

KIRKUS REVIEW

LISTENING TO A CONTINENT SING

Birdsong by Bicycle from the Atlantic to the Pacific

by [Donald Kroodsma](#)

A celebrated ornithologist chronicles his 10-week, cross-country cycling/birding trip with his 24-year-old son.

Most nights, Kroodsma (Emeritus, Ornithology/Univ. of Massachusetts, Amherst; *Birdsong by the Seasons: A Year of Listening to Birds*, 2009, etc.) and David camped out, rising before dawn to record the bird chorus that greeted them each morning. The author, then 56, describes them as pioneers, and their focus was bird songs and calls, which provide “a window into their minds.” Although his 35-year scientific career had focused on songbirds, this trip was a first. “No one before [had] experienced the continent,” as they would. Traveling from Yorktown, Virginia, to Newport, Oregon, father and son enjoyed the peaceful countryside, took pleasure in meeting friendly local people and fellow cyclers along the way, and inspected the historic Civil War battle sites they passed through on their 10-state journey. Despite the strains and sprains of the unaccustomed physical exertion—particularly for the author—they averaged 100 miles or more each day, and they toughened up physically as they went along. Kroodsma evokes the profound pleasure of rising before dawn to listen to the morning songs of the birds and ending the day with their evening choruses. As the pair travel through different parts of the country, the author explains the subtle differences between songbirds of the same species. His special scientific interest is how these relate to the ways in which different species master their special repertoire—e.g. songs passed on genetically, learned from their fathers, or picked up from neighboring birds. Kroodsma’s verbal descriptions of the bird songs and their calls accompany the text, but they are also available as online recordings.

An informative exploration of the subtleties of bird songs, which experienced birders will appreciate, and a helpful guide for newbies but likely of less interest to general readers.