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LIVING

Birdsong II

This week, to further improve our knowledge of bird song, we're going to go on a virtual field trip to three common habitat types in the Kawarthas: fields and roadsides, marshes, and woodlands. In each of these habitats, I will describe some of the bird songs you are most likely to hear and provide the mnemonic, or memory aid, for



remembering the bird's song. So, grab your binoculars and bird-song CD (for listening to in the car, of course) and let's go.

Fields and roadsides

OUR CHANGING SEASONS
Drew Monkman

This familiar, widespread habitat, such as found along Smith Centre Line (County Road 24) is home to many species, most of which are quite vocal. One of the first voices to grab your attention in and around fields is the eastern meadowlark's SPRING-OF-THE-YEAR song. The slow, clear, slurred whistle carries surprisingly far.

If you focus your attention on the more subtle songs, you will soon hear the ZIT-ZIT-ZIT-ZEEEEE-ZAAAY of the savannah sparrow. This common species sings a descending series of very high, fine buzzes and is usually perched on a fence post or wire.

You can't spend much time birding roadsides, either, before you hear the eastern kingbird's T-T-T-TSEEEP. This black and white bird sings a series of very high, sputtering, electric notes that end in a rasping buzz.

Be sure to listen, too, for an accelerating series of clear whistles, rising in pitch, and ending in a beautiful trill. This is the song of the field sparrow. The pattern can be likened to that of a ping-pong ball bouncing up and down on a table and speeding up as the bouncing stops.

In the larger meadows of long grass, the bobolink sings an exuberant, bubbling (boboling!) warble of very short notes that seem to almost trip over each other. Then, from overhead, you may soon hear the high, strident KEE-DEE of the killdeer.

In the same general habitat type, but coming from shrubby at the edge of a bordering woodland, sooner or later you'll be treated to the MAIDS MAIDS MAIDS PUT ON YOUR TEA KETTLE ETTLE ETTLE of the song sparrow. This song consists of a variable, complex series of notes that include a trill in the middle of the song.

Listen carefully, too, for the yellow warbler as it pours out its SWEET-SWEET-SWEET-I'M-SO-SWEET. The clear, high, whistled notes are rushed at the end of the song. Another warbler sharing this habitat is the chestnut-sided. Similar to the yellow warbler's song, the chestnut-sided sings a clear, musical PLEASED-PLEASED-PLEASED-TA-MEETCHA — with an emphatic ending.

One of the loudest songsters found in brushy, field habitat is the brown thrasher. Singing a series of rich, musical phrases, usually twice-repeated, the memory aid for this beautiful bird is DROP-IT, DROP-IT, COVER-IT-UP, COVER-IT-UP, PULL-IT-UP, PULL-IT-UP.

Where the shrubby becomes increasingly thick, the similar-sounding gray catbird may also turn up. Listen for the catbird's MEEEEEE-EW, a nasal, very catlike mew given in the middle of a loud, rambling, warbled song of disjointed notes. The catbird only sings each note once, whereas the



Karl Egressy, special to The Examiner

A brown thrasher (centre); inset photos, clockwise from top left, show a black and white warbler, a Virginia rail, an eastern meadowlark, a bobolink, a chestnut-sided warbler, an eastern kingbird and a common yellowthroat.



somewhat similar sounding thrasher tends to repeat each note a second time.

Finally, your attention may turn to a song emanating from the telephone wires or the dead, uppermost branches of a tree. It could easily be the FIRE-FIRE, WHERE-WHERE, THERE-THERE of the indigo bunting. The high, whistled phrases are almost always sung in couplets.

Marshes and other wetlands

Usually the first species you will hear when approaching a large, marshy area with cattails is the red-winged blackbird. Its loud, squeaky, rising song ends in a gurgling trill and is often described as KON-KA-REEEEEEEE. Another very common song of this same habitat is that of the swamp sparrow. Its SWEET-SWEET-SWEET-SWEET-SWEET-SWEET-SWEET is a slow, musical trill that belongs to the "sewing machine" group of

bird songs and is therefore similar to the song of the chipping sparrow.

Several warblers, too, frequent wetlands. One of the first you'll probably hear is the common yellowthroat. It sings one of the easiest warbler songs to learn. Listen for a loud, clear WITCHITY-WITCHITY-WITCHITY-WITCH, characterized by an up and down, rolling rhythm. Singing from the dense tree and shrub cover along wetland margins or from damp woodlands, the CHIP-CHIP-CHIP-WEET-WEET-WEET-CHEW-CHEW-CHEW of the northern waterthrush is another common warbler sound. The strikingly loud, emphatic notes drop in pitch at the end. The yellow warbler's SWEET-SWEET-SWEET-I'M-SO-SWEET is also a common song of wetland margins.

In large marshes such as the Miller Creek Conservation Area on the Seventh Line of Smith-Ennismore-Lakefield, the GULP-A-PUMP voice of the American bit-

tern adds an exotic touch to any outing. The deep, gulping song is not unlike the sound of an old water pump. The Virginia rail also calls from this same marsh. It makes hard, mechanical call notes that sound like KI-DIK, KI-DIK, KI-DIK.

If you spend any amount of time at a large marsh like Miller Creek, you will eventually hear the dry, clattering, non-musical rattle of the belted kingfisher. The call is almost always a given in flight. Other voices that are usually part of a wetland outing are the common grackle's GRACK-GRACK-KEEK-A-LEEK, the eastern kingbird's T-T-T-TSEEEP, and the tree swallow's liquid twittering.

Woodlands

The many roads and trails that wind through the widespread forest and woodland habitat of the Kawarthas - the Fourth Line of South Monaghan for example - are also excellent birding locales. An early morning walk in May or June

can be an almost overwhelming acoustic experience! One of the first songs you often hear is that of the veery. Its VER-VEER-VEER-VEER-VEER is a smooth, calming series of fluty, ethereal notes that spiral downward. Sharing the same habitat is the closely related wood thrush. Its EE-OH-LAYYYY also consists of rich, flute-like notes but ends in a buzzy trill.

The most abundant species of woodland habitat is usually the red-eyed vireo. Its short, robin-like phrases are repeated endlessly from the treetops, often throughout the entire day. Try to remember it as LOOK-UP, OVER-HERE, SEE-MEE, UP-HERE. Another robin-like woodland singer is the rose-breasted Grosbeak. Its CHEER-UP, CHEER-A-LEE, CHEER-EE-O is a melodic warble of whistled phrases that inspired one birder to liken the song to "a robin who has taken voice lessons." It's usually only a matter of time, too, until you hear the TCHE-BEK! of the least flycatcher. This dry, emphatic, two-note song is repeated rapidly. In French, this bird is actually called the "tchebec".

Warblers also add a wide assortment of acoustic contributions to the morning woodland chorus. The most common warbler is usually the ovenbird. Its easy-to-remember t-CHER-t-CHER-t-CHER-t-CHER-t-CHER! is a loud, ringing, series of two-syllable "teacher" notes repeated quickly and accented on the second syllable. Another fairly common song of inner forest habitat is the drawling, lazy, husky buzz of the black-throated blue warbler. The mnemonic for this species is the very apt I AM SO LAZ-EEEEEE.

In and around woodland margins, listen carefully for the WEE-ZEE, WEE-ZEE, WEE-ZEE of the black-and-white warbler. It sings a series of high, thin two-syllable phrases that sound like a bathtub squeaky toy. Another common denizen of this habitat is the great crested flycatcher. Its loud, clear rising WHEEP! is often repeated in a noisy series and, too me at least, sounds more like something you would expect to hear in the jungles of Africa!

In areas like Petroglyphs Provincial Park where coniferous trees such as spruce, hemlock and pine become more prevalent, you are likely to hear a rhythmic series of short buzzes. These belong to the black-throated green warbler. TREES-TREES-MURMURING-TREES is the mnemonic. In stands of white pine, the appropriately named pine warbler can be found. Another of the sewing machine singers, the pine warbler's song consists of a rapid trill of similar sounding notes. Finally, in damper areas and along wetland margins where conifers dominate, the beautiful OH SWEET CANADA, CANADA, CANADA of the white-throated sparrow is a fairly common song. Its high, clear, whistled notes are given in a slow, rhythmic pattern. For many people, the sound of this species is synonymous with Algonquin Park in early summer.

With practice in associating different bird songs with specific habitats, you'll soon be able to answer your friends when they ask "What bird is that...?" Your neck won't be aching, either, from trying to actually see every last bird moving about in the leaf-covered treetops. Identification for almost all species is just a matter of knowing the song.

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