tune in to the dawn chorus
BBC Breathing Places is a major campaign to inspire and motivate you to create and care for nature-friendly green spaces where you live.

Getting out and enjoying nature can have great benefits for you and there are lots of exciting ways you can get involved.

Go wild with Breathing Places at bbc.co.uk/breathingplaces

“Get up early and make a cup of tea. Take a long sip. Open the window, breathe and listen to the sound of a new day.”

Adrian Chiles
Adrian Chiles’ guide to the dawn chorus

The cheat’s way
1 Head for bed and set your alarm for dawn.
2 Awake to alarm and switch off.
3 Ignore time on clock.
4 Stumble bleary-eyed to window and open a crack.
5 Fall back into bed and tune into the symphony of the songbirds.
6 Drift back to sleep to the dulcet tones of the dawn chorus.

If you balk at the idea of waking at dawn, listen out for the dusk chorus instead about an hour before sunset. It isn’t as easy to hear as the dawn chorus because it’s a busy, noisy time of day. So book yourself a few minutes of silence, turn off the TV and zone out the traffic, prick up your ears and tune in.

Or for a wilder experience...
Go on a family adventure: rise before 4am and head out to your nearest park or into the countryside. Whether in the city, the country or your own garden, you’ll be amazed at the range of birds you can hear when you’re out in the open. If you’re really keen, why not join an organised early morning bird walk on a nature reserve?

Check out events with our partners at bbc.co.uk/breathingplaces

This booklet will guide you through the wonders of the dawn chorus, helping you to tune in, sift through the sounds of dawn and hear that rude awakening as a symphony.
What is the dawn chorus?

From early spring to summer, as day breaks, songbirds live up to their name and fill the air with music. It’s the males who sing the longest and loudest, for two reasons: to defend their territory and attract a mate. Think of a cockerel – his brash crowing might not be music to the ears, but the principle’s the same: when he shouts out “Cock-a-doodle-doo”, he’s warning any boys that he’s in charge and alerting the girls that he’s about. But it’s the sweet sounds of the songbirds such as the robin and song thrush that make the dawn chorus such an ode to joy.

International Dawn Chorus Day

International Dawn Chorus Day is celebrated on the first Sunday of every May. It began in the 1980s when the broadcaster and environmentalist Chris Baines held the first dawn chorus event on his 40th birthday. He asked everyone to attend his party at 4am so they could enjoy the dawn chorus with him!

Since then dawn chorus events have been held as far afield as the Caribbean and South East Asia. But you don’t have to travel to the tropics to enjoy the dawn chorus – it’s just as rich and varied right on your doorstep and there are plenty of organised outings to join.

“The dawn chorus is a simple and beautiful way of sharing nature with lots of people.”

Chris Baines, environmentalist, broadcaster and founder of International Dawn Chorus Day
Play bird bingo with our top stars of the dawn chorus

Fine-tune your ears and listen out for some star singers in the dawn chorus. If you’ve already picked up a Breathing Places dawn chorus CD then listen along, or log on to bbc.co.uk/breathingplaces to hear the song of each bird. Here are some songs to identify:

“The dawn chorus is one of nature’s most precious gifts. Make the effort to hear it, and you’ll be walking on air for the rest of the day!”

Mark Ward, RSPB

Song Thrush – has a rich and varied song. Often one of the first birds to start off the dawn chorus.

Robin – has a sweet singing voice. Its familiar refrain can be heard all over the UK.

Blackbird – dressed smartly all in black, the male blackbird has a beautiful, bubbling, warbling song.

Many of these birds can be heard all over the UK although a few are not present in the far north and west of Scotland.
Chiffchaff – helpfully says its name “chiffchaff chiffchaff” making it easier to recognize.

Nightingale – the famous song of the nightingale is fast and loud but is only heard in the south east of England.

Wren – makes a lot of noise for such a small bird. Its high-pitched song can be heard in gardens and woods all over the UK.

Warbler! Florence Seen and heard

Great Tit – has a distinctive two-note song – “teacher teacher teacher teacher”.

Goldfinch – has a high, twittering song rather like a canary.

Starling – can alter its song by impersonating not just other birds but also objects such as car alarms and mobile phones.

Teach-you! Spotted! Bird house!
Wood Pigeon – its distinctive “co-coo-coo” can often be heard echoing down chimneypots.

Blue Tit – this striking, little, blue and yellow bird helps you to “see, see, see” when it calls.

House Sparrow – hardly a song, but the lively “chirps” and chattering of groups of sparrows can brighten up a dull morning.

Skylark – one of the earliest birds in the dawn chorus, coining the phrase “up with the lark”.

Chaffinch – this common garden bird has a short and cheerful song.

Whitethroat – this bird spends winter in the Sahara desert and comes to the UK in the summer to breed.

The lark ascending!

Cherry-doo

Bingo!
Dawn chorus bird diary

Why not keep a personal diary to help you track what you’ve spotted?

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All about birds

Why do birds sing at dawn?
Birds sing at dawn because it’s quiet. Singing at dawn is thought to be 20 times more effective than singing at midday when there is more background noise. The fuss dies down when it’s light enough to find some breakfast.

How do birds sing?
Birds have a syrinx which works like our vocal cords. What’s special about it is that some birds, such as the song thrush, can sing more than one note at a time.

Do all birds sing?
Some species of birds, like gulls, do not have songs, but most have something to sing about. It is the passerines (the songbirds) who are the star singers of the dawn chorus.

Why do birds sing in the spring?
As spring approaches, the longer days activate a chemical change in the brains of male birds. They realise it’s time to start breeding and so the dawn chorus begins.

Do some birds sing earlier than others?
Some birds do start singing very early in the morning. Robins, song thrushes and blackbirds are always among the first to strike up.

The changing dawn chorus
Noise and light pollution are changing the dawn chorus. In some places, robins can be heard singing through the night, which may be due to light from streetlamps confusing them as to when dawn breaks. Studies suggest that a changing climate might see new birds taking up residence in the UK – their songs bringing new melodies to the dawn chorus.
Find your flock

Try this with your kids!
The game lasts for about two minutes – it’s a good icebreaker and it helps you remember bird songs and find out why birds sing them.

Preparations: You need at least 10 people to play this game and as many pieces of paper as there are people. Divide the paper into five piles. Write the name of a bird and the sound it makes when it sings on all the pieces of paper in one pile, making sure each pile names a different bird. Shuffle the paper slips.

How to play
1 Introduce the bird songs to the players:
   - Chaffinch – “pink, pink” (like a hammer hitting stone)
   - Great Tit – “teacher, teacher” (with a squeaky, seesawing sound)
   - Blue Tit – “see, see, see” (with a high-pitched voice!)
   - Wood Pigeon – ”I don’t knoooow” (slowly with a Lancastrian accent!)
   - Starling – “click, click, click” (like clicking fingers)
2 Dish out the pieces of paper at random among the players.
3 Explain that birds sing to find a mate and to stake their territory.
4 When everyone’s ready, tell the group to start singing their songs as loudly as they can.
5 Their aim is to find the rest of their flock and gather in a group (still singing).
6 The last group to gather as a flock or anyone without a mate is excluded from the next round.
Get your own garden orchestra

If you like what you hear, why not invite the dawn chorus orchestra to sing outside your window? Many birds which were once common, such as sparrows and starlings, are now in decline. You can help out by making your garden or any outside space bird-friendly. Here are a few ideas:

**Give a bird a home**
Bird boxes are easily available from garden centres and are easy to make too. Different birds like different boxes. Log on to [bbc.co.uk/breathingplaces](http://bbc.co.uk/breathingplaces) to find out which boxes suit which birds.

**Provide water for birds**
If your garden looks thirsty then the birds are thirsty too so help them out and provide a safe place for them to drink. They’ll use it as bath water too.

**Plant for birds**
You can help birds by creating a varied habitat in your garden. A good mixture of different species and sizes of flowers, shrubs and trees can provide food and shelter for birds and other wildlife.

**Feed the birds**
You can attract birds into your garden simply by leaving food out for them. Winter is the most important time to feed birds but you can do it all year round.

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**Mozart’s starling**
The composer Mozart had a pet starling. Centuries ago, these birds were popular pets due to their ability to mimic sounds. Mozart’s starling was even able to whistle parts of his compositions.
For more information about BBC Breathing Places, visit your local library, listen to your local BBC Radio station’s nature programmes or log on to:

**bbc.co.uk/breathingplaces**

Other useful dawn chorus and bird links:
- www.idcd.info
- www.wildlifetrusts.org
- www.rspb.org.uk
- www.bto.org.uk

With thanks to the RSPB and the Wildlife Trusts