

**TAPE REVIEW: WESTERN BIRDING BY EAR:  
A GUIDE TO BIRD SONG IDENTIFICATION**

by Bruce Hallett

*Western Birding by Ear: A Guide to Bird Song Identification*, by Richard K. Walton and Robert W. Lawson. 1990. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. \$35.00.

It is mid-June in Western Montana. It is clear but still cool as I work my way toward the river on a half-lit trail through some low brush. Hearing the water, I stop to set up my fly rod and choose a fly for the brown trout I think I will fool this morning. As the eastern sky brightens, the first Western Wood-Pee-wee starts its monotone call from the cottonwood grove to the left. A Warbling Vireo then starts singing from the willows by the stream, and a MacGillivray's Warbler scolds from the underbrush. On a rocky hillside across the river, a Rock Wren trills, and a Common Poorwill gives its last call of the evening. I have not actually seen any of these birds, but I know them nonetheless.

Recognizing songs and calls has always given me a sense of satisfaction, but it was not that way at first. Identification by sight was the way I started birding. Although I knew there were sounds all around me, I was not really paying attention. Soon it was apparent, especially in thick cover or foliage where the birds were not always visible, that seeing birds was not the only function of identification. It took years of bramble scratches and endless searching into leafy trees to track down and sort out birds, such as Black-headed Grosbeaks and Summer Tanagers. I did not have a system, which is why I wish that the Walton and Lawson tapes were available a dozen years ago. Just listening to the introduction by Dick Walton, where he talks about techniques for distinguishing and remembering songs, was enough for me to realize that my old trial and error methods could have used some refinements.

*Western Birding By Ear* is the second guide to bird song identification recorded by Dick Walton and Bob Lawson, and it follows the same format as its predecessor, *Eastern/Central Birding By Ear*. Ninety-one western species are organized by learning groups with similar vocalizations—name-sayers, whistlers, and trillers, to name a few—and by fourteen habitats ranging from urban parks to Pacific coastal forests. It is this organization of songs, calls, and "harsh vocalizations" into meaningful groupings, along with appropriate phonetics, comparative ideas, and mnemonics, that make the Walton and Lawson tapes unique and extraordinarily valuable for field birders.

The physical package itself consists of three cassette tapes with an instructional booklet, contained in a handy carrying case. The tapes are good quality and Dick Walton's voice is clear and unhurried. The booklet is well illustrated, has both habitat and voice descriptions, a place to make notes, and

page references to the *Peterson Field Guide to Western Birds*.

The purpose of *Western Birding By Ear* is to help the birder develop a basic vocabulary of bird songs through comparisons and pairings, and then to use these skills to characterize both familiar and unfamiliar songs and calls. Simple enough, but to do this, Walton takes us through two and one-half tapes carefully pinpointing various features of a particular song, so that the listener can develop a "handle." For example, once a handle is learned for the song of a House Finch, this can be applied to and compared with other birds that sound very similar, such as Purple and Cassin's finches and Warbling Vireos. The call notes of the birds are also discussed since they are just as important as the songs.

The last one-half tape is a review but with a different twist. Bird songs that were presented previously have been grouped by habitat. This is a helpful way to recall what has been learned, and to test and reinforce recognition according to the habitat where each of the species is most likely to be seen and heard. It is a particularly good feature, not only because of its teaching function, but also because it gives immediate value to the purpose of learning bird songs.

When I first went through the booklet, my reaction was that a number of species had been left out. Where were the Hepatic Tanagers when the Black-headed Grosbeaks were discussed, and what about comparing Hermit and Townsend's warblers with Black-throated Gray Warblers? Why not more trilly sparrows? As I listened to the introduction, however, I realized that the selection was correct. This is an introductory program, and the study groups were limited on purpose so that people would not be saturated with too many new songs. Blue Grosbeak or Savannah Sparrow would have been nice, but Walton and Lawson were correct in their philosophy.

In the June 1989 issue of *Bird Observer*, Dorothy Arvidson did a fine and complete review of *Eastern/Central Birding By Ear*. Her conclusion was to recommend it without qualification, and I agree with that recommendation for the western version. I also echo Dorothy's sentiments that Houghton Mifflin and the Walton and Lawson team should work on a "more advanced, side-by-side analysis of sound-alike birds across the continent."

I never caught anything that Montana morning, but I did hear lots of great birds.

**BRUCE HALLETT**, a resident of Brookline, Massachusetts, for eleven years, moved to Atlanta, Georgia, in August 1989. He is currently organizing and conducting birding tours in North America, primarily in Alaska, Florida, and the western United States. Although he still carries an emotional attachment to the boys of summer from Fenway Park, he now does the tomahawk chop with Jane and Ted Turner for the Atlanta Braves.



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