

David Sibley

Female Speaker:

From the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

Rosemary Girard:

This is Rosemary Girard [spelled phonetically] at the Library of Congress. Saturday, August 30th will mark the fourteenth year that book lovers of all ages have gathered in Washington, D.C. to celebrate the written word at the Library of Congress National Book Festival.

The festival, which is free and open to the public, will hold evening hours for the first time ever this year in its new location, the Walter E. Washington Convention Center in Washington, D.C. Hours will be from 10:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. For more details, visit www.loc.gov/bookfest. And now it is my great pleasure to introduce David Sibley, the man behind "The Sibley Guide to Birds." David, thank you so much for joining us.

David Sibley:

It's my pleasure. Thanks for having me.

Rosemary Girard:

David, your book has been incredibly popular and well received. So, what do you think it is about your approach to this book that has really drawn audiences in?

David Sibley:

I don't know. The one thing I think, bird identification -- well, it's not identification, bird watching has gotten more popular over the last couple of decades. It keeps growing in popularity and the thing that bird watchers need, more than anything else, is information. So I think that one of the big things that my book offers is more details about how to identify birds on each page. And there are twice as many or more than twice as many illustrations in my book as in any other field guide. I have a lot of different variations. Its plumage is shown, every species shown in flight, and that's the critical thing, that the quickest way to identify a bird is just to match what you see to a picture in the book. Just do a quick scan and pattern recognition and latch on to the image that the bird you've just seen. And the more images you have to look at the better.

Rosemary Girard:

Right. And speaking of those details, of course, a book of this nature requires a great deal of field work. So can you share some insight into your research process or approach for a book like this?

David Sibley:

Yeah, well, I started this book -- well, I started thinking about field guides when I was a kid. I was a bird watcher from seven years old. And using field guides and learning about bird identification and thinking about what would make -- the things that I was learning at the time that weren't in the field guides. So, what would make a better field guide and from the time I was about 18 years old, I just started traveling around the country watching birds full time; 360 days a year out in the

field, watching and sketching. I spent about 12 years doing that before I started working on the final draft of this field guide. So there was 12 years of serious field work, just learning as much as I could about the birds, and then six years in the studio painting and writing to produce this -- the book.

Rosemary Girard:

Right, and you mentioned that you started doing this you know, roughly when you were about seven years old and I was wondering if, you know, when did you realize this was something you wanted to do? Was it at that age or was there a certain point of inspiration early on in your life?

David Sibley:

It wasn't really a clear beginning to this. It's something I've always just enjoyed doing. I've always loved bird watching and learning about birds and nature and I loved drawing. And the two things go together perfectly. It's a -- drawing is a great way to learn about things and it just makes my experiences in the field that much richer and more enjoyable. So I've just always enjoyed drawing birds and learning about them. And I guess when I was a teenager I started thinking about -- I probably then started thinking more seriously about creating my own field guide and it wasn't until I was about -- I think I was about 27 when I finally committed to it. When I said out loud and started telling my friends that yes, I was working on a field guide. And from that point it was about six more years before I started actually in the studio doing the paintings and working on the final draft.

Rosemary Girard:

Right, and you said that, and I love how you put this, that drawing something is a great way to learn about it. And of course, along with being the book's author, you served the additional role of being the book's illustrator. So, can you also tell us a little bit about that process in capturing different birds' colors, their motion in flight, and how you were able to turn them into intricate paintings for the book?

David Sibley:

Yeah it's -- well, it's just a lot of hours, years of watching and sketching. And these sketches, just a learning process. There's a little -- it was trial and error, it's experimentation. You're trying to find the right lines, the essential markings and shapes that represent that bird in two dimensions. So there's a tremendous amount of simplifying that has to go on because you're taking this living, breathing, three-dimensional bird and turning it into a few pencil lines of a sheet of paper. It's just a lot of testing, experimentation, trying things out, and I learned a little bit from each sketch and a lot of things I learned I could then apply to all of the birds. It's not -- I learned a lot of general things about drawing birds that made all of my drawings better, it's not specific to one species. So, and that experience,; mostly when I was in the field doing those pencil sketches, I'm looking at shapes, proportions and the posture of the birds trying to capture the shape, their outline, their habits, and that's the most critical part of the paintings to me. If the outline of the bird isn't right, nothing else is going to work out in the end. When you add color and pattern to that, it just won't quite fit. So, the outline has to be

just right and so that was my main focus in all of those years in the field was just learning the birds' shapes and the general appearance and trying -- when I get to the field guide, I can continue on with this sketch. In the illustrations that I do for the field guide I'm trying to simplify and represent an average or a typical sort of caricature of that species.

Rosemary Girard:
Right. Yeah.

David Sibley:
Not one individual in particular, but very much an average, normal individual that is most likely to match what someone has just seen.

Rosemary Girard:
Right, because you have to, you know, every birder is going to be observing, you know, the bird at different angle or in a different season or whatever, so I imagine that's hard to, kind of, like you said, come up with an average to illustrate.

David Sibley:
Yeah, and I -- it turned out that some of the hardest species for me to paint for the field guide were the ones that I had seen the most often -- American robin, American crow, these birds that had been in my backyard that I've seen essentially every day since I was seven years old. Those species, I was never quite satisfied with the paintings that I did and I think the explanation is that my experience with them is so varied and so broad that trying to condense it all into three or six images that represent the essence of that species was much more difficult. And the species that I've seen less of and are seen in a narrower range of conditions and habits and seasons, were easier. I couldn't -- I can take my experience with them and condense it more easily into a few average images. These birds like robin, pigeon, crow, I just -- my experience with them is so varied.

Rosemary Girard:
Right.

David Sibley:
I think it was just difficult to come up with what satisfied me as being the quintessential images of those birds.

Rosemary Girard:
Exactly. And given all of this research which, you know, as you said, just takes years and years, do you have a favorite bird to observe or do you love all of them the same?

David Sibley:
I don't really have a favorite. I enjoy watching every bird that I see. I think I can think of questions to ask and things I can learn from every bird that I see. And I enjoy watching and sketching them all.

Rosemary Girard:

Now, in 2002 you received the Roger Tory Peterson Award from the American Birding Association for Lifetime Achievement in Promoting the Cause of Birding. So what would you say to folks who have either never considered birding or to those who are interested but may be not quite sure where to begin?

David Sibley:

Well, first I think that -- I think one of the reasons for the increase in popularity of birding is just that people crave some connection to nature and our lives have become more and more disconnected from nature where we can live in and go from our houses to our cars to our offices and not really get that connection of just sensing the change of seasons and I think that bird watching is fun, it's exciting, it's intellectually challenging, it's inspiring, and it's more and more socially acceptable way of just getting outdoors. It gives you an excuse to set the alarm for 5:00 in the morning and go outside on a Saturday even if it's raining, even if it's windy. And the reward is the birds that you'll see but also just the experience of watching the sunrise or seeing a fox or whatever happens. And I think that's the real appeal of bird watching. And to people who are just getting started I would say, you'll need a field guide, you'll need binoculars, and spend some time with the field guide at home before you go out. Just flipping through the pages and getting to know the birds have kind of odd names that you'll see. The first time you're looking a guide to birds, you'll see names like scoter and vireo and wren and oriole and toohey; all the odd names and just getting familiar with those. And understanding the difference between a sparrow and a warbler and a vireo. You can get that from the field guide just by flipping through the pages and browsing and that will really help your early attempts at identification. And once you've learned a few species, 25 species or so, then it becomes much easier. The others sort of fit the pattern and you start to learn how they all work together and how they're all related and it becomes much more rewarding and easier.

Rosemary Girard:

David, as you may know, this year's national book festival theme is stay up with a good book. So I'm wondering if there's a book you've read recently that you enjoyed staying to read. Doesn't have to be about birding, but I wonder if you can share maybe a recommendation with readers?

David Sibley:

Yeah. Most of what I read is non-fiction and bird wildlife late at night I've never been [unintelligible] a really interesting, brand new book by John Marbrook [spelled phonetically], called Welcome to Subirdia [spelled phonetically]. It's all about how the suburbs, the places where we live are actually really important bird habitats. There is a tremendous amount we can do, first to recognize that these -- the neighborhoods that we live in are really important bird habitat and pulled a lot of birds and a high diversity of birds and also a lot of ideas about what we can do to improve that habitat and make it even more bird-friendly. So it's a really interesting book and has a really good message and kind of a hopeful view of our natural future.

Rosemary Girard:

Excellent. Well, I think you've given your fans a great recommendation for a book. I think it save to say that birders and frankly, anyone who's interested in science and nature will delight in getting to hear you speak at this year's book festival. So, what can we expect to hear from you in the Science Pavilion?

David Sibley:

I'm going to talk about my early development as a bird watcher and artist. I'll share some of my early sketches and the -- talk about the process of sketching and some of the topics that I touched on in this interview, but the process of sketching and the creation of the book.

Rosemary Girard:

Well, excellent. We're certainly looking forward to it. We've been hearing from David Sibley, who will appear on Saturday, August 30th in the Science Pavilion at the National Book Festival at the Washington Convention Center. Thank you so much, David.

David Sibley:

Thank you.

Female Speaker:

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