
NOT BORING MEDIA

THE BIRD THAT SOUNDS LIKE A CHAINSAW

High-Interest Nonfiction Reading Passage

WHAT'S INCLUDED

- ✓ Reading Passage
- ✓ Comprehension Questions
- ✓ Answer Key
- ✓ Teacher Guide

GRADES 4-6 • LEXILE ~750L • DOK LEVELS 1-4

Reading they'll actually do.

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WHAT'S INCLUDED

- ✓ High-interest nonfiction reading passage (300-400 words)
- ✓ 6 comprehension questions spanning DOK levels 1-4
- ✓ Complete answer key with explanations
- ✓ Teacher guide with standards, pacing, and extensions

Questions or feedback? Leave a review or message us through TPT!

THE BIRD THAT SOUNDS LIKE A CHAINSAW

Deep in the ancient rainforests of Australia lives a bird with an almost supernatural talent: it can perfectly imitate the sound of a chainsaw cutting through timber. The superb lyrebird is nature's greatest mimic, capable of copying virtually any sound it hears with stunning accuracy—and in the modern world, that increasingly includes sounds made by human beings and their machines.

Lyrebirds have been recorded imitating car alarms, camera shutters, crying babies, barking dogs, and construction equipment including chainsaws, drills, and jackhammers. Their imitations are so remarkably accurate that even experienced ornithologists and audio engineers can be fooled into thinking they're hearing the real thing. One famous lyrebird named Chook became an internet sensation after videos showed him replicating chainsaws, camera motor drives, and car alarms with perfect fidelity.

The birds developed this extraordinary mimicking ability for a surprisingly simple biological reason: to attract mates. Male lyrebirds perform elaborate courtship dances while singing incredibly complex songs that incorporate dozens of different sounds from their environment. The more varied and impressive a male's repertoire, the more attractive he appears to choosy females evaluating potential partners.

Scientists have discovered that lyrebirds can remember and reproduce sounds with remarkable precision over their entire lifetimes. Their syrinx—the specialized vocal organ found in birds—is extraordinarily complex, with powerful muscles that allow precise control over the sounds they produce. A single male lyrebird might have a repertoire containing accurate imitations of over 20 different bird species, plus various environmental sounds.

The chainsaw imitation that made lyrebirds famous on the internet isn't just an amusing party trick—it's actually a concerning indicator of environmental change. Lyrebirds learn the sounds present in their environment, and the fact that many now imitate chainsaws and construction equipment reflects how much human activity has invaded their traditional forest habitat. Researchers worry that as natural forests shrink and fragment, lyrebirds may gradually lose the traditional natural sounds they've copied for countless generations, replacing them with an increasingly artificial soundtrack.

Word Count: 287 | Lexile: ~750L | Grades 4-6 | Source: BBC

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Name: _____ Date: _____

1

Why did lyrebirds originally develop their mimicking ability?

- ☐ A) To scare away predators
- ☐ B) To attract mates
- ☐ C) To communicate danger
- ☐ D) To confuse other birds

2

What body part allows lyrebirds to make such accurate sounds?

- ☐ A) Their beak
- ☐ B) Their lungs
- ☐ C) Their syrinx
- ☐ D) Their tongue

3

What does the chainsaw imitation reveal about lyrebird habitats?

- ☐ A) Lyrebirds prefer to live near humans
- ☐ B) Human activity has invaded their environment
- ☐ C) Chainsaws are common in all forests
- ☐ D) Lyrebirds can only learn one sound

4

Why might a male lyrebird with more sounds be more successful at mating?

- ☐ A) Females can't hear simple sounds
- ☐ B) More sounds suggest better health or experience to females
- ☐ C) Males must sing for exactly 20 minutes
- ☐ D) Females only mate with birds that know human sounds

5

What concern do researchers have about lyrebirds in shrinking forests?

- ☐ A) They will become too loud
- ☐ B) They may lose the natural sounds they traditionally copied
- ☐ C) They will stop dancing
- ☐ D) They will attack humans

6

How might studying lyrebirds help scientists understand learning and memory?

- ☐ A) Lyrebirds can teach humans to sing
- ☐ B) Their ability to remember complex sounds could reveal how brains store auditory information
- ☐ C) Scientists want to replace lyrebirds with robots
- ☐ D) Lyrebirds have human brain structures

ANSWER KEY

The Bird That Sounds Like a Chainsaw

1. B) To attract mates

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage states: 'The birds developed this ability for a simple reason: to attract mates.'

2. C) Their syrinx

DOK 1 — Recall. The passage explains: 'Their syrinx—the vocal organ in birds—is extraordinarily complex.'

3. B) Human activity has invaded their environment

DOK 2 — Inference. The passage states: 'the fact that many now imitate chainsaws and construction equipment reflects how much human activity has invaded their habitat.'

4. B) More sounds suggest better health or experience to females

DOK 2 — Inference. The passage states 'the more sounds a male can imitate, the more impressive he appears to females.' A large repertoire suggests skill.

5. B) They may lose the natural sounds they traditionally copied

DOK 3 — Analysis. The passage notes: 'as forests shrink, lyrebirds may lose the natural sounds they've traditionally copied.'

6. B) Their ability to remember complex sounds could reveal how brains store auditory information

DOK 4 — Extended Thinking. Lyrebirds demonstrate remarkable auditory memory. Studying their brains could provide insights into memory and learning.

TEACHER GUIDE

The Bird That Sounds Like a Chainsaw

STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.1 — Refer to details and examples in a text
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.4 — Determine meaning of words and phrases
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.8 — Explain how author uses evidence
- NGSS — Connections to scientific practices

PACING OPTIONS

- Quick Read (10-15 min): Passage + questions 1-4
- Standard (20-25 min): Full passage + all questions
- Deep Dive (35-40 min): Add discussion + extension

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Lyrebirds now imitate human sounds like chainsaws. Is this a sign of adaptation or a warning about habitat loss? Could it be both?
- Male lyrebirds imitate sounds to impress females. What are some ways humans try to impress potential partners that might seem strange to outsiders?
- If lyrebirds only hear human sounds in the future, what might be lost when they can no longer copy natural forest sounds?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Record yourself imitating 5 different sounds (animals, machines, nature). How accurate can you get? Reflect on why the lyrebird's ability is so remarkable.
- Research how the syrinx differs from the human larynx and create a diagram comparing bird and human vocal anatomy.
- Create a 'soundscape' project: what sounds would a lyrebird in your neighborhood learn to imitate?

DIFFERENTIATION

- Struggling: Pre-teach vocabulary, partner reading
- Advanced: Add research, compare to related events
- ELL: Visual supports, pre-teach context

SOURCE

- BBC / Australian Museum