February 2015

BIRDIFUL

20+ BIRD WONDERS

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BREEDS

why I LOVE birdwatching?

How a pair of better binoculars, Aldo Leopold, and the death of my parents combined to make me a birdwatcher!

Whip-poor-will Synchronicity

Two local birding legends were always first to hear the hopeful song that inspired Faulkner. Take a deep look at beautiful birds!

SPRING TIME BIRING

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WINTER BIRD PHOTOGRAPHY

Corn Bunting

The corn bunting (Emberiza calandra) is a passerine bird in the bunting family Emberizidae.

This is an unusual bunting because the sexes appear similar in plumage, although the males are approximately 20% larger than females. This large bulky bunting is 16 to 19 cm long, with similar plumages for the male and female, and lacks the showy male colours, especially on the head, common in the genus Emberiza. Both sexes look something like larks, with streaked grey-brown above, and whitish underparts. The song of the male is than females. a repetitive metallic sound, usually likened to jangling keys, which is plumages for the male given from a low bush, fence post or telephone wires.

It breeds across southern and central Europe, north Africa and Asia across to Kazahkstan depriving it of its food. With a few exception, it is mainly resident, but some birds from colder regions of central Europe and Asia migrate southwards in winter.

The corn bunting is a bird of open country with trees, such as farmland and weedy wasteland. It has declined and decreased greatly in north-west Europe due to intensive agricultural practices depriving it of its food supply of weed seeds and insects, the latter especially when feeding young. It has recently become extinct in Ireland, where it was previously common.

Males defend territories in the breeding season and can be polygynous, with up to three females per breeding male. The population sex ratio is generally 1 and 1, which means some males remain unmated during a season. Males are not involved in nest building or incubation, and only feed the chicks when they are over half grown.

The nest is made of grass, lined with hair or fine grass, and is usually built on the ground. Average clutch size is four, but commonly varies from three to five, occasionally six.

In England, the government's would explain the comparative paucity environmental organisation Natural England offers grants towards implementing measures to conserve this species, under the environmental stewardship scheme.

The family Emberizidae may have originated in South America and spread first into North America comparative paucity before crossing into eastern Asia and continuing to move west. This would explain the comparative paucity of emberizid species in Europe and Africa compared to the Americas nment's environmental. However, a DNA sequence-based study of passerines concluded emberizids spread from North to South America. Their diet consists mainly of seeds, but may be supplemented with insects, especially when feeding their young.

The habits of emberizids are similar to those of finches, with which they sometimes used to be grouped. Older sources may place some emberizids in the Fringillidae family, and the common names of some emberizids still refer to them as finches. With a few exceptions, emberizids build cup-shaped nests from grasses and other plant fibres, and are monogamous. The relationships of these birds with other groups within the huge nine-primaried oscine assemblage are at this point largely unresolved.

SIX TIPS FOR BIRDING BY EAR

Two Cornell Big Day birders and a tour leader tell how they learned to identify birds by ear — and you can too!

By Jennifer Horton

I arrived at Beaver Lake Bird Sanctuary a few minutes late, having hit the snooze button one too many times on an early June morning. The workshop, a survey of bird song hosted by a local tour company, had already started.

My interest in bird song had begun after an outing with the local birding club. As I scrambled to focus my binoculars on every flash of movement, the more experienced members of the group walked along casually, binoculars at their sides, calling out bird IDs left and right. I realized then that there's more to watching birds than, well, watching. I had paid for optics and spent time studying field guides but invested too little in my other senses.

1. Learn how to listen

After a few excruciating moments of blindfolded silence, bird sounds started to reverberate off Beaver Lake: a sweet succession of whistles, a plaintive call, a harsh jeer. Before asking us to put names with the sounds, Simon Thompson, leader of the workshop, asked us to focus on one at a time and describe what we were hearing. "Put words with it if you like, or describe it in some other way that makes sense to you. Does it sound like a rusty gate? Is it sweet? Repetitive?"

2. Master the songs of local birds

Once you've learned how to listen and what to listen for, the next question is where to begin. The thought of learning every single call and song in every single bird's repertoire can seem daunting even for the most musically gifted. So start small. Learning bird songs is like learning a language: Before you can speak, you have to develop your basic vocabulary. In bird speak, this means picking out several birds in your area starting to and learning them well. "Once you have that solid grounding, it's pretty transferable," says eBird project leader and BirdWatchingmagazine contributor Marshall Iliff.

3. Associate songs with something memorable

We've all heard the catchy phrases people come up with to describe bird songs. Some of them, like "Drink your tea!" for Eastern Towhee, are obvious. Others are less so. The key is to find something memorable to associate with what you're hearing. Thompson's approach is a good starting point. Many people like to use words, but when White-throated Sparrow sings, what sounds like "Old Sam Peabody Peabody" to one person may sound like "Oh sweet Canada Canada" to another.

4. Track down birds on your own

When it comes to building your ID toolbox, all the birders I spoke with agree there is no substitute for going out and tracking down birds on your own. Thompson, who's been every flash of movement birding since he was eight and is reluctant to give away his age, admits bird-song CDs didn't even exist when he was starting out. "I did have a couple of 45s, and I'd listen to those, but mostly I just did an awful lot of exploring by myself."

5. Go out with more experienced ear birders

After working on your own, there will come a time when you'll need a boost. This is when it can be helpful to attach yourself to ear birders who are more experienced than you. Doing this helped Iliff realize much more he could learn. He recommends not being afraid to ask questions.

"You'll definitely reach a plateau doing it on your own," he says, "and you may not even realize how high you can raise the bar until you go out with some birders who are better than you. You'll realize that they don't ignore the birds starting to get a handle on flying overhead, and that they are able to tell Grasshopper Sparrow from Savannah Sparrow consistently."

6. Learn the difference between songs and calls

Finally, while it may seem obvious, an important but often neglected piece to the birding-by-ear puzzle is understanding the difference between songs and calls. Birds issue calls year-round to communicate a variety of information. Songs tend to be given primarily in the spring, and usually by males, to defend territory and attract mates. As such, songs are frequently more complex, longer, and more beautiful-sounding than the short, irregular notes of calls. Songs are also usually repeated in a regular pattern. Their length and complexity often make them easier to learn than calls, says Barry, because they give you more to latch on to.

Rely on your ears

Because of the profusion of bird songs in the spring and early summer, skilled birders like Iliff, Barry, and Thompson often find binoculars unnecessary. Iliff estimates that 80 to 95 percent of his identifications during breeding season are based on sound. He simply walks along, barely looking up. Tour leader Thompson, who relies on his good ears to lead patrons to life birds, admits to doing "practically everything by listening." The practice has become automatic for Barry, too. "In the spring, I honestly am not picking up my binoculars very often," she admits.