

## Bird Notes *By Patrick Fawkes*

On May 30, a dozen people met at the entrance to Central Park to listen to bird songs and try to identify the singers. After a brief introduction, Jenny Balke asked who could identify five or more songs; they would go with me and the others with Jenny. It was 8:30 in the morning, still a good time to hear a variety of birds. The best time is to listen to the dawn chorus which starts at least an hour before sunrise. No-one was interested in doing that!

We started up Pickles Road Trail, then turned onto Graveyard Marsh Trail. Several American Robins were singing. This was a good start because we could compare some of the other songs, such as the Swainson's Thrush and Western Tanager to the robin's song which is often taken as the starting point for learning songs. I used to think the swainson's evening song was a robin singing: now I know that the swainson's song is more liquid than the robin's, and it spirals upwards at the end.

Sibley, in his *Birding Basics* book says the robin's *eetalo, ooti, ooti, eetalo* series of phrases are clearly separated from one another by a long pause, whereas the tanager sings a shorter series of phrases run together with almost no pause. The tanager frequently utters a *pit-ick* call, often before or as part of song. The female tanager's song is more hasty and often more repetitious.

All birds, except vultures, have a syrinx, their vocal organ. In songbirds the syrinx is at the junction of the two bronchi (air passages) from the lungs, and each side of the syrinx can be used separately. Ronald Kroodsma's book, *The Singing Life of Birds*, shows a sonogram (a picture of sound frequency or pitch versus time, like a musical score for birdsong) showing a Brown Thrasher, a master songster, singing different notes on each side simultaneously. Kroodsma also shows a sonogram of a young robin practising his song in winter, singing different songs on each side of the syrinx simultaneously. Sonograms can tell so much about what a bird is singing: Kroodsma's books are full of them. I don't have space to get into discussing them here though.

The Swainson's Thrush is probably also singing different notes on each side of the syrinx to produce the intricate, liquid song we hear.

Back to the Central Park walk:

We heard Warbling Vireos everywhere: hard to describe it to someone who's not heard it before.

There's no mnemonics, i.e. words like *witchity-witchity-witchity* for the Common Yellowthroat, to describe the vireo's song – it is simply a warbling song!

Continuing our walk we came to an open space in the trees and heard *three-beer* or *fitz-bew*, a Willow Flycatcher. For anyone who knows that song, the mnemonics are a useful reminder of who the singer is. This song is innate, not a learnt song like other songbirds. Kroodsma, writes: "Some 60 to 80 million years ago, a special lineage of birds split into two, one became the songbirds (oscines) the other to become the flycatchers and the sub-oscine relatives, such as woodcreepers, antbirds and their relatives of the New World Tropics. The songbirds like the sparrow, chickadee, yellowthroat etc., must learn their songs; the youngsters memorize the adult songs and then babble to match their singing to their memories. But for flycatchers and other sub-oscines, their songs are not learned but rather encoded in their genetic material".

It was cold and misty when we arrived at the Boardwalk. A House Wren was singing vigorously high in a dead tree it had nested in a few years ago. A Pacific Slope Flycatcher sang in a tall maple tree across the marsh.

Other species we had heard on our walk were Black-throated Gray Warbler, Song Sparrow and Spotted Towhee. I don't remember if we heard a Dark-eyed Junco.

By this time the group was getting tired of trying to memorize more bird songs(!), so we continued up the Beaufort View Trail planning to take a shorter way back. Walking through an open area of low salal, someone said "not much happening here", while I was thinking it was a good place for a White-crowned Sparrow, whereupon one flew up and gave its plaintive song! Two people with binoculars were looking at a bird in a small fir tree closely. "What would a bright yellow bird with a back head be?" An American Goldfinch came to my mind but it only has a black cap. I asked Steve Carballeira to bring up a MacGillivray's Warbler on his iphone with an ibird app.

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"That's it" said the person with the binocs (apologies to the person for not remembering her name). MacGillivray's has yellowish underparts and an almost black head in the male, the female has a gray head. It did not sing.

We walked back briskly, talking, without noticing birds' songs – we were doing a "bird plow", a word used by Jon Young in his book *What The Robin Knows*, to describe the rather careless walking we sometimes do, and frighten all the birds away! If you want to get into learning the various bird calls, this is a fascinating, if intimidating book when I realize how little I know what birds are saying.

On June 30<sup>th</sup> I decided to get up before sunrise to hear the dawn chorus. I set my alarm for 4:00 a.m., an hour before sunrise at 5:15 a.m. Waking abruptly in the dark, I dressed quickly and crept downstairs so as not to disturb Jane or the dog, and went out the back door. It was totally quiet – good, I'll be able to hear the introduction to the chorus as each bird starts to sing. I had an old microcassette recorder to record my comments of what I heard, as I wouldn't be recording the songs. I prepped my recorder: "June 10, 2015, time . . . 1:25 a.m.." "What the hell am I doing out here at this time, it's supposed to be 4:00 a.m.!" I went back to bed for a couple of hours. When I stepped out the back door again, at 4:10 a.m., the chorus was well under way, American Robins almost drowning out other birds' songs and calls. I heard Violet-green Swallows twittering as they flew around just above the alder trees, but I couldn't see them. I found it hard to believe that they could see where they all were. I had the same experience once before when they occasionally flew down around me, I couldn't see them but could feel the rushing air as they passed. These pre-dawn flights are thought to be part of courtship displays: was this a game of "chicken" seeing how fast they could fly close to the treetops or to each other?

I walked down through the apple orchard. At least four robins were singing over towards our neighbour's recently mown field. There were probably plenty of bugs to feast on, so no need to carve up the territory to defend a portion when food was so abundant. I heard a very clear, plaintive song of a White-crowned Sparrow (one of my favourite songs at this time of year; a Swainson's Thrush; the buzzing trill of a Spotted Towhee; an explosive *pichew* or *fitz-pew* of a Willow Flycatcher. The list goes on.

All these mnemonics are to remind me what the songs or calls sounded like – most of them I make up, some are in books. I hear the towhee again singing a clear trill. No, it's a junco, the trill is more musical than the towhee's. I can see it singing from the top of a post; it sings a few phrases then jumps up several inches, lands on the post and sings some more, repeating this acrobatic feat several times. There must be a female near for the male to put on this

performance. The song is interesting for me because I've been assuming it was coming from a towhee. I learn something every day.

4:32 a.m. and getting lighter. An Orange-crowned warbler sings a clear buzzy song that goes down at the end; that distinguishes it from the harsher Chipping Sparrow's buzz.

By 5:00 a.m. I'm losing interest! I have heard 12 species of birds and about 60 individual birds. That's enough for one session.

I must do this pre-dawn chorus walkabout with my microphone in a parabolic reflector, and a better recorder. A few years ago I did that. This is how I described it in a *Flagstone* article: With headphones on, I plug the recorder into the microphone and switch on . . . suddenly I'm in a different world, the world of birds. I'm amongst a loud twittering of Violet-green swallows, flying in and out of the alder trees in the dim light before dawn; I feel the energy and excitement in the air as they catch a fresh crop of insects . . . this is a wonderful way to listen to bird vocalizations – it focuses the sound right into your ears (and brain), and often I hear a sound I hadn't noticed before.

If what I have written doesn't help in learning birds' songs, start again, with the robin. Make sure you know all the nuances of its song – and some of the calls too. Listen, listen to the silence between the songs, and train your ears to hear like a deer (says Jon Young): see how it turns its ears, its microphones, towards you.

Then pick a different bird and listen carefully to its song, and enjoy the music.