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Bird by Bird

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Learn From the Birds
Kirsten Furlong

BIRD BY BIRD

19 — Jun — 2023

I check my watch. **Start time:** 05:54.

A quick scan of the sky in all directions: a stunning, salmon pre-dawn sky in the east, the setting moon slithering into darkness in the west, hints of Manhattan to the northwest, shrouded by trees.

Cloud: 5%, **Precip:** 0. I look at the leaves on hackberry trees emerging from the upper fingers of a drainage, only the slightest hint of movement.

Wind: 1. It would be a great morning. I pull up the weather on my phone.

Temp: 22°C. I should move quickly — the forecast was for heat descending like a blanket by 09:30. The birds won't like the heat.

I listen, really listen, with every neuron. I'm always listening; I've been listening since I left my battered truck, jumped the fence and briskly walked a quarter of a mile across the prairie, shins and boots wet with dew. Now, at this arbitrary starting point marked on my GPS, I become acutely aware of each song, chip and twitter.

I stand still for several minutes, pencil on clipboard, acknowledging and, in an odd way, honoring each individual bird.

SUTA — 1 — M — 0m — 160m — 240°. I record an exuberant song and splash of red over in the trees — a male summer tanager greeting the rising sun. There is one of him; I'm at the beginning of my 300-meter transect; he is 160 meters away and located south-southwest of me.

And so it goes. I record each bird by its four-letter code, sex if I can determine it, where I am and where the bird is, until all within earshot have been recorded. Then I start walking along an imaginary line, making small detours to avoid shrubs. I stop every time I see or hear a new bird, honoring each in the same nerdy way.

The ones I'm most excited about are the **GRSP** and **HESP** (grasshopper sparrow and Henslow's sparrow). It takes a good ear and

an even better eye to pick out these coy creatures who become briefly emboldened during the summer months to sing from the tops of last year's ironweed or cling sideways to swaying stems of big bluestem. I also get excited when I hear the wolf whistle of an UPSA (upland sandpiper) high overhead, or the peent and vroom of a displaying CONI (common nighthawk).

All these species live elsewhere for most of the year but migrate to the Flint Hills in hopes of raising a new batch of babies. I never stop marveling at the paths each has taken. Grasshopper sparrows make their winter homes in the high, arid lands of northern Mexico. Henslow's sparrows sneak around in pine savannas near the Gulf Coast. The splashy summer tanager likes coffee plantations in Central America. Dickcissels hang out in Venezuelan rice fields.

But those upland sandpipers! Like the sparrows, they really like grass, disdaining all things tree-like. They also disdain water for the most part, atypical in the sandpiper world. Unlike the sparrows, though, they are not content to fly a mere 1,000 miles to northern Mexico. Instead, they head south over the Gulf, cross Central America, fly off the Pacific coast making landfall in Ecuador, cross the Andes to Amazonia, and continue on to the grasslands of Argentina. A few months later, they do it all in reverse, making a 10,000-mile round trip each year!

When I moved here more than a decade ago, my naive self felt only the elation and peace of solitude in nature, witnessing the waking world and spying on the private lives of birds. From the first, I was smitten by this landscape. Growing up at the northernmost edge of the tallgrass prairie ecosystem, I had never actually experienced prairie. Southern Manitoba is almost all wheat and canola these days.

When I first stepped out into the Flint Hills, my soul recognized some sort of ancestral home, no doubt shaped by a deep history of human evolution from the African savanna. Now, beneath that internal song, other emotions, difficult to avoid, compete for the melody line.

I recorded only one grasshopper sparrow on this transect. When I started working here, there were a dozen grasshopper sparrow territories in this area. Sure, abundance varies year to year depending on fire, grazing and rain. But in only one decade, I have watched the birds I love disappear before my eyes. I can count on my fingers all the upland sandpipers at the Konza Prairie this year. Our local prairie chicken lek dwindled to three males and one female this spring, down from dozens in the early 2000s.

My students roll their eyes at my drama when I tell them that to see displaying prairie chickens — something I consider Kansans' birthright — they should make the effort to roll out of bed early **this year**



Night Passages Bobolink (detail)
Collection of The Great Plains Art Museum, Lincoln, NE
Kirsten Furlong

instead of waiting any longer. I dread the March morning when I realize they are gone, and I live in fear of it being next year.

The reason for the counting and tromping, noting direction and time, wind and song? I bear witness to these declines in the way that science demands. Soon after the Konza Prairie came under the stewardship of Kansas State University, my predecessors established monitoring protocols for many plant and animal groups. For two weeks

every June for over four decades, first Zimmerman, then Sandercock, and now I have placed our names at the tops of these datasheets, retracing the same paths, honoring successive generations of feathered miracles.

Land management has changed, and that has surely affected the birds. In the days of Zimmerman, there were fewer trees and shrubs, and consequently, fewer tanagers. Gone are the hot summer fires that kept the woody growth at bay, and gone, too, are the massive, transient bison

herds. We do our best with manageable spring burns and domestic cattle, but a world of fenced-off pastures, ranch-style homes and mile-gridded roads constrains what is possible.

Stewardship operates at different spatial scales for grassland birds relative to birds elsewhere, or even other grassland critters. Of the grasshopper sparrows that breed here one year, only about 20% of them will return the next year, and those will be replaced by individuals from elsewhere. Unlike the robin in your backyard who makes her nest on the same downspout year after year, prairie birds may decide that Nebraska is the place for them next year, or perhaps the Red Hills near Oklahoma. Then again, the following year, we may find them back in their old haunts across the Flint Hills.

Whether they return or not is partly shaped by the previous year's weather, both here and in the crazy quilt drought and flood pattern of the Great Plains. Last year's rain affects birds by shaping the finer points of vegetation structure in those patches that have not been burned for a year or two. We can now write out a local "recipe" for ideal grasshopper sparrow conditions. But because the birds see a multi-state region as their summer cottage, good stewardship in the Flint Hills cannot succeed without good

stewardship in the broader region. There is much work yet to be done.

By 09:32 I finish the last transect of the day. I see my truck three miles distant, but I am hot and tired. I find a flat limestone slab where I eat breakfast, drink the last swig of tepid coffee and briefly rest. Most birds' enthusiasm for song has waned, and cicadas are revving their engines. Before me is one of the most beautiful and under-appreciated sights in North America — impossibly green plateaus, spectacular floral shows and the big, broad expanse of land and sky that city folk find hard to imagine.

If only I could transport each of them in turn to this spot and show them the world through my eyes! If only I could explain how loss of native prairie, exchanged for factories or cornfields, or due to woody encroachment is the equivalent of logging giant redwoods! If only I could explain how every choice each of us makes has implications for the planet.

We **can** steward this land responsibly. We **can** act at spatial scales that match birds' behavior. It starts with deep love and appreciation. And for me, that morning, it started by getting up, putting one foot in front of the other, walking back to my truck, and making sure that what I learned on the prairie shapes what I do tomorrow and every future day.

Alice Boyle is an associate professor at Kansas State University. She studies the movements and the ways in which the environment shapes the life histories of tropical and grassland birds. Prior to becoming a biologist, she was a professional musician and continues to explore the interface between art and science.



Killing Me Softly: Hawks
Kirsten Furlong