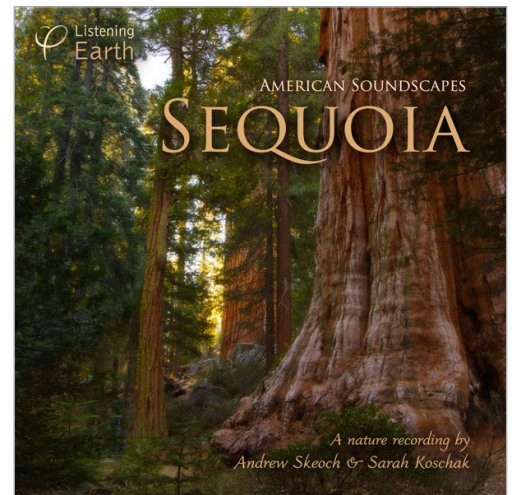


“American Soundscapes - Sequoia”

Listening Notes

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This album presents an ambience of sounds heard in California's Sequoia forests.



Sequoias are famous as the most massive trees on the planet (ie; containing the greatest physical mass). They're nearly the tallest as well, Redwoods just pipping them to that honour.

They certainly are huge - from the forest floor, their crowns are often hidden by intervening foliage. All you see are the bases of trees; tangibly ancient and compressed by the weight bearing down from above. Ascending upwards, the massive, straight trunk, often riddled with woodpecker holes.

To be amongst these forest giants we found very peaceful. After placing my microphones, I found myself just wanting to remain quiet and breathe the place in. We hope this recording conveys some of that feeling.

The album was recorded at the Grant Sequoia Grove in King's Canyon National Park. I had two microphone rigs running over the several mornings that we spent there. These rigs would get moved every now and then to another part of the forest, so I could capture some of the sonic diversity to be found in what was actually quite a small area.

The album presents an hour or so of early morning, that time after the dawn chorus had subsided, when birds are actively moving around and feeding.

It is comprised of 4 tracks, each a single, continuous recording from adjacent parts of the forest. Hence it is like you are walking around the Sequoia grove, pausing every now and then to listen and absorb yourself. As you progress, you move from the territory of one species, to be nearer another. The dominance of one voice is replaced by something else. The whole soundscape, whilst maintaining a homogeneity, shifts subtly throughout.



Track 1: Flicker, Sapsucker and Smaller Woodpeckers

As the album begins, we hear several small passerine species taking their turn at singing.

Firstly, two warblers with very similar calls, quite difficult to tell apart; the Nashville Warbler and Audubon's Warbler. Both have a "Sisisisi, chep" type call. The Nashville has a slightly sweeter tone (0:07, 0:22, 0:37...), while the Audubon's is more burry in texture (0:39). You can compare them (0:47), the Nashville first and Audubon's in the background immediately after. This is the only part of the recording where you'll hear the Nashville, but the Audubon's Warbler you'll hear later on, quite a bit more clearly.

Also in the opening sequence you can hear the rippling song of a Purple Finch (0:26, 0:37, 0:52...), and the distant, flat trills of Dark-eyed Juncos (0:28, ... 1:00...).

A pair of Pacific Slope Flycatchers are present, the male evident by his characteristic upward "fee-it!" whistle (0:10, 4:18), and both by their persistent contact calls; a sharp, high pitched "chet!" given continually (if you listen closely with headphones, you can hear the two birds calling back and forth). This positional call is sometimes ascribed to only the female, but the male also gives it, and it makes sense that what we are hearing here is a male and female keeping in contact.

While we're noticing high-frequency vocalisations, there is a short song from a Brown Creeper (0:31, 0:43, 0:58, ...). You can hear this song a little clearer later (eg; 10:12). The other stratospheric vocalist is the Golden-crowned Kinglet. They are so high that some people have difficulty hearing their calls. They are present throughout this recording, to varying degrees. There are singing and calling in this first track (eg; 3:28), but once again, we'll hear them more clearly later too.



Lower down in frequency are the calls of Common Ravens (0:20, 0:23...) and the extraordinarily persistent Red-breasted Nuthatches, you can hear their plaintive "yank, yank, yank..." sounds almost throughout this recording. The Nuthatches also have a variation on that sound, more a rapid "chap, chap, chap..." (heard from around 2 to 16 minutes).

You will hear Fox Sparrows singing lustily later in the recording, but for now, one gives a hint of its presence by uttering just the first syllable of its song (0:56), followed by a few complete song phrases (3:06, 3:21...).

The drumming of various members of the woodpecker family are very evident on this recording. I think of them as the signature species of the Sequoia forests, as their sound speaks not only of their presence, but of the massive trees that are their sounding board. If I was a woodpecker in this grove, I'd be in drumming heaven!

Woodpeckers can be difficult to identify based on only their drumming patterns, but we'll give it a go:

From vocalisations (which I'll point out as they are heard), we can recognise the following species as being present: Hairy Woodpecker, Red-breasted Sapsucker, White-headed Woodpecker, Pileated Woodpecker and Northern Flicker.

The Red-breasted Sapsucker is relatively easy to pick out, as its loud drumming has a stuttered, morse-code-like pattern (1:07).

Soon there is a sequence of drumming from several species. A Northern Flicker can be heard vocalising (3:08, also 4:11 and 4:36) from the same direction (use headphones to hear this best) as the deeper drumming (eg; 3:18). So this drumming (2:04, 2:15 2:34...) we can surmise is the Flicker.

A White-headed Woodpecker can be heard calling (two quick calls: “che-dit”, 1:48) in the middle distance, once again corresponding to the direction and distance of the lighter-toned drumming (1:44, 1:53, 2:09...). There are two birds giving this lighter drumming, one a little further away (1:49, 2:11, 2:30); they may both be White-headed Woodpeckers, or the other a Hairy Woodpecker.

A Red-breasted Sapsucker calls distantly (4:05), but we’ll hear it more clearly later, and another Woodpecker call (4:46) may be either a White-headed or Hairy. A Mountain Chickadee gives an unusual call (5:52).



Small mammals are frequently seen and heard in the Sequoia grove. We saw both Douglas Squirrels and Lodgepole Chipmunks in some abundance, however I am not confident of ascribing the vocalisations heard here to a particular species. A steady series of “chuck, chuck, chuck...” (begins 4:17 and carries on until 7:07, and intermittently thereafter) may more likely be a Douglas Squirrel, while there is another, more whistled, mammal call faintly audible (5:46-6:23).

What sounds like a falling pine cone hits a branch (7:34) before thudding to the forest floor (7:39).

A Northern Pygmy-Owl is heard (9:35) before settling into a measured series of calls: “hoo, hoo, hoo...” (9:49 on to 13:47). Almost immediately we hear the sharp, splintered, agitation calls of a Dark-eyed Junco (9:55...). The Brown Creepers also get much more vocally active (from 10:25), giving both calls and songs - maybe we are hearing a small flock mobbing the owl?

A Northern Flicker gives its ‘long’ call (10:01, 10:26, 11:08), interspersed with drumming (8:51, 9:32, 10:15, 11:42...), and followed by a series of shorter calls (12:06). All the while, one of the smaller Woodpeckers (Hairy? White-headed?) taps persistently on a tree.

It is exciting to hear an uncommon Mountain Quail gives its far-carrying “que-er!” calls (11:20, 11:30, 11:43).

The ‘squirrel’ begins again, offering an interesting contrast between avian (owl) and mammalian voices (12:05, then gradually intensifying through to 14:55).

Audubon’s Warbler is now more clearly audible (14:23...), and an American Robin gives its ‘laughing’ flight call (15:44) - showing its membership of the cosmopolitan Turdus thrush family, as it is an almost identical sound to that made by a European Blackbird.

Track 2: **Audubon's Warbler and Rufous Hummingbird**

Audubon's Warblers begin the track, one very nearby, allowing us to hear that slightly scratchy character in its call (0:03).

The male Pacific Slope Flycatcher has been giving occasional territorial whistles during the previous track, but now spits out aggressive vocalisations as it chases off an unknown intruder (0:08...).

A Fox Sparrow begins its rich, rippling song (0:32, 0:50...), each song phrase varied with the next. It will continue singing every 30 seconds or so for some time during both this and the following tracks. The birds in this Californian mountain forest are the 'Thick-billed' subspecies.

An American Robin begins singing in the background (0:40...), gradually intensifying its song, comprised of a series of di-syllabic whistles, mixing them up with "quip!" call notes.

Meanwhile Golden-crowned Kinglets also begin singing (0:23...), coming closer (1:26 - 2:22), at which point you may be able to pick up their faint, ascending "si,si,si,si, si" (try around 2:02). It actually sounds like this may be a pair of birds alternating songs. After a while they move off (by 2:54).

A Flicker can be heard in the distance (4:19, 4:46), and the short chatter of a White-headed Woodpecker (6:12). A Robin seems slightly agitated (5:59)

You can hear the variability in the Audubon's Warbler song; one phrase has two concluding strophes (9:40), and the next (9:58) only one.

Suddenly, right next to us, a Rufous Hummingbird takes to the air, zooming from one side to the other and giving high-pitched squeeks (14:31), before moving off into the forest.



Track 3: **Pileated Woodpecker and Fox Sparrow**



We have now moved closer to the Fox Sparrow's territory, where it calls regularly from the tops of low shrubs or a pine sappling.

A Flicker gives its distinctive "clear!" call (0:04), and the Pygmy-Owl is heard once more (0:00...). The Robin is a little closer too, and also back on song (0:32...).

From our left comes the somewhat distant call of a Red-breasted Sapsucker (1:50), followed shortly after by its distinctive morse-code drumming (2:04).

Throughout this track there is a lot of woodpecker activity. I'm not going to try and

identify them all, particularly the smaller species (Hairy and White-headed) which are difficult to tell apart by drumming alone. However when we come to it, I will highlight the Pileated Woodpecker, whom we will soon encounter.

A Pacific Slope Flycatcher begins singing, a variation on the simple whistle we've been hearing thus far (4:13...). It keeps doing this for a minute or more (until around 5:43), at the end of which there are some high-frequency calls from a Dark-eyed Junco (5:46-5:59). Audubon's Warblers continue to be heard (prominently 6:00...) and the Ravens are back (5:43).



Mountain Chickadee

A Mountain Chickadee gives its delightful and musical notes (6:19-6:44). They are relatively common birds, and quite vocal, so it is a mild disappointment that we didn't hear more of their pleasant calls in this location.

A little later the Pacific Slope Flycatcher is back, and this time he's really close and quite agitated. First he flies in with some spitting calls (11:28). You can hear another Flycatcher in the background (11:35) - maybe that's who he's getting aggressive with. Over the next minute and a half he sings, whistles and carries on determinedly. It seems a strong territorial display to ward off any intruder.

Now - the Pileated Woodpecker. The king of woodpeckers! What a magnificent creature. Actually, we've been hearing his deep, resonant drumming since the beginning of this track (2:27, 2:51...), but only now do we hear him actually calling (7:52). Superficially his sound is similar to the Flicker, but if you listen back to the Flickers we heard earlier, you can notice the Pileated has a more full-bodied voice, and both a slower and much shorter sequence of notes, with the last note falling slightly in pitch (the Flicker leaves off on a high note). Listen to the direction it is calling from (headphones again), and hear that the drum that precedes it (7:42) comes from the same left side, confirming all those big drums for the last few minutes have been from him. The Pileated can be heard calling again later (at 13:08 and 21:48).

Just before this, a Red-breasted Sapsucker has also given us a textbook call (12:25). A little later it calls again, this time a 'lazy' version (13:04). This part of the recording is full of the most wonderful variety of woodpecker drums, large and small.

In the midst of all this, the Kinglets are back again (13:13...). A little later they are closer, providing another opportunity tune in to their voices. First some general calling (19:21...), which eventually turns into a series of those ascending song phrases (20:16 - 23:23). There is also some high-pitched chipping from a Junco (22:03), preceded by some slightly agitated vocalising. There is a little more later (25:46).



Hairy Woodpecker

We now hear a new passerine voice, a Black-headed Grosbeak, uttering a rambling collection of phrases lasting 15-20 seconds (28:00, 29:48...). The Brown Creepers are still around and you can hear them calling every so often.

Finally a White-headed Woodpecker calls on the wing (33:05 - 33:26), as it flies off through the forest. This is probably the clearest example of its call we've heard so far.

Track 4: **Stellar's Jays and Common Ravens**

A family of Stellar's Jays now appear, giving both their characteristic calls (0:03...) and what seems to be an imitation, most likely of a squirrel call (1:05...). The Juncos aren't happy at all, and you can hear them moving in (1:25...) giving their alarm calls continually.

Now we get to hear more of those wonderful Raven voices (2:44...), in particular their gargling sounds (9:08, 9:37...), which are usually heard as an intimate form of communication between a bonded pair.



Nuthatches, Robin, Kinglets and Audubon's Warblers continue in the background. If you haven't recognised the Kinglet yet, one calls very clear and close (6:44), with many contact calls also to be heard. Similarly a Brown Creeper can be heard singing clearly (11:44, 11:54). A Junco flies past calling (5:48).

Finally, a great example of the Northern Flicker's "clear" calls (13:26). Notice the soft, and very similarly structured call of a Red-breasted Sapsucker immediately afterwards (13:55), this is their 'short call'.

While all this has been going on, a Raven has flown in and away behind us on characteristically deep wingbeats (13:31).

