

ON THE WILD SIDE

Listen for the sounds of spring

Kathleen Ebert-Zawasky

Just stepping out the door, I can immediately hear the difference. The soundscape has changed. Even though the temperature has been unusually cold, I can hear the calls of birds that have been quiet for several months or have just returned.

The cardinal has a very distinctive song. The male produces a loud somewhat piercing chip or repeating whistle that is hard to miss. Likewise, the chickadees are out there with a new spring song. The males whistle a call to attract females that is often described as “fee-bee.”

And of course the robins are changing their tunes, too. Some have been here all winter while others are returning from southern adventures in search of mates and family building. At dawn, they sing “cheerily” repeatedly. But I particularly like the evening songs of robins when I walk down Leonard St. in spring and summer. There is a stand of trees there where they roost in large numbers. I find their evening sounds (“cuck”) are comforting and familiar.

Then there is the Carolina Wren. Although many of them do not survive a very cold winter, we have heard and seen a few of them. The male is notorious for his loud clear “tea-kettle, tea-kettle, tea-kettle” which we have been hearing again. Their songs are louder than most birds, relative to their size. But the method works well since once the male and female come together, they tend to mate for life.

Just Saturday, I heard the shrill sound of the male Red-winged Blackbirds. So far they are still in flocks, but pretty soon each male will be announcing and defending his own territory from some perch near the river. “Conk-la-ree, Conk-la-ree” He defends his territory from other males and from nest predators. Actually, males may be protecting several nests as they mate with several females, and, they probably are also protecting another male’s offspring in some of those nests!

In the evening, things change. In early February I heard a very distinctive sound. Even though I had the television on, I heard two owls hooting to each other. I muted the TV and opened the window to hear them more clearly. One owl seemed to be close by and the other quite a distance away, based on the lower volume of its response. Since then, we have heard the pair many times in the late afternoon and into the evening. These are Great Horned Owls. Although they have been with us all winter long, they mate in January or February and have families well along by the arrival of spring. Be on the lookout for “branchers”, that is, young who sit together in a row on branches before they master flying.

I can’t wait to hear the Baltimore Orioles. The crisp, rich series of musical notes of this lovely but discrete bird is probably my favorite spring sound. I usually have a hard time

spotting them in the tops of the trees but the call is enticing. That will have to wait for a while though. They tend not to arrive until spring is well established.

Another great sound of spring – soon to be heard - is the mating call of the American Woodcock. We don't get them in our woody neighborhood because they need wide open fields to carry out their mating ritual. But, my friend, Linda, will soon be calling to tell us it is time for Woodcock Night. Be sure to read our next column to get the details about the life and times of the American Woodcock.

Finally, the joyous gentle sound of water trickling as the ice melts on our rivers and streams reminds me of the other animals about to announce their presence.

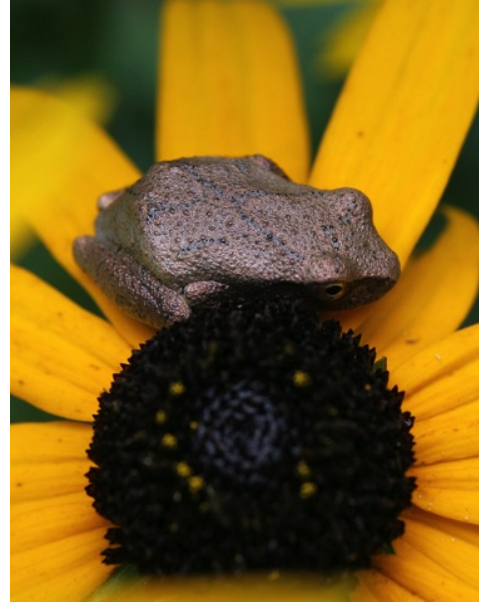
Spring is the time of amphibian matings, too, and they certainly add to the spring chorus as the temperature rises. If you have lived in Norton for any length of time, you know that the Spring Peepers will be at it soon.

These tiny frogs come out of hibernation and seek a mate by emitting a high pitched whistle that sounds a little like jingling bells when many join in. After mating, the female peepers lay eggs in the water and both males and females head back to the forest.

For help recognizing bird sounds in your neighborhood, check the Cornell Lab of Ornithology website: www.allaboutbirds.org

To help ensure a welcoming environment for our spring whistlers and singers, consider certifying your yard as a Certified Wildlife Habitat. For complete information, go to the National Wildlife Federation website: www.nwf.org/In-Your-Backyard.aspx or see the Land Preservation Society (LPS) of Norton website: www.nortonlandpreservation.org

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Spring Peepers like this one will soon be heading to ponds and adding to the sounds of spring.

Photo by Charlene A. McNeil