

Bringing in the Birds

Feature Article by Ryan Zimmerling

Have you ever been birdwatching and noticed a bird skulking around in dense thickets, but couldn't get a good look at it? Most birders, at some point during their forays into the field, have encountered a situation where they have frustratingly wished for just one quick look at a hidden, possibly rare, bird. In some cases, glimpses of non-passerines can be equally difficult. Sharp-shinned Hawks, for example, rarely call during the breeding season and are usually only identified visually. Moreover, songs or calls of some species are practically indistinguishable from others. Many species of woodpeckers, for example, cannot be positively identified by drumming alone, because of the high variation in resonance among drumming substrates. As many birders know, numerous species of birds are also excellent mimics; Blue Jays can imitate the calls of Broad-winged Hawks and Red-shouldered Hawks. But what if there was a way that you could actually make some, or all, of these species more visible?

The Art of Pishing

For decades, birdwatchers have been making squeaking noises, imitating owl calls, and using a variety of other methods to entice birds to approach more closely. While feigning your own death might indeed attract vultures, probably the most widely used and easiest to produce method of attracting birds is “pishing,” which dates back to as early as the 10th century. Pishing involves saying the words “pish pish pish pish” in rapid succession, followed by “chattering,” where the observer quickly

says “chit chit chit chit chit chit chit.” When birders make these pishing noises, they often find themselves quickly surrounded by a flock of little birds. Now, before you dismiss pishing as something that only expert birders do, realize that it is basically as simple as just described. Admittedly, a raspy, drawn-out, “pish-h-h-h-h” repeated three or four times, followed by a quick chattering does seem to work best, but just about anyone can successfully pish-in birds.

Pishing is believed to resemble the alarm call of a group of small birds mobbing a predator. Naturally, this begs the question why small birds, which are potential prey species for hawks and owls, would come to harass a creature that views them as dinner. Research has shown that mobbing behaviour is an effective anti-predator strategy and is commonplace among potential prey species. Owls and hawks can often be seen surrounded by an entourage of irate small birds intent on signalling the danger to other birds within the vicinity. Harassment by mobbing birds, or the resulting attention drawn to the predator, usually is enough to persuade the intruder to leave the area.

Birds that Answer the Call

Given that pishing has been widely used for decades, at least here in North America, it is somewhat odd that, until recently, few books on birding mention pishing as a technique to aid in bird identification. Moreover, only in the last five years have ornithologists begun to quantify the effectiveness of pishing, especially for supplementing traditional

bird surveying techniques. As a result of this research, birders now know that time of day, time of year, weather, ambient noise, geographic region, and even too much pishing can affect the success of this technique. In a study of eastern Ontario woodlands, for example, an average of 20% more songbird species were detected using pishing during spring point counts (a popular method for surveying birds) than point counts without pishing. Species such as Least Flycatcher, Eastern Kingbird, Pine Warbler, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak were particularly responsive, often approaching within metres of the pishing sound. In general, flycatchers, crows, jays, warblers, and sparrows all enthusiastically respond to pishing. Interestingly, this research also showed that, in dichromatic species (those in which males and females sport different coloured plumages), males tended to respond more often to pishing than did females.

Other research has shown that pishing can be an effective technique for augmenting winter point counts. In southwestern Ontario, resident species such as Black-capped Chickadee, Northern Cardinal, White-breasted Nuthatch, and Blue Jay were quick to respond. As well as woodlands, wetland habitats may also yield shy and secretive species. During spring and summer, cattail marshes and impenetrable damp thickets are home to Marsh Wrens, Swamp Sparrows, and Common Yellowthroats, all of which generally skulk in their protective cover, except when singing on territory. While they live out of sight much of the time, they are quick to respond to pishing.

Although primarily used for attracting



Eastern Kingbirds often approach within metres of pishing. Le Tyrann tritri s'approche souvent à quelques mètres de l'observateur qui lance des pish, pish, pish.

songbirds, some waterbirds, hawks, and woodpeckers also respond to pishing. For example, Downy and Hairy woodpeckers often closely approach a pishing birder. In contrast, detection of other non-passerine species increases due to birds fleeing (i.e., taking flight) from the pishing sound. For example, when pishing was used on spring point counts in eastern Ontario, Red-shouldered Hawks were recorded significantly more often as they flushed from perches in the canopy. Other raptors, such as American Kestrels, Cooper's Hawks, and Merlins exhibited a similar response. Had these birds not fled from their perches, they might have gone unnoticed. Admittedly, for species that

Photos: Ron Ridout

flee from pishing, any unusual sound (e.g., clapping hands or shouting) probably would have induced the same behaviour.

Interestingly, many European and resident Central American bird species appear unresponsive to pishing. The reasons for these geographic and taxonomic differences are unclear, but relative to North America, European birders use pishing less frequently.



Pishing can help distinguish between similar sounding woodpeckers. Le recours au « pishing » peut aider à distinguer les pics qui émettent des sons similaires. Downy Woodpecker/Pic mineur



Identifying Blue Jays by sight will ensure they don't trick you with imitations. Identifier les Geais bleus à la vue vous garantira que leurs imitations ne vous jouent pas de tours.



Flycatchers, crows, jays, warblers, and sparrows all enthusiastically respond to pishing. Moucherolles, corneilles, geais, parulines et moineaux répondent tous avec enthousiasme aux appels des observateurs. American Tree Sparrow/Bruant hudsonien



American Kestrels tend to flee from pishing, which may present birders with a good view. La Crécerelle d'Amérique cherche en général à s'éloigner lorsqu'on l'appelle, ce qui peut permettre à l'ornithologue de bien l'observer. Photo: Harold Stiver

The Ethics of Pishing

Is it ethical to attract or distract birds when they should be busy looking for food, defending territories, or raising young? There is much debate but, generally, most birdwatchers keep pishing to a minimum so as not to disturb the birds for a prolonged period of time. Others suggest that pishing does not cause distress in birds for the simple reason that birds are fairly intelligent creatures and, while they may be initially drawn to the pishing source, they are more than capable of telling a human from a predator. Therefore, they often quickly disappear once they realize that they have been duped. This is probably why birds in the boreal forest, which rarely encounter humans, almost always respond to pishing. Conversely, at places like Point Pelee National Park, which are frequented by thousands of birders, many birds appear less responsive to pishing, likely because they have become accustomed to the nearly constant sound.

Pishing has been widely used by birders because it is extremely effective in luring numerous bird species closer to the observer. Yet it is probably the most overlooked means for supplementing traditional bird surveys, although some programs, including the Christmas Bird Count, permit pishing to attract birds. In special applications, pishing can be used to augment bird counts in densely vegetated habitats with limited visibility (e.g., marshes) or for special surveys of species that have soft or barely audible calls (e.g., Golden-crowned Kinglet). In addition, pishing can be used to enhance detection of uncommon species that might otherwise be missed during site inventories.

Although pishing substantially increases detection of many species, there are several potential objections to the use of pishing as a tool for counting woodland birds. First, pishing sounds likely reduce a birder's ability to distinguish all singing species, especially early in the morning when many species can be vocalizing simultaneously. However, having intermittent periods of pishing and silence should minimize such effects. Perhaps the strongest objection to the use of pishing is that comparison with results of standard point counts will be confounded, especially for normally inconspicuous species that respond strongly to pishing. Hence, estimates of species abundance and density could be biased. This is why programs such as the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas permit the use of pishing during area-searches, but not during standardized point counts.

Still, pishing is a proven and excellent tool for general birding purposes. So, the next time you go birdwatching, consider giving it a try. This method of attracting birds may seem a little unorthodox, especially to people who stop and stare when you pish at the shrubbery in your neighbourhood park. Just remember, if someone asks what you are doing, try to avoid saying, "I'm just pishing."



Some shy, secretive wetland species, such as Marsh Wrens, respond well to pishing calls. Certaines espèces timides des milieux humides, comme le Troglodyte des marais, répondent bien aux appels des observateurs. Photo: Harold Stiver

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