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LIVING

One of the most wonderful features of early spring is that the deafening silence of winter has finally been broken. Sound has once again returned to the natural world.

There are three great choruses in nature's year. The first is the resurgence of bird song, beginning in February. By mid-April, the voices of the amphibian world will add their music and, when mid-summer arrives, the insect kingdom will dominate the soundscape. This week, however, I want to talk about the avian chorus.

By early April, bird song is already very noticeable. Even for those of us living in suburban areas, the early morning cacophony of song may at first seem terribly confusing. However, almost all of the voices belong to fewer than a dozen species. The dominant singer in built-up areas is quite often the northern cardinal.

Broadcasting its ownership of territory from an open, elevated perch, the cardinal sings loud, lusty, one- or two-note phrases over and over again. One of the most common cardinal songs starts with a series of drawn out "TWEER-TWEER-TWEER-TWEER" whistles, followed immediately by a rapid string of WHIT-WHIT-WHIT-WHIT... notes. Keep in mind, however, that the cardinal's song is extremely variable.

Competing for supremacy over the soundwaves but singing a little more softly, the voices of American robins are almost impossible to miss. The song is a series of low whistled phrases, often described in English translation as "CHEERILY-CHEERY-CHEERILY." When they become agitated, listen for their "PIIK" call and loud, descending whinny. Robins are especially vocal at sunrise.

Five other players, albeit of lesser musical virtuosity, are also quite dominant most days. The raspy, nasal "CAW" of the American crow is an almost constant presence. Its close cousin, the blue jay, is usually heard, too, blasting out a harsh, raucous "JAAY-JAAY-JAAY..." Jays also sing a musical, rolling "TOOLILI" phrase that is not easily recognized by the casual birder. The harsh "CHACK"s of common grackles are generally part of the cacophony, as well. These birds often fly about in early spring in small, noisy flocks. They are very distinctive, with their shiny, iridescent, purple-black feathers. A fourth species that can be quite loud is the European starling. Often perched on telephone wires, starlings produce a raspy, squeaky chatter that seems completely disjointed. Listen for high, sliding whistles thrown into the mix, as well. Finally, it's hard to go anywhere in Peterborough in the early spring without hearing the monotonous series of identical "CHIRP"s of the house sparrow. This species is especially common in the downtown core.

Once you've sorted out the vocal bullies of the morning chorus, it's time to concentrate on some of the softer voices. These almost always include the soft, clear, two- or three-note whistle of the black-capped chickadee. Often described as "FEEEE-BEE," the first note is higher and longer than the second. Some people remember it as "HI CUTY." You should also listen for a very high-pitched, musical series of warbled notes that are delivered with machine gun rapidity. Usually emanating from the very top of a spruce tree, this ridiculously complex warble belongs to the house finch. Completing the trio of gentler singers is the ubiquitous mourning dove. Its soothing "OOO-OOO-OOO" song is confused by many people for that of an owl.

If you happen to live in a more rural area that is interspersed with fields, the call of the killdeer can be a common sound. This member of the plover family makes a sharp, piercing "DEE-DEE-DEE" that is often given in flight. This same habitat is also home to the eastern meadowlark, another very vocal songster of early spring. Meadowlarks produce a beautiful, clear whistle that can be heard at considerable distances. The mnemonic for this song is "SPRING OF THE YEAR." In shrubby areas, or along a roadway or fenceline, the song sparrow's outpourings are hard to miss. The song is a complex, jumbled production of trills and

April's avian chorus



Karl Egressy, Special to The Examiner

clear notes. "MAIDS-MAIDS-MAIDS-PUT-ON-YOUR-TEA-KETTLE-ETTLE-ETTLE" is the rather off-the-wall memory aid for this song.

Damp fields and wetlands have several other species to offer. Most noticeable in early spring is the red-winged blackbird. Male red-wings advertise their presence by screeching a loud, strident "CONK-AREEEEEEE." They also produce high, clear whistles which serve as alarm calls. Turning your attention skyward, there's a good chance you may hear a strange tremolo sound. Although actually seeing the bird may prove difficult, what you are hearing is the "winnowing" of the Wilson's snipe. As part of his courtship display, the male flies in wide, horizontal circles high above the ground and regularly dives with its tailed fanned. With each dive, the outer tail feathers vibrate and create the tremolo effect. This signals other male snipe to stay away!

If you make an evening visit to damp, open habitats bordered by second-growth forest or wetland, you will also stand an excellent chance of hearing and seeing the American woodcock. In the twilight period after sunset, woodcock begin to make a loud, nasal "PEENT" sound. As darkness falls, the calls become more numerous until, all of a sudden, the bird takes off. As it gains altitude, its outer flight feathers begin to vibrate and produce a high twittering sound. When the bird begins its descent, the twittering is replaced by liquid, warbled notes that the woodcock actually sings. The warbling ends abruptly just before the bird lands. Upon landing, it walks stiff legged in the direction of the female and once again begins peenting. Woodcock often display in the dawn twilight, as well.

Although less abundant and far less predictable as to when and where you can hear them, owls also lend their voices to the sounds of early spring. In woodlots throughout central and southern Peterborough County, listen for the very deep, muffled, rhythmic hoots of the great horned owl. The mnemonic for remembering this song is "WHO'S AWAKE? ME, TOO." Southern Peterborough County is home to the eastern screech owl. They are often found in woodlots along the Indian, Ouse, and Otonabee rivers. The screech owl's most common song



The dark orange breast and black head of an American robin (top photo) indicate that this bird is a male; a male red-winged blackbird (above) and a male song sparrow in full voice (left).

in quite close to you in response to a tape recording of their call. My wife will never forgive me for one night at my brother's cottage when we ended up with more owl entertainment than we bargained for. We were sitting around a campfire late one evening when I decided to call in a barred owl that was hooting in the distance. The bird responded almost immediately to my tape and was soon perched above us in a maple, staring down with its big brown eyes. As it continued to call sporadically in the glare of the flashlight, we all enjoyed a great look at this beautiful bird. The show didn't stop there, however. Convinced that there was another male in its territory, the indignant owl continued to blast out its "WHO COOKS FOR YOU..." call every couple of minutes for the next two or three hours and managed to keep everyone awake half the night.

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is a rapidly-delivered series of notes descending in pitch and sounding like a horse's whinny. These small owls also deliver a similar sounding trill which stays on one pitch.

If you head north onto the Shield, the most common owl species is usually the barred owl. This species's song is higher-pitched than that of the great horned and much louder and emphatic. It sounds remarkably like "WHO-COOKS-FOR-YOU? WHO-COOKS-FOR-YOU-ALL?" The last note drops in pitch and is drawn out.

Both barred and screech owls will often fly