

Will Knight: *iPhone & Bird Song*

This entry is about the serendipitous encounter of the most mobile of technological devices, the iPhone, and the most mobile of animals, the bird. I have been a birdwatcher since the 1980s when my mother gave me a bird guide and a birding diary for my 23rd birthday. She kept birdfeeders and taught me to look at birds more closely. The first bird I “saw” was a Wilson’s Warbler, a small yellow bird with a black cap, perched in a white birch in our front yard in suburban Ottawa. It was migrating, perhaps from Central America to Hudson’s Bay where the bird is, according to the *Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Ontario*, “widespread.” Since then I have watched birds and recorded my sightings in a motley set of bird guides. I am not what the British call a “twitcher”— an obsessive birder — but I am a persistent one and plug away every spring when the songbirds flow north.

In the spring of 2011 I was loaned an iPhone for a digital history project. About the same time I was reading about the first field recordings of bird songs by ornithologists (a story recounted in Dan Stapp’s *Birdsong: A Natural History*) and thought it would be cool to make my own recordings. But the parabolic microphones and Nagra recorders needed to clearly record bird songs were too expensive for what seemed to be a passing fancy.

In late spring I drove to Nova Scotia to visit my sister. I used the iPhone’s map function to trace my movement eastward, its pulsing blue beacon pinging like a radar. One day I accidentally launched the iPhone’s “Voice Memo” utility. The app is visually cute: the interface is a retro condenser microphone with a VU meter to measure sound levels. Could it record bird songs?

My first morning I stepped out of my sister’s house and walked down the road. A Common Yellowthroat started singing in a roadside thicket. At 7:42 a.m. I pointed the phone toward the bird’s singing and recorded 24 seconds of song. I played it back immediately and the iPhone had crisply captured the yellowthroat’s *witchity witchity witchity*. I was instantly hooked and spent the rest of that morning holding the iPhone at arm’s length toward clumps of bushes and trees, recording Magnolia and Blackburnian Warblers, Ovenbirds and Hermit Thrushes, Solitary and Red-Eyed Vireos.

To my delight, songs of different bird species overlapped. I was keen to record a Northern Parula, a lovely little warbler with blue plumage that my brother-in-law exactly described as “air cadet blue.” As the Parula began to sing, a Northern Waterthrush — another warbler — intruded and drowned it out with its own strident notes. Once launched the voice utility would also turn itself on and record odd scraps of sound such as conversation, wind, frogs, a banging screen door — a collection of aural ephemera from my trip to Nova Scotia. I keep these along with the songs that mark out breeding territories of birds that have flown hundreds if not thousands of kilometres.

I continue to record songs with my arm pointed up into the tree canopy toward a bird I usually can’t see. The iPhone has permanently shifted my sensory attention in birdwatching; before birding was all about seeing the bird and now it is listening for

song. This isn't news to birders who are experts at identifying song but for me the iPhone has changed how I move through space, with my ears now leading my eyes.

The bird songs are filed away on my laptop where they are orphaned along with my digital photographs. One day, we will have to reckon with these new forms of personal digital legacy. The extreme mobility of bits and bytes reduces our material trace, our passage, our memory, to a single repository such as this laptop I write on. I worry about the fragility of these digital devices and fragments.

But it is also true that digital mobility has opened up new possibilities for my appreciation of avian mobility. While I haven't yet found a simple way to share my bird-song recordings, I can log my sightings in online programs such as eBird. This Cornell bird lab program aggregates reports from around the world and acts as a portal for birdwatchers like myself. I now use eBird after each trip and can see what other birders in Ottawa are up to: together we map migrations as a community of citizen scientists.

Those sightings thus have permanence and utility as long as the servers continue to hum. The songs I am less sure about: I don't think they will survive. Previous generations left photo albums like our old family one with its maroon covers and thick black pages. That album was also mobile and migrated to Canada in a crate aboard the *S.S. Mauretania*, Liverpool to New York, November 1951. But will digital mobility — and the migratory paths that it affords and traces — leave an equally material and visible sign?