

Communications from the Forest

By Scott Pemberton, Operations Manager for the Morgan Arboretum

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This past winter the Arboretum experimented with the use of walkie talkies to increase communication and cohesion between the office and field work. The forest is so wild and thick however, that attaining complete coverage is a work in progress. So it is that, one day, with the white noise crackle of an unresponsive radio in the background, I was left truly in awe of the incredible communication amongst wild birds. It sometimes seems like technology isn't leaving nature behind, we are simply catching up.

At this time of year bird song is finally back to grace our ears in the early mornings, and we thoroughly bask in the delight of this spring symphony, but for birds this is less a musical performance and more a transfer of vital survival information. The fancy tunes are secretly coded messages that contain strict indicators of reproductive suitability and territoriality. In our part of the world it is mostly males doing the singing, and a few wrong notes or a pitch too high or too low and Barbie bird might just end up with some other feathery Ken.

Birds also make plenty of other noises, more subtle and less enjoyable to our ear, that are referred to as bird calls. These are the myriads of squeaks and chirps used to alarm other birds to hide from predators (called alarm calls), to call on other birds to rally together and mob a nearby perched predator (called mob alarm calls), to simply talk and stay in contact (called contact calls), to communicate specifically while in flight (flight calls) and calls that young chicks use to beg for food from mama and papa bird (called begging calls). Amazingly some of these calls are universally understood across species, while others are used more intimately between individuals of the same species. Some calls, and some bird song, are innate while some are learned at a young age from older birds. The variety of calls is impressive and the distance over which birds can communicate to one another is stunning.



A couple of white-breasted nuthatches making eye contact over lunch. *Photo: Bruce Adams*

This is also why imitating bird call or song, either verbally or with the aid of a recording device or birding app, should be done strictly in a conservative manner. One cannot be certain the message conveyed and to whom. While most of what we read on our Twitter feeds is absolute nonsense, birds are finely tuned into the messages that pass through the forest's air waves and they adjust their lifestyles accordingly!

Surely come late August I will be lamenting the onerous cooing of Mourning Doves outside my window in the wee hours of the morning, such is the fickle nature of the human spirit, but for now the return of bird song is refreshing and inspiring and a reminder of just how much I have missed the warmth of summer.

Warmer weather brings plenty of activities, educational programs and volunteer projects to the Morgan Arboretum. Just this past month a new Salamander Migration Initiative has been launched on site with active participation from local volunteers. Communications Intern Hannah Legault continues great work expanding the Arboretum's own social media and online communication network so check out our website (morganarboretum.org) and follow us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram for the latest news on projects, sightings and activities at the McGill Morgan Arboretum! 