

Wow, Did You Hear That? — Observations from a Blind Birder

Jerry Berrier

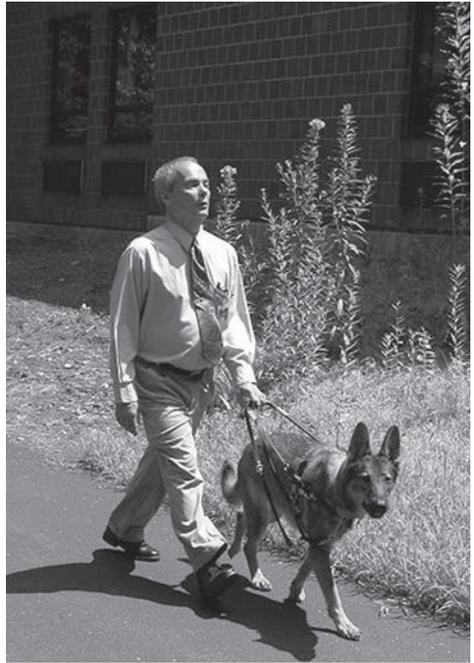
My college biology professor introduced me to birding in 1971. He felt that the laboratory portion of the course I was taking would present some significant problems for me, a blind student, so he created a workable alternative. My assignment involved listening to recordings of birds common to the northeastern United States. I was asked to study these sounds on a regular basis during the school term, and my exam would consist of an early-morning stroll with my teacher, during which I was to identify some bird sounds. His proposal that I learn to identify bird calls turned out to be a marvelous gift, leading me to a hobby that still brings me immense pleasure.

Ever since that biology class, I have enjoyed listening to and identifying bird sounds, and I eventually started making audio recordings of some of the more interesting ones. When my children were very young, I attached an inexpensive microphone to our bird feeder so I could listen to the birds from inside the house, but what I heard was not what I expected. The microphone amplified all of their scratching and chewing sounds and the noise was sometimes astoundingly unpleasant. My son and daughter, however, did enjoy watching them from the window while listening to them through my crude setup.

Since then, I have found that a microphone works much better if placed some distance from the feeder. I currently have a parabolic microphone called a Bird Bug, which I purchased over the Internet, attached to the outside of my house and wired to my computer's sound card, so that I can listen and enjoy the birds from indoors during the winter. The Bird Bug came with fifty feet of cable and a small amplifier/speaker box. Although it picks up some traffic noise, it serves its purpose well. As I write this article, sitting in my home office, I am hearing through my computer speakers the sound of robins, Blue Jays, and a Tufted Titmouse calling from my backyard, along with the hammering of a woodpecker. Using an audio editing program, I can capture sounds for later use. I currently use a program called "Gold Wave," but there are many others on the market that work very well. If I plan to work at my desk for a while, I set Gold Wave in "loop mode." If I hear a sound I want to capture, I can stop the recording and automatically save the previous sixty seconds of sound. I have added some of my recordings to my personal web site at <http://www.townisp.com/~jerry.berrier>.

I also use a minidisk recorder and a relatively inexpensive hand-held microphone to record interesting bird sounds. If I am out somewhere and hear a sound that I cannot identify, I record it and then try to match it with a sound from one of several birding CDs I have purchased over the years. Some day I hope to acquire a parabolic microphone for field recording, but for now I use a Sony MZR907 "powered" stereo microphone, which does quite well.

I live in a relatively quiet suburban area, and my guide dog Sobe and I take long walks, during which I often pause to make brief recordings. She has gotten accustomed to my all-too-frequent commands to “Halt!” and is generally patient while I stop to capture bird sounds. I sometimes feel a bit conspicuous and wonder what neighbors think when they see me out there with a microphone in my hand. Nobody has yet questioned me about it; perhaps they think it’s a high-tech device I use to find my way back home. Although I enjoy taking such walks with my dog and recording bird song, my ability to learn new sounds is limited, because I have no way of visually confirming what I think I am hearing. My enjoyment of birding is greatly heightened when I can walk with a sighted companion who shares my enthusiasm.



The author and Sobe

Over the years, my interest in birds has made me more aware of my surroundings, and it has provided a link to the outdoors and to a part of the world that most people either fail to notice at all or enjoy only by seeing. When traveling, one of the first things I detect when I get out of the car is the sound of whatever birds happen to be vocalizing. I’m always on the lookout for a good opportunity to record a bird I have yet to add to my sounds collection. My passion for birding encourages me to spend a lot of time outdoors. To me, there’s nothing more uplifting than the sound of the first robin in the spring, or the *konk-la-ree* sound of the Red-winged Blackbird announcing that winter is almost over for another year.

Friends have asked me how I, a person who has been blind from birth, can sustain an interest in something that is inherently so visual; frankly, I have pondered that myself a time or two. There’s an old saying that “You cannot miss something you have never had.” Well, I have never been able to see, and I most definitely miss it. The inability to see robs me of the chance to experience many things that sighted people find beautiful and interesting. Rather than lament that, I seek ways to find beauty and inspiration through my other senses. When I hear a towhee sing *drink your tea*, I am delighted and think it is singing just for me; I don’t need to see it to be fascinated and greatly thrilled by it. If that’s not awesome enough, how about the sound of a wood thrush as its song echoes softly through a dense woodland on a cool summer evening. I have experienced that, but I can no more adequately describe it to you than you can enable me to feel your joy at the sight of a stunningly handsome cardinal as it perches on your deck railing. We must each experience beauty in our own way.

Birding by ear has brought me much joy, and it has given me some common ground with sighted birders. More than anything else, though, it has raised my consciousness and afforded me a deeper appreciation of some of the miracles of nature that can help make life on earth a truly beautiful experience. 🐦

Jerry Berrier recently retired from Verizon Communications, where he worked for the past six years as assistant manager in the Verizon Center for Customers with Disabilities in Marlboro, MA. Prior to that he spent 18 years in Pittsburgh, PA, in the human resources department of the telephone company. He is now beginning a new and exciting career as a consultant, training people who are blind to use computers. He has run “birding by ear” workshops for several groups of blind and visually impaired adults and also for a Girl Scout troop. He lives in Shrewsbury, MA, with his wife Elaine.

LETTERS

To the Editor:

I am a subscriber to *Bird Observer* and grew up in Wellesley near Rockridge Pond, where I found a Red Phalarope at age thirteen. I had the same science teacher [Doug Sands] as Wayne Petersen and Dick Forster.

I enjoyed the brief article on the Common Loon by William Davis. I have spent my summers near Dublin Lake in the Monadnock Region. In recent years, loons have returned to the lake (along with Northern Goshawks, Bald Eagles, and a pair of Black Vultures).

As Dr. Davis pointed out, loons are fish eaters. While fishing for trout from a canoe, I have on many occasions observed a loon catching a relatively large trout and chewing/flipping the fish between its mandibles, losing the fish and recapturing it before finally tilting its head and swallowing the fish whole. The entire process lasts approximately twenty minutes. All fish are eaten above water in these observations.

The loons swim approximately four hundred yards between two points of land in a section of the lake known for cold-water springs. I presume the springs oxygenate the water, thus making it more attractive to trout and to the loons.

Sincerely,

Tom Warren



COMMON LOON BY DAVID LARSON