

During several stints as college professor and Forest Service scientist, I mostly researched *charismatic megafauna*, the big, splashy critters such as bears, mountain lions, elk, antelope and the like. We looked down our noses at the LBJs (little brown jobs - those teeny birds flitting through the woods). Then I started a research project on the impact of forest management on forest wildlife, and by far those most impacted were the LBJs. We monitored changes in numbers of LBJs caused by changes in structure and composition of trees and shrubs by recording numbers of singing males: each species has a distinctive breeding song. A totally new world opened up to me. There is nothing like birdsong in the forest on a spring morning.

The birds (males) sing to attract mates and identify their territory, warning other males to keep out. They tolerate males of different species, but attack their male brethren. Each species has its unique forest habitat: some nest and sing in the treetops, some in the shrubs, and some on the ground. Some must have patches of dense conifers, others insist on stream sides, and still others prefer forest-field edges. They sing April-June, beginning about a half hour before dawn, and quitting around 10am. Thus, any patch of woodland larger than a few acres might have 10 or more different species singing their hearts out. They produce an incredible variety of trills, flute-like spirals, squeaks, and complex melodies. A few examples:

**Trillers:** The yellow, blue and white *northern parula*, which inhabits swampy woods with hemlocks, constructs a nest of moss and lichens 10-100 feet up on the tip of a limb. Song is a “*buzzy trill that climbs up the scale, tripping over at the top - zeeeeeeeeeee-up. Also buzzy notes terminating in a trill - zh-zh-zh-zheeeee.*”



**Flutists:** The spotted *wood thrush* prefers cool, mature forests near water & swamps, building a compact cup nest in the fork of a small tree, hidden in the leaves. Song is flute-like *ee-o-lay*. The similarly spotted *hermit thrush* has a clear, ethereal flute-like song with a long introductory note then a series of 3-4 phrases at different pitches.



**Squeakers:** The *black and white warbler*, which feeds in the treetops and nests in a depression at the base of a tree, has a distinctive *week-a, week-a, week-a* call which sounds like a squeaky wheel.



**Melodists:** The black, gray and white mockingbird likes isolated patches of trees and woodland edges, building its nest in the fork of a small tree 3-10 feet above ground. Its song is a prolonged and varied succession of notes and phrases, repeated 3 or more times. The mocker has distinctive wing bars in flight.



The birds we once dismissed as drab are anything but, with males displaying a variety of bright colors and patterns to attract females. Several excellent CDs are available for learning to identify birds by their songs: *Stokes Field Guide to Bird Songs* (for eastern birds) is a dandy 3 CD set and can be purchased, with accompanying illustrated booklet, at local bookstores, at Amazon or at Sapsucker Woods, the Cornell bird research center ([www.sapsuckerwoods.com](http://www.sapsuckerwoods.com)). Get a CD set, spend a few wintry hours learning the songs, then hit the woods in spring for a new perspective. Make sure you sample the variety of habitats described above, and carry binoculars to link the birds with their songs. Stop in each habitat and listen - it takes the birds a few minutes to forget you are there and resume singing.