

HOW DO PEOPLE BECOME BIRD WATCHERS?

Eliot Taylor, Sherborn

When I was in the 6th grade, my teacher was interested in birds, and every other week we had someone from the Massachusetts Audubon Society lecture and show slides on conservation and the various balances of nature. After the leaves were off of the trees, I littered the classroom with about 60 birds' nests that I collected as a nature project. Although I found the nests fascinating, I was really more interested in climbing trees. So I lived through the next few years not knowing a wood thrush from a yellow warbler, and caring less.

Then one spring day it happened. I was walking through the woods when I heard a clear two-note, two-pitched "fee-bee" from the top of a big pine tree. I knew that there was a bird called a phoebe, and I figured that I was hearing one. As the bird continued, I started wondering what would happen if I tried to imitate it. Every sporting goods store sold duck and crow calls, and I had heard of people luring birds by whistling. I looked all around and made absolutely sure that I was alone -- even at 14 I knew that people shouldn't be seen whistling at birds.

I tried my imitation. As I watched the top of the tree, I saw the bird drop down about 10 feet, look my way and continue to give his call. After three minutes, two birds flew down and landed on a dead branch within five feet of me. Now I could see that they were chickadees, that is unless phoebes looked like chickadees and occasionally say "chickadee." The next day I visited the library and found out that phoebes do not look like chickadees and that chickadees say "fee-bee" and that phoebes do not say "chickadee."

A few days later I was in the woods whistling "chickadee" when I heard "towhee" and "drink your tea" calls. Again, I tried imitations and in a few minutes I had a male and a female towhee within 15 feet. I now had two species on my "Attracted-by-Imitating" list. After one more trip to the library to look up towhees, I went to a store and bought my first bird book.

My third species was the whip-poor-will. One night after a Boy Scout meeting, we heard one calling from the cliff in the woods behind a cemetery. We formed a circle around the cliff and closed in, and two of the boys caught a glimpse of the bird as it flew away.

I knew that I could attract black-capped chickadees and rufous-sided towhees, so I started whistling whip-poor-will calls. In a few moments this bird returned and landed in a nearby bush where we could all see it. After I called a few more times, it disappeared. As we walked the half-mile back to my house we kept laughing and giving calls. It was a big joke to us but not for the bird -- during the next four nights I was awakened at two a.m. by a whip-poor-will in the forsythia bushes under my bedroom window!

A year or two later I was sitting on the same cliff behind the cemetery at twilight whistling at hermit thrushes, when the first whip-poor-will of the evening called. I returned the favor and the bird flew down the path and landed on the cliff about 20 feet away. It was still fairly light, and we looked at each other. I called again and the whip-poor-will flew over and landed on my left thigh. I sat motionless and watched as it jumped down between my feet and then up onto my right thigh. Then another whip-poor-will flew over the cliff, giving some "chuck" calls, and my bird flew into the trees behind me. When I called again it flew back and landed on my left shoulder for about 15 seconds before leaving for good.

Whenever I hear a new bird I try my best to imitate it. If I can get either the pitch or the rhythm, the bird may come. Of course, if I can get both the pitch and rhythm my odds are greatly increased. The next time that you are in the woods, all alone, try whistling the chickadee's "fee-bee" call or something else. You too may be pleasantly surprised.

Here is a list of 55 birds that I have lured by imitating their calls: screech, great-horned, barred and saw-whet owls; whip-poor-will; great-crested and Trail's fly-catcher; wood pewee; blue jay; black-capped chickadee; tufted titmouse; Carolina wren; mockingbird; catbird; brown thrasher; wood and hermit thrush; veery; bluebird; golden-

crowned and ruby-crowned kinglets; yellow-throated, solitary, red-eyed and warbling vireo; black-and-white, blue-winged, Parula, yellow, black-throated blue, myrtle, black-throated green, chestnut-sided, Canada, and prairie warblers; yellowthroat; redstart; eastern meadowlark; Baltimore oriole; rusty blackbird; scarlet and summer tanagers; cardinal; rose-breasted and pine grosbeaks; indigo bunting; purple finch; goldfinch; rufous-sided towhee; vesper, field, white-throated, fox, Lincoln's and song sparrows.

GIRLS DON'T FLY SO WELL

Large pelagic birds epitomize soaring, seemingly effortless flight over long distances. The great wing areas of albatrosses and frigatebirds, for example, catch even the most subtle thermal updrafts, permitting these birds to range far.

In the Gulf of Mexico at Tarpon Key, male frigatebirds (*Fregata magnificens*) outnumber females 9 to 1, whereas 225 miles to the south at Dry Tortugas, the opposite ratio prevails. This curious sexual imbalance prompted the three-year study by B. A. Harrington, R. W. Schreiber, and G. E. Woolfenden of the University of South Florida that is described in American Birds, Vol. 26, No. 6.

They note that few frigatebirds fly on windless days and that the proportion of females aloft increases with windspeed. Since females carry an average of 1/100 ounce more weight per square inch of wing area than do males, females need more lift from the wind to permit easy soaring.

The reason for the island imbalance is that the average windspeed at Dry Tortugas is somewhat greater than at Tarpon Key, providing a preferential habitat for the relatively heavy girls. Perhaps subtle differences in windspeed are sufficient to determine the world distribution of frigatebirds.

L.J.R.



THE CAHOW

The fortunes of the rare Cahow or Bermuda Petrel seem to be looking up. These birds were thought to be extinct after 1621, when men and their rats and hogs invaded the Cahow's nesting grounds decimating the population. A specimen of a Cahow was found in 1906, but it wasn't until 1951 that it was confirmed that they were breeding on small islets off Bermuda. Since that time the government of Bermuda has given the Cahows strict protection, including the attentions of a warden. The Bermudians have even constructed special nesting burrows designed to reduce nest site competition from the larger and aggressive Tropic-birds. However, the Cahow population continued to decline concurrent with an increase in the amounts of D.D.T. found in dead chicks and unhatched eggs. In 1968, the 26 known nesting pairs fledged only eight young. In 1972, however, there were 37 pairs with 17 fledged young. Significantly, the level of D.D.T. residue found in Cahow eggs has decreased in recent years. This summary was prepared from information in Audubon, Vol. 70, No. 6; and Audubon, Vol. 75, No. 2.

P.M.