

Nature Notes, June 2021

Taking Note of Our Songbirds

By John Patterson

It's early in the morning and the sun is not up yet. Through the bedroom window drifts the familiar song of the American robin. The bird outside, perched on the corner of the roof, is singing in repeated bursts. Chances are he will keep going for a while yet.

Sometimes the most familiar things are the least examined. Their familiarity shunts them to the background unappreciated. But you are well advised to take the time to smell the roses and, likewise, to listen to the robins. If you do, you can find a structure there and begin to understand how each bird assembles his own unique song (yes, it is a he). Besides, it may help you get back to sleep.

As you listen to the jumble of notes, you will soon realize that he is stringing together a series of two-, three-, four- or five-note phrases. The earliest songs in the morning are a continuous series of phrases, transformed later into groupings of phrases separated by short intervals. 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 phrases, seemingly mixed at random and belted out with vigour. 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 intended target audience is twofold: his male rivals in the neighbourhood who are being warned away, and the local females who are being invited to linger. His song repertoire is unique, with his own favourite phrases mixed in his own way with the hope that the vocal package is sufficiently impressive to attract and retain a mate, while keeping the rivals at bay. By singing from the rooftop or a tall tree, he is spreading his message as widely as possible and is marking his territory from those of his neighbours. While the songs are the creation of male birds, they are shaped by the females – only the singers of songs judged to be worthy by the females will mate and pass on their musical talent to the next generation.



The sounds birds make are varied and purposeful. Song is most closely associated with the breeding season in spring, but there are also shorter and simpler calls of

all sorts made by both males and females heard throughout the year. Simple contact calls allow a pair to keep track of each other as they forage through your yard. Alarm calls are survival tools as birds, even of different species, warn each other of approaching danger. The robin calls, which sound like tut and peek, seem to signal alertness or a low-grade alarm, while a whinny-type call is a higher-level alarm. The high-pitched seeeee is the highest-grade alarm made and understood by many songbird species – often signalling a hawk or falcon overhead.

While the robin and other common birds well adapted to urban living are still present in good numbers and easy to hear, the same cannot be said of songbirds, in general, and grassland birds, in particular. As their numbers decline year after year, their songs are heard less frequently. It used to be that canaries were taken into coal mines because they are sensitive to poor conditions. As long as the canary was singing, the miners knew they were safe. If the bird went quiet, it was the equivalent of an alarm bell sounding. Today, as the song of so many of our native birds begins to fade, we should all take note.

It's all the more reason to listen and appreciate birdsong when you hear it. 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 published in the Saskatoon Bridges. It 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.