

March 15, 2005

The Return of Bird Song

In March's tug-of-war between winter and spring, the signs of the change of season are often subtle. They reveal themselves mostly to those who search them out. A good way to start is to forget what the day-to-day weather may be doing and simply taking a minute each morning to stop and listen. Bird song has returned. For the first time since mid-July, the walk from house to car is accompanied by the voices of impassioned birds, caught up in the business of advertising ownership of nesting territories and securing a mate. The dreary silence of winter has finally lost its grip.

Although not the yet full chorus of April and May, there is now a good selection of bird song to be heard most mornings. The songs of year-round resident species such as northern cardinals and mourning doves are joined this month by a variety of migrants returning from their wintering grounds in the United States. In the coming days, the voices of red-winged blackbirds, common grackles, eastern meadowlarks, American robins, killdeers and song sparrows will have joined the concert.

March is therefore a great time to learn these common songs. Since the number of species that can be heard this month is still fairly small, learning the various vocalizations is still manageable. If you can remember these songs, you'll be better able to detect the new voices which will join the soundscape in April and May when most of our migrants return.

Bird song refers to the notes and phrases used almost exclusively by males to announce and defend nesting territories against other males of the same species. They also serve to either attract a new mate or maintain a pair bond with an existing partner. Evolution has conferred upon each species of bird a unique song which we can use to identify the species in question. In other words, no two types of birds sound exactly the same. With very similar looking species such as some flycatchers, song is actually the safest means of identification.

Birds also have a variety of calls - often single or double notes - which are shorter and simpler than songs. They are used for a variety of purposes such as expressing alarm or maintaining contact among members of a flock. Calls are often given in flight and, like songs, can be very useful for identification purposes. They tend to be somewhat harder to learn, however, and often require very sharp ears.

There is a great deal of satisfaction in recognizing at least the most common birds songs. You will also save yourself a lot of time and energy. Even before the leaves come out you will probably hear three or four times as many birds as you will see. To the practised ear, a chorus of bird song is like a symphony in which you recognize each of the individual instruments. However, to memorize bird song as pure sound is extremely difficult for most people. Personally, I find the easiest way to remember them is through a mnemonic or memory aid. The red-breasted nuthatch sounds like a child's toy horn while the European starling brings to mind a disjointed one-man orchestra incorporating gurgles, hisses, clucks and whistles.

However, the mnemonics that work best for me are the English "translation" variety. The short, sweet phrases of the American robin sound like "CHEERILY-CHEERY-CHEERILY-CHEER." The clear, slurred whistle of the eastern meadowlark brings to mind the phrase "SPRING OF THE YEAR." The song of the red-winged blackbird, a signature sound of March, can be compared to "KONK-A-REEEEE."

There is no doubt that some species sound similar to others. However, when you take into consideration the context of the song - habitat, time of year and the bird's behaviour - the choice usually comes down to one species. The context is what birders use to make what might otherwise seem like extraordinary acoustic identifications.

Start by learning the songs of the species that are most common in your own neighbourhood. If you live in the city, these will probably include the house sparrow, European starling, house finch, mourning dove, northern cardinal, blue jay, American crow, black-capped chickadee, common grackle and song sparrow. If you have wetlands and fields around your home, you should include eastern meadowlark, red-winged blackbird and killdeer on the list. In April, the songs of northward-bound dark-eyed juncos and American tree sparrows are also useful to know. Juncos in particular can be quite abundant and vocal for several weeks, even in city backyards.

I find that tapes and CDs of bird songs are great learning aids. I regularly listen to them in the car for review purposes. Initially, you may wish to make up your own tape that includes only the most common species. A good beginner's recording is "Birding by Ear" by Richard Walton. Published by Houghton Mifflin, the recordings actually teach you how to remember the various songs. You can also listen to birds songs and calls at a number of different web sites on the Internet.. One of the most complete can be found at <http://www.naturesongs.com/birds.html>. It is essential, however, to spend as much time as possible in the field, listening and then tracking down the birds you hear in order to be sure of the identification. This is especially important for species such as cardinals which have a wide repertoire of songs, not all of which are necessarily on the tape or CD.

When, each year, I hear the expected migrants singing on schedule in the expected places, I know the natural world is unfolding as it should and that, despite the myriad obstacles of migration, the birds of spring have once again returned.

What to watch for this week

When you are out for a walk or drive, notice how the bark of the red-osier dogwoods glows with a much more exuberant red than earlier in the winter. As these common shrubs break their winter dormancy, sap begins to rise and apparently brings about changes in the red pigments of the bark. You can see the same phenomenon in willows which, depending on the species, acquire a deeper honey-bronze or wine red colour as spring approaches.

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