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September 19, 2013, 2:21 p.m. ET

Chirp changes: NY study finds PCBs affect birdsong

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Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. — Low levels of PCBs can change the ways chickadees chirp and song sparrows trill.

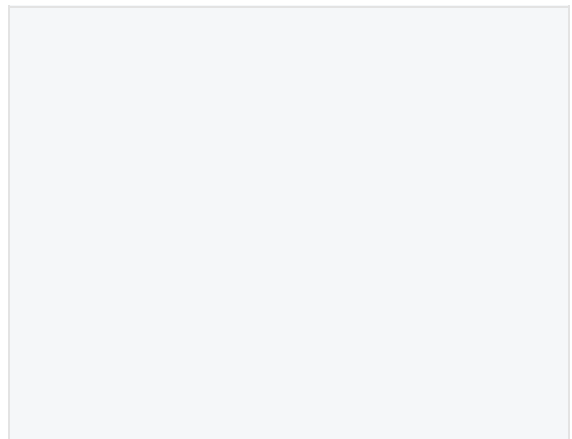
That's the finding of a new study comparing the songs of birds from a stretch of the Hudson River contaminated with polychlorinated biphenyls to those from an uncontaminated area in the Adirondacks. It was published this week in the journal PLOS ONE.

Lead author Sara DeLeon of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology says computer analysis of song patterns showed variations in the chickadee's "fee-bee" song and higher quality in the song sparrow's trills. Blood samples confirmed the presence of PCBs, which the birds ingest by eating contaminated insects.

The authors say a key finding was that the song disruption was tied to specific types of PCBs, which have 209 variations.

The study was released Wednesday.

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