

Birding by Ear with Hearing Aids

by Carolee Colter, *Shade Coffee Volunteer*

It was a Rock Wren in Idaho that first told me my hearing was going. Although my companions couldn't see it skulking below the ridgeline, they could identify it by song. But I couldn't hear anything but the wind. From the time I started birding 20 years ago, I never did hear Golden-crowned Kinglets or Cedar Waxwings. Obviously I had a problem with high frequencies.

And owling was an exercise in frustration. In the predawn woods, I would hear only the wind, the rustling of Gore-tex, and fellow birders shifting from foot

to foot, while they called out "Saw-whet," "Screech," and "Great Horned." Sometimes on the very edge of consciousness, I could pick up the thumping of a Ruffed Grouse in spring. So obviously I had a problem with low frequencies, too.

But a Rock Wren, the call of which Sibley describes as "a

ringing buzzy trill *pdzee* audible at great distance"? Well, not so audible to me.

Why did I wait for seven more years after that encounter with the Rock Wren to get my hearing tested? No rational reason but a lot of excuses. I thought hearing aids were for old people and I was only in my 40s. I'd seen my mother and friends of my parents struggle with their hearing aids, desperately trying to find a setting that would allow them to hear voices over loud background noise. I didn't want something that would beep painful feedback into my ears.

Eventually I realized I was starting to avoid certain friends because it was a strain to hear their soft voices. I made an appointment for a hearing test at University Hospital. At one point in the test the low-frequency beeps reminded me of the cadence of owl calls—Saw-whets, Pygmy-Owls—reminding me of what I had lost and hoped to regain.

By law, consumers are entitled to try out hearing aids for 30 days before making a final commitment. My first trial pair was the in-the-canal type. My hearing impairment was not severe enough to warrant the more powerful behind-the-ear aids. I found it hard to handle the sensation of the wind blowing across my ears. You know the sound of a microphone exposed to the wind at an outdoor concert? Even harder to take were the comments of certain acquaintances. I cringed when one woman said in a much louder than usual voice, "I can see you've got aids. Don't you hate getting old?" causing others in the room to turn around and stare at me.

With the helpful advice of my audiologist, I tried completely-in-the-canal aids. These are much harder for the casual observer to notice and greatly reduce the wind problem. Now I could go out in the field and listen to birds. I was amazed at all I had been missing. I could now hear Great Horned Owls and Golden-crowned Kinglets. Even more amazing were the harmonics in thrush song. I could begin to tell the warblers apart.

I'm on my second-generation hearing aids now, the digital generation. I have a "party noise" button that filters out loud background noise at airports and restaurants. Also with time, my brain has relearned how to filter out some of the unwanted sounds, though never as efficiently as my original hearing. The clacking of my computer keyboard no longer annoys me—I barely hear it now.

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Ruby-crowned Kinglet, singing at the Montlake Fill.

Continued from the previous page.

But the real gift is to hear the birds again. On a spring evening in Madera Canyon in Arizona, I heard Elf Owls twittering all around me, interrupted by the rhythm of a Whiskered Screech-Owl. From inside my house, I've heard Yellow-rumped Warblers migrating through my yard. There are still some people whose

speech I can't understand no matter how close I stand to them, and when the wind is blowing hard, there are some bird songs I can't quite catch. But I would advise any fellow birder who can no longer hear the Golden-crowned Kinglets to get a hearing test and take it from there. You can get the birdsong back in your life.

Birding by Ear, Not by Sight

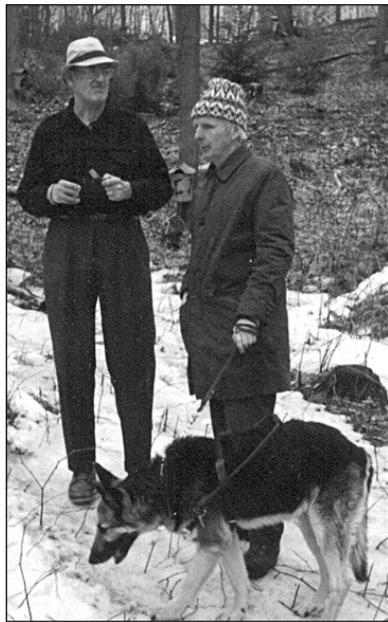
by Ted Morgan, Father of Alex Morgan, Son of Donald Morgan

Alex Morgan, Seattle Audubon's Conservation Director, can trace his interest in birds back two generations, to a blind grandfather who learned to identify birds in the 1940s and '50s by listening to old Cornell and Audubon recordings.

Donald Morgan, a political science professor at Mt. Holyoke College in Massachusetts, was blinded at age 16. He was an avid walker, and his wife, Margot, and each of his four children would take regular walks with him, along the country roads of rural New Hampshire. With his finely tuned hearing, Don would point out all the local birds—open-country favorites like bluebirds, White-throated Sparrows, and chickadees, and woodland favorites like the Wood and Hermit Thrushes, Veery, Red-eyed Vireo, and the like.

On some walks, Don's son Kit Morgan recalls, "Dad would challenge me to see who could count more bird songs. I still do that, especially in spring." Another family contest was: Who would guess the date for the first robin in spring?

These walks made a deep impression on his four children. Though scattered from New Hampshire and Pennsylvania to Vashon Island and California, we all still greatly enjoy "birding by ear," especially when walking in the countryside. My two older children, Becky and Alex, have both been involved with birds in their professional lives.



Right, Donald Morgan

Don also had a keen ability to imitate the birdsongs himself, not only the classic phrases contained in the Peterson Guide ("quick, three beers"), but high-pitched songs like those of chickadees and White-throated Sparrows. For those, Don would screw up his face and whistle his little friends over for a visit. His children also learned to emulate his patience in training nut-hatches and chickadees to eat sunflowers from his hand, or off his hat.

The pleasure of birding by ear has a special meaning for Donald Morgan's extended family. Don's wife, his four children, and his older grandchildren remember vividly the moment during Don's memorial service when the service paused, and a recording of birdsongs was played. It was a powerful and meaningful moment, and those who knew of Don's association with birds felt his spirit in the room.

Another hearing aid solution...

I suffered a serious hearing loss in my right ear and a moderate hearing loss in my left ear while working for many years on construction sites. I purchased a hearing aid designed to aid in hearing the human voice. It didn't help much at all with birds or music.

When I learned about a small company in Pennsylvania that makes specialized hearing aids for birders, I had a new hearing test and got ear molds and sent it all off. What a difference! My hearing is not corrected to that of a person with really good hearing, and background noise is a real problem, but with concentration I can hear most of the birds.

These hearing aids are expensive, but well worth the price to this birder. I'd be happy to share information with others.

—Alan Roedell,
206-522-0809,
roedell@speakeasy.net.