

Flight Call

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This is a short story, a piece of fiction. We encourage readers to read this piece before the interview with the author that follows.

Matthew could hear the bird singing and struggled to thread the tape over the heads and onto the takeup reel. It was dusk, and the wind was dying down. Alone, in a cemetery, he had stopped to wait under a spruce tree at the edge of the bordering forest. He'd walked down the road a mile to get there because she'd told him it would be a good place to make a recording. He was learning the songs of the birds in his neighbourhood. It was almost as if the bird were singing to greet me, he thought, and now I can't get the recorder started. He'll probably fly away before I can capture his song.

But the bird sang again, and this time the tape was moving. The song was short, sometimes two tones and sometimes three, repeated after about five seconds of silence. Matthew couldn't see the bird; he could hear them better than he could see them. The bird's song penetrated Matthew's ear and vibrated the drum, almost as if to say "Hear me!" What was the bird trying to tell him? He couldn't understand. The bird kept repeating it.

He turned off the recorder and put down his microphone. The song was coming from high up in some nearby spruce, or maybe one of the poplars. If he moved toward the sound, he might see the bird. He stepped around as quietly as he could, but the decaying spruce needles and poplar leaves on the ground rustled as he crept nearer. The singing stopped. Matthew looked up, raising his binoculars and scanning the branches of the spruce trees. Then he saw it. It was flying away. It was high and moving fast. He couldn't make out any markings. It was small, and brownish or greyish. That described a lot of birds. But he had the song on tape. Now he could listen to the Audubon

recordings he'd borrowed from the library until he found one that was like it. Then he'd know the name of the bird.

He moved to another edge of the cemetery. It was getting darker, but maybe he'd find another bird. Not a chickadee; they were all around and he knew their song: a descending minor third, two notes—or three if you listened carefully. The third one was repeated in the same breath as the second, the same pitch and barely distinguishable. The thought struck Matthew that birds must breathe. He stood still for a few minutes, listening, but all he heard was the buzz of a distant chainsaw and the occasional sound of a passing automobile. He wondered what the birds made of those common sounds—ignored them, probably, unless they interfered with the messages going out to the other birds. What about airplanes? Did they stop singing when a plane flew overhead? Did they think planes were birds? Did birds think at all? Did they have intentions or just instincts? How could anyone ever find out? He made a mental note to look that up.

A red squirrel chattered at him. He saw it going out of sight up the back side of a spruce tree. Maybe it had returned to its nest and been startled to see him there. It was a loud, unpleasant, rattling chatter. It sounded like the squirrel was scolding him. *Tchit tchit*, you scared the bird away. *Tchit tchit*, you don't belong here. The grey ones didn't make those sounds. Birds must know the sounds red squirrels made. Probably they wouldn't want to nest too close to them. Want? Do animals want? This squirrel certainly acted like it wanted him to go. He moved away to let the squirrel be. It was coming on dark. He closed up the recorder and unplugged the microphone and put them both away. He thought he'd better walk home.

Before supper he listened back to his recording. It was clear and distinct. Soon he'd check it against the Audubon recordings. It was good to have it there, so he wouldn't get confused by the succession of Audubon songs. He'd tried that before, listening to a birdsong and memorizing it, only to have it come apart after a minute of Audubon. But the recording he made would remind him. It wouldn't change.

It was his turn to make supper for him and Madeline. It would be a stir-fry because she liked to eat healthful foods. Tofu and vegetables over brown rice. He liked to use an electric rice cooker. Simple and sure. He coated the inside of cooker with canola oil, then measured and poured in a cup of rice and two cups of water—and a little more water. The tofu had been marinating in a garlic and soy sauce, so he added that to some carrots and celery and broccoli and green and red pepper he'd diced up, and tossed them into the wok that was sautéing onions and garlic.

At supper, Madeline asked him about the recording. “Did you get anything?”

“Yes, I played it back before supper. It’s nice and clear.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know yet.” He told her about the bird, how it had sung for a minute and then when he tried to get closer, it flew off. He hadn’t gotten a good look, but the song would tell.

Madeline was more experienced at bird watching. She could see them more easily, and she was good with binoculars. He still had some trouble using them. He’d practiced picking up the binoculars and moving quickly to a branch that he’d just looked at with his naked eye, but he didn’t think he was getting any better at it. She also knew what she was looking at, most of the time. It was still a puzzle to him, except for the birds that were common, like the white-throats and the nuthatches, the goldfinches and the song sparrows. He’d known what blue jays and cardinals looked like since childhood, but most birds had just been birds. His parents hadn’t paid much attention to them either. To his mother a bird was a bird, a flower a flower. No use going any further with that when you had mouths to feed, a house to clean and bills to pay. But now that he was noticing them, it was like they were coming into their own distinct shapes and colours and sounds. And, of course, they could tell each other apart, right down to the individual bird that was their mate.

“Can you tell an individual bird? I mean, when a bird comes to the feeder and then goes away and another one comes, can you tell if it’s the same bird or another one?”

“No, not usually,” said Madeline. “Sometimes you’ll get one that has a little different look, but mostly it’s impossible to tell them apart, except a male from a female. But if it’s a rare bird here, if it comes again it’s probably the same bird.”

After supper he went into his work room to play back the tape and match it to one of the Audubons. It took him a while but eventually he got it. The authoritative voice on the recording said, “Pine grosbeak, flight call,” and then he heard the song of his bird. A flight call! No wonder the bird flew away. He had frightened it. It was calling an alarm to the other birds in the area. “Danger!” “Danger!” That’s what the pine grosbeak kept saying.

Matthew appreciated the irony. Here it was, the first time he tried to record birdsong, to make a connection with a bird through its song, and instead of welcoming him, the bird had sounded an alarm! What a world we lived in. Animals were not our kin. It was foolish to be sentimental about them. They were alien. They suffered our existence, did the best they could to avoid us. Except dogs. But wild birds and animals were afraid or indifferent.

We shouldn't expect anything more. Matthew felt guilty; he'd invaded the bird's privacy.

Wait a minute, he thought. What harm is there in learning to know the birds by their songs? He'd decided to learn the songs and then sing them back to the birds to see what might happen. He'd even decided to try to make a computer program from his recordings of local birds that would help him remember the songs and maybe help others to do the same. A program called HyperCard would help him build a custom piece of software with pictures of the birds and their songs.

Madeline had encouraged him. She'd said he might be having trouble matching the songs he was hearing to the Audubon recordings because birds sang in different dialects depending on location. A white-throated sparrow in Ohio sounded a little different from one in New Hampshire. Maybe the one in Ohio would sing only one or two Peabodies. Madeline had catch phrases to identify some of the songs. "Drink your tea!" "Teacher, teacher!" "O Sam Peabody, Peabody, Peabody!" How did they come up with these funny little mnemonics? He'd even made up one himself, for the black-throated green warbler: "I'm black-throated GREEN!" By now he'd forgotten the song of the bird he'd recorded earlier that day. He'd heard one nearby who sang Peabody, Pea—ending with the one syllable Pea. Maybe the foreshortened tune marked a young bird just learning his song and practicing. If birds could think, if they had intentions, the youngsters might intend to practice their species song. Audubon had only one recording for each species. It could be from anywhere. Well, his computer program would store and play back the local dialects. That would be better for this place than the Audubon recordings.

Throughout the spring and early summer, Matthew kept recording nearby birds. He was excited by the sounds of the warblers. Audubon distinguished these pretty well, but Matthew noticed some local dialects. None of them were virtuoso singers like the song sparrow and hermit thrush, his favourites. He hadn't realized the goldfinch had so many songs, or how cheerfully the robin sang after a rain, or how like the robin's song was the purple finch's.

Later in the summer, he began putting the songs into his computer program. The program gave you a virtual file cabinet of blank index cards. You could put whatever you wanted on each card. Matthew decided he wanted a database, so he made a field for the name of the bird and another one for the song. After adding a few other fields, he assigned each species one card, with its species name, a picture, some words about the bird's appearance and habits and a button to press for the song. He despaired over photographing them in the wild. How could he, when it was so hard to see them? He had

tried to photograph some at the feeder, learning that he needed a tripod and a long telephoto lens and plenty of light. But that could be only a few of the most common species. Most didn't come near the feeder. He decided to compromise and scan photos from the bird identification books into his program. He added a few of his own. By fall, the computer program was full enough to demonstrate. Madeline said she was impressed. And on those rare occasions when friends came over, he would trot it out and show it to them.

"And here's the first bird recording I made. The flight call of the pine grosbeak," he'd say. And then he'd tell his story about frightening his first bird and how what they were hearing was an alarm. "'Danger! Danger!' And then it flew away." The more he told it, the more it became an allegory about invasions of privacy, identity theft and how animals really were strangers in our midst.

As the year went on and the birdsong diminished, Matthew spent less time bird watching. He'd filled his computer program with the songs of birds he'd recorded, and had a list of other birds whose songs he hoped to record next spring. He'd been tempted to use Audubon recordings for those other birds he knew were in the neighbourhood, but he wanted his recordings to be local. He knew there were other birdwatchers in the area because Madeline had told him about the Christmas bird count, and he planned to tag along with her on it and see if he might find others who were making recordings.

The Audubon Society sponsored Christmas counts to get an idea of changes in bird populations in various parts of the world. He and Madeline lived just beyond the northern range of wrens and cardinals, but with global warming they were moving north. He hadn't seen any wrens or cardinals this year but he wondered if any of the other birdwatchers in the neighbourhood might have. He looked forward to meeting them.

The day of the count arrived—it was not on Christmas, but a weekend afterwards, when visitors had departed and life had returned to normal. The idea was to go out looking for birds and make a note of all the species that were in their region, and how many. Madeline had been in touch with the bird count organizer, who assigned them to look for birds in an area close by, which suited them fine. They were paired with another couple whom they didn't know. They went out in that couple's car and stopped to get out here and there along the road wherever they thought the habitat was promising. The other couple knew some paths through the woods and they went down one of these to a pond, all the while taking notes about the birds they saw. Matthew was impressed at how good the others were at seeing them, and not only at seeing them but also recognizing them after only a glimpse. They could tell from a bird's size and grey underside what species it was, whereas

Matthew would have had to look it up in the bird book—and even then, how many had grey undersides? He'd hoped to hear some of them singing, but very few obliged. He did hear golden-crowned kinglets high in the spruce trees, and then so did the others. He wrote it down.

After an invigorating morning, they gathered at the local elementary school cafeteria for lunch. About ten of them sat down at a table after going through the cafeteria line. The children had already eaten and were back in their classrooms. Matthew and Madeline didn't know any of the others, but they were made to feel welcome as they talked about what birds they'd seen and where they were, and what birds they expected to see but hadn't yet. "How about the barred owl? Anybody seen one?" asked an older gentleman with wire-rimmed glasses. Matthew had never seen one and wasn't sure he'd recognize it if he did, but he knew the sound it made. He'd heard it. But the count would be over by mid-afternoon, and the owl sang at night. No one had seen one that morning. "They're hard to spot," a brown-haired, middle-aged lady in a ski parka said. "We'll be lucky to find one. I know they're here." This wasn't the time to ask if any of them were making birdsong recordings. He could ask later. Madeline took the lead and entered the discussion easily. He was grateful for that. For now all he wanted to do was listen and be a part of the group. He wished he had something to contribute.

They went with a different couple in the afternoon, and to a different area. The weather was mild for late December, and there was not much snow on the ground in the woods. This time they went to a swampy area where he was glad to have worn waterproof shoes. They didn't find a barred owl. Instead they saw "the usual suspects," as one of the group had called them: nuthatches, juncos, robins, goldfinches and of course the ever-present black-capped chickadees. Didn't the birds know that something was up with all those people roaming the woods on that special day? That they should come out and be counted? Matthew had studied the bird book to make sure he knew what a wren looked like if he saw one, but no one spotted any. He knew what cardinals looked like, but no luck there either.

At mid-afternoon they stopped and went to join the others back at the school, where the children had just been let out. The birdwatchers gathered back in the cafeteria for hot chocolate and a potluck snack. Conversation continued as the birders began to compare notes. No one had seen a wren or a cardinal. This year's count would be pretty much like the last year's. They gave over their notes to the leader, who was going to make the final tally and report it to Audubon. She was a member of the Audubon Society and had been delegated with this task. Madeline mentioned Matthew's computer program and the rest were interested, but none of them had made any recordings.

Matthew offered to demonstrate the program, and they all agreed to keep in touch and try to set a date to get together. The couple that Madeline and Matthew had gone out with in the morning invited them for supper the following weekend. "Maybe you can come over in the afternoon and we can go out and find some birds," the lady said. Matthew had planned to split wood that afternoon, but that could wait. They accepted the invitation with pleasure.

As the spring approached, Matthew and Madeline began visiting with some of the other birdwatchers in the group. They liked to go out on weekend afternoons and then come in for a potluck supper, just as they had on the count. Sometimes it was two couples, sometimes more. Matthew met some who had not been on the Christmas count because of other commitments on that day. They were interested in the birdsongs, but none had made any recordings. Matthew showed his computer program and they encouraged him to fill in the missing songs. Occasionally the talk about birds went beyond identification. Some of them were very serious about this hobby. They kept life lists, with notations of every species they'd seen: name, date, time and place. When they traveled abroad, they always brought their binoculars. In answer to Matthew's questions, they were pretty sure birds had feelings, just like human beings. Hadn't he ever heard a bird squalling and crying over a mate that had been killed?

In the spring and summer Matthew was recording again, finding some of the missing songs. He'd adapted his program so that each bird now had two sound buttons, one for the song and another for the call. Matthew found some books on ornithology at the public library, and in the chapters on birdsong, he learned some things he hadn't known before. Many birds had more than one kind of song. There were songs used to attract mates, songs used for alarm and so on. He'd thought that a flight call was an alarm call, but he'd been mistaken. The first recording he'd made had been a flight call, all right, but a flight call was something a bird made to keep the flock together, usually while flying. He would have to change his story.

Matthew needed more song buttons for his program. He began to wonder if individual birds had songs. Could a bird recognize its mate by its particular song? Maybe there were sounds in the birdsong beyond the range of the human ear. The computer program might be able to represent the song in a spectrogram, and then he might be able to tell two songs from individual birds in the same species apart.

A summer bird count had been scheduled for July, but it had to be cancelled. Still, it didn't make that much difference. He and Madeline had made some friends among the other birdwatchers, and now they went out together once or twice a month on weekends to watch birds and share a potluck meal

afterwards. It was a very pleasant way to spend an afternoon and evening. Matthew sometimes brought his tape recorder on these trips but found that he didn't like asking the others to be quiet, so he stopped. His computer program was done, anyway. He now had a guide to the birds in the neighbourhood, and he could show it to anyone who wanted to see it. He was happy to give a copy away to anyone who wanted it. A teacher at the elementary school found out about it, and asked if he would visit her class in the fall to demonstrate it for the youngsters. They were learning about computers and would be interested in how he made the program. He could show them how to make programs of their own. Besides, it might encourage them to do more in the way of nature study. Matthew said he would be glad to come. He knew that the children would be delighted, and so would he. He would give the school a copy of the bird program. He smiled as he imagined the children taking field trips. The birds would be waiting for them. ❁