

Excerpt from the chapter “Lines Upon a Graph,” in *Return to Warden’s Grove: Science, Desire and the Lives of Sparrows*.

I love the time of day when the last tasks are finished: tomorrow’s bread baked, pails of water fetched from the spring, field notes and journal entries completed. Before climbing into my bunk I step outside for one last look at the view: the sedge meadow immediately to the east, then the narrow band of spruce that hugs the cutbank above the river. Beyond lies the Thelon, then the undulating waves of tundra, rolling off towards the Clarke River. The best evenings come before the full flush of summer, before sparrows fledge their young and clouds of mosquitoes rise into the air. When the night is tranquil and the final bit of sunlight has faded from the Last Light Hills, when the air is calm and the river is still as silence and the last sparrow song has died away, I sometimes have the notion that all is right with the world. Then it’s hard to pull myself away from the view and the sense of quiet satisfaction that comes after a good stretch in the field, but I’m usually dog-tired after a day that, more often than not, has stretched on towards eighteen hours. Once in my sleeping bag, I pick up a book and read a few pages, then drift off to sleep. But before doing so I like to replay the day’s events and tally my successes – one new nest found, three more birds banded, two more hours of nest observations completed, another snow survey finished. I measure my progress through the field season, and occasionally, through my entire study and doctoral program. I recall MacArthur: “To do science is to search for patterns.” I know that I will uncover a few of these patterns, but I recognize another sort of pattern, too – one that’s formed by my work. The intensive search for nests, bird trapping and banding, daily nest rounds, weekly arthropod counts, vegetation measurements - these tasks create a kind of rhythm, one flowing within the frame of reference formed by the Barrens. There is the insistent northern wind, the rising tide of migration, the pirouette of ice flows on the spring river, the wandering bears, the flowering heads of sedges rising from brown tussocks, the eggs laid in nests of woven grass, beneath the stunted birch.

*I have my work, and it’s nice to know that this work is good. I watch the numbers accumulate - usually slowly, but on most days I add a few more items to my cache of data. I take pleasure in this process, in coming to know a few things that haven’t been known before, however trivial they seem in the larger scheme of things. I know that part of this pleasure comes from the pride of possession, and having some small measure of uniqueness in the world. The lives of Harris’s Sparrows are clear to me in ways in which they are clear to no one else, and I will produce the tables and graphs, the dissertation and scientific papers to prove it. And yet, beyond this small expression of hubris there lies a more satisfying and worthwhile end. I have, in spite of my own limitations – my impatience and crabbiness, my fears and lack of attention to detail, and my inability to see well - stumbled towards a more complete sense of the world. Through right practice – by sitting and watching, weighing and measuring – and almost in spite of myself, I have entered into the landscape. The focused attention of a female Harris’s Sparrow to her eggs and nestlings has focused my attention, too. This concentration has led me into an obsession with *Zonotrichia querula*, but it has led in the opposite direction, too – into the world that spirals outward from a female bird (mass of 33.7 grams) incubating her clutch*

of eggs (average mass of 3.09 ± 0.26 grams/egg), past the dwarf birch that shelters her nest (average height of vegetation at the nest of 47.6 ± 22.4 centimeters) towards the green sedge meadows (18 percent of the landscape around Warden's Grove) and Last Light Hills and beyond, into the infinite distance that fades into a rumor of blue on the endless horizon.