

CROWS SAY CAW

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I enjoyed Victor Friesen's attempt to re-interpret the sound of the common crow.² To his ear it sounded like *aw*, rather than *caw*. It may be that his auditory perception is culturally biased.

A quick look at the audio-spectrograph of the crow, shown in the field guide *Birds of North America* by Robbins, among others, reveals that the crow does in fact utter something like *caw*.³ The sharp onset of the audio signal is the non-stressed consonant *k* and the subsequent inflection is the *aw*. *Caw* is not a bad catchphrase for this sound. The perceptual problem is partly a cultural one; in this case, based on the lack of "voiceless" consonants in our language and our limited alphabetic representation of such sounds. The "voiceless velar stop *k*," to use the jargon of language students, is a common attribute of the languages of many aboriginal peoples such as the Inuit. In this respect and others related to their language, these people may have a "better ear" for animal sounds than we do.

Several years ago, in response to reviews of bird field guide books in the *Blue Jay*, I commented on the value of sonagrams for birders.¹ I felt that reviewers of bird field guides had overlooked or downplayed this unique feature of the Robbins' field guide. I empathized with one reviewer's point that sonagrams are "an interesting feature — for those

who can read them." Although the unfamiliar format of sonagrams may be intimidating, with a little attention and practise they can extend our acoustic senses into an abstract form — like notes in sheet music. Sonagrams allow us to convert natural sounds into a two-dimensional format suitable for our visual senses.

Robbins' guide provides a concise introduction to the use of sonagrams and several clear examples of sounds to which we can relate. As an example, I used the sonagram of the Olive-sided Flycatcher and referred to its distinctive *Whip Three Beer* call. Later, I received a letter from a *Blue Jay* reader who said that he had never heard the *p* sound and suggested that the call should really be *Whee Three Beer*. The sonagram in Robbins' guide showed that he was correct. Then I began to look for other misrepresentations. There are many; for example, there is no indication of the *Q* in mallard's quack. But the crow definitely says *caw*, and in that, I feel somewhat vindicated.

1. FINLEY, K.J. 1984. Whip Three Beer. *Blue Jay* 42:188-189.
2. FRIESEN, V.C. 1991. Crows and their (c)awing. *Blue Jay* 49:123-125.
3. ROBBINS, C.S., BESTEL BRUUN and H.S. ZIM. 1966. *Birds of North America. A guide to field identification.* Golden Press, New York. 340 pp.

Editor's note: We could not publish the sonagrams because of copyright problems.