

# Birds in the Night Light

A sound, in the distance, unrelenting and getting louder. I awake and there in the dim light from the cabin window, I see it, the cursed watch, beeping. I fumble for the alarm and pull my arm back into the warmth of my sleeping bag. Listening, I hear no rain, no wind, only the hum of mosquitoes outside the screen. At just after midnight, it's not easy to pull myself out of bed, even at the end of the road in Denali National Park.

I am rising at this absurd hour to count birds, as I have been doing every day for the past two weeks. It is breeding season in interior Alaska, and it doesn't last long. Those in my profession get out daily during June, to watch and listen for birds. Using a method called point counts, field biologists tally every bird seen or heard from a series of points scattered

across the landscape. Today my route runs along a ridge well above the highest trees. It will take me an hour or more to climb the 2,000 feet and several miles to the first point. The hike ahead is incentive to force myself out of bed.

I pull on tough jeans and rain pants. On top goes a T-shirt, a light sweater, and most important of all, the bug jacket. This last, most noble invention is the savior of many Alaska biologists. The layer of cloth and mesh keeps the mosquitoes at bay, stemming the flow of blood where even the most liberal coating of chemicals will fail. After putting on leather gloves, I feel invincible and hot, in the stuffy cabin. I grab pack, clipboard, a few energy bars, and start walking.

There is a unique quality to the summer night light in the far North. It

is not predawn or dusk, there are no shadows, and the sky always appears gray. The colors remain, but are drab, like a fading color photograph. In the vast open spaces through which I now walk, distances are disrupted. The imprecise perspective leaves me feeling disoriented. Perhaps because of their odd other-world quality, Arctic summer nights have always appealed to me, probably because they often find me out, alone, listening to the sounds of birds.

The tundra is covered in dew; each blueberry and dwarf birch leaf holds a tiny drop of water, tumbling when brushed by a passing leg. These drops quickly drench. The rain pants keep my legs dry but my feet are not so lucky. The abuse of constant brushing against scratchy tundra plants and a thousand walks over rocky terrain has rendered my boots permeable and socks soggy. Ignoring this minor dis-

comfort, I listen as I walk.

Millions of white-crowned sparrows nest across the tundra of the Alaska Range. This morning the majority of them seem to have joined me. Thousands of songs, repeating *I-like-chitti-chitti-bang-bang-bang* sound from the hillsides. As I climb, the sparrows become less numerous, replaced by the single notes and chips of alpine species: horned lark, American pipit, and somewhere above, the occasional call of a surf-bird. The first time I encountered a surfbird on top of an alpine ridge, I thought it (or I) was lost. I had only seen these birds patrolling the rocky shorelines of saltwater coasts, flashing their wings and leaping away from incoming waves. Though surf-birds spend their winters along the ocean, they breed in the northern high country, existing in two worlds.

I top the ridge at 1:30 a.m. The



**Morning alpenglow on the Denali and Alaska Range in Denali National Park, Alaska.**  
**Rock ptarmigan, female.**

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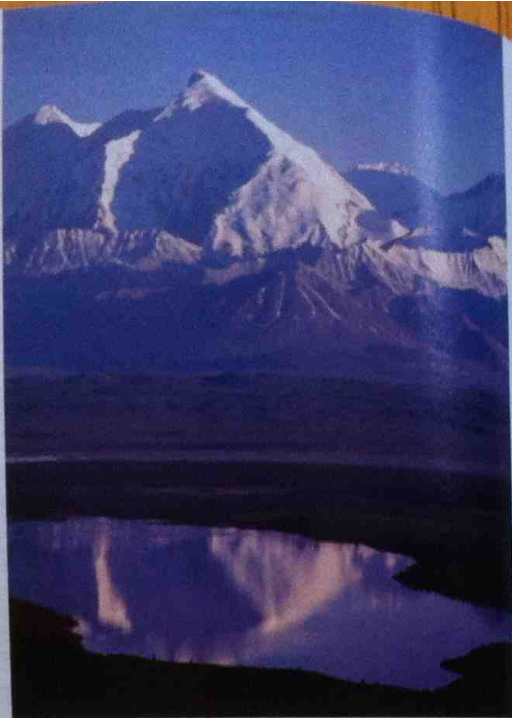


Great One, Denali, is gray against the sky 30 miles to the south. From that distance, it monopolizes the view. The details are not visible; the gray mass of the mountain sits, hulking, seemingly more than a physical presence. Slightly disconcerted, I turn away from the spectral view and continue along the spine of the ridge.

Finally at 2:00, I arrive at the first point of the morning. I have 30 minutes before sunrise, when I start my count. I sit back on a patch of tundra and eat an energy bar. Light is growing in the sky. The sounds of the numerous lowland birds are obscured by distance. Here in the alpine, things are different. This is the realm of nesting shorebirds, upland passerines, ptarmigan, and on the cliffs, peregrines, gyrfalcons, and golden eagles. The already short summers are here compressed to a few weeks. Birds fly in, reproduce, and get out. Only the ptarmigan stick out the winter, lying low in the snow, napping through the winter storms.

A moment before 2:30, I pull out the clipboard and stand. I set my watch to time eight minutes and begin to listen and watch. For a dozen points, this is how the morning goes. The points are about 550 yards apart, turning my walk into a series of long steps down the ridge. At the third stop, Denali and its surrounding peaks turn red with the coming dawn. The sharp tip of Mount Brooks, just east of Denali, is reflected in Wonder Lake, turning both snow and water a vivid pink.

At 3:30 I am bathed in sun. By 5:00 I am halfway through the route. At each point I find a new ensemble of birds. The ubiquitous white-crowns from the lower slopes are heard but not



**The snow-covered peaks of Mount Brooks reflected in Wonder Lake in Denali National Park. White-crowned sparrow.**



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often seen from my perch on the ridge. Pipits and larks flit about but mostly make their presence known through their single note calls. Walking between points, I nearly trip over a rock ptarmigan. Its reddish-brown feathers make it nearly invisible against the rocks and grass of the ridge top. I wonder how many others I have blindly passed. At one point a gully reaches up toward the ridge. From the willows within, I hear the distinctive trill of an Arctic warbler. Wintering in the tropical forests of Southeast Asia, many of this species cross the Bering Sea to breed along tundra streams in Alaska. Its subtle green-and-white plumage makes it appear as at home in Alaska willows as in the Philippine rainforest. This poor male, far above his species' normal habitat, is trying hard to woo a female to join him. *Up here, he sings, just look at the view!*

A few hardy mosquitoes have discovered me and I am grateful for a breeze. The mosquitoes and I play a game; they fly at my face against the wind, using the eddy created in my lee. As they approach, I duck, or move to the side, so the wind catches and carries them away. Always, they find their way back.

Later, the valley below fills with sunshine. The air is so clear I can discern every ridge and cornice of Denali's Wickersham Wall. Sitting down, I close my eyes for a moment and feel the breeze. Smiling, I lean back on my elbows and smell the tundra beneath me. Tundra has a unique odor: earth, air, and fruit. I would fall immediately in love with any woman possessing such perfume.

Crunch! My eyes snap open, and slowly I turn my head to a stand of alders a few yards away; they are

moving, and not with the wind. Rising to its hind legs, a grizzly bear emerges from the brush. I tense; only once have I been closer to a bear, and that was from the sturdy protection of my Toyota pickup. I can see the morning sun reflected in its small, dark eyes. A piece of lichen dangles from the shaggy fur of its chest. The bear sniffs the air, drops to all fours, and crawls out of the willows. Glancing at me, it lumbers off, angling down the hill. Slowly I release my breath and watch it go. I had not been following the rules, shouting, "Hey bear!" every few moments as I walked.

Despite the logic of yelling as I walk to notify bears of my presence, I hate disrupting the silence with my raucous shouts. To be honest, I feel silly, walking along hollering to myself. The adrenaline rush following the ursine appearance has disturbed my reverie, so I stand and continue to the last few points.

Descending the ridge back to the cabin, I find I am tired. A full day, and it is only 9:30 a.m. I arrive at the tiny cabin, nestled in dwarf-sized spruces. It looks friendly, genuine, and well...Alaskan. Pulling off rain pants and bug jacket I tumble back into my sleeping bag. Staring at the wooden beams of the cabin, waiting for sleep, I find myself comforted knowing that there are still places where bears roam where they wish and the only sound is the music of birds. *A*

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