

A Bird to overhear —

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listening

Are we listening? Are you listening? When did I start listening?
When did you first hear them? Do you recall which one?
Was it the dawn chorus? Or the wail, cry, caw at last light?
When did it dawn on you? Are you listening?

Can you name them? How many can you name?

According to the New York Times only 1 in 8 can
name more than 20 species. Can you name their songs?
Can you hear them? Can you see their flight patterns?

The landscape architect Gertrude Jekyll, once blind,
could name them by the sound of their wings in flight.

Cardinal. Bluebird. Blue Jay. Crow. Red-winged Blackbird.
Great Horned Owl. Barred Owl. Ruby-throated Hummingbird.
Bald Eagle. Red-tailed Hawk. Goshawk. Peregrine Falcon. Wren.
Swallow. Baltimore Oriole. Cedar Waxwing. Goldfinch. Titmouse.
Black-capped Chickadee. Flycatcher. Mourning Dove. Pigeon.
Gull. Sandpiper. Pelican. Loggerhead Shrike. Grackle. Vireo.
Downy Woodpecker. Hairy Woodpecker. Mockingbird. Catbird.
Pileated Woodpecker. Flicker. Whippoorwill. Bobwhite. Quail.
Turkey. Rose-breasted Grosbeak. Wood Thrush. Song Sparrow.
Mallard. Hooded Merganser. Wood Duck. Canadian Goose.
Kingfisher. Piping Plover. Grouse. Loon. Great Blue Heron.
Night Heron. Buzzard. Junco. Starling. Red-bellied Woodpecker.
Pheasant. Grosbeak. Purple Finch. Scarlet Tanager. Indigo Bunting.

Listening. Looking. Seeing.
What makes a bird watcher?

The overlooked ornithologist, Florence Merriam Bailey wrote the first
portable bird watching guide, *Birds Through an Opera-Glass* (1889)
and advises young birdwatchers that:

'Four things only are necessary — a scrupulous conscience, unlimited
patience, a notebook, and an opera-glass. The notebook enables one to
put down the points which the opera-glass has brought within sight, and
by means of which the bird may be found in the key; patience leads to
trained ears and eyes, and conscience prevents hasty conclusions and
doubtful records.'

observing

(All observations of birds and their habitats on ancestral grounds of the Mohican people.)

My observations and records over years of bird watching:

- Jan 1 'Who cooks for you' asks the Barred Owl
- Jan 5 Kingfisher belting out at marsh
- Jan 7 Rose Breasted Finches, burst of carmine red
- Jan 8 Vireo nest — blown down by last night's winds —
 clad in white birch bark, hidden against crystalline snow
- Jan 12 Pileated Woodpecker working 2+ hours on dead maple tree
- Jan 20 Barred Owl sitting hidden amongst the 'duck green' pine
 branches
- Jan 24 Flocks of Turkeys in wet field devoid of snow
- Feb 3 Robins feasting on the scarlet red barberries
- Feb 9 Off in the distance, the Barred Owl asks me again 'Who
 Cooks for you?'
- Feb 10 12 Mourning Doves roost in gigantic maple tree, dusk
- Feb. 14 Bald Eagle sitting on limb of birch tree along field edge for 2
 hours, mid-afternoon
- Feb 28 Six loud Blue Jays — 'shrill felicity' according to Emily
 Dickinson
- March 5 Red-winged Blackbirds return
- March 15 Pair of Hooded Mergansers at swimming pond
- March 20 Pair of Canadian Geese exploring marsh pond
- March 30 Bluebirds return
- April 2 Morning, 3 Crows berating a Red-tailed Hawk on its perch
 above the marsh 3pm, immature Bald Eagle lands in marsh
 amidst pairs of wild ducks
- April 5 Great Blue Heron flies in a long slow-motion arc,
 winding in between stalks of dead trees

- April 21 Lone Female Turkey meanders through field foraging, no never mind to the lightening and thunder crackling above her
- April 24 Emily Dickinson's 'buccaneering' Bluebirds against the azure blue sky
- April 26 Kestrel, feathers of orange & blue, preening on maple tree branch at field's edge
- May 6 5am, Catbird chortling in the lilac bush. Others join in— Baltimore Orioles, Goldfinches
2pm, Swallows circling in field above Wood Ducks at pond, whilst Bluebirds sit atop birdhouses
- May 7 Female Wood Duck spotted up in tree in woods
- May 10 Five Goslings with parents in pond & lone female Turkey in field
- May 11 Common Yellowthroat in gamboge yellow forsythia bush
- May 13 Wood Thrush sounds its harmonizing notes from edge of woods
Female Baltimore Oriole repeatedly taking long strands of dried grass for nest
- May 15 American Redstart building nest in rhododendron
- May 16 Located Baltimore Oriole nest high in maple tree, soon to be hidden by leaves
- June 1 Wrens stuffing small twigs into birdhouse
- June 7 5 Ducks at marsh aka 2 parents & 3 ducklings for swimming class
- June 24 3 Turkey hens and 7-10 young
- July 5 Joyous morning chorus, as sky turns a lighter grey Catbird begins and then the orchestra swells with Wrens. Phoebes. Song Sparrow. Cardinals. Doves. Goldfinch. Robin. Rooster. Hairy Woodpecker. Nuthatch. Baltimore Oriole. Pileated Woodpecker.
- July 7 Thunderstorm. Heavy pelting rain. Robin on her nest under maple leaves
- July 8 Robin abandons nest in maple tree due to storm damage
- July 10 Green Heron fishing from log in old swimming pond
- July 15 Groups of Cedar Waxwings flitting about the fronds of phragmites

- July 20 West coast fire smog at dawn. Pair of Great Horned Owls mating in dead tree above misty marsh
- July 22 Orioles sing 'chick chicky boom' so joyous in the orchard
- July 30 4pm, Great Blue Heron, Duck family & Kingfisher at beaver marsh
- Aug 1 Solo Cardinal greets the dawn. Only a month ago, it was an orchestra
- Aug 3 Catbird trying to catch a monarch butterfly
- Aug 7 Kingfisher chattering at marsh the whole day through
- Aug 15 Red-tailed Hawk riding thermals
- Aug 28 Brown and white Turkey feather found in orchard amongst fallen apples
- Aug 31 Owls first hoot of the day, then Catbirds, Wrens, Hummingbirds & Crows
- Sept 10 Buckets of rain. Gang of Four Crows sit atop dead tree in marsh. All silhouettes
- Sept 14 Pileated Woodpecker jackhammers at decayed tree
- Sept 19 Great Blue Heron plunges and catches fish in pond
- Sept 21 Frosty crystals, catbirds and bluebirds
- Oct 2 5:30am, pair of Barred Owls greet the dawn
- Oct 3 Crows cawing and flying from treetop to treetop
- Oct 6 Vs of Geese float above me against bright ultramarine blue sky
- Oct 10 Rat-a-tat-tat of Downy Woodpecker on old apple tree
- Oct 13 Crows & Geese feasting in cornfield
- Oct 18 Milkweed silky filaments floating in fields Kingfisher dives into pond, water ripples out
- Oct 27 Great Blue Heron & Kingfisher share the marsh
- Nov 1 Not one, but two pairs of Bluebirds in south field. Pair of Eagles over mill pond, slowly descend to pine trees, with Geese and Ducks protesting

Nov 5 Great Blue Heron on felled tree in pond, preening and fishing, alternately

Nov 8 Blue Jays, Chickadees & Titmice

Nov 14 Bluebirds at bird houses, again

Nov 16 Asphalt road glistens in rain, Ring-necked Pheasant tail feather found directly in center

Nov 26 Turtles on logs, Robins, Bluebirds, Hooded Mergansers relish in sun of unusually hot day

Dec 8 50 Turkeys in a line walking down mountain

Dec 9 Hawk flew from maple tree into field & caught a mouse

Dec 10 Bluebirds at pond. Emily Dickinson's birthday

Dec 11 Hawk on tip-top spike of pine tree, soaking up sun's rays

Dec 13 'Who cooks for you' heard on morning walk

Dec 19 High Noon. Crow battles a Red-Tailed Hawk

Dec 21 At dawn, Bald Eagle overhead, Red-Tailed Hawk at 10 & Kingfisher at 1pm — Solstice

Dec 26 Bald Eagle in field

entanglement

The painter Ellsworth Kelly, a birder from age eight, recalled:

‘I remember vividly the first time I saw a Redstart,
a small black bird with a few very bright red marks.
I believe my early interest in nature taught me to see.’

Taught me to see. To register the darts and dashes, the flecks of colour
Yet finding a bird’s nest is harder to see, harder to locate. What do they
build them with?

Materials at hand, mighty foragers are they —

Silky spider's webs. Thin strips of Birch bark.
Moss pulled from the wet ground.
Grape vine bark torn into small strands.
Rootlets. Dried reeds. And leaves.
Large sticks and small twigs. Straw. Lichens.
Milkweed filaments. Human Hair. Thistle and coltsfoot down.
Horse hair. Cinquefoil stems. So many Weeds.
Wasp nest paper. Mud.

And it is Genevieve Estelle Jones and her families *Illustrations of the
Nests and Eggs of Birds of Ohio* that 'taught me to see' — to recognize
those disparate parts that form a whole.

Nests — these assemblages of the bits and bobs, often just plain detritus,
are so well hidden that to find them, one must both listen and look.

Listening.

Is this just pure hear say? Or can one really follow the sound of a bird at
first light to their nest location?

What say you, poet Susan Howe?

‘The language of the birds is very ancient,
and like other ancient modes of speech, very elliptical;
little is said, but much is meant and understood.’

And poet, Emily Dickinson:

“Hope” is the thing with feathers —
That perches in the soul —
And sings the tune without the words —
And never stops — at all —

And even Marcel Proust, wise to the sounds of birds:

‘The bird-lover in a wood at once distinguishes
the twittering of different species,
which to ordinary people sound the same.’

silenced

Songsters. Choirmasters. Orchestras.

Chirping. Cooing. Chortling. Chattering.
Cackling. Clucking. Crackling. Crying.
Dawling. Hammering. Hooting. Howling.
Mewing. Meowing.
Quavering. Rattling. Squeaking.
Trilling. Twittering. Vibrating.
Warbling. Whistling. Yakking.

Yet in the summer of 1958, scientist author ecologist Rachel Carson heard no birds and portrays what this might be like in the introduction to her groundbreaking 1962 book, *Silent Spring*

‘What has already silenced the voices of spring in countless towns in America?’

‘There was a strange stillness.
The birds, for example — where had they gone?
Many people spoke of them, puzzled and disturbed.
The feeding stations in the backyards were deserted.
The few birds seen anywhere were moribund ...
It was a spring without voices.
On the mornings that had once throbbed with the dawn chorus
of robins, catbirds, doves, jays,
wrens, and scores of other bird voices
there was now no sound;
only silence lay over the fields and woods and marsh.’

DDT then. Neonicotinoids now.
Chemical killers spread over fields bring silence.
Loss of habitat — woods and willows and marshes, now so silent
as the industry of capitalism gobbles up the vacant spots.

The Fields. The Woods. The Willows.

Silence.

The Wrens.

Almost as teeny as the Hummingbird, they flit about until the right perch is found, and belt forth a tune that commands one to stop and listen.

What would you call this bird, song so fluid with fortitude,
if you could not find its name in the dictionary?

Wren. Short and sweet could be the definition and perhaps, you will
search for it in the pages of the Oxford Junior Dictionary.

Seek not, for in 2016 the publisher, Oxford University Press
removed a flock of 111 words — many linked to the natural world
and a few to birds of flight.

Budgerigar. Canary. Cygnet. Drake. Magpie. Pelican.
Poultry. Raven. Starling. Stork. Thrush. Wren.

Wren. Silenced.

overhear

Trappist Monk & writer Thomas Merton wrote:

‘Do I spend my day in a place? I know there are trees here.
I know there are birds here. I know the birds, in fact very well,
for there are exactly 15 pairs of birds living in the immediate area
of my cabin and I share this particular place with them.
We form an ecological balance. This harmony gives “a place a
different configuration.”’

Friends. Visitors. Guests. Community.

To hear an Oriole sing
May be a common thing —
Or only a divine.
(Emily Dickinson, #402, 1862)

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Notes:

1. Title from Emily Dickinson's poem #873, 1864

It is a lonesome Glee —
Yet sanctifies the Mind —
With fair association —
Afar upon the Wind

A Bird to overhear —
Delight without a Cause —
Arrestless as invisible —
A Matter of the Skies.

Emily Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by R. W. Franklin, (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 380-381.

2. Chapter 3, 'Entanglement': Grape vines swirl around trees in the woods and once fallen make entanglements from which birds gather strands of grape vines to make their nests.

3. Title colours, indigo. Indigo is mysterious, mercurial and magical. Dyeing with it can be confounding, not only in the making of the vat, but in the maintaining of it (feeding it and keeping it warm, a daily diligence). Indigo as a dye source is found throughout the world, first on eastern continents Africa, Asia and India before being brought to the West. There is dichotomy of the indigo garment, both worn by royalty and as work wear, blue jeans. Emily Dickinson notes this in her poems describing indigo and working garments in relation to plumage of both the Robin and Bluebird. Both poems reside in the collection of the American Antiquarian Society (Worcester, MA) and were sent by Dickinson in the form of letters to her friend Mrs. Edward Tuckerman.

The Robin is a Gabriel
In humble circumstances —
His Dress denotes him socially,
Of Transport's Working Classes —
He has the punctuality
Of the New England Farmer —
The same oblique integrity,
A Vista vastly warmer —
A small but sturdy Residence
A self denying Household,
The Guests of Perspicacity
Are all that cross his Threshold —
As covert as a Fugitive,
Cajoling Consternation
By Ditties to the Enemy
And Sylvan Punctuation —

Emily Dickinson, Poem #1520, 1880

Before you thought of Spring,
Except as a Surmise,
You see - God bless his suddenness
A Fellow in the Skies
Of independent Hues
A little weather worn,
Inspiring habiliments
Of Indigo and Brown.
With Specimens of Song,
As if for you to choose -
Discretion in the interval
With gay delays he goes

To some superior Tree
Without a single Leaf,
And shouts for joy to Nobody
But his seraphic self -

Emily Dickinson, Poem #1484, 1879

Sources:

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