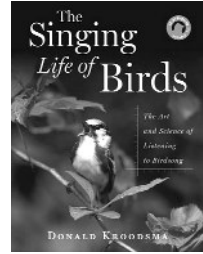


ABOUT BOOKS

The Hills are Alive with the Sound of Thrashers, Titmice, and Robins (i.e., Music)

Mark Lynch



The Singing Life of Birds: The Art and Science of Listening to Birdsong. Donald Kroodsma. 2005. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.

“Hear the birds? Sometimes I like to pretend that I’m deaf and I try to imagine what it’s like not to be able to hear them. ...It’s not that bad.” Larry David on an episode of the HBO TV series *Curb Your Enthusiasm*.

I, on the other hand, like to imagine Donald Kroodsma watching that episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and reacting with total unbelieving shock, shaking his head with the look of someone watching the desecration of the Pieta by Lazlo Thoth. For Dr. Kroodsma is unapologetically passionate about birdsong. I have only seen his kind of uncurbed enthusiasm expressed by connoisseurs of Mozart symphonies and expensive fine wines. I have watched Don listen to a recording of a birdsong — his own recording at that. He breaks into a smile of sheer pleasure and wonder. It is the very picture of someone continually thinking: “Wow!” And then the torrent of questions starts: “Wasn’t that an odd sound?” “Why did the bird do that at that point?” “What is this bird’s neighbor singing?” In *The Singing Life of Birds*, Kroodsma allows the reader to intimately experience the mindset of a scientist who genuinely loves his work.

Birdsong is one of the most prevalent, complex, and acoustically rich natural phenomena we experience. It is therefore interesting and a bit shocking how little birders think about birdsong beyond considering the vocalizations as just another field mark to aid in identification. We all have these records, tapes, and CDs of short snippets of song that we use to help us learn what species is singing what song. On recordings like the *Peterson Field Guide* series or the *Stokes* series, a bird’s name is read in monotone and then typically one quick example of a call or chip note is given. The *Birding by Ear* series by Dick Walton is a vast improvement over these spare snippets found on previous recordings because his sound tracks compare similar calls and teach the listener how to discriminate between them. But still, the focus is on species identification only. New birders are left with the feeling that each species sings only one song and that is all you have to “worry” about. Only a few recordings, such as Donald Borror’s classic *Warblers*, have shown that song within a species is much more complex and variable. But why are they singing? What do all these tweets, whistles, and chirps mean?

Outside of the technical ornithological literature, it has been tough to find information about the reasons birds sing. If you were to ask most birders just a few years ago, they would reply that birds “sing” to attract a mate and advertise their territory. This is like reducing all of human speech to pickup lines given in bars and yelling, “Hey, here I am!” in a crowd. The 1980s and 1990s saw the publishing of a few popular books on ethology, and through these some of the scientific findings on bird behavior became available to a wider audience. Popular books like Bernd Heinrich’s *Ravens in Winter* and Eugene Morton’s *Animal Talk* showed that the vocal behavior of certain species was far more complicated than most people realized, and these authors began to analyze some of these natural “languages” and theorize about their evolution.

In *The Singing Life of Birds*, Kroodsma gives example after example of how unique and complex each INDIVIDUAL bird’s song is. Reading this book is nothing less than revelatory and even mind-blowing. Shortly after starting this book, readers will feel that they have never actually listened to a birdsong before. It will seem that a garrulous and fascinating conversation has been going on all around us, and we have just never bothered to listen it with a sufficiently critical ear. Listening to a bird’s song before and after reading Kroodsma’s book is like the difference between listening to Mingus or Coltrane when you were six years old and then, later, when you are forty.

Kroodsma is adamant that to understand a birdsong in all its variation, you have to be able to SEE that song. Our ears are just not equipped to hear all that is happening in any one song. The best way to do this is with sonograms. Birders whose only experience with sonograms has been the miniscule sonograms included in species accounts in the *Golden Field Guide to Birds of North America* (Robbins, et al. 1966) are likely wincing at this point. Kroodsma understands this reaction. The best way to learn to “love the sonogram” is to be reading them *while* simultaneously listening to the songs. *The Singing Life of Birds* is chock full of nice big, clear sonograms illustrating all the points that Kroodsma is discussing in the text. Most importantly, a CD is also included with the book, so the reader can listen while looking at all Kroodsma’s examples. After several repeat experiences of using the text and the CD, the layperson will begin to use sonograms as a crucial tool to understand avian vocalizations.

You will need every tool you can get because *The Singing Life of Birds* is a celebration of the unexpectedly daunting complexity of birdsong. Each individual robin on your lawn sings his own complex song made up of unique sequences of notes and sounds. On just Point Reyes Peninsula in California, different areas feature populations of White-crowned Sparrows, each with different songs—like regional variations within the Chinese language. How are these songs learned? The Marsh Wren is shown to be likely two species, a western and an eastern, each with its very different song. Kroodsma cannot contain his excitement when he tracks down the marshes where the two different songs can be heard side by side, but the two populations of wrens remain within their song group. Unlike Marsh Wrens, the Sedge Wren’s song seems infinitely malleable, always changing. Why? The Black-capped Chickadee’s *hey-sweetie* call is remarkably consistent across much of North America,

yet on tiny Martha's Vineyard, three different populations of chickadees have three very different variations on *hey-sweetie*. Why only on the Vineyard? Three-wattled Bellbirds not only have dialects, but an individual's song changes from year to year. This is especially interesting because the bellbirds are suboscines, a group of birds including the flycatchers whose songs are supposedly "hardwired" into their DNA. In other words, they supposedly do not learn their songs. What is going on with bellbirds? Each discovery leads to ten more questions.

The Singing Life of Birds could easily have been a dry recitation of the research and discoveries about birdsong much like the volume of collected scientific papers that Kroodsma edited titled *Ecology and Evolution of Acoustic Communication in Birds*. This was an important and very interesting book, but not in any way geared for public consumption. *The Singing Life of Birds* is all about the passion of research as well as the findings. Much of the book is told in a diary format, and the reader is brought step by step through Kroodsma's thoughts as he ponders what these noisy birds are doing traveling from marsh to forest to sagebrush plain. At the same time, Kroodsma is from Massachusetts' Connecticut River Valley and there are many passages in this book that are about our neck of the woods, particularly the Valley and the Berkshires and the birds we commonly hear in those areas.

Kroodsma's writing is wonderfully evocative of the many places his quest for birdsong brings him. Seeking to record a Winter Wren, Donald finds himself in their archetypical habitat:


Smothering the boulders and rotting logs and uprooted tree stumps all around me is a luxuriant growth of soft green mosses. The brook bubbles lazily nearby, the boggy forest floor extending in all directions, the air heavy with moisture. Though it is midmorning, the sunshine barely penetrates the hemlock and spruce towering overhead. Here in the cool of my dark New England forests, here is his home (p. 214).

He is not shy about expressing his real sense of pleasure at hearing birds sing. On listening to Bachman's Sparrows sing among the pines and palmettos:

As for the beauty in the songs, yes I confirmed that too, but not in any rigorous fashion, nor could I have. I took them in, one at a time, marveling at the purity of the whistles, the pleasant buzzes, the contrast among them all. I need no one to confirm my reaction, though I will seek out the opinions of those who know music, those who might hear and be able to describe better what it is about these songs that make them so satisfying to some, perhaps all human ears (p. 233).

Woven among all this poetic writing is the story of how the very hard and often tedious real work of science gets done. Kroodsma becomes interested in the mimicry of a Sage Thrasher and sets out with his equipment to record a daunting straight eight hours and ten minutes of this one bird singing. But that is not enough for Kroodsma's endlessly curious mind, and he is back the next day to record the same bird again for the full day. These recordings are then converted to sonograms, patterns are plotted

out, the species that were mimicked are carefully noted. His dedication to his research is never ending. He may wake up before dawn, hear a titmouse, note something curious about its song, and begin a full day's recording session with that bird. It is this seamless mix of passion and scientific dedication that makes *The Singing Life of Birds* one of the best books I have read to explain how real science gets done.

At the heart of all of Kroodsma's writing are, of course, the amazing songs of the birds. These are revealed to be endlessly complex, so very different in quality, quantity, tenor, tone, and purpose from species to species and sometimes from individual to individual, that there is virtually no single statement we can make about birdsong. It is like discovering a vast lost library of millions upon millions of volumes all written in a language we are only just beginning to decipher. *The Singing Life of Birds* is a groundbreaking book, a classic that will forever alter your experience of the natural world. 

Other Resources:

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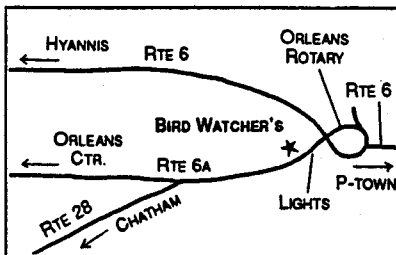
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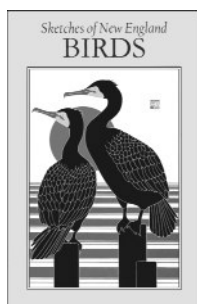
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