SOUNDWORK

The Bird Park Sessions

Julie Andreyev

The soundwork file is openly available online on the UBC Library Open Journal Systems website: https://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/bcstudies/article/view/193703/version/11672.

Figure 1. The old elms blooming in Woodland Park, East Vancouver, British Columbia. Photo courtesy of the author, 2020.

It's a beautiful sight – the new seedpods adorning the old elms in Woodland Park. They make their brilliant appearance before the leaves of a deeper hue emerge, and on a sunny day they lend the trees a fresh yellow-green glow communicating spring's arrival in Vancouver.[1] This last spring, I knew the goldfinches would also be showing up, migrating into the neighbourhood and settling in the elms for a few weeks before heading to their nesting sites. Sure enough, at the end of April, I began hearing their clear energetic songs providing acoustic highlights to the fragrant air and effervescent trees. The birds were likely the same ones that migrated here last year, and the years before, each time bringing along a new generation learning about the route and best places to stop.[2] The experienced ones know that the Woodland Park elms are a good place to rest, pair up, and hang out.

The goldfinches of Woodland Park are somewhat elusive. You hear their songs before you see them. As with most birds, their vocalizations identify them and their visual characteristics provide verification. If you're lucky, you may catch a glimpse of their striking plumage, the females with their light olive green, and the males with brilliant yellow emphasized by black forehead and wing bars. Each morning, I'd try to catch sight of them while walking with my dogs Tom and Sugi under the tree branches. Not able to spot them, I'd resign myself to just listening. The goldfinches were the dominant singers in the dawn chorus that included starlings, crows, flickers, sparrows, house finches, chickadees, nuthatches, and bushtits. The birds were calling out their territories and sharing information with their kin and community. Even in the city, you can hear the dawn chorus from daybreak until around nine o'clock, along with the rush hour traffic and Vancouver port noise. This spring, with the coronavirus pandemic and reduced traffic, the dawn chorus was particularly noticeable. The birds were finding relief from the normally overpowering anthrophony, and they seemed to be congregating in larger and louder numbers, creating a rich urban biophony.[3]

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[1] Vancouver is located on the unceded, traditional, and ancestral xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish), and səl̓ilw̓ətaʔɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) territories.

[2] Scientists say that most migratory birds (up to 60 percent) return to the same locations each year. See Cornell Lab, "Do Backyard Birds Return to the Same Spot Year after Year?" *All About Birds* (1 April 2009), https://www.allaboutbirds.org/news/do-backyard-birds-return-to-the-same-spot-year-after-year/.

[3] Field recordist and acoustician Bernie Krause theorizes three categories of sound: *biophony*, which describes sounds made by living organisms; *anthrophony*, which describes sounds made by humans, including mechanical sounds; and *geophony*, which describes sounds generated by earth forces such as wind, weather, and water. Krause has studied the biophony of natural

One morning, I finally spotted a few goldfinches flying from tree to tree and, in that moment, had a revelation. Their colouring was almost identical to the elms with their fresh seed-dresses, and the combination of tree-tips and finch-feathers created a visual synergy. Each morning afterwards, I visited the goldfinches in the elms and marvelled at their cultural co-evolution. The birds' plumage was a result of aesthetic choices, handed down through generations by females choosing pleasing males.[4] Their choices accumulated to produce a standard of beauty for the finches, and somehow the colour of their mating plumage coincided with the trees' fresh green blooms. The birds timed their yearly nesting migration with a stopover in Woodland Park that precisely aligned with the trees' own pollination. This co-creation – birds picking each other and trees attracting birds – became an annual multi-species tradition. Not only that, but the colour synchronization between plant and animal was simply beautiful. For millennia, humans have been fascinateed by bird plumage, and this moment demonstrated for me the evolutionary reality of cross-species aesthetics. The birds were choosing beauty among themselves and among the trees, and I easily became their admirer. The insight made me feel even more connected to the non-human inhabitants in my neighbourhood – don't we all seek beauty?[5] This event became the inspiration for the *Bird Park Sessions*,[6] an album of soundscapes composed from field recordings of specific moments in local natural spaces. I began the project with the goldfinches and elms, and then followed the calls of other birds that told their own stories of place and tradition across southern British Columbia.

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locations and, through spectrogram analysis of his field recordings, has identified the negative effects of forestry practices on biodiversity. See Bernie Krause, *The Great Animal Orchestra: Finding the Origins of Music in the World's Wild Places* (New York: Black Bay Books, 2012).

4 Richard Prum discusses Darwin's theory of mate choice and how females choose males for their aesthetic characteristics, including plumage, colouring, and movement. Darwin's theory was radical because it suggested that females, through choice, actively evolve the bodies of their species. Prum elaborates that evolution is not only about biological fitness but also about aesthetic value. See Richard Prum, *The Evolution of Beauty: How Darwin's Forgotten Theory of Mate Choice Shapes the Animal World and Us* (New York: Doubleday, 2017).

5 Carl Safina makes an argument for cross-species aesthetics in his field studies of scarlet macaws, a species he closely observed in the Peruvian Amazon. Safina speculates on the perception of beauty and the fact that this phenomenon occurs across species. He asks, "Can it be true that, for all creatures, the whole world brims with beauty? Can it not be?" See Carl Safina, *Becoming Wild: How Animal Cultures Raise Families, Create Beauty, and Achieve Peace* (New York: Henry Holt, 2020), 126.

6 Most of the recordings for the *Bird Park Sessions* were created using a Røde NT-SF1 ambisonic microphone and MixPre-6 field recorder, edited to create binaural listening experiences. For more information about the *Bird Park Sessions,* visit Julie Andreyev's website at www.animallover.ca.

The goldfinches and elms also marked another turning point. On the evening of 5 May, just two days after I made my first field recording of the birds, our beloved Tom died. He was sixteen and had suffered from cancer and heart trouble over the year. He passed away at home, in bed, surrounded by family. Despite the privilege of a long goodbye, I felt a hole. For days, sadness and tears washed over me like waves. To deal with the grief, I kept a schedule that included morning and evening walks with my partner Greg, and Sugi, where I'd find solace. We'd spend time walking and listening to the neighbourhood birds, trying to spot them among the trees with their bird-shaped leaves. Within a few days, the goldfinches departed too, but the comfort of listening to the natural world took on a deeper significance.

After the goldfinches left, the dawn chorus of Woodland Park changed. I made more recordings: starlings with their playful songs that included copies of other bird calls – such as those of red-winged blackbirds, seagulls, and eagles – and even sirens; house finches with their soft undulations; and song sparrows singing in pulses. It became clear to me that the biophony of the place was shifting with the daily rituals and seasonal traditions of resident birds. I learned that nothing stays the same, and while this lesson had its attendant sadness, it also offered up joyful discoveries about the agency of the natural world.

Greg, Sugi, and I planned a camping vacation to the interior of the province, and I took along the field recording gear. We stopped at the places that Tom loved, including Nicola Lake, Okanagan Lake, and Deep Creek.[7] I marked each spot with a recording session. I tried to be unobtrusive, setting up my gear and staying still while the birds resumed their vocalizations. I recorded as much as possible and looked forward to listening to what the birds contributed. Back in the studio, I noticed that each location's sonic field was a weaving not only of birds but also of sounds of the earth as well as of humans. This re-listening process helped me determine what I needed to do to reveal narratives in the soundscapes. I decided to use simple editing techniques to transform the recordings into listening experiences that depicted the temporal realism of these interconnections, such as how a towhee at Okanagan Lake changed the phrasing of its song with the sound of an approaching vehicle on the highway, or how a single bird call pierced the sonic intensity of wind and waves at Nicola Lake. Five of the seven soundscapes were made from one recording, recorded in a single take, edited down to the section

[7] Nicola Lake, Okanagan Lake, and Deep Creek are part of the Syilx/Okanagan traditional territories.

Figure 2. The author preparing for field recording at Nicola Lake, British Columbia. Photo courtesy of Greg Snider, 2020.

that best emphasized the story of that moment told by its vocalists and sound-makers.

Two of the soundscapes include electronic interventions. *Woodland Park Sparrow and Sirens* has a track I produced using a modular synthesizer that sonically mimics the Vancouver port and police sirens found in the field recording that forms the basis of the work. The synth siren gently enters the sound space of the field recording and, for a moment, syncs with it, emphasizing the rhythmic pulses of the real sirens. But the synth siren is just slightly out of sync with the real sirens, so, as it diverges, it reveals the layered modulations that build a sonic metaphor signalling the conjunct urgencies of the climate emergency, the approaching sixth mass extinction,[8] and racial injustices brought to the fore by recent Black Lives Matter protests.

[8] A recent study identifies significant bird declines over the past forty years, with an overall loss of 30 percent of bird populations – nearly three billion birds – between 1970 and 2019. The declines are primarily due to the diminishment of habitat from human development and agriculture. The majority of the losses are in the common families of birds, such as sparrows, finches, and blackbirds. The irony is that when we look around the city, it seems that these birds are okay because we find them in our neighbourhoods and at our bird feeders. But if we compare their numbers to the 1970 baseline, we see the significance of the declines. See Kenneth V. Rosenberg, Adriaan M. Dokter, Peter J. Blancher, John R. Sauer, Adam C. Smith,

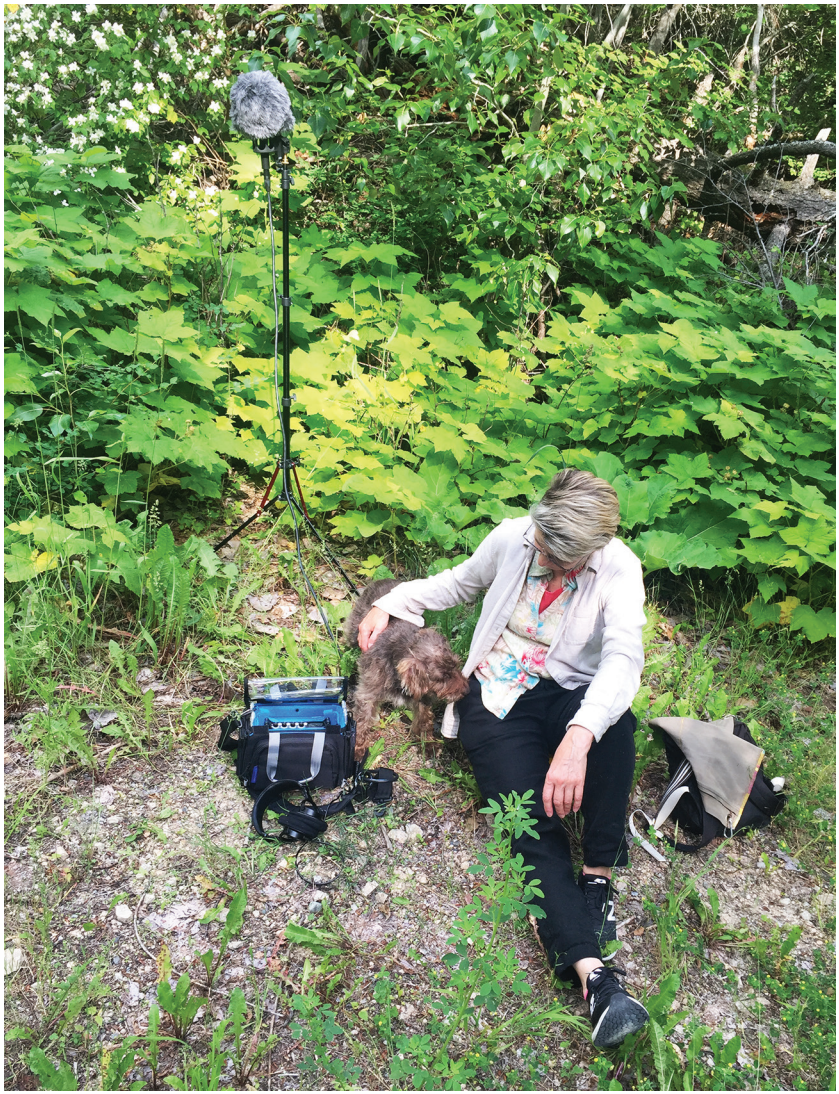

Figure 3. The author with Sugi field recording at Deep Creek, British Columbia. Photo courtesy of Greg Snider, 2020.

Figure 4. Video still from the *Bird Park Survival Station*, showing crow parents drinking from the water dishes fixed with a contact mic. Photo courtesy of the author, 2020.

The most "composed" soundscape is *Bird Park*, an arrangement of clips from the *Bird Park Survival Station* (2015–ongoing), a multi-species art project that I built on the roof of my home in the east side of Vancouver.[9] The *Station* provides affordances to local and migratory birds – fresh water, small amounts of food, caching and perching features, trees, plants, and flowers – to help them survive the climate emergency. Here in southern British Columbia, the changing climate is evidenced in the warmer and drier summers, and habitat loss due to the resulting increase in forest fires. The shifting climate puts pressures on the wildlife inhabiting this region and will make it more difficult for some species to survive. In exchange for the offerings in the *Station*, I record the birds' activities through a computer vision system that triggers GoPro cameras and a sound recording system.[10] Each year, the *Station* records hundreds of videos and sound files. By analyzing them, I learn about the birds and improve the affordances to suit their needs. During the past three summers, I installed contact mics throughout the *Station* and recorded the vibrations of local birds using the water dishes and perching features.

Paul A. Smith, Jessica C. Stanton, Arvind Panjabi, Laura Helft, Michael Parr, and Peter P. Marra, "Decline of the North American Avifauna," *Science* 336, no. 6461 (2019): 120–24. doi:10.1126/science.aaw1313.

[9] For more information on the *Bird Park Survival Station*, see Julie Andreyev's website at www.animallover.ca.

[10] The computer vision software was custom made by computational artist and composer Simon Lysander Overstall. See his website at www.simonlysander.net.

Figure 5. Video still from the *Bird Park Survival Station*, showing sparrows bathing in the water dishes. Photo courtesy of the author, 2020.

These recordings revealed instances of local birds enacting their seasonal traditions raising their families: crow parents pounding their finds into small pieces for young mouths, starling families hopping on the metal perching wire connecting the two bird feeders, communal bathing and chatting among generations of sparrows. *Bird Park*, the soundscape, includes these contact mic recordings set amidst the sound-field of the dawn chorus as it is heard from the *Station*. While I listened to each recording and made decisions about the overall composition, I learned something else that gave me a sense of connection to my avian community. I could hear that the birds were getting on with things, doing what must be done, despite their personal hardships.

Throughout the process of making the soundscapes, I kept in mind the need to create works that *I* would want to listen to – works that could provide moments of comfort during times of loss and change. For other listeners, I hope the *Bird Park Sessions* evoke a sense of wonder for the natural world of this province and perhaps convey that we, as humans, are embedded within it. The soundscapes represent expressive instances of local beings living alongside earth's forces and amidst anthropogenic stresses, together creating this place we call home.