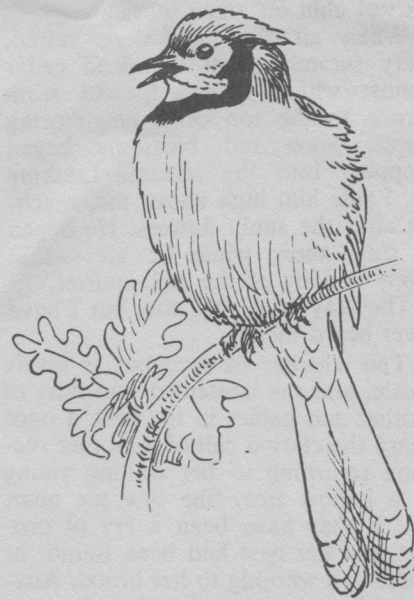


# Is it safe to come near you? You won't hurt me, will you?



**BY HOPE SAWYER BUYUK-MIHCI.** The warbling of a robin in springtime rain; the gabble of wild geese flying over in fall—these sounds haunt man with mystery he cannot fathom. Such familiar voices are just a sample of infinite animal vocabulary, of which human beings have glimpsed only a few words.

Take the bluejay, for instance. When the bluejay is near human dwellings he is on guard against cats, dogs and our own unpredictable actions, and he is apt to shriek loudly and persistently. If we walk in his woods, he may warn family and friends that we are there. But sit quietly in the woods, hidden by brush, and listen to bluejays at ease. They talk softly to each other in a variety of low tones. And the hushed warbling of a bluejay song is one of the sweetest sounds in nature. And a mother bluejay at the nest speaks with great tenderness to her young.

Why should we judge a bluejay's talents by his yells of anger or fear? Do we rate a woman's voice by her occasional scream of terror, or by her tones as she croons a lullaby? And which is the true voice of the minister—his stirring message from the pulpit, or his utterances when he hits his thumb with a hammer?

Crow language covers a wide range.

Ernest Thompson Seton once coded the cries of a crow leader by means of musical notes on a scale, and he found that each series of notes held a special meaning. My experience confirms his discovery. Our pet crow Billy taught me a lot of crow talk, though not the whole language by any means. His wild cawing when alarmed was in sharp contrast to dove-like coos he gave when bowing his head and fluttering his wings in loving communication with friends. Nestling beak-to-cheek he murmured gently in people's ears. And he prattled by the hour while engaged in solitary play.

Billy had his own distinctive vocabulary, as has each pet crow we have known. In the wild, crows laugh heartily among themselves, scold and speak softly, and many of their sayings are quite different from the "Caw" usually associated with their kind.

The starling, a rollicking extrovert, whistling at girls and, calling out boldly, is sometimes accused of being noisy. Yet he is quite reticent about his true singing. Have you ever heard the starling sing his own song? It is pitched so low that only an attentive ear may catch the sound. It is enchanting.

Another study in contrasts is the

brown thrasher's lusty spring music versus his autumn singing—his spring repertoire in its fullness, but muted to a delicate whisper. Head cocked, white throat pulsing, he carries his lonely concert through the woods, feeding as he goes. It is a fading echo of spring to match the dying leaves.

Most birds have a sharp cry or a series of harsh notes expressing alarm. But each has his conversational chatter and his lovesong, too. As with human beings, there is wide variation in talent. Although the song of a species is distinctive, individuals display degrees of artistry, and some speak more fluently than others.

One of woodland's most charming singers is the red squirrel. This minuscule mammal chatters and chirrs, vituperating in garish tones. Your presence is a valid excuse. But gain Chickaree's confidence and you may hear a different tune. Quizzzy the Inquisitive Red Squirrel, with whom I was associated during three winters, always approached me with bird-like chirps, voicing recognition and caution in the same breath.

Another red squirrel, whom I called Fiery because of his flaming tail, arrived daily one spring to eat nutmeats from a cache I provided. On a cool April morning when the sun

streamed through budding trees, lighting up the red flowers of swamp maples, Fiery came to eat. After filling up, he buried nuts in the black earth, pausing now and then to wipe his wet chin on green moss.

When all the nuts were stored, Fiery scrambled up the dead cedar against which I leaned, and from thence to the top of a neighboring maple. Soon red blossoms began dropping into the stream. Looking up, I saw him high above me, reaching after the sunlit flowers. He began to sing, then, while he ate—that lovely melody of the red squirrel.

They say mice sing, too, but I have never heard them.

The whicker of raccoons is lovely music, and the contented murmurs of mother and babies in the nest. I once heard the clarion call of a mother raccoon returning to her waiting young in a hollow tree. She saw me near, and it may have been a cry of protest that her nest had been found, or possibly a warning to her brood. Anyway, there was heartbreak in it, soon evidenced by the mother's taking her youngsters, one by one, to a new home.

One of the most poignant sounds in nature is the rallying call of the quail. Near dusk, when human hunters have

gone exulting home, the leader of the quail covey calls the remnants together, and sometimes those remnants are pitifully few. In spring, however, the "Bobwhite!" call of the quail is joyous, and the communion of a mother with her chicks, threading the grass, is antiphonal music of the highest order.

Beavers, though quiet, are not voiceless. I have heard them speak in many different tones. Since we humans, with our incessant, world-linked chatter, still find no adequate way to express deep feelings, we can imagine that the beaver too falls short of making himself fully known—even to a fellow beaver. But the mewling of beaver kittens expresses contentment at times, and at other times, frustration. There is happy vocal exchange when two beavers meet, and excited talk when they play together. Approaching me, beavers utter a greeting which seems to hold the eternal question wild animals must ask of man: "Is it safe to come near? You won't hurt me, will you?"

Otters' language is infinitely varied. Many people have told me of otters' fierce screams in the night. Trappers recall otters snarling in traps. But how about the anxious chirps of young otters looking for their parents; the

gay barking of otter pups at play; and the mellow, duck-like quacking of the otter family moving swiftly along a stream, keeping in constant touch. Otters playing and sunning on the bank converse with varied inflections, and a parent who is guarding young gives snorts of warning if an intruder comes near. I am sure that the fragments of otter talk which I have heard are only a small part of what otters say.

With limitless wealth of natural sound around us, it is hard to pick a favorite. Yet to most of us there is one voice that brings a special thrill. For some it is the glad whistle of the cardinal; for others, the trill of the mockingbird or the sweetness of a white-throat singing in the rain. For me it is the bluebird's plaintive call, holding all the sad beauty of life in a handful of melody.

Observation and imagination are banishing the old concept that only human beings can "talk." We see evidence of animal language; we find mystery. And mystery invites understanding. It takes a listening ear and a humble heart. Thus attuned, we begin to appreciate wild language, and advance in the art of understanding our fellows when they speak—and glorying in their voices when they sing. □

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