

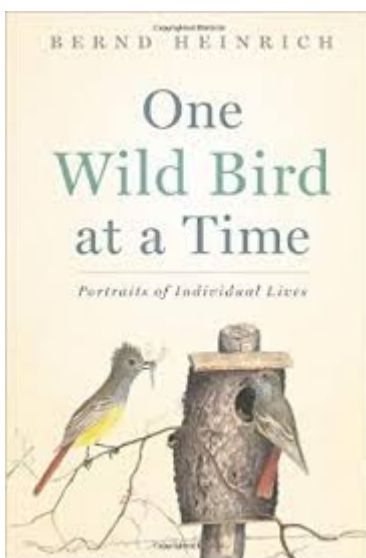
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# One Wild Bird at a Time: Portraits of Individual Lives – Evergreen Audubon

4-5 minutes

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I'm sure you are all aware that Bernd Heinrich is one of my favorite nature writers. I've reviewed several of his books in this column. If you haven't read Heinrich yet, I recommend that you get started with his latest book, *One Wild Bird at a Time*. It's a series of wonderful memoirs, recording encounters with individual birds over a life time. The *Los Angeles Times* said it yields "marvelous, mind-altering" insights and discoveries.



If you're already familiar with Heinrich, you know that he lives in a cabin he built in the Maine Woods, off the grid. Each chapter of *One Wild Bird at a Time* describes a Maine experience with a

bird. The first, a Northern Flicker, will be familiar to Evergreen residents as a bird that loves to drill holes in our houses. Of course, Heinrich's flicker is the yellow-shafted Eastern variety, not our red-shafted form. This flicker wakes Heinrich at 4:30 am one day by vigorously tapping on the wall of his log cabin. Clearly, it is excavating a nest cavity.

Heinrich uses the opportunity to study the birds' nesting behavior. He drills an opening from his inside wall and puts up a platform for the nest between the outer and inner walls. By removing the loose panel on the inside wall, he is able to observe the nest throughout the nesting cycle. In a few days, he finds seven eggs that turn into seven tiny naked pink bodies. As he watches them grow, he charts how much and what kind of food they gave the nestlings. He counts the number of times the male and female feed the nestlings, with the female averaging three times the feedings. Of course, the male worked harder at getting the nest built.

Watching the nestlings fledge is exciting. Finally there is only one left, dubbed Pipsqueak, who finally is persuaded by the parents to leave the nest after many days of ignoring their pleas.

Each account is similar to the first. Lots of details, many hypotheses, some of them wrong, and often amazing discoveries about bird behavior.

Heinrich devotes another chapter to barred owls talking. In April 2013, he hears a barred owl hoot and then finds a pellet. Like a true scientist, he immediately dissects the pellet, wondering what the owl is finding to eat under the deep, hard-crusting snow. He discovers five perfect skulls of the short-tailed shrew and no

other bones. Apparently, the owl is finding the shrews at his bird feeder, where they come out from underground and under the snow to feed on the sunflower seeds. We also learn about the distinctive *who-cooks-for-you* calls, as well as long *whooo*'s, and weird shrieking.

In *One Wild Bird at a Time*, we find accounts of blue-headed vireo birth control, red-breasted nuthatch homemaking, blue jay communications, black-capped chickadees finding insects in the middle of the winter, and so much more. Heinrich also provides color plates of his paintings of each of the birds he describes in the book. They are also quite amazing, from an accomplished artist.



Perhaps my favorite account is the last one, observing a woodcock. Heinrich explains that he's been the audience for a woodcock's aerial dance since he was a boy on his family's farm. Sixty years later he is still observing the woodcock's nightly performance and still learning about what it might mean. He ends with this advice: "... I'm still learning by being an audience to a

woodcock, and so can anyone learn by watching a starling, a sapsucker, a flicker, or a house sparrow—one wild bird at a time.”

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