

BOOK REVIEW

The Singing Life of Birds, by Donald Kroodisma. 2007. Houghton Mifflin, New York. 482 pages, numerous black-and-white figures, accompanying CD. Paperback, \$16.95. ISBN-13: 978-0-618-84076-2.

"Somewhere, always, the sun is rising, and somewhere, always, the birds are singing." So begins the preface to this remarkable book, subtitled "The Art and Science of Listening to Bird Song." Kroodisma's ears and mind were opened to the world of bird sound over 30 years ago, when he started listening to and studying a Bewick's Wren in his back yard. And so began a lifetime of inquiry, of discovery, and of wonder, much of which is conveyed in *The Singing Life of Birds*, originally published in 2005 as a hardback. This very reasonably priced paperback makes the singing planet even more accessible.

It is a pleasure to read a book that is well-written about a fascinating subject, written by someone who knows his subject and can convey his passion in an infectious manner. *The Singing Life of Birds* celebrates the diversity of bird vocalizations through the mind of a brilliant scientist, yet one who writes with a nondogmatic, philosophical, and sometimes poetic perspective. For example, on page 22, as Kroodisma observes that "the ways to knowing are as diverse as the emerging colors on the glowing West Temple and Towers across the valley as I cycle up out of Zion Canyon."

The book starts with a very personal chapter entitled "Beginnings," which tells how Kroodisma became hooked on bird sound and reveals the magic and paradoxical simplicity and complexity of the subject. His subjects in this first chapter are the humble Bewick's Wren and American Robin. The former taught Kroodisma to listen, and the latter refreshes his memory annually. His tales of these two species relate with elegant simplicity the ways any of us can become a scientist—by observing (with our ears), by making field notes, and then by asking questions. The book's heart is five chapters on how songs develop, on dialects, on the extremes of male song, on dawn singing, and on female song. Appendices discuss songs and sounds on the accompanying CD and provide tips on recording bird sound. The book ends with helpful notes that reference subjects mentioned in the chapters, a solid bibliography, and an index.

The Singing Life of Birds is strongly illustrated with sonograms ("sound pictures"), for which we are given a friendly primer in the first chapter. These sonograms often correspond to songs on the CD so that one can see what one is hearing, what one is listening to—an invaluable tool for learning. When one learns to listen, not just to hear, then a world of questions is more easily accessible. How do birds acquire their calls and songs? Are they innate or learned, and learned from whom? What are the functions of these sounds? Why are these sounds the way they are? And how do things work—how do brain impulses translate to the voice box? An exploration of these questions is the book's core, via the results of lifelong studies of Kroodisma and other scientists. For example, the White-crowned Sparrow is noted for its dialects and the boundaries between them. How do dialects form? Why are the boundaries so pronounced? Do the dialects promote "inbreeding" and thus could they be a means to speciation? How persistent are the boundaries over generations? I won't spoil the answers or reveal the journeys one must take in search of them—you'll have to read the book, after which I imagine you will see (and hear) the world differently.

As a reviewer, one is supposed to find things wrong with a book, and I'm sure some people will find minor things to quibble about. One thing did strike me as odd: on page 46 the songs of Spotted Towhees in Marin County are described as "simple *drink-teeeeeeeee* songs," but to my ears the towhees here don't drink. Their song along the coast here is a simple trill, lacking an introductory note. Has it always been that way? Where is the switch to interior birds with more complex songs? Does it have taxonomic significance?

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To study or simply appreciate more fully the world of bird sound, to get into the minds of birds, is something that any of us can do—if we let ourselves. All we need is open ears, an open mind, a little time, and some guidance. *The Singing Life of Birds* is a guide to the singing planet from someone who hears it as a rainbow of color, whereas most of us hear it simply in black-and-white, or at best in gray tones. Don't despair—this book is like a box of colored pencils with which you can color your world of bird sound.

Steve N. G. Howell

32ND ANNUAL WFO CONFERENCE, LAS VEGAS, NEVADA: RETROSPECTIVE

From 27 to 30 September 2007, 140 attendees enjoyed WFO's unique blend of scientific paper sessions, workshops, panels, and field trips, as well as a book signing coordinated with the release of two exciting new books. The conference benefited from local coordination by Red Rock Audubon Society, making it a resounding success.

ORGANIZATIONAL BUSINESS

Jon Feenstra, Ed Pandolfino, and Debbie Van Dooremolen were elected to fill three positions on the board of directors that opened up as a result of last year's enactment of term limits and board expansion. Elisabeth Ammon and Gjon Hazard were re-elected to second terms. Jon, Ed, and Debbie take the places of Ted Floyd, Daniel Gibson, and Mike San Miguel, who were thanked for their years of active and effective service on behalf of the organization.

SCIENTIFIC PROGRAM

This year's scientific paper sessions, moderated by Debbie Van Dooremolen, featured 26 presentations by speakers from 12 states and 3 countries. Abstracts of all papers are at www.wfo-cbrc.org/WFO2007ConferenceAbstracts.pdf.

Many talks featured research on bird communities, conservation efforts, and species of interest (such as the Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Willow Flycatcher, and Clapper Rail) at natural and restored areas in the Las Vegas region, as well as elsewhere in Nevada and the Southwest. We also heard about the distribution of desert thrashers, shorebirds at shrinking reservoirs, nocturnal migration, Snowy Plovers on urban beaches, and tamarisk as bird habitat.

Several talks presented data from radio-telemetry studies, helping to illuminate the behavior of the Laysan Teal, dispersal of the American White Pelican, and pesticide contamination of the White-faced Ibis. Robert Gill delighted us with a second year of hot-off-the-satellite data from Bristle-thighed Curlews migrating across the Pacific Ocean.

A highlight was the session on genetic analysis and avian systematics by John Klicka and his students at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Following an introduction to the methods and approaches of molecular systematics, they revealed some surprising findings about the House Wren, Western Flycatcher, Solitary Vireo, Eastern Towhee, and western pine-oak birds in general. For many in the audience, this session helped bridge the gulf between molecular systematics and field-based ornithology.

Finally, Carol Beardmore and Philip Unitt presented a survey of endemic subspecies