

The Value of Birdsong



Photograph: Heather Neville



John Neville feels that: *"The mournful melody of a Hermit Thrush is not only beautiful, but satisfies one of my reasons for living."*

The sounds of birds and other critters can create a great sense of wonder and mystery. It is an enormous pleasure to listen to the mournful melody of a Hermit Thrush and if the conditions are right to make a clean recording. The melody is not only beautiful, but it satisfies one of my reasons for living.

Likewise, I clearly remember my first encounter with a Sandhill Crane in a Kootenay marsh; the bird started to call and eventually took flight, giving me an atavistic feeling for these creatures over the millennia. One spring, we spent a night in a wooden box, grandly called a blind, in Nebraska to watch and record about half a million of these magnificent birds gather on the Platte River. The cranes flew in by the hundreds, some

roosting within a few meters of us. It was an exciting trip, as that night a storm blew up disturbing both the birds and my recordings, and several times lifting our accommodation up off the ground! I have also experienced the early morning sky filled with sound, as six thousand Snow Geese came and landed in the Fraser River Delta; at these times, the significance of my life and its meaning become such a minor concern.

My recording adventures started in 1992, when I attended a workshop for nature recordists in the Sierra Nevada Mountains given by Cornell University. The course taught me enough about the technical side of microphones and recorders, plus some of the field-craft I needed, to enable me to make reasonably good recordings

Next page →



of nature. By the time I left the Sierra Nevadas, a dream was forming, which was to make my own bird song CD.

The following year was hectic, trying to collect enough bird song material for my very first production. With minimal knowledge of scripting and barely enough good recorded sounds, I went to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology Macaulay Library of Natural Sounds, deep in the Ithaca woods, to satisfy my ambition.



The more I played back my own recordings, the more I found fault; my narration sounded wooden because I was reading the text and thus not fully conveying my thoughts, and what's more, I sometimes had a shortage of good recordings. It became evident to me that I needed to spend more time improving in all of these areas. So that is what I did. My wife and I agreed to do fieldwork for two months each spring, with planning and scripting beginning well ahead of recording in the outdoors. Writing of the dialogue continued right

through to production time, so that when I sat down before a microphone in the studio I knew the material by heart and it sounded far more convincing!



As my field-craft has improved over the last twenty years, I have learned to blend in more and more with my environment. Doing this in full view of the birds means slowing down, avoiding eye contact, approaching obliquely and wearing dark clothing. If I appear relaxed, the birds often will show curiosity and move closer. I have learned to pause a hundred meters from a bird, then move gradually forward ten meters at a time, and then repeat that sequence. Being in the outdoors in this manner, has led to some remarkable wildlife encounters. I

Next
page →



was once circled in the Rockies by a curious Grey Wolf while following a Yellow-rumped Warbler from song perch to song perch. Likewise, I was also once followed by a young moose, while walking along the edge of a lake in Nova Scotia recording a Green Frog. I have had two families of Grey Jays in the Yukon converged on me as I held out some bird seed, resulting in sometimes three of them at a time being perched on me or the microphone as six others waited their turn! These encounters are truly unforgettable moments, and satisfy my reason to be outdoors with the birds and other critters.

Getting a rare recording though, can sometimes involve great patience. I have waited twelve wet stormy days on the North coast of Scotland to record a Northern Wheatear. When the time eventually came, the bird sat quite unconcerned on a drystone wall singing his heart out. I once visited a cliff in the Yukon four times, before gaining an acceptable recording of a Gyrfalcon. On one occasion, I stood by the fence of the Victoria airport for four hours waiting for a quiet period to record two or three minutes of the beautiful flight song of the Skylark. This is the only place they occur in North America.

Last year, I completed my largest project to date, titled 'Bird Songs of Canada, Chants d'Oiseaux du Canada'. The production comprises four volumes, and over one thousand recordings are used to illustrate four hundred and thirty-five bird species. These recordings are of the vocal sounds of birds in Canada and the Northern United States.



Birds have been on earth much longer than human beings, and are now known to be descendants of Theropod Dinosaurs. One of my major goals is to help people recognize birds through CDs and talks. We are all more likely to be sympathetic to protecting a marsh or woodland, when we know certain bird species in our neighbourhood may disappear without some help. My hope is that my recordings

will be a useful guide and reference tool for everyone interested in birds.●

You can learn more about John and his recordings at www.nevillerecording.com or you can search for John Neville in iTunes to purchase his recordings!