

A Tweet is Barely a Noise

By Daniel Shaw
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A tweet is barely a noise.

I used to pay attention to tweets that hit echo chambers that passed for news. And then, I gave up the echo chamber to listen for original tweets.

In New Mexico, where I live, 29 species of frogs are found. In all of the 48 states there are not even 100 species of frogs. Yet arid New Mexico, with its lowest ratio of water-surface to land-surface of all the states, holds the incredible number of 29 water dependent frog species, and each of them has a tweet all of its own.

These frogs can only reproduce in the presence of water. They don't necessarily need a lot of it, but they need some of it. And like most New Mexicans - human, fish, fowl, or frog - water draws us in. And for many of us, frogs most of all, it causes us to sing.

To be a frog in the presence of water in an arid landscape is to be in a race to survive; or if not survive, at least to reproduce. Males stake our territory in and near water. To lure in females, they roar and boom and twitter and tweet.



Green toad *Bufo debilis*

Somewhere, in the midst of last winter, when the body politic seemed fixated on the latest tweet, I consciously directed my attention elsewhere. Our local zoo offered a frog song course, once passed, certifying a person as a FrogWatch USA citizen scientist volunteer. I signed up. Listening for an elusive frog in the expanse of a dry landscape for the good of science and conservation caught more of my imagination than anything I was hearing on the news.

There are subtle differences between the calls of a Northern Leopard Frog and its cousin, the Chiricahua Leopard Frog. Driving solo across 7 hours of southwest landscape each way to and from my niece's wedding I discerned the difference. Twenty-nine audio files, each of just a couple of minutes, repeatedly played on random helped me to master them all.



Red-spotted Toad *Bufo punctatus*

I passed the FrogWatch test. Then I headed out into my neighborhood to listen. The protocol is pretty simple. One goes to frog habitat and as long as it isn't raining too much or overly windy, one stands still and quiet for two or three minutes. That lets the frogs forget you walked in to their habitat. And then for the next three minutes all you have to do is listen and remember which frog species you hear. There is a little bit more to it than that, but not much. Mostly it is just standing in the evening, on one's home watershed, listening into the darkness for frogs.

It's called FrogWatch, but in truth, it really is frog listening. In a world of incessant noise, distracting screens, and bombastic rhetoric, standing still and listening to nature is a balm. Frogs the world over are an imperiled group of animals. The list of what is leading to amphibian collapse across the globe includes

the standard culprits like loss of habitat and climate change, but there is also a nasty fungus called *Chytrid*, often spread by humans, that wipes out whole populations of frogs, or sometimes even a whole species, in less than two years.

We live in the time of the Earth's sixth great extinction. One cannot mourn for what one never knew. More importantly, one cannot fight to protect a species, while there is still time to save it, if one is unaware of it in the first place. I am a school teacher. I haul my students outside to learn their wildlife neighbors.

My students and I have helped to document over 125 vertebrate species on our school campus. We do not need to go on a distant field trip to a national park to find habitat and wildlife. It is around us every day. It includes a handful of frog species. My students now share my Frogwatch journey. No screen time. Stillness and silence for three minutes to give the frogs a chance to forget our presence. Then there is only quiet and listening. Most times my students do not hear anything. But sometimes they do. And when they do hear the rumble or tweet of a frog, they are able to name it and tell a little bit about it. They find joy in such discoveries and knowledge.



Boreal Toad *Bufo boreas*

I do not know what skills will be essential for mid-century human success, happiness, and well being. In teacher meetings we discuss such things, draw up lists, and build curriculum around what we believe will be necessary. We reference national standards and their lofty goals. We mean well and want very much to do right by our students.

Yet somehow, in the face of an onslaught of student expectation and performance standards, I just want my kids to disconnect from all of that, step into silence, and listen for the call of a particular species of frog, an animal that might well be extinct by the time my students are adults.

In a modern school curriculum, it is hard to find time for reverence, awe, and stillness. For now, the frogs and I are coming together to give my students a small dose of all of that. We do it, one frog tweet at a time.

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For More Information:

<https://www.aza.org/frogwatch>

<http://bosqueschoolshaw.weebly.com/>

<http://www.amphibianark.org/the-crisis/chytrid-fungus/>

