

Summer Birdsongs

by John Toren

Once the leaves have filled out on the trees and the migrating warblers have passed through the Garden, most of them on their way to nesting sites farther north, we often must content ourselves with hearing birds that we don't see. But learning the bird songs is a tricky thing. Birding guides sometimes provide mnemonic aids for remembering the songs; for example, the Eastern towhee says "drink-your-tea" and the barred owl says "who-cooks-for-you?" Such aids can

help us remember songs we already know, but they're seldom of much use to anyone who hasn't already learned to associate a song with a particular bird. The best way to learn a bird-call—perhaps the only way—is to recognize the bird and then watch it sing. But if you can describe something you've heard in common language it might be easier to call the bird to mind the next time you hear its song. And you can reinforce those associations at websites like allaboutbirds.com.

Here are ten birds you might not see but are likely to hear at the Garden in summer, described in plain English.



GOLDFINCH ►

The goldfinch has a high-pitched, cheerful song, sometimes sharp and tuneful, at other times sputtering like an old jalopy that won't start. You will often see a flock of goldfinches in the distance, singing as they fly; the bobbing flight pattern also gives them away.

◄ INDIGO BUNTING

The indigo bunting is almost always solitary. You often see it singing from the top of a tree up in the prairie area. In bright sun it might look black rather than indigo-blue. Its song is similar to that of the goldfinch, less melodic but also deeper and richer. The sound reminds me of someone slurping saliva loudly through their cheeks and teeth.

EASTERN WOOD PEWEE ►

The sweet, languorous, high-pitched song of this bird is unique and unmistakable. It has two parts that sound like they're being played on a very small plastic slide-whistle. The first part resembles the whistle someone might make to summon their lagging companions with a wave of the hand—"Come on, over here!"—though it's far slower and more fatigued.



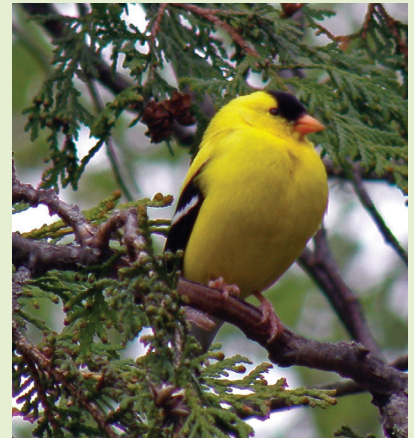
The second part, which always comes a few seconds later (and sometimes not at all) is a two-note descending call full of disappointment. Evidently no one came! Neither part sounds terribly vigorous or hopeful.

◄ GREAT-CRESTED FLYCATCHER

This bird gives a single loud call that reminds me of an ascending war hoop—though I've never heard a war hoop, except in the movies.

RED-BELLIED WOODPECKER ►

This bird delivers a single loud horse-like shriek that echoes through the woods, as if to say:
Please! I do not have a red belly."





◀ RED-EYED VIREO

The red-eyed vireo is the bird most likely to be singing in the mid-day heat. Its song is a long succession of crisp three-note riffs—up-down-up or down-up-down— each one different than the last but all of them tethered within a relatively small range of pitches. Some birders find it helpful to remember the pattern by repeating the phrases, “Here-am-I. Where-are-you?” The song tends to be loud. In fact, it’s often delivered with enough force to provide a little “whip” to the end of each three-note explosion. (A robin sometimes repeats a similar three-note phrase, but its voice is much richer and more relaxed.) We might liken it to a lecture during which the professor resorts to insistent delivery to compensate for the fact that she’s saying the same thing over and over again.

HOUSE WREN ▶

This little brown bird with an upturned tail is the supreme chatterer of the forest. A rapid-fire succession of busy notes on various pitches becomes a blur of agitated sound. But if the scolding seems to go on and on, and sounds unusually high-pitched and musical, you’re probably listening to the far-less-common winter wren strut his stuff.



◀ CEDAR WAXWING

The call of the cedar waxwing is a twittering squeak, like two pieces of wood rotating against each other,

but it’s so faint and high-pitched, many people simply can’t hear it. Cedar waxwings travel in flocks, and if a flock happens to be passing by overhead you’ll commonly hear a chorus of out-of-key squeaking, like a hundred miniature oxcarts moving slowly down the trail. If you can hear and recognize this sound, you’ll soon become convinced that cedar waxwings are among our most common birds.



BLUE JAY ▶

The blue jay has quite a few calls and songs, including a harsh squawk, but the one I like best is a loud hollow echoing gurgle that reminds me of the sound effect used on old TV shows like *Silent Service* and *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea* when submarines were diving or cruising underwater.



◀ SONG SPARROW

The song of this bird is less a song than a succession of stutters and shrieks, and what distinguishes it is the unusually large interval between the shrieks, which are high-pitched, and the cluck-like sputters, which are more than an octave lower. During the sputters, the song sparrow seems to be gathering material or energy for the next shriek. The second sputter is shorter than the first, and the third shriek is less dramatic than the first two.

