

## Song Period

### Title

Song period Enquiry 1937-1940

### Description and Summary of Results

It was well-known that many passerines and some other birds sing in the spring although there was continuing debate over whether this was to attract a mate and/or to deter other males from their territory – a debate which has continued. However, there was rather little known about how much individual birds sing, when (both diurnal and seasonal) and how the activity fitted into their life cycle. Hence the BTO organised a survey to try to find some answers.

Over 80 observers sent in schedules for the first season, and a rather smaller number for the second year including some from new localities; during 1939-40, owing to war conditions, barely 30 were received. Very few schedules came from Wales, Scotland, or Ireland. Two observers sent in records from high moorland localities in Yorkshire, but all the other observers were living in lowland districts.

There was however a great deal of variability in the song production by individual birds, in the methods of recording by the observers and evidently in the ability of the observers. Some records were therefore unusable. In general there was little or no evidence of any geographical variation, and there appeared to be little or no difference between morning and evening.

Considering individual species Mistle Thrushes *Turdus viscivorus* started to sing in August and continued to early May although in very variable amounts through the winter. Song Thrushes *T. philomelos* sang extensively in the autumn and carried on into May and June, and during the winter the amount was much greater on warmer days. Blackbirds *T. merula* hardly started singing until January (much less in autumn than the Song Thrush) and continued often well into June. The autumn song of Chaffinches *Fringilla coelebs* was very variable and apparently confined to a few individuals. Most observers recorded no song at all between the end of July and the end of December or even January. It only sang regularly from March to about the end of June and it was noted that if one sang then others nearby also started. Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella* was very poorly recorded although it was noted as one of the few to continue into July and early August when most other species were silent. Skylarks *Alauda arvensis* had a strongly pronounced autumn song and this continued through the winter, spring and summer into late July. Robin *Erithacus rubecula* was heard in every month except July. Dunnock *Prunella modularis* was only sporadic in autumn but started in mild weather in January and February and lasted until June. The Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes* was more nearly an all-the-year round songster than any other British species. The Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*, the one summer migrant in the list, seemed to sing almost constantly throughout the day in the height of the season and from as soon as they arrived (early April) to the end of June. Finally the Woodpigeon *Columba palumbus* started in late February or March and continued right through the summer till late September or early October.

**Methods of Data Capture**

The inquiry covered three seasons: August to July in each of 1937-1938 to 1939-1940 although the last was somewhat curtailed by the outbreak of the Second World War. In the first two years observers were asked to note the songs of Mistle Thrush, Song Thrush, Blackbird, Chaffinch, Yellowhammer and Skylark. For the third year the Song Thrush was continued, but the other five were replaced by Robin, Dunnock, Wren, Willow Warbler and Woodpigeon.

Observers were asked to record song as: S -- only scraps of song or subsong were heard; F - - a few of the species were in good song; G -- song seemed to be general. After the first year, in order to try to get more accurate estimates of the volume of song, it was suggested that + and - signs could be used with these letters, and several did this. However it seemed that the method of deciding between S, F and G was very variable among different observers and it turned out impossible to use the + and - signs.

Observers were asked to record daily and to provide notes on the weather, especially frost and snow and to mark those days when no recording was possible. This last was thoroughly used by some observers, but very scantily by others. Observers were also asked to indicate whether they had one, few or many birds under observation. (It would have been useful if they had been asked in every case to give as exact a count as possible of the number of singing birds of a species. A few did this anyway and proved to be a great aid for analysis.)

**Purpose of Data Capture**

To determine the song periods of a range of species through the year.

**Geographic Coverage**

All of Britain and Ireland although in practice most records were from lowland England.

**Temporal Coverage**

Three "seasons" August to July in each of 1937-1938, 1938-1939 and 1939-1940.

**Other Interested parties**

The survey was organised and run by Horace Alexander for the BTO.

**Organiser(s)**

Horace G Alexander

**Current Staff Contact**

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**Publications**

The main report of the survey is:

Alexander, H.G. 1942. Report on the bird-song inquiry. *British Birds* 36: 65-72; 86-92; 102-109.

The survey was noticed in the *BTO Annual Report* numbers 3, 4, 5 and 6; and *BTO Bulletins* numbers 11, 12 and 13.

**Available from NBN?**

No.

**Computer data -- location**

None.

**Computer data -- outline contents**

N/A.

**Computer data -- description of contents**

N/A.

**Information held in BTO Archives**

5 boxes contain the data for the 11 main species, letters etc. All have been scanned.

**Notes on Access and Use****Other information****Notes on Survey Design****Specific Issues for Analysis**