



Enjoying the Outdoors, Indoors

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Project for my Gold Award

TOP 5 BIRD SONGS TO HEAR IN PASADENA

Here are five common songbirds you're likely to encounter around town, with what to listen for and where they hang out:

1. Northern Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*)
 1. Song: A dazzling medley of flutelike phrases and mimicry—often repeating each phrase 2–4 times before switching.
 2. Where to Hear: Parks, yards, street trees—often singing all day and even at night. [audubon](#)
2. American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*)
 1. Song: A cheerful series of clear “cheer-up, cheerily” carols, especially at dawn.
 2. Where to Hear: Lawns and open grassy areas as they forage for worms. [csusb](#)
3. Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*)
 1. Song: A rich, musical trill that often ends with a buzzy flourish—imagine “Ma-ry-Ma-ry-Ma-ry.”
 2. Where to Hear: Shrubby hedges, garden edges, riparian thickets. [csusb](#)
4. House Finch (*Haemorhous mexicanus*)
 1. Song: A long, warbling twitter with high-pitched, squeaky notes—often delivered from treetops or power lines.
 2. Where to Hear: Backyards, feeders, urban greenery. [csusb](#)
5. Bewick's Wren (*Thryomanes bewickii*)
 1. Song: Begins with a few sharp, high “chip” notes, drops into a low, scratchy growl, then ends in a bubbly warble.
 2. Where to Hear: Chaparral patches, dense shrubs, garden thickets. [nrm.dfg.ca](#)

Tips for Listening in Pasadena

- Best Time: Aim for dawn (around 6 AM) when birds are most vocal.
- Top Spots: Eaton Canyon and Hahamongna Watershed Park are local favorites for these species [pasadenaaudubon](#).
- Gear Up: Use a smartphone with the Merlin Bird ID app (Cornell Lab) or Audubon Bird Guide to record and visually compare sonograms.
- Stay Quiet: Find a secluded spot, switch your phone to silent, and let your ears do the work.

Happy birding—tune in, turn up the volume on nature’s greatest hits, and let those songs be your guide!

Sources

1. Why Birds Make Sounds

1. Territory Defense

1. Songs let other birds know “This patch of trees (or yard) is taken!”
2. A strong, loud song can keep rivals away without a fight.

2. Mate Attraction

1. Males often sing elaborate tunes to show off their health, stamina, and “good genes.”
2. The richer or more complex the song, the more likely a female is to choose him.

3. Alarm & Warning Calls

1. Sharp, abrupt calls (e.g., “kree!” or “chip-chip”) alert others to predators—hawks, cats, or even humans.
2. Different calls can signal different threats (air vs. ground).

4. Contact & Flock Cohesion

1. Soft “chip” or “see-see” calls help birds keep track of each other in flight or while feeding.
2. Especially important in dense foliage or low light.

5. Begging & Parent-Offspring Communication

1. Fuzzy nestlings peep incessantly to tell parents “Feed me!”
2. Parents use specific calls to locate or corral chicks.

2. Songs vs. Calls: Structure & Stereotypy

• Songs

- Usually longer (several seconds), with distinct phrases or “stanzas.”
- Often learned from tutors (dad or neighboring adults) during a “critical period.”
- Many songbirds have a repertoire—several different song types they can switch between.

• Calls

- Shorter, simpler, and more hard-wired (innate).
- Designed for quick, clear transmission—think of them as “emergency alerts” or “text messages,” not full symphonies.

3. Repetition vs. Variation

• Why Repeat?

- Repeating a phrase several times (e.g., 2–6 times) makes it easier for listeners to catch the message, especially over background noise.
- Many birds stick to a pattern: “Phrase A” three times, then “Phrase B” twice, and so on.

• Where’s the Variety?

- Repertoire Size: Some species (like Northern Mockingbirds) have dozens—even hundreds—of different phrases they can string together.
- Dialects: Populations in different areas sing slightly different versions of the “same” song. A Song Sparrow in Pasadena might have a subtly different tune than one in San Diego.

- Improvisation & Mimicry: Mockingbirds and starlings literally copy sounds from other species (and even car alarms!).
- Seasonal Changes: Young birds may practice and refine their songs each spring; older birds sometimes tweak their tunes year to year.

Think of Tone, Repetition, Pattern

Variation Notes

1. Song Sparrow 3–5 repeating trills + buzzy end
 - a. Each male has ~5–10 song “types” in his repertoire.
2. Northern Mockingbird
 - a. Repeats each phrase 2–4 times
 - b. Mimics other birds, frogs, even machinery
3. American Robin 2–3 clear whistles, pause, repeat
 - a. Song stays pretty consistent, but intensity varies with mood
4. Red-winged Blackbird “Conk-la-ree!” repeated up to 10×
 - a. Flashes red epaulet while singing to assert dominance.

Bottom Line

Bird sounds are purposeful “messages,” and while repetition helps ensure the message gets through, most songbirds mix it up with multiple song types, regional dialects, or even borrowed sounds. Next time you hear that “cheer-up, cheerily,” pay attention—not just to what they’re saying, but how they’re saying it!