

An Educator's Guide to the Language of Birds

by Rebecca F. Coulter

Finding hidden birds is an important skill in birding, but it can be frustrating for young children. Kids, however, can be great at listening to birds and understanding bird language, often picking out sounds that some adults may miss. By hearing a bird first, we can often learn how and where to see it!



Bill Bouton

Western Meadowlark

Birds communicate with one another in a variety of ways, and they also can serve as an alarm system for wildlife in an area. With practice, humans can learn to interpret this bird language.

One of the best ways to begin learning is to choose an outdoor location where you can observe birds regularly—a quiet spot in your neighborhood. Visit that same spot frequently and observe for at least a half hour, alternating between 10 minutes of stillness and 5 minutes of talking quietly about what you heard. When we become very still and quiet, we become “tuned in” to sounds we don’t normally notice.

Make a list of different sounds—think of words or other sounds that describe them. “Tweet” and “chirp” just don’t say it all; a Red-shouldered Hawk shrieks “Keer, Keer, Keer” as it flies through the woods or your neighborhood; a Lesser Goldfinch sounds like a kitten meowing.



Lynn Watson

Lesser Goldfinch



Dieter J. Schaefer

Red-shouldered Hawk

There are also non-vocal bird sounds to listen for: leaf-scratching, branches moving, or water splashing.

The first step is to recognize the differences between the normal types of bird communication. Most bird sounds can be categorized into one of five major categories:

1. Song

Most bird song is heard only in the spring and summer (though some birds sing all year long and some all night long!). Songs are generally longer vocalizations and often include a variety of notes in a sequence. The song is used mostly by males to attract a mate and also to establish and defend territory. The song can indicate to another bird, “This is my area. Stay out.” Birds with the most accomplished songs are most likely to attract mates. Young birds even practice songs before they reach breeding age, refining their notes and phrases with often funny results.



Dave Furseth

Bewick's Wren

2. The Companion Call

Call notes are short communications, often single notes, sometimes referred to as “chip” notes. They are generally used between mates or members of a flock to signal each other’s whereabouts. These notes are commonly used when a group of birds is traveling and/or feeding together.

An easy bird to listen to is the California Towhee.



Tom Gray

California Towhee

These birds feed on the ground in pairs and regularly call back and



forth with a loud “chink.” House Finches also call regularly to each other. If companion calls are interrupted and irregular due to your intrusion, the wildlife in the area will listen and react, usually by hiding. Learning not to disturb birds will make other wildlife easier to see.



House Finch

Chris Taylor

5. Alarm Call

When a bird has identified a potential danger, such as a predator or intruder on the landscape, it sometimes voices an alarm call. This is the type of bird sound that can tell us when and where there is an animal hidden in the landscape. These calls are often short and can be louder and/or higher in pitch than companion calls. It could be described as the difference between saying, “hey” and “HEY!!!” This is often followed by nearby birds stopping their normal activity and flying up to perches to gather information about where and what kind of danger might be present.

3. Aggression

Birds often compete for territory, mates, and food sources. It is quite common for two individuals of the same species to trade aggressive call notes back and forth, perform posturing, and even chase one another. Anna’s Hummingbirds are very aggressive and fun to watch because they are so vocal. While these aggression calls can sound violent, they are yet another form of normal behavior. Aggression calls often sound like a very intense or repeated version of a companion call.



Anna’s Hummingbird (male)

Larry Friesen

One of the most effective bird alarm systems is used by the Bushtit. They travel through the trees and shrubs feeding in loose flocks, accompanied by other birds. If a predatory bird flies through the trees, the Bushtits set up a high-pitched repetitive alarm call, different from any other calls they make, which is a great warning for all birds in an area. When you learn to recognize this call, stop and look around; nine times out of ten you will find a nearby hawk or owl.



Bushtit

Larry Friesen

4. Juvenile Begging

Baby birds in a nest will make a racket as they beg for food, becoming silent when the parent leaves. But even after young birds have fledged and left the nest, they will often follow the adults around while making distressed calls to beg for food. Though these calls sound urgent, they still represent normal behavior, as there is no imminent danger being communicated. Often these calls are accompanied by wing fluttering and bowing of the head, which makes the juveniles even more obvious to predators.



Bill Bouton

Human intruders can also set off the alarm if our movement is sudden and loud. If you are quiet and move slowly or not at all, the birds will decide you are not a danger and continue with their activities. The presence of bird-eating hawks and owls can often be detected by the raucous and constant calls of many species of birds in a small area, as they “mob” the predators. Crows and jays are known for this type of intense mobbing behavior—sometimes accompanied by repeatedly flying near the hawk or owl—so always remember to stop and observe if you see and hear this activity.



Warbling Vireo

Bill Bouton

Becoming Invisible

Notice what happens when you go into a wooded area.



Many of the birds will fly high into the trees and stop their normal behavior. They are watching you, judging whether or not you are a threat. Once the bird learns that you are not a threat, it will resume its activities.

Learn to walk invisibly in the woods, quietly and slowly, pausing often to listen to what is all around you. A birding walk is often more stopping than walking! By learning to listen to all types of bird sounds, you'll see more of them—and other wild creatures, too.

Resource:

Cornell Lab of Ornithology: One of the best sources for bird information, identification, and sounds.

Go to the web site at
<http://www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/>



Dave Furseth

Common Yellowthroat

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Bill Bouton
Larry Friesen
Dave Furseth
Dieter J. Schaefer
Chris Taylor
Lynn Watson

