

THE DAWN CHORUS AT BOXFORD

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Any account of the dawn chorus in Crooked Pond, Boxford, must be personal. For me, it is an annual birding event that I have participated in for almost thirty years. The first consideration must be to pick the right day in May. A day close to or just after May 15th usually fits the bill quite well. Since I admit to a bird-listing addiction, the excitement grows on that particular day with the thought that new birds may be added to my year's list. Anticipation is enhanced if the Barred Owl of Boxford would be my first of the year.

An expedition to Boxford in the early morning may have two purposes. First of all, this is an excellent spot at which to begin a Big Day. However, "Big Day" is an understatement, and years ago I found that my enthusiasm for seeing the maximum number of birds in one day dimmed hopelessly after about fourteen hours in the field. But even if you don't plan an ornithological marathon, there is no more gloriously beautiful spot in Eastern Massachusetts at which to spend the early hours of the morning. And early the hour should be: if there is a ray of light in the sky upon arrival, you are too late. So, to be safe, plan to be at the entrance by 3:30, and at the listening spot by 3:40 a.m.

The excitement begins before reaching the entrance to Crooked Pond. In the dark of the night, with one's headlights in high beam, there is a chance an owl may fly across the road. Park at the entrance, make sure you are well-sprayed with insecticide, and then walk in along the dirt road without delay.

The area is completely familiar to me, even in the dark. First comes a small deciduous wood, and then the swamp on the left with the running stream on the right. A little farther is the fallen-log area, one of the spots where the Louisiana Waterthrush sings, and behind it those giant conifers on the hillside which must be the largest in Eastern Massachusetts. That noisy water feeds from the pond on the left, at the end of which is the listening spot (at the bend of the road). Lights out. Listen. The time is right. It is still pitch dark, with no wind. The silence is overpowering, and the listening so intense that breathing seems noisy. Far off in the distance one can catch a sound. No, it is only a barking dog. The mosquitos are an annoying distraction. Then, from across the pond and up the hillside comes the unmistakable hooting of the Barred Owl--faint, but distinct. He repeats his call twice and speaks no more. We have not seen him, but we have heard him, and the day is made.

Suddenly we are more aware of the outlines of the trees. The frogs are croaking. At first, there is but one, and then in seconds it is as if the pond were too small to contain so many frogs. A Gray Catbird hisses, a Common Yellowthroat sings, and then comes the beautiful, haunting song of a Wood Thrush. The chorus has begun. "Chebec," the Least Flycatcher calls out. Another Wood Thrush and yet another until you begin to think every Wood Thrush in the world is singing at Crooked Pond. "Teacher, teacher, teacher," sings the Ovenbird, tuning up for the day. Then comes another thrill: faintly but clearly starts the unmistakable song of the Winter Wren. How can that tiny bird sing for so long? Great Crested Flycatchers, many dozens of Scarlet Tanagers, Northern Orioles and Black-throated Green Warblers join the chorus. Their music is overwhelming--almost too much. Geese are honking over the pond, and late Evening Grosbeaks call out for the last time before heading North. The sky is pink. It is time to leave the corner. But wait--a Ruffed Grouse is drumming deep in the woods.

We go on up the hill to the abandoned farm area, just in time to hear the Woodcock sound his ground note. He flies upwards, barely visible, and tumbles down with the breathtaking song that is made by his whistling wings. A Field Sparrow sings and swallows fly about overhead. It is time to leave, if the rails are still to be heard in Lynnfield. We shall probably hear more species on the way out, or we can come back later for Louisiana and Northern Waterthrushes, Solitary Vireo, Brown Creeper, and hopefully, Blue-winged and Golden-winged Warblers. Perhaps just one stop to listen for a Blackburnian. There he is, and I can hear the whole song, so my high notes are still intact. Is that a Blue Jay? No, listen closely, it is a Red-shouldered Hawk calling--a nostalgic cry out of the past.