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Birding by Ear: a Guide to Bird-song Identification

Florida Field Naturalist

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REVIEWS

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Birding By Ear: A Guide to Bird-song Identification.—Richard K. Walton and Robert W. Lawson. 1989. Houghton-Mifflin Company, Boston. Three cassettes, 64-page booklet, \$35.00.—Walton and Lawson take an approach to identifying birds by song that is similar to a field ornithology course taught by a good teacher. Aimed at beginning birders, their goal in these cassettes and booklet is to create a vocabulary for describing avian sounds and to develop a system for memorizing those sounds.

Recognizing that no two people learn in the same way, the authors wisely offer a variety of techniques for characterizing and recalling bird sounds. The suggested techniques include breaking a song into recognizable units to get a rhythm (e.g., the paired phrases of the Indigo Bunting), developing “comparative ideas” (e.g., the common grackle’s call is like a squeaky gate), attaching descriptive words (e.g., the flute-like songs of thrushes), and even drawing a diagram of the song. The authors also encourage their listeners to experiment with several methods and to create their own new systems.

With a combination of clear text and verbal instructions on the tape, the authors proceed to introduce songs, calls, and sounds of 85 species of common birds. Most of the species are loosely organized into taxonomic (eg., hawks), phonetic (eg., whistlers), and mnemonic (eg., name-sayers) groups. Common and miscellaneous species and species that make unusual sounds are also represented in groups. To give an example of their approach, the phonetic group of sing-singers consists of the American Robin, Scarlet Tanager, Summer Tanager, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and Red-eyed Vireo. Using the robin’s call as a foundation, the authors carefully discuss the defining characteristics of the other species in the group. With this technique, which they call pairing, the authors succeed in their aim to create a learning system comparable to the field guide system of bird identification. After presenting 17 learning groups, all species are rearranged into habitat groupings to simulate a real field quiz.

Approximately one-third of the species that can be heard on these cassettes do not breed in Florida. However, almost all the species either winter or migrate through the state, which makes these high quality recordings useful for birding in Florida. More importantly, Walton and Lawson are excellent teachers for beginners who are interested in learning to identify birds by the sounds they make.

Instead of concentrating on identification by contrast, Lang Elliot takes a different approach (*Know Your Bird Sounds, Volume 1: Yard, Garden, and City Birds* and *Volume 2: Birds of the Countryside*. 1991. Chelsea Green Publishing, Post Mills, Vermont. Each volume contains one 65-minute cassette and a 32-page booklet for \$12.95.) He offers a sampler of the variety of sounds made by 70 selected species. Where possible the sex of the individual making the sound, time of year, and behavioral context are given. Songs, calls, call notes, woodpecker drumming, bill snapping, and wing whirs are some of the variety of sounds presented. Exposure to the diversity of sounds made by a species will help experienced birders and beginners to “know” their birds more thoroughly. These tapes will open new dimensions to those who only know the American Crow by its simple “Caw”!

Elliot’s recordings share 53 species with the recordings by Walton and Lawson. Differences are a broader presentation of shorebirds and swallows by Elliot and more hawks, nightjars and warblers by Walton and Lawson. Only two species, Black-capped Chickadee and Common Raven, that are on the tapes by Elliot do not occur in Florida. In fact many of the recordings were made in Florida.

I recommend both of these recordings for their different stated goals. As useful as these tapes are, I agree with Elliot that “the best learning style of all is to immerse yourself in direct outdoor observation.” Both of these excellent sets of recordings will help to initiate the listener into “the community of the ear.”—R. Todd Engstrom, Tall Timbers Research Station, Route 1, Box 678, Tallahassee, Florida 32312.