



Messengers of the Wilderness

A small bird frantically calling from six feet or so off the ground alerts us to the neighborhood cat who has unpleasant intentions towards its nestlings. We might also notice birds high in the trees alerting each other to our presence as we hike down the trail. Imagine how important this knowledge was to our ancestors. Not only do birds communicate to us about potential dangers and prey, but they also have the power to spoil a hunt. Our ancestors had to be deeply aware and respectful of birds.

The Secret Language of Birds

Birds constantly send out information with their vocalizations and their behavior. They let us know about predators, skirmishes and other dramas unfolding around them. We can tap into this network of alarms and news reports by learning to recognize bird language.

We may also become the news!

Concentric Rings

If a forest at peace is like a still pond, concentric rings from a disturbance roll out like ripples coming off a rock thrown into the pond. You know an owl has perched in the nearby oak because the birds have been shrieking at it for the last ten minutes. You can tell a fox is slipping down the hill because the sparrows jump up to the top of their thickets and give a brief note of annoyance. These birds' sounds alert others further away and the alarm spreads quickly.

You give off concentric rings of disturbance as well. Slowing down and quieting the mind reduces this. Touch your feet gently to the earth as you walk. Keep your awareness in the present moment, look around and see, smell, touch things as you walk. The more you reduce your concentric rings, the more wildlife you will come upon.

The Five Voices of Birds

Similar to how we categorize our language into verbs, nouns and pronouns, we can categorize bird language. Here are some basic categories:

Song

Easy to hear and a good way to identify birds. This is what you hear on bird identification tapes. Usually a bird's song lasts the longest of any other sounds that bird makes.

Companion/contact calls

These are used by birds to keep them in touch with their families, flocks and mates, often in a call-and-response rhythm.

Juvenile begging

These sounds happen when baby birds ask for food, or when parent birds hand off food to their mates. They are wheezy, repetitive calls, and can be soft and whispery or loud shrieking. They are usually accompanied by wing fluttering and a hunched-over body.



Aggression

This is not considered an alarm call, because it generally only involves two birds of the same species interacting with each other, and does not indicate a threat to others. It often involves two males, or two females.

Alarm

These sounds alert us to a bird's perceived danger. Alarms can range from mild concern to screeching panic. They might also be an absence of sound. A sudden silence could indicate a hawk flying overhead.