

Whistles and Modes

The tin whistle is generally thought to be limited to playing in only two keys. A whistle is identified by the key for which it is designed – most often a “D” whistle. This whistle can also play in a cross key. That’s a fourth up the scale. That requires the player to finger a C natural, of course. But it’s easy to do that.

So a “D” whistle can play in the keys of D and G plus the relative minors of those keys Bm and Em. That means a whistle player has access to four major keys and two minor keys. In theory the whistle can play any of the seven modes of this scale. As a practical matter, a D whistle has access to these modes:

D Ionian: D E F# G A B C# D

E Dorian: E F# G A B C# D E

A Mixolydian: A B C# D E F# G A

B Aeolian: B C# D E F# G A B

G Ionian: G A B C_(natural due to fingering options) D E F# G

One whistle can play in five keys or modes.

If a tune is in, say, G mixolydian, a C whistle will be needed. If the tune is in A Dorian, a G whistle is required. That’s why experienced whistle players show up at a session with a bag full of whistles.