

Mecklenburg Audubon Society

Bird Behavior: Bird Song

What's all that Noise?

A man's home is his castle may be a sexist cliché, but it's one rooted in biological fact. Implied in the statement is that a man will defend his home as knights once defended their castles. Biologists call any defended area a 'territory'. The defended area may be a food supply, a place to mate or a place to nest. In any case, something within the territory is valued enough by the owner to defend it.

Mammals use a scent to mark the boundaries of their territories – usually with urine [even dogs and cats do this]. Sunfish and bass chase intruders away from their nests during spawning. And lizards get their message across with aggressive displays of 'push-ups' when competitors show up.

Most examples of territoriality are difficult to observe. They occur at night, or under water or require sensory abilities we simply do not possess. But one group of animals flaunts its territorial nature right under our noses – birds. From well before dawn until sunset and beyond, birds sing to claim and defend their territories.

It may come as a surprise to greeting card manufacturers and Disneyesque animators, but birds do not sing for joy, to entertain or just because they feel good. Bird song has much greater meaning.



The enjoyment we derived from it is purely incidental.

Usually only males sing, and their song has three purposes. First, it simply announces to other members of the same species that, "I am here." For example, when the first phoebe arrives this spring, his repetitious "fee bee, fee bee" informs later arriving male phoebes something to the effect that, "I was here first, and possession is nine-tenths of the law."

Furthermore, song also acts as a keep-out signal to other males. Sung from various perches around the perimeter of the territory, the message seems to be, "You're not welcome here, so keep out." Song has developed as a ritualistic substitute for physical combat. It's a terrific system that seldom breaks down. So injuries occur rarely.

When female phoebes show up a week or so after the males, song fulfills its final purpose. It announces the availability of a bachelor male, "I'm single, a good provider and ready to start a family." Once a male attracts a female's attention, repetitive singing reinforces the pair bond between the male and female.

But many birds communicate in a much more complex manner. In fact, few birds sing just one song. Most sing many. Song sparrows may have a repertoire of 10 songs, wrens and mockingbirds sing hundreds and brown thrashers may master 2,000 songs.

Don Kroodsma, an ornithologist at the University of Massachusetts, lumps bird songs into one of two

categories – primary and secondary. Primary songs attract and hold the attention of females. Secondary songs announce to other males territory ownership.

In nature it works like this. An unmated chestnut-sided warbler, for example, sings his primary song, 'please-please-please-to-MEET-cha.' He begins before dawn and continues throughout the day. Only when a neighboring male trespasses on his turf does he launch into a secondary song.

After pairing with a female, though, he adopts a different approach. He begins each day with an hour or so of secondary song, a lower pitched growl. The female is now content to stay within her mate's territory, so he can devote more time to keeping other males out. After all, he must not let an intruder breed with his mate.

Once the female lays her eggs and begins incubating them, the male alters his behavior once more. The female is no longer receptive to the male song – she's got more important things to attend to. So the male sings more primary songs and sometimes attracts a second mate. And so it goes.

Yes, a man's home may be his castle, but more correctly, it's his territory. Maybe that's why he sings in the shower.

