

## **Bird Language: The Five Voices of Songbirds**

Throughout time, people who live close to the land have been experts at understanding what the birds were saying to each other. If the birds were relaxed and calm (singing, eating), the people knew there were no predators about. If the birds were alarmed and retreating, people knew that they needed to take care because there might be danger. Tuning into bird language can tell us so much about what is occurring around us.

Birds have a whole repertoire of sounds to communicate what they're experiencing. Singing and alarming are just two of the five vocalizations that life-long naturalist and bird language expert, Jon Young refers to.

- Songs — the relatively structured sounds they use to defend territory and attract mates.
- Companion calls — the sounds birds use to communicate with each other during feeding or travel, a way to let their companions know where they are and that they're OK.
- Juvenile begging — the "I'm hungry!" sounds that chicks and young birds make to get adults to feed them.
- Aggression — the sounds made by birds defending their territory against other intruding birds.
- Alarm — the sound made when expressing alarm about a threat.



Pacific Wren

Alarm sounds combined with behavior reveal a surprising amount of information. As Audubon points out, "Amazingly, birds can tailor their calls to respond to a wide range of threats. If a raptor's flying overhead, a songbird may make a short, quiet, high-pitched sound that won't carry far. This alerts nearby birds without revealing the caller's location. But if a raptor is perched, smaller species might try to project deeply and loudly to rally the troops and mob the intruder. Chickadees, for instance, utter a high *seet* when they see an aerial predator. If they encounter a perched owl, though, they'll holler *chick-a-dee!* with an increasing number of *dees* depending on the severity of the threat."



Black-capped chickadees

**Here are links to two videos which will give you a glimpse into the songs, calls and other behaviors of two of Mama Fox's favorite local resident birds.**

**Pacific Wren:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OGgmLH7hm7A>

**Black-capped Chickadee:** [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5KdvPp1\\_Jel](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5KdvPp1_Jel)

**Parents and Older Kids:** The five types of songbird vocalizations and the intricacies of

bird language are explained in detail in Young's wonderful book, "What The Robin Knows," an essential read for anyone who wants to understand bird language.

### **Bird Sit Activity**

Did you know that it can take 10-20 minutes for birds to normalize after you've come into their space? Have you ever walked into a spot in the forest with lots of birdsong and suddenly it all stops when you show up? Try doing a **bird sit** to see if you can sit still enough to have the birds resume their normal activity.

- Find a spot where you can sit quietly, safely, and comfortably for 10-20 minutes. Try not to move around too much.
- Take a few deep breaths to settle in and then start using your senses like hearing and vision to start noticing bird activity. Unfocus your eyes (owl eyes) to notice movement in your periphery. Listen for any sort of bird movement near or far as well as any of the bird language sounds discussed earlier.
- After a while, hopefully the birds will accept that you are in their space and resume normal activity.
- Try to guess what birds might be doing:
  - If they are flying back and forth to and from the same spots, perhaps there is a nest and they are feeding babies.
  - Are birds flying really fast and/or making loud alarm calls? Maybe there is a bird of prey nearby.
  - Are birds singing? Perhaps everything is good for now.
  - Are there high-pitched, squeaky sounds? Maybe there is a nest nearby!
- Try this activity in different places - in the forest, on the edge of a forest in a meadow, near a wetland, and in an urban environment. Do the birds react differently to you in different settings?
- Try this activity at different times of day and notice the differences.
- Check in with yourself throughout your bird sit and see how you feel when you notice different things.

**Enjoy!**