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LIVING

Identifying bird song

With the unseasonably warm weather of the past week, the freshness of new leaf has drawn a green veil upon our neighbourhoods and woodlands. Although the variety of birdlife is greater now than at any other time of year, the dense greenery can make seeing some species quite a challenge. To be fully aware of the bird diversity around us, we therefore need to depend on our ears even more than on our eyes.



OUR CHANGING SEASONS
Drew Monkman

In May and June, you will probably hear five or six times as many birds as you will see. However, with practice, they can all be identified by song. Recognizing the common bird songs not only provides a great deal of satisfaction but, at the same time, avoids the hard work of having to actually see the birds every time. Roger Tory Peterson, the father of modern ornithology and author of *A Field Guide to the Birds*, used to say that on a May morning, he would leisurely identify several dozen species before he even got up, simply by lying in bed with the window open.

However, memorizing bird song as pure sound is difficult. For most of us, including myself, it is much easier to convert the songs to a mnemonic — any device which serves to assist memory or memory aid. Fortunately, mnemonics for many species have already been established and are used by birders all over North America. For example, 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. However, you should also feel free to come up with your own gimmicks for remembering a song. If a bird sounds like a squeaky clothesline, write this mnemonic down in your field guide.

Actually tracking down and watching the bird while it sings is very important in "fixing" the song and mnemonic in your brain. Begin with those species that are most familiar and easy to see. In most of Peterborough, these will include the American robin, mourning dove, European starling, common grackle, black-capped chickadee, house finch, northern cardinal, house sparrow, chipping sparrow and song sparrow. When you have mastered these songs, you will be much more aware of the new and different bird voices you hear elsewhere — at the cottage, for example, or even in the city during migration.

To the practiced ear, a chorus of bird song is like a symphony in which you recognize each of the individual instruments. As a beginner, though, you should learn to focus on one song at a time and not the entire symphony, which can be quite overwhelming. Focus your attention first on the closest, loudest and most obvious songs. You can then move on to the softer voices or those coming from further away. Cupping your ears is a great aid to hearing quieter or more distant songs.

The many tapes, 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 the tapes in the car while driving to and home from work. Now, you can easily download the recordings onto an iPod or similar device and even practice while walking the dog or working in the garden.

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 the latter 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*, at www.learnbirdsongs.com/index.php

While recordings do provide a convenient means of practising your auditory skills, seeing and hearing the bird in the field provides



Karl Egnessy, special to The Examiner
Common bird voices of Peterborough: northern flicker (above left); house wren (far left); northern cardinal (left); American robin (below left); house sparrow (below); and a yellow warbler (above).

a lot more information. Let's take the red-eyed vireo as an example. You will see what the bird is actually doing while it sings (moving slowly from branch to branch), where it is singing from (high in a deciduous tree) and what habitat the bird is in (a woodland or densely treed neighbourhood). All of these are very useful clues to recognition.

The following mnemonics will help you to recognize 80 per cent of the songs and/or calls that you are likely to hear in urban and suburban areas of central Ontario. Some highly visible birds with simple calls have not been included in the list. These include the rock pigeon, American crow, barn swallow, tree swallow and ring-billed gull. Two species, the white-throated sparrow and dark-eyed junco, are only heard during spring migration. However, they often linger for several weeks and can be quite vocal.

American goldfinch: PO-TA-TO-CHIP! — this distinctive call is given on the uprise of the goldfinch's roller-coaster flight.

American robin: CHEERILY-CHEERY-CHEERILY-CHEER... — a series of short, sweet, musical whistles, rising and falling. Robins are especially vocal just before dawn.

Baltimore oriole: HERE-HERE-COME RIGHT HERE-DEAR — a flute-like, disjointed series of bright, slurred whistles. Listen also for harsh or raspy notes and a rattling chatter.

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 its harsh, descending "jaaay" scream.

Brown-headed cowbird: BUBBLE-BUBBLE-SEELEEEEE — several faint bubbling sounds followed by a long squeaky note.

Cedar waxwing: SREEEEE-SREEEEE-SREEEEE — an extremely high-pitched, hissy, non-musical whistle. It is weak sounding and does not carry far.

Chimney swift: CHIT-CHIT-CHIT-CHIT — an ultra-rapid burst of notes given as the birds fly overhead, usually in the downtown core.

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.

Common nighthawk: BEERZH-BEERZH — a sharp, nasal buzz usually heard as the bird flies high above the downtown in the evening.

Dark-eyed junco: a pleasant ringing trill, similar to the "sewing machine" sound of the chipping sparrow but more musical.

Eastern phoebe: FEE-BEEE — a very emphatic, two-note song with a raspy or burred second note. This bird is almost always found around buildings.

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

House wren: listen for a rapid, bubbling series of trills and rattles, both rising and descending. This bird can be a non-stop singer practically all day long.

Killdeer: KILL-DEEEER or KEE-DEE — a high, strident song, often given in flight.

Mourning dove: HOOO-AH-HOO-HOO-HOO — very slow and "mourning," could be mistaken for that of an owl.

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.

Northern flicker: FLICK-FLICK-FLICK-FLICK... — a single-note song given in a long, rapid series lasting up to 15 seconds.

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.

Red-winged blackbird: KON-KA-REEEEE — a harsh, gurgling song ending in a trill.

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.

White-breasted nuthatch: YANK-YANK-YANK — a nasal, slightly descending call.

White-throated sparrow: OH-SWEET-CANADA-CANADA-CANADA or simply CANADA-CANADA-CANADA — high, clear, whistled notes given in a slow, rhythmic pattern.

Yellow warbler: SWEET-SWEET-SWEET-I'M-SO-SWEET — clear, high, whistled notes that are rushed at the end of the song.

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 only one or two species. The context, along with the mnemonic, are the keys to making what might otherwise seem like extremely difficult acoustic identifications.

Being able to recognize bird song is one of the most satisfying ways to enjoy the natural world. To step out the back door or walk down a forest trail and hear the expected birds singing in the expected locations provides a reassurance that the bird community is healthy, and the seasonal rhythms of the natural world are occurring as they should.

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