Drew Lanham:

The caged doors, any that I had caged myself in, were flung open. There's nothing like it when someone says, you know, be you, do you. And then you're like, wait, really?

Dr. Rae Wynn-Grant:

I'm talking to Drew Lanham in his home office in South Carolina. It's raining, and we can hear the rain falling on this tin roof. Recently, Drew won the prestigious MacArthur Genius Grant. It's $800,000 paid out over five years with no strings attached. It's only given to highly creative people to help them with their future creative work in anything like art, music, literature, math, or even science.

The foundation just selects you because you're a rockstar. Some of the past winners include Cormac McCarthy, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Lin Manuel Miranda, and even NK Jemisin. And like everyone on that list, Drew is a creative powerhouse. And his primary area of expertise is birds.

Drew Lanham:

Just this very sweet lilting song.

Dr. Rae Wynn-Grant:

Drew is an ornithologist, and his love for birds led him down a path to get his doctorate, do research, write a memoir, write poetry, teach, and on and on. But what's hard to believe about this award-winning scientist is that he almost didn't study birds at all.

Drew Lanham:

Part of my story has been one of living life not necessarily for myself, but oftentimes for others. Here I was a black kid, good at math and science. The algorithm was, if black and good at math and science, then engineer. I felt choiceless. I felt trapped. I had really dark thoughts at times about my life. And so I have always been appreciative of chickens because it was a bird that saved my life.

Dr. Rae Wynn-Grant:

I'm Dr. Rae Wynn-Grant, and this is a different kind of nature show, a podcast all about the human drama of saving animals.

This season I want to share my story, but I also want to introduce you to the other amazing wildlife scientists out there. Some of my friends who study hyenas work with lizards and even track sharks. The animals we study are great, but who we are as people, and how that affects our work, is just as interesting. And we're going to talk all about it. This is *Going Wild*.

As the rain falls in South Carolina, Drew tells me all about how his job as an ornithologist is to save birds. He wants to understand why they're declining, and try and stop that decline. And the whole story begins when Drew was a little boy.

Drew Lanham:

It starts in Edgefield, South Carolina, on a family farm land that had been in my family probably since the early 1900s.

Dr. Rae Wynn-Grant:

Drew grew up on a couple hundred acres full of forests, fields, creeks, and springs. And he was surrounded by wildlife like foxes, field mice, hawks, and wrens. Now if you know me, I was raised as a city girl, so I saw pigeons and heard construction noises. But Drew heard prairie warblers and drank water from the spring. And some of the little things that I took for granted in the city like fast food, well, Drew had a different experience.

Drew Lanham:

If we wanted french fries what would happen was, my sister and I would go to the garden and we would dig some potatoes right out of the ground. Wash them, scrub them, peel them, and then she'd slice them and fry them in a cast iron pan on the stove. And that's a process of what, maybe, I don't know, an hour? That was fast food.

Magically, soil and sun and water have turned those potato slips, as we call them, into potatoes. And it was like magic, but it was magic that you could explain. And then it was magic you could eat. Occasionally my father would kill a rabbit, and we knew that our meat had lived. Most of the fish we ate came out of the creek. So our catch and release was always in a pan of hot grease.

Dr. Rae Wynn-Grant:

Growing up on his family's land, Drew was just a boy free to be himself. And of all the things on his land, it was birds that truly captured his heart.

Drew Lanham:

I was in love with songbirds and soaring hawks.

I can remember when I would be in the backseat of our parents' car driving along, my sister, Julia, showed me how to take a mirror when we were sitting by the window. And you could take that mirror and angle it so that as you drove, all you would see was sky and the trees. And it was like flying.

As a kid, I wanted to fly. I was obsessed with flight. I mean, I've always loved aircraft, and would put together model airplanes all the time. And studied aircraft, and pilots, and pretended to fly planes around the house. So birds could do that without mirrors or tricks. They could just pick themselves up at a whim and fly.

Dr. Rae Wynn-Grant:

Drew's parents were scientists. He would go through the encyclopedias on their shelf and learn about all different types of birds. He loved watching birds, and listening to birds, and learning about birds. So it makes sense that Drew thought about studying zoology or ornithology for school. But his parents had other plans for him.

Drew Lanham:

And one of the things that my grandmother instilled in me from earliest youth was to obey my mother and my father. I mean, biblically, that's supposed to mean a longer life.

Dr. Rae Wynn-Grant:

At that time, there was a growing emphasis in education on STEM, which stands for science, technology, engineering, and math. And Drew's parents saw an opportunity for him there, so they pushed him to be an engineer. And his grandmother had taught him, he obeyed. And ended up going to a couple of engineering camps in high school.

Drew Lanham:

You got to drop eggs off of buildings and build bridges. I mean, that very sexy part of engineering where you're designing stuff and building it, and you're testing it.

Dr. Rae Wynn-Grant:

Drew even got a paid engineering internship while in high school.

Drew Lanham:

And the money was good, but then it wasn't what was at my heart. It was, again, what others had sort of set forth for me in this sort of expectation. And here I was, a black kid good at math and science. The algorithm was, if black and good at math and science, then engineer.

Dr. Rae Wynn-Grant:

And then there was yet another turning point in Drew's path that pushed him further away from birds. Drew learned he was in the running for the prestigious DuPont Scholarship Award, a scholarship that would give him a full ride to any program in the US as long as he studied engineering.

Drew Lanham:

And on top of it, it guaranteed employment with the DuPont Corporation beyond that. So when you're presented with that kind of thing, that kind of offer, it's one of those things that you can't refuse. Or at least, that's what everybody tells you. I was hoping, I probably prayed that I wouldn't get it because I did not want to be an engineer. I could not see myself as an engineer.

Dr. Rae Wynn-Grant:

Drew got the scholarship. It was an amazing opportunity, but for something he had no interest in.

Drew Lanham:

And I made sort of a last minute decision on Clemson University. And so I was in engineering for three and a half years. And I was doing okay, but just getting by. But I wasn't dropping eggs off of buildings, and I wasn't building bridges. It was doing this really important, but now to me kind of really against my principle of thinking. I was working at a nuclear weapons facility.

Dr. Rae Wynn-Grant:

This engineering path Drew was on was so far from studying birds. And he had well-meaning people in his life telling him that once he was successful, he could still study birds on the side. But drew wanted birds at the center.

Drew Lanham:

And so every day I would go in. I would look, I have this big calendar, and I would mark the day off. I couldn't wait to mark an X through every day. And every year I would beg my scholarship sponsors, and beg is the proper word, to allow me to change my major to something that was closer to what I loved. Biomechanical engineer, something else. And every year they refused. And so I felt increasingly cornered, increasingly resentful, and increasingly like my life was not in my own hands.

Dr. Rae Wynn-Grant:

And on top of all of that, right before he got the scholarship, Drew's father passed away. It was a difficult time for him and his family, and it felt impossible for Drew to choose a path that would ultimately let his parents down.

Drew Lanham:

After my father died, I took to wearing this pair of shoes that he had worn. Literally. I stepped into this pair of lace-up oxfords that my father had worn the day he died. One of his favorite pair of shoes. And I wore those shoes for three years.

I took this role of people pleaser, and trying to fill the shoes of this person who I greatly admired. And so I had to outgrow those shoes, both literally and figuratively, to really begin to follow my heart.

Dr. Rae Wynn-Grant:

And one day something happened, where Drew realized he couldn't deny his heart any longer. He went home, back to the Lanham land where he grew up on. Back to his father's land.

Drew Lanham:

I wasn't well mentally at the time, either. In and out of depression, and really dark thoughts at times about my life.

Dr. Rae Wynn-Grant:

Drew's father had died without a will, and the land was divided amongst his father's siblings. Much of it had been clear cut for timber, and in some ways it was destroyed. But while Drew was there, walking in that once-familiar land where he used to roam wild and free, he heard something.

Drew Lanham:

And there was this one bird, this prairie warbler. Little yellow bird with black markings. But this little bird, three and a half, four inch long bird, was singing from a sapling in the middle of this clear cut where the land had been ravaged.

And I remember hearing that bird sing. I remember stopping as I was leaving and this bird was singing, and it lit a different fire in me. I knew that I had to find my way back to that bird and to other birds.

Dr. Rae Wynn-Grant:

To hear just how Drew made his way back to birds with the help of a chicken, stay tuned after the break.

After that moment back on his family's land, being captivated by the prairie warbler, Drew had a new sense of clarity. He decided engineering was not for him. He went back to Clemson and immediately quit his major. He was not going to be an engineer.

Drew Lanham:

I lost the scholarship immediately.

Dr. Rae Wynn-Grant:

Drew didn't have the money to pay for school, so he made a desperate last ditch attempt to be with the birds.

Drew Lanham:

I knew that if I went into the military, they would pay for school. And so I went to the recruiter's office. And at the time, there was this movie called *Top Gun*. And I thought, oh, well, I'll be a fighter pilot. I'll fly off the decks of aircraft carriers, and that way I'll fly and I'll escape some of this.

And yeah, that would've been a choice that I made. But then suddenly I'm having to follow someone else's orders as work.

Dr. Rae Wynn-Grant:

But here's where another bird came in and saved Drew. He was one day away, one day away from signing his commitment to the military, when he walked out to his mailbox and there waiting for him was a letter.

Drew Lanham:

A letter that I almost tossed. It was from Amick Farms. And I remember opening this letter and reading it, and it was a scholarship from a chicken producer. And this scholarship originally was supposed to go to someone from a particular county who was majoring in poultry science. Well, if that person didn't exist, then there was this whole litany of people then that it could go to. My position was probably seventh or eighth on this list. This scholarship fell to me. And so I have always been appreciative of chickens in this way because it was a bird that saved my life.

If not for that scholarship, I would not have had the money to pursue my passion. Yeah, maybe I would've taken out student loans. That probably would've been the thing. But my mother had to cosign for the one semester I had, and I hated asking for her help. So when they took that scholarship like they did from me, it was really motivation. And quite frankly, it's been motivation to this day.

When I'm successful at something in some ways, yeah, people had a certain kind of faith in me, I guess, that I could be an engineer. But they also turned a deaf ear to who it was that I wanted to be. So that's a chip. I don't think I carry very many chips on my shoulder, but that's one of the chips. That there were lots of people who just thought they knew better for me than I knew for myself. No one asked me how I saw myself at the time. And not that others didn't want good for me, but their good wasn't my good.

Dr. Rae Wynn-Grant:

For Drew, this poultry scholarship freed him up to follow his heart. He studied Ornithology, got his doctorate. He taught, he did all sorts of research to save birds and understand their habitats and migration patterns. And he started to realize that he was free, not just to study birds, but to do whatever his heart desired. So he began to write poems, articles, even a memoir.

Drew Lanham:

I think it's important for writers to declare why they write. And so I wrote this essay about why I write. And one of the things that I say in it is that as I talk about birds, is I don't just write about birds, but I write for birds and I write to birds, that I have to also write about the context in which we all live.

Dr. Rae Wynn-Grant:

So in 2013, Drew wrote an article for Orion Magazine.

Drew Lanham:

Nine Rules for the Black Bird Watcher.

Number one, be prepared to be confused with the other black birder.

Number two, carry your binoculars and three forms of identification at all times.

Number five, black birds. Any black birds are your birds.

You'll need the photo ID to convince the cops, FBI, homeland security and the flashlight-toting security guard that you're not a terrorist or escaped convict.

Crows and their kin are among the smartest things with feathers and wings. They're largely ignored because of their ubiquity, and often persecuted because of stereotype and misunderstanding. Hm, sounds like profiling to me.

Dr. Rae Wynn-Grant:

In 2020, seven years after he wrote that article, his writing career got a huge boost because the article went viral. It was the most popular article for Orion that year. Drew was on the radio, on television, and he realized he didn't need to write on the side anymore. Writing became a core part of his work. He wrote other articles, like The Nine New Revelations for the Black American Bird Watcher.

Drew Lanham:

Revelation number one, hooded warblers are lucky. They can wear hoodies and no one asks questions or feels threatened.

Revelation number two, no one denies the eye bending beauty of a painted bunting by saying, I don't see color.

Revelation number four, why are some immigrants accepted and others not? Just asking for a European starling.

Dr. Rae Wynn-Grant:

And now Drew has yet another reason to believe that he chose the right path. This time, it isn't a poultry scholarship or a viral article, but the MacArthur Genius Grant. $800,000 to use however he pleases. He doesn't have to join the military or make nuclear weapons. He doesn't have to follow anyone else's orders. He only has to follow his heart, which will always lead him back to his love for birds.

And whether it's creating art, watching birds, collaborating on conservation work, no matter what he chooses to do, Drew says that being supported is a powerful feeling.

Drew Lanham:

Discovering this wide open space again, of desire and discovery and others who would support me in it. There's nothing like that. There's nothing like it when someone says, you know, be you. Do you.

Dr. Rae Wynn-Grant:

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