

Sounds of Nature By Caleb Clarkson

The world is a big place filled with noise. Even the places we believe to be silent and peaceful have something to say if you listen closely. Deep in Antarctica, darkened by perpetual polar nights, glaciers settling and wind blowing can be heard across the ice. The so-called “barren” deserts of the American West are peppered with the sounds of critters stashed away in the shade.

For us busy humans, it's not necessarily that we can't hear those quiet noises, it's that we just haven't noticed them yet or taken the time to listen. You can try it yourself! Go to a quiet spot outdoors and listen closely... Are there any sounds you can identify? Which ones are new to you?

In our lives today, it sometimes seems hard to find the time to slow down and listen to the sounds around us, but throughout history, the practice has proven useful. For hunters trying to put food on the table, listening to their surroundings could make the difference between finding food and going hungry, and for lost travelers, the soft sounds of a distant, familiar river brought hope of returning home.

Sounds are more than just air vibrations; they can carry lots of information for the animals, (including humans) that hear them. Loud sounds like the snap of a falling tree or blaring car horns warn of danger, and when we hear these noises we instinctively look to see where the sound came from and if its origin poses any threat to our survival. From the sound itself, one can roughly tell how far away the sound was and in what direction it came from- useful information to know if it's a potential danger.

Many species across the globe produce and receive sounds as a vital part of their communication. Amphibians, birds, mammals, and more use vocalizations to communicate the location of predators, food, potential mates, and other useful information. Similarly, the languages humans speak are complex sequences of sounds structured to convey a precise meaning to others.

Sound is used for more than just communication in the animal kingdom. Sound is an important part of using echolocation to find food and navigate. Animals that echolocate send out a call and listen to see how the sound bounces back to them. With the sound that comes back, they can identify where the prey is, what species it is, how fast it is, and if it is injured.

To combat being located by echolocation, some prey species have evolved countermeasures such as emitting ultrasonic clicks to disrupt their locating abilities. In the ocean, Sperm Whales use a special organ called the spermaceti to amplify their calls to up to 235 decibels (a jet engine is 150 decibels), enough to deafen- or possibly kill- a human who might be unfortunate enough to be in nearby. These loud clicks allow sperm whales to communicate thousands of miles across the ocean and to locate prey at large distances.

The world is filled with the endless sounds of billions and billions of living, hunting, and communicating critters. Many of those sounds we might never hear. The low moans of a whale can be too deep for human ears, while the footsteps of an ant are far too soft to hear. But the sounds we can hear, if we take the time to listen, can deepen our understanding of our surroundings and enhance our appreciation for the noisy, lively world we share with our animal neighbors.

Photo Credit: Mike Williams

Photo caption: One of the many bird calls you can hear in our area is the “Chick-a-dee-dee-dee” of a Carolina Chickadee.