

TAPE REVIEW: *BIRDING BY EAR*

by Dorothy R. Arvidson

Birding by Ear: A Guide to Bird Song Identification by Richard K. Walton and Robert W. Lawson. 1989. Boston: Houghton Mifflin (Peterson Field Guides). Three sixty-minute cassette tapes and instructional booklet. \$35.

The Walton/Lawson tapes introduce a new concept in bird guides. Roger Tory Peterson writes in the Editor's Note: "Just as my Field Guide shows what to *look* for, *Birding by Ear* points out exactly what to *listen* for to tell one bird from another....The entertaining and educational narrative does the same job as the arrows in my Field Guide, pinpointing the precise differences between similar species." Walton and Lawson explain in the Introduction that "most bird-song recordings are simply collections....[that] constitute a valuable reference, but they do not provide techniques for distinguishing and remembering songs."

This cassette package does just that. It is a well-planned and masterfully presented instructional seminar in bird-song recognition that will enable anyone interested in birds, whether a novice or experienced birder (including those with a tin ear) to learn to recognize eighty-five eastern and central North American bird species by sound, thereby improving birding skills and enhancing the pleasures of birding. The price of the three-hour cassette package is very reasonable: an equivalent course of instruction would cost much more.

Birding by Ear was created by Richard K. Walton and Robert W. Lawson. Dick Walton is a Concord naturalist, birder, and writer, and, most important, an experienced educator. Walton, who narrates the tapes, has a pleasant teaching voice: mellow and unhurried. He suggests and persuades, rather than expounds. Bob Lawson, also a birder and a trained musician, is the owner of the Blue Jay Recording Studio, where the production was assembled and recorded. The tapes are of the highest acoustical quality and proved to be a pleasure to listen to on four different tape machines that varied in quality from hifi to portable players. The recorded songs, obtained from professional sources, are first-rate and have been well chosen. The slim instruction booklet is indispensable and fits neatly within the compact tape package (1 by 5 by 8.5 inches). For each species on the tapes, this guide offers a brief description of the bird, its voice, and habitat, a John Sill sketch, a page reference to the 1980 Peterson field guide, and space for personal notes. Most helpfully, a phonetic index is provided that lists alphabetically all of the phonetic units suggested by Walton as memory aids, i.e., words and phrases that represent the songs.

The first cassette begins with a beautifully phrased fifteen-minute introduction that summarizes methods useful in learning bird song. Phonetic units that represent the actual sounds made by birds are demonstrated. For

example, "Conkaree" is suggested as a commonly accepted phonetic rendition of the Red-winged Blackbird's carol, and "Who cooks for you, who cooks for you all?" as connoting for some birders both the sound and the rhythmic cadence of the Barred Owl's song. Other mnemonics discussed are comparison ideas, e.g., the likening of the Field Sparrow's song to "a ping-pong ball dropping on a table," and descriptive words that characterize some aspect of the song such as flutelike (thrushes), abrupt (Acadian Flycatcher), ascending (Northern Parula), or harsh (grackle). Another learning device introduced in the section on woodpeckers is "pairing"—listening to similar-sounding birds in close succession so as to emphasize any diagnostic differences.

The great merit of these cassettes lies in the selection and pinpointing of a recognizable feature of a particular bird song, a "handle," as Walton repeatedly calls it, that is not only distinctive of the species' song but that can be learned and retained by even a nonmusical person. The amount of field experience, acoustic perception, and educational expertise required to conceive and create these tapes is incalculable. Numerous specific memory aids are suggested, but early on, Walton asks, "Does this work for you?" At intervals listeners are urged to be active and independent, to find a personal "handle" in the song or to create their own phonetic paraphrases and ideas that will serve to associate the bird with its song.

The bird vocalizations selected cover a broad range of widespread and vocal birds. The focus of attention is on primary song and song substitutes (like the drumming of the ruffed grouse) that are heard chiefly in the breeding season. But also included are call notes that are sufficiently distinctive to be helpful in recognition.

How is the subject matter arranged for ease of learning? The bird songs are organized into sensible "learning groups," based mostly but not entirely on acoustic similarity. The number of species included in any one unit varies between three and ten. Ten of the seventeen learning groups compare the songs of only three or four species, an arrangement that makes for easy mastery. The groups have been given descriptive titles, such as Sing-Songers, Chippers and Trillers, High-pitchers, Whistlers, Name-sayers, and Warbling Songsters, which often provide a useful association to the sound produced by the birds in that category. Other groups are titled Mimics, Woodpeckers, Hawks, Owls and a Dove (why not hooters?), Commoners, Wood Warblers and a Warbling Wren; Simple Vocalizations, Complex Vocalizations, and Thrushes.

The sequence of these learning groups has been arranged to provide contrast, with the result that the listener's interest is held, the ear is stimulated by the constant change of pace, and sensory fatigue is avoided. For example, the varied and musical vocalizations of the mimicking thrushes are followed by the unmusical squeaks and rattles of woodpeckers; the melodic caroling of robin

sound-alikes in Sing-Songers precedes the screams and whistles of hawks, which are followed by the mechanical songs of Chippers and Trillers (Swamp and Chipping Sparrows, junco, and Pine Warbler). I repeat, it is a pleasure just to listen.

The most complex of the learning groups—it includes ten species—is Wood Warblers and a Warbling Wren. Here the selection and arrangement of songs are indicative of the creative educational professionalism that went into this project. The unit begins with the two-noted songs of the Black-and-white Warbler and Ovenbird, both fairly easy to learn. This creates confidence in the listener. Then a challenge is presented: the Kentucky Warbler, which also has a two-noted song, is paired with the very similar-sounding Carolina Wren. The student is thus reminded that there are complexities even in simple songs, that "this could be tough" as Walton says of the Chippers and Trillers. But because the differences are pointed out intelligibly, the listener is encouraged to continue. The next five warbler songs are very distinctive: one feels certain they can be mastered with a few repetitions. Several variations of each are introduced while the narrator emphasizes the basic song pattern of each species. This segment concludes with the American Redstart, a varied vocalizer and difficult but not impossible to master. The similarity of one of its songs to the Black-and-White's song is noted, which is somewhat disconcerting. However, the listener is immediately reassured by Walton that even the most experienced birder can be confused by the redstart. Thus, the learner is led step by step, reasonably and encouragingly, through a series of ten bird vocalizations and offered a "handle" for recognizing and eventually remembering each species' song, without avoiding or minimizing the complexities that will be met in the field.

The category Commoners emphasizes the importance of becoming familiar with the sounds made by common birds such as Blue Jays, House Sparrows, blackbirds, grackles, and Song Sparrows so that one is not constantly distracted by them. The group called Miscellaneous Vocalizations includes a few birds unsuited to other categories, although the Chimney Swift might reasonably have been put with the "high-pitchers" group.

On cassette side 3B nearly all of the vocalizations are played again, randomly without commentary, the species grouped this time by habitat, e.g., eastern forest edges, freshwater wetlands, etc. and announced by number. This provides a test for checking your progress as you wish or a fine review anytime.

This reviewer recommends *Birding by Ear* without qualification to beginner and old pro alike and encourages Walton/Lawson and Houghton Mifflin to do more. A guide to western bird songs is perhaps already in the works, but how about a more advanced, side-by-side analysis of sound-alike birds across the continent? And then, of course, there's Mexico...

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