



Birdsong: A Natural History

Don Stap

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Many of us have experienced the interruption, pleasant or otherwise, of a bird singing from high in the trees or a lone chirper perched outside a bedroom window and wondered what the song was about. Following a world expert on birdsong from the woods of Martha's Vineyard to the tropical forests of Central America, Don Staop brings to life the quest to unravel this ancient mystery: Why do birds sing and what do their songs really mean?

In this creative mixture of reportage, storytelling, and research, Stap distills the complexities of the study of birdsong and unveils a remarkable discovery that sheds light on the mystery of mysteries: why young birds in the suborder oscines--the "true" songbirds--must learn their songs while closely related birds are born with their songs genetically encoded. As the story unfolds, Stap contemplates our enduring fascination with birdsong, from ancient pictographs and early Greek soothsayers to the story of Mozart's pet starling. He identifies birds by their specific sounds and calls, and explains the true function of a bird's song, from mating calls to claims of territory.

In a modern, noisy world, it is increasingly difficult to hear the sounds of nature around us. Exploring birdsong takes us to that rare place--in danger of disappearing forever--where one hears only the planet's oldest music.

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