

Backyard Birdsong

How to Learn Birdsong:

1. The key: use words (quail and golden-crowned sparrow in examples)

#1 Mnemonics: Chi-CA-go! I'm soooo tired

#2 Transliterations: Cu-CA-cow Seeea seeew soooo

#3 Descriptions 3 loud notes repeated in sequence, with accent on the second
3 clear high whistles, slurring downward in pitch

* Additional tip: if one element of a complex song is easier to recognize than the rest, learn to listen and identify that specific bit, such as the ending staccato notes of the Bewick's wren song or the *po-ta-to-chips* of American goldfinches (the "Morse code" approach—start with recognizing words, not full sentences).

2. How to practice

#1 Compare descriptions and mnemonics from books, websites, CDs, or those of your own creation with the birds you hear in your yard. *Think* of the words as you listen.

#2 Listen to audio recordings on web (All About Birds; our blog at natureinnovato.com), CDs (local CDs available in store; Stokes Field Guide to Bird Song), or apps (iBird, Merlin, etc.). Remember to think of your preferred mnemonic/verbal description as you listen.

#3 When you hear birds singing—go out and look for them! Piecing together the multiple pieces (sight, sound, behavior, habitat, timing) is part of the fun and how you will attain the fullest and most natural familiarity.

Resources:

- **Web:** Cornell Lab of Ornithology's *All About Birds* website hosts recordings of songs and calls for most North American birds, complete with descriptions and lots of other useful information. If you click the "Macaulay Library" link under each recording, you can also see a sonogram for each sound.
- **App:** Several bird guides that integrate song and call recordings into each species account are available in app form for smartphones and tablets. Cornell's *Merlin* is the best free app; *iBird* is the original and most comprehensive option, but almost all apps include bird songs and calls.
- **CDs:** The *Stokes Field Guide to Bird Songs* is a fairly complete collection of western bird sounds. Our locally-produced *Birding by Ear at Point Reyes* gives a Bay Area-appropriate species selection and includes a helpful commentary to aid in learning the sounds.
- **Books:** Cornell produces an introductory level *Western Backyard Bird Songs* book with built-in audio player. New in 2019 is the magisterial *Peterson Field Guide to Bird Sounds of North America*, which features precise and consistent transliterations, detailed sonograms, and hard-to-find classification of the functions of different vocalizations.

Step One on the Easy Scale: Distinctive song-like calls and sounds

1. **California Quail:** Main call is a series of three syllables, with the second syllable accented *chi-CA-go* or *Where are you?* (Mainly an "assembly" call, not actually a song.)
2. **Great Horned Owl:** Deep, muffled hooting with a stuttering rhythm, *hoo-h'HOO-hoo-hoo* (the exact pattern varies). The male and female of a breeding pair may perform a duet of alternating calls, with the female's voice higher in pitch than the male's.

3. **Mourning Dove:** A rather mournful cooing starting with an upwards slurred, two-part opening note: *coo-AAH, cooo, coo, coo*. Owl hoots are more abrupt, stuttering, variable in pattern, and nocturnal.
4. **Woodpecker drumming:** Drumming speed and length varies slightly by species, but typically occurs in speedy bursts of a few seconds, easily distinct from slower, methodical hammering for cavity excavation or while foraging for insects.

Step Two on the Easy Scale: Four Very Distinctive Backyard Songs

5. **Golden-crowned Sparrow:** High clear whistles; most typically three descending, melancholy notes *I'm-so-tired*, but sometimes rising on the last note, ending in a trill, or abbreviated to only two notes.
6. **Anna's Hummingbird:** A long song (~10 seconds) of rambling squeaks, grating sounds, and buzzes. Also listen for the loud *pop!* at the bottom of males' courtship dives, made by their tail feathers.
7. **Northern Mockingbird:** A long series of varied phrases, each repeated 2–6 times, then followed by a clear but brief pause before beginning the next phrase. Phrases may include imitations of other birds or sounds of human origin. "Unlocking the car" chimes are popular suburban motifs.
8. **California Towhee:** This very common backyard bird is known for its simple metallic *chip* notes, sometimes described uncharitably as similar to the low battery warning of a smoke alarm. The male's spring song is a series of these chip notes, accelerating from a stutter to a trill, like a bouncing ball.

The Three Common Finches: Long, musical songs heard throughout much of the year

9. **House Finch:** A steadily lilting warble about three to four seconds long, slower and richer-toned than lightweight goldfinch songs. Often ends with a drawn out, upward slurred *veerrrr*.
10. **American Goldfinch:** Similar to lesser goldfinch, but more uniform in tone quality, without imitations. Listen for their classic, tell-tale flight call, consisting of four soft, staccato notes sometimes rendered as *po-ta-to-chip* or *per-chick-a-ree*.
11. **Lesser Goldfinch:** A lengthy (often ~10 seconds) jumble of clear notes, wheezes, trills, stutters, and imitated call notes of other species. More varied in sound quality than American goldfinches. Note also that lessers are substantially more common in most yards: what do you see on your feeders?

Common Woodland Songbirds: Birds in Yards with Trees

12. **American Robin:** A string of several whistled phrases, generally *rising* and then *falling* in pitch while following a steady rhythm. Sometimes described as *cheerily, cheer up, cheerio* or other variant sequences of chipper two or three-syllable words.
13. **Dark-eyed Junco:** An even (no change in speed or pitch), dry trill around two seconds long.
14. **Oak Titmouse:** A song of clear, strong notes, steadily repeated in two-syllable pairs of higher and lower pitch, often 2-7 repeated syllable pairs: *peter peter peter* or *teewee teewee teewee*.
15. **Bewick's Wren:** A variable and relatively complex song. Listen for standard elements among the variety: a few well-spaced introductory "pick up" notes, a distinct *buzz* (similar to typical wren calls), often near the beginning, and a typical ending of ~5 distinct staccato notes on one pitch.

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