

haven

A magazine exploring the *exceptional nature* of Bald Head Island, North Carolina



last word

silence

by Jason Frye

WALKER GOLDNER

In every walk with nature one receives far more than he seeks. – John Muir

Over the course of the last year, I have changed the way I think about silence. I used to believe the dictionary definition—the complete absence of sound—was enough, but I’ve changed my mind. According to Gordon Hempton, an Emmy-award winning sound recordist, acclaimed audio ecologist and author, “silence is not the absence of something but the presence of everything.” Silence is the absence of man-made sound and the presence of the full joy and noise of nature. Silence is a cacophony.

With the thought that silence is nature at its most natural, close your eyes and listen for silence. Cut away all of the man-made sonic clutter and find the sounds of nature that are, all too often, drowned out and relegated to the background. What do you hear? Is it spring peepers, the tiny frogs with huge voices filling the evening air? Maybe a stream singing as water passes over, under and through the stones and vegetation that make up its bed? Do you hear the roar and hiss of waves crashing and waves receding?

Intrigued by Hempton’s claims, I read his book, *One Square Inch of Silence*, where he searches America for a location that has “no audible human noise intrusion of any kind” within 15 minutes. Without spoiling the ending, Hempton has a difficult time finding silence of any measure in his cross-country travels. Reading *One Square Inch of Silence* got me thinking about my own experiences with silence and nature.

I have spent a considerable amount of my life outdoors. Growing up in West Virginia, wandering the mountain property my parents own, silence was never hard to come by. In adulthood, I’ve found myself actively seeking it, from the depths of Death Valley to the summit of Mount Whitney to the creeks, paths and beaches of Bald Head Island.

Learning to be still in silence is as important as learning to seek silence. Early on, my father taught me to sit and listen, to observe the woods with my eyes and ears, and appreciate the music of nature. Back home

in West Virginia, I’ve heard the velvety call of barn owls, whippoorwills too blue to fly, the chilling cry of a panther. I’ve heard rain falling, trees falling, their limbs breaking like gunshots across the hills and valleys. When I was still enough and silent enough within myself, I heard leaves fall, rattling through more leaves until they came to rest at the foot of the tree. I’ve heard snow whisper its way from the clouds to the ground.

During a solo trip to Death Valley National Park in California, I drove deep into the mountains to explore canyons and ghost towns. There I applied my father’s lesson of listening. I’d park beside the road and hike for an hour, the only sounds my footfalls, my breath and water sloshing in its bottle. When I’d stop to rest, I could hear Death Valley speak to me through the rustle of pebbles and birdsong drifting over from some secret spring. Its voice was in the quiet scratch of a lizard’s claws on a nearby rock and in the wind off Tin Mountain and Wildrose Peak, carrying with it the heavy smell

of snowmelt. At first glance and first listen, Death Valley was a dead place, but in the peace of silent meditation and observation, it showed itself to be very much alive.

In Death Valley I found my meditations sometimes broken by fighter jets flying practice runs from Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada to the China Lake Naval Weapons Testing Ground just outside the park. They'd pass miles overhead, two or three at a time, the low growl of their engines barely perceptible. But the sound was there, disturbing the silence all the same. Soon after they'd pass, the rumble of their spent payloads dropped on some target in the desert 50 miles distant would roll across the sky, a reminder of our loud and destructive nature.

These intrusions into our silence are all around us. On a trip to climb Mount Whitney, the creak of my pack and the chuffing shuffle of my boots on the trail were intrusions of my own doing. Instead of breaking the silence I was seeking, these sounds accompanied the serenity and stillness of the trail and their rhythm helped me focus on the natural sounds around me. Like the gentle squeak made by a porch swing's chains or the lap of water against your kayak, these sounds both break the silence and add to our appreciation of it.

On Bald Head Island, I've found that the silence is varied by the environment and time of day you are there. The morning and evening marsh are loud with birdsong and frogs. During ebb tides, the ping pong pop of crabs emerging from their holes and the trickle of water receding from the land permeate the air. Fish rising to feed—a little splash—or leaping clear of the water for escape—a splash out and a bigger splash in. Birds wading, the slightest sound of their legs through the water as they hunt. Mating calls. The high, keening hunting calls of an osprey off her nest. But at noon, the marsh is quiet, still: the occasional bird rustling in the reeds, the constant buzz of insects.

In the maritime forest the sound surrounds you with subtle echoes. A bird calls behind you, its potential mate calls from in front of you. The intertwined arms of the

live oaks announce the wind as they move, shuddering, sometimes rubbing against one another. Here too the frogs dominate morning and evening, though, if you're still enough and patient enough, you'll hear much more.

The beach is another world entirely. I sat at The Point one morning and watched and listened to the world come alive. In the pre-dawn light of a nearly full moon, I found a wall of sound and a bed of stars on the surface of the water as the moon reflected there a thousand times over. The hiss-crash of waves created a never-ending line of sound. Between them, the wind through the sea oats, their heads full, bent with the weight of their seed. Overhead, a bird or bat was sounding—stwier stwier stwier—a full hour before sunup. As the sun brightened the horizon, the birds started. First a few, then more, building as they came from their hidden dune nests to begin their search for food. Behind me, in the dunes by the boardwalk to the Shoals Club, a fox barked.

A few years ago, the sounds of Bald Head Island's beaches became an indelible part of my personal soundtrack when I had the good fortune to see a loggerhead sea turtle nesting. Everyone was quiet as fin and shell scraped the sand. I could hear her eggs as they fell into the nest and settled there. The whack and thump as she tamped the sand tight and disguised her nest. Her labored breathing as she lay her clutch and as she pulled herself back to the sea. Those sounds are as clear in my mind today as they were when I tried to sleep that night.

We all have our own soundtracks, those audio files stored away that we'd replay only to those who know us most intimately and only then if we could. One morning while my father and I walked a ridgeline where we would be hunting for the day, we stopped in the pre-dawn dark to catch our breath. Overhead, two shooting stars arced brief and brilliant against the sky. In their passing they made no sound, but in their utter silence they were perfect. And the moment they made between my father and

me, the peace of that, the memory of that, is perfect too.

I grew up with the glorious chorus of silence dominating my soundscape. Too quickly life became busy and complicated with school, with love, with work, and the time I had to seek silence and meditate in it shrank. Now silence is something I don't take for granted. After years of wearing headphones turned up too loud, standing beside the speakers at concerts, target shooting and working in a woodshop without proper hearing protection, the damage has started to show. When my wife and I are at a restaurant and the room is filled with ambient noise, I can't hear her. To me it all sounds like an AM radio playing country music down the hall, behind the neighbor's door. I find myself isolated because it's too difficult to hear and be heard, so I'm always looking for the quiet corner or the door outside.

Moments of natural silence are all too rare in our lives and when we find them we should savor them. The poet Thomas Middleton said, "Anything for a quiet life." He's almost right. "Anything for a silent life" hits closer to home for me. Anything for those times of rest and reflection when the only sound is nature. That's why I have a challenge for you. While you're here on Bald Head Island, and when you return to your home, find a moment each day to put away the toys and distractions and seek silence. Turn off the cell phone, leave the iPod on the table and sit on the beach or on the marsh or in the forest and listen. Soon enough the sounds of man will fall away and all that will remain is the silence you are seeking. Take solace in the cicada, the frog, the birdsong. Find respite from the noise and restlessness of your daily life and listen for the still, small voice inviting you to come back again and again. 🌿

Jason Frye is a freelance writer living in Wilmington, N.C., with his wife Lauren. He holds his MFA in creative writing and is thankful for the many silent hours he's spent on Bald Head Island.