

## Sample chapter from “Encourage A Child To Watch Birds” by Denzil Walton

*I hope you enjoy this sample chapter and that it will persuade you to buy the book. I would be grateful if you do not share this chapter to other people. Thank you.*

### **No. 7 Listen to the birds**

Listening to and learning bird sounds will enable children to more fully understand the workings of the natural world. It will also help them with their bird identification skills. Many birds seem to enjoy hiding from the prying eyes of birdwatchers, whether it's in deep undergrowth, a field of corn, at the top of a tree, or in the pitch black of a moonless night. However, birds often reveal their presence by singing or calling.

Learning bird song will enable a child to walk through a wood in springtime and know what birds are present – the nuthatch, treecreeper, willow warbler and chiffchaff, for example – without having to see them. They will be able to sit in their garden and enjoy identifying the singing dunnock, song thrush, robin and goldcrest – and impress visitors! They will be able to hear and identify the alarm calls of a jay, magpie or wren, or hear the night-time hoots of tawny owls and distinguish between a male and a female. (The well-known tu-whit-tu-who is a combination of two birds: the female goes tu-whit and the male replies whoo-who).

Learning bird sounds may improve children's listening abilities, by training them to perceive often minute differences in the calls of birds, many of which are extremely similar. They may be able to better appreciate pieces of classical music that incorporate or allude to bird sounds. Examples include Beethoven's pastoral symphony with its quail, cuckoo and nightingale; Vaughan Williams' The Lark Ascending; and the duck in Prokofiev's Peter and the Wolf. In short, understanding bird sounds will be another “string to the bow” of a budding young birdwatcher.

Bird sounds can be categorized as songs or calls. A song is generally associated with proclaiming the bird's territory or attracting the attention of a potential mate. It's usually produced by the male, and is limited to the breeding season in most species. Many bird songs are stunningly complex and beautiful. Bird calls, on the other hand, tend to be much simpler, are usually unmusical, and serve a variety of practical, non-sexual functions. A bird's call can alert other birds to the nearby presence or approach of a predator (an alarm call). A bird could make a call to drive away its enemies, such as when birds “mob” a sleeping owl during the day. Or a bird might call to reveal its presence in a flock (a contact call).

Birds also use many non-vocal modes of communication by sound. The classic example is the “drumming” of a woodpecker, when it repeatedly and rapidly pecks on a resonant object to create a pattern of sound. Usually the object is a hollow tree or fallen log, but woodpeckers have been recorded as drumming on fence posts, litter bins, chimneys, drainpipes, and utility poles. Listening to a woodpecker drumming and then trying to spot the bird is a challenge that will keep a child occupied during a spring woodland walk!

Another example, and a particular favourite of mine, is the drumming of snipe. These long-billed wading birds mark out their territories in spring by flying steeply into the sky and then rapidly diving. As they

descend, the snipe's outer tail feathers vibrate in the wind to produce a peculiar and surprisingly loud noise. It's been likened to an anxious sheep bleating.

So how do you encourage your young birdwatcher to learn bird sounds? There's no quick and easy way; it takes time, focus and devotion. The way I did it as a 12-year-old was to listen repeatedly to two LPs called *Bird Sounds in Close-up, Volumes I and II*. They consisted of numerous tracks of birds singing and calling, separated by "beeps", and described on a leaflet. However, at first the records were totally overwhelming as there were just too many bird songs and calls to remember initially. For this reason, I would encourage a child to learn bird sounds gradually, by steadily building up their knowledge base.

Although there are many websites, CDs, DVDs and apps developed for birdwatchers to get to know bird sounds, I recommend starting younger children off with simple audio books. These contain pictures of birds, information on them, and buttons to press to hear those birds singing. A child could start with just one of these books and learn that small collection of songs before moving on to another book. In this way they can gradually build up their repertoire. All the songs and calls that a child memorizes will be firmly and irrevocably etched into their brain.

#### *PROJECTS TO DO TOGETHER*

- *Visit a bookshop or library and look for audio books of bird songs. In the UK, suggested titles are *The Little Book of Garden Bird Songs, The Little Book of the Dawn Chorus, The Little Book of Woodland Bird Sounds* etc. Similar books exist in other markets around the world, also for the more advanced birdwatcher, such as *Bird Songs: 250 North American Birds in Song*.*
- *Play one of the bird songs and ask the child to identify the bird. This can be a fun activity on long car journeys.*

Learning bird sounds is not easy, but there is one trick to make it easier and more fun for children, while also developing their melodic and rhythmic abilities. This is to use mnemonics. These are catchy phrases that are associated with a bird's song or call. For example, the yellowhammer's song typically consists of seven rapidly repeated short notes followed by an eighth, higher and more drawn out note. The traditional mnemonic is "little-bit-of-bread-and-no CHEEEEESE." The barred owl sounds like it's saying "Who cooks for you, who cooks for you all." The red-chested cuckoo is telling the world "it will rain, it will rain," the quail utters "wet-my-lips, wet-my-lips," while the chiming wedgebill poses the question "why did you get drunk?" One of my favourites is the reed bunting's scratchy little song, with its mnemonic "Ich sing immer noch schlecht" (I still sing badly!).

#### *QUESTIONS TO ASK*

- *After you listen to a particular bird song, can you invent your own mnemonic? Pay close attention to the rhythm and timing of the song, and come up with a phrase that you can recall easily.*
- *Can you do some research and make a list of birds that call out their name? Examples are the cuckoo and chickadee.*

Once the child has mastered a few local species, one specific project is to get up early in late April or early May and listen to the dawn chorus. This is a truly magical natural happening that occurs when birds wake up and burst into song to proclaim their territory before they start foraging for food. Interestingly, birds with larger eyes tend to start singing earlier than birds with smaller eyes. The reason

is that larger eyes have a better light-gathering ability. A bird with large eyes can therefore see earlier in the morning compared to a bird with small eyes, and so it will start singing earlier. Furthermore, birds are singing in higher pitches than they used to, which is believed to be an evolutionary coping mechanism for the increased traffic noise in cities.

So far I've been writing about the benefits of learning bird sounds, but there is growing evidence that merely listening to bird sounds can benefit a child in numerous ways. Evolutionary speaking, over hundreds of thousands of years human beings have come to equate bird song with safety. In other words, our brains are conditioned to believe that when the birds are singing, all is well with the world. It's only when birds stop singing – for example due to an approaching predator or an impending natural disaster – that we subconsciously start being concerned that all might not be well in the immediate environment.

This correlation between bird song and peace of mind has been put to good use. Some children's hospitals play bird song in the wards. It's particularly useful to calm young patients as they receive injections. Bird song has been linked to reducing stress levels and lessening the symptoms of attention deficit disorders. It has been found to help children concentrate and improve their focus.

#### *PROJECTS TO DO TOGETHER*

- *Set your alarms so you can get up while it's still dark and experience the wonder of the dawn chorus.*
- *Make a list of the sequence of birds that wake up and start singing during the dawn chorus.*
- *At home, play some quiet bird song as background "music" while a child is doing their school homework, or when they are feeling stressed, anxious or exhausted. (It may help you too!)*

If you have been putting these ideas into practice, the child will hopefully be steadily improving their birdwatching skills and enjoying some wonderful bird sightings and experiences. Now is the time for a child to learn how to record these observations so that they can look back in years to come and recall their experiences with pleasure.