

METHODS IN BIRD WATCHING

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After ten minutes of bush-circling and faint, gray glimpses of a perplexing sparrow, my patience wore thin and I elected to "drive" the bird to force it to a more exposed position. As I began my frankly aggressive march on bush and inhabitant, my birding companion, who had now caught up with me, told me to wait. He stood quite still and proceeded to embark on a brief career of imitating steam boilers; I watched, puzzled but interested. Soon I could see the sparrow fidgeting in the bush, hopping higher and higher. In a few moments a beautiful Lincoln's Sparrow had worked its way to the outside of the bush and eyed us curiously. My comment was immediate and not quite printable. Further, I realized that birdwatching was not necessarily an activity solely for the swift or the keen-eyed or the intrepid, but could be extended greatly if proper techniques — to wit, getting the birds to you or you to the birds — were available.

In the past few years, I have collected (and tried) a number of bird-watching techniques that have been more or less successful. The ones described below are some of the more productive ventures.

Sound Techniques

1. Probably the most useful birding technique — and the easiest — is "squeaking" or "spishing" or "whispering"; it goes by a variety of names. The method depends basically on creating squeaky or hissing noises, similar to the distress notes of small land birds and some of the smaller mammals. "Spishing," to me the easiest, is best performed by saying the words "spish" or "dish" or "tish" through lightly clenched teeth. It has the advantage of leaving both hands free for holding and adjusting binoculars. "Squeaking" can be done by wetly kissing the back of your hand or sucking protractedly on your palm; however, this does tie up at least one hand. Mechanical squeakers I find difficult to use as these require both hands to produce really effective sounds. This spishing readily draws sparrows, warblers, thrushes, jays, Catbirds (they're an out-and-out menace), kinglets, Chickadees, and wrens into easy viewing distance. Further, birds responding to a series of distress notes hop and flit about excitedly, actions that aid greatly in spotting them. And spishing will draw the predators of these species too; it is particularly effective on Sharp-shinned Hawks, shrikes, and Horned and Screech Owls. Another calling method, useful in winter, consists of imitation of the Screech Owl's decrescendo quaver; nuthatches, chickadees, and woodpeckers respond quite well to this, more so if a few frightened "squeaks" and "spishes" are added. However, don't be surprised if you get but one respondent, a Screech Owl. Keep trying; other species — Blue Jays, sparrows, kinglets — may eventually come to seek the source of all this commotion and to pester the owl.

A word of caution — quick, jerky movements on the caller's part can undo much of his "spishing" effort; by keeping binoculars close to eye level or slightly to the side, a minimum of motion and a maximum of spishing can be obtained.

Usually if you have attracted any birds by spishing, you will note that they lose interest after four or five minutes, no matter how distressful-sounding your efforts. Shyer species may appear if a three or four minute

period of vigorous spishing is followed by abrupt silence. Sometimes thrushes fly out to view the now-silent situation; wrens are particularly prone to expose themselves when this sequence is applied.

2. Imitation of bird voices can be a parlor sport, a hobby, an art, or a method; I prefer it as the last. The best examples of imitation and achieving response to same rest with the owls, particularly Barred Owls. Time-wise, late dusk and very early dawn of clear nights are the "prima donna" hours for owls. Duck-calling and crow-calling have been aids to nimrods which can be practiced by birdwatchers. Some shorebirds, especially Yellow-legs, Black-bellied Plover, and Upland Sandpiper, respond well to mimicry of their whistled notes; answering birds will sometimes fly up, only to alight again near the person imitating them. Loud cackles over a marsh can sometimes produce a chorus of responses from the gallinules and rails therein. However, other techniques for that group are available (see below).

3. Marsh birds, rails, and gallinules cackle, court, converse, and complain noisily, especially to loud sounds. This low threshold to noise can be exploited by hand-clapping or the use of firecrackers in or around a marsh. The answering clatter may be out of all proportion to the "trigger-sound" you have made but, fortunately, marsh birds are a bit like Barred Owls — once started, they may launch into a veritable chorus of cackles on their own. Even a shout or a pistol shot across a marsh may evoke typical guttural or chicken-like responses from rails, herons, and gallinules.

Wide grassy meadows are another area where hand-clapping and an occasional shout are useful. With such noisy provocation, Short-eared Owls, Harriers, Pheasants, and Meadowlarks may startle up from deep meadow grass; a single loud handclap may be rewarded with a number of Harriers and Short-eared Owls taking off from unsuspected proximity.

Mechanical Techniques

1. Too often observations of water birds such as loons, grebes, and scoters are meager, frustrating, and hampered by distance. Even if you were able to get out to where the birds were, your observations would in turn be hindered by the low elevation of the boat. By slowly waving (tolling) a large handkerchief or small flag from a hidden but elevated position (sand dune, dirt bluff), such waterbirds, particularly loons and grebes, can be lured to within easy viewing distance. At times I have seen this trick work with a person in full view, but my most successful efforts have been when all but the waving flag was concealed.

2. You can locate rails, wrens, herons, sparrows, and ground nests of many meadow and farm birds by the simple technique of "dragging". The only pieces of equipment needed are: (1) a 100 foot rope ($\frac{3}{8}$ inch diameter), and (2) a partner. Tie one end of the rope about your waist and the other about your partner's waist; then sweep a meadow or marsh with the rope fully extended and dragging slightly between you and your cohort, but do not let it curve out behind. The rustle of the rope on the grass flushes many birds from American Bittern to Short-billed Marsh Wren before it. If this is applied methodically to a field or a grassy marsh, a fairly accurate picture of breeding birds can be obtained. If no partner is available, one can drive a post in the ground, attach the rope to it and, instead of parallel sweeps, make a single circular sweep. A more noisy variation of dragging is to tie empty beer cans with small pebbles inside to the rope to create more racket

and flush up very tight-sitting birds (incubating ducks). Frankly, that gimmick is too noisy, even for me.

3. "Jack-Lighting" provides a night time method particularly appropriate for herons. By searching shallow marsh and beach areas at night with a railroad beam lantern or portable spotlight, you can observe herons standing immobile, apparently fascinated by the light. Often you can walk or canoe (see *Traveling Techniques*) to within a few feet of such birds. Two points to note well: (1) complete silence is the rule, and (2) all observers must be behind the light source. In early April the combination of this technique with a keen ear can result in spotlight performances of Woodcock courtship antics.

4. Many times rails, sparrows, herons, and wrens have eluded me by diving into visible but inaccessible cover. If none of the above tricks will bring them again into view, a pebble carefully placed near them by a sling-shot will often frighten the bird up to look about or to fly, if only briefly, into the open.

Traveling Techniques

1. Too often people complain about seeing birds too distant to identify. With water birds this difficulty may be obviated by a boat if available. In a marsh or northern bog area, a canoe is almost ideal — quiet, easy to maneuver, shallow of draft and, if brown or dull green, almost camouflage-perfect. The use of boats and canoes as blinds make these craft most helpful for nesting studies (e. g. heron colonies, marsh wrens) and photographic work (ducks, herons).

2. For personal traveling in just wet areas or mud sections during warm weather, I prefer canvas shoes or sneakers; such shoes are cheap, washable, and the water flows in and out equally. Occasionally, however, you come upon muddy areas or mud flats too deep or too soft to traverse, yet liberally strewn with exciting but distant shorebirds. In such a situation you can resort to donning snowshoes to cross the terrain (this is very rough on snowshoes, believe me). A more inexpensive, equally feasible method is strapping bushel — or $\frac{3}{4}$ bushel-basket covers to your canvas shoes with clothesline and then strolling out on mud or muck, using the covers just as you would snowshoes. Also, such covers are readily acquired and, when mud-decorated and smelly, readily disposed of.

3. Winter travel to various areas (e. g. reforestation projects for "winter finches", flooded but frozen swamps for observing woodpeckers or setting out Wood Duck boxes) can be materially accelerated and eased by the use of skis or snowshoes. If using snowshoes, practice a little bit each day before trying extensive traveling.

4. For the young, hot-blooded, athletic type, one last trick — swimming up on shorebirds. If you can swim with only your head exposed, it is possible to approach within a few feet of Knot, Red-backed Sandpiper, or the like, resting or feeding along channel or inlet edges. Apparently these birds do not recognize a solitary, floating head, so a near view is comparatively easy to obtain and the method is even refreshing if the day is warm.

Most of the above maneuvers have been rather successful in getting birds to people or people to birds. If you have other methods, please let me know of them and their effectiveness, as I would like to add them to the growing file on "birdwatching techniques".