



Start Birding
Fledging new birdwatchers every year

Learning birdsong with **Start Birding**

www.startbirding.co.uk

Tips and resources

Introduction

The best time to start learning birdsong is at the beginning of September while there are only a couple of resident species singing. Build this up to around 16 resident bird songs before the spring migrants arrive in March. Start with robin, wren, dunnock and house sparrow then gradually include great tit, blue tit, coal tit, long-tailed tit, goldfinch, greenfinch, chaffinch, bullfinch, song thrush, mistle thrush, blackbird and starling. Below are my tips and recommendations to enable you to do this at home.

The listening experience

How many songs do you know from your youth? You learnt these because someone played them very often on the radio. Initially you'll have learned parts of the tune of the chorus, then some words, then the whole chorus, then the sound of the verses, then the words of the verses. Initially you wouldn't have known the artist or the title of the song. Not knowing this didn't hinder your enjoyment of the song at all. It's like that with bird song. You don't need to impair your learning and enjoyment by needing to label the species. What you do need to do is to listen regularly and not attempt to learn too many songs at once.

Learn using natural sounds

We live in a noisy world and a consequence of this is that most of us have learned to close off the background sounds around us. If you want to be able to identify birds by sound you'll need to relearn how to listen and extend your peripheral hearing. This exercise will help you to do this.

Sit quietly in your garden, woodland or park with your eyes closed. Pick out a song that you're particularly attracted to. Just like with the songs from your youth, you don't need to label the species at this time. The bird will sing then pause to listen to its neighbours of the same species. See if you can identify the same song coming from a different direction. Listen to the pitch, phrases, rhythm and the length of the pauses. Is it repeating phrases or is each phrase randomly generated? Does it remind you of a particular musical instrument or does it sound like something familiar? Once you can match the song close by with another one further away you'll then be able to listen to a resource to identify the bird.



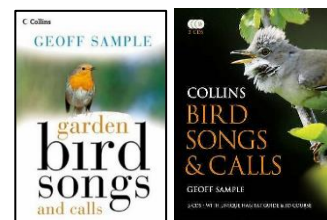
Learning using resources

Most birdsong resources are good for reference but very few actively promote the learning process. In the past, all records and tapes listed birdsong in taxonomic order and, apart from providing an excellent resource to fall asleep to, none were conducive to learning. Today, there are a few that will really help you to accelerate your learning. Here are the best ones that I've used.

Compact Discs: The best CDs, and my number one favourite, are produced by sound recordist Geoff Sample, a very good teacher. you can get a 3 CD set but my advice is to stick to the [1 CD garden bird version](#) to get you started. He plays birds by habitat and gives you a chance to listen before telling you what the bird is. Choose one habitat for active listening. By all means listen to a whole CD for relaxation but don't try to learn too many birds at once. This will make you feel very tired, forget what you've already learned, and affect your confidence. Becoming overwhelmed by information is part of learning the learning process but,

as long as you recognise this and don't start to berate yourself, you'll be fine. Just switch it off and start again the next day. The trick is to keep your active listening to a few species at a time.

- Garden Bird Songs and Calls (1 CD and book)
- Collins Bird Songs and Calls (3 CDs and book)



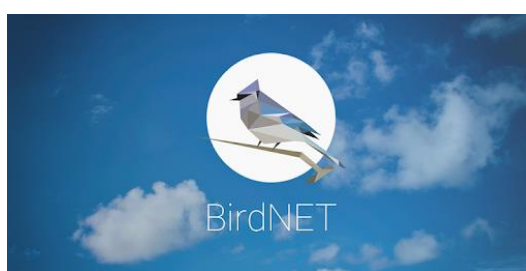
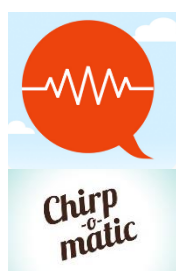
Birdsong apps: There are lots of apps available to buy but not many good ones. These are the best

- Chirp! by Spiny Software Ltd (iOS only). Allows you to listen to individual songs and calls for reference; listen and view a slideshow and learn by using the interactive quiz (this is the best feature of all and great fun to use)
- UK Bird Sounds (GB) by luminous apps (an Android only option but not as good as Chirp!)



Birdsong identification apps: There are now a few listening apps that you can use to help you identify birdsong. Initially these didn't work too well but are now becoming more sophisticated and accurate.

- Chirpomatic by iSpiny identifies bird song in the field. www.chirpomatic.com
- Warblr is another birdsong recognition app for Apple www.warblr.co.uk
- BirdNET by Stefan Kahl, Cornell Lab for Ornithology (Apple and Android) <https://birdnet.cornell.edu/>
- Garden Bird Song ID by Sunbird <https://sunbird.tv/product/bird-song-id-uk-automatic/>



Other useful resources

- Brett Westwood's guide to bird song: www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/science/birdsong.shtml
- BTO : www.bto.org/develop-your-skills/bird-identification/videos
- RSPB: Bird song available under each species: www.rspb.org.uk/wildlife/birdguide/name/a