

Perching Birds (Advanced Passerines)

Module 9 · Online Birding Enthusiast Course · curriculum by Joe Grosel (1966–2021)

Passerines — the perching birds — are the great kingdom of birding. Over half of every bird species on Earth. The order responsible for almost all the music of the bush.

9.1 What is a passerine

Order Passeriformes. Defining feature: anisodactyl foot with an automatic tendon-locking mechanism that grips a branch even in sleep. Altricial young.

9.2 Sub-orders

Tyranni (sub-oscines) — simpler syrinx, mostly New World. Passeri (oscines) — complex syrinx, the TRUE songbirds. Almost all SA passerines are oscines.

9.3 Weavers, bishops, widowbirds

Family Ploceidae. Polygynous, gregarious, master nest-builders. Spectacular breeding plumage in males.

9.4 Sparrows

Confusingly named — most SA 'sparrows' are weavers historically. Cape Sparrow, House Sparrow, Yellow-throated Petronia.

9.5 Waxbills, mannikins, finches

Tiny grain-eaters. Common Waxbill, Blue Waxbill, Bronze Mannikin, Pin-tailed Whydah.

9.6 Larks, pipits, longclaws

The grassland LBJ trio. Voice and display flight are king. Hindclaw length and bill shape are technical features.

9.7 Swallows, martins, swifts

Swallows are passerines; swifts are NOT (Apodiformes). Swallows perch, build mud nests, forked tails.

9.8 Bulbuls, robins, chats, thrushes

The 'thrush family complex'. Dark-capped Bulbul, Cape Robin-Chat, White-browed Robin-Chat, Mocking Cliff-Chat, Olive Thrush.

9.9 Warblers, cisticolas

Tiny insectivores, master of the LBJ category. Acrocephalus warblers in reeds, cisticolas in grass, prinias in scrub.

9.10 Flycatchers, batises, sunbirds, white-eyes

Canopy insectivores and nectarivores. Spotted Flycatcher, Chinspot Batis, Amethyst Sunbird, Cape White-eye.

9.11 Shrikes, drongos, orioles, crows, starlings

The 'tough' passerines. Bigger, predatory, social. Crimson-breasted Shrike, Fork-tailed Drongo, Black-headed Oriole, Pied Crow, Cape Glossy Starling.

Key Terms

Passeriformes The order of perching birds — over 6,500 species worldwide.

Oscine True songbird — complex syrinx.

Anisodactyl 3 toes forward, 1 back — the perching foot.

Polygynous One male, multiple females in a breeding system.

Brood patch Bare belly skin used to incubate eggs with body heat.