New Help for Birders with Impaired Hearing
By Charles A. Kemper, M.D.

Much as I have enjoyed a vigorous, active pursuit of birds and bird study for the past thirty-five years, I have been baffled and frustrated by a common problem—impaired hearing. I don’t mean deafness—I mean simple hearing loss for high-frequency sound waves.

How I envy those wizards who can hear a Redstart at 45 miles an hour, hone in on a Blue-Winged Warbler a block away, hear a Gray Cheeked Thrush fly overhead at night, pick up a Grasshopper or LaConite’s Sparrow out of a half acre of fallow field, recognize the chip of a Snow Bunting flying through the haze of early winter dawn. One spring morning my good friend, Sam Robbins, riding with me in an open car, bedazzled me by counting 20 Tennessee Warblers on a brief ride across town. I missed almost every one.

By listening over and over to bird records and tapes one can become very proficient at recognizing bird songs. But it doesn’t help all that much in the field if the bird has to be practically singing in your ear to be heard. On the other hand it is nice to know that if you can hear the bird it has to be close.

When I was a youngster growing up in the pre-penicillin, pre-sulfonamide era I was victimized by recurring otitis media (middle ear infection), leaving my ear drums scarred, thickened and retracted. This was not a serious handicap. I might play the radio a little louder, perhaps bothering someone else but not me. I didn’t realize then that my perception of high frequency sounds had been greatly diminished.

Normal conversational tones and low pitched sounds were never a problem. It was only when I was thrown in with avid birders that I realized what I was missing. And that is when frustration and disgust began.

It occurred to me that a hearing aid might be a neat tool to have on a bird count. This was 25 years ago. There was a microphone that clipped to your shirt pocket and connected to your ear via a cord and ear plug. I tried it. Disaster. Wind noises, static from clothes rubbing against the microphone—and worst of all—little or no enhancement of high frequency bird sounds. I gave up on hearing aids for many years. They were made to amplify conversational relatively low frequency sound waves. Consequently they were of no use to the birder who can hear well enough for ordinary conversation but who wants to hear higher pitched bird sounds.

There were other routes. I played around with an electronic toy called “The Big Ear” which hooked into a tape recorder. It was fun, but awkward and a little bit tinny sounding. Then I came across a portable little parabolic microphone made by Bell and Howell that sold for $15. This was a neat little instrument that worked well. But inevitably it got broken. When I went to replace it I was informed that the company had stopped making it.

I improvised my own parabolic microphone that worked fairly well. But it was technically crude and had drawbacks. I then invested in a Don Gibson parabolic microphone. Here was a truly professional piece of equipment that for me was a real breakthrough. It has built-in filters to eliminate static. And it really enhanced listening and recording.

The range was amazing. You could pick up a Rose Breasted Grosbeak singing almost a quarter of a mile away on a quiet spring morning. I had many
pleasant hours with this device that served as my ears. But I did feel a little self conscious. There were a lot of curious stares and questions about what I was up to. It was sometimes easier to lie than tell the truth. "I'm making an electronic survey for a mining company." This is a terrific gadget—I wholeheartedly endorse it for anyone who enjoys recording bird sounds or enhancing one’s own hearing. One can not only hear better in the field, but he can also bring the tape home, plug it into a tape deck amplifier, replay the tape and hear things that completely escaped him in the field.

But good as it is, it is not completely satisfying as a hearing aid. First of all it’s very directional. You can miss birds if your aim is a little off target. Also it can get to be a little too much, lugging a large parabolic microphone, ear phones, portable tape recorder, in addition to binoculars and maybe a camera and tripod. You begin to look like a cartoon character out of Mad Magazine.

So I went back to my old quest for a better hearing aid. I needed a hearing aid that just was not manufactured—one that would amplify high pitched sounds—not the low or medium octave ranges. Then I found an audiologist by the name of Ted Mollrud in Eau Claire, who seemed to understand what I was looking for. He came up with a new type of hearing aid called “Cross” type. It is incorporated in the frames of eye glasses. But the microphone is on one side of the frame and there is a tiny ear tube that slips into the ear on the opposite side. Cross is an acronym for contralateral routing of signal. This aid does work on high pitched sounds to some extend and the opposite side arrangement eliminates most feedback and squeal. This definitely enhanced my hearing for most birds. But it still left something to be desired. I still couldn’t pick up Bay-Breasted, Cape May, or the really high pitched trills and buzzes that abound in the bird world.

Good but not good enough—and up to 1980—the very best that was available anywhere. Then Ted came up with something brand new—a very potent hearing device especially for high frequencies. It’s called a Dahlberg AE model. It is small, inconspicuous, fits behind the ear and packs a lot of power, much more than the Cross Over model. The key here is to harness this power with a really tight fitting ear mold. Otherwise the tiny microphone will recirculate the sound back to itself and cause a terrible almost painful high pitched squeal. By taking meticulous pains in fitting the ear mold and by using the proper stiff plastic tubing, narrow apertured, the technician is able to eliminate all feedback. Furthermore, the reception is tremendous. The first time I tried it I could hear the click of a fingernail across the room, and the sound of the shirt collar against the skin when I turned my head.

1. Ear Hook
2. Microphone opening
3. Volume Control
4. Battery Compartment (also serves as On-Off Switch)
5. Tone cut switch
6. Tone cut control

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Furthermore if you use one in each ear you can localize the source of a sound much easier - very important when looking for a bird in deep brush. This was for me the jackpot. When I heard a Clay-colored Sparrow and it turned out to be 150 feet away down the road, that to me was a miracle. I was really thrilled.

I’ve written this account of my experience hoping this may help others with similar problems. For them I want to make some concrete suggestions.

First, this Dahlberg AE hearing aid is probably not for everybody. Wearing the wrong hearing aid is like wearing the wrong glasses. It would be intolerable. Some people won’t be able to afford it. It costs between $400 and $450 a unit. Each person will have to determine if his personal cost/benefit ratio is favorable. To an enthusiast like me, it is.

Secondly, you have to have an audiologist who is accomodating, and willing to take pains. The ear mold has to be really air tight and at the same time comfortable. He must be willing to let you try it out for awhile before you decide to get it. Most hearing aid salesmen I have known will not do this. Them, I suggest you forget.

Also, see an otologist before you do anything. An otologist is a MD who specializes in diseases of the ear. Your type of hearing loss may not be aided by any hearing device. It’s also quite possible you may not realize you have lost some of your hearing. An audiometric test is a good idea for almost everyone.

It should be a comfort to all senior bird watchers to know that as their hearing suffers the inevitable deterioration of advancing years, there is now, finally, an electronic device that may well compensate for this.

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Saw-Whet Owl Nest in Wood Duck Box

By Don G. Follen, Sr.
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On March 18, 1981 a Saw-whet Owl (Aegolius acadicus) nest was identified on the Sandhill Wildlife Area, Babcock, Wisconsin. The nest was in a metal-covered-pine wood duck nest box attached to an oak tree, approximately 6m above ground. The nest box faced east and overlooked a drainage ditch.

The vegetation immediately around the nest site consisted basically of aspen and oak reproduction (origin 1968) with some mature oak, black alder and paper birch along the ditch bank proper. The aspen and oak stand had been cut-over in 1968 and consisted of saplings approximately 10-12m in height.

At the time of nest discovery, an adult Saw-whet was observed in the nest box with 3 eggs. The nest was merely observed and plans were made to return for banding at a later date.

On May 8, 1981 the nest was again checked and two young birds were observed in the box. The larger of the two young was estimated to be approximately 4 weeks of age and the smaller approximately 3½ weeks.