

BOOK REVIEW

Listening to a Continent Sing: Birdsong by Bicycle from the Atlantic to the Pacific, by Donald Kroodsma. 2016. Princeton University Press. xvi + 287 pp., 125 line drawings, 381 QR codes. Clothbound, \$29.95. ISBN 978-0-691-16681-0.

Like any good travelogue, *Listening to a Continent Sing* is built on a variety of aspects. Naturally there are stories of adventure and mishap, as well as personal reflections on family, career, and revisiting memorable places. History, geology, and the culture of cycling all have major roles in the story. The main topic of the book, however, is bird song. Kroodsma reflects on his career of investigation into the subject as he traverses the country, noting the birds and their songs along the way.

Kroodsma and his son embarked on a 71-day, 5000-mile bicycle tour from Virginia to Oregon, retracing the 1976 TransAmerica route. He made every effort to experience the dawn chorus each morning. The best musings on bird song are those based on Kroodsma's past research experience, such as the importance of repertoire size in the Song Sparrow or the likely species boundaries between the eastern and western Marsh Wrens. At other times, Kroodsma explores various questions such as similarities in singing style among different species of vireos, local dialects in the Dickcissel, and amazing mimicry in the European Starling. Other descriptions of the auditory landscape are purely aesthetic, such as the paragraph detailing the dawn chorus of singing Brewer's Sparrows (p. 167).

What really sets this book apart is its *soundtrack*, a multimedia approach to storytelling that adds much more information than could fit in a 287-page book. There are 381 "quick response" (QR) codes peppered throughout the pages. By scanning a QR code with a smartphone, the reader can listen along to the song or soundscape being described in the text, some of them recorded during the trip. Helpfully, the book begins with instructions on how to scan the QR codes to listen to and download recordings. It also includes a brief introduction to programs that can produce a sonogram of the sound, to help readers gain more from the auditory experience. As Kroodsma says, "as I have learned over the last 40 years, learning to hear with your eyes will give your ears a big boost" (p. vii). The vast majority of QR codes are of bird sounds, but a few represent the soundscape of a cycling trip (e.g., barking dogs, bubbling geysers), and some of my favorites are interviews with people encountered along the way. It's fun to hear everyday people, with dialects of their own, describe how they experience and enjoy birds and bird song. I made the mistake of first opening this book on an airplane, without the access to the Internet necessary to scan the QR codes and listen along. It was still a fun travelogue containing interesting tidbits of information, but I had to go back and listen to the recordings to get the full, engaging experience. Another dimension to the multimedia experience is the inclusion of 125 line drawings throughout the pages. Most are of birds, but a few depict landscapes or people, adding a visual component to the reader's immersion in the journey.

When a QR code is scanned, it brings up on the smartphone a page with one or more audio clips to play, text describing the sound and often analyzing it in some way, and a photo of the species. All 381 recordings of over 200 species are also searchable on the website, <http://www.listeningtoacontinentsing.com>, where recordings are downloadable, searchable, and also organized by species and by state. The photos on the website are the main source of errors accompanying a very well-edited book. For example, the page corresponding to recording VA-116 of a singing Common Grackle shows a photo of a female Boat-tailed Grackle, and the page corresponding to recording VA-56 (Alder Flycatcher) also includes an inexplicable photo of a Baltimore Oriole. Such mistakes are, however, few and far between.

In all, *Listening to a Continent Sing* is most valuable for its unique approach to multimedia storytelling and learning. The system of QR codes linking book and

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online resources works tremendously well for these purposes, and I expect to see this technique become common if not the norm for reference books as well. As a travelogue, the story of Donald and David Kroodsmas's adventure is heartfelt, inspiring, and interesting. For an enthusiast of birding by ear, the accompanying recordings and diverse information throughout enrich the experience, although Kroodsmas's *The Singing Life of Birds* (2005, Houghton Mifflin) makes a better reference for much of the same information. Readers will enjoy *Listening to a Continent Sing* as a story and to see and hear birds from Kroodsmas's experienced point of view.

Lauren B. Harter

THANKS TO WESTERN BIRDS' REVIEWERS AND ASSOCIATE EDITORS

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In addition our associate editors, Kenneth P. Able, Matthew J. Baumann, Daniel S. Cooper, Thomas Gardali, Daniel D. Gibson, Robert E. Gill, Ronald R. LeValley, and Dan Reinking, and Daniel R. Ruthrauff, plus featured-photo editor John Sterling, also serve as reviewers of the manuscripts whose review they coordinate, and often of additional manuscripts at the request of other associate editors. *Western Birds* is not possible without their teamwork and dedication. And I thank book-review editor Lauren Harter, assistant editor Dan Gibson, graphics manager Ginger Johnson, photo editor Peter LaTourrette, and webmaster/designer/typographer Tim Brittain for continuing in their roles as vital players in our team producing *Western Birds*.

Philip Unitt