

Preface

Creating *Music of the Birds* has been a labor of love. The seed for the book was planted nearly fifteen years ago when I began recording birds to produce audio guides. In bookstores, I found few popular books on bird song and none that focused on the aesthetics of listening—on how to appreciate nature's finest music. To fill this vacuum became my goal. Little did I realize how much work would be involved. Not only did I have to gather sound recordings, I had to produce high-quality photographs of singing birds and find poems and prose to support my theme.

The process of gathering materials was wonderfully educational. I learned to identify bird songs in the process of making recordings. Many times in my travels, I would record a bird in the twilight of dawn, long before I had a chance to see and identify it. Later in the morning, I would run after the singer with binoculars, hoping to get my first view. Taking photographs brought more new experiences. For the first time I saw birds up close and was thrilled to see them shake out their songs with abandon. Discovering and reading poems and natural history prose was also moving—I was pleased beyond measure to find beautiful and revealing words describing the avian musicians that had become so important to my life.

When I began my survey of literature, I made a special effort to uncover sensitive writing that captured the essence of the listening experience—of encountering our native birds singing in natural surroundings. To my surprise and delight, by far the richest source of material was from naturalists and poets of the 1800s and early 1900s, including such familiar names as Thoreau, Burroughs, Emerson, and Whitman, along with a host of other less well known writers. All had a knack for describing the listening experience—their observations were lucid, alive, and timeless, and they freely acknowledged the effect of bird song on their emotions.

The early writers conveyed sentiment so well that I did not see the need to draw upon contemporary poetic works. This is not meant to belittle modern poets, who are evolving new styles, but it gave me the opportunity to celebrate early writers and bring to light their wonderful poems and prose—contributions that could easily be lost with the passing of time. As Liberty Hyde Bailey observed in 1903, "The good New England poets, did they not know nature? Have they not left us the very essence and flavor of the fields and woods and the sky?"

To keep in tune with the times, I consulted numerous contemporary scientific studies that elucidate the biology of bird song. Suffice it to say that my text is illuminated by the painstaking work of hundreds of ornithologists who have uncovered new and useful information. To reduce clutter and maintain the aesthetic and poetic flavor of the book, such studies have not been individually referenced. In my sources section, however, I recommend a number of texts for those who want to explore the science of bird song more deeply.

Now that the book is done, I am pleased at how well the elements fit together. Read through the text at your leisure. Listen to the songs on the disc. Enjoy the photographs. Savor the quotations. And be assured that a world of heightened appreciation awaits you if you go outdoors and embrace the music of the birds. But beware! You may end up like me, waiting impatiently for the snow and ice to melt, listening quietly for the first cheerful notes, and finally celebrating with joy those glorious days when spring has arrived and the birds are in full song.

Acknowledgments

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Marsh Wren

*O there's a song on the fragrant breeze,
From every bird that sings,
And the rapture of their melodies,
Through all the welkin rings.*

—CLARENCE HAWKES