

Gordon Hempton

Seattle, WA

quietparks.org



My early May visit to Montello had two goals. First, I would test Montello for Quiet Residence status according to the standards of Quiet Parks International. And second, if my disability would permit, I would record my first soundscape portrait in more than 10 years with the help of two state-of-the-art hearing aids.

Reaching a determination of quiet at Montello was straight forward and simple. I would be attentive all sounds continuously over several days, noting noise polluting sources, decibel levels and prevalence. I would use the data to support my subjective evaluation. Do I feel quiet? Am I quiet? If so the award would be granted.

The air at Montello was thin (elev. 5,000+ feet), cold (20 - 30° F), dry (humidity 30%) and turbulent (gusts up to 30 mph)—all factors that favor quiet because sound waves loose power as the air becomes less elastic. The Amazon Rainforest by comparison is lower in elevation, hotter, more humid, and calm both day and night. When visiting the Ecuadorian Amazon in March of this year, I found the extremely elastic atmospheric conditions allowed the sound waves to hold power much longer and travel further (~15 miles) than Montello, providing the listener with an auditory awareness zone the size of more than 700 square miles! At Montello the relatively non-elastic atmospheric conditions typically allowed sound to travel about ¼ mile providing an auditory awareness zone of only about 160 acres. To my ears, listening to Montello is intimate and personal. While the experiences at Montello and the Amazon are dramatically different, both share quietude or a very limited amount of noise pollution. Faint sounds may be heard—from falling flakes of snow at Montello to the hum of insect wings in the Amazon—at these quiet destinations.

Haleakala Crater on the island of Maui, also known today as the quietest place on earth because of its high elevation, often cold temperatures, dry conditions and a landscape composed of sound adsorbing volcanic ash. The Ancient Hawaiians considered Haleakala Crater to be the birthplace of creativity.

Montello is also a birthplace of creativity. My footfalls translate the sand, crushed rock, dust or twig into pouf, cresch, puff and snap to put it crudely. All sound is information—even noise pollution. The problem with noise pollution is that it is simple information (a car, a plane, a train, or electric plant) that usually has little if any benefits and loud enough to deny the listener access to the meaningful information that has everything to say about what makes each place different. The faintest sound audible to the human ear

was described by John Muir as a Sequoia seed falling onto thinly crusted snow. Quiet places are informative places. The innocent question, *Why is quiet important?* can be re-phrased as, *Why is awareness important?* The answer is so obvious it demands no answer.

The western meadowlark is music to my ears. Scientists say the meadowlark sings to advertise for a mate and establish its territory as a food base to feed its young—but wouldn't a series of chirps do? Why does the meadowlark sing! Each individual's song is its song, different from all others owing to the facts that the song is both learned from its parents and improvised during its performance. Windblown meadowlark song maintains intelligibility despite the adverse propagation conditions because it's song design uses specific amplitude and frequency modulations that hold up under the most difficult conditions. No birdsongs in the Amazon Rainforest are comparable. There the jungle has it's own set of rigorous criteria that requires songs be designed differently, often single notes with slow changes, if any. But in both Montello and the Amazon when a bird sings for a mate, it is not just the potential mate who listens but also all potential predators. Yet the song is passionate and without fear. Love and risk are inseparable. The quiet winds of Montello revealed by sage, juniper, and sparce grasses all play the same tune but with different tonalities, a perfect accompaniment to the meadowlark which uses none of those frequencies.

Our symphonic halls around the world spend tens of millions of dollars to be quiet. Does wildlife need quiet, too? Nearly 300 miles to the north is Barber Sensory Laboratories at Boise State University, traffic noise was artificially introduced into a wilderness study area with speakers to study the effects of highway noise on bird populations—all species declined and some were eliminated entirely despite the presence of food, water and shelter.

Everywhere, Montello whispers time. The ageless junipers especially. Unlike photographs which can be captured in 1/60th of a second or less shutter speeds, sound takes time. Is that why it has become so difficult to listen?

Just as light is invisible until it illuminates an object, so is the air until it brushes the landscape to become audible.

For a recording by Gordon Hempton please go to montellofoundation.org/audio.htm

