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Chaffinch and Winter Wren Podcast and Scientist Interview

Fringilla coelebs, Troglodytes troglodytes

Every morning when he walks the dog, retired professor of natural history Peter Slater can identify as many as thirty birds by their song alone. On a walk in a Scottish town with Ari Daniel Shapiro, Slater explains what two common songsters, the chaffinch and winter wren, are singing about, and how even city dwellers can learn to “bird by ear” in their own neighborhoods, with rewarding results.

Transcript

Ari: From the Encyclopedia of Life, this is: One Species at a Time. I'm Ari Daniel Shapiro.

Slater: Well, I'm going to take you out to show you a few of our nice, local native birds and to listen to them particularly. We'll go across the street here, I think.

Ari: Peter Slater was professor of natural history at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland.

Slater: Professor of natural history is a lovely old Scottish title.

Ari: He retired a couple years back but almost 10 years ago, Peter was my advisor for my Master's degree. When I was in Scotland recently, I took him up on his offer to go on a local bird walk. We started right on Peter's doorstep.

Slater: I take my dog for a walk every morning in St. Andrews and I count all the birds that I see or hear. And I usually get up to 20 or 30 different sorts of bird. Actually, quite a few of those I hardly ever see. But because I've been studying birdsong for many years, I can actually recognize them by their voice.

Ari: Why do you keep track of the birds like that?

Slater: For fun. For fun. There's a joy in being able to recognize the different sounds that they produce. We're gonna get run over here, I think, so we've got to be a bit careful.

Ari: We made our way along a few streets before arriving on a wide pedestrian walkway lined with trees.

Slater: That's a chaffinch singing somewhere around here. That's him there.

Ari: What do chaffinches look like?

Slater: They're a sort of reddy-orange breast, grayish head, and a sort of russet-brown back. That's a male, and they have two white wingbars. So they're quite striking. The female, as in many species, is much more dowdy.

Ari: When you say dowdy, you mean kind of brown, gray, drab?

Slater: Yeah, she's drab, drab, yeah, gray. Sorry, is dowdy not an American word? <laughs> <chaffinch song> There he is. Isn't he lovely? I love chaffinches. My favorite bird. And his female will probably be sitting on eggs. <chaffinch song> And he's singing away in the treetops there, keeping other males out of the territory. He doesn't sit on the eggs but he does help her feed the chicks. So when the eggs hatch, he will stop singing, and he will start bombing to and fro, collecting caterpillars and insects and things and stuffing them into the beaks of the chicks. But at the moment, his main task is to keep the territory free of other chaffinches. So when the eggs hatch, that territory is theirs and theirs alone and all the food on it that's suitable for chaffinches is there for him, for his female and for their chicks in the nest.

Ari: And what's going on in the song here?

Slater: It consists of a trill, of little notes <song>, like that. But at the end of it – wee! – did you hear at the end, there's a thing called a flourish? The trill consists of different sorts of notes – it'll sing A-A-A-A-A, B-B-B-B-B, C-C-C-C-C, and then it'll sing D, which is the big flourish at the end. So bird song is usually used one to attract females, the other to keep rivals out. And they use the same song for both those reasons.

Ari: It seems like listening for and looking out for birds in your neighborhood is something that a lot of people can do, even if they live in a rather settled area.

Slater: Sure. Absolutely, I mean, an awful lot of birds live in towns and cities. Birds are attracted to human habitations and gardens. I don't know, I should think that you could hear at the moment 10 or 15 different species of birds singing in St. Andrews in this little area here. It's certainly something you can do bang in the middle of cities. No problem. And it's rather charm–Isn't that – just as we walk into the botanic garden, a wren. That's the same as your wren – it's a winter wren. They're small and brown and speckled-y. And they have a tiny little upturned tail. And they eat insects.

Wren song has about the highest rate of production of notes of any birdsong. I can't remember how it is: it's 30 or 40 different notes in one second. I mean, they really come very, very thick and fast. <wren song> Hear the wren there? Isn't that beautiful? Most extraordinary little bird, you know. Incredibly varied song it produces at a fantastic rate, and it produces a huge volume of sound out of this tiny, tiny little body. <wren song>

Ari: What are the species – the genus and species for the chaffinch and the wren?

Slater: The chaffinch is Fringilla.

Ari: Fringilla...?

Slater: Fringilla coelebs. And the wren is Troglodytes troglodytes troglodytes. There he is.

I mean it is so difficult to describe sounds verbally. I think it's like describing wine or something like that. You get these people who are extraordinarily expert at using particular phrases to describe the taste of a white wine or something like that. It's like these sort of sounds. How do you describe that? What words can you use? It defies description in many ways.

Ari: You have to hear it.

Slater: You have to hear it, really.

Ari: You can hear more from Peter Slater about how birds learn their songs at the Encyclopedia of Life website – eol.org. And you can see pictures of chaffinches, wrens, and the elusive Peter Slater. Oh, let us know what kinds of birds you can see and hear in your own neighborhood. Send us a note or leave us an audio message when you visit our website: eol.org.

Meet the Scientist

Meet scientist Dr. Peter Slater from the Chaffinch and Wren podcast:



Where do you work?

I am emeritus professor of natural history (an old Scottish title for a chair of zoology) in the School of Biology at the University of St Andrews in Scotland.

What do you study?

My research is on animal communication, concentrating in particular on the sounds produced by birds and mammals, how they develop and the role that they play in the lives of the animals that produce them.

What are three titles you would give yourself?

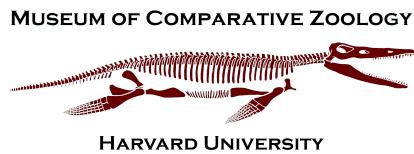
I am an ethologist, a zoologist and an ornithologist.

What do you like to do when you are not working?

I enjoy reading, writing and listening to music, but especially going out and about in the Scottish countryside in search of interesting plants and animals, accompanied by my dog and with my binoculars round my neck.

What do you like most about science?

What fascinates me most about animal behaviour is its huge variety and the way in which natural selection has adapted the behaviour of each species so beautifully to the world in which it lives. I love passing on my knowledge and enthusiasm to students, and I am particularly lucky that my research involves travel to some stunning places: one of the wrens we study only occurs in a few valleys round Machu Pichu, so we just had to go there!



The One Species at a Time podcast series is supported by the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology.