



EPISODE 9

Bird Sounds and Mnemonics Tricks

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INTRO: Hey there, I'm Christa, your host for the Birding Tools podcast.

Each week, I'll delve into the wonderful world of birds for birding beginners and those wanting to get the low-down on what goes into birdwatching and identifying birds.

Let's get started.

CHRISTA ROLLS: First, I wanted to let you know that I have a free guide to learning all about bird identification. After going through this workbook, you'll know about the five keys to bird identification: size and shape, color and pattern, behavior, habitat and distribution, and sound. When you understand the main components of identifying a bird, you'll begin to feel more confident with your birding and identification skills. This process will not just help you with identifying birds by sight and sound easier, but it will also help deepen your connection with nature. To get this free guide, just visit the podcast show notes at birdingtools.com.

There are around 10,000 species of birds in the world and pretty much all of those bird species have a unique song, call, or sound specific to that particular species.

While learning bird sounds can be overwhelming at first, it's easiest to start off with a small subset of birds or ones with easy mnemonics.

By definition, a mnemonic is a pattern of letters, ideas, or associations that assists in remembering something. They help aid in memorization because you're taking a sound, in this case, and you're creating a memorization tool by connecting it with something that you can relate to.

Did you, or do you, ever use memorization techniques in school, where you learned the acronym, PEMDAS in math, for example. I'm not even sure they teach PEMDAS in math anymore, but let's go with it. This acronym helped students understand the order of operations for mathematical formulas, where parentheses were addressed first in the equation, then exponents, then multiplication, division, addition, and subtraction, in that order. I'm curious how many listening solved a math problem with the help of PEMDAS. This is a mnemonic.

By applying mnemonics, you're using memorization techniques to better help you differentiate and ID birds.

When you take a minute to listen to the noises birds make and how they actually sound, it can be easier to associate particular sounds with a memory or a set of words. It's these memorization techniques that will help immensely in learning bird songs or other vocals. It's easier to do this with some birds more than others.

A way to have fun with it is to place bird sounds into categories, three of which I'll be getting into in more detail today.

Don't forget, too, that sound is one of the five keys to bird identification, which is based on the guide I mentioned at the beginning of the episode. Because it's one of the ways that you can identify birds, it's a really great skill to know and learn if you're looking to up your bird game. It's also really convenient because you don't actually have to get your eyes on the bird if you know the bird's sound. Pretty nifty right? Plus, keying in on bird sounds is a great way to

actually locate birds if you're not sure about the noise, but know how to follow the noise to get a good look at them.

So, first, what do I mean by sounds a bird makes? There are three categories of sound I refer to specifically, and those are songs, calls, and aural noises.

When you look in your bird field guide, you'll note that each bird has a "sound" or "voice" category indicating the noises a bird makes. Sometimes you'll see something as simple as "a series of high-pitched chips" but other times you'll see a more recognizable sound, like the "caw caw" of an American Crow or something more descriptive like the super-high-pitched wee-zee-wee-zee-wee-zee of the Black-and-white Warbler.

Songs are often associated with territoriality and establishment of a bird's space or dominance, and while we often think of songs as sing-songy, not all noises considered songs are sing-songy.

Birds also have calls, or chips or single note noises that can be indicative of information transferred from a bird to another of the same species in a contact call, a baby bird to its parent in a begging call, to other nearby birds to indicate an intruder or predator in an alarm call, and flight calls.

Birds also make aural noises – that's a-u-r-a-l or of and relating to the ear and hearing. While calls and songs are technically aural, or relating to the sound a bird makes, in this case, I'm referring those noises that are neither a song as we think of it or a call. When you think of the noises that woodpeckers make while drumming a tree, or the sounds vultures make when they're communicating despite not having a bird voice box, or the wing whistle made when a Mourning Dove gets startled up and flies off somewhere.

So now that we have the idea of the kinds of sounds a bird can make let's get into how to use these sounds as a tool to help identify a bird. You won't be able to necessarily do this with all birds but this is really helpful if you are learning bird songs and can associate noises with a particular sound. And this is just a SMALL portion of the effort to learning birds by ear, but remember I said to start off small.

OK and just a little disclaimer. Since we're talking about bird songs I'm going to attempt to mimic some birds' sounds... Just know that I'm NOT musically inclined, so bear with me. Don't worry, I'll supplement my attempts to mimic these birds with their actual sounds.

The three kinds of sounds we are going to focus on are descriptive sounds, mnemonic phrases, and say-my-name sounds. While there are a lot of other categories of sounds to learn, and lots of detail that goes into learning birds by sound, we're just going to stick with these three today.

So first, let's first look at descriptive sounds.

Using descriptive sounds can be really useful because your mind is associating another sound you already know with the sequence of notes that the bird is singing.

Let's take the Field Sparrow for example. When I was learning about bird sounds in the beginning of my birding career, this sound was always equated to a ping pong ball being dropped on the floor and bouncing as it went along the floor. So, it starts off bouncing slowly and then continues into a faster Pace as the song progresses. If you think about a ping pong ball being dropped on the floor from above, you'll hear the ball hit the ground, then as physics take over and the ball bounces, losing air and distance from the ground as it progresses, you hear than bouncing noise become more frequent. Let's listen to the Field Sparrow.

Field Sparrow Song

Do you hear that ping pong ball-like sound as the notes get faster and closer together?

Oh, and I want to mention that the sounds I'm using on the podcast are from the incredible bird sound repository, Xeno-Canto, spelled x-e-n-o-c-a-n-t-o. On here, you can search for nearly any bird's sound in the world, and if you've recorded bird sounds in the past, I suggest checking out Xeno-Canto to add to



their library of sounds. All the links to these sounds will also be linked to in the show notes.

Now, quick tip, too, is to still recognize the habitat in which you're located, as well as the distribution and seasonality of the birds you suppose you're hearing. Habitat and distribution is one of the five keys to bird ID, remember, so even if you don't have your eyes on the bird, still pay attention to where you're birding to see if the habitat in which you're hearing the bird you think you've IDed matches with where you are.

As the Field Sparrow's name implies, they are often found in and around scrubby grasslands and overgrown fields in the central and eastern part of the United States.

Let's take a look at another bird – the Common Grackle – using the same descriptor sound category. Common Grackles make a series of noises and rattles, but their overall sounds is very distinctive, and sounds like a rusty gate being opened and shut. Let's take a listen to it.

Common Grackle Song

While other black birds make similar kind of noises this is where you'll go into the habitat and distribution part of your ID to see if Common Grackles are found where you are. I'm in California, so I wouldn't hear Common Grackles here since they're found east of me, but I would see Brewer's Blackbirds, which sound to me more like a rusty swing on a swing set. See how I did that?

Play around with this the next time you're out observing and watching birds. Take notes of the kinds of noises they're making and see whether a descriptor is useful in classifying that bird's sound to your ears.

Also, another tip for you is to only look at the birds found where you are so that you aren't focusing on learning bird songs for other areas that you won't see or hear near you anyway. This goes back to my previous tip about bird distribution but specifically honing in on creating a local bird list to better focus and pinpoint your sound-learning efforts.

Ok so let's do one more descriptive sound. This is one of my favorite North American birds, the Northern Cardinal. The sounds that makes are often compared to a spaceship making pew pew noises, so let's take a listen and compare.

Northern Cardinal song

While the Northern Cardinal does have a really varied song, for the most part, it does have this electronic sort of quality to the sound of it song. And the great thing is that both males and females sing these songs often.

So now that we've gone into some examples for descriptive sounds or noises, let's get into mnemonic phrases in particular.

Now, for mnemonic phrases you can associate the sound of a song with a set of words to help you memorize that song.

One of my favorites is the olive sided flycatcher. Like any flycatcher, they're difficult to identify if you're just looking at them through your scope or binoculars. But if it starts to sing its song "quick three beers quick three beers," I know exactly which species it is because no other flycatcher sounds that way or has that mnemonic.

Let's take a listen and see how it sounds to compare it to the mnemonic it is often associated with.

Olive Sided Flycatcher Song

Another mnemonic that is just too good not to share and honestly is kind of bizarre is the warbling vireo. When you get your eyes on a vireo, it's actually not super difficult to identify which one it is because there are only a handful of vireos in North America and they all look fairly distinct from each other. But the sound is especially what makes a difference.

The Warbling Vireo says "if I see you then I'll seize you and I'll squeeze you till you squirt."

Warbling Vireo Song

If I see you then I'll seize you and I'll squeeze you till you squirt... Did you hear it?

I don't know what the heck that phrase means or where it came from or what is squirting or who seizing who, but it sticks and you'll probably never forget it because it's so weird.

One thing to keep in mind when you are listening to bird songs in general is that there are some songs that blend in so well with the surrounding environment that you might not even register that it's a bird song until you've been hearing it and honing in on that pitch for a while.

One such song I always have trouble honing in on, probably because of its sweet, soft, high-pitched song, is the Brown Treecreeper. The Brown Treecreeper has the mnemonic phrase "trees trees beautiful trees." But it's so high pitched that it's often a song that we tuck into the back of our mind because it blends in with the surrounding environment so well and also is not super in your face like a lot of other birds can be.

Here's what the Brown Treecreeper sounds like.

Brown Treecreeper song

There are a lot of birds with mnemonic phrases out there that birders have widely associated with certain bird species' songs, and in the show notes, I'll link to some resources that have further mnemonic examples. As you're learning bird sounds, you can plug these into your mind as a good identification technique. When you're trying to differentiate with other birds, it actually makes it so much easier because once you know the sound, you don't have to mess around as much with physical ID factors like size and shape or color and pattern.

That's not to say that it's not always good to double check and verify your ideas of what the bird could be so, especially as you're starting out and learning sounds, continue using physical characteristics as a two-factor identification of sorts.

I'm not a huge fan of second guessing yourself all the time because I think that that really holds birders back from identifying things and being okay with being wrong, but I do think that there is a lot of value in being able to stick to your wits and be confident in your identification skills especially if you've been practicing and if you are going through the five keys to bird identification to make a proper and accurate ID.

Now let's get into what I like to call the Say-my-name birds. Say-my name birds, you guessed it, say their name in the sounds they make. These ones make it so easy to remember because they're literally telling you exactly what they are named and is the reason why they are named what they are.

One of the most famous examples for this is the Common cuckoo because although they're featured in cuckoo clocks and are very popular in European history and folklore, they are also a dream when birding by ear because they are so easy to remember. I know, I'm breaking from the other North American birds and giving you one found in Europe and Asia, but they're so iconic and indicative of the say-my-name birds that I had to share. They say cuckoo "cuckoo cuckoo." Let's take a listen.

Common Cuckoo song

Isn't that so iconic? I love how perfectly distinct it is and there's just no mistaking it.

One beloved North American species that says their name in their song is the Eastern Wood Pewee. They have the sweetest song and they are so distinct in eastern North American woods and Woodland areas. If you don't know what a Pewee looks like, they're pretty greyish-olive flycatchers (like pretty much every other flycatcher), so when you first see them off the bat you might think great, which flycatcher is that.

But their song says their name which makes it so easy to identify them. Let's take a listen.

Eastern Wood Pewee song

Do you hear how they say “peeawee”? Pretty distinctive, right? If you’re in the eastern and central part of North America, keep an ear out for these ones.

Of course there are always exceptions because when birds are singing they sometimes change up their song or only sing portions of their song.

Notice how with the Pewee, sometimes it only sings the second portion of its song, singing “wee” instead of the full “peeawee”.

Partial Eastern Wood Pewee song

Honestly, this goes for pretty much every bird because any bird could technically sing only a portion of its song or act kind of weird and sing a variety of different songs.

This is a good time to mention dialect. Did you know that birds have different dialects depending on where they’re found in the country or the world? The Carolina Wren is one of my favorite examples for this because they specifically have a very bubbly, fast-paced song that actually slows down and changes in tone and pitch depending on where you are in the country. Let’s listen to a Carolina Wren in northeastern America and then let’s listen to a wren in Southeastern North America so you can hear the difference in the sound.

Carolina Wren song from Northeastern America

Carolina Wren song from Southeastern America

Do you hear how the northeastern Carolina Wren sounds like it’s the same bird as the Southeastern Carolina Wren but they’re just a little bit different?

By the way, the mnemonic for the Carolina wren is “cheeseburger cheeseburger.” You can hear the mnemonic a lot easier in the slower song than in the really rapid fire song, but this is also sort of just training your brain for first what wrens sound like in general and then accounting for the other species that might sound like a wren.

Now, let’s get back to a couple more say-my-name birds. This is a really fun bird, and before I mention which bird it is, I’m actually going to play the call first

to see if you can guess the name just based on the sound it's making. Remember, this is a say-my-name bird.

Black-capped Chickadee song

Do you know which bird it is? It's a Black-capped Chickadee! Yes, there are other chickadee species, and in fact the Carolina Chickadee makes a very similar chicka-dee-dee-dee sound, but the black-capped says the distinctive "chicka-dee-dee-dee." Again, distribution comes into play in a big way here because when you are able to account for where you are it will help you with your bird ID – this case, these two species overlap somewhat in range, but only slightly. It's good to know that sometimes you get birds that sound similar when they are in the same place and part of the same family. BUT remember, this helps you narrow down your options of what it could be significantly.

Recognizing bird sounds – and finding mnemonics that can aid in ID - can give you a huge advantage when it comes to identification for that reason of being able to narrow down what you're seeing and hearing.

One of my favorite examples for this is with the Kentucky warbler and the Ovenbird. If you actually saw them in your binoculars you would easily be able to distinguish between the two because the Kentucky warbler and the Ovenbird don't look anything alike, though they're both warblers. But both are found in woodlands and both have song with two sequential notes. However, they have distinct mnemonics for each. The Ovenbird says "teacher teacher teacher" where the subsequent "teacher" notes get louder and louder, while the Kentucky Warbler's mnemonic is "churry chirry chirry." One way to think of it is that the Ovenbird sounds more, oh, aggressive than the sweeter sounding Kentucky Warbler. The Kentucky Warbler also doesn't increase in tempo or volume.

Let's listen to each. Here is the Ovenbird.

Ovenbird song

And here is the Kentucky Warbler.



Kentucky Warbler song

If you say their mnemonics as they are singing, it can also help solidify which bird is which or which sound belongs to which bird.

So there you have it!

Which birds do you know by sound? Can you think of some good mnemonics for birds you're hearing outside? Remember, the key is to come up with a system that works best for you!

Thanks so much for tuning in to the Birding Tools Podcast and I hope this material was helpful to you.

To access information about the content I've mentioned in the show, and the show notes, visit our website at birdingtools.com.

Next week, I'll be reviewing and talking about the characteristics of different bird identification apps you can get on your phone. I'd love to know which you already have or have tried out!

If you enjoyed this episode and want to get updates on the latest Birding Tools has to offer, subscribe to the podcast wherever you're listening now.

See you next time.