

Bird Photography - Using Song to Identify the Subject

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When it comes to bird photography we all know that it's very easy to spend thousands of dollars in photography equipment, but perhaps one of the most important tools can be had for only pennies. Why would you spend all that money on equipment only to walk right by that rare bird that's singing its heart out only a few feet out of sight? Learning to recognize all the bird calls and songs can take up a tremendous amount of time, but I have found that it is worth every minute.

When first learning calls and songs it's much easier to start with your local backyard birds. You will be surprised at how many birds sound similar, with only slight variations to some of the most common birds. I will never forget hearing my first Kentucky warbler and thinking "that sounds like a Northern cardinal mixed with a Carolina wren." By establishing a solid foundation with the songs of your local birds, you will be setting the ground work for the more difficult songs you will learn in the future.

Bird photography is at its prime during spring migration and at no other time is the knowledge of songs more helpful. The forest and parks are filled with magical flutes and trills from the avian world. Without the knowledge of individual songs, photography can quickly turn into a very confusing free-for-all at this time of year. For the bird photographer who can easily recognize the song of that target bird, chances of getting that precious shot increases significantly.

Once you have set the common birds to memory you will also be quick to recognize songs that are different from the norm, or out of place from what you're use to hearing. This can also be of great benefit for finding new photographic subjects that have wondered into your neck of the woods. Many times I still hear songs that I am not familiar with, and I stop immediately in hope of adding this new bird to my photographic files.

Another very significant reward for learning songs is the ability to identify many tough birds. I know very few people who can properly and consistently identify many of the Espionages (flycatchers) without hearing their songs and calls. This is true with many of the avian species, and can be as solid an identification factor as a purple wing bar.

Once you're ready to move on to more difficult bird songs, first learn the sparrows and all their subtle chirps and trills. There is no better way to decipher the sounds of the prairie than the knowledge you gain by learning these songs. And once you think you know it all, proceed to the warblers for they have a song for you. Many of the warbler songs can be very familiar and difficult to discern, but don't get overwhelmed - it takes many hours of studying and trial and error in the field to differentiate between these colorful birds. I can think of no other species that almost *requires* the knowledge of song to find and photograph than the elusive warbler.

There are a couple ways to study bird songs. Some bird photographers prefer CDs while others use websites that host audio files. Which ever way you choose, remember that nothing replaces being out in the field and hearing these musical masterpieces with



Photo 1



Photo 4



Photo 2



Photo 5

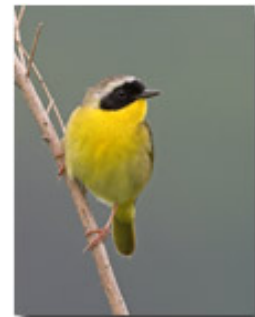


Photo 3

your own ears. Once you have learned to get in tune with nature's symphony, you will truly have a whole new appreciation of avian song, and I can't imagine a better way to start one's day.

For as the sun breaks over the horizon and the prairie grass glistens with dew, the faint song of a sparrow emerges like only a field sparrow can do.

Useful Online and CD Resources

- [Learn Bird Songs](#)
- [The Virtual Birder - Bird Song Central](#)
- [Bird Song Ear Training Guide](#) (CD)
- [Bird Song Resources](#) on www.birdwatching.com

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