

dawn chorus

a surging wave of birdsong



Every morning throughout spring and early summer,
a wave of birdsong surges around the planet
ahead of the rising sun - the dawn chorus.

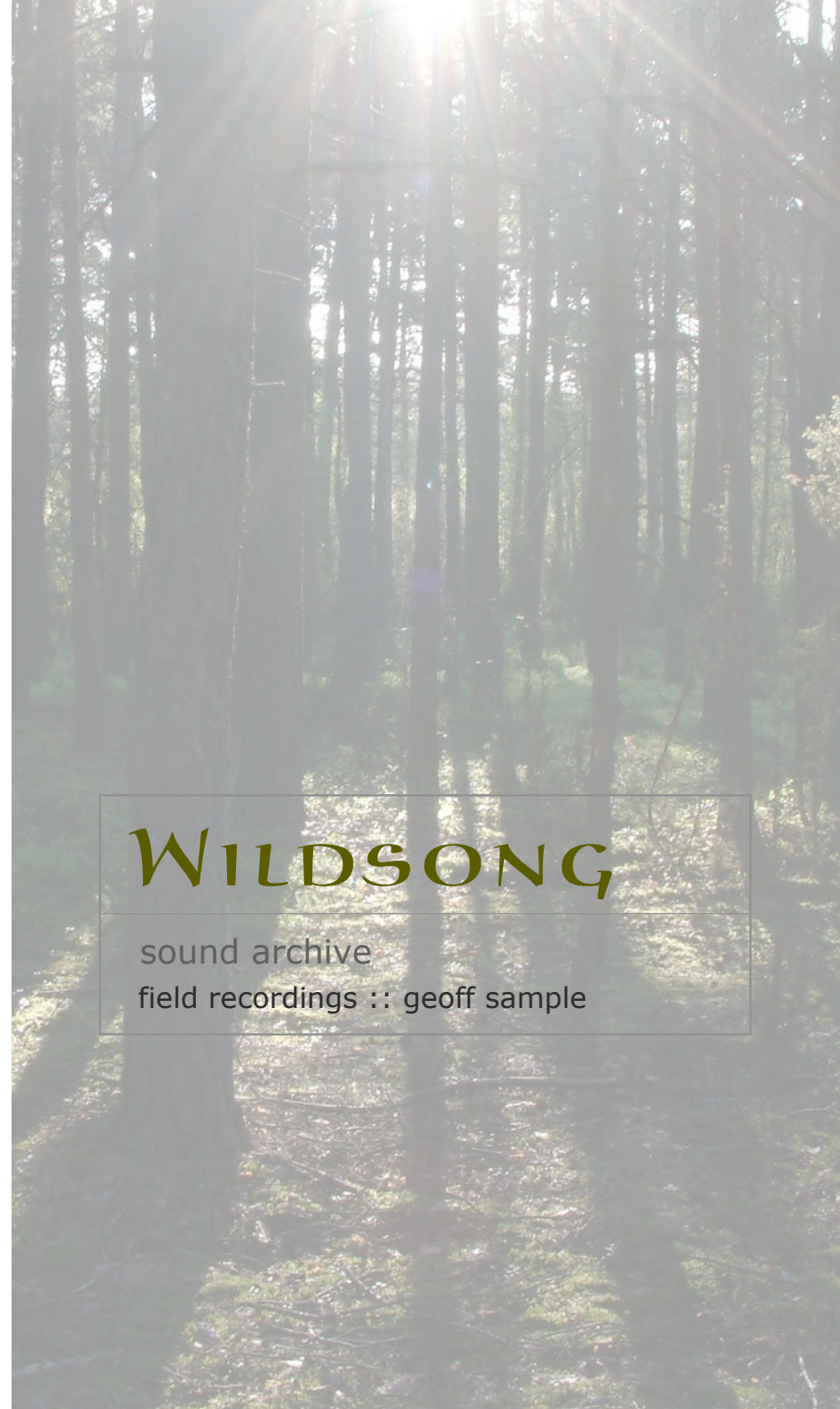
In the still, cool air of the early morning, sound travels well
and the males of all species broadcast their signature themes,
in a lust for life, to mark their territories and attract females.

The woods and gardens of Britain are a riot of sound,
while most humans are still wrapped in dreams.

WILDSONG

sound archive

field recordings :: geoff sample



3:40am, May - a wood in northern England

pheasant, woodcock, woodpigeon, cuckoo, tawny owl,
great spotted woodpecker, wren, dunnoek, robin, redstart,
blackbird, song thrush, mistle thrush, garden warbler,
blackcap, chiffchaff, willow warbler, goldcrest, great tit,
nuthatch, chaffinch, greenfinch, goldfinch, linnet,
yellowhammer

At the start you'll hear the moisture from overnight mists dripping through the trees. If you set your volume so this is just audible, the bird song shouldn't be too loud when the full chorus swells.

The recordings are from an area of mixed woods about 10 miles inland from the North Sea coast. Often when a period of high pressure settles in the spring, an easterly drift to the air brings cold overnight mists in from the sea. Come the dawn, trees and ground vegetation are soaked in a heavy dew. Once the sun has risen, its warmth disperses the mists and dries out the dew leaving a fine sunny day, though the mists may linger along the coast.



1 It's 3:40am in an area of oaks - still quite dark. Somewhere in the distance a robin sings, so faintly; the crooning of a woodpigeon, then a redstart nearer and the cries of lambs in nearby fields. A tawny owl sings, as it returns to its daytime roost, and several times we hear the croak and squeak of a woodcock, passing by on its roding flight, and a distant cuckoo. The barks are from a roe deer buck, possibly aware of the recordist in the woods.

2 As the cuckoo continues closer, other song thrushes and robins are begining to sing. It's still too dark to see much, but as the light grows, the chorus swells.

Soon the tangle of themes makes it difficult to distinguish individual voices, though the bold, repetitive phrases of the song thrushes tend to cut through, a little louder than other birds, while the rounded fluting of blackbirds bubbles just underneath.

3 A great spotted woodpecker drums his rolls on a branch nearby - a percussive instrumental theme that serves as his song. And the first wrens break into their convoluted trilling.

4 As a nearby woodpigeon floats his tune, a song thrush and blackbird also begin to sing close-to; and somewhere within the massed voices the ringing chimes of a great tit.

5 Now the chorus is reaching its peak, we move out of the trees to a point overlooking the woodland area - a sea of birdsong in a valley echoing with cuckoos.

6 Then we move on to an open, bushy area alongside the woodland, where we can appreciate the full chorus in a softer acoustic. Here the blackbirds are more dominant, with a sibilant topping of wren song hiding the softer languid verses from a yellowhammer. The hoarse crooning of woodpigeons and the explosive crowing of pheasants intersperse the flow of songbirds.

7 As daylight grows, other species begin their deliveries: a linnet sings nearby for a while and, woven into the dense texture, are the songs of garden warbler, chaffinch, willow warbler and chiffchaff.

8 A goldfinch arrives to sing from the top of a hawthorn briefly and soon afterwards the trills of a greenfinch are heard, leading into the clapped wings of woodpigeons flighting from the trees.

9 Once the full chorus has passed and some of the birds have left off singing to feed, we re-enter the woodland with the first of the sun's rays - an area of mixed conifers and some broad-leaved trees. A robin is singing by the path, with blackbird and mistle thrush a little further off and the high-pitched tweedling songs of goldcrests.

10 Further on the bubbling chatter of a garden warbler intertwines with the songs of robin and song thrush. When the thrush goes quiet, there's space to hear the 2-note see-saw of a chiffchaff and the lilting cascades of a willow warbler.

11 The soft piping of a nuthatch carries through the trees, accompanied by distant wren, blackbird, chaffinch, willow warbler and from beyond the wood the cries of lambs and rooks. Later a few sweet verses from a dunnoek and the bubbling garden warbler provide a background for the robin's bitter-sweet bursts.

12 One of the wood's vocal masters, this blackcap may continue its variations for much of the day, if it stays fine; later the garden warbler can be heard between the blackcap's verses, in contrasting similarity.