



# A Theologian Studies Birds

It's early morning in the Great Smoky Mountains.

Kevin Burrell dozes, wrapped in his sleeping bag. Before emerging into the brisk air, he hears the call of a hermit thrush above his tent. The flutelike tune stops but is followed by the chirps of a northern cardinal and the cheerful song of a tufted titmouse.

The sounds come from the same spot above him. As an avid bird-watcher, he knows that all are made by a single northern mockingbird.

While some might pull their sleeping bags over their heads, Burrell ponders meaning in the bird's mimicry. He sees the mockingbird as representing Christian discipleship, which entails imitating Jesus. The bird is also a lifelong learner, which is what Burrell says he is called to be as a follower (disciple means "learner") of Christ.

Not every Christian perceives deep meaning from God's avian creatures. Most know birds appear in

the Bible—including doves, eagles, hawks, sparrows, and swallows—but few consider connections between birds and Christianity. That's not the case with believing birdwatchers like Burrell though. Songbirds remind him and other Christian fowl fans of singing during worship; chickadees splashing in a birdbath reflect a kind of prayer.

Renowned theologian and birder John Stott coined the word *ornitheology* in his book, *The Birds, Our Teachers*. It refers to a unique blend of scientific study and religious appreciation of birds.

In his bird book, Stott takes Jesus' urging to "Look at the birds of the air" (Matthew 6:26) seriously.

Burrell is senior pastor at StoneBridge Church Community in Charlotte, North Carolina. On his blog, *ornitheology.com*, he recounts birdwatching trips with both biological detail and biblical devotion.

"To me, the beauty is a window that points to a Creator of it all. It's a means to a greater end," Burrell says.

The pastoral outdoorsman is most attentive to birds local to his area. One post explains the link between the northern mockingbird and discipleship. Another likens the unrelenting refrain of the Carolina wren to worship songs. The bird's persistence reminds him of the believer's call to continual singing, prayer, and worship. A post about homing pigeons details a theology of home.

For Burrell, being a Christian birder means being able to thank Someone for the beauty he encounters in a ruby-throated hummingbird in North Carolina or a rainbow lorikeet in Australia.

"I think that everybody who takes seriously the fact that God is a creative God should pay attention to some creative aspects of what He's made," says Burrell. "And I choose birds."



Carolina wren

**WHY?** The Creator God leaves His imprint on all of creation. Encouraging others to see and appreciate His character reflected in His work brings Him glory and draws believers into closer communion with Him.

