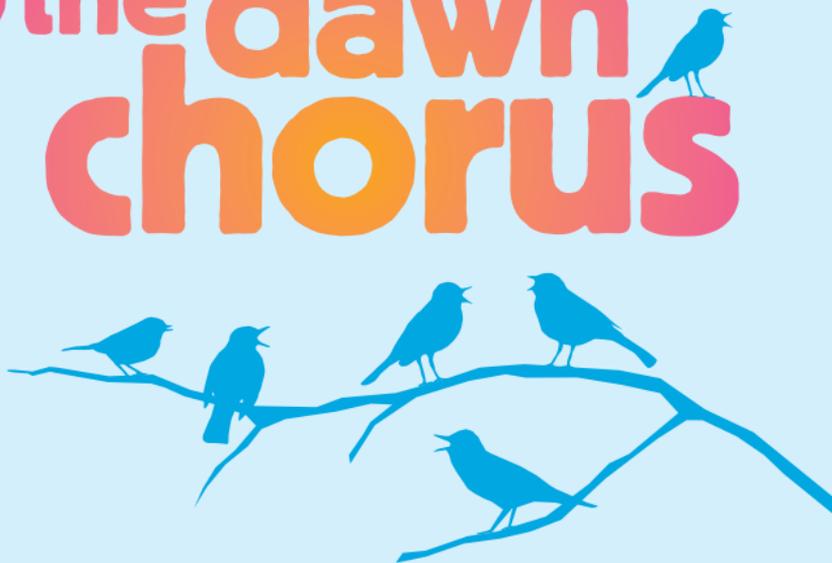


BBC
breathing
places

tune in
to the dawn
chorus



pocket guide

BBC Breathing Places is a major BBC Learning 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

BBC's The One Show presenter



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 so special. There's even an International Dawn Chorus Day which takes place every year on the first Sunday of May.

On this day dawn chorus events are held worldwide, including the UK where there are plenty of organised outings to join.

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.

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

Chris Baines

Environmentalist and broadcaster

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.



Tweet yourself

The cheat's way –

For those who suffer from pillow separation anxiety:

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 it a crack.
5. Fall back into bed and listen.
6. Drift back to sleep to the sweet sound of birdsong.

The full monty –

For those who love an adventure:

1. Rise before 4am.
2. Head for your garden, a park or into the countryside – rural or urban, you'll be amazed at the range of birds you can hear when you're out in the open.
3. Listen, relax and enjoy.
4. Celebrate with a slap-up breakfast – you've earned it!

Alternatively, join an organised dawn chorus walk. Check out the Breathing Places Event Finder: www.breathingplaces.org for details of events near you.

Find your flock

A great children's game or icebreaker! You'll need at least 10 people, a piece of paper per person and one pen. How to play:

1. Divide the paper into five piles. Write the name of a single bird and the sound it makes on each piece of paper within that pile. Shuffle them.
2. Introduce the bird songs to the group eg:
 - Blue tit – 'see, see, see' (high-pitched voice)
 - Chaffinch – 'pink, pink' (like a hammer hitting stone)
 - Great tit – 'teacher, teacher' (with a squeaky, seesawing sound)
 - Starling – 'click, click, click' (like clicking fingers)
3. Randomly dish out the paper.
4. Explain birds sing to find a mate and to stake their territory.
5. Get the group singing to find their flock.
6. The last group to gather is excluded from the next round.

Birdsong bingo



Fine-tune your ears and see if you can identify some star singers in the dawn chorus.



Blackbird – The male, a striking bird, dressed smartly all in black, has a beautiful, bubbling, warbling song.



Chiffchaff – Helpfully says its name 'chiffchaff chiffchaff' making it easier to recognise.

Seen

Seen



Skylark – One of the earliest birds in the dawn chorus, coining the phrase 'up with the lark'. Only sings when flying.



Song thrush – Has a rich song, marked by repeated phrases. Often one of the first birds to start off the dawn chorus.



Seen



Seen



Whitethroat – Comes to the UK to breed in summer. Its short, scratchy song can be heard coming from farmland hedgerows.



Woodpigeon – Its distinctive, familiar 'ooh-ooh, ooooh, ooh-ooh' can often be heard echoing down chimneypots.



Seen



Bingo!

Do One Thing

Fancy getting closer to birds? Try these ideas.

Show your support

Use wildlife-friendly pest controls in your garden and you'll get the birds on your side. Song thrushes adore eating slugs and snails and most tits love greenfly and blackfly.

Create a bird-friendly space

Try putting up a nest box or planting a mixture of flowers, shrubs and trees in your garden. Try leaving some wild corners too. Organisations like the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and The Wildlife Trusts provide advice.

Expand your horizons

Visit a local nature reserve. You'll discover birds you may not see or hear near your house or in your garden. That's because they may need different types of food and habitat from what you have at home. Want to do more? Volunteer with organisations like The British Trust for Ornithology (BTO).

Get arty

Take children on a dawn chorus walk. Based on the birdsong they hear, get them to sketch what they think the birds look like. Now show them the real thing – the internet and books are a great place to start. Libraries are also a good source of information.

Practice makes perfect

After tuning into the real thing, pick up a birdsong CD and listen at any time of the day or night – or download the 'dawn chorus' CD from the Breathing Places website. You'll soon start to recognise which birds sing which songs. Try the International Dawn Chorus Day website for additional clips.

Discover the dusk

Dawn not your thing? Listen out for the dusk chorus instead. This kicks off about an hour before sunset, but is not so easy to hear because of the 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.

For more details regarding these and other ideas, check out: **bbc.co.uk/breathingplaces**

**do
one
thing**

For more ideas of what you can do for nature, why not check out other Do One Thing activities at:

bbc.co.uk/breathingplaces

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