

Love What You Love Podcast

Episode 39: Birding with Rachel Barham

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Welcome to *Love What You Love*; I'm Julie Rose. I'm insatiably curious about people and the world around us, and absolutely in love with passion and unselfconscious enthusiasm. Every other week I geek out with someone about the thing that they love, and then I share it with you.

Welcome back! Or, Welcome! It's that time of the year when the sun is up earlier and earlier, which means *you're* getting up earlier and earlier. It should be easy to just roll over and go back to sleep, but around here, we have some very vocal birds who insist on a cacophonous dawn chorus every single morning. For this week's wonderfully soulful guest, this is the very definition of Heaven.

Rachel Evangeline Barham is a professional singer and vocal teacher, and absolutely passionate about all kinds of birds, especially songbirds. In this chat, we talk about bird early warning systems, birds singing badly, different planes of existence, birds with rubies in their tailfeathers, Black Birders Week, observing versus collecting, and so, so much more. So find out why Rachel loves birding and why you might learn to love it, too.

Julie: Hello, Rachel! Thank you so much for joining me today!

Rachel: Hello, Julie! Thank you for having me. I'm so excited.

Julie: I'm so interested in birds, which is a big change for me because I was absolutely terrified of them for my entire life until recently, so... [laughs]

Rachel: Really? Wow!

Julie: Yeah, that's a whole 'nother story. But I'd like to know, what is birding, for folks who don't know what it is, and then how did you get into it?

Rachel: Those are two very big and, sort of, loaded questions. What is birding... I'm glad you said birding because it's so much more than birdwatching. I would say it's observation. Sometimes it means staring at a tree for 20 minutes and waiting for something to happen, but obviously, I think that has some value on its own. Just going out and being in nature, but sort of tapping into this different plane of existence.

So, you're going to see birds, sure. You might be going to count birds, and you're certainly going to listen for them. That's a dimension that I think is not apparent to everybody, that birding by ear, just listening for what they're saying, is huge. I mean, for me it might even be the biggest part of it. And then you're also looking for their behavior. Birds are sort of a triple threat, right? They're singing, they're dancing...

And I guess, it's singing, it's what they look like; their plumage, their feathers, and enjoying them on that level, and also their behavior, what they're doing. I guess that's my little definition of birding.

How did I get into birding? This is a... It's probably a pretty long story. I guess I have to say, there are two people who really got me into birding. One was my father. He died in 2008, and he was a Methodist minister in Mississippi; that's where I grew up. And he was an amateur naturalist on all senses of the word. He loved anything in nature. He was just insatiably curious about birds, and bugs, and leaves, trees... just all sorts of things in nature.

And I know that he did specifically teach me about some birds, and I can talk a little bit about that later. He was always telling me and my brother, "Look at this. Look at this. Listen to this." So I think that was part of it. I also think I inherited a lot of his personality just naturally, so if he had not specifically told me about some of these things, I'm pretty sure I would've come there on my own eventually.

And then my brother... I'm trying to pin down the year, but somewhere around the time that my father passed away, my brother and I, kind of, seriously got into birding. He's my only sibling, and he lives not too far from me. I'm in Washington DC and he lives in Virginia. And I would go birding and tell him about my observations and vice versa, and that was how I ended up figuring out a lot of what I was hearing or seeing. I'd say, "Hey, I heard this thing and it makes this noise, what do you think that is?" And he'd say, "That's a such-and-such."

So, we sort of went back and forth, and I think I have now surpassed him in bird craziness. Not necessarily in being better at it or anything like that, but just being a little bit more obsessed than he is. So yeah, I think birds, for the two of us, became sort of an extended... We're not twins, but we're close in age and we have this, sort of, twin language where we... You know, you make up a language that your parents can't understand. And we like words, we like... Both of us are musicians as well, and we like to, kind of, imitate the songs of the birds and things like that. So I guess those are the two dimensions of it.

Then, fairly recently, actually... For me, birding was always an introverted thing. It was something I did by myself, and I would report my observations to my brother, and I would report some of them to a citizen science thing. But it was sort of a thing that I did on my own. It was a solitary activity that I need very much, as an introvert, to get away from people, to restore myself.

And I think it was about 2017 I discovered... I guess I just started going out to a different place where there were a lot more birders around, so it wasn't just me. And I got in with a group of people who were just as obsessed as I am, and I have now kept up... There's a little bit of a social element to that. We have a little chat thing where we talk about our observations and things like that, and I'm now connected to some major, major birders.

I should say this up front, I'm an amateur. This is a hobby for me. It's not something I do professionally, and there are people who have degrees in this. I'm not one of them. [laughs] So, it has recently become a little bit more of a social activity, but now I still have to have my introvert birding time, so I'm kind of birding a lot these days. [laughs]

Julie: Yeah. Oh my gosh, there's so many questions. What is a typical day of birding like for you?

Rachel: That's a good question. It depends on the season. Right now, it's late April here and... So, late April until late May, in DC, in this area, is the height of spring bird migration. So you have not only the resident birds, they're here most of the year, but you have these little birds migrating through that are only here for, sometimes, a day, or a week, or that individual may be just here for a day, that species may just be here for a week or two before they move on. So it's really nuts right now when you go out there.

So what I try to do... I do have a few places that I need to drive to, but I really try to do it by bicycle. I think it's probably not any secret that birds are facing all sorts of threats, and climate change is a big one, and I'm like, "Well, why don't I walk the walk and not

just talk the talk?" So, I really... I know it's not an option for everyone, for many reasons, but I try to go to a place that's nearby. Luckily, I have a fantastic... several places to choose from, actually. So, I will get my morning coffee, go ahead and go through all of that. Get dressed and everything. I'm not actually much of a morning person. [laughs] I usually roll in around eight o'clock when the first shift... well, probably when the first shift of birders is leaving, because in the spring some people show up at like five o'clock in the morning to see what's out there.

You do get more of a concentration first thing in the morning, but I can never make it over there unless I wake up in the middle of the night. And what I do is I try very hard to lock up my bike before I get my binoculars out because if I go ahead and do that, I'm doomed. [laughs] I'm sitting there, like with my bike leaning against me, like, "Come on, just lock up the bike, lock up the- Ooh! What is that?!" [laughs] So that's pretty typical.

And that would be one of those days where so much is going on that you literally can't focus your eyes or your ears. There's just, like, a wall of sound. Everybody's singing. And there are, typically, several other birders out there too. So, you see somebody... I get my bike locked up, I see somebody with their binoculars pointed somewhere, or I see a group of people with their binoculars pointed, and I'm like, "Oh, what are they looking at?" But you never go, like, running up to them and saying, "What is it! What is it!" There's these, kind of, protocols. [laughs]

You try to find what it is they're finding and you say, "Oh, you've got a rufous-sided towhee," or whatever. They've actually changed the name of that bird to an eastern towhee, but I like to say rufous-sided towhee because it's fun to say.

So that's sort of how it goes. And then, people come and go in waves if you're at a spot where a lot of people go. Sometimes I like to just stay there after everybody's left and see what comes down. I think, usually by about ten in the morning, the birds are quieting down a little bit. They're just not quite singing as much; they're dispersed a little bit more. But around noon, a lot of them come down to get a drink of water or to get a bath, so if you can find a good puddle or a good stream, you've got some action going on there. That's going to be great birdwatching. There's nothing like watching a bird take a bath. It's just so wonderful.

I guess that's a typical day, but there are also the days where it's slow for no particular reason. And on a day like that, you really might get to listen to something like a concert that a wood thrush is giving you, or *really* observe one bird, an individual, and those days are just as good to me. I love both kinds of those days.

Julie: Is it like collecting? Or it's an experience but it's also like cataloging the world.

Rachel: You're right. It is a little like cataloging the world. And I've had the great privilege to go snorkeling a few times and I found that my brain works in this sort of encyclopedic way of classifying animals or nature. I don't know a lot about plants and trees. That's something I would like to know, but I haven't really had time. There are too many birds.

But I found... You sort of group them by size, and shape, and color, things like that, or by the family. I actually don't know a whole lot about the science. I'm really more of an observer. So there is that, you want to work on your life list just to say, "This is how many species I've seen." Oh shoot, I should've looked up that number. My official count is somewhere around 350, but there's some old lists I haven't put in, particularly

from when I was traveling places, so I know I'm well over 400. And that's nothing compared to people who go all over the world looking for birds.

But I will say that I'm pretty proud of my yard list. I'm up to 93 birds in my yard, and this is in Washington DC. It's in a fairly... It's not a super urban part of the city. You would look at it and say that's a suburb. Lawns, sidewalks... But we don't have a lot of trees. It's just that we're close enough to Rock Creek Park, which is one of the places that I like to go, that I think a lot of birds stop in our few little trees on the way to the park as they're migrating. I've had these things... They just land for four seconds and then they go away, so I just have to be out there in the morning when they do it. Or it might be a flyover. Like, I've never had a bald eagle in my yard, but I've seen them flying over.

But you asked about collecting, and that's an experience that... I don't do it for that reason, but when I've taken somebody on a bird walk with me, somebody who's never done it before, I see that tendency. I'm like, "We're not playing Pokémon Go here." [laughs] They're like, "Oh, there's a bird..." And I'll tell them what it is, and I'll tell them a little bit about it, and then they're like, "Okay..." And I see their feet starting to move. And I'm like, "We could stay and see if it does anything, or see if it sings for us, you know?"

So, to me it is more about, kind of, being still out there and waiting for them to come to me, waiting for them to do their thing, because it's a great privilege when one is pretty close to you and you can really get more of a sense of it than just a sighting, just a glance.

Julie: Now, what do birds represent for you? Do you dream about them? Do they have symbolism for you?

Rachel: I do dream about birds, frequently. And occasionally I have a dream that is so vivid that I literally get up going like, "I've got to put this on my bird list... Wait a minute! That was a dream." [laughs] And I also dream... I mean, I dream vividly anyway, but I dream birds that don't exist, and some of them are so beautiful that I draw them just for my own personal record. I remember one that had a... It's a small bird, kind of gray, and in its tail were these square, like, cut rubies. So like, what a great bird that I dreamed up!

As far as what they represent for me, I do think... They occupy our world but on a completely different plane, and it's something like, for me, this connection with that... I'm getting chills right now. This plane that they occupy that we will never understand. We know a lot about them, but there is so much mystery to where they go, what they do, what their motivations are. You know, we will never be able to know all of those things, and I love living in that state of mystery, living in that state of uncertainty about, "What's this bird going to do?" Or, you know, "I'm going to go out today. Who's going to show up? What am I going to see?"

The other thing about birds is we can't control them. I can't anymore will a bird to go away from my house than to come to me. I have these backyard birds that hang out all the time. I can't will them to come and sit in my hand. You can train some wild birds to come eat out of your hand, but that's not the point. The point is, they do what they want, or they do what they are somehow programmed to do. And the mystery of that programming that makes a northern cardinal sing the same song that every northern cardinal sings, or a song sparrow will learn a different song from its parents. They're

just so mysterious. As much as I know about them, there's always going to be something else to find out and always going to be something to surprise me.

Julie: What can birds, in general, tell us about a neighborhood or about an environment?

Rachel: Well, this might be where we need to cue the audio samples that I sent you.

Julie: Yes!

Rachel: Would you like to hear those? I had a feeling you might ask me one of two questions, one of which would be 'what's my favorite bird', and of course there's not an answer to that. Actually, I think the answer to that is, "Whichever bird I'm observing right now is my favorite bird." So that's the easy answer.

I do have a favorite category of birds, which is birds that imitate other birds in their singing. Now, I am a classically trained singer, that's what my profession is, and I do think I'm probably more keyed into that than most people are, just because I'm used to distinguishing my pitch out of a whole mess of orchestra, or you know, singing my own part, one person per part in an ensemble, things like that. So, I think I'm better at discerning the sounds than a lot of people are. One of my favorite kinds of birds is birds that imitate other birds, and there are several of those but there are three that are in the same family that all live in my area.

I meant to say, birding is regionalized. I know you're on the West Coast. I'm mainly talking about East Coast birds, but if anybody's disappointed that they don't have the birds I'm talking about, just go to your local Audubon Society and someone will tell you about all the cool birds that are in *your* area that I am totally jealous of. So, there's something for everyone, everywhere.

So, these birds are called mimids. Three birds. One is the northern mockingbird; very famous in literature. One is the brown thrasher, so that's kind of a cousin of the mockingbird. A large, beautiful bird. It's this, sort of, rusty brown color on top and has spots and stripes on the breast. It's a really beautiful, striking bird. It looks like a dinosaur. And the other one is a gray catbird. I just saw my... I just *heard* my first gray catbird yesterday. They have come back after going wherever they go for the winter, so I'm super excited about those.

These are all really great birds that imitate other birds. So if you get to a place that has a mockingbird, all you have to do is listen to that mockingbird, and it is going to tell you every bird that it's ever heard in its life, plus possibly some that some other bird heard and passed it on to that other bird.

Julie: Wow...

Rachel: So, if you want to play that one, it's the first sample. The mockingbird that I sent you, this is actually "my" bird that inhabits my yard. He's so friendly to me that... My front door is wooden and it sticks a little bit, so I have to, kind of, kick it to open it. I go out there, I kick the door, and he is sitting there on the railing, not scared of anything because he knows me. And in this sample, he imitates... I'm going to go ahead and tell you this because I just think it's so stinkin' amazing.

This bird imitates... I think I gave you about a one-minute sample. By the way, this was a 17-minute concert that he gave me. He imitates eight birds that I can discern, and of those eight birds, 19 different fragments of song, *and* a car alarm. So you're going to hear him go, "Ree-rrr ree-rrr ree-rrr." And I believe right after the car alarm, he also

imitates a crow, which is my favorite thing. He's like "caw, caw, caw." So, listen to that sample and see what you think about a mockingbird.

[clip of the mockingbird, singing snippets of many different bird songs in quick succession, including a crow, and a car alarm]

Julie: That is astonishing!

Rachel: So that's one bird. [laughs] That is literally a bird who can tell you about everything that's going on.

Julie: So why do they do that?

Rachel: I mean, I guess you'd have to ask them. But it's their way of establishing their territory. And you know, the louder you can sing and the better singer you are, the more ladies you're going to attract, really. That's sort of the crux of that.

By the way, this bird has done... he's imitated two birds that are not on my yard list because I have never observed these two birds, so he must've heard them in the middle of the night as they were flying over or something. I've never seen them, but I know the songs. So, he's just incredible. They are just fantastic singers.

Hollywood loves this bird. If you need just, sort of, a birdsong in the background that keeps going, they will deliver! [laughs] That's my virtuoso mockingbird. And sometimes, I almost can't go out in the woods and look for the little warblers and things because I don't want to leave him! I want to hear everything he's saying to me. He's so wonderful. And they are *fearless*. They'll attack a cat. They attack crows. They're great birds. I wish every home had a mockingbird.

The next one is a brown thrasher, and I have had these in my neighborhood, but they like a little bit more open territory, or some woods and some water, so they're a little more ex-urban and you'll find them in more wild areas. But this guy is... And by the way, these are all males. For most songbirds - not all, but most songbirds - it's the males that do the most singing. The northern cardinal is a notable exception to that. The female cardinals sing as well.

But anyway, this guy... I only hear him specifically imitating three other birds in this recording. I have a lot of other recordings, but I just wanted you to hear the quality of the sounds that he's making. It's not like these whistly things. It sounds electric or something. It's this other-worldly sound. So, why don't you listen to the brown thrasher?

[clip of brown thrasher imitating a handful of other birds' songs and other digital-sounding noises]

Julie: Wow...

Rachel: R2D2, right?

Julie: Yes!

Rachel: I mean, I'm a voice teacher, and I just can't even wrap my brain around how they are physically making those sounds. They do have a different... Most songbirds have two different vocal organs, so they actually can make two sounds at once.

I meant to say about the brown thrasher that, unlike the mockingbird, he always does... he does these short little snippets of songs, and he always repeats it. So it's, "This, this, that, that, this, this, that, that," with pauses in the middle so you can always

tell the difference between those two birds. So, I heard that one last week, and what I'm disappointed in is, it was really windy so I didn't get a good recording. That was his public concert, where he was really showing off and trying to say, "I'm the loudest. I'm the best!"

But right before that, for about probably three or four minutes, he gave me a private concert. I was so close to him that I could hear he was practicing. And it was like half that volume or less. It was maybe a quarter of that volume, and he actually imitated completely different birds in this lower volume setting. I've never heard anything like it. So, that was one of those things where you show up and you don't expect something like that to happen. It was just unbelievable.

Now we have a catbird, and a catbird is called a catbird because - and I don't think it's on this recording - one of their calls... That's the call as opposed to the song. The song is, like, what they sing. The call is more like, "Hey I'm here." It's just a little note that they make. The catbird goes, "Reeeer. Reeer." So they sound like they're mewling like a cat.

And the catbird... You know about the singer Florence Foster Jenkins who was notoriously, just, horrible but she made all these recordings because she was rich enough to do it? There was a movie with Meryl Streep. There's a famous quote that she gave: "There may have been people who said I *couldn't* sing, but nobody could ever say that I *didn't* sing." So that's a catbird.

They are imitating other birds, and in this recording that I gave you, I hear seven different birds. But catbirds are terrible. They don't sing very well. They're off pitch, but they're so much fun to have around. They are just... to anthropomorphize just a little bit, they're just so joyful. So, see if you love the catbird.

[clip of a catbird "badly" singing various birdsongs]

Julie: Not knowing what they're supposed to be imitating, I find them just charming!

Rachel: Yeah, I think they're wonderful. They just sing! I have a Mary Oliver poem if you want me to read it. This is from her collection *Owls and Other Fantasies*, and I'm going to try not to cry because it's one of my favorite poems. It's called "Catbird."

*He picks his pond, and the soft thicket of his world.
He bids his lady come, and she does,
flirting with her tail.
He begins early, and makes up his song as he goes.
He does not enter a house at night, or when it rains.
He is not afraid of the wind, though he is cautious.
He watches the snake, that stripe of black fire,
until it flows away.
He watches the hawk with her sharpest shins, aloft
in the high tree.
He keeps his prayer under his tongue.
In his whole life he has never missed the rising of the sun.
He dislikes snow.
But a few raisins give him the greatest delight.
He sits in the forelock of the lilac, or he struts
in its shadow.
He is neither the rare plover or the brilliant bunting,
but as common as the grass.*

*His black cap gives him a jaunty look, for which
we humans have learned to tilt our caps, in envy.
When he is not singing, he is listening.
Neither have I ever seen him with his eyes closed.
Though he may be looking at nothing more than a cloud
it brings to his mind several dozen new remarks.
From one branch to another, or across the path,
he dazzles with flight.
Since I see him every morning, I have rewarded myself
the pleasure of thinking that he knows me.
Yet never once has he answered my nod.
He seems, in fact, to find in me a kind of humor,
I am so vast, uncertain and strange.
I am the one who comes and goes,
and who knows why.
Will I ever understand him?
Certainly he will never understand me, or the world
I come from.
For he will never sing for the kingdom of dollars.
For he will never grow pockets in his gray wings.*

Julie: Oh my goodness, that's beautiful!

Rachel: I think that poem actually introduced me to Mary Oliver, and I was hooked. And I think that actually... that sentiment sort of sums up a lot of... You were asking what birds mean to me. They don't inhabit our world, but they visit. They're here. And so we can learn about their world by observing them. You know, I'm not super into finding metaphors, I guess, but just observing them and embracing some of that mystery they show us if we're willing to just pay attention.

Julie: Yeah... Now, you said there's a difference between a call and a song. Do all birds have a song, or do some of them just have a call? And the purpose of the song is a mating thing, or is it just because they do?

Rachel: Yes, I have been talking about songbirds mostly, but something like a great blue heron just goes "Mah!" you know. [laughs] So, not everything has... I think I'm mainly talking about songbirds, so that's a good question.

An example that a lot of people might know is a northern cardinal. These are the red birds you see on Christmas cards. Although, the female is beautiful. She's like an olive green, sort of, with a bright red beak and red highlights all over her, like on her shoulders and tail, and her little crest is red. Very pretty bird. So, their call is like, [clicking sound]. They're just always clicking back and forth. Cardinals mate for life, and they are in constant contact with their mate, saying, "Here's the best food. I'm over here. Everything's cool. I'm good. How you doing?" It's a baseline.

And when they stop calling, it might mean that there's a predator or something like that. It's like, "Oh, pay attention." Or if the call speeds up; sometimes you'll hear them go [clicks rapidly], and that might mean there's a rival coming, there's a predator or something like that. And the song, they have so many different songs. We actually heard the mockingbird do several versions of a cardinal song. But it's typically notated as "wheat-wheat-wheat-chew." So they kind of go, "Wheeeeat. Wheeeeat. Wheeeeat.

Chew! Chew! Chew!" Or they might go, "chewchewchewchewchew." One of mine goes, "Vermere! Vermere! Vermere! Beer! Beer! Beer! Beer! Beer!" [laughs]

But basically, it's this ascending thing and then descending thing repeated over and over. So that's a cardinal. That's the difference in the call and the song. And yes, the song is... There are probably people who have studied this scientifically more than I have, but I think it's generally to establish their territory to say, "If you can hear me, then you're too close" to a rival, and to attract females. I'm not really sure why the female cardinal sings. I guess she's probably trying to attract males. I don't know.

I also have heard... This is kind of interesting because singing definitely calls attention to a bird, doesn't it? That's like saying, "Hey, look at me! Listen to me!" I have seen male birds singing very near the nest, so I'm not sure what that's about, if it's a territorial thing. When the female's sitting on the nest, the male will be sitting there going, "Look at me. Here's my house. It's bigger than your house," or whatever. I don't know exactly why they do that. But that's another...

Gosh, watching birds build a nest, it's just gotta be the most magical thing ever. They don't have hands! And they build these intricate nests. They're just, like, master weavers. And some of them decorate too. I watched blue-gray gnatcatchers... which is this tiny little bird. It's hardly bigger than a dragonfly, really. It's not a big bird. They build a nest about the size of a hummingbird nest, and they use lichens and spiderwebs, and they'll use, like, petals from pink trees and things like this to put in their nest.

I watched them building a nest last year, and it looked to me like both of them were working on it, the male and the female. They would bring up a new lichen, and then move one of the old ones, like, "Oh, no I didn't really like that there. I just put that there the day that we moved in." [laughs] Decorators! It's really, really neat to watch a bird build a nest.

Julie: Especially if somebody's, like, new to birding or just interested in how that works, what is this language about what a birdcall sounds like if you don't actually get to hear a clip?

Rachel: You gave me a great segue! Thank you, Julie. I have a few resources here that I think might be helpful for people. So, first of all, I would say, if you kind of know your feeder birds by sight but you're interested in getting to learn their songs a little bit better and their calls, find out what your top ten most common birds are, and then learn those. The ones that are there year-round, the ones that you see at your feeder. So that's a really good place to start. There are tons of online resources. The Cornell Lab of Ornithology is one of the best places to look for... it's basically an online field guide that they have, and they have an app as well.

So there are things like that where you can hear different recordings. Also, like I said, go to your local Audubon Society and you're going to find somebody like me who is dying to tell you the top ten birds that you should learn. But I do have a book recommendation for somebody who's, kind of, really interested in the language of birds. It's called *What the Robin Knows* by Jon Young. He talks about tracking, the art of tracking, where you're listening for not just the birds but everything; the squirrels and the rabbits. He lives in a different area from me, but he has some other mammals that are involved as well, the deer.

Everybody's communicating all the time through sound, and if you can tap into that world, then you really start learning a lot. When I read this book, it was just a couple of years ago, and he actually confirms things for me that I had observed for myself. For example, chickadees, I think there's some kind of chickadees all over the US. We have Carolina chickadees here and they go "CHICK-a-dee-dee. CHICK-a-dee-dee-dee." They say their names. They have some other noises they make too, but they are always talking. They're just always doing that. They don't make a lot of noise. It's not a loud bird, but it's always in the background.

And they actually warn everybody else, all the other birds, and the mammals, the deer, everybody, if there's a predator coming. And they'll say, "This predator is one of those bipeds that has earbuds and jogging shorts on. Probably not much of a threat, but you might want to get out of the way." There's one call that says that, and then there's another call that says, "There's a hawk up there, but it's the kind of hawk that only will kill a bird if it has nothing else to eat, so you're probably okay. But just head's up."

And then, there are a couple of hawks, at least that we have here, that specifically eat birds, and they are super amazing predators. You just have to be in awe of them, even if they're eating your songbirds that you like. And they sail in through the trees, just silently, sometimes very close to the forest floor. This is a Cooper's hawk and a sharp-shinned hawk; they're the same thing. And if a chickadee notices a Cooper's hawk, it'll go, "Sssss." I don't know if you could hear that. It's this tiny, high-pitched little noise. And everybody gets quiet.

It can even be one of those days... this actually happened the other day. There was this wall of birdsong. Just... you couldn't even distinguish anything from anything else, and everybody stopped. I didn't hear the chickadee, but everybody stopped singing, became completely silent, and I said, "Where's the hawk?" And I looked up, and in a few moments, there it was.

Julie: Whoa!

Rachel: So, this book, *What the Robin Knows*, tells you what you can listen for. And there's hardly a learning curve. It's actually very easy. All you have to do is dedicate yourself to it and pay attention. So, I highly recommend that book anyway, and it comes with some supplemental listening on the website. So, the birds that he's talking about and the specific sounds that they make, you can actually go and listen to them. You don't have to look that up on your own. That's a great resource.

Julie: You are a trained soprano...

Rachel: Mm-hmm.

Julie: And this is probably a ridiculous question but I'm going to ask it anyway. [laughs] What is the most beautiful birdsong, in your opinion?

Rachel: It's hard to compete with a wood thrush. This is the official bird of the District of Columbia. Also, as of last week, in the House of Representatives, also known as Washington Douglass Commonwealth. If we become the 51st state, that's going to be who we are, and I love that. I'd rather be named after Frederick Douglass than Columbus. He's got plenty of things named after him.

Julie: Yeah.

Rachel: So, the wood thrush is related to our American robin, which is related to [singing] "Blackbird singing in the dead of night..." That blackbird. It's a thrush. And all of this type of thrush have a song that sort of goes "yip. yip." There are a lot of pauses in it, and it kind of goes from down to up. It's like, "Ayerat. [higher] Eeyarrat. [even higher] Eyerrat." That's a very bad... That's like a catbird imitating. [laughs]

But you should maybe go online and listen to a wood thrush. I don't have any recordings queued up for you today. But it is this clear whistle that's interpolated, I guess, with little trills. And there's something very haunting about it. It's loud, but it just beckons you to listen to it, and they'll give you a concert. In fact, there's a place very near me, like walking distance but it's into the national park area, where sometimes, if you go in May when the wood thrushes are here, there's this wall of sound. In music we call it antiphony, antiphonal singing. So, there's one over here, and one over here, and one over here, and they're all singing at the same time. Around dusk, that's a great time to go listen for them.

And it sounds like the aliens are landing. [laughs] But there is something so haunting about that sound. And one of the things I want to, kind of, warn about... I know that people, especially people in different generations from me, really like to use apps, and this can be so helpful. It's an extremely helpful tool to listen to birdsongs online, but you can't actually tell the real acoustical qualities of it unless you're hearing it in its natural habitat. So, you'll hear it echo through the trees, and it's bouncing off trees, and things like that. And a lot of the recordings that are online, they're trying to isolate that sound, right? So that you can learn it. Very helpful tool, but there's no substitute for listening, going out and really observing it for yourself because then you can say, "Oh! That's louder than this bird but it's less loud than that bird."

Yeah, so I'd say a wood thrush is one of the big ones. A house finch, which is a very common bird... I think most people think that it's just twittering because it's at an acoustic level that is, kind of, easy to overlook. It's kind of easy to tune out. But if you listen to that song, there's this rhetoric to it. A house finch, the male is this strawberry-colored bird, and I guess... I'm not sure if they mate for life, but they certainly are always with their mates. And the female is a brown stripey bird. Kind of tan with brown stripes. And this is another bird that's just very cheerful. They sort of bounce up and down to the feeder, and they're always talking to each other, very boisterous.

And he sings this song that goes... the contour of it, it's something like, "Be-boo-be-boo [*jazz scat singing be-boops*] REEEar!" [laughs] But if you listen to it over and over, it's like a complete sentence. There's this rhetoric to it. And I love that song. It's so cheerful. They actually sing through the winter here sometimes and it's great to hear any bird in the winter.

And when he is trying to impress the ladies, specifically in the spring, he will add an extra octave to his song sometimes when he's displaying. He's like singing and dancing for her, and it's just the best show. It's wonderful. And you know, there are some others that I love, but those are a couple of the big ones. One that you might need to go out somewhere to see, and then one that's always around.

Julie: What is the most unusual or rare bird that you have observed?

Rachel: I would say, one of the ones where I felt like I was overhearing a secret that I wasn't supposed to hear was a... Okay, there are several types of these and they've changed the names of some of them, but it was a saltmarsh sparrow. I think it's saltmarsh or

seaside. My bird people are having conniption fits right now because I can't... But they changed the name of it after I saw it, I think, so I can't keep up with it.

And this is a bird that nests in marshes. I was in Delaware when I saw it. And it was just, like, "Wow, what *is* that?" And the thing is, they're not super visible; they don't like to be seen, so they will hide down in these marsh, sort of, weeds. And you might see the movement of the bird, but you don't actually see the bird. And it actually came out for me, and I was able to get such a good look at it. I just took my field notes really quick and then went and pored over the books to see what it was. So, that was one...

I think also, when I was in Italy, I was actually visiting Pompei, I was hoping to see this bird and I actually did get to see it. It was so exciting. My husband was like, "What is wrong with you?" It's a hoopoe, which is this, kind of, large... I don't actually know that much about them, but you see them in all the paintings of the old masters. If you're in a European art gallery, you see these things everywhere. And it's just this large bird that has a, sort of, rusty orange color and black and white. It's a very prominent bird, and you always see them depicted in art with their crest up. It's got, like, sort of round things... It's got a big crest. It just looks so exotic. And so this thing lands in front of me at Pompei, and puts its crest up, "Brrrooop!" And then just leaves. And I was like, "Oh my god!! It was a hoopoe!" So yeah, [laughs] that was pretty cool.

And even... I think pretty much anywhere I go where I know nothing about the birds... I study a lot. I study up and say, "This is what I'm probably going to see." But if you go to Europe or somewhere where it's a completely different set of birds, every single bird is exciting. Gosh, I guess another would be when I was in Colorado and saw my first rufous hummingbird. I was in a store where they had hummingbird feeders out, and I saw this bird, and a guy was like, "What's wrong with you? You've never seen a bird before?" [laughs]

Rufous hummingbird is... You can't paint a picture of it. There's no way to depict it because of the shininess of the feathers. The way that they catch the light, it's just unbelievably beautiful. And there it was, you know? This bird that I've read about in books. Very cool.

Julie: Are there misconceptions about birding that drive you crazy?

Rachel: I think everything about birders is probably true. [laughs] So, you know, we probably fit into a lot of stereotypes. If you don't mind my twisting your question just a little bit.

Julie: Yeah, absolutely.

Rachel: On the same day that George Floyd was murdered in 2020, there was this racial profiling incident with Christian Cooper in Central Park. And this went... It's been all over the world. And that in part led to Black Birders Week, which is a celebration and awareness campaign, mostly on social media, for Black birdwatchers, Black birders who have felt excluded for many, any reasons, who have been excluded for many reasons. And those are... That's not anything that I think I have to spell out, but just so you know, #BlackBirdersWeeks2021 is May 30th to June 5th, and you should tune your Twitter to all of the amazing, amazing work that Black birders and other natural science practitioners are doing. I don't do Twitter very much at all. I kind of started doing it to do shameless self-promotion, and the pandemic kind of took a lot of that away because I haven't been something much.

But every time I tune it, it's just these amazing pictures of birds. I've got herpetologists, and people who study plants, and all sorts of things. It's just great to see what people are doing. But that's just sort of a call to people like me. I identify as white; I have always said I'm an Anglo-mutt. We don't really know much about my family. We're probably mostly from the British Isles way back. And it is... I know a *lot* of birdwatchers, a lot of birders of all stripes. I know gay people, I know trans people, I know Asian people, Southeast Asian people, Asian-Americans. I know people who identify as Hispanic. I know *one* black birdwatcher, and I live in Washington DC. So that tells you something about the need for not just, you know, being nice out in the field and being inclusive, but some sort of dedicated inclusivity and diversity training for birdwatchers.

I don't know exactly how we're all going to go about that as a society, but I'm so glad that it's out in the open and that we are all very aware that probably all of us have unintentionally been sort of exclusive at some point. So, I hate to twist your question, but I really wanted to bring that up because it's a serious problem.

And for one thing, there's economic disadvantage. A pair of binoculars costs... A decent pair is \$350. It ranges from \$100 to 'New Tesla' in terms of price. So yeah, I mean, there are a lot of things that need to be done on that front.

I think if I had to say, it's probably what we already talked about, that a lot of people... they think you're just collecting the birds. Like, "I saw that, so now I can move on. I saw that, so now I can move on." It's so much more than that.

Julie: Just one final question for you. Which composer do you think gets closest to how you feel about birdsong?

Rachel: Great question. Thank you! Olivier Messiaen, French composer, mostly 20th century, specifically wrote birdsongs into his works, and they're a little tough to get into if you're not a trained musician. I would say it's a little niche. And he did a lot of work in the Grand Canyon and Bryce Canyon observing the birds there and noting their songs. I don't know those birds very well because I haven't spent much time... I've not spent *any* time there; I would like to.

So, one of the composers that doesn't have an extensive output in birdsong but is really, really good at it when she does, is Amy Beach. Now, I don't have her dates in front of me; I think she died in 1935. She was mostly self-taught. She was a piano prodigy, but she grew up in a, sort of, waspy family where it wasn't okay for women to do certain things. So, she was okay being a piano prodigy until she got a little bit older, and then it's like, "Okay, you have to get married." So she married a man twice her again, and he said, "Yeah, you're not going to be a composer. That's not a thing." She said, "Mmh... I mean, I *am* going to be a composer because I am a composer." But she said, "Okay, I just won't study at a conservatory or anything."

So she was self-taught. But a really, really brilliant composer. And I guess I can do some shameless promotion. I recorded... It came out in 2019. 2020 was supposed to be the year I promoted this album. I did an album called *Up Toward the Sky*, and it's American art songs. I feature several premiers, and it's mostly art songs from the 20th century. An art song is generally a song with solo voice and piano, usually from an existing poem, so it's poetry set to music. So, I do three Amy Beach songs on there, and one is "The Blackbird," one is "The Thrush," and one is "Meadow-Larks." And in the "Meadow-Larks" song, in the piano, not in the voice, she imitates the song of the Western meadowlark.

[clip from "Meadowlark," Rachel singing with piano accompaniment:]

*Sweet, sweet, sweet!
O happy that I am!
(Listen to the meadow-larks,
across the fields that sing!)
Sweet, sweet, sweet!
O subtle breath of balm,
O winds that blow,
O buds that grow,
O rapture of the spring!*

But she wrote a very, very famous piece of music for piano. It's actually two pieces of music. "Hermit Thrush at Eve," and the other one's "Hermit Thrush at Morn." It's Hermit Thrush, and it has two movements. And she, basically, transcribed the song of the hermit thrush on the piano. This song, I can't even describe how beautiful it is.

And I had only heard them last month... this month, April. I had only heard them on their breeding grounds, farther north. Where did I hear them... I heard them in Colorado and I heard them in Oregon. And that's where they breed, but they actually spend winters with us, and so they don't sing in the winter because they're not trying to attract the ladies. Right before they start moving in the spring, so about the second week of April, sometimes if you're really quiet and still, you can hear them sing. And I did. I heard it twice. This was two weeks ago, and now they're gone, most... Probably they're all gone because they're on their way to the breeding grounds. Very special.

I didn't even get into bird migration! Oh my gosh. It's a meta-phenomenon. You're looking at this little thing and going, "Wait, you were just in the Dominican Republic two weeks ago? And you're here? And you're going to Canada?" And it's three inches long! It's just unbelievable what they do. Of course, they face so many threats. Outdoor cats, and window strikes, and climate change. I would say habitat destruction is the one that I've seen the most firsthand. People building things where there used to be some trees, or a meadow, or something, and the birds just go away. North America has lost a quarter of its birds since the early 1970s.

Julie: Oh my god!

Rachel: And that's billions. I can't even remember the number because I don't think in billions. I can't wrap my brain around it. But that study actually came out in... I think it was 2019, how many birds that we've lost. And the thing is, it's preventable and we can change it. There is real, real hope here. It's not one of these things where we're just doomed. And I think that... Maybe you can tell this about me. The most compelling argument for conservation is just joy, and excitement, and curiosity. And educating people about what is right there if they just pay attention and some very common-sense ways to help them out.

Julie: Well Rachel, this has been an absolute delight. Thank you so much for taking so much time and being so generous with your time and talking with me today.

Rachel: Likewise. I have listened to a couple of episodes of your podcast, and I love it! I absolutely love it. And as soon as bird migration season is over I'm going to binge-listen to all of it.

Julie: Ah! [laughs] Thank you.

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