

The Singing of Birds

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We are surrounded by beauty, and whereas we appreciate the visual glory, we are sometimes not so aware of the wonderful sounds around us. Some of the most beautiful sound is that of nature produced by our amazing feathered inhabitants.

Bird calls consist of many types of sounds, including whistling, piping, chirping, clicking, trilling, warbling, twittering, cheeping, cackling, hooting, laughing, rasping, honking, squeaking, rattling, cooing, quacking, chattering, wailing, screeching, ringing, rattling, and hissing. Calls are also identified and recognized by their pitch, rhythm and pattern, and experienced bird observers can quickly determine the species (and sometimes the sex) of the bird making the call. Whereas humans have a single voice-box, most birds have dual vocal valves and are capable of producing two separate notes simultaneously.

Are bird calls and bird songs separate and different things? Often, they are. Some songs seem to be for sheer joy, but there is mostly some other compunction. Perhaps the most common reason for bird calls is “contact”. Just birds saying “I am here” so that partners or groups keep track of each other and can keep moving about together, or perhaps it is also an indication of “I am okay at this time, there is no danger, and I do not need assistance or protection.”

Calls and songs are important in breeding, and many birds use additional calls during the breeding season which are not heard at other times of the year. Males often establish a territory which they defend by physical attack and threat, but mostly by advertising with territorial calls. They sing to attract a mate, proving the beauty and strength of their song and their genetic fitness to father offspring. The pair sings to each other to bond, and some species have special calls when it is time for the changeover of brooding duties. The relieving parent moves to near the nest site and gives its special call, so that the brooding parent is able to fly off to feed, assured of the safety of the eggs or nestlings. Some birds prove their fitness by mimicry. Encouraged caged birds, of course, can copy human speech, but others in the wild such as Spangled Drongo and Pied Butcherbirds mimic other species. Documentaries have been produced on the wondrous mimicry of the Superb Lyrebird, and I have listened to them continue a routine of copying up to eight different birds as well as mechanical sounds as they wander through territory or perch in a prominent position.

Nestlings and dependent juveniles have a highly effective demanding begging call which prompts parents into feeding them. This call drops from their repertoire when independent.

Other calls with specific usage include alarms (perhaps warning of a raptor in the vicinity), distress (when a snake or goanna nears a nest or young), scolding (maybe a human straying into an active territory), and at non-breeding sites there may be war or fighting warnings if another bird enters a patch considered the territory of a family or group. Certain alarm calls, especially those of the Noisy Miner, seem universally recognized by birds. They do not even check what the danger may be, but react in panic to anticipated imminent danger and flee to the nearest safe retreat.

It is interesting to note that some species have evolved with a very simple call or a few simple calls – perhaps a simple “peep” type – and yet have achieved evolutionary success, whilst others have evolved with multiple glorious melodies and yet are certainly no more successful. It is not as though those with the simple calls are endeavouring to hide from something which may pose a threat, as they call when exposed or in flight. Those with magnificent calls are often likely to perch prominently and let forth a loud glorious song, and some of them actually chorus with a mate or family. Our urban species such as Australian Magpie, and Pied and Grey

Butcherbirds are beautiful singers who chorus, i.e. sing in duet with a mate or family member. The Grey Shrike-Thrush and Brown Honeyeater are also beautiful songsters. All these species are either black, white and grey plumaged, or a plain brown in the case of the honeyeater, but lack of brilliant colour is certainly not the only reason for the beauty of sound, if at all.

There are many species which do not have a melodious call and the sound may be raucous or unattractive to humans. The Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, Torresian Crow, various ducks and Little Wattlebird are examples. The cockatoo, surprisingly, when caged, excels at mimicry.

In the very early morning, bird calls gradually commence to dominate the sound spectrum. Many of these calls are unfamiliar to even keen bird observers as they are so different from day-time calls. Each bird commences to call according to its visual acuity. It is not wise to advertise one's position to a predator without being able to clearly see the predator. As with many daytime songs, the dawn chorus is advertising to attract or affirm a mate and a defence of territory.



Some of our lovely songsters – Brown Honeyeater, Grey Butcherbird, Australian Magpie, and Pied Butcherbird