



SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

App Identifies Birds by Sound

September 13, 2023

Tracee Herbaugh lives in the Boston area of Massachusetts.

Herbaugh thought she was alone in her **backyard** recently when she used the Merlin Bird ID app. She learned from listening that she was surrounded by more than 12 kinds of birds.

There were the familiar blue jays, cardinals and goldfinch. But the app also identified birds like chimney swift, northern flicker, fish crow, killdeer and gray catbird.

Two birds identified by the app, veery and great horned owl, even had a red **dot** next to their names. The red dot meant it was a rare sighting.

Herbaugh wrote: “Who knew all these birds could be in one yard?”

Cornell Lab of Ornithology is the maker of Merlin Bird ID. The app was released in 2014. At first, the app only identified birds by sight called Photo ID. The user answered a series of questions to help identify the bird, such as date, area, color, and size. The app became popular during the pandemic when people increasingly wanted to be outdoors.

In 2021, Cornell Lab added Sound ID to identify birds by their sound. In the United States alone, Merlin’s Sound ID can identify over 700 kinds of birds. More than 7 million people now use the Merlin Bird ID worldwide.

Alli Smith works on the Merlin project at Cornell Lab. Smith said birdwatching by sound “opens up a whole new world.” Even if you cannot see the birds, Smith added, “you can hear their beautiful songs and know they’re sharing your neighborhood.”

Other bird-identifying apps include the Audubon Bird Guide, ChirpOMatic, Picture Bird and Smart Bird.

Connecting with people

More than birds, Herbaugh said the app also helped her reconnect with people across the country.

When Herbaugh shared her bird list on social media, two childhood friends who also used the app messaged her about it.

Her relative in Montana shared a list that included hawks, raptors and hummingbirds. And even her young children now quickly go for the app any time they hear an unfamiliar bird call.

Herbaugh has identified 45 birds on her list so far. She said her children are now the ones driving her to get more on the bird list.

Smith said when people write to Merlin, they often talk about connection. She said, "There are so many little wonders around and it's fun to share that with people."

I'm Dorothy Gundy.

Tracee Herbaugh reported this story for The Associated Press. Gena Bennett adapted the report for VOA Learning English.

Words in This Story

backyard-*n.* the area outside around a house

dot-*n.* a small round mark