

# BIRD BREAK - 'SOUNDS OF THE SOUTH'

These two are to me, the Sounds of the South. Long before we called it home, on visits here the songs and calls of just a few species made our visits complete. These are storied sounds from iconic birds and along with the odd bullfrog, peepers, cicadas and of course the occasional airboat, set so many sunrises firmly in memory.



The **Fish Crow** is the American Crow's shorter, snarkier cousin who moved to the coast and developed a superiority complex about it. Where the American Crow delivers a confident caw, the Fish Crow responds with what ornithologists diplomatically describe as "nasal" and everyone else describes as dismissive. It scavenges beaches, steals eggs, and loiters near fast food establishments with the unbothered energy of someone between career moves. It travels in loud, opinionated little gangs, raids nests without a shred of guilt, and will eat literally anything, including your lunch. It has no plans. It's nature's most perfectly outfitted skeptic. It's doing stand-up and doesn't even know it. It has the swagger of a bird that has never once doubted itself.

**Song and Call:** Its call, a nasal, doubting '**Nuh-uh!**' sounds precisely like a teenager who has already heard your explanation and remains unconvinced. Fish Crows are technically songbirds, true passerines with all the vocal equipment, but you'd never know it from listening to one; like the hawks, they skip the concert and stick to calls. The signature sound is a short, nasal, two-note "uh-uh" or "car-car," pinched and adenoidal, like the bird has a head cold it refuses to acknowledge. This is the single best way to separate it from the American Crow, whose call is a single, clear, open "caw": no nasal pinch, no second syllable. Listen for pairs and you've got a fish crow; one clean note and it's the common crow. Beyond that, they'll toss in rattles, clicks, and assorted croaks when squabbling over food, which, given the diet, is often. (See next month's 'corvid caper', 'Murder, She Wrote'!)

The **Carolina Chickadee** is the neighborhood's tiny, caffeinated optimist, a bird so small it seems assembled from spare parts, yet somehow the most confident thing in the yard. It flits in, inspects the feeder with the seriousness of a health inspector, grabs one seed, and vanishes to a branch to interrogate it in private. It has a black cap pulled down like a tiny beanie and a white cheek patch that gives it a permanent look of polite surprise. It travels in a loose entourage of nuthatches and titmice like it's running the group project, and it remembers thousands of seed-hiding spots better than you remember where you put your keys, and, being the southern branch of the family, it does all this without ever once complaining about the humidity.



**Song and Call:** The song is a clear, whistled "fee-bee-fee-bay," delivered briskly, almost like it's got somewhere to be. The call is the source of its name: a bright, scolding "chick-a-dee-dee-dee," and the number of "dee"s isn't random, more dees signal a higher threat level, so a lazy "chick-a-dee-dee" means "eh, whatever," while a frantic "chick-a-dee-dee-dee-dee-dee" means there's a hawk in the yard and the whole flock should panic accordingly. A built-in threat-level system, and honestly more organized than most 'Alert Clay' or Amber Alerts

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*Full disclosure: my thanks to Cornell Lab of Ornithology for their brilliant 'Merlin Bird ID' app, which uses your phone to identify the birds in your backyard by their calls! You gotta try this! The rest I noodled up on my own. You know, before coffee when I have some sense!*

