



Learning to identify the melodies bursting into life around us at this time of year can turn a simple walk into a tuning-in experience, connecting us to our surroundings. Recent research confirms that birdsong has a positive impact on our mood and cognitive abilities. So, with the arrival of spring heralding a burgeoning dawn chorus in our trees, hedgerows and even in the heart of our towns and cities, there's no better time to get up early and take in the wonder of nature's sunrise symphony.

Start by learning something easy, such as the collared dove. Listen out for its unmistakably warm "coo-COO-coo". It's not a pretty melody, but it is a good practice tune and peacefully repetitive, which is ironic considering it mirrors the football chant "u-NI-ted".

Next, try to memorise the robin's song, which often is the first in the dawn chorus. It is bright and short, a few seconds of "twiddle-oo, twiddle-ee-dee, twiddle" or a variation on that theme. You should also be able to see its tell-tale red breast.

The blackbird is similarly easy to spot (all black; orange beak) and another early starter. Its smooth, rounded, liquid-honey notes are beautiful, the very sound of pastoral England. Its song begins lower in register than the robin but finishes in a flashy, inquisitive flurry, reminiscent of R2D2's squeaking and whistling noises in *Star Wars*.

The chiff-chaff's name is onomatopoeic and has unfairly been

Listen out for the real twitterati

A monthly series following **Rob Cowen** and **Leo Critchley** as they reconnect with the simple things in life

compared to a rusty wheel, with its two, leisurely sung notes. However, it sometimes sings one or the other a number of times before swapping. This is opposed to the great tit, which always swaps between its distinct two notes, very much like it is singing the word "teacher" repetitively and quickly.

King of the singers, however, is the song thrush. Browning recorded its tendency to repeat its phrases. "That's the wise thrush; he sings each song twice over", which is odd considering its vast repertoire; it has more than 100. If you hear what sounds like a virtuoso flautist running through their back catalogue, the odds are that it's a song thrush.

The more lines you memorise, the more you want to learn – and knowing even a few phrases is akin to tuning a radio and hearing a favourite song through the static.

We were taking a break from building a traditional Native American "wiki-up" shelter from hazel saplings in the balmy spring sunshine. Sitting close to a field boundary, the slants of light through the West Sussex wood threw hovering yellow notes against the green of the budding branches and dog's mercury to give the glade a magical quality. Here and there along the nearby path a pale yellow primrose stood in contrast to the thicker, egg-yolk coloured daffodils and occasional purple crocus.

Having spent the night before sleeping in the woods, our ears had been filled since dawn with the swelling melodies of the birds in the canopy. But it was only now, as we both stilled and listened, cups of tea in hand, that we shut our eyes and let the musical lines wash over us. A robin and pair of blue tits were closest, almost above us, but back further into the trees; a blackbird and wren were also competing for attention.

It was a worthy duel and the blackbird's notes rose majestically, only to be pipped by the wren's effortless, soaring solo: 740 different notes in a minute that can carry nearly half a mile. It sounded like jazz musicians riffing off each other. Ours were the best seats in the house, and the 10-minute break stretched into an hour. The warm sun pricked our skin; our minds drifted off through the echoing birch, hazel and oak. The sound of birds singing speaks to our instincts. Where birds thrive and choose to settle is dependent on vegetation and water. Hearing them is a gentle balm to our soul, one we should all pause to enjoy whenever and wherever we hear it.

Skimming Stones and Other Ways of Being in the Wild by Rob Cowen and Leo Critchley is out now (Hodder/Coronet, £14.99).

Find the dawn chorus line

Parks, gardens, rural countryside, marshes, woods, or a busy street with birch trees planted for decoration. Birds use any territory they can get. You will hear their song everywhere, but here are a few good places to start:

Runnymede, Windsor, Berkshire
The historic landscape includes ancient forest, verdant meadows and pathways alongside the Thames, all providing the perfect habitat for birds. Expect a cross-section of residents and migrants at this peaceful site with the sounds of skylarks famously filling the air.

Harlow Carr, Harrogate, North Yorkshire
You don't have to go into the beautiful RHS gardens to savour the selection of bird-song (although it's well worth a visit too). Footpaths opposite the entrance take you deep into Harrogate's "Pinewoods", where song thrushes, blackbirds, owls, and all manner of British birdlife reside.

Hampstead Heath, London
Bill Oddie's hot spot is rife with British birds, from siskins to sparrowhawks, as well as an exotic invader – the squawking ring-tailed parakeet. The hedging and trees are perfect sites for nesting and dawn and dusk on the misty heath heralds vocal battles for territory and mates.

The Lodge RSPB Reserve, Bedfordshire
Nuthatches, green woodpeckers, long-tailed tits as well as red kites and kestrels abound in this fantastic bird reserve. The lodge also organises guided walks and bird identification trips so you can polish up your twitching and listening skills.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ROB COWEN AND LEO CRITCHLEY

Open Jaw Where readers write back

Red tape and tourism
Tourists the world over are a constant menace to authoritarian governments. In 1972 the Soviet Union was turning its back on the more liberal climate established by Nikita Khrushchev after the death of Stalin. The expanding dissident movement there kept in touch with the outside world by using willing passengers on the new Thomson Holidays package weekends. At a time when it was possible to censor every letter and every

phone call, these holidays provided a secure and fast means of getting material to exile communities and to concerned human rights groups.
Neil Taylor
The UK has one of the most expensive, time-consuming and humiliating visa processes in the world and one that is clearly not fit for purpose.
"Comfortably Numb 2"
One thing we could easily do is introduce a cheap and easy British extension

to a Schengen visa for lower-risk nationals with onward tickets.
In the specific case of Russia, it's worth noting that there isn't strict visa reciprocity with Russia. Russian visas last for 30 days and need to be registered in every town. British visas last six months and require no registration after entry.
Paluntan
We spent a week in St Petersburg – a fabulous city worth visiting for the Hermitage alone. Wouldn't be



Stately splendour: St Petersburg's Hermitage Museum GETTY

difficult to attract tourists, mostly with plenty of money to spend. But it took us an afternoon to fill in the visa application forms.
Michael

Grand Canyon in winter
My family and I drove the same route as you did on 14 and 15 March. The weather was beautiful – temperatures in the 70s. I was

amazed how fast the weather changed after we left.
"Glover T"
Eating out in Brussels
Eat a typical Belgian sandwich at the Suisse, filled with "filet américain" (beef tartare, Belgian style).
"LexyDR"
48 hours in Dublin
Dublin is about as Irish as Brick Lane is East End. For the sights, the craic, the people who will shake your hand, go to Galway, Kerry, Donegal – even Limerick.
"Green light idea"

CLASSIFIED FEATURE

North Cyprus beaches

Fall in love with the secluded golden sands and welcoming shores of an island steeped in folklore



GOLDEN BEACH, KARPASS PENINSULA, CYPRUS

Legend has it that Cyprus was the birthplace of Aphrodite – the mythical goddess of beauty, love and pleasure – and it's easy to see why. While different towns to the north and south of the island may lay claim to the spot where Aphrodite is said to have emerged from the foaming waves, the golden sands in the north boast a divine quality that clearly sets them apart from other beaches.

Karpass peninsula
There are three areas of coastline that make up the beaches of Northern Cyprus. The northernmost tip of the island, the Karpass peninsula, is the place to head if you want unspoiled beauty and is the ideal destination for a romantic getaway. It's the least populated part of the island, so pack a picnic and everything else you'll need for a day on one of the secluded beaches.

Kyrenia beaches
If you're looking for a family beach holiday then Kyrenia could be your

first port of call. Lara Beach is ideal for small children – the pretty bay has a sandy beach and countless rockpools for the kids to explore, while Incirli Plaji is perfect place for paddling.
For fans of adrenaline-fuelled sports, the area boasts a wealth of options. The sheltered bay at Denizkizi provides an ideal playground for windsurfing or water skiing – and for those with a head for heights, parascending is a must.
Nature lovers should make a trip to Alagadi Turtle Beach. It's one of many northern areas where green turtles and loggerheads

come ashore to lay their eggs in June, and a month later the young hatchlings will make their way back to the water. There's an information centre on the beach run by the Society for Protection of Turtles in North Cyprus where you can book an accompanied nocturnal trip to the beach (see cyprusturtles.org).
If you prefer to let your hair down and party, then the lively resort at Escape Beach ticks all the right boxes with volleyball, scuba diving and banana boats for hire – and in the evening it provides a stunning backdrop for beach parties where international DJs drop tunes as the sun goes down.

Famagusta
To the east lies the sweeping sands of Famagusta Bay, a famous hang-out since the Sixties. After a trip around the sights of the ancient city of Salamis, head for a cooling dip off Silver Beach. Glapsides Beach, meanwhile, has shallow water ideal for snorkelling and also manages to combine a hip hang-out replete with lively bar and restaurant, and the perfect vantage point for birdwatchers to catch sight of migrating birds.

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