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When the Call of the Wild Is Nothing but the Phone in Your Pocket

By FELICITY BARRINGER

Remember when cellphone ring tones mostly advertised personal musical tastes (Beyoncé, Metallica, “The 1812 Overture”) or parental pride (babies cooing)? The chance to make political statements with this seemingly omnipresent speaker system went largely unexploited. But that was before endangered-species ring tones were born.

Now, from Siberia to the ski slopes of the French Alps, from Manitoba to Brazil, tens of thousands of phones howl, hoot, trill, screech, croak or emit the haunting song of whales.

The Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental group based in Arizona known more for litigating on behalf of endangered creatures than building a choral repertoire around them, introduced the ring tones in 2006 and has been counting downloads the way Billboard counts album sales. The new tally: 200,000, a milestone of sorts. (They are most popular, after the United States and Britain, in China and Iran.)

Bumper stickers produce instant reactions, pro and con, said Peter Galvin, the center’s conservation director. But with wildlife sounds, Mr. Galvin added, “people don’t already have their filters on for how they receive that information.”

“It’s powerful,” he continued. “Any kind of music or sound influences

people and how people think.”

Renditions of frogs and owls consumed researchers in the early days. But the list of more than 80 sounds has expanded to include animals that, though not yet endangered, can belt it out with the best of them, like the pika, a rodent dwelling in the Southwestern mountains in the United States, whose cool climes are threatened by climate change. The killer whale and the Mexican gray wolf, both endangered, are currently Nos. 1 and 2 on the charts.

The more endangered a bird or beast, the harder to record it. Jon Slaght, a Ph.D. candidate in wildlife conservation at the University of Minnesota, spent days slogging recording gear around the Russian Far East, in minus-30-degree weather, to get not just the hoot of the world’s largest owl — the Blakiston’s fish owl — but also the far less melodious cry of its offspring. It is this juvenile call that now summons Mr. Slaght to the phone.

“It’s a little embarrassing when I’m in a public place,” he said. “It’s a really grating, unpleasant noise.” But, he added, “it does get you to answer your phone.”

It is incumbent upon downloaders to remember what they downloaded. Grace Matthews, a 19-year-old biology student at the University of Birmingham in England, took a skiing holiday last week in the

French Alps. At one point, she skied away from her companions and into a snowy, dusky forest area. Alone, moving at a good clip on the steep slopes, she was startled by the howl of a wolf.

“I very nearly crashed,” Ms. Matthews said in an interview.

In a separate e-mail message, she added, “It took me several long moments to realize I was being phoned, and not hunted.”

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