

An incomplete audio guide to fledgling calls

My hope is that this guide will help you as you perform Maryland's 3rd Breeding Bird Atlas. This guide is not intended to provide a comprehensive catalog of species nor every variation that each species might make. Rather, I've aimed to provide a solid overview of the kinds of sounds you can expect to hear from fledglings in our area.

Never birded by ear before? Don't fret – my hope is that you'll click through the examples just the same to gain an appreciation for the diversity of baby bird sounds around us!

Before getting to the sounds, let's take a minute to consider some important caveats:

- CAUTION – please be judicious about identifying begging sounds to species without seeing a bird. And recall that begging sounds change as fledglings age because their syrinx grows too.
- CAUTION – use care when attempting to locate fledglings as they're usually buried in foliage and intentionally difficult to spot. It is far safer for birds and more efficient for you too to hang back, look for the adults, and identify them to species. Conveniently, most parents use the same approach path when delivering food.
- CAUTION – use care when visually distinguishing fledglings from adults. Fledglings have fleshy, often puffy, and usually yellow flanges to the bill and their feather is looser than that of adults. You can see these features, for example, [in this photo](#) of a nearly independent catbird fledgling. See how loose and 'cheap-looking' those feathers are? Fledglings grow feathers very quickly in the nest, so their feathers are less dense and of poorer quality compared to adults.

Cheers, Dave

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Yellow-billed Cuckoo – cuckoo chicks leave the nest remarkably soon after hatching and make mechanical-sounding begging calls in their first week out ([ML467543051](#)). As the weeks progress, their begging calls gradually take on the familiar, hollow “kow, kow, kow” sound that adults make ([ML359892711](#)).

Ruby-throated Hummingbird – fledglings hang around the nest for just a few short days before moving around with the female. But while they're around the nest, they make high, thin “see” notes that carry surprising well (*this example is from the closely related Black-chinned Hummingbird*: [XC282797](#)).

HAWKS – the young of large birds of prey are dependent on their parents for months after leaving their nest. Their calls are loud and travel far, making them easy birds to confirm during the fledgling stage. Young hawks continue to give begging calls as they progress to foraging on their own but they stop once they've been driven from their natal territory by their parents. So, if you hear this call in summer, you know the young hawk is still on its parents breeding territory and thus confirms breeding.

Cooper's Hawk – fledglings make persistent shrill, whistle-like sounds ([XC260179](#)) up until they become independent of adults, which is about the time when most songbirds are migrating south.

Red-tailed Hawk – once you learn this you will wonder how you missed the loud, piercing summer cries of fledglings before. The calls have a hearty, eagle-like quality and can sound like a repetitive one-syllabled “vweet” when up close ([XC444202](#)) or a two-parted, “poo-eeek” when further away ([XC450756](#)).

Red-shouldered Hawk – the calls of fledgling Red-shoulders may sound superficially like Red-tails but they lack the hearty, eagle-like quality. They are much more reminiscent of the calls of their parents ([ML457801141](#)).

Broad-winged Hawk – fledglings sound very similar to the calls of adult birds ([ML61230471](#)) but, of course, having 3 or 4 persistently calling Broad-wings in the same place at the same time is a good give away!

OWLS – owls are much like hawks in that they are dependent on adults for months after leaving the nest. The begging calls of our two largest species are loud, incessant, and diagnostic and makes them by far the easiest way to confirm breeding.

Eastern Screech Owl – Young screech owl fledglings are not easy to hear amid the din of spring birdlife ([ML350106821](#)). As they near independence from their parents, their calls begin to take on more of the adult-like “whinny” character ([ML29361791](#)).

Great Horned Owl – the shriek of fledglings is diagnostic when heard between late March and July ([ML236737861](#)). However, CAUTION must be used outside of those times because the calls are also given by females during courtship. This surprises many birders because, after listening to a limited number of recordings, it can be easy to get the impression that juvenile and female Great Horned Owl calls are distinctively different. However, calls of both are highly plastic and individuals of any age can modulate their calls to seamlessly transition between the begging shriek and what’s often called the female “bark” call.

Barred Owl – juvenile calls are shrill, grating, and distinctive ([ML381824601](#)).

WOODPECKERS – although this audio guide is focused on fledglings, few nests are as loud and easy to find as woodpecker nests are, so those sounds are worth mentioning here. March thru May is prime time to be listening for the near-constant, harsh, raspy calls of broods of woodpeckers. Once nestlings fledge, they begin to give toy instrument-like versions of the adult calls with great persistence.

Red-bellied Woodpecker – a nest full of raspy-sounding nestlings is hard to miss ([XC101322](#)). Fledglings give shrill calls and a version of the adult’s “quirrr” call that sounds more like a “chup” ([XC101320](#)). [Adult “quirrr” call for comparison: [XC477003](#)]

Downy Woodpecker – a nest full of youngsters can be easily mistaken for an insect ([XC565022](#)), but fledglings give a rattle call ([XC574170](#)) that is very reminiscent of the adult whinny call. [Adult whinny call for comparison: [XC667190](#)]

Hairy Woodpecker – if you are familiar with the strong “peak” call of an adult Hairy Woodpecker, then you’ll have no trouble recognizing the sound of a nest full of youngsters ([XC450529](#)). Fledglings give a whining version of the adult “peak” call ([XC728100](#)). [Adult “peak” call for comparison: [XC687585](#)]

Northern Flicker – nestlings are loud and raspy ([XC450926](#)) but fledglings give “clear” calls ([XC323227](#)) that sound much like adults. [Adult “clear” call for comparison: [XC267750](#)]

FLYCATCHERS –fledgling flycatchers generally give sounds that are like the most common, year-round call given by adults of their species.

Eastern Wood-Pewee – Whereas adult Eastern Wood-Pewees give a “pwee” call throughout the year, fledglings make a similar-sounding call that has a raspy end ([ML469522321](#)). [Adult “Pwee” call for comparison: [ML437850541](#)]

Eastern Phoebe – Most birders know the familiar “Fee-Bee” song of an adult Eastern Phoebe, and many also know the sweet-sounding “chip” that’s given with regularity throughout the year. The fledgling call is similar to the “chip” but thinner and more plaintive ([ML347835601](#)). [Adult “chip” call for comparison: [XC566104](#)]

Eastern Kingbird – The electric-sounding sputtering notes of kingbirds are a familiar sound throughout summer. Calls of fledglings blend right in with their parents and a family group can make for quite a ruckus ([ML356317051](#)).

VIREOS – vireo fledglings produce sounds that are very similar to the whine sounds given by adults of their species so, as is typical for songbirds, context is important. Fledgling calls are uttered seemingly non-stop and speed up whenever adults approach to deliver food.

White-eyed Vireo – ([XC197329](#))

Warbling Vireo – ([XC383038](#))

Red-eyed Vireo – ([ML246010171](#))

CORVIDS – young jays, crows, and ravens are not afraid to disturb their neighbors! They give varying calls as they grow and so are most diagnostic when fresh out of the nest.

Blue Jay – if you can imagine a Blue Jay’s call being any more nasal than it already is, then you have an idea for what a fledgling sounds like ([ML248599441](#)).

American Crow – if you can imagine what an American Crow with a stuffy nose and a belly ache would sound like, then you have a good idea for what a fledgling sounds like ([ML173032731](#)). Fish Crow fledglings sound very similar so it’s best to hear the attending adults to make certain of the ID.

Common Raven – the higher pitched calls of fledglings imparts a distinctly ‘planet of the apes’ type feel ([ML450630731](#)).

CHICKADEES AND TITMICE – after they leave the nest, fledglings become conspicuous as they travel around in noisy family groups, trailing their parents and begging loudly for weeks.

Carolina Chickadee – individual fledglings give persistent, thin-sounding, “see-dee, see-dee dee” calls ([XC34950](#)) that are reminiscent of adult calls. Family groups can be noisy ([ML243930291](#))!

Tufted Titmouse – individual calls are beefier and more burry than chickadee calls and sound like, “see-jwee, see-jwee jwee” ([ML228446981](#)). Family groups are noisy and hard to miss ([ML463437631](#)).

SWALLOWS – many birders are surprising to learn that fledgling swallows make begging calls too. Swallows usually occur in flocks so homing in on these sounds is a quick, efficient way of drawing your eye to a confirmation. The young of most swallows stay in the vicinity of their nest in the first days after fledging and then travel with adults to a nearby feeding area (usually a field). Fledglings are dependent on adults at that time and can be easily confirmed as they sit on wires and fences to beg for food. After several days, they will begin hounding adults in flight, begging on the wing. Once the young are independent, they stop begging and begin dispersing more widely, at which time they cannot be counted as fledglings.

Barn Swallow – Barn Swallow is a good example of how, even amid the background noise of adults, the persistent, repetitive scratchy sounds made by fledglings can be picked out ([XC253979](#)), especially as the calls intensify when adults with food approach.

MISC SONGBIRDS

White-breasted Nuthatch – if you can imagine Woody Woodpecker trying to imitate the “yank” call of an adult nuthatch, then you have a pretty good idea of what a fledgling sounds like ([ML468500371](#)). Fledglings follow adults in family groups for a couple weeks after leaving the nest and those groups can sound a bit like distant Laughing Gulls ([XC321970](#)).

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher –listen closely to the nasal calls of adult gnatcatchers and you’re likely to be impressed by how varied the noises they make are. By contrast, fledglings have the same nasally quality of adults but their calls are endlessly monotonous ([XC35103](#)).

Carolina Wren – older nestlings give loud, insect-like buzzing sounds from the nest ([ML447606531](#)). Fledglings give high, shrill whistle-like calls ([ML430903041](#)) that become louder and take on a more scraping quality with age ([XC57030](#)).

House Wren – old nestlings give loud, shrill, scraping sounds ([XC560506](#)). Once they fledge, they give a harsh chatter ([ML462414601](#)) that sounds a lot like the adult chatter call.

Gray Catbird – catbirds are among the most numerous and frequently encountered fledglings so it pays dividends to gain familiar with their calls, allowing you to quickly sift them out and concentrate on other fledgling sounds. Fledgling catbirds give a metallic, somewhat cardinal-like chip ([ML245666201](#)) and also a waxwing-like ringing call ([ML140280](#)). Although these might sound different to us, fledglings can seamlessly transition between these two ([ML261239071](#)).

Northern Mockingbird – homeowners actually call exterminators in hopes of getting relief from the endless, loud, breathy “seet” calls of fledgling mockingbirds ([XC370896](#)) so, if there’s one bird that everyone can easily confirm, it’s this one!

Brown Thrasher – fledgling thrashers give somewhat mellow (for a fledgling anyway) quavering calls ([XC144655](#)) that become more rapid and intense-sounding when adults approach ([ML62168741](#)).

European Starling – don't blame me but, once you've learned the distinctive "djijj" sound of fledglings, you'll be dismayed at how many breeding starlings you'll find all around you ([XC320704](#)).

Eastern Bluebird – fledgling bluebirds give a "tur-a-wee" call ([ML244718721](#)) that is similar to the familiar "zewy" call of adults, but it's less musical and more oscillating. [Adult "zewy" call for comparison: [ML445904461](#)]

Wood Thrush – if you already know the sounds of adult Wood Thrushes, you might be surprised to hear the not-so-thrush-like call of fledglings. Fledglings give a loud, sweet small call that is more reminiscent of a chipmunk or a warbler than a thrush ([ML154765211](#)).

American Robin – young robins utter a great variety of calls but one of the most common is a high, squeaky trill-like sound ([ML455352631](#)). Another common sound given when adults approach with food sounds like this: [XC323247](#).

Cedar Waxwing – if you dislike learning new sounds, then this is the bird for you! Fledglings sound about the same as adults do ([XC604912](#)).

House Finch – arguably the best way to learn the House Finch begging call is to hang a potted plant on your porch and endure a summer's worth of scratchy "veet" notes. Alternatively, you could just listen to this example and imagine the torture: [XC326408](#).

American Goldfinch – fans of Sesame Street will know what I mean when I say that fledglings sound much like Ernie saying, "hey Bert" ([ML258733961](#)).

SPARROWS – the fledgling call of sparrows is generally a simple, repeated note. Species that nest low or on the ground are at great risk of predation so, not surprisingly, their young generally leave the nest much earlier than other species. The flightless young remain near the nest and hide in deep cover for about the first week after fledgling. Once flighted, they become more conspicuous as they follow parents around and beg for food.

Song Sparrow – recently fledged young give an airy "bphee" sound ([ML175633211](#)). Over time, that call begins to take on a slight buzz, sounding more like "bzee" ([ML68385171](#)) and eventually onto a hearty, buzzy "bzept" ([ML67994611](#)).

Chipping Sparrow – fledgling Chipping Sparrows are conspicuous and loud as they utter constantly repeated bursts of chip notes, usually while following adults around ([ML355226401](#)). This is a near ubiquitous feature in the soundscape of park parking lots throughout the summer.

Eastern Towhee – towhees are similar to Song Sparrow in their call note progression but their final, most conspicuous version is less buzzy and sounds more like "tseea" ([XC109897](#)).

Yellow-breasted Chat – it's not just the taxonomy of this bird that's been difficult to place, it's fledgling call is equally hard for an ear to place because it sounds reminiscent of a cross between a catbird, vireo, and gnatcatcher ([ML212162](#)).

BLACKBIRDS – blackbird fledglings are generally loud and conspicuous, making them some of the easiest youngsters to find.

Baltimore Oriole – fledglings give calls in a short series that sound like “pwee pee pee pee” ([ML347595761](#)). Also, a thrush-like “djeer djeer djeer” ([ML460262651](#)). Excited birds run these sounds together into a long twittering sound ([ML349839681](#)).

Orchard Oriole – this oriole is one of our earliest fall migrants and birds begin leaving our area in July, with almost all having departed by late August. Fledglings give a short, rapid volley of 5 to 6 non-musical notes that have a woodpecker-like quality to them ([ML64075791](#), [ML463033001](#)). Excited fledglings cram these calls into a run-on series ([ML461867481](#)).

Red-winged Blackbird – fledglings give nasally “phwaa” calls ([ML302345781](#)) and their source can be surprising difficult to pinpoint as the youngsters move about in their marshy haunts the first week out of the nest. As they age, the youngsters become more conspicuous, chasing parents while giving paired calls ([ML171197401](#)).

Brown-headed Cowbird – it defies logic how so many conspicuously loud, delectably plump cowbird fledglings could survive each year to reach adulthood. Their loud, buzzy calls are a common and distinctive sound in our summer landscape ([ML347389161](#)).

Common Grackle – the noisy and rather unpleasant sounding fledglings are difficult to overlook, especially if you loiter in fast food parking lots ([XC196110](#)). Pool owners are also plagued by grackles because of the bird’s unsavory habit of making sorties over water to drop voluminous fecal sacks.

WARBLERS – what fledglings lack in size and vocal complexity they make up for in incessant repetition. They typically repeat a lesser version of the contact call of their species. You needn’t know the contact calls of all warblers to make this work for you. If you hear a simple warbler-like call note repeated non-stop, you can use process of elimination to arrive at an educated guess for the species you’re looking for. This will help you track down and confirm the species. This is a surprisingly easy and effective way to achieve confirmations of species that might otherwise be difficult. Here are some examples:

Ovenbird – ([ML61077121](#))

Louisiana Waterthrush – ([XC343081](#))

Common Yellowthroat – ([ML463264171](#))

American Redstart – ([ML352608561](#))

Yellow Warbler – ([ML351484131](#))

FINCHES – fledgling calls often have a metallic-like quality and can sound much like adult calls. Unlike adults, fledglings call persistently and speed up when parents approach with food.

Northern Cardinal – short volleys of “chip” notes ([ML365702021](#)).

Blue Grosbeak – chink, but not as strong as adults ([ML255290961](#)).

Indigo Bunting – “spit” calls very similar to Cardinal ([ML67072091](#)).