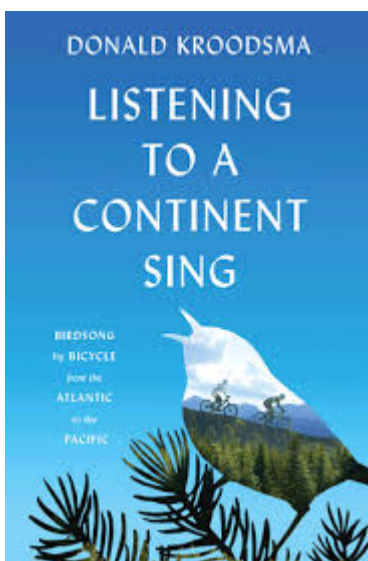


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## Listening To A Continent Sing: Birdsong by Bicycle from the Atlantic to the Pacific – Evergreen Audubon

7-8 minutes

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**It took Donald Kroodsma and his son David ten weeks to cycle from the Atlantic to the Pacific in 2003. It took Kroodsma 13 years to chronicle the trip in this inspiring account.**

In 2005, he published his first book, *The Singing Life of Birds*, and in 2009 his second book, *Birdsong by the Seasons*. I wrote a review of his second book in the [September 2014 Dipper](#). *Listening to A Continent Sing* was worth the wait.

Not only does it take us mile by mile across the country,

accompanied by birdsong all the way, but it also the story of jettisoning his academic life, becoming a new person, and getting to know his son.

Following this ride, Kroodsma left his professorship at the University of Massachusetts and dedicated his life full time to birdsong. It's a remarkable journey.

The story is made real for the reader by the 381 QR codes throughout the text. I used the QR code reader on my iPad to access [ListeningToAContinentSing.com](https://www.evergreenaudubon.org/listening-to-a-continent-sing) to hear the sounds that Kroodsma was hearing as he cycled along the back roads of the country. What a pleasure to hear the **robin** that sings at 5:34 am in the Newport News City Park in Virginia on the first day of the four-thousand mile trip. The robin is singing a half hour before sunrise, up early just like Don Kroodsma, who is an inveterate early riser. He never misses the dawn chorus, even when it is raining, as it is on many mornings near the east coast.

Son David is not an early riser. "Best not to get up before the sun," he declares. Father and son are opposites, at least at the beginning. Kroodsma cherishes the dawn; David prefers the dusk. Kroodsma is an expert at identifying birdsongs, rarely bothering to sight the bird that is singing. David is not a birder at all, but he begins to learn, identifying the songs as the trip progresses. The father and son, so different at the start, become close as the trip progresses.

The cycling trip begins at sunrise at the [Yorktown Virginia Victory Monument](#), the site of the end of the Revolutionary War. The cyclists follow the 4200-mile [TransAm Bicycle Trail](#), beginning on May 4 and ending 71 days later on the Oregon Coast. The first

bird of the trip is the **robin**, the last the **wrentit**, which sounds to me like a bouncing ball.

Don and David make their first stop in Colorado at Pueblo. Most nights they camp out, but in Pueblo with the traffic on Highway 50, they choose a motel. Kroodsma listens in the evening to the songs of the **Western house finches** in the motel courtyard, very different from **Eastern house finches** that result from birds released on Long Island in the 1940s.

In the morning, they cycle along the bike path following the Arkansas River toward Canon City, hearing western mountain birds: **Say's phoebe** and **black-headed grosbeak**. At first, Kroodsma mistakes the grosbeak for an odd robin. It's a robin with voice lessons, singing continuously. He's slowed by a **spotted towhee** who sings a mountain version of the spotted towhee song. While David takes off for a look at the Royal Gorge, Don finds his first **juniper titmouse** and **plumbeous vireo** of the trip.

Early in the morning in Guffey, CO, Don hears his first **cordilleran flycatcher**. In one minute, the flycatcher sings 90 songs.

Counting the songs and listening for repeated phrases provides him with insight into how the flycatchers differ from one another. We learn that the dawn songs frequently differ from the songs as the sun comes up. Birds sing fast and energetically early, slowing their pace as dawn approaches.

An early encounter with a **lesser goldfinch** shows off a skilled mimic. The goldfinch sings a **cliff swallow**, a **house sparrow**, a **robin**, and a **flicker** all in a single minute. They next encounter a huge flock of **pinyon jays**, with young birds calling to be fed by

the adults. On Hoosier Pass, elevation 11,542 feet, they pass through the highest point on the cross-country trip.

Downhill through Silverthorne leads them to Kremmling, just in time for the Kremmling Days festival. Son David enjoys the break and the town's celebration. Father Don hopes to get away early, well before day break on Father's Day, on his way over Muddy Pass, heading toward Walden.

Here is how Kroodsma describes birdsong:

“The sage glows in the moonlight, and rising from the glow is a symphony of Brewer's sparrows and sage thrashers. The sparrow territories are small, with four or five birds always within earshot, and they're all in wild dawn song, each male singing continuously, alternating a series of high notes with a long, canary-like ramble at a much lower frequency. Their voices mix and mingle, and at any given instant some are near and loud, some far and soft, some high and some low, some clear and musical, some raspy and buzzy, their collective voices mesmerizing. I pick out an individual beside the road as I approach, hearing him work through high-pitched buzzes and trills and insect-like zeets, then cascade down to a long series of varied trills, then rise again for another cycle; his voice grows as I approach, then fades as I pass.”





But it's not all about song. One of the most exciting sightings happens in western Montana, just past the North Fork of the Big Hole River, heading over Chief Joseph Pass. On a small post on the side of the road perches a **“great grey owl.”**

“He's huge. Look at that head, so sound and enormous; two large facial discs beautifully lined by concentric half circles, with small, beady yellow eyes at their centers; raised, white boomerang-shaped feather tufts separate those eyes. Just below his yellow bill is a black chin, with snow-white moustaches extending out to the side, looking much like a black-and-white bowtie; heavy streaking below, from head to tail; feathered legs, impressive talons emerging to grip the post. He's great and an owl, sort of grayish, but with lots of subtle patterns in whites and browns and blacks. What an extraordinary creature!” Five minutes later the owl lifts into the air and disappears into the forest.



Photo by JTHackos

*Listening to a Continent Sing* is not just about birdsong. It's the story of a journey of understanding. Father and son get to know

one another, despite their disparate time of day preferences. They grow closer, enjoying incredible views and great experiences, battling injuries, fatigue, rain, lightening, and broken bikes. Kroodsma decides that he needs to let go of his academic life and move on to something he genuinely loves.

Here's how he ends: "I'm making my choice, long overdue. It's life, full time, and birdsong full time, celebrating it from the rooftops with all who have the ears to listen."

You can't just read this book; you must listen to it.

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