

Backyard Birding

... with Gail T. Whitehurst

Birdsong Fun

In the Fall 1985 issue of *Chat*, we discussed the value of knowing the songs, scold notes, and flight calls of birds as an aid in locating and identifying birds. Now we would like to suggest to our readers, especially the young and young at heart, that with some imagination, you can find bird songs full of popular tunes, interesting phrases, and downright comical sentences. You just might add a touch of spice to those otherwise dull backyard duties such as pulling weeds, pruning the hedge, or picking beans in the garden.

For instance, this summer there was a Northern Cardinal in our backyard who sang loudly, "cheeseburger, cheeseburger." In light of the fact that there are at least three fast-food hamburger outfits within less than a mile, I wonder which one was paying him to advertise. He must not have made much, for he soon switched to "cheerburger" and then just said, "cheer, cheer." As far as I know, there are no cardinals in England, but this bird, and others I have heard over the years, frequently call out, "British people, British people!" Perhaps they were allied with the British redcoats during the American Revolution.

Song Sparrows are known to have an immense repertoire of phrases, most of which are quite beautiful to the human ear. Among those frequenting my yard this summer was one whose song tune was quite plainly, "Someone's in the kitchen with Dinah." Another song, from a different bird, sounded to me like, "What now, my love?"

We have had much fun with the songs and phrases of Carolina Wrens over the years. In Raleigh, we had a couple of singing male wrens that I referred to as the "Religious Wrens." Why? Because one of them would call out, "Saint Peter, Saint Peter." The other, from across the way, would respond, "Saint Peter, Saint Peter, *Sir!*" It appeared as though the first wren was being chided by the second wren for being disrespectful. Here in Asheville, we have a wren that often throws in "bishop, bishop," as he runs through his pattern of song. The fun comes sometimes when a certain phrase accompanies the activities of another bird. We know that the bird does not really relate to the situation at all, but the effect can be very comical. Once I was watching a pair of Brown-headed Nuthatches digging a hole in a low fence post (one quite accessible to a cat). While they were busily engaged in this activity, a Carolina Wren flew close and perched nearby. After observing the nuthatches for a moment or two, he threw back his head and sang out, "Pretty stupid, pretty stupid."

Starlings, which everyone prefers to ignore, can come up with some fairly good imitations of other birds. They also have quite an assortment of grunts, cackles, and whistles. I recall one time when, dirty and disheveled from cleaning house, I stepped outside and was greeted by a long, loud wolf whistle from a European Starling. Although I have heard them do this often, the timing was so perfect that I could not help but laugh.

The flycatchers, many of which can be safely identified only by their songs, come up with some fun phrases, too. The Acadian, even in the deepest woods, seems to be calling for "pizza." The time I heard the Olive-sided Flycatcher, he was saying, "Whip three beers." The Alder reportedly offers "free beer."

The Brown Thrasher is a mimic as is his cousin, the Northern Mockingbird. Personally, I think the thrasher's songs are much more melodic—and he doesn't pick up a new sound and harp on it all day long, as does the mocker. In *The Audubon Book of True Nature Stories*, edited by John K. Terres, there is a story about a thrasher that actually learned to talk. He had an extensive vocabulary of some 70 words and phrases. At the time I first read this story, there was a fairly tame Brown Thrasher at our place. I named him "Pretty Bird," and he would come for handouts when I called him by name. I started saying his name over and over whenever he was around—but he gave no vocal response, just making off with the food. But some weeks later, in early fall, I spied him in a hedge. He was singing his songs in a soft whisper—and it was a very lovely medley. Suddenly, he injected the phrase, "Pretty bird, pretty bird." Then he flew away, as if to say, "See, I can talk, if I want to." I never heard him do it again.

A number of birds say their names. In addition to pewee and towhee, there are chickadee and phoebe. I think the Brown-headed Nuthatch says "nuthatch, nuthatch," with the emphasis on "nut." Most everyone agrees that the Blue Jay yells "Jay, jay."

The Brown Creeper, whose song is difficult to hear, being weak and high-pitched, says "see, see, see." He may be inviting us to look and see, but that is more easily said than done as he creeps up the trunk of a tree or along its branches, his color blending with the background.

If you have some pet phrases for wild birds or stories about their calls and songs, won't you share them with us? Perhaps you can help others in locating and identifying a new bird.—GTW

BRIEFS FOR THE FILES

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species is now nesting as far east as Williamston, N.C., where Ed Torrence saw an adult pair at a feeder with three young during the summer.

PINE SISKIN: Ramona Snively noted four at her Winston-Salem feeder until 9 June, a very late date for the piedmont. In the mountains, one was present at Ruth Young's feeder in Fairview from 21 June to 31 July; and Norma and Bill Siebenheller reported many siskins in Transylvania County, N.C., this spring, some in courtship chasing. Siskins have never been confirmed to breed in the southern Appalachians, though they likely do so (at least occasionally).