

Birdsong: reading

I can't believe I'm doing this! It's 4.30 in the morning, pitch black and freezing cold. Nevertheless I find myself getting out of bed and getting dressed. A car horn sounds as I'm putting on a thick coat and wrapping a scarf around me. I grab a hat and join Jim Nightingale in his car. He doesn't seem to mind it's cold and dark, in fact he's smiling. "You're going to love this," he says as we drive off to the nearest park, I'm not so sure.



Jim is what we call a 'twitcher'. This doesn't mean that he's got a nervous twitch, it means he's mad about our feathered friends. At any opportunity he'll be watching quietly, and sometimes excitedly, through his binoculars at a bird. He always has his guidebook to hand, although he seems to know all the birds he sees! Don't get me wrong, I like birds, but I just don't get as crazy about them as Jim. Recently, when he found out that I had never heard the dawn chorus he insisted that we meet at this unearthly hour and head for the local park.

So here we are, luckily Jim has brought hot coffee and a warm rug to sit on. If anyone can see us they must think we're mad - a picnic in the park before the sun rises! After ten shivering minutes there is a very faint light over the eastern side of the park, a suggestion of the day ahead. "Listen," whispers Jim. I listen, nothing. Then clearly and loudly a bird starts singing. "That's the robin, he's usually first." After a few seconds another bird joins in "A blackbird" and then another "A blue tit". It's amazing, twenty minutes later the whole park is alive with the shrieking, calling, singing of birds! And yes, it's wonderful! The noise is incredible, the lighter the sky becomes the louder the birds sing, an incredible avian concert.

"Wow, so they do this *every* morning?" I ask in disbelief.

"Most mornings there are some birds singing but the best time is at the end of the winter and during the spring. May and June are the peak months for birdsong."

"So are they singing because they're happy?"

"Not really," Jim laughs, "in fact they're hungry but they need to do two things. One is to defend their territory and the other is to find a female - by singing they can achieve both." Jim sees my puzzled face and explains. "The birds are nearly always males, they want to have an area of their own to breed. By singing louder and more strongly than other males means that they keep their territory. Some of the birds are quite cunning - they mimic the call of other birds so it sounds like there are many birds nearby, not just the one. Also they know that the females are listening so they want to impress, they develop and redevelop their songs and these can get quite complex. A bird that has a good repertoire, and can sing so heartily even when it's hungry, is sure to get a mate for the spring." By now Jim is having to speak quite loudly because the noise of the singing has really intensified.

We listen together for a while and then slowly but surely, as the sun emerges above the trees, the birds stop singing. "Now it's light enough to find food, that's the end of the show today."

We walk back to Jim's car. "I didn't realize there were so many birds in the town," I say.

“Yes, but not as many as before. Some birds are better at living in towns and adapting to a human world. For example, in big cities the blue tit adjusts its song so that it can be heard more easily over the sound of traffic. In quiet streets the bird has its usual tone, but in busy, noisy streets with a lot of traffic the birds sing higher so that the females can still hear them. By adapting like this means they have a better chance of surviving. Unfortunately, other birds aren’t so clever. The sparrow used to be a very common bird, you could see it everywhere, but the population has dropped 87% over the last thirty years. The increasing noise and light from our cities means that they are unsuitable for many breeding birds.”

Driving home I’m trying not to yawn too much. “But sometimes I hear a bird singing loudly at night, why is that?”

“Ah, that’s the robin. As you saw it was the dawn which triggered the birds to start singing, and the robin is usually first because it’s the most light sensitive. So if it wakes up at night and sees a streetlight shining then it thinks it’s morning and starts singing. People don’t realize how their actions can affect wildlife. However, feeding the birds and putting up nest boxes helps a lot.”

Back in bed I’m pleased that Jim made me listen to the dawn chorus, but I also feel sad that some birds are disappearing. As I set my alarm to wake up in a few hours’ time, I also make a mental note to visit the pet shop when I awake.