

Conservation Corner

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"I heard the bells on Christmas day, their old familiar carols play. And wild and sweet the words repeat of peace on earth, good will to men."

All around us the sights and sounds of Christmas are slowly but surely appearing across the landscape, and the familiar lines of Longfellow's poem still ring true 150 years later. Can't you just hear the wild sweetness of church bells echoing down through the years?

This week let's stop and listen to the gift of music. Perhaps you have a favorite Christmas musical gift ranging from the LP albums and transistor radios of my youth through Walkmans and CD players to iTunes. Perhaps you enjoy singing or playing in your church or community choir or band or attending your children and grandchildren's concerts and programs. Perhaps, like many, your favorite gift of music is Christmas caroling.

The first carols were actually pagan songs sung at Winter Solstice celebrations as the people danced around stone circles, evergreen bonfires, or wooden wheels, all in an effort to turn the Earth back to the Sun. Like us, these early people were ready for shorter nights and longer, warmer days. Originally sung during all four seasons, today carols are mostly heard at Christmastime. Early Christians substituted new words to tell the Story of the Nativity. Did you know the word carol means dance or song of praise and joy?

Carols ring out in many natural habitats as well. As I thought about the many dances and songs of nature, I wondered who would show up to audition for an All Wildlife Orchestra presenting their annual Christmas Concert.

Let's start with the brass section. Possibly great horned owls or whales on tuba, wolves on French horn, and coyotes on trombone? Of course, a flock of trumpeter swans would make a fine trumpet section. For the woodwinds, we could recruit meadowlarks on clarinet, a bobwhite quail on oboe, and Canada Geese on saxophone. Songbirds including the orioles, cardinals, and redwings would make a great flute section with the tiny wren on piccolo.

Natural drummers like woodpeckers and prairie chickens could lead the percussion section. A beaver's tail would make a fine slapstick while the wind plays the tambourine among the birch tree branches encased in ice. Don't forget a few cricket frogs for clickers. For the strings, insects, led by the bees ala "Flight of the Bumblebee," could play the high tremolo of the violins blended with hummingbirds on the cello and bull frogs on the bass fiddle. But who's going to conduct?

I'll close with several phrases from another familiar carol, a song of praise and joy by Isaac Watts still echoing around the world.

Joy to the world, the Lord has come!

Let earth receive her King.

Let every heart prepare him room,
and heaven and nature sing.

Joy to the earth, the Savior reigns!

Let all their songs employ.

While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains
repeat the sounding joy.

