

# Field Notes

Oak Hammock Marsh Interpretive Centre

May 2006

## COURTSHIP



Love is in the air! Spring is the time of year when all animals are looking for a mate; they do this in a wide variety of ways. Courtship is a sequence of songs, calls and/or displays, which lead to mating. Animals compete with each other for the right to breed, for mates, for space, and for the resources needed to raise young.

Frogs, dragonflies, water bugs, fish, ground squirrels, deer, birds, and many more species all have their own unique way of attracting a mate. It is most often the males that do the bulk of the attracting. Their unique combination of sounds and displays helps to ensure that they attract a female of the right species. There are also calls and behaviours that help maintain the bond between the female and the male once established.

The most obvious courtship displays at Oak Hammock Marsh are among the birds. Birds have three main types of courtship visual displays, vocal sounds, and non-vocal sounds.



### Visual displays

Ducks are a good example of a group of species that use visual displays. Their process of forming and maintaining a bond can entail an elaborate and seemingly bizarre series of displays. Dabbling or surface-feeding ducks, many perform a series of headshakes followed by a grunt whistle, in which they arch their body upwards, dip their bill in the water, and

## Did you know?

That Wilson's Snipe make their courtship calls with their tail feathers.



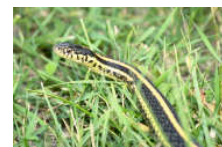
That frogs make their call by inflating a pouch beneath their jaws and exhaling through their mouths.



That American Woodcock's make their courtship calls with their wing feathers.



That Red-sided Garter Snakes mate in large balls (one female and many males).



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## Visual displays cont.

splash the female to get her attention. If she is interested she may synchronize movements with the male. If she is not interested, she may lower her head and jab her bill in short repeated movements, over her shoulder and in the direction of the soon to be rejected male.



Head Throw  
Common Goldeneye

Another elaborate display in ducks is called a head throw, often seen in Canvasbacks and other species. The male lays his head backwards, flat on his back, with the bill pointed upwards and towards the female of interest. He then emits a “coo” as he flings his head forward at high speed resembling the best of contortionists.

Other examples include short-eared owls that impress potential mates by loud wing claps during flight. Sandhill cranes present twigs to females as a symbolic gesture of nest building. Western Grebes perform a side-by-side synchronized water dance.



Water Dance  
Western Grebe

## Vocal sounds

Vocal sounds or singing is probably the most common type of courtship display. A song is a relatively long, often melodious, series of notes. Most species sing at first light and then stop after a few hours. However, some species such as the Red-eyed Vireo sing all day long. About three quarters of all songbirds have two or more songs, the Brown Thrasher takes this to the extreme with over 3000 different song types.



Songs are not only used to attract mates but also to defend territories. Each song is specific to the species and helps to ensure that the female of the right species is attracted. In some species each individual has its own dialect and therefore can be identified.

## Non-vocal sounds

Some birds use their bills, feet, wings, or tails to make sound during courtship. Woodpeckers use their bills to drum on a hollow branch or on a metal gutters to attract a mate. Some species like the American Woodcock, Wilson’s Snipe, Ruffed Grouse and Common Nighthawk alter the spacing between their wing or tail feathers, causing them to vibrate. This creates a variety of whistling, rattling, or buzzing as the air passes through the feathers during flight.

At this time of the year many wildlife species are fighting, feeding, dancing, and singing their way through the spring season. Come out to Oak Hammock and see if you can observe any of these activities.

