

# Listening to Forests and Performing with Birds: Practices of Aural Biophilia in Times of Ecological Crisis

Patricia Jäggi and Natalie Kirschstein

**Abstract.** This paper examines how (auditory) knowledge about, experience of, and interaction with the natural environment affects the social, relational, and performative practices that people have in and with the (natural) world around them. As a point of departure, we take the increasing pursuit of personal growth and well-being through connection to and immersion in nature, and its sonic dimension. Drawing on field research, interviews, observations, and a nascent body of literature, we consider practices such as meditation and mindful listening in nature and interspecies music-making. Practitioners of the newly trendy *shinrin-yoku* (forest bathing) and other forms of mindfulness—particularly through birding—deepen their sense of presence by listening and hearing. Likewise, interspecies musicians, many of whom play with birds, not only open up an understanding of music that transcends species boundaries, but also show how listening can function as another way of “being-with” the world in a Heideggerian sense. These examples are considered in light of Pauline Oliveros’ concept of Deep Listening and within the framework of the Biophilia Hypothesis, which assumes that human beings have an innately emotional affiliation to other living organisms, which may even be essential for bodily and especially mental health and well-being. In both mindfulness practice and interspecies music-making, the sonic and auditory provide an alternative means of knowing and engaging with the natural world, enabling the forging of meaningful connections to the lived environment through listening, sound, and performance. With this paper, we ask how humans’ relationship with nature could be revalorized and reimagined in a non-hierarchical way, rooted in an idea of coexistence rather than human dominance. We hope to begin a conversation about how communion—and perceived communion—with the natural world might create the impetus for engagement and change in times of ecological crisis.

## Introduction

This paper looks at examples of direct auditory and sonic interaction with the natural environment, discusses the way these practices comment on current environmental concerns, and foregrounds the underlying concepts of sound and the natural world. We consider practices such as *shinrin-yoku* (forest bathing) and other forms of mindfulness in nature—including birding—as forms of aural biophilia, because such practices not only aim to deepen affective connection to the natural environment, but also explicitly use the sense of hearing and listening. In contrast to these practices, in which the human is largely silent, interspecies musicians use sound to interact with animals such as birds. In the paper we consider impressions of and reactions to these various practices. We describe interviewees’ and authors’ concerns with personal and environmental well-being and interpret these as a search for a different means of engaging and connecting with the natural environment, one that sees the current ecological crisis as a crisis of relationship between humans and the natural world. In so doing, we hope to contribute to the emergent field of ecomusicology,

which discusses music and sound production in relation to the environment and the environmental crisis.<sup>1</sup>

### Listening to the forest: mindful presence in nature

Conservationist, birdwatcher, and mindfulness author Claire Thompson writes that when walking in nature “I feel invigorated by the wind.... I feel calmed by the sounds of the breeze in the trees, the rustling of reeds and the buzzing of insects ... This gentle, natural stimulation of our senses is the best antidote to the speed and chaotic bustle of modern life.”<sup>2</sup> She argues that this stimulation of the senses is one reason why combining mindfulness practice with nature is so powerful.<sup>3</sup> Mindfulness, as it is understood in a Western secular context, is an awareness and acceptance of the present moment, often used as a therapeutic technique.<sup>4</sup> The senses in general, and the sense of hearing and the act of listening in particular, are vital aspects of many mindfulness practices. Attention to sounds is commonly cited as one way to return a wandering mind to the present moment during meditation and mindfulness practice.<sup>5</sup> Listening always happens in the here and now; attention to the sounding environment thus enhances our capacity to be present.

The most researched (to our knowledge) mindfulness practice in nature, the Japanese *shinrin-yoku*, “forest bathing,” emphasizes connection with both nature and the present moment through the senses, including listening and hearing.<sup>6</sup> One beginner’s guide to the practice directs people to “find a comfy spot to take a seat and listen to the sounds around you.”<sup>7</sup> In another, we read: “The subtle sounds of nature surround you and not the congested drone of urban life.”<sup>8</sup>

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1. Aaron S. Allen and Kevin Dawe, “Ecomusicologies.” In: Allen, Aaron S., and Kevin Dawe (Eds.), *Current Directions in Ecomusicology: Music, Culture, Nature*. Routledge Research in Music. London: Routledge, 2016, p. 1–15, esp. p. 10.

2. Claire Thompson, *The Art of Mindful Birdwatching: Reflections on Freedom & Being*. London, United Kingdom: Leaping Hare Press, 2017, p. 48.

3. While mindfulness practice does not, in and of itself, require a natural setting – indeed acceptance of the present moment regardless of setting is one of its key tenets – it is often situated explicitly in nature. See, for example, Claire Thompson’s writings: *Mindfulness and the Natural World* (London: Leaping Hare Press 2013), or Catherine Kelly’s classes in “mindfulness by the sea”, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/nov/03/blue-space-living-near-water-good-secret-of-happiness> 8.7.2020.

4. “What is Mindfulness?” *Mindful: Healthy Mind, Healthy Life*, 8.7.2020. <https://www.mindful.org/what-is-mindfulness/> (accessed 18.01.2021).

5. See, for example, Bob Stahl, “Turning Sounds into a Meditation Practice.” *Mindful*, 13 September 2018, <https://www.mindful.org/even-loud-sounds-meditation-practice/>. For an entire volume on sound-based mindfulness, see Mark Tanner, *Mindfulness in Sound: Tune in to the World Around Us*. Brighton: Leaping Hare Press, 2020. There is also a plethora of video examples online of guided mindfulness practice through sound (e.g. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=084PIsAnCqI>; <https://insighttimer.com/devinashwood/guided-meditations/mindfulness-of-sound-2>)

6. See, for example, Rainer Schall, *Waldbaden mit allen Sinnen* [Forest Bathing with all the Senses]. Stuttgart: Kosmos Verlag, 2019.

7. Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, “5 Simple Steps to Practising Shinrin Yoku (Forest Bathing).” *Grow Wild*. <https://growwilduk.com/blog/5-simple-steps-practising-shinrin-yoku-forest-bathing> (accessed 10.03.2020).

8. Jennifer Fontaine, “Forest Bathing Connects Us to Nature and Better Health.” *Outdoor Families Magazine*, 30 January 2018. <https://outdoorfamiliesonline.com/forest-bathing-getting-outdoors/> (accessed 18.08.2020).

Central to the auditory experience of a forest is bird sound. It is therefore unsurprising that another common form of mindfulness in nature is through birding.<sup>9</sup> Thompson writes that “birdsong is good for us because it requires us to be mindful,”<sup>10</sup> and birders explain how birding encapsulates this sense of presence with comments such as: “In the end it is less about birding than ‘being.’”<sup>11</sup> Biologically, hearing bird song causes human brains to put out more alpha waves, resulting in a state of calm alertness,<sup>12</sup> the exact state mindfulness exercises aim to achieve. The power of birding as a nature-based mindfulness practice thus derives in large part from its sonic aspect.

The role of listening in mindful birdwatching and shinrin-yoku recalls composer Pauline Oliveros’ concept of Deep Listening, which holds that listening and responding to environmental conditions and performance spaces is just as important as the voices and instruments that are sounded.<sup>13</sup> Oliveros differentiates between hearing and listening: the former is a physical process that takes place in the ear; the latter happens in the brain, by intentionally giving attention to a sound. Deep Listening constantly expands that attention and awareness, by focusing on more and more sounds. Doing so allows the listener to immerse themselves ever more deeply in their surroundings, thereby becoming increasingly connected to their environment.

The premise of both mindful birdwatching and shinrin-yoku is to be fully present—indeed, the “bathing” in “forest bathing” connotes immersion: being in rather than observing from outside; being part of, rather than separate from. In these multisensory experiences, sound is a primary facilitator of this immersion; one can be truly immersed in—surrounded by—sound, an important distinction from the sense of sight, which allows us to only look in one direction or at one image at a time.

Although sound plays a central role in these mindfulness practices, many people come to them not because of listening, but in pursuit of personal well-being.<sup>14</sup> A slew of popular

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9. See, for example, Arnulf Conradi, *Zen und die Kunst der Vogelbeobachtung [Zen and the Art of Birdwatching]*, Verlag Antje Kunstmann 2019, or Claire Thompson’s *The Art of Mindful Birdwatching*. There are also numerous popular articles on the topic, such as Greg Presto, “Birdwatching is an easy Way to Practice Mindfulness.” *Vice Health*, 20 March 2018; Devorah Benu, “Bird Therapy: On the Healing Effects of Watching Birds.” *Forbes*, 31 May 2019.

10. Thompson, *The Art of Mindful Birdwatching* p. 52.

11. Ernie Marshall, “Zen and the Art of Birding.” *The Nature Corner* (blog), 29 April 2017. <https://ecmnaturecorner.wordpress.com/2017/04/29/zen-and-the-art-of-birding/> (accessed 10.12.2019).

12. From an interview with Florence Williams, researcher, science and nature journalist, and author of *The Nature Fix* (2017). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g4J6MV7boUQ> (accessed 18.12.2019).

13. E.g., Pauline Oliveros, *Deep Listening*. Bloomington, IN, iUniverse, 2005; Pauline Oliveros, “The Difference Between Hearing and Listening.” *Ted Talk* at TEDxIndianapolis. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= QHfOuRrJB8> (accessed 18.12.2019).

14. Shinrin-yoku has been shown to lower heart rate and blood pressure, reduce stress hormone production, boost the immune system, and improve overall feelings of wellbeing, while benefits of mindfulness practice include reduced stress, increased self-control, and longer attention span. See, for example, Ephrat Livini, “The Japanese Practice of ‘Forest Bathing’ is Scientifically Proven to be Good for You.” *World Economic Forum*, 23 March 2017; Grace Tatter, “Making Time for Mindfulness.” *Usable Knowledge* (Harvard Graduate School of Education), 23 January 2019.

books and feature articles on both mindfulness and shinrin-yoku point to a growing interest,<sup>15</sup> which aligns with the general increase in valuing closeness with the natural world for both physical and psychological health.<sup>16</sup> Sound is, however, a crucial aspect of mindfulness practices in nature. Deep Listening allows one to become immersed in one's environment, which in turn forges connection with that environment and other beings in it. The well-being derived from practices such as shinrin-yoku and mindfulness is fostered by this sense of connection and direct experience.

### Interspecies music

Whereas in mindfulness practices, humans engage with the natural world through listening while themselves remaining silent, in our second example, interspecies music, that engagement takes place through mutual sound production with beings of different species, in this case, birds.

Beatrice Harrison (1892-1965) was one of the first well-known people to make music with birds. A leading British cellist of her generation, who worked closely with composers such as Edward Elgar and Frederick Delius, she first became aware of the possibility of playing music with birds one summer evening in 1923 in the garden of her Surrey home:

As the nights began to feel warmer I had the sudden longing to go out into the woods [...]. I began to play, very lazily, all the melodies I loved best and to improvise on them. [...] after playing for some time I stopped. Suddenly a glorious note echoed the notes of the cello. I then trilled up and down the instrument, up the top and down again: the voice of the bird followed me in thirds! I had never heard such a bird's song before – to me it seemed a miracle.<sup>17</sup>

Harrison was so fascinated by the bird that from that day on, “every night [she] wandered through the wood playing and listening to the heavenly bird.” A year later she convinced the BBC to live broadcast their interspecies “duet.” Due to the huge public reaction, the experiment was repeated the following week and then every spring for the next twelve years.<sup>18</sup> Harrison and the nightingales became internationally renowned, and she received not only a lot of fan letters addressed to “the Lady of the Nightingales,” but also bus-loads of

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15. E.g. Qing Li, *Forest Bathing: How Trees can Help You Find Health and Happiness*. Viking, 2018.

16. E.g. “Happiness is Greater in Natural Environments.” *Global Environmental Change*, Volume 23, Issue 5, October 2013, pp. 992-1000. Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 2005; Jim Robbins, “Ecopsychology: How Immersion in Nature Benefits Your Health.” *Yale Environment 360*, 9 January 2020; Florence Williams, *The Nature Fix*. New York: WW Norton & Co, 2017.

17. Beatrice Harrison, *The Cello and the Nightingales: The Autobiography of Beatrice Harrison*. Ed. by Patricia Cleveland-Peck. London: J. Murray, 1985, p. 127.

18. Iain Logie Baird, *Capturing the Song of the Nightingale*. Autumn 2015, Issue 04. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15180/15040>; A recording can be found here: *Beatrice Harrison plays cello with the nightingales*, BBC News, 24 March 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/magazine-35874256>.

visitors who came to see her playing live in her garden. Her gardener and others were sure that it was her music that beguiled and attracted the nightingale and other birds to her garden.<sup>19</sup> There are two listeners in this example, one human, one a bird, and the listening experience, such as Harrison described it, was enacted by each party incorporating tunes of the other into their own improvisation. Here, reciprocal listening and reenacting became a form of unusual interaction that reaches beyond species boundaries.

Today, the philosopher and musician David Rothenberg plays clarinet with nightingales, whom he finds to be the perfect improvisation partners: he listens while the bird sings and has time to respond during the characteristic pauses in its song.<sup>20</sup> In an interview, he described the experience:

I like to think we're making a kind of music that no one species could make alone. It's in between human and bird. We [...] make something together just like when you combine music from different cultures [...]. Wouldn't it be amazing if the music is similar enough across one species to another? I think it is. I think when birds put together a song, whether it's their choice or initiative or not, or what's evolved through their species, it has so many of the same criteria of human music: a lot of repetition, repeating certain patterns over and over and over again but the patterns are shaped and formed by a kind of emotion, this kind of musicality [...]. [This is] something that you can feel [...]. [...] And so, when it feels like it's working, you feel like you're taken beyond yourself into something larger and [...] then I realize why it is I was doing this at all. It's something bigger than me [...].<sup>21</sup>

Earlier in the interview, Rothenberg mentioned the range of emotions he experienced when preparing to play with nightingales. He described his initial doubts and then how, after having overcome his fears of being ridiculous and after getting into the flow of improvising with the nightingale, he is taken beyond himself. Like Harrison, he describes a moment of musical transcendence and a feeling of awe, in which listening to and musicking with the nightingale leads to some other way of being with the nightingale and being in the world.

Some of the other interviewees, to whom we spoke within the scope of our research project "Seeking Birdscapes,"<sup>22</sup> were skeptical about the reciprocity of this undertaking. Their critiques fell into one of three main categories:

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19. Beatrice Harrison, *The Cello and the Nightingales: The Autobiography of Beatrice Harrison*. Ed. by Patricia Cleveland-Peck. London: J. Murray, 1985. p. 133.

20. See also: David Rothenberg, *Nightingales in Berlin: Searching for the Perfect Sound*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019.

21. Interview with David Rothenberg by Patricia Jäggi and Matthias Lewy, Frankfurt a.M., 29.05.2019.

22. The project "Seeking Birdscapes: Contemporary Listening and Recording Practices in Ornithology and Environmental Sound Art" investigates the meaning of birdsong today. We are interested in the way different people perceive bird songs and calls and what they associate with them. To this end, alongside observation and participant observation, we are conducting interviews with people interested in ornithology, and with musicians and sound artists who are interested in environmental and avian sound. We thank the Swiss National Science Foundation for the project grant (SNF 100016\_182813).

1. Some cited the different purposes of singing and music making, arguing that humans make music for enjoyment but animals only for a survival-related purpose. The bird does its thing and if it is favorable for its survival to imitate human sounds then it might do so, but true interaction is a human fantasy.
2. A second argument is that the bird does not perceive the music of humans as music, but rather as disturbing noise. Human music disturbs the bird or negatively impacts its natural sonic performance.
3. The third argument against musicking with birds is that interviewees perceive human music as a disruption of their own experience of nature. They would prefer to listen to the nightingale without humanly produced sounds added.

Looking back 100 years, the music Beatrice Harrison played was seen as tempting the nightingale and other birds. Her interspecies musicking drew hundreds of spectators to her garden and was perceived neither as ridiculous nor as disruptive to the birds or to humans' experience of nature. Today human presence (including music) in nature (including birdsong) is often framed as damaging or infringing upon something pristine and inviolable, from which humans should ideally be absent, neither duetting with nor influencing the bird's way of singing in any form. These historical differences highlight the evolution of "nature" as a concept, and its influence on the experience of listening and hearing.

### Discussion

Interspecies music and mindful listening in nature are not simply personal well-being or "feel good" practices. They explore different forms of relationship to the natural world through listening and music. We view this as a response to the current ecological crisis, which proponents of these practices see primarily as a crisis of the human relationship with the natural world around them.

As revealing as the practices themselves are the different reactions to and perceptions of them. Those in which humans engaged as silent listeners were generally viewed in an uncomplicatedly positive light. By contrast, doubts and difficulties often arose around those in which humans sounded. Human sound production seems to be quickly relegated to the category of sound pollution,<sup>23</sup> perceived as disturbing and damaging (a pristine) nature, while natural sound (absent human noise) is perceived as a silent, calming, and healthy environment. This parallels the negative self-image of humanity that has emerged from a growing awareness of the current ecological crisis, namely, that the human species is a virus

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23. For a more extensive discussion of values attributed to human and non-human sounds, see, for example Patricia Jäggi, "Listening to Reveries: Sounds of a Post-Anthropocene Ecology." *Fusion Journal*, Volume 19 (2021), pp. 90–101.

that has infected the earth.<sup>24</sup> The corresponding sonic metaphor: humans are an unbearable noise that needs to be silenced.<sup>25</sup>

The crisis also exposes a problematic dichotomy in our perception of this relationship: at one extreme, human absence, at the other human domination; humans playing the role of either saviors of a pristine nature or overlords stripping the earth of resources. Primeval forest versus concrete jungle. Yet these need not be mutually exclusive.

Current ecologically oriented popular authors as well as ecocritic scholars are beginning to position humans in between those extremes, trying to imagine futures that are “neither naively hopeful nor hopelessly apocalyptic”<sup>26</sup> and searching for ways to think about and reconnect with the natural world beyond nostalgic ideas of “return-to-nature” and alarmist dystopian visions.<sup>27</sup> They offer such practical solutions as managing backyards or urban areas in a more “natural” or green manner, “stewarded wildernesses” envisioned as “spaces of awe and restoration.” This sense of enchantment and affective connection is at the core of the biophilia hypothesis as it is most popularly understood today, wherein humans are believed to have an innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes, and are drawn toward, and have a desire to commune with nature.<sup>28</sup> By “aural biophilia,” we therefore mean that it is worth considering how, through our listening, sounding, and musicking practices, we can be part of “nature” – of the environment – rather than being absent and disconnected from or dominating it.

Philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy has credited a “methexic” quality to listening, that is, having to do with participation, sharing, and an emotional contagion.<sup>29</sup> Sound can be seen as an extraordinary medium of connection, because it can accommodate many voices at one time, while allowing individual voices to remain intelligible.<sup>30</sup> Performing listening in a way that reaches beyond a simple decoding of signs—such as the practices described above—bears furthermore the power to open up an ambiguous space, an intersubjective knowing and

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24. Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009, p. 12; Interview with Chantal S. by Matthias Lewy, *Monatura*, 21.09.2019; Interview with BH by Patricia Jäggi, *Lucerne*, 01.07.2019.

25. See also Anja Kanngieser and Nicholas Beuret, “Refusing the World: Silence, Commoning and the Anthropocene.” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Volume 116, Issue 2, 2017, pp. 363–80.

26. Lauren Greyson, *Vital Reenchantments: Biophilia, Gaia, Cosmos, and the Affectively Ecological*. Earth, Milky Way: Punctum Books, 2019.

27. Emma Marris, *Rambunctious Garden: Saving Nature in a Post-Wild World*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2013; Alexander Rehding, “Ecomusicology between Apocalypse and Nostalgia.” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 64, no. 2 (2011): 409–13; Jerry Adler, “Meet the Ecologist who wants you to Unleash the Wild on Your Backyard.” *Smithsonian Magazine*, April 2020. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/meet-ecologist-who-wants-unleash-wild-backyard-180974372/> (accessed 21.02.2022); Florence Williams, “Making Spaces of Awe and Restoration.” *TED Navesink* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bmmnEJ4rtCI> (accessed 21.02.2022).

28. See Stephen R. Kellert and Edward O. Wilson. *The Biophilia Hypothesis*. Island Press: Washington DC, 1993. Lauren Greyson uses the term “affective ecologies” to highlight the relational aspect of biophilia. (Greyson, *Vital Reenchantments*, 2019).

29. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2007, pp. 10 and 42.

30. Sound artist Gordon Hempton, quoted at <http://earthear.com/aboutesa.html> (accessed 27.10.2019).

engaging that enable not only exchange, but also enchantment and wonder.<sup>31</sup> Especially in times of environmental concern and as a contribution from musicology<sup>32</sup> we find it worth considering sound, music, and listening in a “biophilic way”—that is, in a way that foregrounds its participative and intersubjective strength and the potential it offers for communion and reconnection.

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31. Roland Barthes, *Der entgegenkommende und der stumpfe Sinn*. Frankfurt am Main 1982, p. 251 f.

32. Aaron S. Allen and Kevin Dawe, *Current Directions in Ecomusicology: Music, Culture, Nature*. Routledge Research in Music. London: Routledge, 2016.



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**Patricia Jäggi** is a research associate at the Lucerne School of Music. She received an MA in Cultural Analysis from University of Zurich and a PhD in Cultural Anthropology from University of Basel for a dissertation about cultural politics and radio listening during the Cold War. She works in the fields of sound history, sound art, and ecomusicology.

**Natalie Kirschstein** is a research assistant at the Lucerne School of Music. She earned her BSc in Music and Psychology from Keele University, followed by a PhD in ethnomusicology from Harvard, with a dissertation on Uruguay's murga carnival tradition. Her research interests include music and politics, migration, and sustainability.

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