Bird Memory Phrases

Field marks are not the only clues to use when identifying birds. Since no two kinds of bird sound exactly alike, the sounds they make are another clue to use. In fact, once you learn the songs and calls of birds in your area, you can tell what kinds of birds are around just by listening.

Memory phrases are one trick that many birders use to help them remember the songs of different species. Memory phrases are words that imitate a bird’s song or call. Another way to put it is a memory phrase is a phonetic description of what a species’ song or call sounds like. For instance, if you listen closely to the song of an eastern towhee, it sounds like it’s saying “Drink your tea” with the end of the word tea drawn out. Once you learn this phrase and hear the bird’s song a few times, the phrase sticks in your memory making it easier to identify the bird the next time you hear it. The following are commonly used memory phrases that are sometimes included in field guides. Kids enjoy learning these silly phases, and become excited when they recognize them in the field.

Memory phrases of some common resident birds

Blue Jay               Jay! Jay! Jay!
Northern Cardinal     (loud and clear) Wacheer, pretty, pretty, pretty! or Theodore, Theodore
Eastern Towhee        drink your tea! (song) or Towhee! (call)
American Robin        cherry up, cheerio, cheery up, cheerio
American Goldfinch    Bobeee, potato chip!
Barred Owl             I cook for me, who cooks for you all?
Great-horned Owl       (muffled) Whooo’s awake? (pause) me too.
Mourning Dove          CoooOOO, coo, coo, coo (mournful)
Red Winged Blackbird  Conk-er-reeeeee! (ascending, louder at end)
Red-bellied Woodpecker Churrrrrrr! Brrrrrr! (rattle)
Carolina Wren          (loud and clear) “tea kettle, tea kettle, tea kettle!” or “cheeseburger, cheeseburger, cheeseburger!”
Song Sparrow           maids, maids, maids, please put the kettle on
Tufted Titmouse       pita, pita, pita (or Peter, Peter, Peter)
Carolina Chickadee    fee bee, fee bay (song) or chickadee-dee-dee (call)
White-breasted Nuthatch a nasal “yank, yank, yank” (over)
White-throated Sparrow     old Sam, Peabody, Peabody, Peabody
Northern Mockingbird     All or any of the above—each repeated several times
Northern Flicker        klee-yer or a rapid wik, wik, wik call is flicka, flicka

Memory phrases of some Neotropical migrants:

Indigo Bunting      Sweet, sweet, spit, spit, chew, chew
Gray Catbird       soft, disjointed, squeaky sounds, with a cat’s Mew interspersed or at the end
Wood Thrush       ee-o-lay, and ee-o-layeee (flute-like) Call is a sharp pit, pit, pit
Red-eyed Vireo     Incessant here I am, where are you?
White-eyed Vireo  Quick, give me a rain check!
Baltimore Oriole   whistling chitty, chitty, bang, bang!
Orchard Oriole    whistling notes with slurred where at end
Rose-breasted Grosbeak robin-like warble, but sweeter
Summer Tanager    robin-like warble, but nervous Call: pit-tuk or hiccup
Scarlet Tanager   robin-like warble, but harsh, scratchy Call: chip-burr
Great-Crested Flycatcher song: prrr-eeet! call: a loud wheep!
Eastern Wood Pewee pee-a-wee (mournful), or pee-o
Common Yellowthroat witchity, witchity, witchity, witch
Ovenbird          teacher, teacher, TEACHER! (louder)
Chestnut-sided Warbler please, please, please to meet cha!
Black-throated Blue Warbler beer, beer, beer, beeeeee! (ascending)
Black-throated Green Warbler zee-zee-zee, zoo-zee or zoo-zee, zoo-zoo zee
Black-and-White Warbler weesie, weesie, weesie (accent of wee)
Northern Parula    zeeeeee-up (ascend, then abruptly dropping
Louisiana Waterthrush ter-ree, ter-ree, ter-whit-a whit (first three notes slurred, then twitters)
Hooded Warbler     a weeta, weeta, wee-teo