



The Last Quiet Places

TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

IN SEARCH OF THE HEALING POWER OF SILENCE

PHOTOGRAPHS
AND TEXT
BY PETE MCBRIDE

T HAPPENED JUST BEFORE DAWN.

The murmur of bat wings fluttered above me, somewhere within earshot. I lay among the rocks and realized, not for the first time, that my camera was wildly insufficient. In the moonless, inky hours before the sunlight creeps back in from the east, there is very little to see. All I could do was listen to these sightless fliers feeding above me in the stillness.

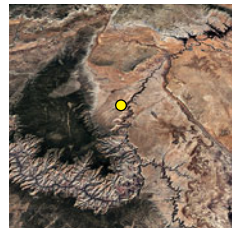
Having spent my career working as a photographer in remote, hard-to-reach areas, it took me nearly two decades to fully realize that the least appreciated and often the hardest gems to document are not the vistas I chase with still cameras, but the auditory elements that surround them. It was that blanket of calm—layered with the notes of wind, wings and scampering claws—that remained with me long after my pixels were processed.

On one assignment, involving a 750-mile trek through the entire length of

< PREVIOUS SPREAD

Marble Canyon, Grand Canyon, Arizona, U.S.

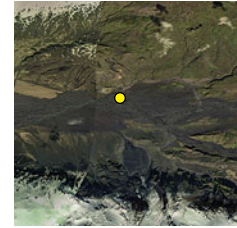
Down on the mile-deep floor of the Grand Canyon, the stillness allows the subtlest natural sounds to emerge, from the call of a peregrine falcon overhead to the scamper of a scorpion underfoot. Rock layers tell their own story, revealing nearly two billion years of geology. But the serenity is no longer guaranteed. It is frequently broken by air tours. In 1999, Senator John McCain of Arizona introduced a law that helped cut down on this persistent source of human noise. But up to 400 flights still cross the canyon or fly below the rim each day.



MILES FROM NEAREST:
AIRPORT: 37, Page Municipal Airport
MAJOR ROAD: 13, Route 89
GAS STATION: 18, Cliff Dweller's Lodge Gas Station
GROCERY STORE: 35, Walmart Supercenter

Markarfljot River, Iceland

Although Iceland draws more than two million visitors a year, the population is a mere 357,000, and some 80 percent of the country is uninhabited. It's not hard to escape to the wild. The rushing, gurgling sounds of glacial rivers provide an especially valued tonic. The Markarfljot River is fed by the Myrdalsjokull and Eyjafjallajokull glaciers, and flows 60 miles to the Atlantic. It's one of many displays of energy and power that give Icelanders a deep reverence for nature.



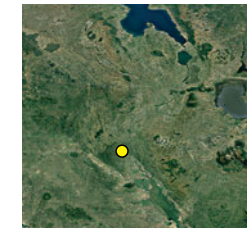
MILES FROM NEAREST:
AIRPORT: 93, Keflavik International Airport
MAJOR ROAD: 11, Route 1
GAS STATION: 19, Orkan
GROCERY STORE: 19, Kronan



MAPS: GOOGLE EARTH (6)



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Majete Wildlife Reserve, Malawi
People tend to think of elephants, with their enormous bulk and trumpetlike calls, as loud beasts. In fact, their footsteps are surprisingly stealthy, and their habitats reverberate with sounds unheard by us. Much of their communication takes place between 1 and 20 hertz, low frequencies out of range of the human ear. But those signals help herds keep in touch with each other over distances as great as six miles. Elephants perceive these vibrations not through the air but through the soles of their padded feet.



MILES FROM NEAREST:
AIRPORT: 28, Chilika International Airport
MAJOR ROAD: 13, M1
GAS STATION: 13, Puma Filling Station
GROCERY STORE: 26, People's Supermarket

the Grand Canyon, I'd set out to create a visual inventory of the wilderness, but after some 500 thirsty, thorny miles, I starting craving not more lenses but a better microphone. I wanted to capture the choir of croaking frogs, the rare applause of rain on rock, the hum of tarantula hawks, the echo of lambs bleating, the wind carrying a change in weather. It was all such a marked contrast from the usual noises that engulfed my life at home: traffic, trucks, lawn mowers, airplanes, construction sounds, portable music beats, my phone buzzing.

My craving led me to Gordon Hempton, a self-described acoustic ecologist. Hempton has spent nearly four decades capturing what he calls the planet's "jukebox" of natural sounds. He has recorded the music of insects and owls, mountain ranges and jungles, the rustling of prairie grasses and the echoing vibrations inside a log of Sitka spruce.

Hempton uses the word "silence" to describe what he's after, even though he isn't seeking a vacuum. He's looking for the soundscapes that emerge when human noise disappears—antidotes to the din of a mechanical, beeping world.

"Silence is the think tank of the soul," Hempton told me softly during a Skype

"Silence is the think tank of the soul. All religions share and revere silence."

interview earlier this year. “All religions share and revere silence.” He warned that quietude “is and has been on the road to extinction for a long time.”

He has the data to prove this. In 1984, after Hempton had spent some years chasing silence, he identified 21 places in his home of Washington State (an area of 71,298 square miles) that were free of human-made noise for intervals of 15 minutes or longer. In 2007, Hempton reported that only three of those places on his list still fit that criterion. Today, he believes a natural silence longer than 15 minutes is rare in the United States and all but gone in Europe. Even remote wilderness areas and national parks are frequently crisscrossed by jets, shrinking the average noise-free interval to less than five minutes during daylight hours.

This noise pollution is harming animals. A study last fall at Queens University Belfast found that human-made sounds threaten the feeding, migration and communication of more than 100 species of mammals, birds, fish, reptiles and amphibians. But noise pollution is also bad for our own health. It can lead to high blood pressure, heart disease, heart attacks, stress and insomnia. In 2011, the World Health Organization

> **Graham Land, Fish Islands, Antarctica**

When winds subside on the Fish Islands—the part of the continent closest to the tip of South America—there are moments of blissful peace, interrupted only by the occasional seal, Gentoo penguin or skua bird. Nonetheless, the industrialized bustle of far-away lands is becoming increasingly evident, perhaps even heard in the trickle of meltwater. The nearby Antarctic Peninsula is facing some of the highest temperature increases on the planet. The area has lost 163 billion tons of ice each year since 2002.



MILES FROM NEAREST:
AIRPORT: 731, Ushuaia Airport, Argentina
MAJOR ROAD: 732, Route 3, Argentina
GAS STATION: 730, YPF Service Station, Argentina
GROCERY STORE: 716, Supermercado, Argentina





Salar de Uyuni, Bolivia
Perched at nearly 12,000 feet, this salt flat is the largest in the world. The ancient lake bed spans 3,900 square miles, so featureless that geophysicists have compared it to an ocean with no waves. While the visual expanse can be overwhelming, the silence is equally striking. The flats are visited by breeding flamingos and bands of salt miners, but they remain relatively untrammelled. That might change with growing global demand for batteries: Major lithium reserves are believed to lie under the salty surface.



MILES FROM NEAREST:
AIRPORT: 54, Jopa Andina Airport
MAJOR ROAD: 44, Route 30
GAS STATION: 55, Estación de Servicio
GROCERY STORE: 55, Supermercado Exito

concluded that 340 million Western Europeans (roughly equivalent to the U.S. population) lost at least one million years of healthy life each year because of traffic-related noise.

Quietude, though, has been shown to promote the regeneration of brain cells in the hippocampus, which is key for learning, memory and emotion. Preliminary findings also suggest that it can be therapeutic for certain types of depression and dementia.

Hermits, writers and philosophers who sought solitude in the woods may have been on a more medicinal path than we've given them credit for. "Silence is the universal refuge, the sequel to all dull discourses and all foolish acts," wrote Henry David Thoreau, the 19th-century transcendentalist, as he recorded natural sounds with the best microphone he had available: a pen.

Whenever I come back from an assignment documenting a quiet corner of the earth, I often notice how much clearer my

“Silence is the universal refuge, the sequel to all dull discourses and foolish acts.”

BYLINES
Photographer and writer **Pete McBride** has traveled to over 75 countries in the last 20 years.
SEE MORE of McBride's photographs of the quietest places on earth at Smithsonianmag.com/silence

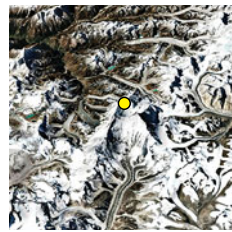
mind feels. The quandaries of life seem simpler, my attention a tad sharper. Even after I reacclimate to the higher decibels of modernity, it feels as if the medicine of silence has eased my mental noise.

This became ever more noticeable during the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic when there were significant drops in tourism and travel, and industrial lockdowns. While many commented on the hushed tones of neighborhoods and the increased awareness of bird sounds again, a report in the journal *Science* reported that the lockdown was “the longest and most coherent global seismic noise reduction in recorded history.”

The images on these pages are some of my visual meditations on the sounds and silences of nature from throughout the years. They are the backdrop to the Khumbu lullaby of Mount Everest’s glaciers moving underfoot, the distant rumble of an elephant. They document the deep stillness in the basement of the Grand Canyon or the thin-air emptiness of the Altiplano’s ancient lakebed of the Salar de Uyuni. I hope these photos can serve as reminders of what the natural world has to tell us—if we listen. ♦



Valley of Silence, Khumbu Icefall, Mount Everest, Nepal
On the south side of Mount Everest, sherpas build a route each climbing season. These men—known locally as the Khumbu icefall doctors—say that in order to create the safest passage, they listen to the ice creak, whine and moan. At the top of the icefall, between Camps 1 and 2, is an area known as the Valley of Silence. At nearly 20,000 feet, it’s famous for its tranquility. But the steepness of the slope, and the constant rise and fall of temperatures, make the valley prone to roaring avalanches.



MILES FROM NEAREST:
AIRPORT: 95, Tribhuvan International Airport
MAJOR ROAD: 41, China National Highway 318
GAS STATION: 22, Ambari Indane Gramin Vitrak
GROCERY STORE: 16, Kiran Shopping Center and Grocery

