Heeding the Song Unseen

by Anne Bell

If one descends the Tatshenshini River in July, one is bound to come across the hermit thrush hopping about under the poplar, willow and scrubby spruce. A reclusive bird, its name seems to suit its unassuming appearance and the sparse, rugged surroundings in which I first heard it sing. Like a small brown robin deprived of its orange breast, it could easily pass unnoticed, and I myself would scarcely have paid it much attention had it not been for its song, a splash of delicate, resonant crystal and sparkling cascades.*

During the few weeks that I spent on the Tatshenshini, the song of the hermit thrush was my constant companion, as constant as the rush of the river itself. It cheered the grey dawns and filled the dusky nights. There can be no more beautiful reveille or serenade on this earth.

Like a meadow of dryas, a mouthful of gritty water or bear prints along the water's edge, the song of the hermit thrush is integral to experiencing the Tatshenshini. It is part of the meaning of the place. And yet, it is unlikely to figure in the ongoing discussions about the fate of the river. At most, it may be included in a bird count, an anonymous bit of data in a biodiversity argument.

Common and widespread, the hermit thrush falls through the cracks of the most powerful conservation rationale. It is neither rare, endangered nor unique to the area. It is not an "indicator species" of ecosystem health or integrity. It is not "game", nor is it of particular interest to the "non-consumptive" pursuits of birders. It lacks the mythical status of a raven, the acrobatics of an arctic tern, the stature of a trumpeter swan. Unlike these birds, the hermit thrush stands little chance of gaining consideration as a "tourism resource" for the region. It is simply one of countless inconspicuous creatures lying just outside of our narrow utilitarian field of view.

It is unfortunate that so much of what we value as humans depends upon our eyes and the categories that they impose on our experience and understanding. Let the hermit thrush remind us of what we fail to see. Let it sing for the voiceless, the inconsequential and all that has been left out of the stories that we tell about nature and its conservation.

**The Tatshenshini River which flows through British Columbia, Yukon and Alaska, is now the subject of a heated land use controversy. Plans to develop one of North America's largest copper mines near a tributary of the river have raised concerns about potential impacts on the area's wildlife and wilderness 'resources'.*