

Outdoors

Voices of the wild

Most of us tend to take our sense of hearing for granted, at least until we miss hearing a beloved or meaningful sound ... the voice of a grandchild, the evening song of a mockingbird, or perhaps a musical composition that “takes us back.”

Music – if ear-splitting rock actually qualifies as music — is the cause of some of the most common hearing problems in America today. My problem, however, is not music, but shooting without adequate ear protection when I was young and stupid.

An audiologist, after testing my hearing 40 years ago, commented “you do a lot of shooting, don’t you?” The cause of my loss was that distinctive, the typical shooter’s loss mostly in the higher frequencies. Since that day I have worn double protection – custom-molded ear plugs plus high-tech muffs – almost every time I’ve pulled a trigger, and a recent audiogram shows no additional hearing loss during the 40 years of blasting and blazing away. All well and good – except that as my interest in birding has grown over the years, my inability to hear and identify high-pitched birdsong has been a growing source of sadness and regret.

Birdsong is just one of the sounds of the wild that I miss. I can still hear some of the other important ones but not as clearly or from as great a distant as I could once.

Certain sounds simply represent the outdoors world in a way that nothing else can. One is the haunting call of the loon; to me it brings back all the brooding grandeur of spruce-shrouded, mirror-calm northern lakes, the tang of woodsmoke from a campfire, and the eerie flicker of *Aurora Borealis* rippling overhead. But loon laughter is high-pitched, and I have to listen hard to catch it.

Another of the unforgettable sounds of the North American wilderness is the bugling of bull elk in mating season. Different elk have different voices. Some are as deep as a jackass braying ... but the typical bugle is a shrill squeal that bespeaks the knotted belly muscles of an 800-pound dumb masculine brute in a high meadow, his challenge echoing from the faces of snow-capped mountains.

It is one of purest voices of the American mountain wilderness, and one that will stop you dead in your tracks every time you hear it. I’m thankful that I can still hear a little of it because that sound transports me instantly across the miles and years to a time when my legs had iron in them and I could still tackle the slopes on my stalk of the bugling bull. There is no more exciting sound on this continent.



Photos by John Wootters

The Bugling of bull elk (shown here with antlers in velvet) is the most exciting sound in the American mountain wilderness, with a wolf chorus a close second.

Currently Outdoors



John Wootters

sounds drops down out of the night skies in fall and spring. Aldo Leopold described it as like the baying of distant hounds in the night. It is the thrilling clamor of the wild geese migrating, far up among the stars. Leopold also wrote what I hold to be the finest sentence in all of outdoors writing: “The flock emerges from the low clouds, a tattered banner of birds, dipping and rising, blown up and blown down, blown together and blown apart, but advancing, the wind wrestling lovingly with each winnowing wing.” (From “A Sand County Almanac”, A. Leopold, 1949)

Not hearing the geese leaves me disconsolate.

One riveting sound that is well within my hearing range is the territorial roaring of a male African lion. It has a shattering quality simply takes your breath away. Heard at close range, there’s a diamond-hard edge to it that you hear with your ears less than you feel it, vibrating deep inside your chest.

Distance softens the roar, which tapers off into a series of diminishing grunts that my late friend, African-born Finn Aagaard, translated into English as: “This land is mine! MINE! ... Mine! Mine ... mine ... mine ... mine!” Once you pause in the African night to listen to the lion’s litany of ownership, you will very likely agree



The cry of the African fishing eagle is so haunting that legend has it that anyone who hears it is fated to return to Botswana, and Wootters agrees.

with him!

There are many other memorable sounds of Africa – the menacing howl of a hyena (quite different from the famous giggling), an elephant’s trumpet, the booming of a cock ostrich ... but one more stands out in my memory: it is the wild, lilting call of the fishing eagle. The native people of Botswana will tell you that when you have once heard the eagle, you must always return to Botswana.

I guess they’re right. I first heard the cry of the fishing

eagle in the Okovango Swamp in 1972 – and so far I’ve already gone back twice.

John Wootters, of Ingram, is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Petersen’s Hunting magazine and author of the monthly column “Buck Sense” and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, “Hunting Trophy Deer.” He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association and written for Shooting Times, Rifle, Handloader, Guns & Ammo and Petersen’s Hunting magazines.