

# Nature Notes



Rupert Evershed's monthly diary of the natural world  
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## Make an appointment with the dawn chorus

**This last weekend, on Sunday, it was International Dawn Chorus Day: an event instigated in the 1980s after Chris Baines, a then TV presenter, reportedly invited friends to celebrate his birthday at 4am so that they could listen to the dawn chorus of birdsong.**

Of course, the dawn chorus had been going on for many millennia before that, but it was the official day established in 1987 that ever since has highlighted, celebrated and promoted one of nature's great wonders and one which we, living in a temperate region of the world, get to enjoy every spring.

Living in suburban St Albans the dawn chorus in spring is almost guaranteed from your bedroom window wherever you live.

You may not think there are that many birds in your garden but thankfully birdsong is not defined or contained by our fences and boundaries. Instead, quite the opposite is true as birdsong declares and defines nature's boundaries through song. The dawn chorus is a bout of aural jousting between birds that the writer and naturalist, Mark Cocker, describes as "their version of territorial warfare conducted through music".

Rising to the top of the singing charts in spring is the blackbird whose patient and quiet practicing of his song during the winter months from the dark depths of a bush finally pays off. His squeaky winter sub-song endured the punching tones of his relative the song thrush and now emerges as the sound of spring – a soft warbling

meditation that is the soothing backdrop to every first barbecue.

The song brings a depth to spring and a richness that wasn't there in the winter months for each blackbird is answered by a rival bird, maybe a few gardens away, and that in turn is gently rebuffed by another even more distant bird. A luxuriant layer of sound is added to our landscape and enriches the balm of a warm spring day.

The name 'dawn chorus' is bit of a misnomer in that if you rise as the sun appears the chances are you will have missed the main performance that actually begins a good hour before sunrise.

It may be that you are well aware of this having been woken recently, like me, well before the alarm clock is due to go off, by the repetitive 'squeaky wheelbarrow' song of the great tit or the angry cries of crows seeing off a skulking fox before first light. This is no way to enjoy the dawn chorus and if there is one thing I would encourage every person to do this spring it is this: to make an appointment with the dawn chorus and get out in it!

This of course means setting the alarm clock for 4am, maybe even earlier, and getting outside, ideally in as rich a natural habitat as possible.

Sticking your head out of the bedroom window will give you a taste of what's on offer but to be out in nature as the dawn chorus swells, rises and unfurls all around you is intoxicating.

Birdsong is beautiful but when combined in unison with the first light of dawn, the sweet smell of May

blossom and the cool dew on shining gossamer threads you are left looking for your next fix.

Every year I make a pilgrimage to Kent in May for a mad day of birdwatching – the rough aim being to see as many different birds in a 24-hour period as possible. It is a hangover from university days when a group of us raced around Kent as part of a yearly countywide sponsored competition. However, it is not the 'day count' as such that draws me back and the competitive flavour to the day has long since gone: it is the chance to be out in nature at dawn and experience one of the best dawn choruses that the UK has to offer.

In an undeniably crazy rejection of the messages our bodies naturally give us we start in a marshland setting at midnight where the birds never really go quiet. Bitterns boom, cuckoos call and marsh frogs holler – at times it is deafening. We then move on to a parkland setting at 4am where the tentative song of redstarts ring out in the pre-dawn darkness, interspersed by the amphibian calls of roding woodcock and squeaking baby owls.

And then it breaks, slowly at first but quickly overwhelming: the full voice of the parkland birdsong rises with the sun, banishing the lingering mist patches and warming every leaf in a carpet of song.

It is exhilarating, uplifting, deafening and any thoughts that it would have been better to stay in bed vanish as nature's drug takes full effect. My appointment with dawn is this Friday...when will yours be?



Singing blackbird (*Turdus merula*).

Picture: MIRKO GRAUL (SHUTTERSTOCK)



Morning sunrise over the countryside.

Picture: GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO