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The American Robin Sings with a Purpose

By John Patterson



Photo by Nick Saunders

It's early morning and through the bedroom window drifts the familiar sound of the American Robin. The bird is perched on the roof, singing in repeated bursts. If you listen, you can find a structure to the song and begin to understand how each bird assembles his own (yes, it is a he that's singing). The jumble of notes, you soon realize, is a series of separate two-, three-, four- or five-note phrases. Listen for a simple phrase you can recognize and see how often he repeats it. Then pick another and do the same. The robin's song usually consists of six to 10 short emphatic phrases, seemingly mixed at random, but notice that some of the phrases form the meat of the song with frequent repetition, while others are the spice, tossed in less often.

His purpose is two-fold: a warning to male rivals to move on, and an invitation to local females to linger. His song repertoire is unique, with his own favourite mix of phrases and by singing from rooftops or tall trees around the perimeter of his territory, he spreads his message as widely as possible. While the songs are the creation of male birds, they are shaped by the females, as the singers of songs judged to be worthy by females will have an easier time finding a mate and passing on their musical talent to the next generation.

The sounds birds make are varied and purposeful. Song is associated with the breeding season, but there are also simpler calls heard throughout the year. Contact calls allow a pair to track each other as they forage. Alarm calls are survival tools, as birds warn each other of danger. Robin alarm calls, sounding like "tut" and "peek" signal alertness, a low-grade alarm, while a whinny-type call is a higher-grade alarm. The high-pitched "seeeee" is the highest-grade alarm made and understood by many songbird species – often signalling a predatory hawk or falcon overhead.

When you slow down to smell the roses, remember to listen to the birds. You may discover that beyond the pretty voice there is endless fascination.

The opinions expressed above are those of the writer, a long-term member of the Saskatoon Nature Society.

This column is provided courtesy of the Saskatoon Nature Society. Reach the society by email at president@saskatoonnature.org or visit their website at saskatoonnature.org. You can find them on Facebook at facebook.com/SaskatoonNatureSociety.