

NATURE TALES FROM A WANDERER
Red-Tailed Hawk – WOW! – Twice
Part II: At Bethpage State Park

Joe Grupp

Part I of this essay, as it appeared in the February issue of the *Skimmer*, took place at my backyard feeder when a Red-tailed Hawk swooped down upon and missed some Rock Pigeons on the ground. Ten days later, I was once again surprised by a Red-tailed Hawk. This time it was at Bethpage State Park. That is where today's story, Part II, takes place.

On the Greenbelt Trail going north, just leaving the wooded area that edges the golf course, where the trail crosses the bike path and the entrance road, I was stopped dead in my tracks when I spotted a large raptor perched among the branches of a nearby pitch pine. An excellent naked eye view and an even better view through binoculars readily identified it as an immature Red-tailed Hawk. Standing there, I studied it as the branches and the long needles of the tree surrounded it in a tunnellike way.

The brown back of the bird was unevenly flecked with small individual white spots that were more evident from this distance than they are from farther away. I studied the dark and light bands on the tail, then the white chest, and finally the head. The bird turned its head occasionally at times, seeming as if it was also observing me, which it probably was for the practical reason of determining if I may have been a threat to it or not. I concentrated my observation for a while on its bill, noticing the lighter color of its base and its darker tip. Most impressive was the shape of the upper bill and how it curved so sharply from a relatively horizontal position near the face to the end of the lower bill and then the near vertical position of the tip, and that the tip extended down well below the lower bill.

The bird was within ten yards of me, so close that two other people, out walking, stopped and with naked eye watched the bird. All of a sudden, as the three of us engaged in conversation, the bird hopped up a branch and with a pause was then in the air. I lost the bird for a second, but then couldn't help but spot it as it was flapping wildly in an even closer leafless tree. It then seemed to lose control and cartwheel to a lower branch, on which it perched. Then I knew what was happening, as it was holding a squirrel, by its rear leg, in its right talon — WOW! Perched there, both the hawk and the squirrel were motionless as if nothing had changed in their worlds.

After a time, there was more flapping and a "falling" to the ground and all again was motionless. The hawk then extended and loosely cupped its wings so its prey, the squirrel, could not be seen. After another quiet pause, a flurry of wings lifted them off the ground a few feet and back down even closer to where we were standing. This time the bird was



facing us and we could see the prey hidden within the cupped wings. The yellow talon of the hawk seemed to be pressing the prey down hard onto the ground, preventing it from moving, holding it there. There was no struggle as the hawk maneuvered its bill in what appeared to be a gentle manner that then dispatched the prey by snapping its spine from the back just below the head.

I watched the hawk with the others for a few minutes as it once again flew up into a tree and perched with the prey in one talon. The bird then flew to a tree farther away. Finally it flew off, prey still in the talon, to a far tree across the golf course. We three strangers that were drawn together by hawk and squirrel then went our separate ways.

It was about a half-hour later that I drove out the entrance road on the way home and saw the hawk still holding its prey in a tree, well across the golf course. There were no signs that the hawk had eaten any of it. I drove on, knowing that soon the very fabric that was the squirrel would in part become the fabric and life-giving energy of the hawk. One life was sacrificed so that another could continue.

One word sums up the two close observations of the Red-tailed Hawk that became this essay. That word is simply WOW!

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BACKYARD SURVEY DATA NEEDED!

Joe Grupp

For several years, SSAS's Research Committee has been conducting a study to document the bird species found in the SSAS area and to estimate their numbers. We greatly appreciate input from anyone that feeds and/or observes birds in their yard or neighborhood. Please do not hesitate to submit your observations, even if you make only very few.

Simply record the date, time, and the number or approximate number of each species. At the end of each month, please mail or e-mail your record to me at the appropriate address listed below, or hand it to me at our monthly meeting. Survey sheets are available at SSAS events and at ssaudubon.org or you can create your own.

Please mail your data to Mr. J. Grupp, Research Chairperson, 660 Edgemere Ave., Uniondale NY 11553 or e-mail Birdstudyjoeg02@aol.com.

HICKS HORTICULTURAL FAIR

Therese Lucas

An early peek at spring awaits you at Hicks Nurseries, Jericho Turnpike, Westbury from February 29 to March 9 during the annual free Flower & Garden Show, which includes a Horticultural Fair on the last weekend.

SSAS has once again been invited to join other environmental and gardening organizations to present a table display during the Horticultural Fair, from 9 A.M. to 5 P.M. on March 8 & 9.



The landscape displays are creative, pleasing to the eye and spirit, and set one's imagination afire with thoughts and plans for spring plantings.

Come and stimulate your mind and heart among the varied offerings. There are classes, informative handouts, landscape and organization displays, and, of course, that first box of pansies of the season.

Hope to see you there; bring a friend.

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SSAS FLEA MARKET ON MAY 31

Maureen Rube

As mentioned briefly in last month's newsletter, South Shore Audubon plans to hold another flea market this year to raise money for our disadvantaged children's environmental camp scholarship program. It will be at the Youngferts' home in Franklin Square on Saturday, May 31st or, in the event of rain, on Sunday, June 1st.

We are asking your help again to make this as successful as last year's. First, please save any unwanted items that are in good shape or any new items that you do not want. We need books, tools, glassware, jewelry, toys, bric-a-brac, chairs and other small pieces of furniture, household items, etc. Second, please consider volunteering to help with pickups of items during the week prior to the flea market. Our small committee was kept extremely busy trying to make all the runs last year. Third, circle the date on your calendar and plan to come to buy lots of great things! (One man's garbage is another man's treasure!) It's a fun way to socialize with members of our group and, at the same time, to contribute to a good cause.

If you have any questions, feel free to call me at 352-4327.

IMPACT OF WIND POWER ON BIRDS AND BATS

Editor's note: The following comes from the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation's website. Audubon New York alerted chapters about the draft guidelines mentioned below and is preparing comments.

New York's wind resource has the potential to provide more than 5000 megawatts (MW) of clean energy. As of the end of 2007, six wind farms are operating with a rated capacity of 423 MW from 263 turbines in Madison, Wyoming, Lewis, and Erie counties. Five other wind farms are under construction in Clinton, Wyoming, and Steuben counties, and will provide an additional 405 MW from 238 turbines when completed sometime in 2008. More than 30 additional wind farm siting proposals are actively undergoing environmental review by DEC biologists and environmental analysts.

The Department of Environmental Conservation has released for public review proposed Guidelines for Conducting Bird and Bat Studies at Commercial Wind Energy Projects. These guidelines inform potential wind developers of the information DEC needs about wind farm sites to assess impacts to birds and bats. The guidelines were developed through a stakeholder process, sponsored by the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority, which included industry representatives as well as bird and bat biologists from government agencies, academia, and non-governmental environmental groups.



Wind energy development is an important component of Governor Eliot Spitzer's clean renewable energy initiative in New York State as well as of New York's ability to achieve the Renewable Portfolio Standard of twenty-five percent (25%) of energy produced from renewable sources by the year 2013. With increased construction of wind turbines comes increased potential for birds and bats to collide with the towers and rotating blades. The proposed guidelines outline DEC's recommendations to commercial wind energy developers on how to characterize bird and bat resources at wind energy sites, and how to document and estimate bird and bat mortality resulting from collisions with turbines. The protocols in the guidelines are intended to provide comparability of data collection among sites and between years so that the information from each site contributes to a statewide understanding of the ecological effects of wind energy generation. Protocols for both pre-construction studies and post-construction monitoring are included.

The guidelines are now available for review [via PDF file at <http://www.dec.ny.gov/energy/40966.html>]. Comments will be received until March 7 via mail to Brianna Gary, NYSDEC Bureau of Habitat, 625 Broadway 5th Floor, Albany, NY 12233-4756 or via email. To provide comments or for further information, contact the Habitat Protection Section at fwhabat@gw.dec.state.ny.us [yes, that's "habtat" according to the website].

A GUIDE TO BIRDING BY EAR (AND LISTENING TO NATURE IN GENERAL)

James F. Remsen, Jr., Ph.D.

Editor's note: This March is the sixth anniversary of a pre-meeting "birding by ear" presentation that was given by SSAS's best no-eyes-needed birder, Jim Remsen. At the time, I asked him to e-mail me the file for his handout, intending to print it in a spring issue of the *Skimmer*, but every April and May issue since then hasn't had enough space. So, finally, here it is; as Jim suggested, I've checked the list of websites at the end and have updated it where needed, with comments in brackets.

Add a new dimension to your birding and become a better birder!

Why should I learn bird songs? There are two very good reasons to cultivate your ear birding skills.

First of all, listening to bird songs and other sounds of nature is hugely enjoyable. We all got into birding in the first place because we enjoy it, right? Well, the sounds made by birds and other animals (not to mention the inanimate components of the ecosystem, like water, wind, rain, etc.) provide a welcome respite from our daily routine and provide great enjoyment in listening.  The planet is musical! Many of us, however, have forgotten how to listen to this music.

Second, identifying birds and other animals by ear is an invaluable field skill. When asked to recommend my favorite birding places, I will sometimes suggest a place that gets the reaction, "I've gone there, even during spring migration, but I never see any birds." Of course, the key word there is *see*; an ear birder might go into the same place and come out with a list of dozens of species, most if not all identified by sound. You will simply be aware of so many more birds once you know their songs. Just think how you might feel if an unusual bird was present in a place where you go birding, and you missed it because you didn't know its song, and seeing it was impossible due to poor light, thick foliage, or other obstacles!

Okay, so why don't more birders learn bird songs then? Usually people say that it is too hard, or they don't have the ear for it, or some other such thing. While it's true that some people are limited due to poor hearing or difficulty in discriminating pitches, the fact is that most people can learn bird songs if they apply the requisite time and effort. There is no magic involved in identifying a bird from a single song or call note, any more than there is in identifying one by a fleeting glimpse. The skilled ear birder has cultivated his or her skills over many years of study and practice; the birder who identifies migrating hawks half a mile away by sight has done the same thing.

So how do I start cultivating this skill? Years ago, people learned bird songs the hard way. They actually tracked down every bird they heard until they identified it by sight. Not easy to do! Nowadays, with the aid of modern recording technology, the sounds of many species of birds

and other wildlife are preserved on commercially available tapes and compact discs, as well as on the Internet. Thus, the student can learn these sounds by repeated listening to these recordings at home or in the field. Remember, though, that bird songs vary geographically, just as human speech does. The bird on the tape, CD, or website you are listening to may not sound exactly like the one you hear on your next field trip. So you must reinforce your listening to recordings with field experience. Although the details of a bird's song may vary from place to place, the overall quality and pattern of the song will be the same. Thus, it is the general quality and pattern of each song that you should seek to learn, rather than trying to commit each recording to memory.

The biggest obstacle you will have to learning how to bird by ear is not, however, the great variety of sounds that birds can make. It's the fact that you will first have to learn how to listen to birds, to be aware of their vocal presence around you.

Note that hearing and listening are not the same thing. It is possible to hear something and not listen to it. Hearing is a passive process, whereby sound waves set up vibrations in the air which strike our eardrums and are transmitted to our other auditory organs and, ultimately, the brain. This happens all the time. But the brain filters out many sounds that we are not pressed to pay attention to, like the air conditioner whirring away in the office, or distant car alarms, or bird songs! These unimportant stimuli are subsequently ignored by us.

Listening, by contrast, is an active process, requiring deliberate close attention to the sound source. Our species evolved listening to the sounds of nature, but as the world has grown noisier, our ears have been trained to ignore just about anything quieter than the noise of an automobile motor, the roar of an airplane, or the hum of a factory. Before worrying about which bird voice belongs to which bird, many of us will have to learn how to hear birds in the first place!

To do this, you can try two things (and I recommend you try both of these). One is to plan field trips where you will stop and listen to every sound present, with special focus on birds or other natural sounds. Choose a favorite birding place, find a spot that is favorable to you, and concentrate on every sound you hear for as long as possible. Do not worry about whether you can identify the sounds or not; just listen for them. You may be surprised at how much is audible. You may need to concentrate for a long time (half an hour or more) before moving on. Do not rush. Listening is the point!

The second method is to simulate listening to a natural environment by using a soundscape recording (described below).

What types of recordings of bird songs are available? There are literally hundreds upon hundreds of recordings of sounds of nature available, covering sounds from all around the world. Today, you can not only learn

how to identify the birds in your backyard by sound, but you can also learn the species you are likely to hear on your next safari to Africa, your upcoming trip to Great Britain, your birding tour to Costa Rica, and dozens of other places.



Recordings available fall into two general types: audio guides and soundscapes. Audio guides are recordings specifically designed to help you learn to identify birds or other wildlife. They usually consist of a narrator who identifies each bird by name, followed by examples of the bird's sounds. Sometimes there is a little extra narration that tells you some interesting facts about the bird's life when you hear its song.

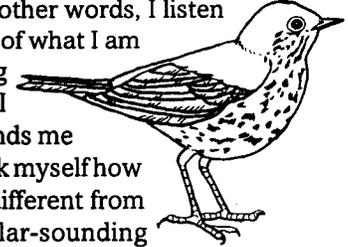
Soundscapes are recordings that are meant to portray the variety of sounds to be heard in some environment, either natural or man-made. They usually do not contain narration or identification of the sounds on the recording (although they may be accompanied by descriptive notes that identify the sounds for you). Examples of soundscape recordings might be a CD of a morning bird chorus; a flowing stream; or several different animal choruses from a marsh, a forest, or some other habitat. Soundscapes are produced in different ways. Sometimes a person will simply take their recording equipment outdoors, set it up, and record every sound exactly as it was produced, and those recordings are subsequently published. Other producers mix different recordings together in the studio to simulate the way a habitat might sound. In any case, soundscape recordings are valuable to birders because they provide enjoyable listening plus a way to test your identification skills. Because they typically do not contain announcements of the species heard on the CD or tape, you just put on the soundscape of your choice and then try to identify as many sounds as you can! You will need to listen carefully, so your listening skills will be improved. I have listed a few recommended audio guides and soundscapes in this article.

How should I study my recordings? There are three things you need to know to get the most out of bird song recordings: repetition, repetition, and repetition. You need to listen as often as possible, not just during the spring and summer, when most birds are singing, but in the fall and winter too. You look at birds all year, so you should listen to them all year too. It's the best way to cultivate your listening skills.

To prepare for your birding trips, consider preparing a custom bird song tape which you can use to help you learn the birds found in the place you will be visiting. If you have been there before, you may have an idea about some of the species you may find; lists can also be found in the literature or online. With the aid of a computer and appropriate software, you can also "cannibalize" your bird song CDs, transfer the bird calls you need for study to your computer, and burn your own custom bird song or

soundscape CDs for study and enjoyment, containing just the sounds you want to review.

I usually listen to some form of nature recording every week, for at least two hours or more. I've been doing this for about thirty years now. And when I say listen, I mean I listen. I don't play the recording as a background to other activities, like eating or writing or working (sometimes I will do this, but not most of the time). I put it on and listen to it as closely as if I were actually listening to these birds or wildlife in the field. I ask myself questions like, was that a Downy Woodpecker I heard in the background? Or, doesn't that bird sound a lot like a Wood Thrush (pictured), only at a higher pitch? In other words, I listen actively, and impressions of what I am hearing are always going through my mind. When I hear a new bird that reminds me of one I already know, I ask myself how the new species sounds different from the more familiar, similar-sounding species. Allow any thoughts that come into your mind to guide your listening. You will get much more out of it that way. Most of all, enjoy it! You will be hearing the unique voices of the planet we call home, and they will never cease to amaze you with their variety and beauty.



I hope these hints will help you get started in learning how to become an ear birder. A whole new world of birding excitement awaits you! Your life list will increase more quickly and you will gain a new appreciation for the wildlife with which we share our world.

Recommended Sound Recordings

(Note: These recordings are geared mostly toward eastern and central North America.)

Audio Guides for Beginners

Elliott, L. and M. Read. *Common Birds and Their Songs*. A full-color book of 50 common species of North American birds. Each is shown in color photos, and a one-page description of each is also given. The book includes a superb compact disc containing the songs of all the birds shown in the book. Each species is placed on a separate track on the CD for easy access to its sounds. (One CD; no cassette version available.)

Walton, R. and R. Lawson. *Birding by Ear: Eastern/Central and More Birding by Ear: Eastern/Central*. From the Peterson Field Guide Series, these collections contain 85 and 91 species of birds, respectively, with helpful narration that provides hints on how to remember the songs. Similar-sounding birds are grouped together for comparison. One disadvantage: each bird species is not on a separate CD track for easy access. (Three CDs or three cassettes in each volume.)

Audio Guides for Advanced Ear Birders

Elliott, L. *Stokes Field Guide to Bird Songs, Eastern Region*. A comprehensive guide to the songs and calls of almost 400 species of birds from eastern and central North

America. Each bird is heard for about 35 seconds on average. There are no more than two birds on each track of the CD version, and many species are individually tracked. This is the best comprehensive bird song guide available for the eastern region. (Three CDs or three cassettes.)

Soundscapes

Elliott, L. *Songbird Portraits*. A series of superb stereo soundscapes of North American birds, produced by one of the foremost nature sound recordists in the world. The recordings average several minutes each and usually feature at least one main bird vocalist plus numerous others in the background. For pleasant listening as well as a test of one's ability to identify bird songs, this disc is hard to top. (One CD; no cassette version available.)

Gibson, D. *By Canoe to Loon Lake/Dawn by a Gentle Stream*. Two soundscapes, each about half an hour long, composed of the sounds of birds and other wildlife of the northeastern United States and Canada. The first creates an imaginary canoe trip along a Canadian river, accompanied by the sounds of kinglets, White-throated Sparrows, thrushes, loons, and others. The second is a dawn bird chorus by a woodland stream.

Storm, J. and the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology. *Great Smoky Mountains National Park*. A series of recordings made in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, in all seasons. These are some of the most astonishing natural soundscapes ever recorded. Listening to them is almost an eerie experience at times; it is as if someone literally took the feeling of being in the wilderness and stuck it onto a CD. No editing or mixing was done in the studio; the sounds are presented just as they were recorded in the field. Thus, at times the wildlife sounds distant, at others close by. The amount of detail captured in the recordings is remarkable, and some passages are very quiet (you can even hear snow falling off of tree branches in one winter sequence). For optimum appreciation, these should be listened to with headphones. Not just birds, but insects, amphibians, and mammals are presented, along with the sounds of wind, rain, and water. There are three separate CDs or tapes in the series: *Storms in the Smokies*, *Summer and Fall*, and *Winter and Spring*.



Where to Find Sound Recordings of Birds and Other Wildlife

A number of SSAS members have asked me where to buy bird song recordings or other recordings of wildlife sounds. Generally, you will need to either go to a nature store or order them from a catalog or the Internet (these are my current major sources of material). In the days when vinyl LPs were popular, a number of record stores carried bird song records, but nowadays major record chains do not carry them. Here are some places for you to

try. There are other sources, but these will give you a good idea of what's available today.

1. South Shore Audubon Society's Online Store (ssaudubon.org; once on the web page, look for the "Online Store" link, then click on "Bird Songs"). SSAS's online store sells a wide variety of both audio guide and soundscape recordings (including most of those mentioned above), and the prices are excellent. If our online store has the CD or tape you are looking for, please consider buying it from us, as all proceeds help support the chapter.

2. Natys.com (www.natys.com). This web site sells the catalogue of Sittelle, which is Europe's largest producer of natural sound CDs and is based in France. They have a huge catalogue (over 90 titles in print as of this writing). The majority of these are soundscapes from around the world, but they also have audio guides, mostly of European wildlife. Among their many excellent CDs are "All the Bird Songs of Britain and Europe," "Bird Songs of Paris," "Songs Through the Seasons," "African Sounds at Dusk," "American Forests and Lakes," and "Yutaje: The Lost World of Venezuela." Many of their titles are not available in the U.S., but can be easily obtained from the website [if you know French; the English version seems to be gone].

3. CD Nature Soundscapes (www.naturenet.com.br). Based in Brazil, this company is run by Brazilian nature sound recordist Beto Bertolini and includes CDs of natural soundscapes from Central and South America [website may be defunct].

4. EarthEar (www.earthear.com). This company sells mostly soundscape CDs, not only of nature but also of man-made sounds. A great selection; this is the only U.S. source I know of for some Australian and British productions. [The website is being rebuilt and refers customers to www.cdemusic.org for titles that they used to carry.]

5. Naturesongs (www.naturesongs.com). You can listen to many bird songs and other nature sounds online here. This site is run by recordist Doug Von Gausig; he also sells homemade CDs of some of his recordings.

6. The Birding Shop Audio/Visual Page (www.thebirdingshop.com/audio_visual.htm). This website is based in Australia. You can find many Australian bird recordings here.

7. American Birding Association Birding Store (www.abasales.com; click on "Multimedia"). Has a wide selection of bird recordings.

8. Los Angeles Audubon Society Online Nature Store (www.losangelesaudubon.org/store/). Good selection of recordings.

9. Wildsounds (www.wildsounds.com). Based in Great Britain. Incredible selection of audio guides and soundscapes from around the world; many not available in the U.S.

10. Natureandco.com (www.natureandco.com/store-nz/redirect_old/audio.htm). Based in New Zealand. Features CDs of the sounds of New Zealand's birds.

