Podcast: Imagine This

Episode: Why do birds sing?

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Bri: Hello. My name's Bri. Today on the show, we're going to use our ears to listen to something. Did you know that every morning, just before the sun comes up and it's still a little bit dark and the air is thin, you can hear birds start to sing? We call this Dawn Chorus, because it sounds like a chorus of birds. But have you ever wondered why birds sing? Our question today comes from four-year-old, Hannah.

Hannah: Why do birds sing?

[Hannah imitates a birdsong]

Bri: Good question, Hannah. Today on Imagine This, we're listening to the birds in the park. I wonder what they're saying?

Kids: Kookaburra!

He's angry.

Bri: What does a Kookaburra have to be angry about?

Kids: I think because the other bird is not letting him do what wants to do.

Bri: That would be frustrating. What about this bird call?

[Bird call]

Kids: Cockatoos.

Cockatoos. They were definitely my white cockatoos, my favourite.

Bri: What do you think the cockatoo might be saying?

Kids: Maybe they're saying, "I'm hungry." Or maybe they're saying, "This is fun."

Going, "Whee!"

Bri: It looks like it would be fun to be a bird, but how do we really know?

[Brass music]

Kids: I don't know, but I got a idea. Maybe we can look it up from a scientist on your phone.

Bri: Oh yeah. Good idea. I'm pretty sure I've got a bird scientist in my phone somewhere. Oh, Simon Griffith, let's give him a call.

[Phone rings]

Simon: Hello?

Bri: Hey Simon. Is that you?

Simon: Yeah.

Bri: We're outside listening to the birds. Do you want to come meet us?

Simon: Yeah, sure.

Bri: Hang on. You're not at the park right now are you?

Simon: Yep.

Bri: Oh, hey, I think I can see you. Hey Simon, it's me waving. Can you see me?

Simon: Um yes.

Bri: Come on over.

Simon: For sure.

Bri: Hey Simon.

Simon: Hi.

Bri: You know these birds sure do make a lot of noise.

Simon: Yeah. Each bird has kind of a different language.

Bri: A different language?

Simon: Yeah. All birds have calls, but some birds have songs.

Bri: So what's the difference between a call and a song?

[Bird tweet]

Simon: That's a call.

[Birds chirp for longer]

That's a song.

[Bird tweet]

That's call.

[Birds chirp for longer]

Now, that's a song.

Kids: Magpie.

Magpie.

Bri: Wow. Those songs sound really complicated. So why do they call?

[Rapid flute music, birds chirping]

Simon: Some birds call to warn other birds of danger. "Look out!" Some birds called to say, "Where are you?" And other birds call back to say, "I'm over here." Some birds call to say, "This is my place, I live here." And baby birds can call out for food, because they're hungry.

Bri: So, if birds are calling out to each other all the time, then why do they need to sing?

Simon: They try and sing the most beautiful song in the world to stand out from the rest.

[Birds chirping]

Simon: If you go out in the bush, you can often hear birds having a singing competition.

Bri: How does that work?

[Dramatic anticipatory drum roll]

Bri: And now coming to you live from the Australian bush, it's the bird song competition. Our first contestant is the Golden Whistler. Simon, do you think they're ready?

Simon: Absolutely.

Bri: Tell us how this one works, Simon.

Simon: You'll hear one bird sing and then somewhere else you'll hear another bird singing back.

[Bird sings. Another bird sings in response]

Bri: I can hear it. So why are they having a singing competition?

Simon: To show how healthy they are and how good they're feeling.

Bri: Why does that matter?

Simon: Birds will often sing to find a mate so that they can build a nest and start a family.

Bri: They can use their songs to start a family?

Simon: Yeah. Some birds sing to impress other birds. Listen to this bird

[Bird song]

Kids: Lyrebird.

Bri: Yep. Lyrebirds make the sounds of other things.

Kids: They can do any noises.

Bri: Like what?

Simon: Like a chainsaw, like a telephone

[Telephone ring tweet]

Kids: They can do a motorbike noise

[Motorbike noise]

Bri: A motorbike? That's clever. How do you think the birds learn how to sing?

Kids: Maybe with their little bird friends?

Or a bird teacher.

The mother one!

It might be a bit smart. They might of learn how to sing on their own.

Simon: That's right. Each type of bird is born being able to make a particular sound. But it's the parents that really teach them how to get good at the calls and the songs

[Bird song]

Bri: They must listen with their ears.

Kids: But they don't have any ears.

Bri: Do birds have ears?

Kids: No they don't.

Bri: I can't see any.

Kids: Maybe their ears are camouflaged.

Bri: Oh, do you think their ears are hiding under their feathers?

Kids: Yeah!

Bri: Simon, do birds have ears?

Simon: Absolutely.

Bri: So they can listen?

Simon: Yes

[Playful strings]

Simon: Baby birds start learning their songs and calls even while they're still in the egg. They can hear what's going on through the shells. And when they're babies in the nest, they start to practice.

Kids: By singing as well?

[Birds call and respond]

Simon: Yep. They listen and they try, and they listen and they try, until they get really good at it. We call that vocal learning, because it's all with the voice and nothing's written down, just what they can hear, the songs.

Bri: So Hannah, birds call and sing for lots of different reasons. It's how they communicate. And in Australia there are around 700 different types of birds. And they all have their very own language, just like us. In this country there are hundreds of different indigenous languages, and hundreds of languages that we speak from all over the world. So we all sound a little bit different. And if you're anything like the Lyrebird, you might be able to speak more than one language.

[Music concludes]

Bri: Imagine This is a coproduction, brought to you by ABC Kids Listen and The Conversation. Special thanks to Dr. Simon Griffith, from Macquarie University, Hamish Camilleri for mixing and all the kids who had a chat with us for this episode. I'm your host and producer Brianna Peterson. To hear more episodes of Imagine This, you can download the free ABC Kids Listen app, or find them wherever you get your podcasts.