**BIRD LANGUAGE**

**E-Course Part 1: Bird Language Basics – A Universal Language**

**What is Bird Language?**

There is a universal language in nature. Many kinds of birds and animals communicate through this “secret,” yet common, language.

For thousands of years, people around the world in varied, traditional place-based cultures have successfully learned enough of this language to help locate food and stay safe from danger. Scientific research is now beginning to “catch up” with this ancient traditional ecological knowledge.

A number of excellent studies have begun to emerge, documenting a variety of different aspects of animal communication. Much has been discovered, yet each answer opens a doorway to new questions and mysteries.

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**A few examples of bird language in action:**

-Black-capped Chickadees are known to use different calls in proximity to different types of predators, varying the degree of endings on their “chick-a-dee-dee-dee” call based on the danger level of the predator. Nuthatches have been found to listen in on the chickadee vocalizations to help assess the threat level of different raptors at a distance. *University of Washington (2007, March 19). Eavesdropping Nuthatches Appear To Understand Chickadees In Distress.*

-Jim Corbett, the famous conservationist and tracker from the Kumaon foothills of India, wrote in his book, *Jungle Lore*, that he always knew where the leopard was by the sounds of the other animals in the forest.

-A study published in 2008 showed that Siberian Jays use different calls to indicate the threat level of hawks. A perched hawk elicited a different jay call than a hawk actively searching for prey, and direct hawk attack elicited its own type of call.

Other jays responded to the attack call by fleeing to a safer place and then looking for the hawk; the searching hawk call led jays to hide and remain still; and the perched hawk call alerted other jays to fly up to a higher level and then look for the hawk. *Uppsala University. “Some Birds Can Communicate About Behavior Of Predators.” ScienceDaily, 9 Jan. 2008. Web. 2 Feb. 2012.*

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**What is this universal language? How can you learn it?**

The building blocks of this communication system are simple enough:

1) sound

2) motion

3) the nature of the intent behind the behavior

**Sound & Motion**

A bird’s posture and vocalization patterns contain a lot of information. By getting to know and understand some basic patterns, we can learn to understand a lot about what is happening in that moment in time not just for that bird, but for other birds and animals in the area.

An American robin that is on a perch, singing persistently it’s “cheeri-up-CHEERIO-cheerily” song and scanning in multiple directions is carrying a different intention and presence than a robin that is perched but looking alertly in one direction, pumping its tail and uttering a sharp “TEET-tut-tut-tut!” call.

This could be the same bird, on the same perch, but the quality of the calls and postures exudes a totally different feeling. The first scenario, with the singing bird, denotes what we call the “baseline” state for that bird: the bird is not in immediate danger, and is able to sing, proclaim and defend his territory, and (hopefully) attract a mate.

The robin in the second example has been forced to leave that state of baseline. Something has caused enough concern for the bird to utter an alarm call. The robin peers into the distance, giving both visual signals through tail flicking, and auditory signals through the vocalized notes. What is causing the alarm?

This is where the journey into understanding bird language begins.

Many other birds and animals will take notice of the robin’s altered behavior. Birds in the distance may pause their feeding or songs to take notice. Other birds may begin to alarm as well. Some types of alarm even occur through an animal’s LACK of sound and motion.

The skill, challenge, and great fun of bird language is in learning to interpret who is causing the alarm, and how the ripple of disturbance is moving across the landscape.

We’ll get further into this art of interpretation later. For now, go outside and observe some of the birds in your area. We recommend starting with getting to know one common bird in your area. The American Robin (Turdus migratorius) is a great one to start with because they are so common and widespread. We’ll recommend others as we move further along.

**Adventure of the Week:**

For now, just get outside and try to find one bird that is common around your home. Even if you think you know this bird well, make some observations and deepen your connection with this species. If you don’t know the bird species by name, try to sketch it or get a photo, and look it up in a field guide.

The Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology’s website, [http://AllAboutBirds.org,](http://AllAboutBirds.org) is a great one for learning and identification purposes.

If you are familiar with the species you have observed, try to learn something new about the behavior being exhibited.

**A few basic tips will help you to get started:**

-Use all of your senses while in the field.

-Take your time and slow down. Let go of the fast pace of daily life and enjoy each moment.

-Walk softly and slowly. Make sure you are comfortable while observing in the field; dress appropriately for the weather. Your body temperature may drop if you sit still for a while.

-Find a nice place to sit, with a good view of the area where you can settle in. Be calm and still in order to minimize disturbance to the area. Sit for half an hour or forty minutes if possible; if not, even five minutes can help you connect and de-stress.

-Let your body language be relaxed and natural. Don’t make any fast, startling motions if you see a bird or mammal.

-In general, keep your eyes ahead and softly looking into the distance to scan for bird activity. Use your peripheral vision to help spot movements of birds and other animals, then focus in when needed to catch the details.

-Bring a small pocket notepad with you to jot down any observations or sketches. Write down any questions or thoughts you want to follow-up on later.

**Do This:**

Make this moment of connection a daily habit, even if it is only for five minutes. Keep a journal of your field notes, with the date, basic weather pattern (breezy? Calm? overcast? raining? temperature?), and notes on the birds you observed (little brown birds in a flock perched on a wire).

We’ll be asking you in Part 2 next week about your observations, so make sure you get out there. It’s okay if you don’t know the names of the birds you see as you are starting out. Just do your best to describe them, and we will give you tips on identification next time.

Bird language is about learning tendencies and patterns of behavior, so you can learn a lot just by observing what a bird or group of birds is doing (or not doing).

Have fun!

# E-Course Part 2: Bird Language Basics – Getting to Know One Species Well

This week we look at some building blocks of behavior for understanding bird language, for those who need some help learning identification, some basics of bird identification, and some building blocks of behavior for understanding bird language.

If you got out this last week and observed the birds in your neighborhood, here’s a few questions and reflections that can help you begin to decipher Sound & Motion among the birds and animals in your neighborhood.

You might be wondering if you can do this without knowing the birds’ species identity. This might seem like a bit of a stretch, but our Shikari trackers who visit places in the world they have never been to before can interpret bird and animal language without knowing the names of the local species at all.

This happened a number of years in a row, when members of our training team were first visiting Europe, and then Africa; in both cases, the trackers successfully identified behavior patterns by the “shapes” of the Sound & Motion.

Here’s how it’s done…

## Basic Behavioral Interpretation: Sound & Motion in Context

Here are some essential questions to consider while observing birds in the field:

* What was the bird doing? Was it on the ground, on a perch (how high?), or in the air?
* Was the bird preening its feathers at all? or, was it totally still?
* Was the bird making any sounds? Describe them as best you can.
* What food sources do you think this bird is interested in right now, in this season? Look around next time and see what you can find.
* Do you think any predators were around, or was the bird in its “baseline” state of singing, preening, or feeding?

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Ok, that’s more than enough questions for now. It’s okay if you didn’t have answers to a lot of these questions. The point here is to give you some things to look for the next time around.

## Get to Know One Species Well

One of the keys to learning bird language is to get to know one species REALLY well. Learn all the nuances of its behavior.

For instance, a lot of people see American robins around their yard. They are super common.

But how many people know the difference between a robin’s dawn song compared to its song later in the day?

Or the difference in the robin’s reaction to the presence of a hunting house cat compared to the presence of an active, bird-eating Cooper’s hawk?

And what about the robin’s reaction to a gray squirrel burying an acorn in the Autumn, compared to a gray squirrel attempting to rob a robin’s nest in the springtime?

There are many levels of subtlety in behavior waiting to be discovered, even in that common robin that’s always on your lawn. It’s easy to walk by and ignore that robin, and to go off in search of rarer finds. But, it’s the everyday bird that you see a million times that has the most to teach you about bird language.

## See Beyond the Common-Place

If you can see the mystery there in that every-day robin, the word “common” will lose its meaning; a doorway to a deeper world of bird language will open for you.

The basic principles of bird language exhibited by the robin will apply to many more species, so the more connection you have with that individual robin, the easier it will be to learn from and interpret the behavior of other species of birds.

If there is no robin in your yard or study area, pick a bird that you do see everyday there—even if you don’t know its species identity (see the next section for help with identification).

For this week, get out there again and make some more observations of that bird that you (hopefully) found last week. It’s okay if you can’t find the same bird again. Just do your best and work with what you’ve got. Consider these questions when you are out in the field:

What perches or feeding areas is the bird using right now?

If the bird is part of a flock, is there a dominance hierarchy in the feeding order?

Where could this bird take cover if it needed to hide?

Where do you think this bird sleeps at night, and how could you know?

Have fun, we’ll be add in some new layers next week with part three.

## Identification Tips:

If you need help with bird identification, here are some questions and tips that can help you to refine your ID skills.

### ****Using Field Guides****

What kind of bird was it? A good field guide can help with this. There are a number of great field guides and other resources available these days. Each book out there has something different to offer, so we recommend you peruse the books at your library or bookstore and see which ones work for you. Some people like color photographs in a field guide; others prefer hand-drawn images that represent an “average” of what you might come across in the field.

If you can afford more than one book, many experienced birders will tell you it’s best to have a couple of different resources to choose from—especially for cross-referencing purposes. There are some great mobile apps now for your smart phones and portable digital devices as well.

### ****Size Comparisons****

If you are just starting out, it helps to describe the bird you’ve observed and write your observations in a journal. About how big was it? Using common birds as size markers for comparison can help – “it was as big as a crow” or “about the size of a sparrow.”

### Beak Shape

Was the beak thin like a robin’s, or triangular and short like a sparrow’s? or a different shape?

 A beak’s shape can tell you a lot about the diet and behavior of the bird that owns it. . . insect eaters have longer, thinner beaks, while seed eaters have shorter, triangular beaks. Nectar drinkers like hummingbirds have long beaks that can extract the nectar from flowers. Birds of prey have sharp, hooked beaks that tear and pull.

Glance through a field guide to the birds and see all the various specialized bills that exist, from shorebirds to ducks and beyond. A beak’s shape is a window into the habits and diet of a bird.

### ****Plumage****

What color patterns or distinguishing markings did the bird have?

A bird’s plumage says a lot about its natural history and life style. Earth colored birds are able to blend closely with the ground. Birds with showy plumage may give displays from high perches. Each bird has a different view of the world, and will bring you different information about the movement of predators in an area.

In learning bird language, we often recommend starting with the birds of the ground and thicket, like the song sparrow. These types of birds, often with drab plumage, will be your second set of eyes and ears on the ground, and often have a lot to say about approaching predators like coyotes and bobcats.

### Develop Your Storyteller’s Mind’s Eye

If you close your eyes, can you picture one of the birds you saw in the field this last week? How clearly can you picture the bird? This is a helpful skill to practice.

**E-course Part 3: Listening to the Quietest Sound**

If you have a sit spot (a place that you sit outside regularly), or just have a place you can go and sit to observe nature for a bit, you can try this exercise next time you go there. Here’s a summary…

Once you are settled in, start to listen for the quietest sound that you can hear. At first you will mostly notice the “louder of the quietest sounds”. With a cyclical re-atunement through each direction—listening again for the quietest sound—you will begin to notice the quieter, and finally, the quietest sounds. This ability will keep developing over time.

Your ears and awareness will slowly adjust and reach harder and harder for the quieter sounds. With practice you will really tune in to the quiet sounds, and suddenly your ears (and your awareness) will be much more receptive to taking in the nuances of bird language.

**Your “Filters” & the Effect of the Quietest Sound**

It is well known through neurological science that the ears—and senses—are constantly absorbing loads of information every moment.

Over time, the influences of cultural and societal context will cause a person to filter what is “irrelevant”. Bird language training is about re-awakening some of these aspects of sensory input that have been ‘muffled’ through the influences of our life experiences up until this point.

The trick is re-tuning into all of the data, and learning which pieces can help you understand what is happening through the voices of the birds. Through this process you will re-organize your filtering mechanisms. It can take a little time, so be patient with yourself.

**You Are Part of the Story—Adjusting Your Impact**

*There is a story happening every moment on the landscape–and, you are part of it.*

Remember the “observer effect” from physics class? Well, that is coming into play as soon as you begin to head out for your sit spot. Your presence creates an impact on the story.

Do your best to recall that you are part of the story of bird language whether you like it or not, and you want to choose what part you will play in the story. Set your intentions and goals, make some notes in your journal about your current awareness of bird language and wildlife relationships. Refer back to them in six months and see what has changed!

*How big, and what type of impact you make, depends on how you move across the landscape, and how you conduct yourself.*

Learn to quiet yourself and move fluidly, like a calm breeze across the earth. Stop often to listen, observe and literally take a breath. Better still, take a few relaxing breaths and remember that you are in the story—ask yourself, “how?” Take your time and enjoy every step!

You might even develop the habit of practicing the ‘listening in four directions’ exercise whenever you stop to breathe. You will find this very helpful. Let’s look at this exercise of four directional listening in a bit more detail.

**The Practice of Listening in Four Directions, in Detail**

So, you’ve moved gracefully to your sit area. You have tuned into your senses, and started listening for the quietest sounds in the distance. Perhaps the quiet chip calls of a junco begin to catch your awareness, or the rustling scratch-feeding of a pair of spotted towhees starts to speak to you.

*Spend a few minutes listening deeply and absorbing the sonic environment.*

Next, begin sending your hearing straight out ahead of you. Start listening close in, and work your hearing further and further ahead of you onto the landscape. Then, send your hearing in the same way out to your right, and then to your left. Then listen for any sounds coming from behind you.

Spend a good minute or so – at least – listening in each direction. Then, listen above you as well. Listen to the sounds on the earth, too – the crinkling of leaves, tiny footsteps of mice and shrews, and the crickets hiding in the grass; even the movement of earthworms in the entrance to their tunnels can be heard at times.

After consciously listening in each direction, let your hearing spread out in all directions all at once. Take this in as a tapestry in a diffused way of listening. Let the sounds move you now the way wind moves the leaves. Listen for what catches your attention and draws your curiosity.

The more mysteries you engage with on the landscape, the more powerfully you may find that your hearing is “tugged” across the land by your deep questions.

**Start with simple questions:**

• What’s that sound right over there?

• What birds are singing near each direction? Who’s the closet sound-maker? Do I hear squirrels?

• Do I hear the distant sound of highways, jets, helicopters or other human-made sounds?

As you practice more and more times at your sit spot, let your questions evolve to deeper, more relationship-oriented questions with the “locals”:

* *Where are the robin’s favorite perches?*
* *Is that a different robin counter-singing off to the east?*
* *Who is creating that alarm call at the edge of the meadow – is there a bobcat sneaking in there?*

These types of questions, along with an open and engaged sense of curiosity, create more reasons to listen.

**Do This:**

Try the listening exercise this week, and don’t forget to keep an eye out for those “common” birds you have been getting to know. Keep an ear to the ground (and the trees), and we’ll be back with more next week.

# E-Course Part 4: A Key to Learning Bird Language

One thing we hear sometimes from people is, “How will I ever learn this art of understanding bird language? It seems so daunting. . .“

Just take it one day, and one observation, at a time. Keep your ears open, practice deep listening, and you’ll be surprised how much you can learn about the lives of the birds and animals around you – and what they have to tell you about yourself and others.

Jim Corbett, author of the classic book Jungle Lore, who wrote about his observations of the language of nature in the sub-Himalayan hill country in India, wrote that learning the language of the birds and animals is an absorption process, one that continues throughout life, as “the book of nature has no beginning, as it has no end. . .”

Wherever you are at on your learning journey, there are always new connections to make and new mysteries to explore. Just enjoy each moment and revel in each new mystery that you happen upon.

## Good habits that will help you:

**1) Keep a journal.**

Just write down whatever sticks with you. Birds that you saw today, behaviors, seasonal feeding – all of this is fair game. Be sure to write down any questions or curiosities. If you are new to identification you may find it helpful to sketch a local bird or two out of the field guide, and draw arrows to point out the main field marks of the bird. This is a great way to start learning and remembering field marks for identification.

Even committing to spend two minutes a day scratching down notes will help to jog your memory and prime you for your next round of bird language listening.

**2) Get out to your sit spot, or just outside in general, every day, even if it’s only for a few minutes.**

Sometimes it’s the quality of time that can make the difference, if you don’t have the quantity to work with. How present can you be in your senses on the landscape? Keep practicing the deep listening exercise we shared with you earlier.

**3) Draw simple maps of ‘top down’ views of bird behaviors.**

Mapping will help you learn the areas that birds are associated with, eventually yielding an understanding of territories.

**4) Draw side-views of where you see birds in relationship to the ground, shrubs, understory and canopy of the trees.**

You will begin to see associations with bird positions and presence / absence of danger. Each different kind of bird has different ways of ‘expressing’ their language of ‘position’ with respect to position on the vertical structures and cover features of the landscape.

## Do This:

Start a Bird Language journal today. Make time to get out at least once this week to watch the birds. Put it on your calendar right now (seriously!).

Make a commitment to write down even just a few observations each day or every other day. Draw a few simple maps and diagrams of vertical positioning behavior of birds (include squirrels too). Some people even set daily reminders for themselves on their smartphones to sit, to journal and/or to map!

Do whatever works. Acting now, even in a simple way, will help you to start building momentum on your learning journey.

## Resources:

There are two unique resources that we highly recommend for delving deeper into bird language skills beyond this e-course:

The Learning Bird Language DVD, and also the Advanced Bird Language CD set, both featuring Jon Young.

On the Learning Bird Language DVD, you’ll see helpful graphical displays of the different shapes of alarm, tips from Jon Young and the BirdLanguage.com team, and also learn the basics of mapping bird language for yourself and for group sits.

The Advanced Bird Language CD set has over eight hours of inspiring stories from Jon Young and will take you deeper into the five voices, the shapes of alarm, and also the inner journey of awareness that occurs as connection to bird language deepens.

## References:

Jungle Lore. Jim Corbett. Oxford University Press, Delhi. 1998 reprinting.

# E-course Part 5: Baseline and Alarm

Last week we talked about a couple of good habits that will help you to boost your bird language skills – keeping a simple bird journal, and getting out to your sit spot, or at least outside, for a few quality minutes every day.

We also shared a deep listening exercise that can really open up new levels of bird language experience for you.

Today, let’s get into some more basics of bird language as we introduce the Five Voices of the Birds.

## A Pattern Language

Bird language involves patterns of sound, motion, and intention. These interacting behaviors are always better interpreted when one understands “what would like to be happening” for a songbird – as in the absence of predators, intruders in nesting areas, or other kinds of disturbances to what we call “baseline”.

To understand baseline is to understand bird language in context. It’s similar to training to hear the quietest sounds in order to pick up the nuances of bird language. It just involves more senses, and a few more variables…

## Learning the Baseline Harmony of Nature

Everything in nature is in motion. When we go to a sit spot regularly, we can begin to track and understand how the “baseline feeling” of a place shifts throughout each day and season. Each time of day, season, climate, ecosystem, and even weather condition has a unique style of baseline variation. The rhythms of the land and season are reflected in the activities of the wildlife that live there.

The level of activity that you expect to hear and see from songbirds during a springtime dawn chorus is much different than what you would normally experience during a summer afternoon. Behaviors and activities shift to maximize opportunity and conserve energy when needed. Yet, there are tendencies for each time and place.

You can learn about this variation by always asking, “What is the tendency for this time of day and season? What I am observing? What is the general activity level of the birds and animals right now? What conditions are present that feed into this pattern?”

In this way, you’ll gradually develop a sense of baseline throughout the seasons. It takes time and observation. This learning is so incredibly useful – because you’ll also begin to learn how to tell when an “event” happens that shatters the baseline experience, and your ability to interpret the bird language stories around you will grow that much further.

**Now let’s look at the five voices with this understanding of baseline as a backdrop to our learning.**

To make a simplified generalization about the patterns of bird language, we say that there are “five voices” of the birds in a universal sense.

Jon Young gets into great detail around these five voices in his books and audio resources (see the resources section at the bottom).

If you are interested in the science, and can wait a few months, Jon’s new book, What the Robin Knows, is filled with references from a variety of studies documenting many aspects of bird and animal language.

Dan Gardoqui is the science editor for the book and a bird language master, as well as an amazing teacher who has been working with Jon Young for over 25 years and today runs his own mentoring program—White Pine Programs, in Cape Neddick, Maine—to teach tracking and bird language.

Dan has created an amazing audio companion resource for learning the five voices of the birds working closely with sound recordist and author, Lang Elliot. All this will be available with What the Robin Knows!

These are all great resources for learning bird language. For now, we’ll pull out some general principles here to get you started.

As a bonus, we have included for you here the transcripts from the original audio edition of Seeing Through Native Eyes Volume 6, as this audio may be hard to find. In the pages of this transcript you will find some very helpful tools for learning bird language in your neighborhood. [Download the transcript here.](http://db.tt/PjvI17Br)

## The Five Voices of the Birds

Understanding the basics of these five patterns will allow you to see and hear deeper into the story of the landscape, even if you are on unfamiliar ground and don’t know the names of the birds around you.

The first four voices represent a baseline state of existence for the bird: song, companion calls, juvenile begging calls, and territorial aggression. Although these behaviors may each contain their own types of survival stress, they are routine and indicate the bird is able to go about its daily patterns of life.

Feeding, preening, and sleeping would also fit into the baseline category. When birds see each other exhibiting these behaviors, a feeling of baseline harmony is established – i.e., there is no immediate known threat from a predator. Territorial displays, foraging, and other maintenance behaviors can continue for the moment.

## Voice 1. Song

A robin that hears a nearby robin singing may be “stressed” by needing to make a counter-song back to maintain territorial boundaries or attract a mate (and singing can take a lot of energy!).

The song state, however, belies a lack of predators that would force the robin to stop doing what is usual for it in that time of day and season. Sneak attacks can occur, however. More than one hyper-focused songster has been plucked off its perch by a deft raptor.

## Voice 2. Companion Calls

Like song, companion calls also indicate a state of baseline. A mated pair of birds will often call back and forth to each other as they feed, enabling them to maintain contact even if they are out of visual range.

## Voice 3. Begging Calls

Begging calls made by juveniles to their parents also indicate a state of baseline, although the inexperienced youngsters may continue begging even in the vicinity of a predator!

## Voice 4. Territorial Aggression

Territorial aggression displays may have a harsh, alarm-like tone and a flurry of movement and activity. Yet, if two robins are fighting over a territory boundary, the song sparrow next door will likely react very little, continuing to feed.

So despite the extreme appearance, territorial aggression is still considered a baseline state, as it does not signal a general alarm across multiple species.

## Voice 5. Alarm

If, however, the robin suddenly hears a chickadee make its high-pitched alarm, and a flicker makes a sharp CLEAR! sound, and another robin makes a sharp TEEK TUT! TUT! , and then everything goes quiet, an accipiter (bird eating hawk) may be close at hand. Now, the baseline activity is stopped.

A state of alarm ensues. No one in the area within striking range of the hawk is singing or preening their feathers now (except for inexperienced juvenile birds, which may continue begging for food, leading the hawk right to their nest).

In fact, if the accipiter is perched and you know where the Cooper’s hawk is exactly, and start listening to the sounds – or lack of sounds – of the other birds, you would start to notice some interesting patterns. This is actually the best way to learn bird language – by observing directly in the field. Here’s what you might hear and see:

Birds around the hawk will stop singing. The area will get very quiet. We call this shape of alarm a “zone of oppression.” No one wants to give away their position to the hunting hawk, and birds will cease or mute their activities until the threat is gone.

Birds out of immediate reach of the Cooper’s hawk might alarm. A robin 100 yards from the hawk might give some sharp “TEEK! TUT TUT TUT!” calls. A flicker 100 yards way from the hawk might give its loud “Clear!” call. If the hawk is in flight, a chickadee may give its high thin whistle alarm (often given in close proximity, this ventriloquial call is hard to locate due to its high pitch).

Other birds further out from the alarmers may hook up into a “sentinel” position, coming higher up and closer in to get a view of the situation. Sentinel is one of the most common alarm behaviors. You can even see it while driving as birds perch quietly on telephone lines, looking into the distance.

Beyond the sentinels, out of reach of danger, you will hear bird-song continuing unabated—along with other baseline activities. There is a nice display animated graphic of this whole scenario in the Learning Bird Language DVD.

This “zone of oppression,” surrounded by alarm calls, and then by sentinel behavior, is just one example of a “shape of alarm”. Each predator has a different alarm signature. One of the great adventures in learning bird language is beginning to decipher these different alarm shapes. We’ll share more next week about how wildlife tracking skills can help you in this quest.

## Adventure of the Week:

-Get outside this week and start looking for shapes of alarm. Start by noticing in a broad sense which areas are quiet, which have song, and which if any have persistent, repetitive call notes occurring.

Learn to determine the baseline of each area. For instance, you will notice that certain types of trees have more activities than others. Quiet-prone trees—such as redwoods—are not ‘alarm’ trees, they are just naturally quieter areas. This quiet is the baseline sound for redwoods.

-Domestic animals such as dogs, or feral cats in park settings and backyards can provide rich opportunities for studying alarm shapes.

## Do This:

-Draw a simple map of the terrain and note these areas on your map when you get home, and any sightings or guesses about who was causing alarm sequences to occur.

Note how high up an alarm call occurred, and the level of tension or excitement you perceived in the call.

## Resources from Jon Young:

Advanced Bird Language CD series (OWLink Media),

Animal Tracking Basics (Young & Morgan; Stackpole Press),

Bird Language with Jon Young DVD (Village Video Productions & OWLink Media)

Seeing Through Native Eyes First Edition Part 6, Seeing Through the Eyes of the Forest (OWLink Media)

What the Robin Knows—How Birds Reveal the Secrets of the Natural World (to be released May 2012, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt)

## Other Resources:

Cornell Lab of Ornithology. A great resource for learning bird songs and calls. <http://AllAboutBirds.org>.

Bird Song By the Seasons: A Year of Listening to the Birds. Donald Kroodsma. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009.

The Singing Life of Birds: The Art and Science of Listening to Birdsong. Donald Kroodsma. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005. A unique look into the amazing world of bird song by one of the world’s foremost ornithologists.

The Music of Nature. Online site with multimedia resources for learning and appreciating nature from Lang Elliot and friends. <http://www.musicofnature.org/>

# E-course Part 6: Why Tracking is the Other Half of Learning Bird Language

Last week we shared some bird language stories about the shapes of alarm.

Hopefully you had a chance to get out for a bit and start listening for the “broad strokes” of bird language – noting the areas on the landscape full of song; any quiet areas; and any areas with sentinel behaviors or repetitive call notes (possible alarms).

## Mapping as a Routine to Deep Connection

Sometimes the actual mapping process can teach you the most about what you experience in the field. The act of mapping helps you see the landscape from a larger perspective. A deeper story about what happened may emerge for you through the map as you recall the sequence and location of events.

At the [Regenerative Design and Nature Awareness program](http://8shields.com/programs/nine-month-intensives/), the staff has been trained by Jon Young, myself (Josh Lane), Dan Gardoqui and the 8 Shields staff to work with this mapping and diagramming approach to unlocking the ‘secrets of bird language.’

Participants engage in a group bird sit, debrief process, and group mapping each week for nine months. This is also the core process we use in our [Weeklong Intensive bird language class](http://8shields.com/programs/bird-week/) each spring. This group debrief methodology is shared in detail on the Bird Language with Jon Young DVD.

Working with a group can really speed your learning process – it helps to have more eyes and ears on the landscape! Still, there is a lot you can pick up on your own, especially if you get out regularly to the same place.

## Adopt a Place on the Landscape to Observe

If you end up sitting a lot in the same place each week, over time you will really start to get a sense of the patterns that occur there. You will start to develop some really deep questions about the landscape.

You might start to hear the same bird alarm sequence every morning, around the same time in the same thicket:

…A junco hooks up to chest height, and starts giving its short soft alarm note, and then a few seconds later, further down the thicket, a song sparrow hooks up to the same height and gives a short alarm.

By hearing and seeing this sequence over and over, you might start to wonder if something is moving through the thicket every morning. If you ever crawl into the thicket, just out of sight, you just might find what trackers call an “animal run,” a path in the soil worn smooth by the repetitive, routine passage of animal feet.

## Tracking is the Other Half of Bird Language

Perhaps on this well-worn animal run, you’ll find a scat (animal dropping) filled with raspberry seeds or rabbit fur, or even find a clear dog-like track with four toes and sharp thin claw marks. Who left the tracks?

Suddenly the other half of learning bird language, wildlife tracking, begins to awaken in one’s curiosity.

What animal could fit through the tiny opening in the thicket? Was it a fox? Where did it go to catch the rabbit? Could I see this animal?

These kinds of questions start to emerge.

Through these kinds of clues and questions, you will start to get a sense of who is living in the neighborhood. By honing your tracking skills, you can start to deduce who might be causing some of the bird language events in your area.

The book Animal Tracking Basics by Jon Young and Tiffany Morgan outlines some very effective routines that will help expand your tracking abilities. Just as the journey of learning bird language can benefit from practicing a set of “core routines”, so does the art of tracking.

The methods in that book, in conjunction with a good field guide to animal tracks, will give you some strong foundations in the art of tracking. Such a study will add many new layers to your bird language experiences.

Paul Rezendes’ Tracking and the Art of Seeing is a very accessible identification guide for beginners; Mark Elbroch’s Mammal Tracks & Sign: A Guide to North Amercian Species is the most comprehensive for identification purposes; James Lowery’s The Tracker’s Field Guide contains helpful behavior and track interpretation information.

## Adventure of the Week:

This week, get out and look for tracks and other signs of wildlife in your favorite bird language observation and bird-watching area. Footprints, scratch marks on trees, scats, worn-in runways, and feeding signs are all waiting for your discovery. Such things can even be found in the heart of the city!

Footprints often are found in pockets of dust along trails, or in places where silt is washed out, or even where animal has stepped from mud onto concrete. Creek-sides are excellent places to look. The sharp hoof prints of deer can even be felt with your hand by pressing under the fallen leaves along forest trails.

## Do This:

-Find some clear mammal tracks in a good substrate. Practice drawing tracks in your field journal. Note the number of toes, the presence or absence of claw marks, and the length and width of the tracks. All of these pieces of information can help you when using a tracking field guide for identification.

-Observe your birding area for animal “runs”, worn in pathways that are used repeatedly by different animals. Make a general map of any runs or other signs that you find. This will come in handy as a reference for when you hear bird alarm sequences in the field.

## 

## Resources:

Animal Tracking Basics. Jon Young and Tiffany Morgan. Stackpole Books, 2007.

Bird Language with Jon Young. DVD. Village Video and OWLink Media, 2011.

Mammal Tracks & Sign: A Guide to North Amercian Species. Mark Elbroch. Stackpole Books, 2003.

The Tracker’s Field Guide. James Lowery. A Falcon Guide, Globe Pequot Press, 2006.

Tracking and the Art of Seeing. Paul Rezendes.

# E-course Part 7: Bird Language Happens Everywhere

Once your ears become attuned to listening for bird language, you might be surprised at how often you’ll begin to notice alarm sequences happening around you. Each environment has something different to teach us.

## Bird Language in the City

In the city, a surprising number of avian predators may be common and active. Peregrine falcons often make their nests high atop tall buildings. Their surprise, high speed dives can knock out prey in mid air, leaving only a puff of feathers drifting in the wind.

Cooper’s hawks also hunt for pigeons in urban areas. These bird eating hawks, with females growing up to the size of a crow, specialize in fast aerial maneuvers to catch birds. Female Cooper’s hawks, like other birds of prey, are noticeable larger than males, and may hunt larger prey.

Look for scattered flights of pigeons that have been forced off their roosts or feeding grounds. Further out from the scene of the attack, look for sentinel birds that have hooked up to get a view of the danger.

## Bird Language in the Suburbs

Suburban areas also offer a rich tapestry of possibilities for enterprising predators. Coyotes, foxes, snakes, owls, and even weasels may frequent forest patches, thick hedgerows, and overgrown lots.

Ground predators offer a wide variety of alarm shapes to study and observe. A few basic principles can help you in your interpretation.

## Some Principles of Bird Language

First, animals tend to conserve energy as much as possible in their motion. A bird that is hooking up out of reach of a predator tends to go only as far as needed, and no further (also depending on what perches are available, and perhaps how surprised they are).

So, consider the “threat level” of each predator in your area, and the effective reach of that predator in catching a bird. A nestling-hunting snake has a different speed and reach, and therefore, a different alarm shape, than a Cooper’s hawk. The snake alarm tends to be much more localized (although very noisy!).

The more you know about the behaviors and abilities of each animal in your area, the more refined your interpretations of bird language events will become (an “event” is any disturbance that breaks the baseline activity of an area).

## Adventure of the Week:

-Look for the “alarm shapes” of common animals like dogs in a park, or stray cats, or even joggers on a trail. How do the birds react to their presence? How far will a bird go to get out of reach of each animal? Do different types of birds react in different ways to these disturbances?

-Make sure to write any observations in your journal when you get home. Draw a bird’s eye view map of the action. Also draw side-sketches showing the height of the bird activity off of the ground.

## Do this:

-Brainstorm a list of animals in your area that might cause bird alarms. Include separate categories for raptors, mammals, snakes, and other alarm sources

-Next, do some more research into the animals that live in your area (include any species that live within 100 miles of your home). Mammals, avian predators, and snakes are all worth researching. Learn more about their lives and natural history.

A good field guide such as Peterson’s Field Guide to Mammals can help you.

Use the range maps in the back of the book to make a list of predatory mammals in your area. Online resources like ENature.com may also help.

# E-course Part 8: What Are the Birds Telling You About Yourself?

So far in this e-course, we have looked at some different shapes of alarm.

We described the large zone of oppression that surrounds a hunting Cooper’s hawk on a perch, and the close-in, raucous alarm calls of parent birds that spy a rat snake approaching their nest.

We also emphasized the importance of getting to know the different animals in your area, to better interpret the reactions of the birds to their presence.

## Birds as a Mirror for Ourselves

Now, let’s turn inwards and learn what the birds are telling us about ourselves. That’s right, we humans are not immune to having our presence broadcasted via the universal language of the forest. In fact, the birds have a lot to say about how we move and conduct ourselves.

How noisy are you when you are outside? How quickly do you move?

Loud sounds and fast motions trigger wildlife to flee and hide. A loud, tense person walking in the woods will have a very different experience than a quiet, relaxed person.

If you go to your sit spot and sit for about forty minutes and sit still, very quietly, you may notice some changes in the bird and mammal activity around you. It generally takes half an hour or so for the activity to return to its baseline state after a person has “splashed” through an area.

## The Honoring Routine

You can diminish the amount of time that it takes an area to return to baseline by adopting a slower, quieter approach to your sit area. Take your time. Relax. Walk slowly, and pause often to open your senses and “take it all in.”

When you walk, notice how grounded in your senses you are, versus how engaged you are in your internal dialogue of thoughts and concerns. Make your bird language walks a time to connect and listen deeply; use all of your senses.

The first step in avoiding triggering alarm sequences is to pay attention to the birds. Scan ahead of you before walking to check for feeding birds. Wait for birds to get out of your way, or walk around them whenever possible, rather than going right through their activity zones. Stop often and listen to the sounds around you. We call this the “honoring routine.”

Over time, the animals at your sit spot will get used to your presence, especially if you move quietly and calmly. As you learn to weave into the pattern of baseline, you may start catching glimpses of the “shyer” animals. This is because many animals rely on bird alarms for warning of approaching danger. By walking in harmony with the baseline of an area, you are effectively “bypassing” the alarm system of the forest.

## Adventure for the Week:

-Practice the Honoring Routine and walk slowly and quietly to your sit spot. Use all of your sense to detect the location of birds and avoid pushing them out of their baseline activity.

-Observe how the birds react to you. How close do certain kinds of birds allow you to pass before they startle? Over time you will learn to estimate each species’ range of comfort.

# E-course Part 9: What can the Sit Spot teach you about Bird Language?

## The Sit Spot as a Doorway to Bird Language

The sit spot seems like such a simple routine. It is so basic, that it’s easy to overlook. What is it? It’s about adopting one place on the landscape that you return to, over and over. Your sit spot will become a great friend as you get to know it’s many moods and patterns over the years.

The key to a good sit spot is easy access. Many of us lead very busy lives – so the easier it is to get to your sit spot, the better. A lot of people report success by having one sit spot right out the back door that they visit every day, and another that they visit when they have more time, that offers a different landscape and perhaps a different selection of birds and other animals.

Even in the suburbs or city, it’s that sparrow that’s always outside your door that has the most to teach you about bird language. The common birds around us, as we mentioned at the beginning of this e-course, are our most valuable resource for this journey.

## What Will You Learn From Your Sit Spot?

By going to a sit spot over and over, in different times of day, season, and weather, we can begin to sense how the activity and baseline of the birds shifts accordingly. We start to observe where the foods are in each season, and how bird activity shifts with this.

 Over time, we start to get a sense for when migrant birds arrive and set up shop, and when they depart for warmer climes.

 We also start to notice certain alarm shapes emerging during specific seasons – rats, squirrels, and snakes take on a fierce alarm signature as they are harassed by parent birds during nesting season, when these opportunists attempt to prey upon bird eggs and nestlings.

In the end, there is no substitute for experience. We have found that there is also no end to the learning of bird language patterns. There is always another layer of mystery waiting to be discovered.

Keep a journal of the events that unfold at your sit spot. It’s fun to look back on old stories years later; a journal is a great way to help keep those memories fresh.

## Do This:

Write a journal entry this week about your sit spot. Bring in as many vivid sensory details about the place in this season as you can, so that when you read this entry again later, you can be transported back to the moment once again.

You can also practice this kind of deep sensory-driven storytelling by finding someone who wants to hear your story – take the other person there with you through your story.

# E-course Part 10: Patterns and Territories of Birds

When you have spent some good time at your sit spot, patterns begin to emerge that you may not have been present to earlier in the game.

Observation, mapping and journal keeping all help the patterns of the birds and bird language events to form into a larger picture of activity in your awareness. This is a perspective that takes time to develop.

## Routines for Success

The tools that we have shared in this course are meant to be used as routines. Keep going to your sit spot, keep looking for tracks and animal sign, and keep your journals and questions about the landscape developing and growing over time.

## Territory Mapping

Springtime is a great time to observe the patterns of local birds, but you can also use this exercise any time of the year. We call this “territory mapping,” and it’s a great window into the lives of the birds.

Watch your spot and notice how activity patterns start to shift as the spring arrives. Songs may increase dramatically and fill the air. Certain perches begin to be favored and used in a routine way more and more.

Pick one bird species and try to outline the territory by the use of regular perches and feeding areas. Note any nest-building activity and territorial aggression.

Over the course of the spring, keep noting these patterns on a map. You’ll start to get a sense of an individual bird’s territory in that season.

You may notice boundaries shift before, during and after nesting. At other times of year, you may get a sense of territorial boundaries and feeding hierarchies for certain birds around seasonal food sources.

This is a great exercise to do each year at your sit spot. You may even recognize individual birds that return year after year, and it’s fun to watch their activities and patterns over time.

## Tracking and Territory Maps

You can also relate your territory maps to your maps of mammal activity, and start to weave together possible alarm sequences with tracks and trails that you observe. These kinds of mysteries are never-ending and very absorbing.

## Join the Discussion!

We hope you’ve enjoyed this e-course introduction to the art of learning bird language. We’ll continue to send out updates as we add content to the BirdLanguage.com blog.

You can also join in the various discussions on our 8 Shields Village site (including a bird language stories group), which you can join for free here:

<http://naturementoring.ning.com>

In Connection,

Josh Lane and the BirdLanguage.com Team