

BIRD NOTES by Rick Pyeritz



It was only a bird call at evening, unidentified,
as I came from the spring with water, across the rocky back-pasture;
but so still I stood sky above was not stiller than sky in pail-water.

Years pass, all places and faces fade, some people have died,
and I stand in a far land, the evening still, and am at last sure
that I miss more the stillness at bird-call than some things that
were to fail later.

Robert Penn Warren
Ornithology in a World of Flux

‘Delight comes from plants and springs
and gardens and gentle winds
and flowers and the song of birds’

Libanios, 314 -- c. 393 AD

As a young lad, I spent part of my summers at my grandmother’s farm in southwestern Pennsylvania. Seventeen acres of woods, old fields, numerous flower beds, three acres of berries, an overfed dog, a spring house with a resident black snake, a stone quarry used to construct a large farm house, a large root cellar and chicken coop were enough to keep me occupied and let my imagination roam free for a time. I still remember the morning chill of even the hottest days, the fresh smell of the first part of day, and one particular bird song I remembered much later. Children are usually quite observant of the world around them; everything is new and fascinating, and there is much to excite a sense of wonder. We lose this ability as we grow older, I believe, because we no longer observe. Just as our muscles lose their tone and flexibility with disuse, our ability to wonder wanes because we no longer observe. John Burroughs in his essay, *The Art of Seeing Things*, states that:

“There is nothing in which people differ more than in their powers of observation. Some are only half alive to what is going on around them, others, again, are keenly alive....”

Whatever way we appreciate birds, we utilize our senses. Actually, we know what goes on in the world around us through our senses.

“The senses don’t just make sense of life in bold or subtle acts of clarity; they tear reality apart into vibrant morsels and reassemble them into a meaningful pattern.”

Diane Ackerman
A Natural History of the Senses

This is an active process that requires attention and practice. If we become proficient at being aware of our senses, we may feel a sense of wonderment. The definition of wonder, according to Webster, is.....

“a state of fascinated, questioning attention before what strikes us as strange beyond understanding---of, or relating things that excite amazed admiration.”

In order for a person to gain a sense of wonderment at anything---a bird, a flower, a Beethoven symphony, a fine wine---one has to pay close attention to the “vibrant morsels” from our senses. One has to observe. By observation, I mean a state of being receptive to the information that our senses are transmitting to us, whether it be smell, touch, taste, hearing, or vision. Observation is the process that stakes the sensory information from our environment and transforms it into wonder. Observe with our senses, and we may discover the truth revealed in the following quote by John Burroughs.....

“How insignificant appear most of the facets which one sees in his walks. In the life of the birds, the flowers, the animals, or in the phases of the landscape, or the look of the sky---insignificant until they are put through some emotional process and their true value appears.”

But beware, wonder is an infectious disease whose cure is to stay inside, close your windows, pull the blinds, and turn on the TV.

Vision is usually the first sense utilized when experiencing birds. Too often our eyesight is used to identify a species and move on. How often have we stopped and taken 10 minutes to watch a Robin on a lawn going about its business of staying alive? Have we ever examined the various shades of blue on the Blue Jay? What about the Cedar Waxing.....



“Consider the Cedar Waxwing’s refinement of sculpture and creamy consistency of hue. Could a conscious artistic inspiration have wrought it with greater sureness?”

Charlton Ogburn, Jr.
Atlantic Naturalist

Will visual observation always lead to a sense of wonder? Probably not, but I believe if one does not observe, one will never gain that ability. The child described in the following quote certainly had a sense of wonder.

“If child asked me a question that suggested even a faint awareness of the mystery behind the arrival of a migrant sandpiper on the beach of an August morning, I would be far more pleased than by the mere fact that he knew it was a sandpiper and not a plover.”

Rachel Carson
The Sense of Wonder

Hearing is the neglected sense of birding. In fact, hearing is a just plain neglected sense. We hear what we want or need to hear. We do not observe with our ears. John Burroughs had something relevant to say on this subject....

“I suspect it requires a special gift of grace to enable one to hear the bird songs; some new power must be added to the ear, or some obstruction removed. There are not only scales upon our eyes so that we do not see; there are scales upon our ears so that we do not hear. There is something elusive, indefinite, neutral about bird songs that makes them strike obliquely, as it were, upon the ear; and we are very apt to miss them. They are part of Nature, The Nature that lies about us, entirely occupied with her own affairs, and quite regardless of our presence. Hence it is with bird songs as it is with so many other things in Nature ---- they are what we make of them; the ear that hears them must be half creative.

John Burroughs
Bird Songs



Because our sense of hearing is so underutilized, I am not puzzled at how difficult it is to learn the owner of a particular bird song. Something needs to happen in order to make the song come alive in the imagination so it can be recalled. That something happens when we are paying attention, observing. Reflecting back to summer mornings at my grandmother's farm

I remembered a trilling song coming from one of the old fields. It was not only the song, but the smell, freshness and feel of the morning I remember. Years later, as a sophomore in college, imagine my reaction when I heard that call again and its owner identified, a Field Sparrow. Will I ever forget the identity of that call?

“Then, if to the time and place one could only add the association, or hear the bird through the Vista of the years, the song touched with the magic of youthful memories”

Gilbert White
The Natural History of Selborne

Imagine yourself at a salt marsh, searching for that elusive Black-crowned Night Heron --- alert for any movement in the rushes, or the calls of various crepuscular birds---how can one avoid the smell of the salt marsh or perhaps the salt breeze coming off the ocean. The same can be

said for the fresh fragrance of a country morning, the scent of decaying vegetation in autumn or the musty odor after a summer rain.

“Nothing is more memorable than a smell”

Diane Ackerman
A Natural History of the Senses

“I can remember waking at dawn on a May morning when I was seven years old; perhaps the dawn chorus of singing birds itself had woken me. The very air itself seemed to carry the spores of an unfolding day. The early morning air was significant to the sense of touch, and above all, the sense of smell made it evocative of the fullness of nature.”

F. Fraser Darling
On Becoming a Naturalist

If one pays close attention to one of the senses your ability to focus on the others usually follows.

Questions or Comments email me at eapyeritz@gmail.com.

