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Birds By Ear

Listening and logging 90 miles a day, father and son race the birdsong season from east to west.



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

By **JULIE ZICKEFOOSE**

July 29, 2016 3:44 p.m. ET

One of my favorite things to do is to sit down beneath a singing mockingbird, writing down in shorthand code each bird that I hear him imitate. My pen flies as the performer runs through the six different calls of the blue jay, or the entire aural life of a bluebird, from begging nestling calls to alarm calls and the songs of adults. He switches dizzyingly from ring-billed gull to downy woodpecker to grackle to the ringing *bzeerp!* of a common nighthawk and tops it all off with a field cricket's chirp. Some people work

jigsaws and Sudoku; I puzzle out birdsong.

Donald Kroodsma bicycles and listens for birds. “Listening to a Continent Sing” recounts an epic transcontinental voyage spent recording birdsong the whole way. On the rainy morning of May 4, 2003, Mr. Kroodsma and his son, David, started out on a rainy morning in Yorktown, Va., and ended up on the Oregon coast on July 12, having crossed the Appalachians, the Rockies, the Cascades—the entire country. I shook my head in wonder at their ambition. What did I do between May 3 and July 12?

The author savors this huge and beautiful country in all its variety, in every slant of light and weather-mood. But his narrative is based on what this ornithologist hears as he rolls down rural byways. “*Whit whit whit,*” the author writes in Virginia. “Wood thrushes awake, sounding agitated as usual . . . With towhees in the understory and wood thrushes in the canopy, the parkway is waking!” Then *chip-burr*, the scarlet tanager, and the dawn song of a field sparrow. Later he finds the exact place in Kansas where the eastern meadowlark’s slurred whistle is replaced by the joyous bubble of a western meadowlark. Looking back from Oregon on all the birds that he and his son have heard, he reflects: “The most memorable voices surge to the fore and then fade in a wave that sweeps from the Atlantic to the Pacific in much the same way that dawn’s first light and a wave of birdsong sweep the continent every day.”

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As someone whose career is dedicated to recording, studying and interpreting birdsong, Mr. Kroodsma offers glimpses into the avian mind and insight into birds’ song acquisition and delivery that no one else could. The sputtering intro of a scissor-tailed flycatcher’s song makes perfect sense to the ornithologist, who notes: “The inheritance of singing genes from their kingbird ancestor seems clear. Males . . . stutter and sputter

 LISTENING TO A CONTINENT SING

By Donald Kroodsma

Princeton, 311 pages, \$29.95

for a bit, then deliver their emphatic climax.”

Mr. Kroodsma keeps a draconian schedule, rising as early as 3:30 a.m. in order to catch the first dawn chorus and logging as many as 90 miles per day as he and David race the season of spring birdsong across the

continent from the sea-level Southeast, where birds breed early, to the high-elevation West, where spring is tardy. It’s an aural landscape that we would do well to factor into our own plans: Mr. Kroodsma secretly pities a group of bikers met on the road in Oregon, who are just starting their own cross-country trek; the birdsong will have all but died away for the summer back East.

If you already bird by ear, Mr. Kroodsma’s pitch-perfect descriptions of birdsong will awaken deep memories of beautiful places and the desire to seek out new landscapes and bird voices. If you don’t, a stunning aural exploration awaits you in his carefully amassed sound files: Page margins are peppered with “quick-response codes” that will take phone users directly to each bird on the website (listeningtoacontinentsing.com), where recordings taken on the trip are archived. The site also organizes sound files by bird species and by state.

One of the fascinating aspects of both the book and the recordings is that, while chasing after birdsong, Mr. Kroodsma captures so much other detail as well. Don’t miss the pack of mongrels and hounds bellowing the bikers through Dwarf, Ky., or the creaking bicycle saddle accompanying the rich afternoon chorus of a moist deciduous forest on a steep uphill climb in the same state’s damp and diverse mountains. “Listening to a Continent Sing”, along with its website, is both an inspiration and a bundle of gifts waiting to be unwrapped.

—*Ms. Zickefoose is the author and illustrator of, most recently, “Baby Birds: An Artist Looks Into the Nest.”*

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