

Bird Language

Outline revised from BEETLES: Science and Teaching for Field Instructors from the Lawrence Hall of Science.

Background

Birds are constantly communicating, and by paying close attention to their sounds you can start to learn not only what they are communicating, but how their behavior can give you information about other things going on in the area.

Materials

- Nature Journal or notebook
- Pen or Pencil and Eraser
- Water Bottle (filled with water)
- Optional:
 - Binoculars
 - Watch
 - Blanket or something to sit on outside

Instructions

1. Go outside somewhere you think you might be able to hear birds. Or simply open a window in your house to hear outside.
2. Listen for any bird sounds.
3. In your journal, write down statements beginning with the words, "I noticed," "I wonder," and "It reminds me of," focused on the bird sounds that you hear.
4. Listen silently again and memorize one bird sound.
5. Try to draw in a notebook that bird sound. Possibly by making a squiggly line on the page that goes up and down when the bird sound moves up and down in pitch. Try to indicate how fast the sound is by making the squiggles closer or farther apart.
6. Listen again. If you heard more than one bird sound, describe at least one similarity and difference between the bird sounds you heard.

Observing patterns and asking and investigating questions about them helps scientists learn about the world. Even though there are many kinds of birds, people have identified patterns in bird sounds because birds have similar responses to certain situations in order to have the best chance of survival.

7. What kinds of messages might birds need to communicate, and how might they help with survival? Write down your thoughts in a journal!

Are any of your ideas similar to the following:

- Let others know the boundaries of a territory (Territory)
- Chasing another away (Aggression)
- Identify flock or family members (Contact)
- Ask parents for food (Begging)
- Announce the presence of a predator (Alarm)

- Attract a mate (Attract)
- Let others know where food is (Food Call)

Songs are often used to alert others about territory, and for attracting a mate. Aggression calls and alarm calls are often loud and abrupt sounding. Short call notes are often used to stay in contact with others from a family or species. Young birds make begging calls, which are often incessant and high-pitched, to ask for food.

Birds don't call just for the heck of it. It takes energy for a bird to make calls, and it reveals their location, which can be dangerous. However, it can be worth it for birds to expend energy making calls because communication increases chances of survival and reproduction.

Now we are going to focus on alarm calls and other ways birds respond to different kinds of threats, because alarm calls can help you learn a lot about what's going on around you.

- Think about the following questions.
 - What are some animals birds might be concerned about?
 - If a bird was perched in the top of a tree and a hawk flew nearby, what might it do?
 - If a bird was on the ground and a bobcat came near, what might it do?
 - If a noisy hiking group walked through an area, what might birds do?
- Find a nice spot outside to sit and silently listen, watch, and try to observe the bird behavior around you. This will give you a chance to spend a few minutes observing birds on your own and begin to interpret what you see and hear.
- Remember the different messages the birds might be communicating. Try to distinguish between these messages as you observe and think about what might be happening in the environment to cause birds to respond with those calls or behaviors.
- Consider the following questions:
 - Is a bird making the same call again and again?
 - When it makes that call, is it in response to something similar happening in the environment or something different?
 - Are different species of birds making similar calls?
 - When do they make those calls?
 - Do you think they are using them to communicate similar things or different things?
- Sit silently for 10 minutes to listen to and watch birds. Either bring a watch with you or ask someone in your household to come get you after 10 minutes.
- If you wish, record any observations you make or fun things you noticed in your nature journal.
- When you are finished with your bird sit, write down in your journal the answers to the following questions:
 - What did you learn about bird behavior?
 - What patterns did you notice as you observed bird language?
 - Do you think you could "learn the language" of a different animal? How?
 - What's something that surprised you?

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