the French

(Photographic assistance by Craig Hunter. Styling assistance by Michael Tong. Grooming by Adam Markarian at Streeters. Grooming assistance by Min Hong.)

American naturalist and artist whose vast contributions to ornithology are complicated by his links to slavery. Cooper, who has sat on the board of the New York City chapter of the organisation for the last eight years, has made the point that anchoring this crucial non-profit to the history of one conflicted man is damaging. While the national organisation recently voted to keep his name, there have been other smaller victories to celebrate. New York’s regional chapter recently became the NYC Bird Alliance; the San Francisco chapter has recently become the Golden Gate Bird Alliance. Chicago is on track to follow suit. Cooper sees this is as an important step in creating a broader and more inclusive perception of birding that will in turn have impacts on conservation. “Anybody that is progressively minded realises that birding has been nearly an all-white activity since it began,” he explains. “We need to bring new people in to make sure everyone feels welcome. Because the demographics of the nation are changing. It’s not just white folks anymore. If birding remains perceived as an activity only white people do, then we’re done. There will be no constituency anymore for the protection of the birds!”

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We reach the park and make a beeline towards a stand of trees where Cooper wants to show me a family of red-tailed hawks who recently had chicks. As we get near, he stops to chat with a woman wearing a T-shirt that says, “Save the Earth for Owl of Us.” She and Cooper have a comforting, familiar rapport that suggests decades of kinship. He introduces her as Loyan Beausoleil, a friend, neighbour and fellow birder. I ask her what she thinks of her friend’s recent rise to fame and she takes a moment to consider. “This terrible thing happened to Chris, with this woman that was so threatening to him,” she says. “I’m actually really happy about how it catapulted him to this place where he has such a big voice. I can’t think of a better person to speak publicly on behalf of birders, queer people, Black people and urban people. I believe that Chris was made for the world stage, and I’m honoured to know him.”

Cooper thinks he spots the hawks and lends me his powerful binoculars. He has a fatherly manner mixed with his signature enthusiasm and I sense a new excitement, which I imagine must come from the potential of converting an average civilian into a birder. His energy is contagious. He points the binoculars in the direction of our target. I finally see them: large, white and brown birds with short, tightly curled beaks; their faces look wise and stoic.

It’s somewhat of a revelation that these elegant, rare creatures live among us in this dense urban space. Their presence recalibrates my view of the city. Here, amongst these now very expensive tenement buildings filled with very busy people striving for their own version of success, this regal family of hawks relaxes at the top of the elm trees. I’m lost in the beauty of the moment, pondering the human need for control and how it plays out in our built environment. No matter how much we want to believe they are separate; nature and the city will always be one.

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At the Eagle, just over a week later, our second round of drinks has made us more relaxed with each other. The crowd has filled in, encircling us. The rooftop has hit absolute capacity, and we are surrounded by conceivably every type of gay man. A troupe of butch twinks in half tops and booty shorts mill around, a nearby muscle grandpa wearing a tiny leather vest with a protruding beer gut is smoking a cigar and chatting with a bunch of his peers, also decked out in fetish gear. To our right is a handful of handsome jocks in their mid-thirties who look like they came directly from the beach.

Cooper leans in. “I love watching the crowd here,” he says. He enjoys seeing the diversity of body types, ages and attitudes, what people wear and how they carry themselves. I nod in agreement. I love watching the wildlife through his eyes, too.

BY THE WAY
— Christian is a lifelong activist. He was brought up attending civil rights marches in Long Island with his mother and father, who would push him around in a stroller, and he has a proud rap sheet from various peaceful protests in New York over the years.