

Wildlife Express

Volume 34 | Issue 8

April 2021

Songbirds



Robin CC BY Eric Heupel on Flickr
Illustration CC BY Mohamed Hassan on Pixabay

Inside:

Songbirds

Bird Song

Beaks

What's in a Name?

Go Birding!

The Language of Science

Be Outside | Sounds of Spring



idfg.idaho.gov

Songbirds

It's spring; the time of year for flowers and bird song! Many people enjoy hearing birds after the quiet of winter. Most of the birds you hear belong to a large group called songbirds. Familiar birds like robins, chickadees, sparrows, wrens, finches and orioles are songbirds. Idaho's state bird, the mountain bluebird, is a songbird.

Songbirds are also called passerines (PASS-er-reens). In total, passerines make up about 60 percent of all the birds in the world. If your class of 30 students were birds, 18 of you would be songbirds. This is a very large group with many different kinds of birds, found all over the world.

Songbirds are usually small to medium-sized birds. The smallest are tiny birds such as kinglets and wrens. They are a little over four inches long and weigh about as much as a nickel. The largest songbird is the common raven. Ravens are not quite two feet tall. They weigh between one-and-a-half to three-and-a-half pounds.

Songbirds are also called perching birds. Can you guess why? It is because many of them spend a lot of time in trees and shrubs. Their feet have four toes, three facing forward and one facing backward. These feet, along with extra-strong legs, allow perching birds to grab branches. They also use their feet for nest-building. Some songbirds, like sparrows, use their feet to scratch on the ground. By scratching, a sparrow turns over leaves to find food.



Photos top to bottom:
Golden crowned kinglet CCBY Christina Butler on Flickr, Oriole CCBY Celeste Ramsay on Flickr, Raven CCBY Supermum1 on Flickr, Black Capped Chickadee CCBY Seabamirum on Flickr, Sagebrush Sparrow CCBY Dominic Sherony on Flickr.

Because passerines are such a large group, you can probably guess that they eat many different things.

Some songbirds eat insects while others eat seeds. A few songbirds, like waxwings, eat fruit. Songbirds that do not migrate often eat insects in the summer and switch to seeds and fruit in the winter. Robins eat worms in the summer and fruit, like crabapples, in the winter. Songbirds that only eat insects, migrate in the fall. Migration takes them to places where they can find their insect prey. Eating many different things allows songbirds to live in many habitats around the world.

As a group, passerines are the best singers of all birds. That's why they are called songbirds. Some songbirds, such as jays and crows, don't exactly have the prettiest songs. Other songbirds, like thrushes and wrens, have beautiful songs. Now that spring has arrived, spend some time outside enjoying the songs of your passerine neighbors.

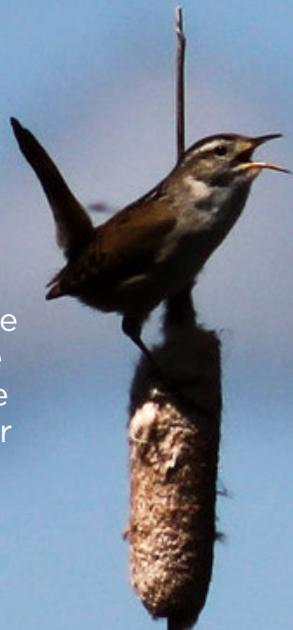


Photos top to bottom:
Bohemian Waxwing CCBY Kameron Perensovich on Flickr,
Blue jay CCBY Tim Harding on Flickr.

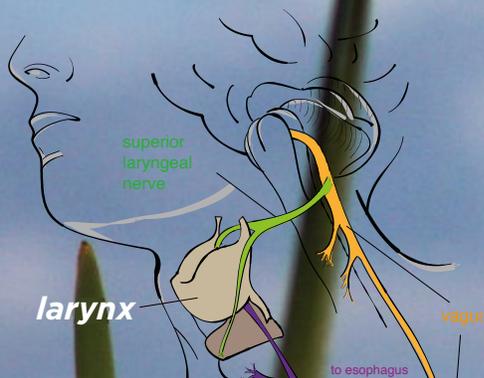
Bird Song

Songbirds get their name because they sing. Singing helps birds defend a territory and attract a mate. Bird song is also a big reason why people enjoy birds. Not only is it beautiful, but it is also amazing.

Birds can sing because of a structure called the *syrinx* (SEER-inks). It's like your voice box or *larynx* (LAR-inks). To feel your larynx, start humming. Now run your fingers along your throat. Can you feel the vibrations? That is your larynx. It is part of the trachea, the tube that brings air into your lungs. Our larynx is pretty simple compared to a bird's syrinx. The syrinx of a songbird is also more complex than the syrinx of other birds. Instead of having one or two pairs of syrinx muscles, songbirds have eight or nine pairs. These muscles control the vocal membranes. All these muscle pairs allow a songbird to make two different sounds at the same time! A bird can also sing one part of its song instead of the whole song. Amazing!



Songbirds do a lot of singing, mostly in the spring. Many songbirds sing between 1,000 to 2,500 times each day. They begin to sing at sunrise. Birdwatchers call this time, the dawn chorus. Songbirds do not only sing early in the morning. Some of them sing at other times, too. Your neighborhood robins sing in the morning and evening. A few species sing at any time of the day. The champion singer is the red-eyed vireo. They often sing all day long. Scientists recorded a male red-eyed vireo that sang over 22,000 times in ten hours. That is a lot of singing!



Beaks

Bird beaks come in many shapes. This is because they have so many different uses. Birds use their beaks for catching and eating food. They feed their babies with their beaks. Birds use their beaks for building a nest. Sometimes they might use their beak to protect themselves from a predator. They also use their beaks to groom themselves. As a group, songbirds have a lot of different kinds of beaks.

Flycatchers have strong beaks with blunt tips.

They can easily grab a flying insect in mid-air with a loud snap of their beak. Shrikes have beaks like a small hawk. They are hooked on the end. This lets the shrike grab and hold insects, small birds and even mice. Songbirds like warblers, vireos and wrens have long, slender, pointed beaks. This beak shape helps these birds pick tiny insects off of leaves and branches. You can think of these beaks as being like a pair of tweezers. Songbirds like sparrows and finches that eat a lot of seeds have short, cone-shaped beaks. These beaks are strong, almost like a pair of pliers. Some members of the finch family are called grosbeaks because of their extra-large beaks. Their beaks can easily crush the hulls of seeds and the exoskeletons of large insects like beetles.

Other members of the songbird family have beaks that help the bird eat anything. Think about crows or jays. These birds are omnivores, eating anything they can find. Their beaks are not as specialized as the tweezer beak of a warbler or the pliers beak of a finch. This helps them live in many different habitats. Next time you see a bird, check out its beak. Can you figure out what it eats by its beak shape?



Photos top to bottom:

Loggerhead Shrike CCBY Dennis Church on Flickr, Singing Warbling vireo CCBY Andrew Reding on Flickr, Yello-rumped Warbler CCBY Mick Thompson on Flickr, Grosbeak CCBY Eric Ellingson on Flickr, Red-tailed hawk CCBY Bandalier National Monument on Flickr.

What's In a Name?



Birds are named for many things. In North America, birds are sometimes named after similar-looking birds from other places. This is how the American robin got its name. These birds reminded early settlers of the familiar European robin of their home countries. Calling new birds by familiar names helped people feel at home in new places.

Sometimes birds are named for their songs or calls. Think of the killdeer. They are named for their loud “killdeer, killdeer” calls, not because they kill and eat deer! The little black-capped chickadee is named for its cheerful “chick-a-dee-dee-dee” call. The song sparrow is named for its beautiful song. Northern flickers get their name from their loud “flicka, flicka, flicka” calls.

Birds can also be named for the places they live. Think of the barn owl. No question where that name came from. How about the marsh wren or the tree swallow? Others are named for the scientists who first described the birds. Here in Idaho, this is how the Clark’s nutcracker and Steller’s jay got their names. Other birds were given English names based on how the names sounded in languages spoken by native peoples.

Many bird names come from what the bird looks like. Can you guess the color of a yellow warbler? What about a gray catbird? How about a black-throated gray warbler?



Photos top to bottom:
Gray catbird CCBY Fyn Kynd on Flickr, Lochsa River Drainage CCBY Charles Peterson on Flickr, American Dipper CCBY Tom Benson on Flickr.



Behavior is another way that birds are named. Nuthatches used to be called nut-hacks because of the way they open seeds and nuts. Over time, the name became nuthatch. The American dipper, a bird living along Idaho's mountain streams, got its name because it "dips" its body up and down. The flycatcher family is named for how these birds fly out to catch flying insects.



Figuring out how a bird got its name can be fascinating. It can give you a clue to where it lives and its behaviors. Some bird species also have nicknames. These might be heard only in certain areas.

Just for fun, here are nicknames for some common North American birds you can see in Idaho:

Spotted sandpiper

Barn owl

Yellow-rumped Warbler

Northern flicker

Common nighthawk

Great horned owl

Northern shrike

American goldfinch

Teeterpeep

Church Owl

Butterbutt

Yellowhammer

Bullbat

Hoot owl

Butcherbird

Thistlebird

Nuthatch

Canada jay

Spruce grouse

Turkey vulture

Barn swallow

Great blue heron

Dark-eyed junco

Tree mouse

Whiskey jack

Fool hen

Buzzard

Country swallow

Blue crane

Snowbird



Photos top to bottom:

Nuthatch CCBY DaPuglet on Flickr, Dark-eyed junco CCBY Anne Davis 773 on Flickr, Killdeer CCBY Kelly Colgan Azar on Flickr, Northern Flicker CCBY Renee Grayson on Flickr, Barn owl CCBY Guy Frankland on Flickr.

Go Birding!

Birdwatching is cool! More people watch birds than enjoy any other kind of outdoor recreation. The best part about birdwatching is you can do it anywhere you see birds. Birdwatching or birding can help you become a careful observer. You learn to see movement and pick out colors and patterns. You also learn to slow down and move quietly when outdoors. If you also enjoy hunting, the observation skills you learn as a birdwatcher will help you be a more successful hunter.

Binoculars and a bird book or field guide are good things to have when you birdwatch. If you can use your parent's smartphone, ask permission to download the Merlin app. It's from the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology and is free. The scientists at the Lab study birds. They made the app to help birders. It's a great tool to help you identify the birds you see. You enter some basic information about the bird based on its size, colors and location. The app gives you a list of photos of possible birds. Once you choose a bird, the app gives you a lot of extra information. It's a fun way to learn to identify birds.

The best part about birdwatching is just getting outside and enjoying nature. Spring is here and migrating songbirds are heading to Idaho. Get outside and see what has arrived in your backyard.



Photos top to bottom:
Girls watching stock photo, Canada Jay CCBY Michael Klotz
on Flickr, Yellow Warbler CCBY Stan Lupo on Flickr, Spotted
Sandpiper CCBY Doug Greenberg on Flickr, Female bluebird
CCBY Charles Peterson on Flickr.

The language of science

Science is full of names. Animals and plants have common and scientific names. Common names are in the language of the country where the animal lives. Scientific names are in Latin. This helps scientists all over the world know what animals and plants they are talking about. For example, we say bald eagle. But a scientist might say *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*. This is the bald eagle's scientific name. Scientific names often describe something about the animal. The translation of the bald eagle's scientific name is white-headed sea eagle.

Science also has special names for groups of animals. You already know some of these names. How about *carnivore*, *herbivore* or *omnivore*? See, you are already speaking the language of science. Like scientific names, these words often come from Latin words.

The suffix “-vore” comes from the Latin word “vorare.” This means “to devour.” The prefix *carni* means meat. Put them together and you have *carnivore*, a meat-eater. *Omni* is Latin for all or many. An animal that eats many different things is an *omnivore*. How about a plant eater? *Herb* refers to plant, so an herbivore is an animal that eats plants.

Sometimes, these labels can get very specific. An *insectivore* is a kind of *carnivore* that eats insects. Many songbirds are *insectivores*. *Frugivores* are *herbivores* that eat fruit. Ever hear of a *hemovore*? In Latin, “*hemo*” refers to blood. So, a *hemovore* is an animal that eats blood. Next time you swat a mosquito, you can say “take that you *hemovore*!” Have fun creating names for animals based on what they eat. You and your friends just might be pizzavores!



Pizzavores



Haliaeetus leucocephalus



BE OUTSIDE
IDAHO CHILDREN IN NATURE

Be Outside!

Sounds of spring

Songbirds are all around us. They live in our backyards, in neighborhood parks and out in the wilderness. Listening to their beautiful songs is a wonderful way to enjoy the outdoors. Because different birds live in different places, you can enjoy new bird songs when you visit different kinds of habitats.

Some bird songs are simple. Chickadees have a simple song that is easy to remember. Others, like the songs of thrushes or warblers, can be very complex. If you take the time to listen, you can learn to identify birds by their songs. This is called “birding by ear.” Start by focusing on one or two songs that you hear a lot. Do they have a rhythm? Do the notes change? Can you put words to the song? Putting a song into words is called a *mnemonic* (new-MON-ic). Mnemonics can help you learn birdsongs. Here are a few mnemonics for the songs of some common Idaho birds—listen for them in your yard or neighborhood:



Black-capped Chickadee

“Cheese-burger”
to
“chick-a-dee, dee, dee”



Killdeer

“killdeer, killdeer, killdeer”



American Goldfinch

“potato chip,
potato chip”



Yellow Warbler

“sweet, sweet,
sweet,
J’m so sweet”



Northern Flicker

“flicka,
flicka,
flicka”



American Robin

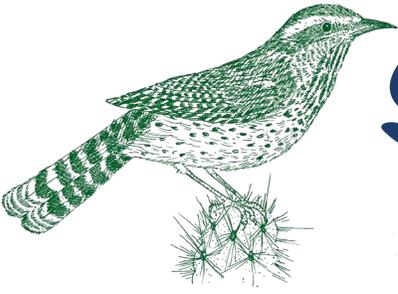
“cheerily cheer,
cheer-up, cheer-up”



Mourning Dove

“hooooo-la,
hoop,
hoop, hoop”

Photos top to bottom:
Black-capped Chickadee CCBY Seabmirum on Flickr, Killdeer CCBY Kelly Colgan on Flickr, American Goldfinch CCBY Jerry McFarland Flickr, Northern Flicker CCBY Renee Grayson on Flickr, Warbler CCBY Stan Lupo on Flickr, American Robin CCBY Desert Rice on Flickr, Mourning Dove CCBY Trish Hartmann on Flickr.



SONGBIRD SEARCH!

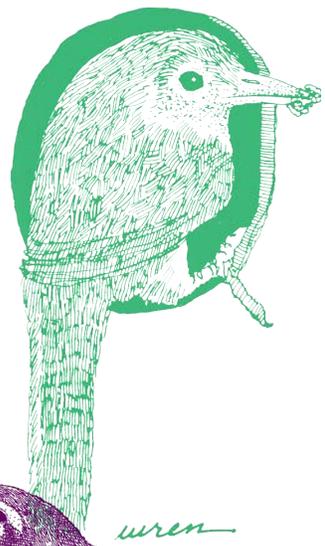


Find these words associated with songbirds.

- | | | | | | |
|----------|-------------|-----------|-----------|-------------|---------|
| beak | birdwatcher | carnivore | herbivore | insectivore | kinglet |
| omnivore | passerine | perching | raven | robin | song |
| songbird | sparrow | syrinx | territory | warbler | wren |



R W H E R T S P A X Z R C U P
 E X C R A H O H R J N A X A N
 H T F J V T N Z E J Z I S N U
 C F S W E U G F X L E S R X I
 T N O B N R B I C E E H V Y N
 A H L C G N I H C R E P T K S
 W R O B I N R P I E D K I I E
 D S U X C R D N R U I N I E C
 R S P B Z S E O S N S P N R T
 I C Z A O S V L G N E R W O I
 B J C N R I Z L B B Y K Q V V
 E H G N B R E S F R A D C I O
 T E R R I T O R Y E A B E N R
 A H E I M P B W B W H W X M E
 Q H O H C A R N I V O R E O X



Illustrations CCBY IDFG

Wildlife Express

Volume 34 • Issue 8 • Songbirds • April 2021

Wildlife Express is published by the Idaho Department of Fish and Game

Editor: Adare Evans

Lead Writer: Vicky Runnoe

Layout: Mary K Johnson

Contributors: Vicky Runnoe and Adare Evans



WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU!
 If you have a letter, poem or question for Wildlife Express, it may be included in a future issue! Send it to:
 adare.evans@idfg.idaho.gov
 or
 Wildlife Express, Idaho Fish and Game
 PO Box 25, Boise, ID 83707