

Night-time Sounds of Summer

August 13, 2009

Last night as Erin, Theo, Roxy and I were drifting off to sleep; we were startled awake by a chorus of yowls, howls, and yips coming from Kleinstuck. Roxy immediately leapt up and started growling, howling, and barking back. Erin and I sat up to listen more carefully while Theo kicked his legs a few times, grunted and fell back asleep (He gets a pass for his indifference this time since he is only three months old. But in few years I suspect we'll be prowling out back with our flashlights looking for reflecting eye-shines. Finally, the excuse I've been waiting for!).

It had been a long time since we've heard coyotes out back. It was probably a family group, perhaps enjoying the meteor shower. I am continually surprised at how impossible it is to tell how many are calling at once. Our estimate was somewhere between 3 and 300. Realistically, it was probably parents and this year's litter – so maybe 4 or 5 tops.

It got me thinking about the night sounds of summer. Most people are familiar with summer sounds to the level of "it sounds like summer", but the majority doesn't really know what they are listening to. Most of what we are hearing right now are songs of crickets – lots and lots of crickets of all different kinds. During late afternoon into evening we hear the familiar chirping of the big black Field Crickets that live in the gardens around our homes.

If you listen as twilight descends, you may notice that the chirping from the lawn begins to blend with trilling from above in the trees. These are the tree crickets, and they like to sign in the dark. They tend to be long, slender, and green. Some species are browner while others are quite pale, such as the Snowy Tree Cricket. Folks really in the know can identify many different species of crickets simply their calls (I'm sticking to birds for the time being). The speed and rhythm of their calling is dictated by the air temperature. This is most evident when the Katydids start singing in a couple weeks.

In my mind, the Katydids mark the crest of summer's hill. Still to this day, the calls of "Katie-did-did" remind me of coming home from summer trips and having school looming in the near future – mixed feelings for sure. The first Katydids should be calling soon, rubbing their wings together to make their distinctive call. They have the body and head of a medium-sized green grasshopper and large bright green leaf-like wings. During warm nights they will call with a quick rhythm: "Katie-did-did-Katie-did-did-Katie-did-did". On those end of summer cool nights, they slow down to: "Katie...did...did". And on those really chilly nights it becomes simply: "Kate.....Kate.....Kate".

The time of night influences who you will hear as well. The tree crickets will often sing well into the night. Theo and I are often awake around 3:00 or 4:00 a.m. and we can attest to their dedication to song. But by 5:00 a.m. they are ready to call it a night, dawn isn't far away, and the Field Crickets will take over from there. Katydids don't have that kind of stamina and peter out much earlier. I can't tell you off hand if they sing as late as 3:00 a.m., but I'm sure Theo and I will have it figured out in a couple weeks!

Enjoy the rest of summer!

-Nate