

Mated Birds Singing Duets



PHOTO: PETE GILMORE

Great Horned Owl near Flowed Meadow

There are a number of bird species around the world in which both male and female sing, and often sing duets with each other. You might think that this happens in exotic places with exotic species, and it does. What is surprising to many Newton residents is the fact that four of our common, local species sing male-female duets. These are our Northern Cardinals, Carolina Wrens, Great Horned Owls and Barred Owls.

Our Great Horned Owls court around the time of the Christmas Bird Count in late December. This singing may begin in November, goes on into January, and then slows as most females are on eggs by February, sometimes with snow on their backs. During the courtship one can often hear them singing duets after dusk or before dawn. They have classic owl hoots in a rhythm that sounds like **Hooo...Hoo-Hoo-Hoo, Hooo-Hooo...Hooo...Hooo.** The female answer is in the same rhythm as the male but is usually higher in pitch than the his song. They sing back and forth to each other, getting pretty intense about it as they get ready to mate. These Great Horned Owls are the top of the avian food chain in Newton. You can find them roosting in large coniferous trees in most of our parks, but certainly in Cold Spring Park, Nahanton Park and along the Charles River in places like Flowed Meadow in Auburndale. Even Red-tailed Hawks must take care around these big owls. Their talons are very powerful. If you want to hear the duets of Great Horned Owls, you might come on the next Christmas Bird Count in late December of 2018. The only drawback is going out at 5 A.M. in December.

The Barred Owls have a hooting sequence and rhythm that lends itself to anthropomorphic phrasing. We usually

describe it as “Who cooks for you, who cooks for you all.” **Hoo-Hoo...Hoo-Hooo... Hoo-Hoo...Hoo-Hooo-AAAAAWWW.** These owls tend to breed a little later than their Great Horned Owl cousins. The two species are in different genera, so are not closely related. Where you find Great Horned Owls you will not see Barred Owls. The larger Great Horned Owls are a threat to the Barred Owls. When Great Horned Owls are in Cold Spring Park, or in the large white pines near the top of Windsor Road along the Braeburn Golf Course, you may find Barred Owls along the Cochituate Aqueduct. The female Barred Owl has the same rhythm as her mate-to-be but hoots on a higher pitch. When they are hooting duets you can hear the difference distinctly. These owls have shown up by my feeders a little before dawn in the spring, hoping for an early, unwary squirrel. In both the Barred Owls and the Great Horned Owls it is impossible to tell the gender of the birds by sight alone.



PHOTO: PETE GILMORE

Barred Owl, Cochituate Aqueduct

A less predatory and more brightly feathered songbird around our houses is the Northern Cardinal. They stay with us all year round. They can survive our winters as they are seed eaters. Northern Cardinals are monogamous for the most part. Cardinals tolerate others of their kind during the winter, but again pair up and defend their territory in the spring. Both genders are beautiful against the snow. When spring is under way you may see a red male cardinal offering food to his more subtly plumaged mate. Her mix of warm browns and lighter reds are a very nice sight when you look carefully. Her plumage contrasts with her bright red beak. The male Northern Cardinals began singing in my neighborhood this year in late January. I usually first notice them in early February, advertising the coming of spring. They are in sync with Punxatawney Phil, but seem more steadily optimistic. We mimic their sound in



PHOTO: PETE GILMORE

Northern Cardinal

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words as some version of “Whit-cheer...cheer, cheer, cheer, bertie, bertie, bertie.” What is interesting to listen for is the response of the female Northern Cardinal to her mate. The females begin singing about a month after the males have been singing. Their song is the same as their mate’s but is quieter and is often sung from hiding, whereas



PHOTO: LANNY MCDOWELL

Carolina Wren

the male perches up high and sings to the world. He is a prime target for predation when he does this, so he has to remain alert. She wants to be less noticeable as she will be on their eggs and close to their young and so does not want to attract attention. A researcher in Wisconsin has studied female cardinals singing quietly while on their nest. They seem to signal to their mates that it is time to bring food to the nest. When you see and hear all of these warm and relational communications between a pair of cardinals, you are even more drawn to their beauty.

A final pair of birds that sing duets are our Carolina Wrens. Both this species and the Northern Cardinals were originally more southern in their ranges but have adapted to life in more northern places probably because of the changes in habitat around our towns. The Carolina Wrens are very perky, rusty brown birds with a white stripe over their eye. Again, the gender is impossible to distinguish by

sight. This wren was very common in Newton until the record snowy winter of 2014-15, which killed a lot of them. Since that hard winter they have been replenishing their stock in Newton and again are becoming more common. In this species the females have some completely different sounds from their mates. The male Carolina Wren has loud, clear phrases that usually come in triples. One year I made up some mnemonic phrases for one that sang near my house. “Chirpity-chirpity-chirpity” is one “Meateater-meateater-meateater” another, “Teakettle-teakettle-teakettle” another and “Sweeney-sweeney-sweeney” is a fourth. There are many variations, but once you hear one version of a Carolina Wren’s song, you will recognize the next character of this species who sings near you. Often, while a male Carolina Wren is singing his loud, clear song there is an accompanying descending chatter near him. This is his mate. This duet is common enough that it is in the songs included on the Sibley birding app for smartphones, the *Sibley eGuide to Birds*. You sometimes hear her chatter call without the male singing. It sounds like a scold or a warning when you hear it alone. Carolina Wrens sing less frequently during the winter. They do sing all year round. It fills you with good cheer to hear them in the snow.

An online reference for bird sounds can be found at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology’s Macaulay Library web site: <https://search.macaulaylibrary.org/catalog> There are lots of audio recordings for many species in this library and it may take some listening to find a good one. ■

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✿ Pete Gilmore



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