

CD Review – Bird Songs of Canada by John Neville.

4-CD audio set. 2014

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Not all readers of this magazine will be aware that John Neville, our past President, is regarded as one of the best, if not the best bird song recordists in North America. Starting with *Birds of the Kootenays* in 1995, John has gone on to release a new bird song CD production on average every two years, even going off continent to record *Bird Songs of the Scottish Highlands and Islands* in 2003 and *Wild New Zealand* (a digital download) in 2008. This two-decade pursuit has ultimately lead to what must be considered his magnum opus – *Bird Songs of Canada*.

Most bird song CDs, understandably, deal with song birds - the passerines or perching birds. This 4-CD set covers the lot! Marine birds, water birds, waders, raptors, game birds, in fact almost all the birds that regularly appear in Canada; 435 species in total. It is an astonishing achievement.

Listening to these recordings one cannot be but impressed by the amazing variety of avian sounds. From the Razorbill to the Brown-headed Cowbird, or the Trumpeter Swan to the Rose-breasted Grosbeak, what a versatile apparatus the syrinx is!

The recordings are super clear and ambient, placing the subject bird sharply focused at the centre, but in the context of a sound-scape: rippling water, waves rolling onto a beach, other birds singing softly in the distance. It does not take too much imagination to picture the scene. This is a Neville trademark. I found it fun trying to identify the other birds singing in the background! These recordings are a league above the sterile bird song ID files one can download from the internet or load onto one's I-phone.

Besides the full range of each bird's vocabulary, such as calls and warning notes, often he has been able to catch quite intimate sounds, little chirpings and peepings, or the bill clackings and nuzzleings of male-female interactions that one would never normally hear. I found that a real delight. The Barred Owl recording is a perfect example. As a recordist myself, I marvel at how John can get so close with his microphone!

With 99 tracks on each of the four CDs there is no room for a commentary, John simply names

the bird at the start of each track. In this sense it is not the ideal set for a beginner trying to learn bird song from scratch. Rather it will appeal to bird song aficionados, or any nature lover who likes to appreciate the beauty of the natural world with their ears as well as their eyes. Of course, it is also an unparalleled reference set for any serious birder.

In such a comprehensive project as this, it is not possible for one person to do all the recordings themselves. Guest contributors are listed in the liner notes and acknowledged by their initials beside the relevant track.

On the technical side, the recordings are presented in the order of the American Ornithologist's Union's (AOU) 2012 *Check-List of North American Birds*. Species names are given in English, French and by their scientific name, which are printed on the inside of the 4-panel, fold out, card-stock package. They are also encoded onto the CDs themselves, so for a suitably equipped CD player the names will appear on the display.

Truly a magnificent achievement both in scope and execution. Highly recommended. If you are looking for that perfect gift for a birding friend you could do no better.

Reviewed by Mel Coulson, Bulkley Valley Naturalists

Bio: Mel first developed an interest in birds as a young boy growing up in a small rural village in northern England. Having poor eyesight and with a pair of binoculars totally out of reach financially, he quickly learned that one of the best ways to identify birds was by their songs. Arriving in Canada in 1971 he had a whole new suite of bird songs to learn! In 2001 he recorded and produced *A Beginners Guide to Bulkley Valley Bird Song* as a fund-raiser for the Bulkley Valley Naturalists Club.