



Bird Notes

From Northeast Kingdom Audubon
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For Immediate Release

Why Do Birds Sing?

Just think of what bird songs have done for us. The sounds of birds help us find and identify them. They inspire familiar melodies (see below) or comical paraphrases (anybody know, “Drink you teaeeee”?). They give us sonograms (nobody can really read these). Their power adds to the loveliness and interest in the natural world. And don’t forget the wonderful bird song clocks we have received or given as presents. But what do the songs do for the birds?

First of all “songs” take on many forms, from drumming on trees, flapping wings, guttural croaks and caws, amazing nasal sounds, to melodious frequencies sometimes out of our range. There are birds that are actually referred to as True Songbirds, but of course all the other birds share the same purpose of sound making. They all say, “Here I am!” Just think of those penguins calling out amongst the hordes! Unbelievable.

Yes, there is a time and place for everything, especially with bird songs. Males primarily deliver the tune at certain times of the year and in certain places. In the beginning of a bird’s nesting cycle, the sounds help the birds define their territory and attract mates. Woodpeckers start all this very early in the New Year with noticeable drumming. Some birds, like black-capped chickadees sing one song in winter and another in early spring. Researchers found that city chickadees near loud traffic pitch their songs at higher frequencies than do birds in quiet neighborhoods. Some young female songsters develop a less prominent “subsong”, but not a primary song. Girls just want to sing, something. Did you know that some birds while sitting contentedly on the nest will sing a soft, muted “whisper” song? Both males and females may sing these songs from trees, shrubbery and other cover. A little nest music?

Early morning is the best time to be serenaded, but also listen in the late afternoon; both periods are the loveliest times of day. But you can be delighted with the evening crooners as well. A mockingbird or whip-poor-will perched on a roof peak can definitely interrupt one’s sleep. Owls of course are the best known nighttime vocalists.

So many devices and programs are available to help you recognize the songs; I could not begin to cover the list. As usual, I think of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology store as a place to begin (www.birds.cornell.edu). But more than that, the best thing is to get up early and just go for a walk and enjoy the minstrels.

Do you recognize this song? You can hear it played at this interesting website: Birds Songs in Musical Notation, <http://www.math.sunysb.edu/~tony/birds/music/hermitA.html>

Hermit Thrush 98Gf1

Bird sings 3 octaves higher and at tempo 1/4=600.



Happy Birding!

Carolyn E. Boardman is a member of NEK Audubon living in Brownington, Vermont. NEK Audubon is one of 8 chapters of Audubon Vermont and part of the National Audubon Society. NEK Audubon is a non-profit organization that encourages people’s enjoyment of birds, wildlife and natural habitats through field trips, programs and publications. For more information about meetings, field trips and special events, visit www.nekaudubon.org.
Art work by Robin Rothman.