

## WHAT THE ROBIN KNOWS

Jon Young, in *What the Robin Knows: How Birds Reveal the Secrets of the Natural World* (241 pp, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011) teaches us bird watching without life lists or even, necessarily, species identification.

Because for survival every creature, from bluebirds to black bears, is watching and listening to every other, always, any disturbance in the status quo will be broadcast, like rings from a stone thrown into a still pond, as far as sight and sound can reach.

So we could have a badger or a bobcat living in our backyard and never see it – warned by the birds’ songs or the squirrels’ chatter, it will have slipped quietly away.

To hear what the badger or the bobcat hear, we need to learn “deep bird language,” to expand awareness and shrink disturbance, to create a routine of invisibility.

Disturb one, disturb all. If you want to see wild animals, first get permission from the birds.

To do this, Young suggests we choose a “sit spot,” somewhere close and easily accessible to spend at least a half hour a day, listening to and watching the birds – and everything else. An ideal location would be near water, bushes, trees and open space. A feeder will help, at least initially. Learn the sit spot’s ecology – where its inhabitants hide, drink, nest, feed.

Occupy it initially in the warm months, at dawn and dusk if possible. Approach and leave it by different routes and walk on cat feet, pausing frequently. Develop expanded peripheral vision (owl eyes) and hearing (deers’ ears) by focusing softly, diffusely. You’re a visitor trying to be

invisible, not a hunter – not even a sight hunter, as birdwatchers are. Then the intimidating surface of that world will yield to your awareness, and reveal its hidden patterns.

Focus first on birds common year-round, that feed and nest near the ground and establish small territories. Their vocalizations include songs (best for identification), companion calls (for keeping close touch), territorial aggression, adolescent begging (deadly for the young) and alarms.

Once you learn what's normal, the baseline “cacophony of harmony,” a backdrop against which everything plays out, you'll recognize breaks in the pattern, usually triggered by predators or intruders. You will, Young promises, even learn to distinguish different kinds of threat, depending on the birds' responses.

The baseline has its own rhythm – a dawn chorus, a mid-day lull, and another chorus in late afternoon to sunset. Within this, birds' vocalizations confirm baseline conditions (no danger) or signal tension or alarm.

Birds' actions also indicate danger. We're all familiar with the “bird plow” – birds flushing away at full speed -- since our clumsy approaches often cause it. Other actions include “sentinel” – facing a threat, focused – “hook,” a quick circling back, “popcorn,” a series of such hooks in response to a rapidly moving intruder, “parabolic,” “weasel,” “cat,” “bullet,” “ditch,” “zone of silence,” and “safety barrier” (hiding near threats to predators, like humans.)

Birds will show you the invisible limits of their territories, who's where at any given moment, and what the degree of calm or tension is.

If learning this sounds daunting, Young assures us that, since we too were once predators and prey, our brains still remember, and with practice, ancient deep buried synapses, memory fields and instincts can be awakened.

From Young I gained deeper respect for wild creatures' intelligence: their memorizing every inch of a territory and knowing every creature in it; their distinguishing threats precisely, to conserve energy; their bright attention to the living moment.

What the robin knows is plenty, and he's talking.

To hear the vocalizations Young mentions, go to [BirdLanguage.com](http://BirdLanguage.com).