

Danehill & Chelwood Gate Parish Report on Dawn Chorus Bird-Song March 2021

Even if you are not an early riser why not make an exception this April and get up early, open your bedroom window and listen to the dawn chorus of bird-song. This will be in full swing well before 6.00 am during this month. The timing of the peak of the day's dawn chorus is light-dependent so as Spring progresses through May so bird-song will commence progressively earlier in our village gardens, hedgerows and copses.

Why is bird-song at its peak early in the morning in Spring? Many species of birds, especially songbirds, begin to sing before sunrise because at that time of day the sun has not heated up the air. Colder air allows bird-song to carry further and so songbirds expend less energy to create maximum sound. Because it is not yet sunrise there is not sufficient light to start feeding so songbirds occupy this early time of day in singing. But why sing at all since singing expends valuable energy? Well - birds do not sing in order to entertain humans -although most of us enjoy hearing it and life would be emptier without bird-song. Birds sing for just *two* reasons: - firstly to demarcate their territories and secondly to attract a mate for breeding.



In most species, but *not* all, it is the male birds which sing. The first purpose of bird-song, that of defending a territory, is why some of our resident bird species sing during the winter such as **Song thrush** and **Robin**. In the case of Robin their garden feeding territories are relatively small and this may be why female Robins sing too: in order pugnaciously to protect their food sources

to survive to breed later. Both sexes of **Dunnock** (right) sing and since they also defend relatively small territories in gardens they probably do so for the same reason. The second reason why birds sing is to attract a mate, and usually it is the male who does this from his secured territory. Dominant males of many species, who have chosen the prime feeding and nesting territories, will use their repertoire of song to attract a female. Those males with the most complex songs will be the most desirable mates, because it is thought, both the cumulative past energy expended in having managed to learn a more complex variety of notes and the current energy expended in continually “pouring it out” in singing is an indication to a female of the male's health & breeding vigour. It has been demonstrated that male Chaffinches





whose song ends with a more elaborate flourish than normal is more likely to “get the gal “.

Birds of course also *call* as well as sing. Research shows that calling is instinctive for any given species, inherited from generation to generation. In contrast song has to be *learnt* by each individual. Each young bird tries to mimic the adults around it. The bird’s repertoire then develops

to a point where it crystallises in the bird’s memory for the rest of its life. If the song has been learned poorly or with flaws then a potential female partner may “turn her beak up “at him and not mate with that individual on the basis he may have other deficiencies. One of the few species that has the capacity to continue to learn new songs, augmenting its repertoire *through life* to mimic new noises both avian and otherwise is the **Starling**.



Why not open a bedroom window in April before dawn and listen to see what different bird-songs you can distinguish in the dawn chorus . I heard the following in my garden in Chelwood Gate on 14 March 2021 (sunrise was 06:17): -

05:27 ROBIN & TAWNY OWL

05:35 PHEASANT, WOODPIGEON, BLACKBIRD, SONG THRUSH

05:45 : Sue Poole, talking in the garden to our Black Labrador “ Poppy “

05:46 GREAT TIT, CARRION CROW

05:55 CHAFFINCH (call only), GREENFINCH

06:08 WREN, DUNNOCK

Happy listening !

CLIVE POOLE14 March 2021