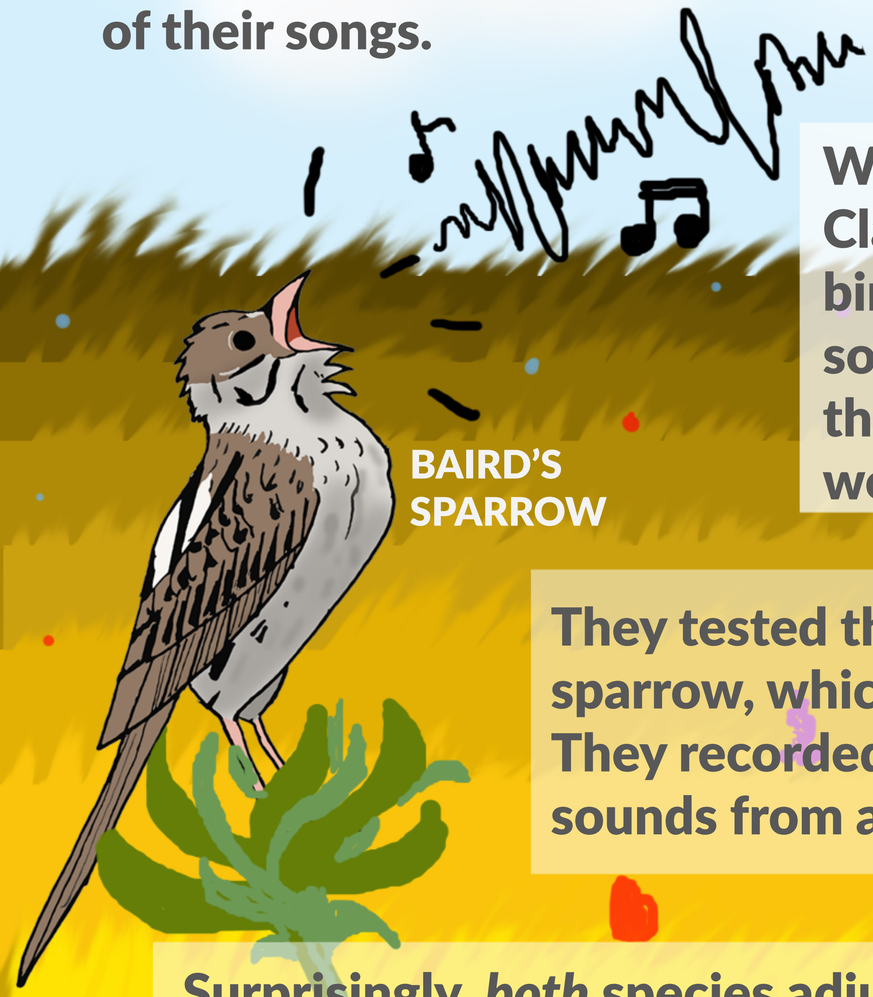
Singin' in the *prairie*

Humans make a lot of noise. Animals that communicate with sound can have a hard time being heard, so to get their message across, they change tactics. Some birds, but not all, alter the frequency or pitch of their songs.



BAIRD'S SPARROW

Why do only some birds change their tune? Claire Curry and colleagues predicted that bird species that already had pretty variable songs would have an easier time modifying them, but other species with more static songs wouldn't.

NOISY OIL DRILL

They tested this hypothesis using two songbird species: the Savannah sparrow, which has variable songs, and Baird's sparrow, which doesn't. They recorded the birds' songs before, during, and after playing back sounds from a noisy oil drill.

Surprisingly, *both* species adjusted their songs in the presence of noise! Baird's sparrows decreased song frequency, while Savannah sparrows' song frequencies increased.

SAVANNAH SPARROW

Maybe birds that live in habitats with a lot of different sounds are used to having to change their songs.
But, we don't know whether this makes their songs any easier to hear, or if it affects the message they're trying to communicate. Answering these kinds of questions can help us make better conservation decisions!

Reference
Curry, C.M., Antze, B., Warrington, M.H., Des Brisay., P., Rosa, P. and Koper, N. 2017. Ability to alter song in two grassland songbirds exposed to simulated anthropogenic noise is not related to pre-existing variability. Bioacoustics. DOI: 10.1080/09524622.2017.1289123