



ALABAMA AUDUBON

De-Coding Bird Vocalizations

Try to put the bird sounds you hear into manageable categories. Listen carefully to the content and the quality of the sound the bird makes. Now ask yourself questions:

First, make it easy on yourself. Does the vocalization seem to “say” the bird’s name. Many do. It was the easiest way to name a new species in the field. Our first category is name-sayers. So is the bird a Phoebe, a Chickadee, a Towhee, a Bobwhite, a Pewee, A Whip-poor-will, a Killdeer, etc.?

Is it one of the distinctly non-musical birds, such as the woodpeckers and the Belted kingfisher, with their woody or metallic rattles and whinnies?

Is the bird a mimic? That is, does it seem to run through a selection of random calls that are similar to several (other) birds? If so, it’s likely one of the mimic thrushes. Catbirds seldom repeat songs in the list, and punctuate the phrases with occasional coarse mewing notes. Brown thrashers typically do a series of chirpy couplets, and Mockingbirds often repeat songs three or more times before moving on.

Now, with those out of the way, describe the vocalization. Is it:

- ✓ Simple – one, two, or three notes? If so, how many?

- ✓ A trill? Does it rise or fall in pitch, or change speed? Is it musical, mechanical, woody, or metallic?

- ✓ Is the song whistled?

- ✓ Is it sung?

- ✓ Is it harsh or buzzy?

- ✓ How about the tone – is it thin, flutey, nasal, wheezy...

- ✓ And the pitch – low or high?

- ✓ Would you call the sound “guttural?”

- ✓ Does it “say” anything to you – might there be a mnemonic device to decipher the song?

- ✓ On more complex vocalizations, are there introductory notes, a “tic” of some sort within the song, or a notable ending?

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