

SOME WAYS TO REMEMBER BIRD SONGS AND CALLS

Jim Ayers

One or two people I've been lucky enough to go out birding with have asked me to write down some of the mnemonics or gimmicks I use in birding by ear. I guess they got tired of hearing me repeat these over and over ad infinitum ad nauseum in the field and thought I'd shut up once I wrote them down. Only time will tell.

Birding by ear is very important. In spring and summer the majority of bird identification begins or ends with songs and calls. Even if you aren't sure what you are hearing, you can know whether to chase down a bird or pass it off as just something ordinary. Is it really worth climbing that barbed-wire fence, or what? And, your eyesight might go before your hearing does. Did, in fact.

Learning bird sounds takes a long time. It can't be crammed in. You learn a few each year and gradually add it all up. The progression is more geometric than mathematical. The more you know, the faster you learn additional songs and calls. You build on what you know. You learn the yellow warbler's self-centered song first, then use it to recognize the laid back yellow-throated warbler. Tapes can be helpful but they aren't the answer. Experience in the field is the answer. Listen to the real thing. Watch the bird singing. When it comes to bird songs, birding field trips are usually more social than instructive. Bird with one or two people who seem to know more songs than you do.

Not everyone learns things the same way. One man's sonogram is another man's graffiti. Probably the best way to learn bird songs and calls is to be able to distinguish among the various qualities of sound of the individual species. I can only manage that in one or two cases and for certain groups of birds. This may come in handy where cardinals are concerned. But, imagine my chagrin when I first went to Costa Rica and discovered an entire family of woodcreepers that were dead ringers for northern cardinals! So, I have found that I need lots of help: gimmicks, mnemonics, divine intervention, etc.

After I wrote these down, I realized that a lot are things I have heard and read from the wisdom of others. In some cases, I remember the source and have mentioned it. But a lot has rubbed off and been ground in over time. I mean, "like a robin with a sore throat" or "a robin who took singing lessons"? Somebody said these first and they were so perfect they were repeated and repeated into anonymity.

These are things I use. They aren't always original.

Yellow-billed Cuckoo: A long series of "ku's", never grouped together.

Black-billed Cuckoo: Groups of 3-5 "ku's" in a rhythmic sequence.

Hairy Woodpecker: A kingfisher-like rattle. Note: a sharp "peen!!"

Downy Woodpecker: A rapid, descending whinny. Note: a weak "pick".

Crested Flycatcher: A whistled "wheep" or "creeep", sometimes ascending. Frequently given repeatedly or in a series.

Acadian Flycatcher: An explosive ascending "pizza", lots of ZA.

Least Flycatcher: A sharp, dry "che-bek". Lots of BEK.

Wood Pewee: Whistles its name, middle syllable slurs downward. Some times forgets its name and whistles "pee-o" only. Cooper's hawk whistles a similar "pee-o".

Olive-sided Flycatcher (non-breeder in Ro-Bot): Sings "whip-three-beers", middle note highest, last note slurring downward.

Brown Creeper (non-breeder): I've only heard it sing once or twice--a weak, clear "see-ti-wee-tu-wee". Note, a single long, thin "seeee", usually ascending, like a tiny, far-off tricycle bell. Quality like a Golden-crowned kinglet.

House Wren: A gurgling song ascending in the middle and descending at the end. I forget it every year until I hear it a couple of times with help from PS.

Winter Wren: I don't hear them much in spring but they sing sometimes in winter--a rapid trilling warble. Note, a wet "tsik" always given twice, like the sound you can make with your tongue against your upper front teeth. Also a bubbly gurgle all on one note.

Carolina Wren: A ringing, usually trisyllabic, song of "TEA-ket-tle, TEA-ket-tle, TEA-ket-tle, TEA" or "CHEESE-burg-er, CHEESE-burg-er, CHEESE-burg-er, CHEESE". Sometimes drops the final syllable. Note: a short, musical trill with the same quality as the song (PS calls it the "cheer" note). Has typical wren-like scold.

Catbird: A disjointed series of notes and phrases some of which are very musical. Notes not repeated like mocker or thrasher. Always, eventually, a distinctive catlike mew.

Brown Thrasher: A series of deliberate notes and short phrases, like a mocker or catbird but almost always repeats each note and phrase in pairs. MS and others recognize this song by its "quality".

Robin: A clear, whistled caroling of short 2 or 3 note phrases going on almost continuously. The caroling quality and length of song are my best (but not infallible) clues to distinguish it from vireos, tanagers and grosbeaks

Wood Thrush: Flute-like with a distinctive "ee-o-lay". Call, a rapid pip-pip-pip-pip". Song ends in an unmusical buzz heard only at close range.

Veery: A liquid, silvery, flutey whistle, tumbling downward. Once heard, never forgotten. Even at close range the song sounds far off. Two call notes: a "veer" note and a chip that sounds a bit like "view". Everything about this bird is ghost-like and ethereal.

Swainson's Thrush (non-breeder): Melodious, breezy, flutey phrases, tumbling upward--a veery in reverse.

Golden-crowned Kinglet (non-breeder): I've never heard one sing. Call note, a high, thin, creeper-like "see-see-see".

Ruby-crowned Kinglet (non-breeder): Another one that sneaks up on me. A beautiful, complex, bubbling song which RTP inscribes as "tee-tee-tee-tew-tew-tew-ti-dadee-ti-dadee" (well, it must have worked for him). I like to see this one to be sure it's what I think it is (or isn't).

Water Pipit (non-breeder): Gives a thin, repeated version of its name with the accent on the first syllable. I sometimes hear them in flight (they usually travel in flocks), watch them land and then identify them.

Cedar Waxwing: Okay. Some of us call this bird a "ceda-wa-wee" because its call is a high thin lispy "zeeee" (ask MD for an explanation--or just humor us).

White-eyed Vireo: More like a flycatcher sound than a vireo. An explosive "pick-up-the-beer-check". There are variations but most begin and end with a sharp "check" or "pick". Call note is this "check" or "pick". Sometimes does an un-nerving version of "whip-three-beers".

Yellow-throated Vireo: Song is a hoarse repetition of 4-5 slurred phrases one of which sounds like "three-eight" or "cherries" (BK). Also said to be something like red-eyed vireo but more musical, lower pitched and with a burr in the notes. The burr is a good clue.

Solitary Vireo/Red-eyed Vireo: I still can't accurately distinguish between these by song. It is humiliating.

Warbling Vireo: A descending, slightly hoarse warble with a snap upward at the end. Try, "squeeze-it-till-it-squirts" (PS). Also described as a hoarse purple finch with an upward turn at the end

Yellow Warbler: A rapid, bright "sweet-sweet-sweet-sweet-I'm-so-sweet". Similar to yellow-throated warbler but much faster and more emphatic. Important song for comparison to other warblers.

Yellow-throated Warbler: Very much like a slow yellow warbler, "sweet-sweet-sweet-sweet-ohhh-sooo-sweet". RTP says it's a series of clear slurred notes dropping slightly in pitch, "tee-ew, tew, tew, tew, tew, tew, wi" (last note picking up).

Black-and-white Warbler: A high thin "weese-weese-weese-weese-weese-weese" with the "see" note lower than the "wee".

Prothonotary Warbler: Emphatic, ringing "sweet-sweet-sweet-sweet-sweet" on one pitch. Quality of the yellow warbler.

Worm-eating Warbler: A dry, thin, insect-like, buzz or rattle. Weaker, thinner, faster and more insect-like than chipping sparrow. Habitat can be a fickle helper.

Golden-winged Warbler: The winged warblers are buzzers. Golden goes "beee-bzz-bzz" with the "bee" note slightly longer and higher than the "bzz's". Caution: the winged warblers sometimes sing each others songs (and sometimes get confused and hybridize!),

Blue-winged Warbler: Goes "beeee-bzzz" (inhale first syllable, exhale second syllable).

Tennessee Warbler (non-breeder): Song is in two parts, the first somewhat like black-and-white warbler's and second like a chipping sparrow that gets louder toward the end. RTP inscribes it "tzip-tzip-tzip-tzip-tzip-tzip, zitzitzitzizizizizi". Nashville is similar but doesn't get louder toward the end and doesn't sing as many times per minute as Tennessee. Quality is high and thin.

Nashville Warbler (non-breeder): Above is all I know. RTP inscribes it "seebit-seebit-seebit-seebit, titititititi".

Parula Warbler: Two songs! The most common is a buzzy trill which climbs the scale and snaps over at the top--an ascending buzzy trill ending in a hiccough. Parula also sings a song without the hiccough at the end which is reminiscent of cerulean warbler. Listen for the beginning notes of the song which are monosyllabic buzzes as opposed to the metered phrases of the opening of the cerulean song. RTP is very helpful here: Parula song #2: "zh-zh-zh-zheeeee". Cerulean song: "ziray-ziray-ziray-zireeeeeee".

Magnolia Warbler (non-breeder): Song's quality suggests yellow warbler but with a different message: "vini-vidi-vichi". RTP inscribes it "weeta-weeta-weetee" with the last note either rising or falling. Sometimes only four notes: "vidi-vichi" (personally experienced a lot in Highland County).

Cape May Warbler (non-breeder): A very high, thin "seet-seet-seet-seet". I can't tell it from a bay-breasted warbler.

Black-throated-blue Warbler: A buzzy, ascending "zur-zur-zur-zuree" or "I-am-laz-y". Frequently sings one note shorter, "I'm-laz-y". It is a lazy song compared to cousin black-throated-green warbler.

Yellow-rumped Warbler (non-breeder): This one's important because so many are still here and singing when the migrants and local breeders arrive. Song is a weak, soft trill reminiscent of a junco but tending to rise and fall in pitch. Note: a loud, "check".

Black-throated-green Warbler: RTP says it best: a lisping, dreamy "zoo-zee-zoo-zoo-zee" or "zee-zee-zee-zoo-zee", the "zee" note on same pitch, the "zoo" notes lower. Much more energetic than cousin blue.

Cerulean Warbler: Rapid, buzzy notes on same pitch followed by a longer note on a higher pitch. Several two syllable buzzes ending in a sneeze: "ziray-ziray-ziray-ziray-zreeeee". (See also parula warbler).

Blackburnian Warbler: Old Firethroat sings a lot like a Nashville: "tizip-tizip-tizip-tizip-zizizizizizizi" but the end note is slurred and so high and thin that some can't hear it. It's almost an electrical sound. Whenever I hear something that sounds like a Nashville or a Tennessee, I know to look for one of them--or Old Firethroat! (It gets a bit easier in June when the Grand Old Opry moves on out of here.)

Chestnut-sided Warbler: The Beecher bird. Quality of a yellow warbler but says, "please-please-please-ta-meetcha" (last note descending abruptly). Or, "I-wish-to-see-Miss-Beecher". There is an aggravating variation which lacks the "Beecher" ending, usually encountered later in summer (post breeding lethargy?).

Bay-breasted Warbler (non-breeder): RTP says, " a high sibilant 'teesi-teesi-teesi' ". Resembles black-and-white but thinner, shorter, and more on one pitch. I can't tell it from a Cape May.

Blackpoll Warbler (non-breeder): A dry, thin, mechanical, "si-si-si-si-si-si-si" on one pitch, louder in the middle and soft on either end.

Pine Warbler: A trill, like a chipping sparrow but looser, more musical, softer and a bit slower. MP says it has the quality of "loose watch parts".

Prairie Warbler: A thin buzzy "zee-zee-zee-zee-zee-zee-zee" ascending the musical scale. Parula and cerulean buzz up at the end but prairie ascends a step with each note. Habitat's a good clue.

Palm Warbler (non-breeder): Heard him for the first time last spring. It's a weak, sort of sissy version of the chipping sparrow, "thi-thi-thi-thi. . .".

Ovenbird: This is the teacher bird, "cher-TEA-cher-TEA-cher-TEA-cher-TEA-cher-TEA-cher-TEA-cher with the accent always on the "TEA" syllable.

Northern Waterthrush (non-breeder): Another one that can trip me up every year. RTP inscribes it, "sweet-sweet-sweet-chew-chew-chew" but I've mistaken it for Swainson's Warbler and Louisiana Waterthrush, among others.

Louisiana Waterthrush: This one's easier, when it sings its proper song. Three clear, slurred whistles followed by a jumble of twittering notes dropping in pitch. There are other variations, especially early in the spring.

Kentucky Warbler: Similar to Carolina wren but less musical and bisyllabic rather than trisyllabic. A rapid, rolling chant of "churry-churry-churry-churry" or in honor of El Rey de los Pajareros, "tory-tory-tory-tory". A musical ovenbird that doesn't get louder in the middle of the song. MS hears it as, "boing-boing-boing-boing".

Common Yellowthroat: This one says, "witchity-witchity-witchity-witch", usually with a southern accent. Note: a loud husky "tchep". Has a wren-like scold.

Yellow-breasted Chat: An amazing alternation of caws, whistles, grunts and rattles. An odd song made up of cleared repeated whistles, alternated with harsh notes and soft crow-like caws. Single notes, such as "whoit" and "kook" are distinctive. Occasionally tries to be a mimic.

Hooded Warbler: A loud, whistled "weeta-wee-tee-o". Penultimate note higher.

Canada Warbler: A jumble of emphatic musical notes, no two on same pitch but almost always ends and sometimes begins with a sharp "chick" or "wip".

American Redstart: At least three songs! RTP suggests, "tsee-tsee-tsee-tsee-tsee-tsee" (last note higher); "tsee-tsee-tsee-tsee-tsee-tsee-o" (with drop on last note); "teetsa-teetsa-teetsa-teetsa-teet". I've chased a many and I'll chase a many more.

Scarlet Tanager: Five (sometimes 4 or 7) short nasal phrases (like a Robin with a sore throat). To me it has a vireo quality. Note: "chip-burr".

Rose-breasted Grosbeak: Carols like a robin who took singing lessons. Each song contains somewhere within it a phrase that PS has convinced me sounds like "whip-or-will". It works for me. Note, a sharp, metallic "keek". MD says it's like the sound of a knife stabbing a block of styrofoam!

Blue Grosbeak: This one took me a long time. It's a cross between an indigo bunting and a purple finch. Lately, I've recognized it as a short house finch song with raspiness throughout.

Indigo Bunting: "Fire-fire-where-where-there-there-see-it-see-it (GM). To save yourself a lot of frustration, try to learn this one. You'll soon know what I mean.

Purple Finch (non-breeder): A fast, long, rich warbling of clear notes.

House Finch: Like the purple but toward the end of each song there is a raspy, harsh note that gives it away for the gate-crasher it really is.

American Goldfinch: Song has many variations which all consist of long, clear, light and canary-like notes usually identifying itself somewhere with a cat-like mew note. Note in flight is "per-chik-o-ree" or "pa-ta-to-chip".

Four-sided Towhee: Formerly called the Chewink for its call note. The song is "drink-your-teeeeeeeee", but there are some variations which omit the first two notes or the last.

Dark-eyed Junco: A loose, quavering trill similar to a chippy but slower and more musical, thinner, softer and higher than pine warbler. Note, "click", also high, soft twittering notes--almost electronic in quality.

Chipping Sparrow: A dry, chipping rattle or trill all on one pitch. To me the term dry means without musical quality, not like MP's "loose watch parts".

White-crowned Sparrow (non-breeder): Begins with a clear, plaintive whistle like a white-throat but ends in a husky buzz that ascends almost out of hearing.

White-throated Sparrow (non-breeder): The Peabody bird. A clear, plaintive, almost apologetic whistle that can be interpreted, "Old-Sam-Pea-body-Pea-body-Pea-body" or "Sow-wheat-Sam-Pea-body-Pea-body-Pea-body".

Song Sparrow: "Hip-hip-hip-its-sprinnnnnnnnnnnnnnng!"

JIM
AYERS
Springs
1989-1990
Reviewed
1998

GM (Gene Moore)
BK (Barry Kinzie)
MD (Mike Donahue)
MP (Mike Purdy)
MS (Mike Smith)
RTP (Roger Tory Peterson)
PS (Peggy Speigel)

I've left out a lot of birds for different reasons. Some I don't hear often enough to know, some I can't explain how to recognize, some I just don't have anything to say about. I mean a whip's a whip and a chuck's a chuck and that's all there is to that. And how do you explain the difference between the "peent" of a woodcock and a nighthawk? You can hear the difference, but. . . ? Likewise with flickers and pileated woodpeckers. And I can't for the life of me describe the beautiful sound of a red-bellied woodpecker in spring and how it's different in winter, or the call of the raven which is at the same time majestic and comical. I also can't describe the sounds of bluebirds, field sparrows or swallows. Ducks? Hawks? Gulls? Terns? Turkeys (is it man or grouse)?

The owls take care of themselves and I gleefully leave the peeps and 'pipes and waders to the Mikes.

I also realized that most of these birds have one thing in common. They are neo-tropical migrants--species who winter as far south of us as Mexico, Central America, South America, and come to North America to breed. These birds are in peril. Their numbers are declining because of habitat destruction in both their wintering and breeding grounds. I realize that they are my favorite birds, the ones I know the best. I hope they last longer than I do. But will they be around for Sarah Donahue and Rachel Hunley?

SOME ADDITIONS

Tufted Titmouse: "PEE-ter-PEE-ter-PEE-ter-PEE-ter. . ." The quality changes a lot in the spring and becomes more flute-like and sweeter. Has a raucous scold, somewhat wren-like, and makes numerous calls and squeaks similar to the chickadees it frequently hangs out with.

Baltimore Oriole: RTP says, "a series of rich, piping, whistled notes". I usually recognize the oriole quality and listen more attentively to see if it's Baltimore or orchard.

Orchard Oriole: Goes on longer than the northern--a little like a loud purple finch--has a characteristic slurring of phrases and includes a guttural or raspy note here and there as "calling" card.

Field Sparrow: A high tee-tee-tee-tee, etc. that starts slow and speeds up toward the end--like a ping-pong ball dropped on the table.

starling: Who cares? But beware of their excellence as mimics of wood pewees and bobwhite in particular.