

Backyard Birding

... with Gail T. Whitehurst

The Importance of Bird Songs, Call Notes, Flight Calls, and Scold Notes as Aids in Identification

One of the nicest things about birds, to a birder, is the fact that they sing, chirp, call, chip, scold, squawk, scream, yell, whistle, or make other sounds most of their waking hours. For those who are not interested, the early-morning chorus of songsters in the spring can be annoying. Too bad! This is the optimum time to enjoy the many beautiful and varied sounds the bird world has to offer.

Birds songs, whether pleasing or distasteful to the human ear, were not designed for our benefit. However, we can not only enjoy the music, but also, as birders, find these songs to be of great benefit in determining the species around us. Much has been written as to why birds sing, and how they do it. There is still a considerable amount of research being done on bird songs. Ornithologists convert recordings of vocalizations into a graphic format, called a sonogram, to facilitate comparative analyses. However, only careful field observations can correlate the various sounds with the birds' behavior.

Birds do not sing all of the time. Some, such as the Carolina Wren and Song Sparrow sing almost the year around. Others cease singing with the onset of the postnuptial molt and do not begin again until the days begin to lengthen in late winter. After all, song is primarily a means of establishing a territory and attracting a mate. Some birds sing only "whisper" songs in the fall. Young birds may take up "practicing" and learning how to sing the songs appropriate to their species during fall and winter. These songs are often imperfect and include sounds of other species, which the novices drop as they mature.

What, then, can we use as aids in identifying birds during these nonsinging periods? That is where knowing the call notes, flight calls, and scold notes comes in handy. Chip notes of fall warblers are helpful in locating the birds. These notes do differ in intensity and pitch. Our wintering Yellow-rumped Warbler has a distinctive chip note that, once heard and learned, can separate "myrts" from the other wintering warblers, such as the Pine Warbler. The *Oporonis* warblers, those found most often on the ground or in low shrubs, have a metallic sound to their chip notes. The Cape May Warbler, in addition to its high chip note, in fall sometimes gives a "squeaky" sound similar to that of a chickadee or titmouse.

The "checks, chacks, and chucks" with differing pitches and intensity enable one to distinguish the different species of blackbirds—red-wingeds, grackles, Brewer's, and

cowbirds. There is a similar quality to the call notes and scold notes among birds of the same family. This is particularly noticeable among the blackbirds and woodpeckers.

Flight calls are generally given by birds that tend to travel in flocks. The finches and blackbirds are vociferous while flying overhead. Perhaps these birds call in an effort to keep the flock together. If we learn these calls and look up quickly when hearing them, we can see species we might otherwise miss. This is helpful when one is doing bird counts or keeping records on migration dates.

Mockingbirds have a deep and harsh scold note as does the Brown Thrasher, but each is distinctively different. Most everyone is familiar with the scold note of the Gray Catbird, which gave it its name. To me these notes also sound like an old-fashioned fishing reel, being wound in.

The smaller the bird, the more high-pitched, and often louder, the song. If you think the Carolina Wren is loud, listen to the smaller House Wren. The even tinier Winter Wren comes forth strongest of all. The tiny Ruby-crowned Kinglet, in spring, can really startle and surprise you with the power in his voice.

The *Oporonis* warblers have very strong voices. One can hear them and never find the singer whether it be a waterthrush or an Ovenbird (with his ringing “teacher, teacher”) or the Hooded Warbler. These birds may be completely hidden and sing from the ground, a low bush, or just over your head. They move about quickly without giving away their position. One instant, you hear the song here—suddenly it comes from over there. In dense bushes and vines the Common Yellowthroat easily eludes the birder who searches for the origin of the “witchity, witchity” song.

The Ruby-crowned Kinglet has a very distinctive call note, but one that easily goes unnoticed by beginning bird students. I call it a “rachety” sound—somewhat like some of the noises of the House Sparrow, but not nearly so loud. When disturbed or excited, the kinglet repeats this note quickly a number of times. I have found many a kinglet in fall and winter, high in a tree, after hearing this note. The Golden-crowned Kinglet has a very different note. It is somewhat like that of a chickadee, but much more highly pitched and not always within the hearing range of many folks. On a dark and cloudy day, a flock of kinglets high in a tree can often be distinguished only by their notes.

The sparrows—which may be very difficult to identify in a weedy field—all have their own specific notes. It is good to know their calls as they pop up briefly and disappear before you can see all the necessary field marks.

Then, there is the very special shrill or high, thin squeal that nearly all birds use to alert all species to the presence of a predator. I have seen many hawks in winter by heeding this alarm cry and looking up into the sky. All the birds take cover upon hearing this call. In the nesting season, robins and thrushes use the call when crows appear—they, too, are predators. Everyone is familiar with the yelling of crows when they spot a large hawk. Blue Jays do it, too, for crows, hawks, owls, and cats.

All of the thrushes have beautiful songs. Most birders are quite familiar with the lovely, flute-like notes of the Wood Thrush. It stops singing in early August, but sticks around until October. We have the Veery as a summer resident in our mountains. His song is quite different from that of the Wood Thrush, but a joy to hear. He and his cousins, the Swainson’s Thrush and Gray-cheeked Thrush, have a quality in their songs that makes them sound as if they are singing from inside of a can, pipe, or hollow tree. Out West, where Swainson’s Thrushes nest, they are often referred to as the “bird in a

can.” As these thrushes migrate north in spring, they may be heard singing “whisper” songs in early morning. Each thrush species has its own distinctive call note, which is used frequently in the fall. The song of the Hermit Thrush, a winter resident in the Carolinas, is very beautiful too.

Incidentally, the Nightingale of Europe, famed in poetry and song, is a member of the thrush family. Roger Tory Peterson says, in his preface to the *Field Guide of European Birds*, that he has heard the song of the Nightingale and that it does not compare in beauty to that of our Wood Thrush!

Some birds are easier to hear singing than to see. The Red-eyed Vireo sings nearly all day long during the nesting season, but because of its color and generally sluggish movements, high in the tree tops, it is difficult to locate. This holds true for the Yellow-throated Vireo as well. The Yellow-billed Cuckoo can be heard for long distances, but is not so often seen.

Many bird watchers have discovered that they can bring small songbirds out into the open by making smacking sounds, by going “pshhh, pshhh, pshhh,” or by playing screech-owl tapes. The last should not be done during the breeding season—nor should one play tapes of bird songs of the species he wishes to see. This can, and does, cause problems for the birds; they may even abandon their nests.

Tapes and recordings do have their place, however. Beginning bird students can make their field trips much more productive if they have had an opportunity to listen to recordings of the birds they expect to see. And advanced birders find that it helps to become familiar with the songs of birds they may encounter during trips to other parts of the country. Peterson’s bird guides are most helpful in describing songs, notes, and calls and by using catch phrases. If one is really serious about finding new birds, some time spent poring over the pictures and reading about the songs before going out will be rewarding.

Classification of birds is constantly undergoing changes as more knowledge about them is acquired. Today’s geneticists are able to prove, or disprove, relationships by studying the make-up of chromosomes and genes. Perhaps there is also some study going on comparing bird songs and call notes. For instance, we suggest that the scold notes of vireos with wing bars (e.g. Yellow-throated, Solitary and White-eyed) show a closer relationship between these species than with the Red-eyed Vireo, whose scold is totally different. We discovered (in Oregon) that one of the songs of the Green-tailed Towhee is like one of those of our own Rufous-sided Towhee. Both birds sing a short phrase that sounds to me like, “Chirp, chirp, See-bring.” The first two notes on the same pitch are followed by a higher note and a lower one with the emphasis on the third note. The Rufous-sided Towhee west of the Rockies does not sing the familiar “Drink your tea”—he just settles for a long, drawn out “Te-e-e-ea.” Both species have the “joreet” call—or is it “towhee” or “joree” to your ears?

Books and tapes are great helps, but there is no substitute for personal observation. Spending hours listening to songs and calls—seeing which bird was making the sounds and under what circumstances—is the best way to really learn them, and you can do it right in your own back yard!—GTW