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Top 10 Tips to Improving Your “Birding By Ear” Skills

** = obvious tips; require rote/repetition*

= require innate talent and/or demand practice and/or field study time

*1. Listen to song/call recordings on CDs, cassettes, and the Web (www.americanbirding.org to order these media).

#2. Attempt to see the bird that’s vocalizing, whereupon the combination of two modalities (sight and sound) sometimes may help your long-term memory recall.

#3. “Predict” which bird species you’re apt to hear before you begin your trail hike by “playing” the suspected target bird species in your “head.” In so doing, you’re more likely to immediately recognize a bird species’ vocalization pattern and, thus, identify it on its INITIAL vocalization that emits nearby.

#4. Increase your ability to be patient while birding so that you fully explore/find by sight the birds you hear vocalizing (This technique relates to #2, above). Five more minutes of concentration often achieves “victory.”

#5. “Draw” bird vocalizations using your own “short-hand” notation marks, ala the chapter in Sibley’s *Birding Basics* (i.e., a quasi-sonogram shorthand method that he introduces). After your birding foray and when you’re out of the field, use these written notation marks while listening to songs/calls on media (e.g., CDs) to ID the species you heard and/or better learn their song/call patterns.

*6. Get out and bird each late winter/spring, especially during the initiation of bird courtship and at dawn/early morning hours when bird song activity is at its peak.

*#7. Go on birding outings with other birders who know to “bird by ear” and are willing to share and tell.

*#8. Whistle quietly/squeak/”pish” to coax birds closer into your view after you hear them singing/calling.

*#9. Use my Bird Song Memory Phrase web resource (above #, click on home page link) to aid your recall.

#10. Increase your understanding of bird species’ life history, life cycle, and natural history so that you’ve done your “homework” and, thus, have the ability to correctly choose the ID of a bird species in question (that you hear/see). Note: the bird in question that you have NOT yet identified is often the most abundant “XX” species until proven otherwise.

That is to say, if you’re in the field looking in northern CA and see, for example, a small flycatcher within a forest opening in early May, it’s best to know that the most abundant, typical species is the Pacific-Slope Flycatcher. Therefore, until proven otherwise with song/call; field marks; and behavior, it’s probably unlikely to be a Hammond’s Flycatcher or another Empidonax genus member (e.g., Willow Flycatcher, Gray Flycatcher, Dusky Flycatcher).