

Kim opened the door of her car and, before saying hello, exclaimed, “Pine Warbler very close, Cerulean Warbler straight ahead, and two Ovenbirds within 50 meters”. After all, to a scientist on a mission the compilation of data from this early morning survey was meat and potatoes. Introductions, while usually performed with a genuine smile and a warm handshake, were broccoli without the dressing. Then, after a heartfelt greeting, 10 more birds were identified by call within the next minute. I released my binoculars, contemplated my first 35 years as a bird watcher, and prepared myself to enter avian elementary school.

Each year a number of point counts are conducted at various locations within the Pine Creek Gorge. The Grand Canyon area is Pennsylvania Important Bird Area (IBA) # 28, and, because of large tracts of unbroken natural habitat, is a premier place to conduct scientific research on birds and the environment. Kim Van Fleet is the IBA Coordinator for Pennsylvania Audubon. My initial field experience with her on this very quiet early morning (5:30am) at the beginning of the Vanaines Trail in the Reynolds Spring/Algerine Swamp Natural Area of Tioga State Forest confirmed for me that the IBA system was in very competent hands.

I can identify the audio waves of some of the common woodland birds and I can even recognize the flute like ascendance of the Hermit Thrush, but loud music in the 60’s and chain sawing without ear protection has left me unable to easily register the higher pitched calls or hear the delicate warbler songs unless they are very close. With IBA point counts, a person stops every 200 laser beamed meters and, after a minute of quiet waiting, starts recording every bird heard or seen, within or beyond a 50 meter circle, for 5 minutes. Birds in flight or appearing between points (flushes) are also noted.

Kim was uncanny in her ability to determine that one Chestnut-sided Warbler was within the circle and two were beyond while making record of over 20 other bird species singing in this early dawn symphony. However, when she looked straight at me and said, “two American Goldfinches flying over,” my sense of reality experienced momentary quicksand as I was hit with the thought that this woman had probably figured out the riddle of what I looked like before my father was born. To ease me and my panic stricken expression, she said, “My husband says that I have radar like ears.” I replied that his assessment was a very large microphonic understatement.

I asked Kim whether the ability to recognize bird songs was a mystical quality bestowed by Zeus on certain wing seeking mortals or an attainment available to everyone through practice. I was comforted to learn that the latter was true. For instance, she said that the Chipping Sparrow, Dark-eyed Junco, Worm-eating and Pine Warblers all sing with a similar trill-like vibration. Since I was familiar with the Junco and “Chippers” song, it followed that I could use these common residents as a base from which to discern the other two bird songs when I heard them. Sure enough, later that morning, the Pine Warbler chirped away at the same location at which Kim had heard one when she first arrived. Wow!! It suddenly seemed plausible that my ear drums could connect with my brain and identify this sound the next time that I heard it. This method of establishing a common bird song base before journeying out was similar to the advice that I give both of my daughters when they are bogged down with homework and unable to move forward; I say, “Clean your room first.”

A young married couple, Ed and Holly Smith, also participated in the morning point count and, after one hour had passed, I realized that I was on the bottom of the bird identification pecking order. A similar feeling had been generated a few years ago when I, as a novice among five electricians, hooked up our solar electric system and, after a number of calls to the manufacturer, figured out that no one knew what the person 'above' him was talking about. Intimidation in circumstances such as these can handcuff the insecure, but my solid rock when confronted with this type of situation lies in the idea of knowing that I am a part of a specific team. Acknowledging that I am another human being on this planet is usually enough to comfort me, but the added ingredient of participating as a member of a bird watching team, gathering information which will be used to monitor and hopefully protect our natural environment, creates no barrier which could block my mission for the day or impinge on my freedom of movement and expression. Who speaks for the birds? I do.

Within a few stops on our count route I had learned the 'squeaky wheel' sound of the Black-and-White Warbler and was informed of the similarities of the Chestnut-sided, Magnolia, and Hooded Warblers. The "sweet-sweet-sweet-I'll switch you" of the Chestnut-sided was slower than the coffee-drinking Magnolia, and the Hooded loudly shouts out the "I'll switch you." This common bird song base tactic led us to talk about the Blue-headed Vireo being a slower version of the monotonous, never ending vocalization of the Red-eyed Vireo. The more southern Carolina Chickadee's notes being faster and higher pitched than the Black-capped. And, knowing the melody of the American Robin can lead to recognizing a lot of other bird songs, such as those of the Scarlet Tanager, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and the Baltimore Oriole.

As my brain started to overload, I envisioned Ed, Holly, and I at Kim's marriage, carefully carrying the long train of her wedding gown like worker bees attending to this Queen of Ornithology's every need and wish. For now I was thrilled to be just carrying a clipboard soaking in these great rays of birding knowledge.

Our walk was coming to a close and Kim was ecstatic that I had agreed to accompany the birder known as "Tech man" on a second point count the next morning on the West Rim Trail.

I was so excited the next day that I arrived at the prescribed meeting spot at 5:00am and decided to listen on my own before Wayne Sierer showed up. As soon as I got out of my car, a haunting, one note, flute like sound filled the forest to my right. I decided to look for the body that was home to this emanation. I thought that I got very close twice, but the randomly projected sound from the bird in its stationary position did not produce a sighting within a 15 minute try. Wayne drove up, got out of his car, and pointed in the direction of this beautiful call, and said "Veery." Here I go again!

As Wayne gathered his gear and we prepared to start the point count, he looked at his binoculars and said, "I guess I'll take these along, they may be useful." I couldn't imagine myself ever being such an accomplished birder to even think of making such a statement. He elaborated that 95% of all bird identifications in eastern deciduous forests are made by ear, not by eye.

I discovered very quickly that he was indeed "Tech man" as his GPS (Global Positioning System) monitor led us to the first point. Kim relied on a GPS unit to arrive at five separate points the day before, but Wayne explained the entire process so thoroughly that I felt like three satellites in a triangle high above were coordinating my every move.

Wayne was responsible for streamlining these GPS/point count surveys statewide, complete with maps and digital printouts, and we arrived within a 2 meter circle of the next designated point. To Wayne, this point was IBA#028J07. I felt secure that I was not going to be somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean at our next stop.

Wayne also rattled off large numbers of bird species that he found within the grid. On one stop his methodical pointing, every time a Black-throated Blue Warbler sang “beera-beera-beera-oh” or when the Black-and-White’s wheel squeaked, helped me to finally hear these two sounds. Graduating from the birding sixth grade now seemed to be a possibility. Kim’s expert analysis of the previous morning was in good hands, and, again, I dutifully manned the clipboard as I felt my status as a worker bee morph into a Gunga Din relationship with Captain Wayne.

These two fun filled mornings were imbued deeply in the scientific process with the goal of monitoring bird populations within a designated habitat. Future counts could show changes or shifts in population density and species type. These data could then be applied and act as a barometer to help determine changes in specific eco-systems and the overall health of our natural environment.

Birds, like humans, are creatures of habit and pattern. I have noticed very definite nesting and distribution tendencies on my own property over the last 30 years. These point counts in remote areas of the Pine Creek Gorge, compiled a few times annually, are a more controlled sampling and have a greater chance of revealing positive and negative trends or changes in the environment.

To put it bluntly, when Starlings and House Sparrows have reason to move into the Vanaines and West Rim Trails we are going to be in big trouble! If that happens, it may be that tourists, hunters, farmers, and other local residents might have reluctantly adapted to an environment that is “just not as nice as it used to be.” Or, the work of scientists like Kim and Wayne and Pennsylvania Audubon may be the parakeet in the mine, signaling the need for action before it is too late.

Thank you, Kim and Wayne, for being our ears and eyes. I am now more aware that a barely audible “squeaky wheel” could mean so much.

Birdwatch appears the second Wednesday of the month in the Outdoor Section of the Wellsboro Gazette. The Tiadaghton Audubon Society ([www.tiaudubon.org](http://www.tiaudubon.org)) meets the third Wednesday of the month (Sept. – May) at the Gmiener Cultural Center, Wellsboro, Pa. For more information about IBA please visit <http://pa.audubon.org/iba/>