

On Birding: Music of birds is his expert passion

Don Kroodsma, the 'reigning authority on avian vocal behavior,' takes a cross-country bicycle trip to record and analyze birdsong.

<http://www.pressherald.com/2016/06/12/on-birding-music-of-birds-is-his-expert-passion/>

By Herb Wilson

The first half of June is the best time of the year for birdsong in Maine. Male songbirds sing insistently, hoping to win the favor of an available female. Males also sing to ward off marauding males from their territories.

Our sophistication in listening to birdsong and our enjoyment have been greatly facilitated by the writings of Don Kroodsma. An emeritus professor at the University of Massachusetts, Kroodsma has been studying bird vocalizations for over 40 years. In 2003, the American Ornithologists Union hailed him as “the reigning authority on the biology of avian vocal behavior.”

Kroodsma has an insatiable curiosity about bird vocalizations and also a deep passion for his subject. He certainly shares Shakespeare’s observation that “the earth has music for those who listen.” Kroodsma’s curiosity, scientific rigor and passion are all on display in his popular books.

In 2005, Kroodsma’s “The Singing Life of Birds” appeared to great acclaim. In easily accessible language, Kroodsma takes the reader through many aspects of bird vocal behavior, including song learning, dialects, the functions of song and singing by females. The book provides thorough training in the interpretation of bird songs.

In this book, Kroodsma provides sonograms for many vocalizations. These graphics show the duration of individual notes and their rise or fall in pitch. He argues that hearing by seeing is a powerful tool.

The latest book by Kroodsma has just appeared and it is wonderful as well. The book is titled “Listening to a Continent Sing: Birdsong by Bicycle from the Atlantic to the Pacific). The book is an account of a 70-day cross-country bike excursion he made with his son David in 2003. Kroodsma was 56 at the time and David was 24. The book is an engaging mix of travelogue and natural history, with a little bit of geology and anthropology mixed in.

Most cross-country cyclists travel from the West Coast to the East to take advantage of prevailing westerly winds to aid their journey. Many cyclists prefer to ride in the afternoon when those winds are stronger and the sun is behind them. Our duo, however, decided to ride in the opposite direction despite frequent headwinds. The purpose of the trip was to hear the songs of the breeding birds. The breeding season arrives late in the Cascades and Rockies. An eastward

trip meant they would miss most of the breeding season east of the Mississippi because they would need to be in the Rockies no earlier than mid-June.

As you can imagine, Kroodsma's early-morning trips were slow-paced with frequent stops to listen intently and record. Kroodsma's focus was on sound. He had a small pair of binoculars with him but they were rarely used. He and David heard hundreds of Eastern wood-pewees and Western wood-pewees but did not see one, by serendipity, until they got to Oregon.

We travel along with the Kroodsma's on an extended field trip, never sure of what we will hear. When Kroodsma does stop to listen, he describes amazing detail and variety in songs that most of us fail to hear. But we can listen to those same songs and understand the detail Kroodsma discerns.

In the margins of the book, you will find QR codes (those two-dimensional bar codes). Downloading a free QR Reader onto your smartphone, iPod or tablet allows you to quickly play each vocalization that Kroodsma analyzes. With over 371 recordings, many of which are several minutes long, you can be in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, the prairie of Kansas or in Yellowstone National Park. If you don't have a QR reader, you can visit ListeningToAContinentSing.com to hear the recordings.

This book provides a delightful, vicarious ride across our country. We stop frequently to appreciate the music of the birds.

Herb Wilson teaches ornithology and other biology courses at Colby College. He welcomes comments and questions at:

whwilson@colby.edu