

Birding call: Name that tune

Identifying birds from the sound of their song alone becomes easier with practice

The explosion of leaves over the past week has drawn a green veil upon our neighbourhoods and woodlands. As beautiful and welcome as the burst of foliage may be, it complicates actually seeing and appreciating the many resident and migrant birds that make the month of May so wonderful. To be fully aware of all the bird diversity that surrounds us, we therefore need to depend on our ears as much as our eyes.



DREW
MONKMAN

OUR CHANGING SEASONS

With practice, nearly all bird species can be identified by the songs and call notes they make, and recognizing the common bird songs provides a great deal of satisfaction. To the practiced ear, a chorus of bird song is like a symphony in which you recognize each of the individual instruments. At the same time, knowing the songs means you don't have to spend a lot of time and energy actually tracking down the unidentified songsters. Let's face it; seeing a Red-eyed Vireo high in the canopy of a fully-leaved maple is hard work.

Memorizing bird song as pure sound, however, is difficult. For most of us, including myself, it is much easier to convert the songs to a mnemonic, which is simply any device that serves as a memory aid. The Red-breasted Nuthatch sounds like a child's toy horn, while the American Bittern's call is reminiscent of the sound of an old pump. Many people simply come up with their own comparisons for remembering a song. If, for example, you think a given bird sounds like a squeaky clothesline, write the mnemonic down in your field guide. You should also try to track down the bird and to watch it while it sings. This will help to "fix" the song in your brain. Cupping your ears with your hands is a great aid to hearing quieter or more distant songs.

To get you started, here are some mnemonics that birders have been using for years. I have grouped the birds and the corresponding mnemonic by habitat type, although many species can be found in more than one habitat. Many of these species are also common in both urban and rural areas.

MOST HABITATS (INCLUDING URBAN)

- American Robin:** CHEERILY-CHEERY-CHEERILY-CHEER... – a series of short, sweet, musical whistles, rising and falling. Robins are especially vocal just before dawn. Make a point of listening to the pre-dawn robin chorus at least once this spring.
- American Goldfinch:** PO-TA-TO-CHIP! – this distinctive call is given on the up rise of the goldfinch's roller-coaster flight.
- Black-capped Chickadee:** HI-CUTY or SPRING-IS-HERE – a clear, two-note whistle. The last note drops in pitch is often double-pulsed. The chickadee's call is the well-known "chick-a-dee-dee-dee."
- Blue Jay:** QUEEDLE-QUEEDLE – a pleasant, musical song, given in a quick burst. Listen also for "squeaky wheelbarrow" sounds and the jay's harsh, descending "jaaaay" scream.
- Cedar Waxwing:** SREEEE-SREEEE-



KARL EGRESSY Special to The Examiner
Memorizing bird calls can take a lot of work, but identifying birds in the canopy of leaves that is now developing is even more difficult. Among local birds that are bringing their distinctive calls back for the spring are (clockwise from above) the Killdeer, Common Yellowthroat, Eastern Phoebe and Eastern Meadowlark,



- SREEEE** – an extremely high-pitched, hissy, weak, non-musical whistle.
- Chipping Sparrow:** a mechanical, rapidly repeated series of dry chips, lasting several seconds and almost sounding like a fast-running sewing machine.
- Common Grackle:** GRACK-CRACK-KEEK-A-LEEK – the harsh, unmusical notes grow higher in pitch and become squeaky as they proceed.
- Eastern Phoebe:** FEE-BEEE – a very emphatic, two-note song with a raspy or burred second note. It is repeated constantly. This bird is most commonly found around cottage and farm out-buildings.
- House Wren:** a rapid, bubbling series of trills and rattles, both rising and descending. This bird can be a non-stop singer practically all day long.
- Mourning Dove:** HOOO-AH-HOO-HOO-HOO – very slow and "mourning." The song could be mistaken for that of an owl.
- Red-eyed Vireo:** LOOK-UP, OVER-HERE, SEE-MEE, UP-HERE... – a series of simple, whistled, robin-like phrases, repeated over and over and sung from tree tops both in the city and county.



- Song Sparrow:** MAIDS-MAIDS-MAIDS-PUT-ON-YOUR-TEA-KETTLE-ETTLE-ETTLE – a variable, complex series of notes that includes one long trill in the middle.
 - Yellow Warbler:** SWEET-SWEET-SWEET-I'M-SO-SWEET – clear, high, whistled notes that are rushed at the end.
- ### MOSTLY URBAN
- Chimney Swift:** CHIT-CHIT-CHIT-CHIT – an ultra-rapid burst of notes given as the birds fly overhead, usually in Peterborough's downtown core.
 - European Starling:** WHEEEE-ERR – a long, down-slurred "wolf-whistle," accompanied by an unmusical series of chips, squawks and squeaky notes. Starlings often sing from telephone wires.
 - House finch:** think of this bird as "the mad warbler" because of its loud, bubbly, quick-paced, warbled song. Harsh "churr" notes are often included. This bird often sings from the very top of spruce trees in the city.
 - House Sparrow:** CHIDDIK-CHIDDIK... – a dry, monotonous series of

- identical chips.
 - Northern Cardinal:** TWEER-TWEER-WHIT-WHIT-WHIT-WHIT or BIRDY-BIRDY-BIRDY-BIRDY – a loud, rich and persistent song, usually sung from a high perch.
- ### WETLANDS
- Red-winged Blackbird:** KON-KA-REEEEEE – a harsh, gurgling song ending in a trill.
 - Common Yellowthroat:** WITCHITY-WITCHITY-WITCHITY-WITCH – a song characterized by an up and down rolling rhythm.
- ### FIELDS AND FARMLAND
- Bobolink:** – a rolling, bubbling (boboling!) warble of very short notes that seem to almost trip over each other. It is given as the bird flies low over a hay field.
 - Eastern Meadowlark:** SPRING-OF-THE-YEAR – a slow, clear, slurred whistle that carries surprisingly far.
 - Killdeer:** KILL-DEEEER or KEE-DEE – a high, strident song, often given in flight.
 - Savannah Sparrow:** ZIT-ZIT-ZIT-

ZEEEE-ZAAAY – a descending series of very high, fine buzzes. This sparrow usually sings from a fence post or wire.

WOODLANDS

- Ovenbird:** t-CHER-t-CHER-t-CHER-t-CHER-t-CHER! – a loud, ringing, series of two-syllable "teacher" notes repeated quickly and accented on the second syllable.
- Veery:** VER-VEER-VEER-VEER-VEER – a smooth, calming series of fluty, ethereal notes that spiral downward.

RECORDINGS

The many apps, CDs and websites available for learning bird songs are also very helpful. When I first set out to learn the songs, I would listen to cassettes in the car while driving to and home from work. One of the most convenient ways to learn them now is by purchasing an app such as the *Sibley eGuide to Birds*. It contains all of the content of the printed book as well as recordings of all the calls and songs of each species. You can also choose to use a filter option in order to show only those birds that are found in Ontario, or to only show the most commonly-seen species. The app is available for iPhone, iPod touch and Android phones.

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Birding by Ear, by Dick Walton and Robert Lawson is a great audio CD for learning the more common birds. It provides a number of mnemonics and explains how to distinguish between similar sounding species. Stokes Field Guide to Bird Songs by Lang Elliott with Donald and Lillian Stokes is also excellent. Although it is not a teaching CD, it does give examples of practically every type of vocalization a given species makes. There are also myriad websites that you can visit. A good site to start with is called "Learn Bird Songs." It can be found at <http://www.learnbird-songs.com/index.php> If you click on City Bird Songs, you are taken to a page where most of the common city species can be heard. The bird guide at allabout-birds.org also has recordings and descriptions of all of the songs and calls you are likely to hear. Finally, another wonderful resource is the Macaulay Library at <http://macaulaylibrary.org/> It is the world's largest and oldest scientific archive of biodiversity audio and video recordings. This site is a veritable treasure trove of not only bird sounds, but also the vocalizations of mammals, amphibians, invertebrates, etc. Finally, you can find videos of most common bird species as they sing by searching YouTube.

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