

SONGS OF THE YEAR-ROUND BIRDS

By Kay Cramer

By mid-fall, most of the migratory songbirds have returned to winter quarters. But here, in Central Pennsylvania, we have a wealth of birds that stick around (or come back here from farther north) through the cold, rain and snows of winter. Although mostly not as flashy as the migrants, they are lovely and tuneful, a treat for those who go looking for birds this time of year.

My so-called 'spark bird', the one that got me passionate about birding, was the White-throated Sparrow. A small, somewhat nondescript bird when seen at a distance with the naked eye, this sparrow returns to Central PA in the fall. I saw mine on a snow-covered log through my first pair of binoculars and rushed home to look up a brown bird with yellow spots above and before the eyes and snowy white eyebrow and throat—so beautiful. I was hooked!

The sparrow's song, traditionally described as "Poor Sam Peabody, Peabody, Peabody" or "Oh, sweet Canada, Canada, Canada," can be heard from now until late spring when it returns to the north for breeding. Once you learn to recognize the song, you can identify it with a single note of its sultry timbre. Interestingly, the three-note triplets of the traditional song have been largely replaced by two-note endings, which style birders have recognized as moving East from the West over the past decade or so. Birdsong fashion changes!

Most people recognize the "caw" of the American crow. With practice, the deep bass croak of the Common Raven becomes easy to identify. Both corvids are present in our area year-round. But what about the calls of the Blue Jay? This gorgeous crested sky-blue and black bird is vilified because of its greedy behavior at back-yard feeders. It is a huge contributor to the spread of oaks, however, because it feeds on and caches acorns widely. Even though it has a brilliant memory, some acorns are forgotten and grow into new trees.

The blue jay has a large repertoire of songs and calls. There is the well-known jeering "jay" call that echoes around the neighborhood in the morning (and all day, sometimes). There is a three-note "car alarm" call, as well as gentle communications with mates during breeding season. The jay is a noted mimic, as well. Famously, it does a fantastic imitation of a hawk, which can be a warning of the imminent approach of that predator, or a clever ruse to clear the feeder of competition.

Both woodpeckers and owls stick around our area for the winter. You can hear the downward whinny of the Downy Woodpecker, as well as the drumming of all the local woodpeckers as they search for insects and communicate with one another. If you are out in the evening or night, listen for the Great Horned Owl's "hoo, hoo-hoooo!" Other strange and spooky calls are the Screech Owl's falling moan and tremolo and the Barred Owl's "who cooks for you!"

There are many more birds that grace our homes and fields throughout the fall and winter, like the cardinal, junco, goldfinch, and tufted titmouse. They keep up a steady chipping as they visit our birdfeeders during the lean times. Perhaps our most iconic and beloved little backyard bird is the Black-capped Chickadee. Most people recognize its "chick-a-dee-dee-dee." Chickadees are great sentinels for other birds and increase the number of "dees" according to the magnitude of the threat. They also have

numerous songs for communicating other information. In the spring, listen for the “Hey, sweetie” three-note love song the male sings to entice his mate.

It is hard to describe in written word the music of the birds, their rhythm, tune and timbre. If you would like to become familiar with birdsong, visit the Cornell Lab of Ornithology’s website, <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/>, or get their free app Merlin, which gives both the photograph and the song of the birds around us. Other sources include National Audubon’s birding app and bird song ear training guides, available online, such as “Who Cooks for Poor Sam Peabody,” by John Feith.

Once your ear is attuned to the songs and calls of the birds around you, going outdoors will never be the same, even in winter!

Photos by Lauren Shaffer

- 1) White-throated sparrow
- 2) Blue jay
- 3) Barred owl
- 4) Black-capped chickadee

