



# The Singing Life of Birds: The Art and Science of Listening to Birdsong

By Donald Kroodsma

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## The Singing Life of Birds: The Art and Science of Listening to Birdsong By Donald Kroodsma

Listen to birds sing as you've never listened before, as the world-renowned birdsong expert Donald Kroodsma takes you on personal journeys of discovery and intrigue. Read stories of wrens and robins, thrushes and thrashers, warblers and whip-poor-wills, bluebirds and cardinals, and many more bird. Learn how each acquires its songs, how songs vary from bird to bird and place to place, how some birds' singing is especially beautiful or ceaseless or complex, how some do not sing at all, how the often quiet female has the last word, and why.

Hear a baby wren and the author's own daughter babble as each learns its local dialect. Listen to the mockingbird by night and by day and count how many different songs he can sing. Marvel at the exquisite harmony in the duet of a wood thrush as he uses his two voice boxes to accompany himself. Feel the extraordinary energy in the songs just before sunrise as dawn's first light sweeps across this singing planet. Hear firsthand the unmistakable evidence that there are not one but two species of marsh wrens and two species of winter wrens in North America. Learn not only to hear but to see birds sing in the form of sonograms, as these visual images dance across the pages while you listen to the accompanying CD.

Using your trained ears and eyes, you can begin your own journeys of discovery. Listen anew to birds in your backyard and beyond, exploring the singing minds of birds as they tell all that they know. Join Kroodsma not only in identifying but in identifying with singing birds, connecting with nature's musicians in a whole new way.

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### **Bibliography**

- Rank: #1037901 in Books
- Brand: Peterson Books
- Published on: 2005-04-04
- Ingredients: Example Ingredients
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x 1.13" w x 7.00" l, 2.36 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 496 pages

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### Editorial Review

#### From Publishers Weekly

Kroodsma, professor emeritus at the University of Massachusetts, shares what he's learned from more than three decades of recording and analyzing the songs of birds in this intriguing, instructional book. Using "sonograms" (also known as sound spectrograms, they plot a sound's frequency over time), he illustrates the songs of 30 birds, from the familiar American robin to the exotic three-wattled bellbird of Costa Rica. He considers how birds acquire their songs (some species learn them; others have their tunes "encoded somehow in nucleotide sequences of the DNA"), what makes the songs unique, what functions they serve, and how they've evolved. No two species sound alike, of course, but groups of birds within each species have their own dialects, and individual birds have their own repertoires as well. A CD of the bird songs discussed is included, as are descriptions of the recording equipment Kroodsma used and explanations on how to make similar recordings and "sonograms." Kroodsma is a warm, encouraging guide to the world of birdsong, and his enthusiasm is contagious. Illus.

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#### From Scientific American

Just as the colors and patterns of the feathers that birds wear show tremendous variation, so, too, do the songs that they broadcast--but much more so. Songs may be absent, or they may range from a few simple genetically encoded notes endlessly repeated, to virtuosos of variety resulting from copying and learning, and even to seemingly endless improvisation. In *The Singing Life of Birds*, Donald E. Kroodsma, an emeritus professor of biology at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, celebrates the diversity through carefully chosen examples, one for each of the 30 years that he has studied birdsong. The book is best described by its subtitle, *The Art and Science of Listening to Birdsong*. Kroodsma shares his secrets--solid, practical advice on how to record bird sounds and how to "see" the sounds in sonograms, visual representations of the recordings of songs. A compact disc that accompanies the text aids readers in this task. He concludes: "There's no longer any mystique to what I have done all these years. Anyone can do this kind of stuff. And anyone should." His infatuation started with a single male Bewick's wren in his backyard in Oregon. Kroodsma discovered that this one wren sang 16 different songs, and in any singing bout it poured forth 40 to 50 renditions of one of them before switching to another, and then to another, and on and on. Meanwhile neighboring wrens hearing the song replied with the same one, while distant males sang other songs. Why? The proximal answers to why birds sing and what they sing run from the trivial to the fascinating: they enjoy it, they are primed by hormones that activate neuronal pathways, they respond to neighbors. But the ultimate, evolutionary question of why they sing and what they sing can be answered only by the comparative study of many species. Sometimes the anomalies provide a clue. For example, most individual wrens of different species learn many songs, and neighboring birds have similar songs--that is, they have dialects. The sedge wren of North America is an exception, however. Unlike other wrens and the sedge wrens of Central and South America, it has lost the ability to learn songs; it can only improvise on songs that are inscribed on its DNA. It is therefore unable to "match" the songs of its neighbors, and no dialects are found. So what is different about the North American sedge wrens in respect to other wrens? They are nomads that live in unpredictable habitat--meadows that can quickly dry up. As a consequence, these birds can never predict who their neighbors will be from one season to the next; hence, learning songs as youngsters for later use in song matching is pointless. Contrast this to the bellbird, a long-lived tropical bird in which individuals come to know one another well. These birds listen to one another all year long and learn the changes in others' songs throughout life. The young birds learn the latest of these variations, and the dialect of the population changes from year to year. Kroodsma takes us repeatedly into the field, into the

birds' world. He shares an all-night vigil with a whip-poor-will, tallying 20,898 identical repetitions of its one song for the entire night. He describes a brown thrasher that in one two-hour session sang 4,654 songs, 1,800 of them different (many borrowed from neighbors of other species). We enter the mind of the researcher as he tries to penetrate the mind of the bird. As much as we humans may enjoy the spectacle of birds flaunting their gaudy garb to the accompaniment of vocalizations and dancelike antics, the show is meant primarily to attract females. It is about sex--about who will be the father of the female's chicks. The males presumably enjoy putting on their show, but whatever else it may do for them (such as serving as a territorial marker), it is the females who have shaped the performance by their tastes and preferences, and these are as various as the 10,000 or so species of birds. Kroodsma emphasizes that we know little about why one or another bird has a specific repertoire. Yet despite the dazzling variety, it appears to me that all birdsongs have general requirements and constraints, and I believe that these shared characteristics may in themselves shed some light on the enigma. The primary requirement of a species' display song is that it must stand out from environmental noise--that is, it must carry--and it must be distinct from competing voices on the stage. Once females reward a specific song type with mating, then success breeds success, and whatever it is that attracts, the male that has more of it enjoys a huge advantage. But singing is not cheap: the performers are conspicuous to predators, and the displays are so costly in time and energy that the performers may appear to handicap themselves. I doubt, however, that it is the flaunting of handicap as such that attracts the females ("I am so strong and healthy that I have energy to waste on singing"). The singer must cater to the females' taste. As in our own fashions of clothing and music, there is not necessarily rhyme or reason in the specifically chosen attribute, except the most important one--it works. Konrad Lorenz reputedly said that birdsong is "more beautiful than necessary." It seems to me that it is just as likely that the flamboyant displays of song and dance, of feathers and, in the bowerbirds, of decorated love shacks are indeed necessary, because females compare, and they are picky. Arbitrary though their criteria of choice may be, it is significant that we humans also find many of the same displays beautiful.

*Bernd Heinrich is professor emeritus at the University of Vermont and author of many popular books on science. Among the most recent are *The Geese of Beaver Bog*, *Winter World* and *Mind of the Raven*.*

#### About the Author

A retired biology professor at the University of Massachusetts, Donald Kroodsma's work on bird song is legendary. His book *The Singing Life of Birds* won the 2006 John Burroughs Medal Award and the American Birding Association's Robert Ridgway Distinguished Service Award for excellence in publications pertaining to field ornithology. In 2003 the American Ornithologists' Union called him the "reigning authority on the biology of avian vocal behavior." Kroodsma received his Ph.D. at Oregon State University and has traveled all over North and South America researching bird song. He is a Fellow of the American Ornithologists' Union and the Animal Behavior Society and has published hundreds of academic and popular articles.

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