

Kids' Planet ... with Thorne Ecological Institute

Bird Song and Color



Drawing by Kara Priest



by Dr. Oakleigh Thorne, II

As spring gets near, you can hear more and more bird songs, while during the winter the birds have been pretty quiet. Do you know why birds sing? Did you know that it's usually just the male bird that sings? When 4th grade students come out to Sombrero Marsh and I ask them these questions, they usually answer, "to attract a female." This is partly right, but the male bird also sings to "stake out" and defend a particular territory that belongs to him. When you here another male bird of the same kind answering, and the two seem very close together, they are probably fighting over

where the boundary actually is that separates their territories from one another.

It's amusing to me to sometimes overhear someone say, "Oh, listen to those two birds singing—they must be very happy!" Actually they are probably very angry and battling out where each one's territory is. As soon as a male bird has established his territory, he usu-



Male Red Winged Blackbird

ally attracts a mate soon, and this female then gets busy building a nest and laying eggs. So wherever a male bird is singing, there is usually a nesting female, too. You can actually measure the number of nesting pairs of birds in an area by mapping out where male birds are singing. This is called a "breeding bird census." You might try to do this in your home area with the help of your parents or teacher. Birds sing the most, right at daybreak, probably because after a night of rest, they feel the urge to start right out defending their territories again. So dawn is the best time to really hear bird songs, so you need to get out of bed early! That's why we often hear the old saying: "I'm up with the birds," from a person who does get up early.

If you would like to see a good example of bird territories, go to the nearest cattail swamp, and you will usually find that there are several red-winged blackbirds in clear sight singing away and sometimes even chasing each other as they defend their individual territories. If there is open water near the cattails, you might even see a male yellow-headed blackbird. These are strikingly beautiful birds, and you can't miss their bright yellow heads.

What about bird color? Why is the male usually more brightly colored than the female? My students usually say, "to attract a mate," and again they are

partly right. But there is another very important reason. Since the female is sitting on the nest keeping her eggs warm and hoping that nothing will see her, she needs to be protectively colored, or "camouflaged," so that she will not be noticed by some animal that might want to eat her, like a raccoon, skunk, or hawk. Again, if you go to your cattail swamp, you will see that the female red-winged blackbirds are brown-striped and hard to see compared with the black-colored males with their bright red shoulder patches.

There are some amazingly colored birds, especially in the tropics. Look through a *Birds of the World* book, and you will see some great examples. With some kinds of birds, the male and female look exactly alike. In the case of the belted kingfisher, which is common in Boulder County, the female actually has an extra rusty stripe, which the male doesn't have. She nests in a hole in the stream bank, however, so she has no need for dull color, because she is totally out of sight.

So as spring arrives, get outside and listen for bird songs! See if you can find each bird and identify what kind it is. You might then become a person who studies birds, called an ornithologist. I'm one!

Dr. Thorne is founder and honorary president of Thorne Ecological Institute in Boulder. For more information about their classes for children, please check www.thorne-eco.org or e-mail info@thorne-eco.org or call (303) 499-3647.

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