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Spring Bird Notes

Turdus migratorius (American Robin)

ORDER: Passeriformes (140 Families)

FAMILY: Turdidae (174 Species)

What kid would not find the word *Turdus* or *Turdidae* to be funny! I bet you are laughing right now just thinking about it. The American Robin is a type of *Turdus*, or a Latin word meaning thrush. The American Robin is Wisconsin's state bird and is very recognizable, even if you are not an avid bird watcher. The characteristic markings are a rufous red breast, dark gray to black head to tail, an incomplete white eye ring, and a bright orangish-yellow bill. The Robin stands with "lazy" wings drooped down. The male is usually smaller and has brighter colors than the female. When people first see the American Robin in late winter, it is a welcome harbinger of spring with new beginnings around the corner.

American Robins are one of the first to start laying eggs after migration. This seasonal monogamous pair mates, then the female constructs a cup nest using grasses, small branches, and even mud. The female will lay gorgeous blue eggs. In fact, in the late 1800's, Tiffany & Co. handpicked the "Robin's egg blue" as their trademark color. It was customary for brides in the Victorian era to give their bridesmaids dove-shaped turquoise broaches as a remembrance gift. Charles Lewis Tiffany wanted to continue this tradition and the little blue box was famously introduced. The blue color that was selected is called 1837 on the Pantone color system for the year Tiffany was founded.

When you watch Robin's foraging on the ground, you will often see them run or hop, then stop. From time to time, you will notice a Robin will cock the head to one side and then miraculously slurp up a worm it just found. How do Robins know where worms are located? In 1965, a California scientist by the name of Frank Heppner wanted to find the answer to this question. He wanted to know if worm location was based on hearing, ground vibrations made by the worm, or visual senses. The result showed that vision was the predominant sense to find worms. The precision vision occurs when the Robin tilts the head 45-60°, allowing one eye to focus on subtle ground movements. Once movement is detected, it





will plunge the beak into the soil to capture a worm. Robins will also forage on other soft-bodied invertebrates and berries. However, worms are favored during the breeding season once the soil has de-thawed and worms start moving again. Thus, you will see a **round**, or group, of Robin's extensively worm foraging right now.

Thrushes are some of the most musical birds. "*Cheerily, cheer-up, cheerio . . . hissely*, says the Robin. Astonishingly, the Robin can produce 6-20 *cheerio* phrases by changing the 2-3 syllables in different orders. Additionally, the song can carry on for long periods of time without pausing, since these birds can breath in and out while singing. Many Robins can be identified by their individual song and by listening closely you may hear the same Robin in your yard singing from day to day. American Robins sing melodically at dawn, dusk, and before a storm. There are many other songs they sing for various reasons, and here is a simplified list.



<i>Song Sound</i>	<i>Function</i>
<i>WHINNY</i>	Alarm - predator or territory protection
<i>CHEEP and KUK</i>	Alarm - followed by more intense song if strong warning
<i>SEET</i>	During flight
<i>SEER</i>	Warning of predator (aerial or land)

See if you can hear these songs next time you are out for a walk. Are the functions listed above correct for the sound? There may be more reasons for the sound you hear than what I have listed. Listen, watch, and determine more!



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