Dominic Couzens

ILLUSTRATED BY
Madeleine Floyd

Includes QR code for every birdsong

A Year of Birdsong

52 stories of songbirds

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BATSFORD

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Introduction

BIRDSONG IS ONE OF THE JOYS OF LIFE FOR THOSE OF us fortunate enough to be able to hear it. It is also a free gift, requiring no charge to appreciate, although recognizing the species might require the help of a tutor or an app. This gift is offered all around the world. Other than some inhospitable desert and polar regions, and over the open ocean, the sound is everywhere, even in the midst of urban centres. And it is almost universally adored. You rarely hear people saying: 'I hate the sound of birds singing,' unless their sleep has been broken at dawn, in which case the birds themselves are quickly forgiven.

The universality of birdsong also extends to the year. While in many parts of the world the zenith of the phenomenon, and the high tide of the dawn chorus, is seasonal, that doesn't mean that it ceases completely. There are always wild voices out there, even lone ones. A drop in singing in one part of the globe might well coincide with a swelling in another, so while the northern hemisphere birds go quiet in summer and autumn, their counterparts in the southern hemisphere start to warm up. In the tropics the best bird choruses coincide with rainy seasons, when most birds are breeding. So,

within these pages we can enjoy an authentic year of birdsong around the world.

This book celebrates 52 memorable bird songs, one for each week of the year. The species and their noises are chosen for many different reasons; not all of the featured voices are even particularly harmonious. Some are chosen because they are apposite to the season, others because they demonstrate an interesting piece of bird song research. Some songs reflect on us, and how we hear and appreciate them. There are stories associated with songs, and literary masterpieces inspired by them. Some songs have an irresistible sense of place.

Although there are birds featured from all over the world, I have chosen mostly from species that are well-known to audiences in Europe and North America. One reason is purely commercial; there might be some wonderful songs from Madagascar, for example, but readers are going to prefer to read about sounds that they know or can imagine hearing. However, the other reason is that most bird song research has been done in these parts of the world, so the most interesting stories and insights, at least until recently, tended to come from here.

The book has been specially written so that any reader can at least get some idea of the actual sound of the bird from a description in words, or even a memory phrase used to identify it. It could be read cover to cover without hearing any of the voices within. However, there is no substitute for actually hearing the songs and calls described, so we have included QR codes. I suggest that you also use a birdsong app (such as Merlin, which covers much of the world)

or visit a website such as Xeno-Canto. Many of the songs are on YouTube as well. Most are easy to find online.

Before you read the accounts that follow, it is necessary for me to explain a few very important terms that are used throughout the book, and also to give a brief explanation of what bird vocalizations are actually for. Without these explanations, certain pages might cause puzzlement.

The book is entitled *A Year of Birdsong*, but not all the sounds featured are, strictly speaking, songs. That's because birders make a (rather loose) distinction between songs and calls. Part of this distinction is purely descriptive, but a significant amount lies in the biological purpose of the vocalization.

To those of us hearing them, bird SONGS are typically complex vocalizations that last a few seconds at least. They are multisyllabic, and could perhaps be described as sentences, or even paragraphs, depending on the bird. On the other hand, those same species might make different, usually less elaborate vocalizations, which are single words or syllables, or sometimes trills and screams. These are CALLS, or CALL NOTES, which are part of the simpler vocabulary of the bird.

Bird songs are usually seasonal. These more intricate vocalizations rise and fall with the breeding season. In many species, at least part of the song is learned. In the majority of species, especially in temperate parts of the world, they are sung largely, or even only by males. The function of a song is primarily twofold. The male is the main claimer and keeper of a territory, so it sings to other males to keep them away. However, the same (or a different) song is also directed at females, with the intention of attracting their

attention and, in a perfect world, eventually mating with them. There are many variations of this theme but understanding its fundamentals will help.

Although most birds, especially those that live in forests or scrubland, sing their songs from a perch, a significant minority perform from the ground, or up in the air, while flying. For the sake of definition, songs which are uttered wholly or usually in flight are known as ‘flight songs’, and the displays in which songs are uttered are known as ‘song flights’.

Calls are used in many contexts and can be very specific, such as those used to incite copulation, or have a broader purpose, such as alarm. They aren’t usually learned, but innate.

The situation is complicated by birds that aren’t strictly songbirds making sounds that are, effectively, a song! Let me explain. Birds are divided into many different groups, by far the largest of which is known as passerines. It’s an unequal divide: more than 60 per cent of the world’s species are sparrow-like passerines, including many of the ones we know best, such as warblers, finches, tits, thrushes and swallows. These passerines are often called perching birds on account of their opposing toe arrangement on the foot, with three facing forwards and one back, allowing for an excellent perching grip. However, passerines are also the world’s main songbirds. This is due to the nature of their sound-producing organ, the syrinx, situated at the bottom of the windpipe, where it divides into the two bronchi (branches) of the lungs. It is much more complicated and advanced than those of other birds – with extra rings, musculature, and so on. The passerine syrinx is a marvel, and much of what makes them special.

However, the lack of a fancy syrinx does not exclude non-passerine birds from defending their territory or attracting a mate by vocalizing. Birds such as cuckoos and doves, for example, obviously do this, often loudly and atmospherically. But they inherit their 'songs', and although their voices are often individually distinct and recognizable, they don't add to them by learning. On the whole, I have tried to call the sounds that they make ADVERTISING CALLS.

There is one more technical matter to describe. Bird song is complex, especially when you listen carefully, and it sometimes needs to be broken down into its constituent parts. For example, birds might repeat a sentence again and again – this is best described as a PHRASE. Within a phrase (or a long monologue) there are often easily distinguished sections, some with several or multiple syllables. These can be called ELEMENTS or STROPHES, the ingredients of the song.

Finally, I will briefly mention a bird sound that is very famous but is not included as itself in the book, and that is the DAWN CHORUS. Clearly, it's a jumble of voices, but not of a single species. Nevertheless, it is a theme throughout the book. Despite the fact that it occurs around the world, and has drawn much attention, it is poorly understood. Why should birds start singing in the predawn darkness?

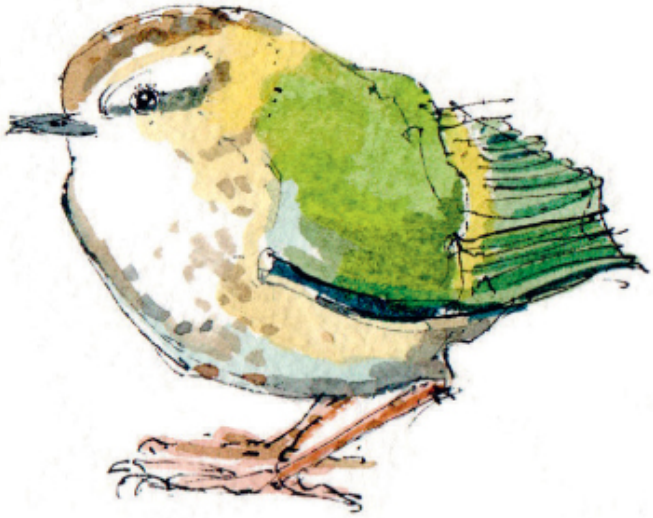
There are various hypotheses. Firstly, the transmission of song is often enhanced at dawn, either by atmospheric conditions or the sheer lack of other competing sounds, including human ones. Secondly, dawn song is relatively safe, because night predators are thinking of retiring and the day predators will wait for the light. And

thirdly, it's too dark to find food during the predawn, so it won't interfere with other activities.

However, these hypotheses cannot explain the full phenomenon, because none of them compel a bird to sing; they just facilitate it. The dawn chorus surely has a compulsion element. One is that, after the night, a bird is wise to protect its territory and mate by reminding everybody that it is still there. Vacancies are noticed immediately and borders soon broken when not defended.

And then there is the effect on the female. The dawn chorus is often at its height, in a particular species, during egg laying, when the female is most fertile; it also peaks at dawn, when a bird has just laid an egg. During this time the male must be vigilant, noisy and impossible for the female to ignore. A male that isn't singing loudly close by the nest before dawn is likely to find that its mate's attention wanders elsewhere. A male's fear of losing its paternity is not the most joyful explanation for the dawn chorus, but it is certainly intriguing!

And song is intriguing. And beautiful, and wonderful; and it lifts the heart. My hope is that, in a small way, this book will do the same.



WEEK 1

Rifleman

Acanthisitta chloris

NEW ZEALAND, 7–9 cm (2¾–3½ in)

IN A BOOK ON SONGBIRDS IT MIGHT SEEM odd to begin with a bird that barely has a song at all. Shouldn't we start with a bang, a clash of cymbals to lift off the year, or introduce the subject with a soaring, glorious voice that will elevate every heart? What's the point in listening to the squeak of a rifleman, a midget that lives in the lush southern beech forests of New Zealand? It utters merely a high-pitched 'seep' sound, which many people can only hear if they strain their ears.

Why indeed? Well, great things have a habit of starting small and quietly. The best New Year resolutions aren't the loud promises we make to others, but the silent hopes that are barely whispered.

If you watch the rifleman foraging and calling on a chilly morning on an alpine slope in New Zealand, you might see a diminutive bird, but what you hear is a voice from deep time. Those quiet trills are stirrings. They are close to what was probably the first sound made by any songbird anywhere on Earth, a breath taken as the non-avian dinosaurs breathed their last.

The rifleman is a member of the most ancient living group of songbirds – or at least the most ancient group known from the original songbird lineage, which evolved around 60 million years ago. The rifleman's family, or New Zealand wrens, are known to have evolved about 55 million years ago, when they branched off from those ancestral forebears. The New Zealand wrens have the simplest sound producing organ, the syrinx, of any songbirds, without any intrinsic muscles, and confined to the trachea. Within the body of the tiny rifleman, and reflected in its breath, is the origin of all the finest bird songs we hear today.

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Not long ago, scientists assumed that the passerines must have evolved somewhere in the northern hemisphere. However, through DNA sequencing studies and by looking at the palaeogeography of

the shifting continents, it is now known this isn't so. Surprising as it may seem, bird song as we know it began in that part of Gondwanaland that is now Australasia.

That means that every one of our northern hemisphere favourites – larks and warblers, thrushes and nightingales, wrens and mockingbirds, robins and robin-chats, babblers, tits and finches – owes their song prowess to birds that first opened their mouths in that southern region. The dawn chorus, the melodrama of spring, the territorial song flights, the duets, the major soundtrack of the wild – it all began down under.

And, of course, so does our year. The first day of January begins in Oceania and spins westwards. New Zealand is one of the first places to receive the New Year sunlight. And the chances are that, for countless millennia, the quiet calls of the rifleman were among the first species to cast their sounds to the air every year. Small beginnings indeed.

Bird song as we know it began in that part of Gondwanaland that is now Australasia.

WEEK 2

Song thrush

Turdus philomelos

WESTERN EUROPE; FURTHER EAST TO CENTRAL ASIA, 20–23 cm (8–9 in)

IT HAPPENS NOW UNTIL APRIL AT LEAST, without fail. Every year is the same. The gardens of Britain and Northern Europe resound to a sweet-voiced bird song, and everybody is confused.

'I've heard this loud song in my garden,' says a neighbour. 'Can you tell me what it might be?' Another says: 'I keep getting woken up by this bird singing in the dark and I've tried all the bird apps, and still don't know what it is.' The answer is always the same. It's a song thrush. It really is, honestly.

The reason why it confuses people is that listeners just hear a few fragments of a seemingly distinctive song and think it should be obvious what it is. But this is a classic case of information impatience. If everybody just gave the bird a chance to show off its regular singing rhythm, they would find it easy to identify. You just have to give it time.

The song of the song thrush has been described thus in a guidebook: 'Loud, varied and with a distinct tendency for rhythmic repetition of phrases.' But far better, and soaked with artistic glamour, are these lines from the poem 'Home Thoughts from Abroad', written by English romantic poet Robert Browning in 1845:

That's the wise thrush; he sings each song twice over,
Lest you should think he never could recapture
The first fine careless rapture!

The essence of this thrush, then, is that it repeats every phrase (or strophe) several times, in a studied, unhurried fashion. It then moves on to another phrase and repeats that, too, and the next. So you will hear something like: 'It's me, it's me, it's me! I'm a song thrush, I'm a song thrush, I'm a song thrush! Listen out, listen out! I'm here, I'm here, I'm here, I'm here …'. In all, a single song thrush may have more than 200 phrases in its vocabulary, although it will tend to use favourites again and again.

> *The song thrush's proclamations are a serenade of earliness, both of the year and the day.*

The other characteristics of the song are that it is loud, clear and well-enunciated – all of which means that it's very easy to notice, breaking out from the running soundtrack of your everyday mind, even when you aren't a frequent listener to bird song.

Another reason for those January bird song enquiries is that the song thrush's proclamations are a serenade of earliness, both of the year and the day. It sings at its best during the lightening or the darkening of the sky. It is naturally a bird that feeds in shade, so the predawn and dusk are its comfort zones. In these conditions it is often a lone voice or is sharing the airwaves with the European robin (see here); but it can easily be dominant, so if a sleepy person is opening the curtains or leaving home for the day shift, this is the song that they hear.

There are several intriguing peculiarities about the song thrush and its song. It can start singing as early as November, a couple of months before many resident birds, presumably to establish a territory for the future breeding season. Its peak starts early. Most unusually for any bird, the song thrush also appears to have no visual displays to begin or cement the pair bond. The song is evidently the key. Again unusually, the male stops singing, except at dawn and dusk, as soon as it is paired. Yet another curious behaviour is that in midsummer there is another late resurgence of song, perhaps when young birds can try out their own voices for the first time (see chaffinch, here).

It seems as though even when you know the singer is a song thrush, not all your questions are easily answered.

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