

# Thirty Years Ago (From Bird Observer Vol. 1, No. 4, 1973)

## HOW DO PEOPLE BECOME BIRD WATCHERS?

Eliot Taylor, Sherborn

When I was in the 6th grade, my teacher was interested in birds, and every other week we had someone from the Massachusetts Audubon Society lecture and show slides on conservation and the various balances of nature. After the leaves were off of the trees, I littered the classroom with about 60 birds' nests that I collected as a nature project. Although I found the nests fascinating, I was really more interested in climbing trees. So I lived through the next few years not knowing a wood thrush from a yellow warbler, and caring less.

Then one spring day it happened. I was walking through the woods when I heard a clear two-note, two-pitched "fee-bee" from the top of a big pine tree. I knew that there was a bird called a phoebe, and I figured that I was hearing one. As the bird continued, I started wondering what would happen if I tried to imitate it. Every sporting goods store sold duck and crow calls, and I had heard of people luring birds by whistling. I looked all around and made absolutely sure that I was alone -- even at 14 I knew that people shouldn't be seen whistling at birds.

I tried my imitation. As I watched the top of the tree, I saw the bird drop down about 10 feet, look my way and continue to give his call. After three minutes, two birds flew down and landed on a dead branch within five feet of me. Now I could see that they were chickadees, that is unless phoebes looked like chickadees and occasionally say "chickadee." The next day I visited the library and found out that phoebes do not look like chickadees and that chickadees say "fee-bee" and that phoebes do not say "chickadee."

A few days later I was in the woods whistling "chickadee" when I heard "towhee" and "drink your tea" calls. Again, I tried imitations and in a few minutes had a male and a female towhee within 15 feet. I now had two species on my "Attracted-by-Imitating" list. After one more trip to the library to look up towhees, I went to a store and bought my first bird book.

My third species was the whip-poor-will. One night after a Boy Scout meeting, we heard one calling from the cliff in the woods behind a cemetery. We formed a circle around the cliff and closed in, and two of the boys caught a glimpse of the bird as it flew away.

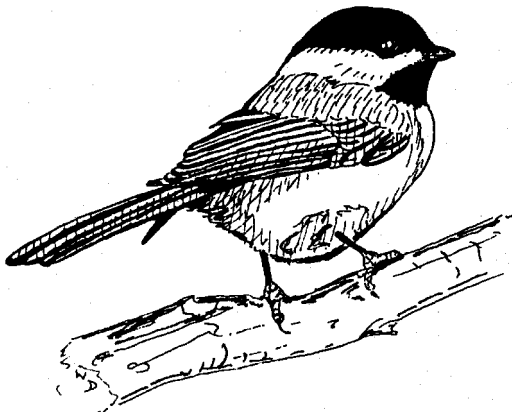
I knew that I could attract black-capped chickadees and rufous-sided towhees, so I started whistling whip-poor-will calls. In a few moments this bird returned and landed in a nearby bush where we could all see it. After I called a few more times, it disappeared. As we walked the half-mile back to my house we kept laughing and

giving calls. It was a big joke to us but not for the bird -- during the next four nights I was awakened at two a.m. by a whip-poor-will in the forsythia bushes under my bedroom window!

A year or two later I was sitting on the same cliff behind the cemetery at twilight whistling at hermit thrushes. when the first whip-poor-will of the evening called. I returned the favor and the bird flew down the path and landed on the cliff about 20 feet away. It was still fairly light, and we looked at each other. I called again and the whip-poor-will flew over and landed on my left thigh. I sat motionless and watched as it jumped down between my feet and then up onto my right thigh. Then another whip-poor-will flew over the cliff, giving some "chuck" calls, and my bird flew into the trees behind me. When I called again it flew back and landed on my left shoulder for about 15 seconds before leaving for good.

Whenever I hear a new bird I try my best to imitate it. If I can get either the pitch or the rhythm, the bird may come. Of course, if I can get both the pitch and rhythm my odds are greatly increased. The next time that you are in the woods, all alone, try whistling the chickadee's "fee-bee" call or something else. You too may be pleasantly surprised.

Here is a list of 55 birds that I have lured by imitating their calls: screech, great-horned, barred and saw-whet owls; whip-poor-will; great-crested and Traill's flycatcher; wood pewee; blue jay; black-capped chickadee; tufted titmouse; Carolina wren; mockingbird; catbird; brown thrasher; wood and hermit thrush; veery; bluebird; golden-crowned and ruby-crowned kinglets; yellow-throated, solitary, red-eyed and warbling vireo; black-and-white, blue-winged, Parula, yellow, black-throated-blue, myrtle, black-throated green, chestnut-sided, Canada, and prairie warblers; yellowthroat; redstart; eastern meadowlark; Baltimore oriole; rusty blackbird; scarlet and summer tanagers; cardinal; rose-breasted and pine grosbeaks; indigo bunting; purple finch; goldfinch; rufous-sided towhee; vesper, field, white-throated, fox, Lincoln's and song sparrows.



BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE BY WILLIAM E. DAVIS, JR.