

Book review: Listening to a Continent Sing by Don Kroodsma

Listening to a Continent Sing. Birdsong by Bicycle from the Atlantic to the Pacific

[Donald Kroodsma](#)

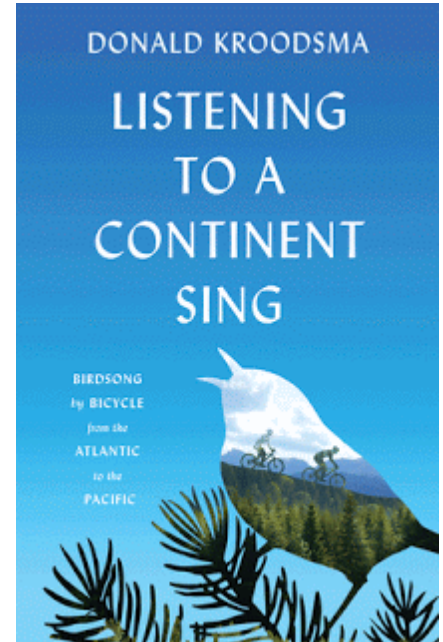
Princeton University Press | 2016

336 pp. | 16 x 24 cm | 125 line illustrations

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[Listening to a Continent Sing](#) documents a ten-week cycle trip made by Don Kroodsma and his son David across the USA from the Atlantic to the Pacific – east to west against the wind in order to best take advantage of the advancing season – “*lingering and listening to our continent sing as no one has before*”. A taste of the coast-to-coast journey, made during the summer of 2003, can be found in the NPR clip [Searching Out 'The Singing Life of Birds'](#), recorded a couple of years after the trip. The author's pure joy, his sense of wonder and curiosity, combined with scientific rigour, so evident in Elizabeth Arnold's interview, are qualities that infuse the resulting book. The text takes the form of a travelogue, but it is more immediately an exploration of rural back routes, a celebration of nature, and a wonderful appreciation of bird song. As a travel diary, it is an easy and entertaining read. But for those who want to take the subject further the book serves as an introduction to learning bird song: the QR codes sprinkled throughout link to 381 recordings that really bring the trip to life and are a great way for the reader to gain familiarity with some of North America's finest songsters. This and much more material is provided on the author's [Listening to a Continent Sing companion website](#). A handful of recordings make up an audio archive documenting some of the characters that the cyclists met *en route* and their relationship with birds: family store owner [Charles Haupt](#) on his Purple Martins in Charles City, Virginia, bubbly Park Naturalist [Terry Owens](#) on the avian delights of Breaks Interstate Park, far western Virginia, or [Rev. James R. Love](#) on his local birds (maintaining that birds sing because they are happy) in Eastview, Kentucky.

Listening to a Continent Sing will be enjoyed by anyone with an interest in the outdoors, by cyclists (David Kroodsma is himself an experienced cyclist and author of [The Bicycle Diaries](#)), and above all by birders. I have only just begun reading the book, but I already suspect that it will turn out to be one of the outstanding popular bird books of the year.





Don Kroodsma at work in the Mérida Andes. Photo: Don Kroodsma

I first met Don Kroodsma in 1995 when he had quickly acquired a reputation as an eccentric *gringo* professor studying, together with student Viviana Salas, endemic Mérida Wren *Cistothorus meridae*, a scarce bird restricted to a tiny range in the Venezuelan Andes. This species was a key target for visiting birders and was not all that well known ecologically, so I was surprised to find that Don knew so much about the population at the head of the Santo Domingo valley: where to find them, how many territories there were (over a dozen!), and of course how many songs formed the repertoire of each male... He was a fount of [fascinating information](#) on the species – and one of his tips helped us obtain superb views of the bird, which can be a tricky business when the weather is inclement.

A year or two later, I was lucky enough to be invited to take a Cornell LNS bird sound workshop with Don, Greg Budney and Dave Ross at the joint ABA/AFO conference in Costa Rica. Their combined experience was formidable and really got me hooked on professional sound recording (prior to that I had been using a cheap and inadequate Sony video microphone feeding into a budget dictaphone).

Being taught by one of the world's experts in bird vocalisations together with one of the premier recordists was a real privilege. On our field trip to Tipantí National Park we were accompanied by a friend of Don's, the late Dave Stemple (husband of children's author Janet Yolen), with whom I was later to spend a lot of time recording bird songs and through whom I kept in contact with Don.

In 1998 I was able to repay Don for his efforts in teaching the workshop, when, while living in Managua, I noticed that the Three-wattled Bellbirds *Procnias tricarunculatus* of the Nicaraguan

highlands sang very differently to their [Costa Rican relatives](#) that I knew fairly well. I suspected that Don might be interested in this, and through Dave, I was able to send Don some extended sound recordings of the Nicaraguan birds, which helped him [document song learning in a suboscine passerine](#). This exciting discovery is described in Don Stapp's [Birdsong. A Natural History](#).

Over the years I have kept up with Don's research – he is, after all, an authority in the field of bird song and his discoveries demand to be read by anyone with an interest in bird vocalisations. I was able to procure a copy of the superb [The Singing Life of Birds](#) and occasionally come across radio interviews. Another NPR interview, with Terry Gross, [Understanding Birdsong — and Its Fans](#) was made on the launch of *The Singing Life of Birds*. A useful [2009 interview in the ABA's Birding magazine](#) contains plenty more links to cuts of North American birds.

“There's this wonderful Zen parable. If you listen to the thrush and hear a thrush, you've not really heard the thrush. But if you listen to a thrush and hear a miracle, then you've heard the thrush.”

— Don Kroodsma in [Searching Out 'The Singing Life of Birds'](#) (NPR interview with Elizabeth Arnold, 13 June 2005)