

BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO BIRD SONGS OF NORTH AMERICA

JOHN NEVILLE and MEL COULSON. 2007. Audio 3CD set. Neville Recording & Mel Coulson. ISBN: 0-9781797-2-2. www.nevillerecording.com. \$33.00 Cdn.

Many people, especially when they first become interested in birds, find identifying bird calls and songs more challenging than identifying the birds which produce them. Anxious to improve their skills, they often turn to the readily available recordings of bird song on CDs, DVDs and the Internet. Most of these sources are collections of hundreds of species, with each given only a few seconds play. These recordings can be helpful if the listener singles out a particular species or a small group of related birds, thrushes, for instance, or grass sparrows. But try to listen to a large number of bird songs, one after another, and the result is almost inevitably frustrating, even destructive. Memory doesn't work that way.

John Neville, originally from England, realized when he arrived in Canada in 1975, that bird identification of hundreds of new species would involve sound as much as sight, something he had almost unwittingly taken for granted back home where he had begun birding as a boy. Gaining technical proficiency, he began recording birds in British Columbia. His first CD, *Birds of the Kootenays*, came out in 1994. Since that time he has produced a large number of CDs, including *Bird Songs of the Okanagan*, *Songs and Sounds of the Canadian Rockies*, *Bird Songs-Western Boreal Forest*, and *Bird Songs of the Arctic*.

A Beginner's Guide to Bird Songs of North America is perhaps Neville's most ambitious production to date. Collaborating with Mel Coulson, who does most of the narrating in this 3CD collection, he introduces us to 108 bird species in seven lessons, representative of both eastern and western North America, and arranged by habitat groupings. He believes that if you learn how to listen, developing your skills and confidence at the same time, you'll eventually feel comfortable with the birds in these recordings, and then be ready to take on the others.

Neville's approach is somewhat different from that in any other series of bird song recordings I've listened to. First of all, more time is devoted to each bird song. He also provides an introduction to each species, mentioning predominant habitat, North American distribution and, often, one or more memorable facts about the bird, just enough to assist memory and add interest. Finally, the pace is relaxing. After presenting a group of no more than 10 to 14 species, he provides a quiz, a replay of the bird songs just heard - but in a changed sequence. Before moving on, listeners will likely want to replay that section several times until they feel comfortable with the sounds and can correctly identify all of them. In the last half of Disc 3, he reviews the birds by family: warblers, sparrows, flycatchers, thrushes, and

wrens, then finishes with “weird sounds in the reeds” and what he calls the “true songsters.”

Neville’s recordings are of high quality. Interestingly, they retain considerable background song, typical of the habitat in which a specific species is found. Other songs may seem an interference at first, but learning to isolate a particular song amid a chorus of others is exactly what the birder must learn to do. Replaying the song several times is a helpful experience and as the listener becomes more experienced, it is also a challenge to identify other songs in the background.

Most of the species on these discs can be found in Western Canada. Several pairings of the similar songs of western and eastern species are not only interesting, but helpful as one grows in birding experience and travels more widely. He introduces us to Eastern and Western Wood Pewees, for instance, Scarlet and Western Tanagers, Western and Eastern Meadowlarks, Eastern and Spotted Towhees, Steller’s and Blue Jays, and Western and Eastern Screech Owls. A small number of the songs sound slightly foreign to my Saskatchewan ear, among them the Spotted Towhee, Common Yellowthroat and Baltimore Oriole. Some of the finest recordings I

have ever heard are those of the Olive-sided and Willow Flycatchers, Eastern and Western Kingbirds, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Barred Owl, Common Nighthawk, Swainson’s Thrush, Yellow-headed Blackbird, Pied-billed Grebe, and Sora.

It is important to remember that this three-volume set is not a full catalogue, even of common bird songs. Neville’s intention is to teach people how, when and where to listen and learn. After using these discs, people will feel much more comfortable with the more complete, even though abbreviated calls and songs, in the recordings of Stokes, Peterson and others. Should Neville produce a second set in this series, beginning birders would profit from hearing the rest of the common warblers, and a wide range of shorebirds, marsh birds, gulls, terns, ducks and geese, not found in the present set.

This reasonably priced set will be a boon to beginners here and elsewhere in Canada. Even experienced birders will profit from a close listening; the treatment of the sounds made by Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers is particularly useful.

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“The Autumn Equinox passes scarcely noticed. The season is well ahead of the almanac, always. All September belongs to autumn.”

Hal Borland, *Beyond Your Doorstep*, p. 347.

Oct 20/02

WHITE-FRONTED GEESE & SNOW GEESE in stubble



MYSTERY PHOTO

SEPTEMBER 2007 MYSTERY PHOTO

These 6-to-7 inch-long, gelatinous nets open into the current and are attached to rocks in shallow water (two inches to a foot deep). They appear to be empty. They are common above the rapids on the Paull River in northern Saskatchewan. Who makes them and what is their function?



ANSWER TO THE JUNE 2007 MYSTERY PHOTO

Ron Hooper writes: " I expect that the pseudoscorpion on the crane fly was probably feeding on mites. Small mites commonly live on insects. Pseudoscorpions feed on small soft bodied insects or arachnids, which they kill by poison from glands in their pincers."

The pseudoscorpions do not harm the insect but rather, by eating the mites, perform a service for the insect, the insect then gives the pseudoscorpions a ride to the next site.

The House Pseudoscorpion (*Chelifer cancroides*), or false scorpion, is the species most commonly encountered. It inhabits houses where it also eats insects. Pseudoscorpions have a pair of appendages attached at the side of the head. These are called pedipalpi and are twice the length of the legs. Like true scorpions, pseudoscorpions have a set of pincers on the end of each

pedipalp but they lack a stinger on the end of the abdomen.

The editors thank Ron Hooper and Robin Leech for contributions to this mystery photo answer, and Robert Bercha for the photographs of the pseudoscorpion and crane fly.



Pseudoscorpion found on crane fly
Robert Bercha © 2007.