

The sky was just beginning to change hue when a small group met at Avington car park at 4.30am on Sunday 1st May.

Walking past heavily scented May/Hawthorn blossoms we reached the edge of the lake. Here we waited silently as first one and then several blackbirds started their morning song. Soon the area was alive with sound, robins and wrens joining in the blackbirds' main chorus.



A bat flitted around us, as a reminder that the night was not yet fully passed. Daubenton's or Pipistrelle, we were not sure, but it circled us and the lake several times. Two tawny owls continued their calling into the mid-light. We hoped for a glimpse but they stayed well within the nearby woods.

By now, the lake was beginning to wake up too. Mallard and moorhen, coot, gadwall and teal, not to mention a mute swan gliding away in the distance and the occasional cackle of a few Canada Geese. Highland cattle and Jacobs sheep were appearing out of the gloom on the far side of the lake too – meandering through their meadow in search of breakfast.

Then a cuckoo, or possibly two, off to the north of us, at first faint, (did we really hear it?) then unmistakably clear.

There were no reed or willow warblers today but, as we took a stroll along the edge of the woods, we heard a blackcap: “a very fine song, ringing and animated.” Great tit, blue tit, chaffinch and chiffchaff – perhaps more familiar to us in Kings Worthy – their calls repetitious, annoying even! Dunnock, not so common now, so it's worth a mention. Then to our delight, a goldcrest, in amongst the several conifer trees. A “needle thin, bat-like call” which has also been described as a “reeling song”.

The usual suspects were also in evidence, crows, rooks and woodpigeon. A pheasant poked its head up out of the long grass close by and scurried away raising its alarm call. In the distance we heard the peacocks at Avington House screeching out their morning alarm call too.

Returning to our cars around 6am the sun rising quickly, an impressive red globe, above the mansion. No swallows or house martins today but just as we were about to leave, a pair of goldfinch flew above us, completing our very enjoyable dawn chorus walk ...

Our thanks to Wilf Simcox, WCV and RSPB member, for his invaluable help in identifying the birds' songs.



Charlotte Smith