

## The Morning Choir: Birdsong and a New Perspective

Waking up to different bird calls is not something I ever take for granted. As someone who's always been tuned into the natural world, birdsong is more than just background noise for me, it's a kind of soundtrack to daily life. These last few weeks, though, have made me realise just how much that soundtrack changes with geography. The experience has given me a whole new appreciation for bird calls and the subtle but powerful way they shape our sense of place.

I'm currently in the middle of writing my Cambridge IGCSE exams, which is stressful enough, but since I don't live near any of the official exam centres, my mom and I have temporarily relocated to stay with family in Lonehill. It's not exactly a cross-country move, but it's just far enough to feel unfamiliar. And one of the first things I noticed was the morning wake-up call. Or more accurately, who was giving it.

Back home, there's a fairly predictable roll call each morning. A Cape Robin-Chat kicking off the dawn chorus, perhaps the liquid whistle of a Southern Boubou weaving its way through the hedge, and of course, the raucous cries of Hadedas Ibises making sure no one even thinks of sleeping in. It's a cast of characters I know so well, I can almost tell the time by them.

But in Lonehill, the stage is set very differently. Suddenly, I'm being woken by calls I don't usually associate with suburbia. The unmistakable nasal "go-away" call of the Grey Go-away-bird has become a regular feature, something I'd previously only really connected with bush holidays or lowveld visits. And while I'd always thought of that bird as something exotic or holiday-adjacent, here it is, perfectly at home in a Johannesburg garden, sitting coolly in the crown of a White Stinkwood as if to say, "You really thought we only lived in the bush?"

It's strange how these little details can shift your perspective. I suppose I'd unknowingly slotted birds into two neat categories in my head: the ones from home, and the ones I see when I go away. But birds don't care about my categories. They go where the food is, where the trees are, where they can raise their young. They don't label themselves as "bush birds" or "suburban regulars," and clearly, I needed the reminder.

The shift in bird calls has had a strange kind of comfort to it, too. As unsettling as exam season can be, there's something grounding about tuning into the birdlife wherever you are. It becomes a ritual, a moment of calm before the chaos of the day. Some days I've sat on the patio with my tea, listening, letting my ears adjust to the different rhythm of this place. It's like learning a new dialect. At first unfamiliar, then slowly, with repetition, oddly soothing.

What I've also realised is how easily we overlook the diversity of bird calls, even in areas that aren't that far apart. We might all be used to the Hadedas alarm clock, but there are layers of sound beyond that, shaped by habitat, climate, garden plants, and even the way the neighbourhood is laid out. A sunbird zipping through an aloe flower might be replaced by a bulbul bouncing along the fence. The small things change the whole feel of the morning.

It has made me think about how disconnected many of us are from the sounds of nature. For those who don't bird or aren't tuned into wildlife, these calls probably blend into the

background. But for me, each one is a clue, a story, a piece of the puzzle. I don't need to see the bird to know it's there, and sometimes, especially during exam weeks, it's enough just to hear it and feel that spark of recognition.

In a way, this temporary move has been a reminder to keep noticing. Not just on birding trips or holidays, but everywhere. The familiar calls of home have their own charm, but so does the chance to hear something new. Even when life feels a little upside down, even when the pressure is on, birds keep calling. They remind me to pay attention, to stay grounded, and to remember that no matter where I am, nature is there with me.

So here's to the morning chorus, in all its regional variety. Here's to the birds that surprise us by showing up where we least expect them. And here's to the small, feathered reminders that change, even temporary change, can be a beautiful thing.