

Bird Communication

By Dr. Leonard Lee Rue III

In the spring, when we hear a bird pour forth its beautiful song, many folks assume the bird sings because it is happy and appreciates the spring as much as we do. Perhaps it does. I'm sure that the birds appreciate the warmth of spring, and perhaps the beauty, too, but I'm only guessing at that. I do know for a fact, when a bird sings, it builds a vocal fence around a particular piece of property that it claims for its own personal territory. This is not just something a bird does; it is something it has to do.

Only birds that feed on the ground or in a tree, sing. These birds need a good sized piece of territory and the size depends on the amount of food available in that territory. A robin, for example, will often claim and defend a piece of lawn about 200' by 200' that will produce enough worms to feed its babies. If there are some berry bushes growing nearby, the robin may claim a smaller piece of territory because the berries will provide additional food.

A bird's territory is not a square piece of land, as is most human's property. The boundaries of the bird's property bend and curve according to the location of the food source. Around the outside edge of the bird's territory will be singing perches. These may be on stiff weeds, bushes or trees. A perch will be elevated, so that the bird can be seen when it sings, thus giving both, a visual and auditory message. Robins are only interested in keeping all other robins off their territory; while birds, having different food requirements are tolerated. Swallows and martins don't sing and, therefore, have no territory. They nest in colonies and feed in the air. Seabirds and gulls also don't sing because they live in colonies and feed in the ocean.

All birds have loud, strident alarm calls that they give when they spot danger. These calls not only alarm birds of their own species, but also all the birds and animals that hear them. Wildlife pays strict attention to any alarm call it hears and so do I. Whenever I hear the alarm call of birds, I know that some type of danger is in the area. Perhaps it's a snake, a cat or even a fox. Silence is also a warning. When all of the birds suddenly stop singing, I know that there is probably a hawk in the area. The presence of a hawk will cause all small birds to remain motionless and to be quiet so that they can escape detection.

Birds also use body language in communication. Their body posture, feather fluffing, rituals and movements, as well as their songs and calls, are done to attract a mate, scare off a rival, or protect their territory; it's all a part of their language. Just as people in different parts of the United States sound different from people in other parts, the same is true of birds. Scientific tests using sonograms (a visual sound recording), have found that birds of the same species have a different sound or dialect in different parts of the country.

To make it all a bit more confusing, some birds are mimics. The mockingbird is able to imitate any bird call it hears, and has been known to give over 100 different bird calls in one long babbling sound. Many people have trained themselves to be able to identify different birds by just their songs.

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Agitated	Excited.
Aigrettes	Very fine, long plume feathers worn by herons and egrets during the breeding season.
Attitudes	How you feel about a subject.
Auditory	A message received through the ear.
Babble	A confusion of sounds.
Brooding	When a mother bird provides body heat to keep the baby birds or eggs warm.
Clamor	A loud noise.
Clasping	To grab.
Camouflage	Protective coloration.
Conspicuously	Easily seen.
Constructing	To build.
Convey	To deliver a message.
Courting	Actions done to win a mate.
Decoy	To attract.
Deterrent	To stop an action.
Display	To show.
Diversionsary	To get attention by pretending to be something else.
Drumming	A sound made by the beating of a ruffed grouse's wings.
Elevated	Raised up.
Emotions	Feelings.
Extensive	Large.
Foster	Care provided by other than the natural parents.
Game Bird	A bird that is hunted by man.
Gesture	Using hands to help send a message.
Guttural	A throaty call.
Haunting	Unforgettable.
Hustle	Hurry.
Imitate	Sound alike.
Incubating	Applying heat so the young inside the egg will develop.
Insulation	Material used to provide warmth.

Intimidate	To frighten.
Iridescence	Feathers or scales that change colors according to the angle of light.
Luring	To attract.
Marsh	A wet area having high grasses.
Mimic	A bird that can imitate calls of another bird.
Nuisance	A pest.
Omission	Left out.
Parasitic	Using another creature for your own gain.
Plaintive	Sad sounding.
Posture	The position of the body.
Potential	Unused ability.
Precocial	Baby birds capable of feeding themselves as soon as they hatch.
Proclaiming	To make known.
Resident	One who lives in a place.
Rival	Someone who wants the same thing you do.
Singing Perch	A favored branch on which birds sit to sing.
Sky-Pointing	When a bird points its bill at the sky.
Strutting	A proud posture of male birds to impress the female.
Swamps	A wet, muddy area having more areas of vegetation than a lake or pond.
Syrinx	A bird's voice box.
Tempo	The speed at which a sound is given.
Territory	An area a creature claims as its own and will fight to keep others of the same species off.
Torrent	Rushing.
Transition	Changing.
Vocalization	The calls or sounds that creatures make using their mouth.
Wingspan	The total length of both of a bird's wings, stretched out.
Wintering	Staying over winter.