

BIRDS ON RECORDS: A PERSONAL SELECTION

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As a commercial enterprise, birds have been Big Business for several decades. Publishers are releasing a growing number of offerings for an audience that grows larger and more selective every year. Many of these are rehashes of previous efforts. A small portion may be truly worthwhile, offering an entertaining story, new information, and superior artwork or photography. And every year sees the publication of a few truly outstanding works, sumptuous in illustration and definitive in text, a true delight to both the eye and mind. The latter are unfortunately the most expensive and unobtainable for most of us. A recent sample, William T. Cooper and Joseph M. Forshaw's *The Birds of Paradise and Bower Birds* (1979) is offered for \$150.00 U.S. Personally, I am awaiting the publication of the non-deluxe, economy edition, which should be available sometime in the next 10 years.

What this has to do with Birds on Records is that here the opposite holds true. The market is not yet glutted, and every addition to the portfolio offers, not repetition, but a new perspective on a theme that is far from exhausted. Prices overall are not exorbitant, and often an album of recorded bird song costs less than the current offerings from our popular recording artists. Of my

own collection of about 450 long-playing albums, over 30 are of birds or other natural sounds. Besides these, I have several recordings on 7-inch discs (though played at 33-1/3 rpm instead of the usual 45 rpm) and some that are available only on cassette tape. For the moment, I will be discussing about half of the full-length albums in my collection.

Perhaps the finest available series is that offered by the Federation of Ontario Naturalists. Three of these (Vol. 4, *Warblers: Songs of Warblers of Eastern North America*, Vol. 6, *Finches: Songs of Fringillidae of Eastern and Central North America*, and Vol. 8, *Thrushes, Wrens and Mockingbirds of Eastern North America*) are in a class of their own, aural field guides par excellence. These are invaluable tools for the observer dedicated to learning the voices of the birds he sees both in migration and on their breeding ground. They offer several different versions of the songs and calls of each species; comprising an incomparable collection of recordings for many difficult species. Besides being functional, all three albums make for very enjoyable easy listening.

Four other albums in the series are equally instructive, but are oriented regionally rather than taxonomically. Vol. 1, *Songs of Spring*, portrays the

typical birds of southern Ontario and Quebec, although 19 of the 25 species featured are common in the prairie provinces. Vol. 2, *A Day in Algonquin Park* features birds but also includes amphibians, and even an insect or two. Perhaps the most aesthetically pleasing of the series, it presents the listener with the sounds to be heard in a full day at Algonquin Park, culminating in a magnificent evening chorus of Common Loons at the end of side two. Vol. 5, *A Day at Flores Moradas*, is an exotic excursion into the unfamiliar world of the Venezuelan llanos. Even if you don't plan on going there, the record is a worthwhile visit, soothing, relaxing, and stimulating all at the same time.

Vol. 8 is of special interest to anyone living in the three prairie provinces. *Prairie Spring* is a veritable treasure, and is the most played album in my collection. Sixty-four species of birds are represented, along with four mammals, even including Hereford cattle! Side 1 deals with the birds of pothole and marsh, while Side 2 concentrates on the birds and mammals of prairie and parkland. Outstanding are the recordings of geese and ducks, the Sharp-tailed and Sage Grouse on their dancing grounds, and the grassland songbirds. The album ends with a haunting coyote serenade. I cannot imagine a more effective evocation of the Canadian plains, and cannot recommend this album enough. It is definitely a "must have."

All of these are currently available from the Blue Jay Bookshop for \$6.95 each. Vol. 3 of the series, *Birds of the Forest*, is no longer available, and I have not heard it. A logical extension of the series, moving westward, would be a recording of the sounds of the mountain and coastal fauna of British Columbia.

Three Dover Records, produced by Donald J. Borror, are available, which are excellent buys at only \$5.75 per album. *Common Bird Songs* features 60 species, 42 of which may be expected in the prairies. It also includes an illustrated 27-page commentary booklet, and the other two albums each have 32-page booklets. *Songs of Eastern Birds* also includes 60 species, 43 of which are found here. *Songs of Western Birds* presents another 60 species, many of which are found in the Canadian Rockies west to the Pacific coast (28 of these are known from Canada, and 20 occur in the southwestern prairies and the Cypress Hills). These three records are a pleasure to listen to, and are useful aids to bird-song recognition as well.

I have two albums from ARA Records, produced by John William Hardy, Curator of Ornithology at the Florida State Museum. ARA-1, *Voices of Neotropical Birds*, is a representative collection of tropical American species ranging from partridges and parrots to a wide range of passerines. ARA-2, *The Wrens*, is a comprehensive survey of more than two-thirds of the 60+ species of wrens in the family Troglodytidae. Both of these records have an interesting commentary, centring on voice as related to speciation in birds, as well as once again being highly listenable. Some of the wrens are simply sensational and nearly unbelievable songsters, my favorite being the Musician Wren of the Amazonian rain forest. To the prospective visitor to the American tropics, they are invaluable. I have not heard a third album, *Sounds of Florida Birds*, but would recommend it based on the excellence of the two I have heard. All are available from the Bookshop for \$10.95 apiece.

In the same vein, L. Irby Davis'

Mexican Bird Songs is a very useful introduction to the bird sounds of Mexico and Central America. It represents 74 species, none of which is known from Canada. The quality of the recordings is excellent, and the only criticism I can offer is that it is not a double album. Davis is an ardent student of bird vocalizations, and has also published *A Field Guide to Birds of Mexico and Central America* (\$6.50 U.S.). In it he gives detailed descriptions of the songs and calls of these little-known species, based on many years of personal observations in the field. The current price of the album is not available, but inquiries may be directed to the Blue Jay Bookshop.

The Peterson Field Guide Series offers two albums, *A Field Guide to Bird Songs* and *A Field Guide to Western Bird Songs*, which are in many ways indispensable. These include recordings of almost all of the species described in the Eastern and Western bird guides. Their main advantage is that they include more species overall than anything else currently available, many species not being included in any other recordings. The Eastern album includes 300+ species (at \$32.95 for the double album or double cassette tape), and the Western album 500+ species (at \$34.95 for the triple album and \$39.50 for the triple

cassette tape). Their main drawbacks are their price, and the fact that each species is represented by only 15-20 seconds of songs and calls. This allows for little or no time to explore differences in dialect or song variation, but in many cases is better than nothing.

Lastly, the National Audubon Society and the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology have produced a truly magnificent double album, *Beautiful Bird Songs of the World*. Fifty species have been carefully selected to include the most impressive virtuosos of the avian world. North America is represented by seven species, five of which occur in Canada. It is nice to see our own prairie favourite, the Western Meadowlark included in the company of such as the Nightingale, Skylark, Hermit Thrush and Superb Lyrebird. Over all, the thrushes take top honours, being represented by 24 species. A 14-page booklet is included, with full colour paintings of all species by renowned bird artist Arthur Singer. The price for the set is about \$25.00, and is well worth it.

Hopefully, this review will stimulate you to sample some of these recordings. For a small investment, the variety and beauty of bird song can be yours whenever you want to hear it, no matter what the weather or the season. Listen, learn, and enjoy!

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BIRDS OF REGINA (rev. ed.)
by *Margaret Belcher*. 1980. 152 pp. \$5.00

BIRDS OF THE QU'APPELLE, 1857-1979
by *E. Manley Callin*. 1980. 168 pp. \$7.00