

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

The Dawn Chorus

The dawn chorus is one of the most evocative sounds of spring. As the new day breaks we are greeted by the sound of birds singing; establishing their territory, attracting potential partners or calling amongst their flocks. This reaches a fantastic crescendo as the sun rises.

British songbirds time their breeding season to the warmest part of the year, when there is plenty of food and lots of daylight in which to find it. As winter turns to spring, the lengthening daylight switches male songbirds into breeding mode.

The first songsters of the season are residents such as robins and great tits, joined later on by migrants like chiffchaffs and blackcaps to make May and June the peak time to enjoy the dawn chorus.

To learn more about the dawn chorus, or any British Birds check out the wonderful RSPB website at rspb.org.uk

Magpies

Magpies are one of the songbirds' main predators. Even though they could survive well on a diet of insects, fruit and berries, plants and road kill, magpies choose to supplement their diet by plundering the nests of other birds – particularly songbirds– and taking both eggs and chicks. Magpies have few natural predators themselves. From the natural world they are sometimes prey to cats, the odd fox or mink and the extremely rare goshawk. Vehicles are the biggest killers of magpies, but they are intelligent birds and in reality few adult magpies actually meet their maker under the wheels of a car.

To learn more about magpies or any other British Birds, check out the wonderful RSPB website at rspb.org.uk

Twits, twitterers and tweeters

- Alcedo the kingfisher
- Chief Inspector Pica the magpie
- Cordelius the greenfinch
- Cornus and Carrion Corone the carrion crows
- Deca and Octo the ring necked doves
- Erithacus/Polly the parrot
- Frugil the crow
- Legus the crow
- Hula the bullfinch
- Major the great tit
- Merula the blackbird
- Mr Blackbird the blackbird
- Parus the blue finch
- Passer the house sparrow
- Pavo & Pavel the peacocks
- Rube the robin
- Seargent Pie the magpie
- Sturnus the starling
- Turdus the song thrush



Rubecular Erithacus

The songbirds of Lane End Garden were all of a twitter with news of exciting new residents in Maple Tree Lodge, a few houses upstream from my waterside nest on the lawn.

The first sighting came from a band of blue tits on their dusk patrol. Apparently, they'd been about to raid next-door's seed feeder when they heard a cawing sound from along the river. Not much keeps those blue tits from the food table, but the noise got them in such a flap they abandoned their dinner and flew over to investigate. It turns out; the cause of the flurry was two strange new creatures in the garden at the other end of our lane. "They're aliens! They've got feathers, but one has a branch growing from the top of its head, the other's got an entire tree growing out of its bottom!" shrieked a young blue tit called Parus.

As such a creature is an unlikely sighting on a spring evening in an English riverside garden, I hopped down from my spade and flew to the bird table to learn more about the new neighbours causing such a fluster. I'm not a tittle-tattler you understand, but as head of our garden Dawn Chorus, it's my duty to know about everything that might affect the songbirds on my patch.

Before I warble on further, perhaps I should introduce myself? My full name is Rubecula Erithacus, but my friends call me Rube. I'm a robin with, although I say so myself, one of the most magnificent red breasts in Berkshire. I live in Lane End Garden, at the end of Riverside Lane. My nest is under the seat of an old wooden rowing boat, which my humans painted blue and white and put on the lawn by the water's edge. It's a lovely spot, planted with pretty flowers and providing a bird's eye view of the garden, the river and the house.

Back to my story. While I hopped and pecked beneath the bird table, and the blue tits ransacked the seed feeder, I recognised the fast, jerky flight of Turdus, our song thrush. Turdus is an intelligent bird who, like me, is not too intimidated by people. This is important; because by the way they behave you'd sometimes think the human's owned this garden. I can't see the point of them myself. They can't fly and they certainly can't sing!

On the day in question, having learnt all I could from the blue tits, I left them to their tweets and twitters and flew to my boat where I perched in my thinking place, clearly visible to birds from my garden as well as to any river birds who might paddle past. It's an ideal spot. If any feathered creature has business to discuss they know where to find me and if there are predators around I can see them and alert the others.

I'd not been there long when Mr Blackbird arrived with the post, a leaf-letter from my neighbour Polly, Dawn Chorus producer and manager. Polly was calling a meeting, and every Dawn Chorus representative in the lane should attend. I took a clean leaf from my stash, pecked out my reply, then withdrew to my private quarters to prepare my plumage. The morning meeting was always a smart event.

The Magpie Mafia

We began at dawn with a chorus so splendid it made the sun rise and swelled my red breast with pride.

Lined up on Polly's fence, singing their hearts out, were birds from every garden along our lane. The mistle thrush from Willow House sang clear and loud and the woodlark from The Mansion chirruped his sweet, melancholy song while drifting above our heads. Hula, the bullfinch from two gardens up, whistled and fluted while a nuthatch from the other end of the lane popped up to a high perch to deliver her loud, rhythmic, tune. A rock dove, a pair of jackdaws, a starling, a green woodpecker, a lot of sparrows, even a heron joined in, 'kaharking' tunelessly to herald in the new day and announce Dawn Chorus of the nesting season.

Once our song was complete, Polly's sparrows distributed notes on all the things we had to discuss.

"Item one" Polly squawked from her cage beside the open window of her house. "Some of you have noticed the newcomers along the lane. Some birdy should visit and welcome them to our community. Find out exactly what sort of exotic creatures they are." .

Major, a great tit from Beech Tree Lawn, volunteered to go and, not to be outdone, Hula the bullfinch offered to accompany him. (There's a long running rivalry between the tits and the finches around our way and Hula has a massive chip on his wing about it.) "Excellent," Polly shrieked, now item two, Predator Patrol."

The magpies run predator Patrol. They're meant to protect us but they run an arrogant, unjust police force. The atmosphere changed when Chief Inspector Pica (the only bird who had not joined the chorus) hopped on to the fence to address us. He looked terrifying as he swaggered up and down the railing with his long, green, glossy tail held high.

"There is a new dog in the road" he barked in his hoarse, unmusical voice.

"A huge, vicious looking beast in Lane End Garden." He bought the flurry of twittering and tweeting to an abrupt silence with a fierce 'cha-ka' sound and continued his report. "But it's the cats and small fluffy dogs who are a greater threat. There are now only eleven cats in the lane; one was exterminated by a member of my patrol who lured the evil tabby into the path of an oncoming vehicle by cleverly pretending she'd broken her wing." He allowed a moment of applause before adding, "the magpie officer responsible was Seargent Pie, quite a feather in her cap don't you agree?" He turned, with a chilling chuckle, and yapped to Corvus and Carrion Corone, a pair of crows from across the lane. "We had quite a feast that night didn't we Corvus?" Corvus fluttered his broad, short wings and winked a cold black eye while I tried to push away an image of them gorging on a dead cat.

"We did indeed," crowed Corvus. "Easier peckings than dropping nuts into the path of cars," he cackled. I wasn't the only bird ruffling his plumage to keep out a sudden chill in the morning air.

"Other than that" Pica continued, "we continue to protect you all with our usual 'cat call.'" He made us jump out of our feathers by demonstrating the hoarse, staccato 'tsche-tsche-tsche' warning that sends all but the bravest birds flying for cover. Pica's voice hardened. "The terms of your protection remain the same. My patrol will soon take '*payment*' from nesters in the usual way." There was an un-bird-like stillness as we considered the '*terms*' none of us could remember agreeing. According to Pica, the magpies were allowed to kill and eat the first egg or chick born to any songbird in our gardens.

His patrol began congregating behind him, dozens of huge black and white birds lining up along the roof of the house.

"Of course" Pica continued coldly, "The *terms* excuse all you Dawn Chorus representatives from payment, for this year at least." Pica made a few strong bounds in the direction of his fellow magpies, cackling, "goodbye my '*friends*'," before leaping into the air and flying away.

As dozens of mighty magpies swept over the garden towards the wood, it struck me why they are one of the few birds who don't join our chorus. Birdsong brings hope, generosity and joy to the world. Magpies are evil, heartless creatures, their voices tuned to despair, not delight.

Polly interrupted my thoughts in a tone softer than her usual cackle,

"Shall we take a break? Doubtless some of you are peckish. Please make free with my garden." It was a kind offer, but just as we hopped down to the ground, the house door burst open and Polly's dogs rushed yapping and snapping into the garden.

I was back on my boat in less than 20 wing beats and stood in my thinking place pondering the events of the dawn. My thoughts were soon disturbed by the chattering of starlings swooping across the garden to the balcony where my adult human's nest.

My adult humans are an odd pair, the female helps to fill the seed feeders and stock the bird table, and the male bangs, claps and occasionally even shoots a water-gun to keep the garden birds at bay. We call him Gunman and the starlings, who declared war on him long ago, have woken him just after dawn ever since he first aimed his water gun at them.

There was a bit of trilling and whistling as all the starlings jostled for position on the balcony outside Gunman's nest window, then once they all had a perch the birds threw back their heads, opened their glorious yellow beaks and began to warble a perfect impression of Gunman's alarm clock. Again and again the naughty birds whistled the alarm until there was an angry shout, followed by rapping on the window and the starlings flew giggling and squeaking back to their nests.

Operation Alien

The next day was a weekend. I know this, because weekends are when the human chicks don't go to school. This is a mixed blessing for Lane End Garden nesters. We have five human children who make a lot of noise and take over the garden but they also leave half finished crisp packets and biscuits around the place, giving us birds rich peckings to top up their diets. The other good thing about weekends is that is when our special child – Bird Boy – fills the seed feeders.

On this particular day, there was much fuss and excitement. The humans had dragged a series of boxes into the garden and while Gunman and his three boys opened them, the mother and two girls cleared the flowerbed. Of course, I was over there straight away. Polly tells me humans think robins are tame but this is a dreadful insult. We're not tame, we're simply not afraid of humans. There's a difference.

Our Bird Boy is the exception to every rule I know about humans. He doesn't only feed us; he protects and cares for us, watches and even talks to us, although only Polly understands what he's saying. Sometimes the dear little cock tries to whistle, a terrible unmusical sound that makes no sense at all, and though it makes me want to cover my ears with my wings, I try to stay on my perch and cock my head inquisitively because when I do, he looks so happy!

On the day in question, shortly after the human girls began digging and the human boys began building whatever it was they'd taken from the box, Bird Boy lost interest and escaped to his secret fort. He thinks we can't see him in there, hidden behind a yew hedge and beneath the boughs of a sycamore tree, but I've been inside many times and can tell you there is a log, which Bird Boy perches on, some books, his binoculars, pen and paper. Bird Boy sits in that fort watching us for hours. Whenever I know he's there, I try to arrange a fly-by of various species and with every sighting, Bird Boy flicks through his picture book, checks the breed, then scribbles on his paper. I sometimes manage to organise a

rare visitor, last summer I persuaded a cuckoo to pose (he owed me a favour as I'd sorted out the enormous upset he'd caused by laying his eggs in Merula the blackbird's nest). A green woodpecker I befriended at last year's sports day once agreed to drum in the tree above Bird Boy's fort, and though she was too shy to show herself, clever Bird Boy identified the sound and drew a lovely woodpecker picture, which he rushed off to show his father. Dear Bird Boy, he sees me every day yet always seems excited when we meet, often drawing my portrait in that little book of his.

The day passed uneventfully, the humans busy with their project and the bird table providing toast crusts in the morning then lunch leftovers later in the day.

As dusk approached the mother herded her chicks inside, leaving Gunman alone in the garden. His girls had dug out the round flowerbed and Gunman was kneeling in the middle, surrounded by long green poles. I was hopping around, pecking insects unearthed by the digging, when I heard a call – a stifled '*butt, butt, butt*' - I recognised as Hula the bullfinch from two gardens up. Hula, you may remember, was meant to be visiting Maple Tree Garden with Major, so I was surprised to find him on my fence.

"Oh Rube" said Hula, his short, deep, podgy bill chattering nervously, "I was a fool to volunteer. I only did it because I hate the tits, they're always so flitty and tweety and pleased with themselves." Even allowing for the fact that bullfinches always sound mournful, Hula did sound upset.

"All you've got to do is fly up there, say hello and find out what these strange creatures are. You'll be alright."

Hula was a stupid, sluggish bird but he was kind, well meaning and strong as an ox.

"But that's what's bothering me," he replied, his surprisingly long tail worrying up and down as he warbled, "what if they *are* aliens? What if they zap me with their head lasers and blow me out of the sky, what if ..." Despite his size (Hula is about half as big as me again) and his fighter's physique Hula's a dreadful worrier. His butch, bright appearance disguises a timid nature and he'd clearly pecked off more than he could swallow volunteering to accompany Major.

Dusk was descending and my reassurances to Hula were falling on deaf ears. I began to panic – Hula would be evicted from FLOC if he messed up this mission, possibly even from his garden. The shame could literally be the death of him. The only way I could persuade him to go with Major was by offering to go with him, and so I reluctantly left my territory for the second time that day and headed upstream with Hula. A cross wind had picked up by the time we reached our meeting point in the maple tree.

Major was waiting for us. His glossy, blue-black head and white cheek patches made Hula look squat beside him and Major's glorious yellow and black belly looked elegant and military as he perched in the maple ping-pong table.

Black clouds were accelerating the arrival of dusk, we'd have to move fast if we were to complete the mission and get back to our territories by nightfall. The aliens were nowhere to be seen, so in the hope of coaxing them out, Major flew to the middle of the lawn and called an almost magpie-like 'che-che-che-che.' I fluttered higher in my tree when two massive multi-coloured monsters burst out of a dog kennel beneath the kitchen window. Though they'd clearly understood Major's call, they walked across the lawn in silence, cocking their tiny heads from left to right. They were odd creatures, with head crests (not lasers), feathered but with no sign of the 'bottom branch' described by the tits.

Major flew to a safe position and called out pompously,

"We are from The Dawn Chorus Committee, we've come to welcome you to our neighbourhood."

I was so busy staring at the newcomers, I failed to notice Hula fly behind the creatures and perch on the top of their dog kennel. I can only imagine he was showing off, maybe trying to outdo Major. He gave a short whistle, and the evening exploded into a chaos of squawks and screeches. Feathers everywhere. The resident cat (who Chief Inspector Pica had *not* told us about) leapt out of the open window with his paws out for balance and his claws out for Hula. Poor Hula, sluggish at the best of times, was a sitting target.

And then everything happened at once. The male creature let out a terrifying shrill cry and his tail spread into a giant fan with evil, hypnotic eyes all along its edge. He lunged at the cat, lashing out with sharp spurs on his feet. The hen raised her smaller tail, and thrashed at the cat with claw-like spurs. At the same

time, Major flew to a low bush right beside the cat and shrieked so loud the sound rose above all the other high pitched screams.

The cat, who picked up Major's call, streaked past the alien creatures and headed straight for him. Major, a perfect size for a tasty cat snack, had bravely turned his back to the wall leaving him nowhere to escape, but allowing Hula to make his get away.

In a final, desperate attempt to avoid carnage, I threw myself to the ground behind the crouching cat. I landed on my side, and trilled a dying call, my upper wing beating feebly. The cat froze, pricked its ears then pressed its stomach to the ground and crept, very slowly, towards me. I waited and waited, my heart hammering against my scarlet breast, until Major's voice cut through the darkness,

"MISSION ABORT!" he screamed, and I was up and off, flying high above the gardens to the safety of Lane End Garden, Hula and Major following in my slipstream.

Gunman

Peacocks! In Riverside Lane! I'm not usually one to get my feathers in a flap but it's exciting to have such exotic new neighbours. Their names are Pavo and Pavel and they originate from India!

We invited the peacocks to address the Dawn Chorus Committee, but they said no. Like Polly, Pavo and Pavel are pets of humans, unlike Polly, they do not fly very well, so Hula, who flushed a little pinker than usual at this honour, was tasked with telling the committee all about our new friends.

The next day, after a rousing song, Hula stood on Polly's windowsill between me and Major, and told the Dawn Chorus Committee all about our new neighbours. Every-birdie wanted to visit the unusual creatures, so it was agreed that while Pavo and Pavel were still settling in - and as they are shy creatures - all well wishers should be accompanied by Hula who could introduce his new friends. For friends they were. By attacking the cat, Pavo and Pavel had risked their own lives to save Hula's and in bird law that creates a bond for life. The meeting over, I swooped down to my boat looking forward to a quiet uneventful day in my own garden. Sturnus and his flock of starlings zoomed upwards and over my head to the Gunman's balcony, '*churring*' gently as they lined up on the railings to begin their game.

"DA-DA-DA-DA, DA-DA-DA-DA, DA-DA-DA-DA, DA-DA-DA-DA," they called, a perfect imitation of the alarm clock that should ring much later, after the sun was up, after the children were up, after the dogs were let out. But for now everything and everybody was fast asleep and it was a beautiful dawn.

"DA-DA-DA-DA, DA-DA-DA-DA, DA-DA-DA-DA, DA-DA-DA-DA," the starlings called again, then raced off '*chirruping*' with delight as the Gunman rapped on the window, furious at another early awakening.

I might have felt sorry for the Gunman, except I knew, later that morning, he was likely to shoot his water gun at Deca and Octo, the elderly collared doves who nest in our conifer hedge and conduct spiritual services when we have a

death in our community.

We have always wondered why Gunman singles out Deca and Octo. Why not shoot at Chief Inspector Pica and magpie police force for example? Deca and Octo are a gentle, dignified old couple. They cause no trouble and have lived in this garden longer than any of us, including the humans. Our question was partly answered when Gunman drank with Polly's humans and she overheard him saying he shoots at pigeons! Pigeons! Deca and Octo are as similar to pigeons as he is to a chimpanzee! Maybe one day Bird Boy will teach him the difference between collared dove and a pigeon, but until that time, and for as long as he stalks poor Deca and Octo, the songbirds of Lane End Garden will continue their campaign of revenge. It goes like this: -

The starlings start the day with a dawn alarm clock imitation. The sparrows work the washing line where, being small and light, they perch and poo on Gunman's clean clothes. Then, when he takes the roof off his precious car, we start our swoop and dump campaign with every songbird in the garden flying low over the cockpit to take aim.

Further fun can be had when the family eats in the garden. The Gunman HATES wasps, and both Merula; our blackbird, and the starlings (who actually live in the woods across the river but with whom we have a special relationship) have generously agreed not to eat our garden wasps, giving us a very high population of the stinging little critters.

At mealtimes, when Gunman sits at the garden table to feed, the wasps go crazy. The silly man fuels their frenzy by flapping them away and, while he's waving his arms around, the sparrows, who are very naughty despite the best efforts of their long suffering teacher Passer, like to nip in, peck his food and – much to the amusement of Bird Boy – poo on Gunman's chair.

On this particular dawn I stood on my boat enjoying the starlings alarm clock call when Mr Blackbird flew in with the post.

"I see you've got new furniture," he said,

"I've what?"

"New garden furniture. That big green thing by the eucalyptus" he said. I looked over and wondered how such a monstrosity could have escaped my notice? Where the females had been gardening the evening before, there was

now a huge, round, green cage.

"What is it for?" I asked. Mr Blackbird shrugged.

"No idea. There's one up in Copper Beech Garden but goodness only knows what it is."

"Do they keep anything in it?"

"Not that I've seen, but they don't get much post up there, so I don't drop in often. Must fly!" He lifted his long tail slightly, made a couple of quick, two footed bounds and took off.

I called for Turdus. A discreet '*zit*' sound told me he was in the flowerbed where I found him breakfasting on snails around the hostas. We flew up for a bird's eye view of the cage and decided that, with no roof, it was not intended to imprison birds.

"Unless the Gunman's adding the roof today" suggested Turdus, "perhaps it's for pigeons? Polly told me humans keep pheasants in cages then shoot at them with guns."

Before I had time to consider Turdus' suggestion, the door was thrown open and all five children, both dogs and the adults burst into the garden. A whirr of wings and the songbirds had all flown to safety. Turdus and I took up position on the fort and watched from there.

All five offspring climbed into the cage, laughing and giggling. Immediately they were in, the adults secured the door and walked to the table where they sat, chatting, laughing and watching their poor children try and escape.

"Look, it's for those poor children. The cruelty of the man knows no bounds," whispered Turdus.

Bird Boy sat at the edge of the cage while the others jumped and stumbled, rolled and fell as they tried to get their footing. The floor of the cage was bouncy and the children seemed to be trying to escape by jumping as high as they could.

"They're trying to fly out," I twittered.

"Poor wretches," said Turdus. "FLAP" he called, "FLAP HARDER." But the children could neither understand, nor flap their way to freedom. If only the poor things had wings to aid their flight.

The Gunman and his wife went inside the house and Turdus and I

withdrew to my boat, where I remembered my post and, while Turdus watched the children bounce around in the cage, I read my leaf letter and felt my feathers stand on end.

“They’re coming,” I whispered,

“And about time too” said Turdus, “those poor children, no food or water ...”

“Not the humans, the black and whites. The magpie mafia. They’re coming for their ‘payment.’”

I read out the letter. “This is to notify the nesters of Lane End Garden that payment due to the magpies, for policing and protecting the songbirds, is now due. The patrol will visit this week.”

“This week!” shrieked Turdus. “But that means ...”

“I know what that means” I replied, cocking my head from side to side to dislodge the memory of last year’s carnage at the wings of the magpies. “Can you announce the news to our nesters Turdus? We must have an emergency, daylight meeting.”

“Daylight. Oh Rube, are you sure? Think of the predators! Can’t we wait ‘till dusk?”

“I’m afraid not. We must meet on the roof of the boathouse immediately, one representative per family, other family members can act as look out.”

And so, while Turdus delivered the dreadful news in a squeaky shrill cascade of notes guaranteed to reach even the deaf old ears of Deca and Octo, and while the children flapped and floundered in their cage, I prepared the grim announcement I must make to my bird friends, an announcement that would surely break the heart of every avian species in the garden.



A Blue Tit's Adventure

The garden was quiet after the meeting, all bird-life struck song-less by the bombshell I'd dropped. Bird Boy seemed to notice. He slipped quietly under the net of the cage, escaped to his fort and watched us anxiously, scribbling madly in his little book.

The songbirds flew back to their families to break the news that the magpies were coming for payment. As realisation dawned, the silence was gradually broken, at first with quiet tweets, then calls, cries and a frenzy of flapping as the songbirds of the Lane End Garden set about battenning down the hatches against the magpies coming to kill and eat the first egg or chick born to any songbird in our gardens.

Although, as a Dawn Chorus representative, my own family was safe, I had a lot of work to do helping the others. I must find Polly and make sure she'd heard and shared the dreaded news. And I needed to alert the river birds, and at least try to get a message to some local birds of prey.

The sky closed in, darkening with clouds of starlings arriving from all directions. The Lane End Garden starlings live at the top of our oak tree and are headed by my friend *Sturnus*, but starlings like formation flying, so *Sturnus's* flock often join wings with others of their breed from around the area. As more and more rowdy birds landed on our boathouse – so many you could barely see the roof itself – I felt a lump in my beak; starlings from all over the area had come to our assistance. *Sturnus* perched on the weather vane addressing hundreds of the creatures, and even as he spoke, waves more were arriving from upstream, downstream, across the river, behind the house. The sky was bursting with starlings weaving and wheeling in perfect formation towards our garden. Once they found a place to land the gregarious, rowdy flock quickly settled into silence and listened to *Sturnus's* grim message. The magpies would reach our garden within three to four days.

Polly called me over the hedge to share a story about a brave crow from

Flamingo Tree Garden. His name was Frugal, and he was about to leave on a quest to find the mythical goshawks rumoured to roost in Cliveden Woods. If we could get those massive birds of prey on our side, the magpies wouldn't have a chance of success. I'm not usually a fan of crows (they make me feel small) but since the magpies pose no threat to them, this crow's pilgrimage to go and find them was entirely selfless. I flew over the hedge to wish him luck.

I heard the crow's hoarse, nasal, croaks long before I saw him. It's unusual for crows to live outside a colony, so I was surprised – and relieved – to find him alone.

"My name is Frugil," he croaked, as I tweeted my arrival. He was enormous, but very down at wing. One of his legs was damaged and he hopped painfully on the other. His left eye was bloody and swollen and his feathers had no sheen.

"Rubecula" I replied, "but call me Rube."

Frugil explained that he'd been rejected from his colony, which roosted in the local nature reserve. He didn't tell me what he'd done to cause this, but it didn't take a genius to see that this goshawk mission was an attempt to rebuild his damaged reputation.

"There's no time to be lost" he croaked, "I'll leave by dusk"

"But how will you manage?"

"Alone, as I do now," replied Frugil sadly. "There's woodland along the route on the other side of the river, so I'll have somewhere to rest my wings. Food should be plentiful there too."

"And the goshawks?" I tweeted, "do you know where they live?"

"No, and they're notoriously silent, but if I can get there by dawn I may be lucky and hear their call. I'll caw an all-bird-alert as I go, in case somebody can point a beak in the goshawk's direction. I only hope I can find them in time, and that they'll help you defend yourselves against the magpies."

I feared for Frugil, setting off on such a dangerous mission alone. I drooped my wings and hopped about a bit, feeling a bit pathetic beside his broken magnificence.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" I twittered.

Frugil shook his head dejectedly.

"You're kind, but no. I need to do this alone."

"Well, if you're certain" I said trying not to sound too relieved. "This is a wonderful thing you're doing for our songbird community. If there's anything we can do for you, please say."

"Well, there might be something," Frugil croaked hesitantly, "but you certainly shouldn't do it alone. If I don't return in two dawns, could you tell my colony where I went? What I tried to do?"

I chirruped agreement with a happy beak and a heavy heart. A crow colony would eat me alive.

"Good luck Frugil" I tweeted, and I flew home.

The next day flew by. Every bird was busy battenning down the hatches. Turdus the song thrush and Merula the blackbird took lookout turns on the weather vane, both birds blessed with a loud (and oddly similar) warning cry, both victims of last spring's magpie massacre.

The starlings had divided into two groups and were rehearsing some sort of call. The tits were frantically collecting nuts from next doors' copper beech tree, and the finch cocks were practicing formation flying while their hens busied themselves picking up red rubber bands left on the lane by the postman.

Deca and Octo were nowhere to be seen until little Parus, a young blue tit who'd been at it beak and feather since dawn, flew into the glass door to the house!

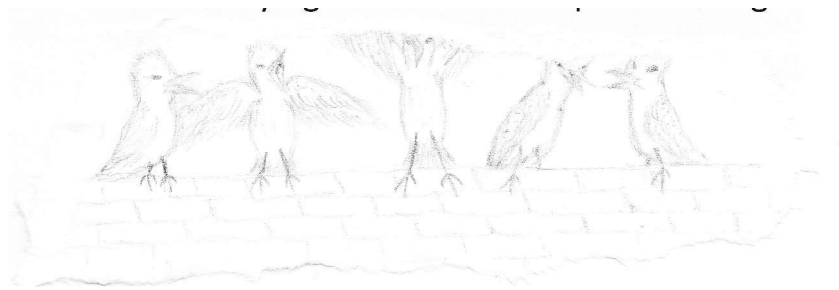
The dog scrabbled and barked on the other side of the glass and we knew Parus's flying days were over when the Gunman came to see what the fuss was about. Poor Parus was lying on the ground like a helpless bumblebee. I quaked, but Deca and Octo flew to the decking and cooed, gently encouraging young Parus to fly away, but it was too late.

The garden fell silent as the door flew open and the Gunman's huge boots stepped onto the terrace. For a long, dreadful moment I thought he was going to stamp on Parus and I covered my eyes with a wing. By the time I looked back Gunman was holding out his huge hand and Parus lay in his palm on a tiny cloth, quivering like a leaf.

The gunman sat on the garden step, held Parus - who was the size of his

thumbnail - up to his mouth and whispered, then tender as a nursing sparrow, he slowly extended his arm, flattened his hand and sat as still as a heron.

Parus struggled to his feet, cocked his little blue skull capped head, then shook himself down and, as Gunman lifted his hand to the sky, Parus left his launching platform and flew into the eucalyptus tree calling '*sisisi, sisisi, sisisi*', before returning to his nest box by the swing.



Rubes' Quest

Dawn rose with a feeling of dread the next day. The starlings didn't even have the heart to torment Gunman on the balcony. With spirits so low, I decided a rousing chorus was needed and though I usually hide when I sing, I flew to the gate at the centre of the river fence, cocked my tail, curtsied and began my tune.

Turdus quickly joined me, then Merula followed by the tits, the finches (including Cordelius, our shy greenfinch) and the house sparrows. The starlings took position on the boathouse roof and even Deca and Octo rose to the chorus, flying onto the fence to join us. We sang until the sky was bursting with music and the sun rose across the river and shone its sleepy rays onto Lane End Garden.

Two dawns had passed since Frugil left. I sat on my boat, wings drooped and head cocked to the sky. There was no sign of the brave, damaged crow and I felt a pebble sized pit in my stomach.

A promise is a promise I know, but this would be the worst time to leave my territory. And take Frugil's message to his colony. The magpie mafia was on their way, they were going to massacre my friends and silence our dawn chorus. I'd never flown as far as the nature reserve before. And even if I survived the journey, and aggressive colony of crows could make mealworm of me in

seconds. I looked longingly towards Cliveden Woods, but the only I saw was a dark, menacing cloud rolling through the sky towards my beloved Lane End Garden.

I went to see Polly, hoping she'd tell me I was ridiculous to even consider visiting the crows, but she thought it was a matter of honour, and that I had no choice but to fly to the nature reserve and deliver Frugil's message.

Two flaps and a glide and I was home, calling Turdus to tell him my plans. Mr Blackbird flew over on his postal path and dropped me a leaf letter. I curtsied my acknowledgement and continued tweeting to Turdus,

"Pica and his gang will most probably come at dusk," I said, "so I will fly to the nature reserve in daylight and try to be back before they come."

"Do you even know the way?" Turdus asked. I didn't.

"Then let me come with you. I've been there before, and Frugil did tell you not to go alone. We'll set off after breakfast." I knew I should object, but I nodded and gulped back the lump in my beak. "And make sure you eat," he called as he flew off, "you'll need all the fuel you can find for a journey like that."

While Turdus went to find his slugs, I read my leaf letter. The river birds from our stretch of water were on their way. Their help against the magpies would be invaluable, but I had no time to wait for them.

Bird Boy came into the garden, walked solemnly down the path and over to my boat. I held my ground and, as we eye balled each other, I marvelled at his bird sense. He set a small tub on my boat bench, then went to his fort and watched me breakfast like a king. He'd bought my favourite mealworms! I pecked and sucked the wriggly little critters with glee and, feeling chirpier, decided Bird Boy must be my spirit human, for he must have been a bird in an earlier life.

Fired up by my feast, I called Merula the blackbird who would have to deputise while I was away. A wind was picking up, but the sky was bright and blue. Merula appeared from his nest in the bush behind the fort. He looked exhausted.

"Just strengthening my defences," he said dejectedly,

"Have you eaten?" I asked, my guilty stomach writhing with mealworms.

"No time."

"Come on" I said, "I'll talk, you eat." I perched in the cordyline tree, admiring Merula's hunting techniques in the flower bed below: still as a statue then in for a worm, stabbing viciously with his glorious yellow beak; still, stab, still, stab, still, stab. I explained about my mission and Merula tried to convince me to let him come.

"Three's a safer number than two" he insisted,

"Don't be a fool Merula. You have work to do here. Turdus and I will be fine. Anyway, I need you to run the lookout with Sturnus. And somebody has to explain things to the river birds when they arrive."

I was relieved when Merula agreed to stay. He'd lost more chicks to the magpie mafia than any other bird in Lane End Garden. He needed to be with his family.

Turdus appeared by my side.

"We should go," he said grimly. "The weather's closing in."

And so off we went on our sad message mission, Turdus first, me flapping furiously behind, ten beats to his five in my efforts to keep up.

We flew over our house and across the lane, then rested high on the school roof, alert to predators and territorial attacks from birds whose 'patch' we'd invaded. A low-pitched '*butt, butt, butt*' from overhead, then Hula the bullfinch crash-landed on the roof beside us.

"You nearly scared the tail feathers off me," I shrieked, "what are you doing here?"

"I've come to join you," Hula whistled breathlessly. My heart sank. The last thing we needed was a passenger. "I flew up to your garden to see how you were getting on, and Merula told me where you'd gone. He says three birds are better than two so here I am, the third bird!"

Before I could tweet my objections Turdus piped up, "OK, but you'll have to keep up and do as you're told."

Hula swelled his strong pink breast and nodded his neckless head.

We flew over the main road, already further from my nest than I'd been before. The favourable wind hastened our journey and soon we were at our second rest point, a tree by the creek, where we met a kingfisher called Alcedo. This beautiful bird was uncharacteristically sociable for a kingfisher. He lived in

a hole in the sandy bank below our perch and offered us food - fish and bones - that we hastily declined.

Hula was chatting, trying to extend our rest by telling Alcedo about the magpies and Frugil's brave attempt to help save the dawn chorus.

"But I know Frugil," said Alcedo, "he came this way after he was rejected by his colony. The poor bird was in a shocking state. I took him to a safe bank to drink and bathe his wounds. I've often wondered what became of him."

"He lived on our lane for a while," I said, sensing the shock our news had caused. "His bravery in trying to find the goshawks alone is astounding."

"That doesn't surprise me," said Alcedo, "Frugil's bravery nearly got him pecked to death by his own flock. He tried change the nature of his colony, to turn them into nicer birds, but it was a foolish thing to do. You see, the crows nest in the tree clumps behind the nature reserve and forage around the paddock. They've never been a problem to me - crows aren't fish eaters - but last winter, when the humans built houses on the paddock, the crows had to look elsewhere for food. Frugil felt they should go further afield, to the farmland beyond the houses, and leave the paddock pickings for the smaller birds, but Legus, the head of the colony, had different ideas. Legus directed his birds to find food as close to home as possible. This decision drove all the tiny songbirds away, many of them perished and died. Eventually Frugil challenged Legus to take over the colony. The rest, as they say, is history. Legus instructed all Frugil's friends and family to attack and kill him. That's why a group of crows is called a 'murder,' they are their own judge and jury and they kill any bird that doesn't behave."

"You should meet Polly," mumbled Hula, "you're both flying encyclopedias."

"So what will happen to us if we fly into the colony?" asked Turdus glaring at Hula.

"It doesn't sound like Legus is going to care about Frugil's message or his mission." I added.

"He will attack you and he will kill you," Alcedo said simply. "You absolutely must not go."

My legs nearly buckled with relief and I was about to chirrup my

enthusiastic agreement, when until Hula swelled himself to his most impressive size and said,

“We MUST go. Mustn’t we Rube? You promised and you would NEVER break your word.”

I nodded. What else could I do?

“And poor Frugil died trying to save us songbirds,” Hula added. There was a grim silence. It was the first time somebody had said the words out loud. Up until now we’d been fooling ourselves we might find Frugil safe and well on our return. Alcedo’s tale explained so much about Frugil’s pilgrimage to find the goshawks. It also explained why he ‘d insisted I shouldn’t visit the crows alone. And why he wanted the story of his final, heroic quest to get back to his colony.

“A promise is a promise. We songbirds have a high code of honour.” Hula continued. “We must bring Frugil’s news to his colony.”

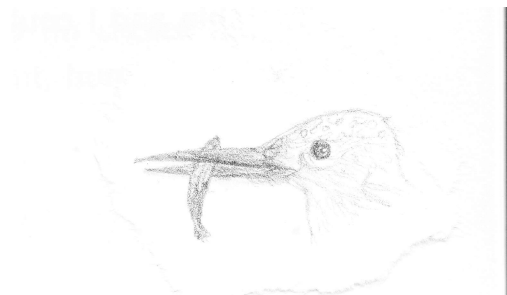
Hula had changed. He’d grown in confidence since the fiasco with the peacocks and I felt proud – and afraid – to hear his brave speech. “Isn’t that right Rube? Turdus?”

We had no choice but to nod in agreement.

“Then let me go,” said Alcedo. “The crows have no gripe with me, we have different diets and different territories. Let me give them Frugil’s news. You go back to your gardens and defend your territory against the magpies. I’ll gladly take your message to the crows.”

“At least let me come with you,” replied Hula. “My family were lost to the magpies long ago. Let me stay with you Alcedo and accompany you on your journey.”

And so it was agreed. Alcedo and Hula went to the crow colony together, and Turdus and I flew home to battle





Murder!

The wind changed in our favour and Turdus and I were home before dusk. Merula was waiting on my boat brimming with news,

“The magpies are gathering by the lock,” he said grimly.

“Is Frugil back?” I asked. Merula shook his head,

“Sturnus sent some starlings on a reconnaissance trip up the river. There was no sign of Frugil but they’re sure the magpies will be with us by tomorrow.”

“At least there’s a chance of some food and rest before the big battle then.” I sighed.

“Bird Boy’s left you some mealworms, and Gunman have been out all day with ladders. Look!” Merula shrieked excitedly, pointing a wing towards the conifer trees. At first I couldn’t see what he was talking about and then I realised,

“Netting!” he said with delight. “With huge holes. Big enough for us to

get in and out safely but too small for the magpies. To reach our nests."

"Genius, sheer genius" I muttered, "Gunman did this?" Merula was hopping about with excitement.

"Gunman and Bird Boy. Gunman was up a ladder, and Bird Boy was holding his book and directing his father." I hopped and curtsied with delight, and my red breast swelled with pride.

"That's what he's been scribbling in that book of his," I twittered, "Nesting places! He's noted all our nesting places and persuaded his father to protect them. He knows the magpies are coming," I twittered under my breath.

"I'm going to check if he did mine," warbled Turdus.

"And mine, and Parus and his family, Sturnus too!" said Merula.

"Deca and Octo?" I asked.

Merula shook his head.

I perched on the fence talking to the river birds when I heard a coarse, grinding sound beneath the flagpole. I flew over to investigate and found Frugil, hunched and ruffled with one eye socket dark and weepy, the remaining eye staring dull and grey.

"Frugil, when did you get back? Did you find them?"

He opened his thick, strong beak, but no sound came out.

"Are you OK? Have you eaten?" I twittered nervously. He was so big and broken; I didn't know how to help him. I needed Polly.

"Stay there" I twittered foolishly, then nipped around the end of the hedge to find her. Polly was in her cage, hanging from the frame of the open window. She walked up and down the bars, pulling herself along with her beak as she considered the situation. Then she jumped to her perch and squawked,

"Fetch the sparrows. They'll attend to his wounds. And if the worst happens and he dies, we'll need to warble last flights so have Deca and Octo on standby to conduct the service."

We have a small community of sparrows in Lane End Garden. They're a social, chatty group, who nest under the roof tiles on the other side of the house. They are the carers in our community, taking food to elderly birds in winter, nursing injured birds and caring for orphans. There's nothing in this world that

is more comforting than chirping and chattering care from our dear house sparrows.

I flew to Passer, the head of the flock's nest, and quickly explained Frugil's plight. Passer immediately whistled a nursing team together and collected a few simple items to attend to Frugil's injuries.

Dusk was descending, and I felt panicked at how vulnerable Frugil would be to predators if we didn't move him before nightfall. There was an unusual crackle in the air. Like electricity. Or was it lightening over the woods? I worried about Hula as I flew back over the house with the sparrows. The sound was getting louder and louder, swelling into a croaking, cawing, rasping sound that made my feathers prickle, but made perfect sense the moment we saw our garden.

There were crows everywhere. Crows on the fence, the path, the flagpole and the boathouse. Crows in the trees and bushes and flowerbeds. There were so many on the lawn not a blade of grass could be seen. They even lined the edge of Bird Boys fort, despite his crouching, goggle-eyed presence behind them. There must have been hundreds of them, a murder of the creatures, all cawing at the top of their voices. The din shook the leave and rattled the clouds. It was deafening.

A glossy female crow stood at the foot of the flagpole. She looked up to the heavens, opened her strong thick beak and screamed, then she bowed her magnificent head and all at once the cawing stopped and there was stillness and silence in Lane End Garden.

After a short while, the same female, who I later learned was Frugil's sister, tilted her head again, letting out a blood curdling, agonizing call. There was a flurry of feathers and every crow took off in unison, their huge black bodies filling the sky with darkness as they flew away, leaving Frugil with his sister by the flagpole. She bowed her head again, gave him a gentle peck, then flapped her mighty wings and soared away to join her colony, leaving Frugil dead and alone in Lane End Garden.

When the stillness settled and the dusk was well behind us, Bird Boy emerged from his fort tear stained and shaky. He inspected Frugil, then walked back to

the house. I was paralysed with shock. Frugil, defender of the Dawn Chorus, lay dead in our garden and I didn't know what to do. But Bird Boy did.

Bright lights flooded the garden, the house doors opened and Gunman and his five children, walked down the path to Frugil's corpse. The children rushed about collecting leaves and twigs, which they laid in a box that Gunman was holding.

Gradually, the garden birds found their confidence and emerged from their hiding places. Perhaps it was the shock of the crow's visit, or maybe the light had fooled us into believing dawn had broken. I could see Turdus in the eucalyptus, Cordelius and the finches on the potato vine and Sturnus and his starlings up on the boathouse. Passer and her flock of sparrows appeared over the roof of the house and perched still and respectful on top of the trellis, while Merula stood boldly on the garden table. Parus and his family fluttered down to the buddleia and I stood my ground on the bow of my boat.

It seemed that having witnessed a crow funeral, Bird Boy was going to give the songbirds a special opportunity to say goodbye to Frugil. While Gunman dug a hole, Bird Boy lifted Frugil's limp body and laid it in the leaf-lined box. The Bird Boy's brothers and sisters covered him with leaves and they closed the lid.

Deca and Octo perched defiantly on the fence beside where Gunman was digging. They were determined to pay their last respects to Frugil. Bird Boy took his book from his pocket, and shoed it to his father. Gunman looked from the book to Deca and Octo, back to the book and back at the bird's one more time then, when he eventually spoke, Bird Boy's smile could have lit up the garden. Deca and Octo cooed, and somehow we all understood their torture at the hands of The Gunman were over.

After Gunman had lowered Frugil's box into the ground and covered it with earth, Bird Boy poked a bamboo cross into the soil and the family stood quietly, their heads lowered, for a moment. Then Turdus burst into song joined by Merula and the finches, Deca and Octo cooed and Sturnus and the starlings warbled from the boathouse roof. The tits, the sparrows and finally me, the proud head of FLOC, joined in the final chorus for Frugil, the hero of the songbirds.



Later that night I heard a rustle in the hedgerow and watched through the moonbeams while Gunman climbed a long, wobbly ladder, netting clenched between his teeth, and erected an elaborate and sturdy frame to protect Deca and Octo's nest from the magpies.

The Battle At Lane End Garden

The magpies arrived at dawn. It had rained all night, nature's tears settling Frugil to rest, and we were ill prepared. Major the great tit bought the warning and stayed to join us for the fight.

"Battle stations, battle stations," shrieked Sturnus from the boathouse and hundreds of starlings appeared from nowhere, dividing into two squabbling groups.

"Take up arms, take up arms," twittered Major, struggling to get Parus and his group of young tits in order.

"Check supplies," tweeted the sparrows from the rooftop.

And then, like a sunburst on a cloudy day, I heard a voice I recognised.

"Hula" I shouted through the chaos. "You're back!"

Hula looked stronger, fitter, more determined than before. He stood proud and firm on the bow of my boat. "Alcedo too," he said, pointing a wing to where Alcedo posed, a dazzling statue on the post by the river. He winked, and I curtsied my reply.

"Not a moment too soon," tweeted Hula, "who's running the finches?"

"Cordelius the greenfinch," I said, "but she's awfully timid and not really made of the right sort of feathers for days like today."

"Then allow me," said Hula and just as he was about to put out a call Major cried,

"Battle stations!" and Chief Inspector Pica landed in the middle of our lawn. The entire garden fell static and silent.

"We are here," Pica barked in his hoarse, unmusical voice, "to collect protection payment in the usual manner." He paused, as if waiting for a reply, then made a couple of menacing bounds towards the conifer hedge. "This need not be a blood bath if you stand back and let us take our dues." There was rustling and twittering behind the camouflage of the bushes and trees. "But my force will be here shortly and, make no mistake, payments will be made and

scores will be settled." He hopped around and looked at me standing on the bow of my boat. "Rube, you know the score. It's your responsibility to make sure this goes smoothly."

"ATTACK!" shrieked Major from the top of the sycamore, and I could hardly believe my eyes when Parus and his cousin shot out of the tree, each holding one end of a red rubber band. Hula swooped down, shouting,

"And you load like this." He made a mid-air grab for the centre of the band, pulled it back with his powerful beak and used his feet to fit a twig to the slingshot before pinging its release, shouting, "AND FIRE!"

The stick flew through the air like an arrow, piercing the lawn behind Pica. He hopped about and barked angrily, then the conifer hedge erupted with teams of tits and finches, all slinging their sticks and stones to break the bones of the magpie who would break their eggs and kill their chicks.

A cat yowled behind me, then another in the corner, another on the roof and another under the fort.

"MMEEEEAAAAOOOWW" they yelled, "MMEEEEAAAAOOOWW." The garden was full of catcalls but there wasn't an animal insight. The racket was coming from Sturnus' starlings who were imitating the magpie's most fearless predator. "MMEEEEAAAAOOOWW!"

The yowling ruffled Pica who called for reinforcements. Two more black and whites landed on the lawn but the others hovered and perched above, unsure about the cat's calling from hidden corners of the garden and while Pica screeched at them to land, a grinding, irascible '*gra-gra-gra-gra*' came from above, a familiar cawing din and multitudes of crows descended on our garden for the second time that week. I had no time to wonder why they'd returned, before the female who'd led Frugil's mourning emitted a blood chilling war cry and the crows mobbed the magpies who'd been too cowardly to land, afraid of the cat-like yowling of Sturnus and his starlings.

Beneath the vicious, bloody battle between the crows and the magpies, Turdus, Merula and I saw our moment and swooped down on Pica as he tried to escape the scene. Six tiny feet scrabbling, six little wings beating and three-minute beaks pecking were still no match for the mighty Pica, who swatted us away like flies.

“We need back up,” thundered Turdus, and Deca and Octo swooped from their home to join us. A whoosh from above and nine Canada geese zoomed overhead in a perfect diamond formation. They returned lower and faster, so we garden birds had to flatten ourselves to the ground to avoid being hit. Pica flapped his wings and barked when the geese prepared for the final fly by that I prayed would beat him, but as they made their turn, Pica managed to hop to the base of the boat house, too close to the building for the geese to make contact. They landed in the river with a tremendous splash, bobbing and gagging and biding their time until their next attack.

Pica was shouting gleefully from his cowardly shelter, and I’d just begun to despair when the house door opened and starling group two shot into action, flying to the end of the garden whistling an extraordinary high pitched tune that drove the dogs wild. They thundered down the garden, all barks blazing, and Sturnus’ superbly trained squad swooped and circled tantalizingly out of reach while the dogs pelted around the garden after them.

Starling group one was still yowling, group two was whistling dog taunts and pretty soon I think every dog in the neighbourhood was barking! The crows cawed and croaked and us little songbirds used our full range of warning calls, so it was unsurprising that in all that din nobody heard Bird Boy come out of the house. I saw him walk down the centre path and stand watching the battle in bewilderment. Then there was a shout from the upstairs window, Bird Boy ducked; there was a powerful spurt of water, and silence.

Gunman closed the window and Bird Boy looked around him. The lawn was a carnage of feathers and sticks and beechnuts and ammunition of all sorts, but unusually for Lane End Garden, there wasn’t a bird in sight. Then Chief Inspector Pica swaggered back onto the lawn. The only living creatures his evil black eyes could see were Bird Boy, and me, and he addressed us, and the hidden masses, in an evil, defiant tone;

“We will be back,” he growled. “And we will keep coming back until we’ve taken every last one of your children. We will see Lane End Garden birdless for what you’ve done today. Your bald, featherless friend can’t protect you for ever with that water gun of his” he barked. And though the garden was still and silent, hundreds tiny hidden birds ruffled their feathers for warmth on

that chilly, spring morning.

Pica took two hops and flew up to the top of the flagpole cackling his evil laugh.

“Oh yes, we’ll be back,” he shrieked. And as he glowered down at us, a huge raptor swooped silently down to the flagpole, gripped Chief Inspector Pica with its massive outstretched talons and, in a few relaxed wing beats, flew up and off into the cold blue sky, Pica flapping and twitching in its grip. The enormous goshawk flew across the river and above the treetops to its mate, then the two magnificent creatures glided elegantly downstream back to their home in the Cliveden Woods and the residents of Lane End Garden burst into song.

The End

Epilogue

P.s. A little bird told me.....

- ♦ *Chief Inspector Pica* was never seen again
- ♦ *Deca and Octo* took up residence on Gunman's balcony where he fed them each morning when he awoke
- ♦ *Erithacus/Polly* lived forever!
- ♦ *Legus* was murdered by his colony which was then taken over by the Frugil's sister
- ♦ *Hula* moved into Lane End Garden and became head of the finches.
- ♦ *Major* and *Hula* together took over policing the neighbourhood.
- ♦ *Merula* had lots more babies and lived to a ripe old age
- ♦ *Parus* never flew into a window again!
- ♦ *Rube* ran the Nesting committee until he died of natural causes at a ripe old age
- ♦ *Seargent Pie* was never seen again
- ♦ *Sturnus* ran the spring singing competition, which he won every year for the next twenty years!
- ♦ *Turdus* lived happily ever after!

Author's Note

Thank you for downloading The Dawn Chorus. I wrote the story for one of my sons who used to be obsessed with garden birds. The odd names I have given the characters stem from the Latin for their breed and I used the RSPB website for information on bird's feeding, flight and eating habits. I have tried to stay true to breed characteristics, but obviously this is a work of fiction so if you want facts on birds this is not the best place. Join the RSPB - they're the experts.

This is my story for my son. It has not been subject to a professional edit or expert formatting. My eldest daughter drew the illustrations.

Please don't share or use The Dawn Chorus in any way without my permission. I am easy to find through social media or via the Contact Me page on my website.

If you have read The Dawn Chorus, I very much hope you have enjoyed it. Do get in touch and let me know.

Julia x