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Bird Songs of the Arctic

Along the Dempster Highway-A double CD album from John Neville

Reviewed by Gordon Edgar

So, it is May 2004, and the 'Neville Recording' team is on the road again, and heading north!

However, before I launch into this review, some background information would not go amiss.

History of Neville Recording

When John arrived in Canada in 1975 there were precious few recordings available for students of birdsong. He became interested in the subject and started nature recording in 1994 after attending a workshop at Cornell University.

John published his first title, 'Birds of the Kootenays' in the same year, and has never looked back. It is fair to say that he is now a record-label mogul!

The 'Neville Recording' team consists of John and Heather, plus Falco the dog. They are veterans of many campaigns in their self contained RV, dubbed the 'Bird Mobile'. 'Bird Songs of the Arctic' is their ninth title so we can assume that the team is fully trained and these legendary expeditions are slick, well-rehearsed operations.

Equipment

Fellow recordists will want to know that John uses a trusty directional Sennheiser 416 and a Telinga Pro-5 'parabolic' microphone to a Marantz PMD 650 MiniDisc Recorder.

He recharges the MiniDisc batteries using an 'inverter / charger' to boost power from the mobile bunkhouse. Bio-acoustniks will appreciate that a MiniDisc is not as 'power-hungry' as a DAT recorder but it is good to be liberated from the electricity grid when working in faraway places.

Post production

Making the recordings is only part of the operation and John spends the rest of the year script writing and documenting his raw audio.

He is working with a new sound engineer named Traz Damji, so the next stage took place at Traz's studio in Vancouver, recording and mixing in the narration. The audio was 'twin-tracked' and after editing, the master copy was sent to Toronto for 'glass mastering' and pressing. Then Heather selected the artwork for the front cover and insert tray. Job done! Mission accomplished and the goods are ready to fly off the shelves!

The Dempster Highway

The Dempster Highway is 734 kilometers of gravel road from Dawson City in the Yukon to Inuvik on the Mackenzie Delta and to remind readers, John penned an abridged version of his adventures for our Spring 2005 issue. Tellingly, he wrote that it was the most wonderful wilderness experience of his life.

John's self-imposed target was 90 key species for a double CD set and in the event he managed to find 75 himself. Recordings of missing species were sought from guest recordists that included Catherine Thexton and Simon Elliott, both fellow WSRS members.

The tracks

This release is intended as a sound guide for identification and continues to use a successful formula: every track being introduced with a 'voice-over'.

It goes without saying that all the audio is good quality and as readers will know, the Telinga Pro-5 microphone has a reflector and a good output, so all the samples are fully modulated.

The tracks are quite short, many lasting less than a minute. There are no long habitat recordings or bird 'concerts', as continental Europeans call them. The longest continuous sequence at 2m 29s was an American Robin singing; it was pleasant listening and it had that all-important convincing background.- Well worth the time-slot!

I have quite a library of North American recordings so many of the subjects are familiar, old friends. Of course, there are marked affinities between the faunas of North America and Northern Europe and indeed many featured species are found in Eurasia, albeit with slightly different names.

Recording the sounds of nature is a specialty and the great outdoors is not a recording studio where the director can control the action. We all know that ideal recording conditions are elusive and there are plenty of difficult subjects to test us.

Running water comes with the territory as the Dempster runs alongside rivers, swollen during the annual thaw. That said, the balance between subject and flowing water is well handled and the tracks featuring the Savannah Sparrow, Northern Waterthrush, and Horned Grebe, had convincing backgrounds, to mention three.

Surely, the American Dipper must rank as a problematic subject, yet in Track 40 we hear a bird singing against the characteristic background of fast flowing water? A difficult subject, handled well! Now it is question time. Do both males and females of this species sing and are their outputs readily separable?

The road runs north through changing vegetation zones, so it is unsurprising that some of the featured subjects are on the edge of their range, quite literally. We learn that the most northerly known nesting site of the Great Grey Owl is at km 237 in the Northern Ogilvies and the most northerly lek of the Sharp-tailed Grouse is found at km 643 by the Rengleng River., Catherine Thexton supplied the sample on Track 29.

And, if you think John is fixated on birds, we have recordings of mammals including Wolf, Beaver, Muskrat and Red Squirrel. I don't associate amphibians with the Arctic but I now know that the hardy Wood Frog breeds all the way to the Mackenzie Delta. Perhaps the world's most northerly frog?

Other noteworthy tracks present local dialects of the American Tree Sparrow, Fox Sparrow and White-crowned Sparrow and a Gray Jay giving a convincing Merlin imitation.

There are plenty of good raptor recordings, namely Sharp-shinned Hawk, Merlin, American Kestrel, Gyrfalcon, Peregrine, Rough-legged Hawk (*Buteo lagopus* to Europeans) and Northern Goshawk.

There is a traditional Gyrfalcon nesting site in Windy Pass at km 158. The very name is a deterrent and presumably, conditions are often testing with an ambience like Cape Horn. Nevertheless, John has produced a clean and rare recording of the species and he rates this as one of the highlights.

I must comment on the Peregrine track that includes intimate calls at the nest, captured by a guest recordist, namely our very own Simon Elliott. Regular readers will have heard this sequence before in our 2004 competitions and in Sound Magazine 140.

I heard the mosquitoes whining in the Alder Flycatcher clip. I wonder if our hero dropped a few notches in the food chain!

There are numerous species of owl in the north and John recorded Great-horned Owl, Boreal Owl (Tengmalm's), Great Gray Owl, Short-eared Owl, Hawk Owl, and Snowy Owl. Again, these are all found in northern Europe except the Great Horned Owl.

Of course, we cannot visit the far north without a stirring 'night chorus' from Common Loons on territory. John delivered the goods, and the audio on Track 36 is as wild and wonderful as ever. Irresistible sounds!

Conclusion

There are lots more treats, too numerous to mention here. John has not lost his form and this set is a worthy addition to the list of titles from Neville Recording. This latest release is the best yet, and the identification aspect will be useful to budding naturalists visiting the north. So there we have it. Why not listen to the album yourself?

Looking ahead

So, what will he do for an encore?

Evidently, John is not a man to rest on his laurels and I happen to know that the team headed for Europe in 2005. In fact, they toured my native Scotland, so I am naturally curious to hear the results. I tried recording there once, but it was an unequal contest; a case of Geophony upstaging Biophony!-Ed

Available from:

<http://www.nevillerecording.com>