

Birding Lessons and the Teachings of Cicadas

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Abstract

This paper explores the ecological and pedagogical images hidden within a tale of the author's returning to the place he was raised and going for a birding walk with some old friends.

Résumé

Cet article explore les images écologiques et pédagogiques cachées dans l'histoire de l'auteur qui revient aux lieux de son enfance et s'en va faire une randonnée d'observation des oiseaux avec quelques vieux amis.

I went birding last summer with some old friends through the Southern Ontario summer forests where I was raised, crackling full of song-birds and head-high ferns and steamy heat. It was, as always, a great relief to return to this place from the clear airs of Alberta where I have lived for eleven years—academic, Faculty of Education, curriculum courses, practicum supervision in the often stuffy, unearthly confines of some elementary schools.

As with every time I return here, it was once again a surprise to find how familiar it was, and to find how deeply I experience my new home in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains through these deeply buried bodily templates of my raising. It is as if I bear a sort of hidden ecological memory of the sensuous spells (Abram 1996) of the place on Earth into which I was born. How things smell, the racket of leaves turning on their stems, how my breath pulls this humid air, how birds songs combine, the familiar directions of sudden thundery winds, the rising insect drills of cicada tree buzzes that I remember so intimately, so immediately, that when they sound, it feels as if this place itself has remembered what I have forgotten, as if my own memory, my own raising, some of my own life, is stored up in these trees for safe keeping.

Cicadas become archaic storytellers telling me, like all good storytellers, of the life I'd forgotten I'd lived, of deep, fleshy, familial relations that worm their ways out of my belly and breath into these soils, these smells, this air.

And I'm left shocked that they know so much, that they remember so well, and that they can be so perfectly articulate.

I became enamoured, during our walk, with listening to my friends' conversations about the different birds that they had been spotting. They spoke of their previous ventures here, of what had been gathered and lost, of moments of surprise and relief, of expectation and frustration. Their conversations were full of a type of discipline, attention and rich interpretive joy, a pleasure taken in a way of knowing that cultivated and deepened our being just here, in this marsh, up beside these hot, late-afternoon sun-yellow limestone cliffs.

Updraughts had pulled a hawk high up above our heads. We spotted a red-winged blackbird circling him, pestering, diving.

Sudden blackbird disappearance.

Hawk remained, over a hundred feet overhead, backlit shadowy wing penumbras making it hard to accurately spot.

Where had that blackbird gone?

"There. Coming down the cliff face."

Sudden distinctive complaint around our heads. He had spotted us as worse and more proximate dangers to this marsh than the hawk that'd been chased far enough away for comfort.

My friends' conversations were, in an ecologically important sense, *of a kind* with the abundance of bird songs and flights that surrounded us—careful, measured, like speaking to like, up out of the hot and heady, mosquitoed air. And, standing alongside them there, sometimes silent, certainly unpractised in this art, involved a type of learning that I had once known but, like cicadas, long-since forgotten.

I had forgotten the pleasure to be had in simply standing in the presence of people who are practised in what they know and listening, feeling, watching them work.

I had forgotten the learning to be had from standing alongside and imitating, practising, repeating, refining the bodily gestures of knowing.

I had forgotten how they could show me things, not just *about this place*, but about how you might carry yourself, what might become of you, when you know this place well.

Part of such carrying, such bearing, is to realize how the creatures of this place can become like great teachers (Jardine, 1997a) with great patience. Such a realization makes it possible to be at a certain ease with what you know. It is no longer necessary to contain or hoard or become overly consumptive in knowing. One can take confidence and comfort in the fact that this place itself will patiently hold some of the remembrances required: like the cicadas, patiently repeating the calls to attention required to know well of this place and its ways.

So we stood together in the bodily presence of this place. Listening, watching, waiting for knowing to be formed through happenstance arrivals and chance noticings. Seeking out expectant, near-secret places that they knew from having been here before, often evoking slow words of fondness, remembrance and familiarity—intimate little tales of other times. Repeating to each other, with low and measured tones, what is seen or suspected. Reciting tales from well-thumbed-through books that showed their age and importance. Belly-laughing over the wonderful, silly, sometimes near-perfect verbal descriptions of bird songs: “a liquid gurgling *konk-la-ree* or *o-ka-lay*” for Peterson’s (1980, p. 252) version of the red-winged blackbird.

Then settling, slowing, returning, listening and looking anew. Meticulousness: “at the edge, below the canopy of the oak, there, no, left, there, yes!”

These are, in part, great fading arts of taxonomic attention, and the deep childly pleasures to be had in sorting and gathering and collecting (Shepard, 1996). There is something about such gathering that is deeply personal, deeply formative, deeply pedagogical. As I slowly gathered something of this place, it became clear that I was also somehow “gathering myself.” And as I gathered something of the compositions of this place, I, too, had to become composed in and by such gathering. And, with the help of cicadas, I did not simply remember this place. Of necessity, I remembered, too, something of what has become of me.

A birding lesson: I *become* someone through what I know.

This little lesson may be the great gift that environmental education can offer to education as a whole. Coming to know,

whatever the discipline, whatever the topic or topography, is never just a matter of learning the ways of a place but learning about how to carry oneself in such a way that the ways of this place might show themselves. Education, perhaps, involves the invitation of children into such living ways.

This idea of a knowledge of the “ways” (Berry, 1983) of things and the immediacy, patience, repetition, persistence and intimacy—the “attention and devotion” (Berry, 1977, p. 34)—that such knowledge requires, is ecologically, pedagogically and spiritually vital. It suggests that a knowledge of the ways of red-winged blackbirds is not found nestled in the detailed and careful descriptions of birding guides. Rather, such knowledge lives in the living, ongoing work of coming to a place, learning its ways and living with the unforeseeable consequence that you inevitably become someone in such efforts, someone full of tales to tell, tales of intimacy, full of proper names, particular ventures, bodily memories that are entangled in and indebted to the very flesh of the Earth they want to tell.

It was clear that my friends loved what they had come to know and what such knowing had required them to become. They took great pleasure in working (Berry, 1989), in showing, in listening, in responding to the simplest, most obvious of questions. There is a telling, disturbing, ecopedagogical (Jardine, 1994) insight buried here. Because a knowledge of the ways of a place is, of necessity, a knowledge webbed into the living character of a place and webbed into the life of the one who bears such knowledge, such knowledge is inevitably fragile, participating in the mortality and passing of the places it knows. A knowledge of ways, then, must, of necessity, include the passing on of what is known as an essential, not accidental part of its knowing. It is always and already deeply pedagogical, concerned, not only with the living character of places, but with what is required of us if that living and our living there is to go on.

Another birding lesson: if this place is fouled by the (seeming) inevitabilities of “progress,” the cost of that progress is always going to be part of my life that is lost.

Some days, it makes perfect sense to say that all knowledge, like all life, is suffering, undergoing, learning to bear and forbear. Because of this fearsome morality that is part of a knowledge of ways, we are obliged, in such knowledge, to cultivate a good, rich,

earthy understanding of “enough” (Berry, 1987). We are obliged, too, to then suffer again the certain knowledge that in our schools, in our lives, in our hallucinations of progress and all the little panics these induce (Jardine, 1996), there never seems to be enough.

Sometimes, in bearing such knowing, I feel my age. I feel my own passing.

At one point we stood on a raised wooden platform in the middle of a marsh just as the sun was setting, and the vocal interplays of red-winged blackbirds' songs, the curves of their flights and the patterning of both of these around nests cupped in the yellow-and-black-garden-spiderly bulrushes—audible but invisible sites bubbling full of the pink, wet warbling smallness of chicks—were clearly, in their own way, acts of spotting *us*.

“Ways” bespeaks a thread of kindredness with what one knows, a sense of deep relatedness and intimate, fleshy obligation (Caputo, 1993). But it betrays another little birding lesson: that we are their relations as much as they are ours, that we are thus caught in whatever regard this place places on us:

The whole ensemble of sentient life cannot be deployed except from the site of a being which is itself visible, audible, sensible. The visible world and the eye share a common flesh; the flesh is their common being and belonging together. (Caputo, 1993, p. 201)

Or, if you like, a more drastic mosquito lesson about living relations: “flesh is . . . a reversible, just insofar as what eats is always edible, what is carnivorous is always carnality” (p. 200). So just as these mosquitoes eat up my sweet, sweaty blood skinslicked under the lures of CO₂ that drew them near, I get their lives in return, gobbled up into liquid gurgling *konk-la-rees*. This is the meaty, trembly level of mutuality and interdependence that crawls beneath all our tall tales of relations. This common flesh is the fearsome limit of our narrativity.

In a knowledge of ways, I do not simply know. I am also *known*. These cicadas and I turn around each other, each forming the other in kind, “both sensible and sensitive, reversible aspects of a common animate element” (Abram, 1996, p. 66). Even more unsettling than this, *as* we know this place, so are we known by it (Palmer, 1989). That is, the character of our knowing and how

gracefully and generously we carry what we know reflects on our character.

One final birding lesson for now. Catching a glimpse of a blue heron pair over past the edge of the marsh, tucked up under the willowy overhangs.

Shore edge log long deep bluey sunset shadow fingers.

Sudden rush of a type of recognition almost too intimate to bear, an event of birding never quite lodged in any birding guides:

"It's *that* pair!"

What a strange and incommensurate piece of knowledge (Jardine, 1997b). How profoundly, how deeply, how wonderfully *useless* it is, knowing that it is *them*, seemingly calling for names more intimate, more proper than "heron," descriptions richer and more giddy than "**Voice:** deep harsh croaks: *frahnk, frahnk, frahnk* (Peterson, 1980, p. 100)." Such knowing doesn't lead anywhere. It is, by itself, already always full, already always enough.

Perhaps this irreplaceable, unavoidable intimacy is why our tales of the Earth always seem to include proper names ("obligations require proper names" [Caputo, 1993, p. 201]), always seem to be full of love and heart, always seem to require narrations of particular times and places, particular faces, particular winds, always seem to invite facing and listening and remembering.

It is squarely here that a great deal of my own work has come to rest: how to carry these birding lessons home, back into the often stuffy confines of elementary schools (Jardine, 1990a), back into the often even stuffier confines, for example, of elementary school mathematics (Jardine, 1990b, 1995), back, too, into the archaic, often literal-minded narrows of academic work and the forms of speaking and writing and research it allows (Jardine, 1992).

Just imagine: mathematics conceived as a living discipline, a living topography, a living place, full of ancestors (Jardine, 1997a) and kin and living relations (Friesen, Clifford & Jardine, in press), full of tales told and tales to tell. And imagine, too, mathematics education conceived as an open, generous invitation of our children into the intimate ways of this old, mysterious, wondrous place.

Notes on Contributor

David Jardine is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education, University of Calgary. Recent work in the area of environmental education has appeared in the *Journal of Curriculum Studies* and in Bert Horwood (Ed.) *Experience and the Curriculum*. He is also the author of the forthcoming collection of essays entitled *"To Dwell with a Boundless Heart": Essays in Curriculum Theory, Hermeneutics and the Ecological Imagination*.

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