

Decoding the Messages Hidden in Their Songs

After an incredible holiday spent immersed in the diversity of our incredible country, I am heading into 2026 with a head full of stories, sightings, lessons, and moments that reminded me exactly why I love the natural world and the spaces that sustain it. From quiet observations to unforgettable encounters, this year already feels full of promise, and I cannot wait to share these experiences, thoughts, and discoveries with you as we step into another year of Daily Birder together.

With social media being abuzz with talk of the Big Year of African Sounds, it got me thinking a little deeper.

There's something almost meditative about sitting outside and listening to the birds. Whether it's the fluty notes of a Cape Robin-Chat at dawn or the harsh "go away" of a Grey Go-away Bird from a nearby tree, bird song has this strange ability to quiet our minds. Yet, as I sat on the bench in the garden the other day, listening to the chatter around me, I couldn't help but wonder, what are they actually saying?

We often assume bird calls are peaceful, soothing, or romantic. They soundtrack our mornings and soften the silence of late afternoons. But perhaps, in the bird world, things aren't always as serene as they sound. Maybe that melodious warbler is lecturing a neighbour for trespassing, or the weaver calling from the tree is nagging his partner about the state of the nest. Maybe, just maybe, that calm morning chorus is the avian version of rush-hour traffic.

Birds are some of nature's best communicators. Their calls and songs aren't just random noise, they're complex, purposeful messages crafted over millions of years of evolution. Scientists estimate that some species can produce over a hundred distinct sounds, each with a specific meaning. To us, it's a beautiful blur of melody, but to them, it's an entire language.

Calls, for example, are usually short and functional. They serve as warnings, signals to flockmates, or messages between partners. Think of them as WhatsApp pings, quick, to the point, and often repeated. Songs, on the other hand, tend to be longer and more elaborate, often used by males to advertise territory or attract a mate. That lyrical dawn chorus we enjoy so much? It's less of a choir and more of a competition. Each male is saying, "This is my patch, my tree, my lady, stay away."

If we start paying closer attention, we begin to realise just how expressive bird sounds can be. Alarm calls, for instance, are one of the most fascinating. When a flock of starlings erupts into high-pitched chatter, they're not just panicking for the fun of it, they're spreading the word: "Raptor incoming, everyone scatter!" What's incredible is that some species can even differentiate between threats. A drongo might use one type of call for a snake and another for an eagle.

And then there are contact calls, the equivalent of a "Hey, where are you?" message. Many species use these when foraging or flying in flocks to make sure no one gets left behind.

Think of a mother bird calling to her fledglings in the garden, those soft, repeated notes are her way of keeping tabs on the kids.

Duets and mimicry add yet another layer of complexity. Birds like the Southern Boubou or the Black-collared Barbet sing in synchronised pairs, each responding to the other in perfect timing, as if finishing each other's sentences. It's not just charming, it reinforces pair bonds and helps defend territory.

Then you get the mimics, the comedians of the bird world. Fork-tailed Drongos, for instance, are known to imitate alarm calls of other species to trick them into dropping food. They're not just talking, they're lying. Imagine shouting "Fire!" in a crowded room so you can steal someone's food. That's Drongo behaviour in a nutshell.

The more I learn about bird communication, the more I realise how much we project human emotion onto what we hear. We call some songs beautiful, others annoying, but in reality, every sound has intent. To a bird, singing is survival. It's about claiming space, finding love, warning of danger, or keeping family close.

So maybe, when we sit outside and hear a Red-eyed Dove cooing repeatedly, it isn't serenading the sunrise, it's insisting that everyone in earshot knows it owns the patch of garden you're sitting in. Or when a Grey Go-away Bird belts out its name from a branch, it might not be mocking you, it could be warning its flock about the cat on the wall.

But I like to think there's more to it too. Perhaps, among all the practical messaging, there's a little room for joy. Some studies suggest that birds sing for the sheer pleasure of it, when they're safe, well-fed, and content. Like humans humming in the shower, their song might sometimes be an expression of feeling, not function.

Next time you find yourself surrounded by birdsong, take a moment to really listen. Try to pick out patterns. Notice how one bird calls and another responds. Watch for the timing, often, there's rhythm and order to the chaos. You might even start to recognise individual calls after a while, learning to tell a robin's alarm from its territorial tune.

It's easy to assume we understand what "tranquil" means when we listen to birds, but maybe the tranquility lies not in the absence of noise, but in being part of it, in realising that we're surrounded by constant conversation, a community of feathered voices sharing their version of life's daily drama.

So yes, perhaps some bird somewhere is ranting to its partner, and the partner is silently wishing it would just hush for a minute. But whether they're arguing, flirting, or celebrating the morning sun, one thing's certain, they're talking, and the least we can do is listen.