



◀ For some simple songs you can put your own words to the rhythm. Woodpigeon and Collared Dove have similar coo-ing songs. The larger Woodpigeon has the longer song ('I looove you Betty' or 'I don't know, do you?') while Collared Doves sing just three notes ('Un-i-ted, Un-i-ted').

FIELD CRAFT

Learning birdsong

It's easier than you think!

As spring advances, the dawn chorus becomes richer and more beautiful by the day, but how many songs do you recognise? Why not make this the year when you really improve this aspect of your birdwatching? Whether starting from scratch or fine-tuning, Su Gough and Ben Darvill have some hints and tips to help you.

Many birdwatchers find identification by song rather daunting but, for those who have taken their first steps, the new dimension that opens up is not only hugely useful, it also massively enhances their enjoyment of the natural world.

It is not as difficult as you may believe; in fact you probably know more than you think already. How about 'cuck-oo' and 'chiff-chaff'? Or 'little bit of bread and no cheeeese' – the familiar song of the Yellowhammer? Another well-known one is the 'teacher teacher' of Great Tit.

One thing these examples have in common is that they concentrate on what the bird is 'saying'. But have you ever listened closely to a Song Thrush? While every individual 'says' a slightly different thing, this is still one of the easiest songs to identify. Why? Because all

Song Thrushes repeat each phrase a few times before moving on to the next. So in this case rather than focusing on what the bird is singing – the words if you like – we are listening to HOW the bird is delivering its performance.

This can be very important. The Great Tit's 'teacher teacher' is also sung by the Coal Tit, but it sounds slightly different. Great Tit is measured, clear and has a characteristic bell-like ringing quality, whilst Coal Tit tends to be faster, thinner and with a buzzy lack of clarity – you might say they are slurring their speech.

Characteristics such as speed, pitch, song-length and 'tone' can all be important, which leads on to another point. Everyone hears (and remembers!) things differently and you should learn in whatever way works best for you. Here are five ideas to help you – why not try them all?

1 A MINDFUL MINUTE

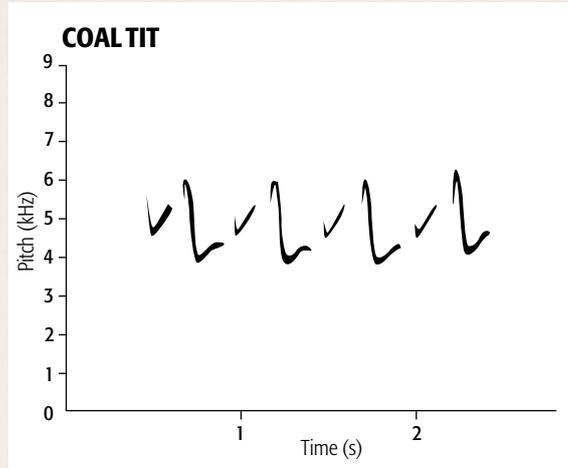
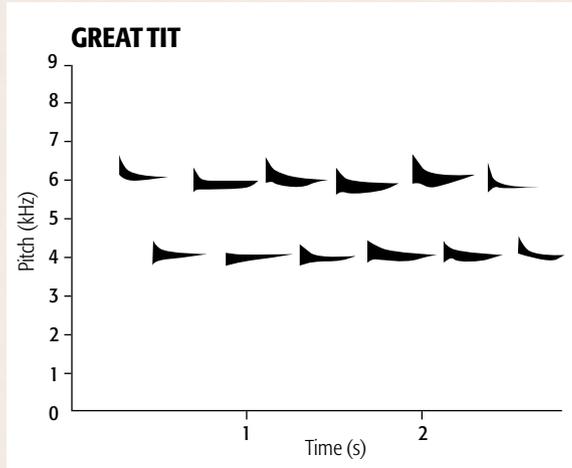
Get into the habit of stopping and actively listening. Shut your eyes for 60 seconds and really tune in. What do you recognise? What's that unfamiliar song over there? Then open your eyes and use

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What is a song?

Any sounds made for defending and advertising a territory and attracting a mate. Song can be heard throughout the year but it is most prominent during the spring, famously so with the dawn chorus. Some birds do not 'sing' but use other sounds for these purposes – a woodpecker drumming, for instance.

Sonograms of birdsong



◀ Sonograms can be useful for visualising the characteristics of birdsong. When seen in this way the well-separated notes of Great Tit (left) clearly differ from the slurred song of the Coal Tit (right).

binoculars to check. Over time you'll get more and more right – and it's hugely rewarding.

2 WATCH THEM SING

Take the time to watch birds singing. Remember anything, no matter how daft, which helps you link the sight and sound. Visual associations form strong memories, and your own ideas will stick best of all. Wrens sing a complex and very loud song incorporating trills and repeated notes, firing out from the undergrowth, so imagine it carrying a mini machine gun.

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3 ONE A WEEK

Whatever your level, resolve to add one new species to your repertoire each week. Listen to CDs or online tracks then use your time outdoors to pick out this new species plus others you have already learned. Don't worry about the rest of the noises – take it steady and you'll get there.

4 PAIR UP

Join forces with a friend or form a small group. Take turns describing what you hear and your ideas for remembering the species. The exercise will help you to actively listen and will focus your thoughts on what the song sounds like to you!

5 STUDY SONOGRAMS

Though not to everyone's taste, sonograms (a way of visualising birdsong) can be useful for highlighting differences between species. The slurring of Coal Tit song, for example, becomes obvious once shown in this way.

Now is a perfect time to start learning. You'll be surprised how many birds are singing, and most of these will be common, garden species. Take the time to become familiar with Wren, Robin, Blackbird and Chaffinch and soon you'll be able to pick these out from the background symphony of song. This will allow you to home in on new songs as spring progresses.

Once you have started this process you will be amazed at how quickly you are able to add new species to your repertoire. Taking that first step is all you need to do, and this will equip you to enjoy the countryside even more. ■

Get involved

We run training courses around the country that help with identifying birds by sound. See www.bto.org/training

Resources

Xeno Canto

www.xeno-canto.org

Free sound recordings – great for adding 'one a week', with sonograms for each species.

BTO's YouTube Channel

www.youtube.com/user/BTOvideo

A growing range of identification videos, including advice on songs and calls.

Collins Bird Songs

and Calls by Geoff Sample

(Book & CDs). The recordings give you time to listen before telling you what you've heard – ideal for learning.

