Birding and Children

by Scott R. Craven

Birds and bird watching enjoy tremendous popularity, and each of us probably has our own unique set of reasons for being “turned on” by birds. But do you recall how you first became interested? Was it a single event such as finding a dazed fledgling in the backyard, or was it an effort by parents or another adult to get you involved in something they enjoyed by pointing out birds or taking you birding?

If your early exposure to birds came by the latter route, you may now find yourself in a position to pass your interest on to your children or grandchildren. Even with no young children around in your own family, it’s quite possible to share your interest in birds with other children through 4H, scouts, nature centers, public schools, and other volunteer opportunities.

The primary purpose of this article is to explore the “how” of kids and birding. The “why” is both personal and practical. Beyond the obvious attraction of the sharing of your own interests with enthusiastic youngsters, you must decide on your own personal agenda. From a practical standpoint, attracting children to birding is an excellent way to foster personal conservation and environmental ethics. Birding can easily lead to a lifelong hobby. Also, more interest in, and knowledge of, birds in the general population will lead to informed public decisions which may impact the conservation of bird populations.

Most bird enthusiasts have ample factual knowledge to share with children. The trick is attracting and holding a child’s interest. Fortunately, there are many excellent sources of help which I will identify. However, first consider some activities or events that would attract the interest of a child. Often the activity, color, or sound of birds is enough. But frequently a so-called “teachable moment” will arise. Such events as a lost fledgling in the backyard, a recovering window-strike victim, an active mixed flock of birds at a feeder on a wintery morning, or a robin nest outside the kitchen window can be used to good advantage. They immediately focus a child’s attention and provide a forum for explaining bird identification, behavior, and many concepts such as sur-
Trills, Shricks, Flutterers, and Drummers!
(Birds Speak to Each Other)

Things to Learn

1. Identify bird species by sounds.
2. Reasons birds make different sounds.
3. To describe bird sounds.
4. To distinguish bird songs, calls, and sounds not made by voice.
5. How weather and time of day affects the sounds birds make.

How You Will Learn

1. Listen to birds you can identify by sight.
2. Listen to recorded bird songs (excellent records and tapes are available).
3. Describe sounds birds make with words or phrases.

Things To Do

1. Learn to recognize 20 birds by the sounds they make.
   - Start with the common birds in your area that you can already identify by sight.
   - List the birds you can identify by sound. Describe the sounds they make with combinations of words and phrases (see Bird Sounds Recording Sheet).
   - Use the "Bird Sounds Recording Sheet" as a tool to help you. Duplicate for use in your bird journal.

Caution

Some birds are "mimics." They "steal" the calls and songs of other birds. They can confuse you! (Example: starlings, bluejays).
   - Listen to starlings and bluejays. Identify the birds whose sounds they are mimicking.

Going Further

Record some bird sounds with a tape recorder. Share the recording with others--friends, family members, or at a 4H club meeting. Use some of your recordings or sound descriptions for an exhibit at the fair. Try to imitate common calls.

Things to Remember

1. All bird sounds are not songs.
2. Bird "calls" are short one- or several-syllable sounds. They are used to warn of danger, or communicate movement, feeding or fright.
3. Bird songs are musical compositions of notes usually sung by males. They are used to attract a female or to keep away other males.
4. Some birds make sounds without voice (the mule ruffed grouse drums his wings).
5. Some birds are silent (examples: pelican, vulture).
6. Spring is the best time of year to learn bird songs. This is when most birds are nesting and migrants are passing through.
7. Birds are most active early in the morning. There is also less noise from people and machinery at this time.
Trills, Shrieks, Flutters, and Drummers
(Recording Sheet)

1. Bird specie's name: ________________________________

2. Sex of bird if known: ______________________________

3. Describe the sound the bird makes. Use letter or word combinations.
   Example: Great Horned Owl - whoo whoo who who
   Crow - caw caw

4. Describe non-voice sounds this bird makes. ________________________________

5. What time of day does this bird sing the most? ______________________________

6. How many times does this bird repeat the song during 10 minutes of greatest
   singing activity? ________________________________

7. What happens if another bird of the same species is near? __________________________

8. How does weather affect this bird's singing or sounds? __________________________

9. Identify birds whose sounds this bird is mimicking. __________________________

vival, mortality, competition, and predation.

Activities you are already involved in—bird feeding, maintaining landscape plantings or natural areas to attract birds, building birdhouses, or bird watching—can all be very exciting for children. The key is to be sure that the children are actively included, adequately informed, and given a chance to really do something, even if it's only filling the feeder, or pounding a few nails. The necessary level of involvement will vary with the age, interest level, and prior experience of the children.

Other activities to consider might include:

(1) A trip to the nearest zoo with special emphasis on the bird collection or aviary. Nature centers may have a few birds on display, especially if they are involved with rehabilitation.

(2) A quiet reading session with a bird/wildlife oriented magazine such as Audubon, National/International Wildlife, Ranger Rick, or Your Big Backyard (the more pictures, the better!).

(3) Make a contest out of bird or bird song identification with a simple prize like a candy bar for fastest, most, best, etc. In a group, de-emphasize the competition aspect and try to have a prize for everyone.

(4) Take children to see and feed urban waterfowl. Most cities now have “urban” ducks or geese in parks and waterways. Their tameness will fascinate the children and allow you to explain their plumage, behavior, identification, etc. Some cities have too much of a good thing! Waterfowl feeding may be discouraged or illegal as part of a program to control burgeoning urban duck and goose flocks. Please abide by local restrictions.

(5) Imaginative use of your feeders and birdhouses to involve the children.

(6) A selection from some of the specific activities that follow.

If you feel uncomfortable dealing with children or don’t really know how to present material at the appropriate level, begin by reading Sharing Nature with Children by Joseph Bharat Cornell (Ananda publications). It is generally considered THE reference for nature awareness. There are many suggested activities (including birds) and introductory suggestions on teaching/sharing techniques. You will find activities you will want to try with or without children!

A child’s interest in art or “coloring” can be put to excellent advantage. One alternative is to have the child draw or color birds or bird parts such as colorful feathers. Children can also try to recreate observations they have made in the field. A better option, especially for older children (up to age 12–14) is the Field Guide to the Birds Coloring Book written by Roger Tory Peterson and Peter Alden and illustrated by John Sill (Houghton-Mifflin). The book contains a detailed black-and-white line drawing of most eastern birds along with a description of each bird. There is also a separate section with fully colored illustrations to be used for reference. Each outlined bird can then be “painted” in its actual plumage. It’s an excellent way for kids to learn by doing a hands-on activity, and it will provide many hours of fun. Perhaps best of all, the child ends up
with a very nice, personally illustrated field guide. The coloring book is usually available at nature centers, local Audubon Society chapters, Wild Birds Unlimited stores and similar outlets.

Children who show an interest in bird identification, but who may be overwhelmed by the size or terminology of a standard field guide, will enjoy The Peterson First Guides: Birds. It is simply a children’s version of the popular Peterson Field Guide. The First Guide contains less species and less prose and should be available at the same outlets as the coloring book. Another excellent guide to field marks, identification clues, and basic birding is the brochure Birdwatching with Roger Tory Peterson published by the National Wildlife Federation. It is part of the Federation’s “Gardening with Wildlife” kit. For single copies or information on ordering the gardening kit contact the NWF at 1412 16th Street NW, Washington, DC 20036–2266.

For activities on birds appropriate for individual children, school classes or youth groups turn to the National Wildlife Federation’s Ranger Rick’s “Naturescope” series and the “Birds, Birds, Birds” edition. This activity guide contains dozens of hands-on activities divided into preschool, primary (K–2), intermediate (3–5), and advanced (6–7) levels. “Birds, Birds, Birds” also offers an excellent bibliography of children’s bird books and general bird related references. The “Naturescope” series includes mammals, insects, dinosaurs, and many other topics. An annual subscription costs $24.00 or you may contact the NWF at the above address for information on single copies.

Also geared for children, and more readily available, are an array of 4H bird project materials which vary from state to state. Here in Wisconsin the bird projects are consolidated in a booklet entitled “Getting to Know Birds”—Wisconsin 4H Project Manual, 4H-340. Contact your county Extension service office (in any state) for availability of 4H project literature. Several activities from the Wisconsin manual are reprinted here as examples of things you can do with children.

If you have never been involved with children as a 4H leader or nature center volunteer, or have never thought much about getting your own kids “turned on” by birds, maybe it’s time to consider it. These suggestions should provide more than enough to keep you and the children busy and entertained! I think it is an excellent way to add a new dimension to your backyard birding and in the long-run it will be good for the kids and the birds. For more information on youth activities or reference availability contact me.

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White-breasted Nuthatch by Lori Jean Hubanks