

# BIRDWALK NEWSLETTER

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Walks conducted by  
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Newsletter Written by  
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Photo right by  
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Black-crowned Night Heron



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**“What nature delivers to us is never stale. Because what nature creates has eternity in it.”** Isaac Bashevis Singer

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## Basics of Bird Vocalization and Communication:

If you walk out into the forest or any area which has plenty of birds available and close your eyes, you may be amazed at all of the calls, songs, wing beating, bill snapping, drumming, quacking, and pounding that you hear. All of these things and more are ways in which birds communicate. This communication may be amongst individuals in a pair, individuals within the species, across species, to predators, or to other intruders. Even though most sounds of a bird are from vocalizations such as song or calls, some sounds are not made by the vocal cords but are more mechanical in nature by use of the wings, beaks, feet, etc. This is why many birders and ornithologist recognize bird communication in 3 categories: song, call, and unspecified (according to the Avian Vocalizations



Red-shouldered Hawk Photo by Guenter Weber

Center). First, let's consider the vocalizations of bird communication. Birds have vocal membranes on bony structures called a syrinx. What makes them unique from human vocal cords is that this structure is located below the trachea rather than at the top of the trachea. The pitch and volume of the notes are controlled by the tension of the membrane and/or the force of exhaling. Bird vocalizations are usually divided into songs and calls. Both can be "attractive" or "musical" so they cannot be simply defined in this way. Songs are usually more complicated in that they require more pitches within the string, have longer auricles, and tend to repeat as in refrains. Therefore they are thought of as musical. Calls tend to be simpler sounds with crisp or harsh vocalizations that tend

to be shorter in length. Of course, there are always exceptions to a rule. Types of vocalizations also have to be looked at according to the birds' intent and the listeners' interpretation. Songs are generally used for bonding, breeding, and mating as well as territorial designation. Duet calls and songs or "counter singing" are also known between individuals in the species. Calls are typically for contact and recognizing purposes as well as for alarms. Sometimes those alarms turn into "mobbing" by many individuals toward a particular threat. It is times like these that these calls definitely illustrate communication recognition for a



Barred Owl

Photo by Guenter Weber

**purpose by those listening.**

**Some birds such as cave-dwellers can also use audible vocalizations to echolocate within their realm. For each species, ornithologists, recordists, and birdwatchers have distinguished these calls and songs and differentiate them for you in guide books.**

**Research has shown that birds learn song and calls from their parents- usually the males. The parent sings to the young to help aid in their vocal development so that they will be better equipped to survive and live on to attract mates themselves and communicate with others for survival purposes. The young, in turn, will first listen to the phrases (sensory learning) and then practice these songs and calls (sensorimotor learning). The health of**

**the species relies on the success of these lessons. Of course, some birds have been known to be mimics of others. This aides in formations of mixed-species flocks which can help with surviving from predators and migrating. North American mimic masters include the mockingbirds, thrashers, catbirds, blue jays, and starlings. Blue Jays can mimic several species of hawks. Parrots have vocal structures similar to humans and have a specialized area in the forebrain for vocalization, and that is why they can mimic human sounds quite readily. European starlings, related to myna birds, are excellent mimics- they can mimic motorcycles and tea kettles! Brown Thrashers are so good at mimicking others that they have over 2000 different songs in their repertoire.**



**Photo by Guenter Weber**

## More Fun Facts:

- An African Gray Parrot, named Prudle, is in the Guinness Book of World Records for having a vocabulary of over 1000 words.
- Greg Budney, an audio curator for birds, says that a gray catbird has been known to mimic many birds and a frog!
- Some cavity nesters can mimic snake hissing to deter predators which may be close by.
- Even though passerines are well known for their songs, some are voiceless and rely entirely on mechanical-type communication.
- Most singing takes place while perched. However, some species can sing while in flight.
- In Eurasia and the Americas, most songs are conducted by the males. In most Australian and African areas, most singing is done by both male and female of the species. This is important for arid regions that have sporadic breeding due to climatic conditions. Locating and bonding of these birds can occur more readily.
- Birds can control both sides of the syrinx and trachea separately. Therefore, they can produce two notes at the same time!
- A man named Ludwig Koch, a famous wildlife recordist, was the first known to record birdsong back in 1889.



Information gathered for this article came from: “Mimics”, The Cornell Lab of Ornithology; “Bird Communication”, Bird Sleuth K-12, The Cornell Lab of Ornithology; “Types of Bird Sounds”, Avian Vocalization Center; “Bird Vocalization”, Wikipedia.

Photo left by Jo Frkovich



Anhinga Female

Photo by Richard Hernandez

August 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017 was a successful bird walk day. Not only did we have a great group of 8 participants to go out and explore, but 43 species were identified. Scattered throughout the property were Anhinga (some juveniles still being seen in nests), Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Pileated Woodpecker, White-eyed

Vireo, Pine Warbler, and Red-winged Blackbird. The cabin area was a productive sight, especially in the wooded area between the cabins and Ravenswood. Specifically in that area, a Great-crested Flycatcher, an Eastern Kingbird, a White-breasted Nuthatch, a few Eastern Bluebird, a Yellow-throated Warbler, and a Summer Tanager were located. An Eastern Towhee was seen near the maintenance area. Highlights of the walk were the Red-eyed Vireo, the American Redstart, and the Northern Waterthrush found along the walk in the wooded areas. In addition, two Northern Parula were seen this week. At Ravenswood, Wood Duck, Little Blue Heron (mostly the young), and White Ibis took the show. At the large impoundment and along the outer dike, the Yellow Warbler, Boat-tailed Grackle, Great Blue Heron, Great Egret, Snowy Egret, Little Blue Heron, and Common Moorhen took center stage. Also in the large impoundment two shorebirds were spotted- the Clapper Rail and the Spotted Sandpiper. Both- the large impoundment and Ravenswood- claimed one each of the Belted Kingfisher. American Crow were counted, but no Fish Crow were seen or heard. Flyover sightings included the Laughing Gulls and the Mississippi Kite. Turkey Vultures were seen, but not the Black Vultures this time. The usual feathered friends were: Carolina Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, Carolina Wren, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Mourning Dove, Blue Jay, Northern Mockingbird, Northern Cardinal, and Common Grackle.