

FRIENDS OF



ASTON'S EYOT

Hints for recognising bird song

- Start close to home – in your garden or around the streets where you live. You see these birds every day but maybe take them for granted. Take more notice of them and try to memorise their songs and calls. Try to link the song to the image of the bird.
- Do the same when you are walking in your local area – Aston's Eyot is ideal as there is a wide range of resident and migrant birds, as well as water birds.
- Whenever you hear a call or song you don't recognise, try to track it down to see which bird is making the sound – it's easier to remember a song or call when you have seen the bird making it.
- Soon you will have a base of knowledge that can be extended as time goes on. This helps with the process of elimination when trying to identify unrecognised songs and calls – *It sounds like a blackbird but ie 'Same but different'*

Once you have built up a basic knowledge of the commonest birds you will find that you recognise a song but can't remember which bird you should attach it to. Here are a few pointers to help remind you how to tell similar sounding songs apart, by linking hints to the names of the birds. To understand what the hints are describing you would need to listen to the songs – see the last page for useful websites and resources.

Mnemonics for distinguishing similar bird songs

Robin / Wren / Dunnock

To a beginner, these three birds can be confused. To separate them try to remember:

Wistful Wobin – thin prolonged wistful fluting

Ringing Wren – begins 'diddly-diddly' but usually with a long, powerful trill in the middle of the song, and ending with a staccato *tioo tioo tioo tioo* (of varying length).

Diddly-diddly Dunnock – a very even, level, 'diddly-diddly' song, fairly brief, often similar to Wren, but without the harsh trill

Blackbird / Song Thrush / Mistle Thrush

Similarly, these three can easily be confused so....

Beautiful Blackbird – may need no introduction – musical phrases of varying length, not repeated, with gaps of 2-3 seconds between.

Mournful Mistle Thrush – very similar to Blackbird but song has a mournful tone, singing for shorter time with shorter intervals between phrases; usually ending on an upward, questioning note. Likes the tops of large trees.

Say it Twice Song Thrush – similar to a Blackbird but shorter phrases, higher pitched and each phrase repeated two or three times.

Great Tit / Coal Tit / Blue Tit

Great Tit – its most common call sounds like 'Great Tit, Great Tit' or as is often said – 'Teacher, Tea-cher'. But remember that Great Tits have numerous other calls. Bill Oddie says that if you know most woodland birds and hear something you can't recognise, it's probably a Great Tit.

Coal Tit – sounds like the Great Tit '*Tea-cher*' call but generally higher pitched, faster, less powerful and a bit wheezy – having spent too much time down the coal mine!

Blue Tee Tee Tee Tit Tit Tit – common call '*Tee tee tee, tit tit tit*'

Pigeons / Doves / Cuckoo

Collared Dove – a three note call – *Du Doo Du*; can if half-heard be confused with Cuckoo & vice-versa

Wood D D Pigeon – a four or five note call similar to a Collared Dove but finishing with an extra one or two '*Du Du*' notes.– *Du Doo Du, Du Du*

Stock Dove – Single repeated *woo*, rising at the end, similar to

Feral Pigeon – but this species has more of a purring sound infused into the *wooup*.

Turtle Dove – now rare but you may hear it – a long low musical purr

Cuckoo - loud *cook-ko*, more staccato than the first two loud notes of the Collared Dove

Chaffinch / Willow Warbler / Chiffchaff / Lesser Whitethroat

Cha-Cha-Cha, Cha-Cha-Cha, Cha-Cha-Cha Chaffinch – a series of descending notes finishing with a flourish of notes. Chaffinches also often make a plaintive '*chink chink*' call, so also think of the **Chink Chink Chaffinch**.

Willow Warbler - also sings a series of descending soft notes, like a soft Chaffinch song, but slower and with no flourish at the end.

While we're on Willow Warblers, their plumage is almost identical to the -

Chiffchaff - but their call is easy to remember as it says its own name – '*chiff-chaff chiff-chaff chiff-chaff*' and so sounds nothing like a Willow Warbler.

Lesser Whitethroat – Rather like a slow Chaffinch without the final flourish, sometimes with an initial scratchy 'diddly' introduction.

The Crow family & Starling

Like the Chiffchaff, some of their names are perhaps onomatopoeic -

Carrion Crow – a harsh and longish 'kaah'

Rook – call very similar to a Crow (but more 'whiny'), generally to be heard in the countryside. If you're in a town, that very large black bird is likely to be a crow (even if there are dozens of them). Outside town, large flocks are more likely to be rooks (but not always) and isolated birds or pairs/family groups may be crows. If you get a close look, rooks have greyish, dull-looking bills whereas crows have shiny black bills. Some years there's a small rookery in Florence Park, but they don't visit the Eyot.

Jackdaw – a shorter, higher pitched 'jack', often repeated 'jack jack'.

Raven – Increasingly seen around Oxford: A low-pitched 'kronk'

'**The Chattering Magpie**' – is the name of a famous Irish folk tune and a very apt description of the harsh, staccato nature of the magpie's call.

Jay – another harsh call (is there a pattern developing here) but a little softer than some other members of the crow family. The call is often made twice and at a distance – jays are more wary of people than most other crows. Very good imitator, particularly of Buzzard calls (captive birds can learn lots of human words).

Starling – Mostly sings from chimney pots/aerials; wide range of strange wheezes and twitters; another good imitator, sometimes produces whole or partial songs of other birds

Blackcap / Garden Warbler / Whitethroat

Blackcap – a rich and varied warble, usually starting with a chattering and finishing with a flourish of flute-like notes. Some people say that you when they get into their rhythm you can detect ‘*duty day/duty done/duty day/duty done*’. Often hard to see.

Garden Warbler – ‘Garbled Warbler’ - very similar to the Blackcap but its song is often longer lasting with shorter pauses and is less varied – goes on a bit. Like Blackcaps, they usually sing from a well concealed perch, which adds to the difficulty of identifying the bird.

Whitethroat – ‘I am a Whitethroat’ – song shorter and more scratchy than the Blackcap and includes a frequent five/six note phrase which sounds like ‘*I am a Whitethroat*’. In early spring does prominent ascending/descending song flights. Often seen at the top of bushes.

Woodpeckers

There are three resident woodpeckers in the UK and their names helpfully describe them.

Green Woodpecker – Jay-sized; usually seen flying away from you from the ground, where it will have been feeding on ants and other invertebrates. Their yellow rump is usually visible as they fly off. Their call, known as a ‘yaffle’, is a descending series of notes, sounding like someone laughing.

Great Spotted Woodpecker – Starling sized; a black and white bird, rarely seen on the ground. Often seen near the tops of trees, searching the crevices for insects. Their call is a short ‘tchick’ sound and often alerts you to their presence. The Great Spotted are also renowned for their drumming on resonant branches, to declare their territory.

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker – Sparrow-sized and now very rare and hardly ever seen, almost never near to urban areas. Their size also tells them apart. Also drum instead of song.

A few other hints.....

Twittering Goldfinch – usually seen in small flocks at the tops of trees or bushes, or feeding on thistles or teasels. A soft, tinkling, twittering song with occasional buzzes and wheezes (mostly in gardens during the summer).

Greenfinch – Usual song like Goldfinch, but always ends with one or several long drawn-out ‘wheee’ calls.

Linnet – also very like Goldfinch, but as bird usually sings from a prominent perch, best checked visually.

Goldcrest – one of the highest pitched songs of woodland birds (many older people can’t hear them). Although they do occur on the Eyot, Goldcrests are more commonly found in coniferous trees and have a soft, round and round ‘diddy diddy’ song lasting for 2-3 seconds, gently rising to end on a high note.

Peeping Bullfinch – short, thin, single peeping note.

Reed Bunting – ‘Roadie Bunting’ – ‘one two, one two, one’.

Treecreeper - generally silent.

Long-tailed tit – high pitched buzzy calls, no real song

Also to be heard on the Eyot: calls of **Pheasant, Moorhen, Canada Goose, Greylag, Mallard, Kestrel, Buzzard, Kite, Black-headed & Lesser Black-backed Gulls, Swift** (these birds have no song as such).

NB: there are several other birds that could turn up on the Eyot, and are more regular around Iffley Meadows, notably **Reed, Sedge & Cetti's Warblers**. The last has a loud explosive song from inside a bush: *Chiu, Ti-ti-ti Chiu, Ti-ti-ti Chiu*, the other two repetitive churring songs.

Finally.....

Get an app for your phone so you can use it out in the field.

Get a DVD of bird song eg <https://www.birdguides.com/store/bookshop/dvd-cd/bird-sounds/>
<https://shopping.rspb.org.uk/bird-reference-books/british-bird-songs-dvd.html>

The Xeno-canto website has bird song from all over the world on it uploaded by enthusiasts, useful for getting an idea of individual variation in songs: www.xeno-canto.org

If you see a bird you don't know and want to identify it by its plumage the RSPB provide a clever bird identifier webpage which works on a simple process of elimination - <http://www.rspb.org.uk/wildlife/birdidentifier/form.aspx>

When you are listening to recordings of bird song keep in mind that the quality is sometimes too good, sounding like the bird is only two feet from you. When you hear birds in the wild their songs are usually less distinct and more distant. If you put a towel over your speakers you will probably get a better representation of how the bird will sound in the wild!!

And remember, birds don't make life simple for us by having only one song. They often have variations on their songs, completely different songs and various contact calls which all add to the challenge!!! Have fun



[compiled originally by Tim Lee, ver.3 revised 17/3/19 - SR]