



DIRECT FROM LAS VEGAS
IMPRESSIONIST
ED MOCKINGBIRD

FEATHERED MIMICS

SOME BIRDS CAN IMITATE
THE SOUNDS OF OTHER BIRDS—
AND EVEN A FEW MAMMALS
AND ELECTRONIC DEVICES.

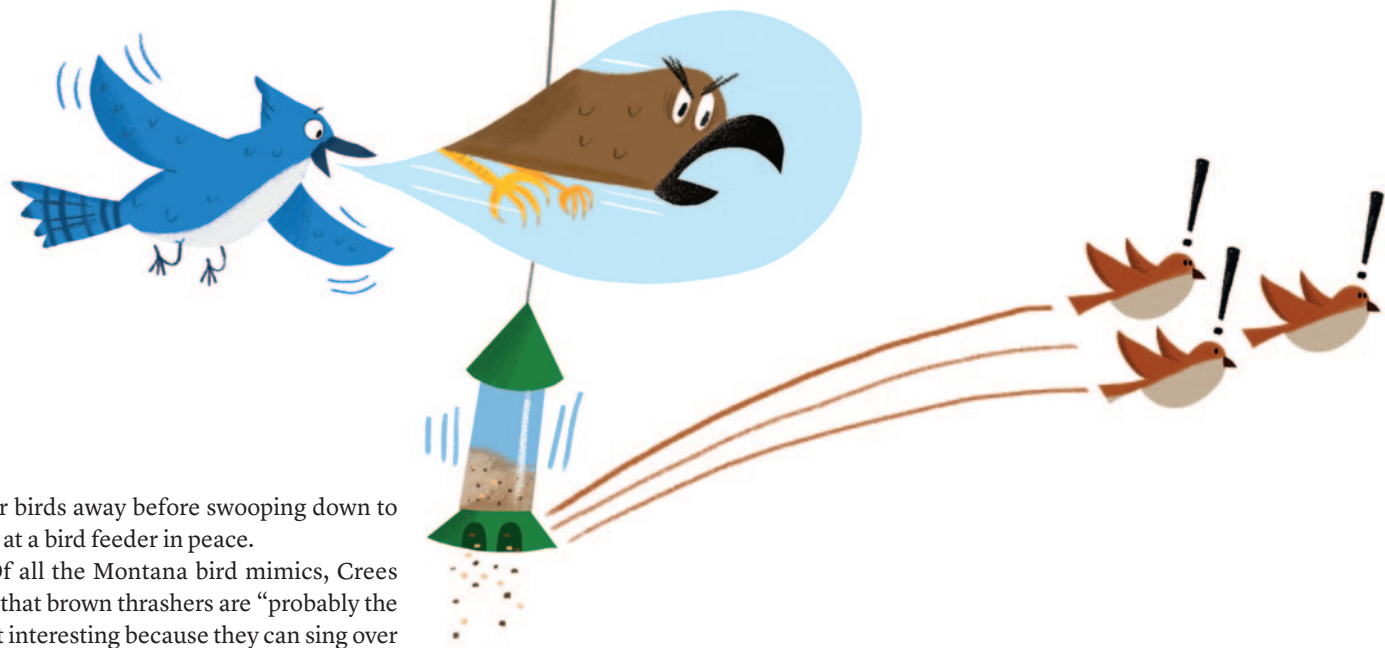
BY AMY GRISAK
ILLUSTRATIONS BY MIKE MORAN

As a sound recordist for natural history television programs for many years, my job was to record accurate background sound to accompany the video footage. Sitting quietly with headphones and microphone, I focused on capturing sounds like tinkling aspen leaves, the burbling of a river rapids, and, most frequently, various birdcalls—from hawks and loons to warblers and thrushes. I jotted down what I thought I heard without knowing that some of these bird sounds might have been made by imposters.

Several bird species are famous worldwide for their ability to mimic other sounds. People delight in teaching African parrots everything from Shakespearean sonnets to naughty limericks. The aptly named northern mockingbird, possibly the nation's best-known mimic, can learn human speech when in captivity.

But a surprising number of common birds can perform an equally impressive playlist.

“My first encounter with bird mimicry in Montana was the Steller’s jay imitating a red-tailed hawk. They’re famous for doing that,” says Bo Crees, avian specialist for Montana Audubon. Crees says he has also watched (and heard) bluejays, another member of the intelligent and vocal corvid family, make the redtail call to scare



other birds away before swooping down to dine at a bird feeder in peace.

Of all the Montana bird mimics, Crees says that brown thrashers are “probably the most interesting because they can sing over 1,000 different phrases” of dozens of birds, including northern flickers, wood thrushes, and various raptors. Like northern mockingbirds and catbirds, brown thrashers belong to the Mimidae (Latin for “mimic”) family, whose name alludes to the members’ vocal talents. A brown thrasher copies the songs of bird species in its area, combining bits and pieces in a freestyle pattern that creates its impressive repertoire.

The catbird is another copycat that can rattle through a sampling of neighboring bird sounds. Catbirds are easier than other mimics to identify because, even after prolonged bird ballads, they often end their riff with the raspy “mew” that earns them their name.

A well-known imitator in this family, though rare in Montana, is the northern

mockingbird, which sings songs of multiple bird species, as well as everything from a croaking frog to a barking dog to a car alarm. Both males and females sing, and their songs—along with the occasional croak and siren—are more pronounced during breeding season, often continue long into the night.

European starlings have been known to emulate songbirds, coyotes, and even a crying child. American crows impersonate barred owls. The yellow-breasted chat does a great crow imitation.

Why do birds imitate other sounds? In addition to scaring away others from feeders, male mimics use their talents to gain an edge during breeding season. “More songs mean greater genetic fitness, making them

more attractive to females,” says Allison Begley, avian conservation biologist for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. “The males try to show off that they have a very big playlist.” Mimicry can also dissuade rivals from entering a male bird’s territory.

As for why some females mimic other birds, it could be self-preservation. “Being able to mimic a big hawk can scare off a smaller raptor or a ground predator,” Begley says. “And then there’s the burrowing owl, which can sound like a rattlesnake, telling a coyote or other predator that they’d better move along.”

IT’S ALL IN THE SYRINX

How birds imitate other sounds is as fascinating as their repertoires. Most have a vocal organ called a syrinx, named after a nymph in Greek mythology who was pursued by the god Pan and turned into panpipes. Unlike a mammal’s voice box, which sits atop the windpipe, a bird’s syrinx sits in the bottom of the trachea at the brachial fork. This feature allows the bird to move different volumes of air through the syrinx from each lung independently, and then manipulate the sound from the syrinx using their tongue and other muscles to produce a wide array of vocalizations.

Knowing what I do now about bird mimics, I can pretty much guarantee that back

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when I was a sound recorder, I certainly misidentified some species. Though I’m no longer gathering sounds professionally, knowing about bird imitators helps me better understand what I am hearing when afield looking and listening for winged wildlife.

Bird mimics can fool even birding experts. One day at the Helena Regulating Reservoir, Crees heard a European starling, then a killdeer, an American robin, a red-tailed hawk, and a western wood pewee. “I was watching the starling,” he says. “But I put a killdeer on my bird list before realizing that

the killdeer vocalization came from the starling.” He then watched and heard the starling imitate each of the other three bird species he had thought were in the trees around him.

Another time, Crees visited Council Grove State Park in spring and was thrilled to hear what he thought was a western wood pewee. “It’s really unusual and a big deal to hear one that early in the season,” he says. “But then I realized it was just a European starling mimicking the wood pewee.”

EXPOSING IMPOSTERS

Birding experts have learned a few tricks to keep from getting fooled. One is that if you hear a bird during a time of year when the species is rarely in Montana, it’s likely an impersonator. Crees recommends checking published records on the eBird app to see when various species are most often in the Treasure State.

Another tip is to notice if a call is coming during a strange time of day. For instance, owls rarely hoot during midday, and hawks don’t usually screech at dawn and dusk. Also note where the call comes from. Some of the best bird mimics—brown thrashers, mockingbirds, and catbirds—are mainly species of shrubs and dense thickets. If you hear a curlew calling from a serviceberry grove, it’s probably not a curlew.

Also, calls from mimics may follow an unusual order. Mockingbirds often imitate the calls of two or three other birds species one after the other. Brown thrashers will sometimes echo the same imitation two or three times. “If you hear the same sound in a repetitive pattern, be suspicious,” Begley says.



Probably the best way to tell the real deal from a BS-er is to practice listening to birds and learning their habitat. To a beginner, a catbird can sound just like a green-winged teal. But as you gain some expertise, you’ll start to notice that the catbird sounds a bit raspier than a real teal.

Also, what would a duck be doing over there in the bushes? 🦆

Editor’s Note: An easy way to learn authentic birdcalls is with the free Merlin Bird ID app, produced by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.



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