

June 2010: Meditations on Summer Birdsong

Although it has felt like summer for a few weeks now, with lupines blooming in roadside fields and the hum of crickets rising from our lawns, the season doesn't officially begin until the morning of June 21. By Summer Solstice migrating birds will all have passed through on their merry way to mates and nests further north. And those birds that spend their breeding season with us along western Penobscot Bay have hopefully found mates and settled down to the nature-driven task of building nests and laying eggs.

Thanks to the early start we got this spring, some birds have in fact already fledged young. Canada geese were observed with goslings in early May. Some robins were real early birds, hustling their young out of the nest by late May, just in time for another round or two before summer's end. In my neighborhood I can tell when the birds have paired up and are focused on family when they stop singing. The cardinal who woke us up like a siren each dawn is now given to only occasional fits of whistling, for example. Other birds have fallen silent altogether.

When you think about why birds sing in the first place, it makes sense. They certainly aren't doing it for our benefit (although it's an interesting question as to why humans not only generally enjoy birdsong but also find it soothing—are we naturally drawn to that which reminds us of our past lives as fellow animals in the wild?) For the male songbird, singing is primarily about establishing and defending a territory and finding a mate. Once he's paired up with a female and they're watching over a nest full of vulnerable eggs or nestlings, the last thing he wants to do is draw attention to them with a loud serenade.

So by Midsummer's Eve, our woods are generally quieter. But not wholly silent. A few birds seem to sing their way through summer, giving voice to the brief and glorious season. A walk on a trail along the forested slopes of Ragged Mountain or Mount Megunticook, for example, will be reliably accompanied by birdsong that, once recognized and heard a few times, may soon carry for you too the essence of the Maine woods in summer.

One of the most poignant of these is the song of the white-throated sparrow. This unassuming little bird spends its time kicking through leaves in the underbrush, one of those "little brown jobs" easily overlooked by the non-birder. But most of us recognize its voice, an initial note followed by a series of higher vibrating notes on the same pitch. My grandmother, who called the bird a "rain sparrow," told me that it was singing (with a slight vibrato), "We're going to have rain." Here in Maine, that sort of avian prediction is not often wrong. Bird books and other birders will tell you that the white-throat is singing, "Old Sam Peabody-Peabody-Peabody," or, depending on their nationality, "O Canada, Canada, Canada." However you hear it, that plaintive song is a common sound in the Maine woods, evoking for me vivid memories of running barefoot down dew-dampened paths lined by foggy spruces or picking raspberries in the awakening heat of early summer mornings.

Because its song is often transliterated as, “Trees, trees, murmuring trees,” the black-throated green warbler seems to be singing about his home habitat—the verdant green tapestry that makes up the canopy of the mixed deciduous forest I also think of as home. As I’m walking on a local trail surrounded by red oaks, maples, and scattered pines, that buzzy song from on high invariably makes me smile. This fist-sized bird with the sunny yellow face and black bib boasts a big voice. He sings well into day and longer into summer, too, after almost all the other warblers have closed their song books. With the trees fully leafed out, he’s almost impossible to see, but for some reason I find it reassuring to hear him and know he’s up there, as if a friend were near. And sometimes as I’m driving down the road his song will rise from the surrounding trees, an unexpected communication from the woods itself.

The black-throated green warbler is often accompanied by another of my summer favorites, the red-eyed vireo. This bird too is near invisible as it flits behind the lush green screen of leaves, but if you know what to listen for, his incessant voice cannot be missed. His repetitive, rollicking song seems to ask a question and then answer it: “Where are you? Here I am. [pause] Where are you? Here I am,” over and over again. A researcher tallying the output of one individual counted 20,000 song repetitions in a single day. Fortunately the song is a pretty one, reminiscent of a robin’s. Many summer afternoons, when other birds are taking a siesta, the red-eye will still be tirelessly singing away, pausing only occasionally to catch a caterpillar, knock it senseless against a tree branch, and then eat it. A non-descript gray bird (its red eyes are not noticeable except at close range), this one appeals to me because of his persistence and familiarity. With him around, at least we’ll never experience a “silent summer.”

A non-birder friend once asked me to join her on a walk in the woods to help her identify a bird that had been haunting her to the point of torment. She hadn’t been able to see it in the dense, coniferous forest near her home, so had nothing to go on to look it up in a bird book, but she avowed that it had the most beautiful birdsong she’d ever heard. When she said that, I knew what we were looking for: the winter wren. This elusive, tiny brown bird skulks around in the roots of upturned trees and in impenetrable thickets of spruce. But his voice arises like a crazy miracle of sound, seeming to issue from the dark heart of the very forest itself—a very long, ecstatic series of high-pitched, ethereal trills. It’s difficult to hear this song while walking alone on a mossy-banked trail, sunlight filtering in through the tall trunks old trees to illuminate wildflowers and ferns in the under story, and not believe in fairy music.