

Young birds practicing now to perfect songs

By [Charles Seabrook](#)

Most of the young songbirds that fledged only a few weeks ago are flitting about now on their own. For the males, this is a critical time for learning a trait that will be essential for them next spring and beyond: singing.

To do so, the young birds must spend much time practicing and honing their singing skills. For most songbirds, singing doesn't come naturally. They must learn to sing, similar to the way human babies learn to talk by hearing and observing adults, especially their parents. Singing is the key to success for most male songbirds in two of the most important things they will do in their lives — attract a mate and hold on to a territory. So it is vital that they quickly learn the songs specific to their species.

(There are exceptions among songbirds. Flycatchers, which include the eastern phoebe and several other species native to Georgia, don't need to learn their songs — they inherit all the genetic instructions they need to sing the appropriate song.)

Among songbirds who learn to sing, the father is a key model. Since the males are the only ones that sing in most songbird species, the young birds must strive to sound like their fathers to be successful in life. Their fathers, of course, were the birds that we heard singing loudly and sweetly during the nesting season in spring.

In late July, we're mostly hearing the recently fledged sons as they practice to reach perfection. As such, most of the bird songs we're hearing now might be a bit raspy and hesitant — not the smooth, mellifluous tunes we heard from the adults last spring.

The "drink your TEA" song of adult towhees, for instance, now might sound more like "drink your" from the voices of young birds. The young towhees and other first-year songbirds — bluebirds, cardinals, chickadees and robins — may practice for hours on end for weeks in a row until they can sing like their fathers.

Some birds, like the indigo bunting that nests across Georgia, will learn only one or two songs. Others, such as the mockingbird and the catbird, may learn dozens of tunes. But the champion singer, the brown thrasher — Georgia's state bird — may acquire as many as 2,000 songs during its lifetime.