

A Nature Sound Recordist Visits Corkscrew

by Christine Cook

Volker Widmann is a nature sound recordist. He and his wife, Claudia spent several days in April 2014 collecting environmental sounds in Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary. They remind us of the value and beauty of the soundscape.



Volker and Claudia

Rubber Head

Volker (pronounced 'Folker') and Claudia live in Konstanz, an historic town in the southwestern part of Germany near the Swiss border. Many years ago, while on a walk in nearby woods, they encountered an odd sight, a man sitting next to a replica of a human head mounted on a tripod. Walter Tilgner had installed microphones in the ears of the rubber head to collect environmental sounds within our landscape. Tilgner explained that the shape of human ears collected sound as a human being would hear them and he wanted that realistic sound for his CD's. Tilgner went on to record 13 CD's of pure environmental sound. Volker was very inspired by the work of this man.

Corkscrew Connection

Sometime after meeting Tilgner, Volker befriended Bernie Krause who recorded the environmental sounds for the multi-media theater at the Blair Audubon Center. Krause has just published a book called "The Great Animal Orchestra" which Volker highly recommends.

Back in Germany, Volker was interviewed on a radio program for his sound recordings and the response encouraged him to continue his work.

Folk Cow

Volker's love of sound is rooted in his musical background. He plays percussion instruments and excels at the Bodhran, a large Irish instrument.

His band is coincidentally named "Folk Cow" ("Volker" means folk) but the name was taken from a band-naming computer program.

It is through music that Volker met Claudia, who is also a percussionist. They play Irish traditional and American old time music.

Alligator Bellows

Volker uses small Olympus recorders protected in waterproof cases. Attached are studio microphones with superior sound quality.



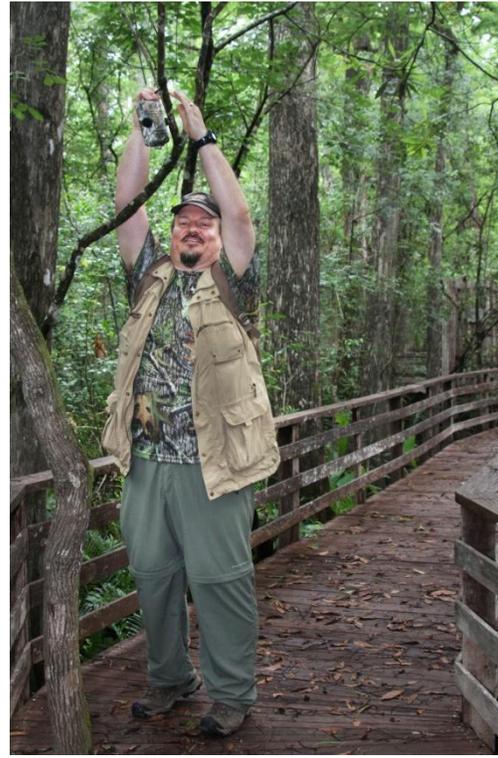
Hand-held recorders and mics

Because they can record 30-50 hours of sound, they can be left in the woods hanging from trees all night.

Nighttime is when sounds from civilization are reduced; sounds from traffic, airplanes, air conditioners and people.

Unfortunately, the microphones can still pick up these distant noises even though we may not notice them.

If he reduced the frequency range, however, he might exclude something important such as the low sounds of alligators bellowing or high-pitched cricket sounds.



Volker placing recorder in tree

Volker says, “We tend to hear what we see, because we hear with our brains, not just our ears.”

He explains that the brain filters out some sounds in order to focus on others, so we may not pick up the distant sounds of traffic that his audio equipment records.

Fortunately, using his Adobe program, Volker can reduce some of the impact of background noise in his recordings

Wizardry

“Now, here comes the wizardry!” exclaims Volker with a gleeful gleam in his eye.

He uses an Adobe program for audio processing, called “Audition”. The computer program provides a graphic display of sound frequencies.

Using this program, he has learned to identify the sources of sounds based on their appearance on the display.

He can recognize crickets, owls, birds, water and noises of civilization just by their frequency level and shape.

Listening to the recordings, this writer heard the clear call, “Who cooks for you?” of the Barred Owl at 4AM.



Volker and Christine listening to recordings

I heard the dawn chorus of birds begin just before sunrise as the cricket sounds faded out.

Around 8AM, as the birds began feeding, their sounds decreased and Woodpeckers who rise about an hour later began their calls.

In the background, I heard the rain when it fell very hard and then when it diminished to droplets. We can gather valuable information about the environment and bird behavior with sound recordings.

Claudia believes these recordings are so good that one can just sit back and enjoy listening to them.

We discussed the difference between nature sound *recordings* and recordings that *include* nature sounds but feature instruments such as the recordings of Dan Gibson and his son on the Solitude label. Although he praises this work as very supportive of nature, Volker says “Sometimes I wish the piano music would go away so that I could enjoy the nature sounds themselves.”

Quite a different perspective.

When asked for the most interesting sound he has collected, Volker described a hawk catching a titmouse: first he heard their individual calls followed by sounds of a struggle, screeches from the titmouse which gradually died down, the sound of swallowing and then silence.

Touching Hearts

“Natural soundscapes are worth preserving because they tell a lot about the health of an area.” says Volker.

As he collects sounds from around the world, he hopes that his work and the work of others will inspire people to appreciate the natural soundscapes around them and to work to preserve them.

Volker’s main goal is “To have a recording that is so good that it touches other people’s hearts.”

*Christine Cook is a Florida Master Naturalist, a Corkscrew Boardwalk Naturalist and a Photographer. All photos were taken by her.
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