

FIELD CRAFT

Learning to identify bird calls

Recognising birds by their calls is often seen as an advanced aspect of birding, particularly when it involves detecting and identifying faint or brief flight calls. However, with practice, they can be decoded, and becoming familiar with them will greatly enrich your birding experience. Training Manager Nick Moran explains how to make the right call on the bird calls you hear.

Learning to pick out calls can be very rewarding as it opens the door to experiencing the thrill of migration, even in some unexpected parts of the country. It can also shed light on hitherto overlooked patterns of occurrence. For example, knowing the call of Chiffchaff, as well as its more familiar song, may well reveal it to be locally abundant in early autumn, depending on your location, and even help you discover wintering individuals.

Song or call?

Songs, produced by songbirds and various other birds including Cuckoo and Nightjar, are used to defend territories and advertise for mates. Usually given by males, and most frequently during the breeding season, many songs are quite complex. They often follow a clear pattern, though there is usually some variation between individuals of the same species (see Masterclass, *BTO News* 338).

DESCRIBE-VISUALISE-MEMORISE

There's a good chance that you already know the Magpie's distinctive rattle, the "cheep" of House Sparrow and perhaps the excited twittering calls of Goldfinch. Having some familiar reference points will make it easier to add to the repertoire of calls you recognise. If you are not yet familiar with any calls, there's good news: many common species will call regularly and some, such as Wren and Robin, hold winter territories. Not only will they sing to proclaim these territories over the next few months but they will also call when another bird – or a birdwatcher! – approaches, providing plenty of opportunities for you to build familiarity at a time of year when fewer birds are vocalising.

Start by trying to describe the sounds you hear, using technical language if possible: frequency (high or low

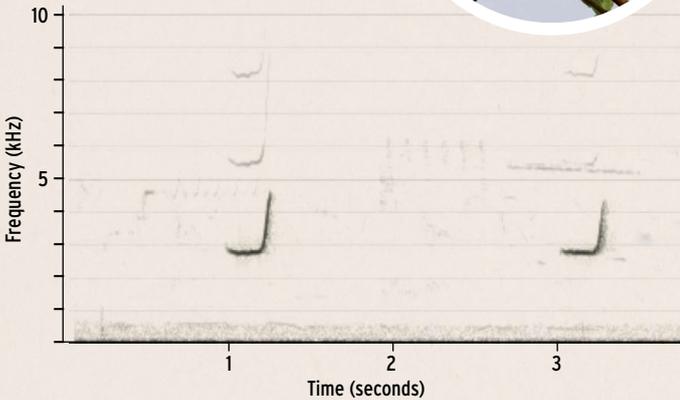
Knowing the call of Chiffchaff, as well as its more familiar song, may well reveal it to be locally abundant in early autumn

pitched), volume, duration, repetition, speed of delivery and tone quality. On his Earbirding website (www.earbirding.com), Nathan Pieplow suggests seven basic tone qualities to use when describing bird sounds: whistled, hooting, clicking, buzzy, nasal, noisy and polyphonic (such as the discordant "seep" of a Dunnock). Sticking with Wren and Robin, their



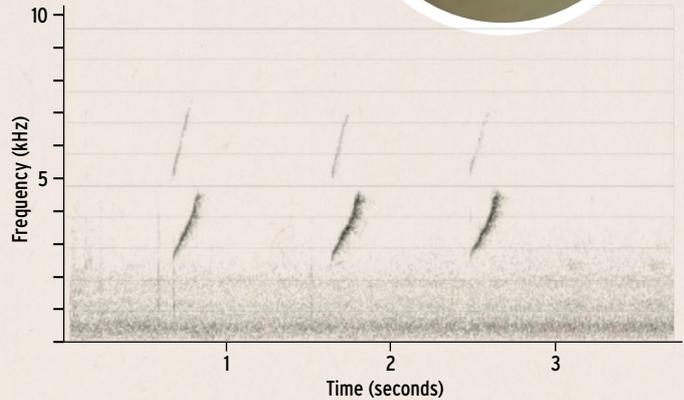
WILLOW WARBLER

Two-syllable call lasting ~0.3 seconds.



CHIFFCHAFF

One-syllable call lasting ~0.2 seconds.



typical calls in autumn and winter are clicking sounds: sudden bursts of sound like the clicking of fingers or snapping of a twig. Listen for three key differences: Robin tick calls are higher pitched and somewhat softer. They are usually delivered in an irregular, almost indecisive manner, with two or three calls in quick succession, then a pause, then another tick or two, then perhaps a short flurry. The tone quality and style of delivery means they are often likened to the sound of a ratchet being tightened. Wren calls are lower-pitched, louder and with a harsher quality. Whilst they can be delivered singly or run together into a rapid, scolding sequence, there is usually a more predictable pattern, with a sequence of calls given in ones, twos or threes, before a longer burst, perhaps reflecting the bird's increasing level of agitation.

Many people find that being able to visualise a sound is a useful next step that not only aids the describing process but also helps with remembering subtle differences. The upsurred calls of Chiffchaff and Willow Warbler are a good example of how a sonogram (or spectrogram) can really emphasise the difference, in this case between the Chiffchaff's monosyllabic "hueet" and the disyllabic "hu-iitt" of Willow Warbler.

CREATING MEMORY AIDS FOR CALLS

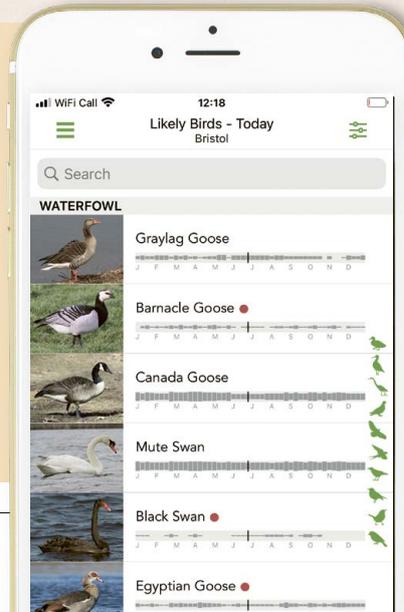
Finding a way to memorise bird sounds is the ultimate goal here. Whilst this can be hard to do for calls because of their simple nature, these two warblers show what you can do with a bit of creative thinking: Chiffchaff is one word and its call has one syllable whereas Willow Warbler is two words and gives a two-syllable call! Again,

Innate calls
Studies have shown that in most songbirds, the basic call notes are instinctive. But, in many species, the young male must hear its species' song at a certain age to learn it.

visualising the calls can make it easier to hear the differences that your eyes are picking out from the sonogram, and commit the sounds to memory. You can also come up with words or phrases that can be likened to what you are hearing, such as using the phrase "Winner, Winner! Did it! Did it!" for the twittering calls of Gold(medal?!)finch. ■

Is there an app for that?

Several free smartphone apps are available that can give suggested identifications for bird calls (as well as songs). Two of the best-known – and most reliable – are the Merlin Bird ID (merlin.allaboutbirds.org/sound-id) and BirdNET (birdnet.cornell.edu) apps, both from Cornell Lab of Ornithology. If you choose to use either of these to help identify calls, treat the answers with caution. These apps draw on occurrence data to help come up with the most likely species in a particular spot at a certain time of year. However, calls are still just as hard for these systems to sort out as they are for our brains, and smartphone microphones have their limitations, too.



Find out more Email training@bto.org to find out how to access recordings of our Bird ID and Songbird ID courses.

GOLDFINCH: DAVID TIPLING/BIROPHOTO.CO.UK; WREN: ALLAN DREWITT/BTO; WILLOW WARBLER: ALLAN DREWITT/BTO; CHIFFCHAFF: EDMUND FELLOWES/BTO