

# EBU Dawn Chorus – May 1<sup>st</sup> 2016

*Europe wakes to the sound of the dawn chorus*

**International Dawn Chorus Day** takes place this year on Sunday, May 1<sup>st</sup>. The EBU Radio division will broadcast a live six-hour programme, from 00:00 - 06:00 (BST), to celebrate this ornithological opera!

## **What is the Dawn Chorus?**

It is the collective sound of all the birds that sing at dawn. It usually refers to those sounds made by birds that sing during the breeding season, which for most birds in Europe is between late March and the beginning of July. The dawn chorus is usually associated with woodland birds but it can be heard in villages, towns and cities all over Europe. Each habitat has its own distinctive "chorus members".

The dawn chorus is one of the most magical experiences in nature. As our natural world's most impressive and renowned concert, it is almost as though it has been tailor-made for radio. For many years now, the live *Mooney Goes Wild* dawn chorus broadcast each May has been a much-loved staple on RTÉ Radio, attracting a wide range of enthusiastic listeners at a time of day when most people would be tucked up in bed. There is quite simply nothing like it on air anywhere else in the world.

Following the success of the live RTÉ Radio One broadcast in 2015, which featured the programme's first ever international contributions in the form of live dawn chorus and commentary link-ups with both the BBC Radio Ulster in Northern Ireland and NRK in Norway, the time seems perfect to expand the idea to encompass the whole European continent.

The dawn chorus is a remarkable phenomenon. Travelling from east to west with the rising sun, a literal wave of sound spanning Asia, Europe and North America, it is one of man's most primal and long-standing connections with the natural world. It sounds much the same today as it did to our distant ancestors, involving hundreds of different bird species across every conceivable type of natural habitat, transcending national boundaries and linking us all in a very special way.

With a couple of rare exceptions, bird song is an activity that is strictly limited to the spring and early summer. It may sound like beautiful music to our ears, but to the birds it is something quite different. At its most simple, it is a way for rival males (for it is only the male of the species who sings in the vast majority of cases) to fight and resolve conflicts without directly coming to blows, and also a means by which they can impress and attract a mate. Essentially, the louder and stronger your song, and the more time you spend singing it, the better the territory that you can claim and the higher the chance of a female choosing to mate with you.

## Why May?

Why is the start of May the best time for a live dawn chorus broadcast such as this? In general terms, the further north you go in Europe, the earlier the birdsong season begins. In northern Russia and Scandinavia for example, the dawn chorus can be heard from mid-March to late May, while in the middle latitudes of the continent it runs from late April to mid-June. The breeding season for many species is a little more extended in the Mediterranean region, due to the generally warmer spring and summer weather, and there the birdsong tends to peak in late April and early May.

This means that the first week or so of May is the very best time for people all over Europe simultaneously to experience the dawn chorus: the average level of birdsong is simply higher and more prominent at that time of year than at any other. This is the very reason that International Dawn Chorus Day is always held on the first Sunday of May each year: in 2016, this falls on Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> May.

## Format

**The programme will be on air live from midnight 00.00 – 06.00 (BST) on Sunday, May 1<sup>st</sup> 2016.**

RTÉ will host this inaugural broadcast of the dawn chorus from Cuskinny Marsh Nature Reserve in Cobh, Co. Cork. The presenter will be Derek Mooney. Derek Mooney is an award-winning radio producer with twenty years experience of broadcasting the dawn chorus in Ireland. Derek will also be the main driver of the programme and he will hand over to participating countries as the birds begin to sing. For example, we expect to hear the first birds in Moscow at approximately 00.30 GMT. You will find a list of countries, bird species and approximate times below. Alongside Derek in Cobh will be ornithologist Jim Wilson and zoologist Dr Richard Collins.

We want as many EBU member broadcasters as possible to participate in this year's event. They must provide a live link from the birds' location, and have one/two experts on hand who can commentate on the activity at their chosen site. It is important that all experts have a good command of English.

For example:

EBU member: BBC UK  
Location: RSPB Reserve Minsmere, Suffolk.

It is not simply enough to broadcast birds singing, the listeners' experience is greatly enhanced by commentary from ornithologists who can explain what is happening, why the birds are singing, which species can be heard at a given time etc. The movement of the constant wave of sound from east to west, perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the phenomenon, is also something that it is difficult for listeners properly to grasp without interpretive commentary. It is also vital, of course, to know when to remain silent and to allow the listeners to immerse themselves fully in the sounds of nature, but with the proper preparation and context it makes the listening experience all the more magical and enjoyable.

There is a lot more going on during the dawn chorus than might initially meet the ear. For example, not many people realise that the order in which the birds start to sing each day is far from random: those birds with larger eyes start to sing earlier than those with smaller eyes. Many birds that live in urban areas, with increased traffic noise, have begun to evolve higher-pitched songs than those that live in more natural environments. Light pollution in many cities has led to a longer daily singing period for some individuals, apparently increasing their breeding success but reducing their lifespans. Females of certain species are more attracted to males that sing longer, more complex songs - a subtle signal that the singer is older and more experienced, thereby proving that his territory provides ample food and shelter, and also that longevity is in his genes - both highly desirable qualities in a potential father.

Bearing this in mind, the opportunity for high quality natural history commentary and interpretation is enormous in a broadcast of this nature, and it is a great way to keep listeners hooked. The opportunity also exists for listeners to participate, be it via phone, SMS or social media, to ask questions and to relate and compare their own local experiences of the dawn chorus.

Expert advice on birds at a national level is readily available for national broadcasters to utilise. All EBU member countries are home to a national partner or affiliate of BirdLife International, the global umbrella bird conservation organisation, and most of these national partners have highly skilled and knowledgeable communications experts who can lend assistance.

In short, our experiences in Ireland have led us to believe that a Europe-wide dawn chorus broadcast would make for an unforgettable and highly original piece of radio, something that would generate a great deal of publicity and support, and which would prove extremely popular with listeners at a time of day when people are generally less accustomed to listening to the radio. Such a broadcast would also serve to focus attention on just how remarkable and impressive our continent's wildlife is, not to mention how every one of us can learn to experience it for ourselves. In addition, it offers Europe's citizens a way to connect, both with nature and with each other, in a truly unique and memorable way.

**RTÉ**

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