



ALABAMA AUDUBON

Birding by Ear: Mimics and Name-Sayers

Mimics: *Birds that imitate the songs or calls of other species. The “tell” on these birds is whether and how many times they repeat the songs they sing before moving on to the next imitation.*

Grey catbird – Labored, squeaky renditions of snippets of other birds' songs. Sings as if under duress. Listen for two characteristics: Catbirds seldom if ever repeat the snippets, and they often insert the “meeow” call that gives them their name. So...Catbirds sing once, then move on.

Brown thrasher – Bright, chirpy, cheerful, enthusiastic versions of other birds' songs. Brown thrashers' vocalizations are characterized by the dominance of couplets – they sing most of their snippets twice – “Drop-it...drop-it...pick-it-up...pick-it-up...put-it-down...put-it-down...where...where...” And the call note is a ringing; “Smack.” So...thrashers sing things twice.

Northern mockingbird – Here we go...Mockingbirds are...tireless singers, through most months of the year, all day long, and sometimes...often...even at night. Pretty decent mimics, they are indefatigable. They sing each phrase time and time and time again. So...if the bird imitates other species' songs, and typically sings each phrase three or more times, it's a Mockingbird.

Name-Sayers: *Birds whose names derive from their song or call, or sometimes from what the song sounds like. Some names require a healthy dose of...imagination to discern, but they're in there.*

Northern bobwhite. Clear, whistled. A no-doubter.

Clapper rail – Requires a little latitude. “Kack-kack-kack-kack-kack.” And they sometimes respond to clapping.

Killdeer – The vocalization in question is generally heard in flight or as an alarm call.

Cuckoos – Yellow-billed occasionally says; “coo,” and Black-billed typically calls; “coo-coo-coo-coo.”

Saw-whet owl – A soft, toneless repeated whistle; “too-toot-toot-toot-toot,” like someone sharpening a saw.

Northern flicker – One of the calls is; “wicka-wicka-wicka-wicka.”

Eastern wood-pewee – A looping, slurred, whistled; “pee-a-wee.”

Eastern phoebe – A buzzy, nasal; “fee-bee; fee-be-be.”

Blue jay – It's actually one of their minor, secondary calls – a screamed; “jay...jay.”

Carolina chickadee – Often repeats the last bit – “chick-a-dee-dee-dee. Black-capped doesn't repeat that.

Veery – Song is a repeated series of: “veer-y” notes, descending in tone.

Grey catbird – Call is a grating, drawn-out; “meeow.”

American pipit – Flight call is; “pip-it, pip-it.”

Yellow-breasted chat – One of the myriad horrific or rude noises is a; “meow.” “Chat” is French for “cat.”

Eastern towhee – Says; Che-wink, tow-HEEE.” Or “Drink-your-tea.” If it's the first one, voila.

Chipping sparrow – I know. They all do. But this one's song is a rapid, mechanical series of “chip” notes.

Grasshopper sparrow – Named for its insect-like buzzy song; “tick-tack-toe—bzzzzzzzz.”



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Dickcissel – A sharp, guttural call that says; “dick...dick-dick...cissel-cissel-cissel.

Bobolink – A notchy, electro-mechanical -song that begins with; “bob-o-link-link-link...plink, plank, plunk.

Whip-poor-will – Says its name. Sings like a metronome, swinging back and forth and back and forth and back...In the; 'whip-poor-will:,"song, the notes are slurred, the accent/emphasis is one the “WILL,” and the final note goes UP in pitch.

Chuck-will's-widow – Says its name, too. But the song is staccato, percussive, and the final note tails off, going DOWN in pitch.