



ALABAMA AUDUBON

## **Birding by Ear: The Robin Song Family**

This song family is comprised of birds whose songs incorporate a series of short phrases, and those phrases are typically two- or three- notes in duration. The phrases often have a “tumbling” quality. Learn the Robin and the Red-eye-vireo – our touchstones, or points of departure for this group of singers. Learn their tones, and their delivery of the songs, and then compare the other birds in the group, using the differences to sort out the various species.

**American robin** – Flutey tone, with the individual notes are clearly enunciated, and the two- and three-note phrases are clearly separated. It’s a cheerful song and it says so, with a repeated; ”Cheer-a-lee, cheer-up, cheer-up, cheer-a-lee-sweee,” The distinguishing characteristics are the flutey, almost-thrush-like tone, and the distinctive single aspirated single-syllable note that the bird periodically inserts in the song. And the bird takes its time, too – it never sounds rushed, but sings as if it has nothing else to do all day. Common all year.

**Summer tanager** – Like a Robin with a sore throat. The song is less musical than the Robin’s; it’s harsh, burry, and sounds a bit distorted. There is never an aspirated single note. But the similarity to the Robin is that the tumbling 2- and 3-note phrases remain, and those phrases are clearly separated from one another. This tanager sings in a businesslike manner – it’s not particularly musical or sweet, but it doesn’t so terribly rushed. A breeder in all substantial woodlands throughout the state.

**Scarlet tanager** – Like a Robin that’s been hit in the throat. The song is based on the Robin’s, but now it’s rushed; it’s blurted out in a hurry, as though on a deadline. The duration of the song is shorter than the Robin or the Summer tanager. Listen carefully – you can no longer pick out the individual notes in the phrases, and the phrases bleed into one another. “Bree-Brah-Brew-Bruh”.....”Bree-Brah-Brew-Bruh.” An uncommon to fairly-common breeding bird in the northern half of Alabama, most common at higher elevations.

**Rose-breasted grosbeak** – A superb singer, like a Robin who’s had voice lessons. An utterly beguiling singer, the RBGB’s song is sung in a long series of tumbling Robin-like phrases, but now with vibrato and voluna and tone modulation. It intersperses the occasional whistle, squeak, or (especially) soft purrs (as though it’s please with itself) as it sings. And listen for the characteristic call note – a squeak, like sneakers on a gym floor – that it will sometimes drop into the song. A pure migrant in Alabama, but a frequent singer while present in late April and early May.

**Red-eyed vireo** – The well-known “Preacher bird.” A tireless singer of hardwood and mixed hardwood-and-pine forest throughout the state. Listen for the thin, chirpy, nasal 2- and 3-note phrases; “look-at-me...way-up-high...in-a-tree...see?” So common, so widespread, and so enthusiastic a singer that a vireo singing these phrases is assumed to be a Red-eyed vireo until proven otherwise.

**Blue-headed vireo** – This song is like the Red-eyed’s but the individual notes are typically less distinct, and the phrases slur from one to the next, whereas the Red-eyed vireo is more chirpy and choppy. This is a very uncommon breeder from scattered locations on the northern half of Alabama, and it sometimes sings in winter, when it is most common in the southern parts of the state.

**Philadelphia vireo** – Sings a song almost identical to that of the Red-eyed vireo, but the Philadelphia vireo’s song is higher-pitched and slower. This is purely a migrant through Alabama, and is not an especially enthusiastic singer, though they may possibly be heard singing as they pass through the state in April and early May.

**Yellow-throated vireo** – The Yellow-throated vireo sings a pair of widely-separated two-note phrases. The first phrase ends on a note that rises in tone; the second phrase end on a descending note. Basically, it asks a question, pauses, then (slowly and eventually) answers it. “Three-eight? ----- pause ---- Three-eight.” The notes are loud and burry – not at all melodic. This is an uncommon breeding species of hardwood forests near water throughout the state.