

Autumn Melodies

Why Some Birds Sing in Fall

by Nan Buckhardt

You're walking through a marshy area on a crisp autumn morning when breeding season is a distant memory. The sun hits your back and slowly warms you. Suddenly, you hear a familiar "okaree." It's a Red-winged Blackbird. Singing. Not only that, but you also hear a Song Sparrow vocalizing its melodious breeding song.

What's going on? The birds have been silent for weeks. Has spring returned bypassing

fall and winter?

What you have experienced is not an unusual phenomenon. In fact, many birds sing long after the completion of the breeding season. This phenomenon is most common in migrating species which nest in the northern temperate zones including Illinois. In fall you may hear such species as the Eastern Wood-Pewee, Wood Thrush, White-throated Sparrow, Fox Sparrow, Northern Oriole, and House Wren singing.

In late summer, these and other species tend to be less vocal and remain secretive. The lack of singing at this time could be a protective measure. After all, many birds do not fly well while molting and in turn become more vulnerable.

When feathers are in place and danger is lessened, some birds resume their singing. Some species such as the Eastern Wood-Pewee may even sing more elaborate and technical songs than they did in spring.

What triggers this behavior still baffles ornithologists. Many theories; however, do exist.

Perhaps the light conditions in early fall approximate the light conditions of spring. As a result, the bird's hypothalamus, a small portion of the brain that controls reproductive hormones, may be stimulated. The

bird thus responds by vocalizing as it would in spring.

Another explanation could be that the late season singing is due, in part, to the physiological changes that accompany the decrease in the size of the gonad, an organ that produces reproductive cells. The lowering of hormone levels could confuse the brain and result in song.

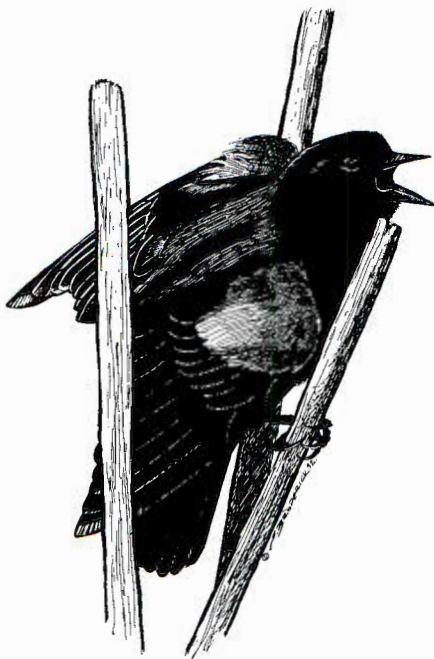
Others have theorized that the singing is the result of excess energy and the birds are singing for the pure pleasure of it (Berger, 1961). Still others suggests that the post-breeding season offers birds a chance to try out song variations. The mating and breeding pressures are off and new songs can be practiced.

Whatever the reason, each fall I look forward to the late season song of Illinois' migrants. It gives me one more chance to relive spring before mentally preparing for winter. ■

LITERATURE CITED

Berger, Andrew J. 1961, 1971. *Bird Study*. Dover Publications. New York

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Red-winged Blackbird.
Drawing by Emmet Broderick.