

FIELD CRAFT

Birding with hearing aids

BTO's Media Manager Paul Stancliffe explains how he enjoys birding and contributes to surveys despite experiencing hearing loss.

It was during a family walk in Thetford Forest in the summer of 2010 that it happened. My two daughters were running on ahead, when Hazel, the youngest, came back and said that Lily, the oldest, had found something. So, my wife and I wandered up and Lily said "There" and pointed. I couldn't see anything and said so. Lily said, "No, listen". I couldn't hear anything either. My wife and two daughters thought I was joking, because it was so loud. We eventually found the source: a Roesel's Bush-cricket. I could see that it was stridulating but I couldn't hear a sound. I could still hear birds, evidenced by a singing Goldcrest further down the track, but it was a worry.

It took me another seven years to admit defeat and book a hearing test, and sure enough I had lost the top end of my hearing – the Grasshopper Warbler, Goldcrest end. It hadn't



occurred to me that I hadn't really heard either for a while. I was prescribed two Siemens Teneo S+ hearing aids and given them there and then. They were plugged into a laptop and tweaked to enhance only the range that I had lost. I wandered out of the clinic and what hit me was amazing – the flock of Long-tailed Tits feeding in a nearby tree sounded like it was on my shoulder. It wasn't all good though, as the birds sounded a little bit tinny.

HEARING-AID ADJUSTMENT

I was told to give a few days to let my ears and, more importantly, my brain adjust to the information they were processing. However, a week later and I was still not happy with the sound and returned to the clinic – in all I went back to the clinic four times to get the hearing aids tweaked until I was happy that the birds I was hearing sounded like they should.

So, how much of a difference have they made? In short, they have made a huge difference. I am also a spectacle wearer and I love the way everything 'dinks' into sharp focus when I put them on. It is the same with my hearing aids – I can still hear birds but when I put my hearing aids in they all dink into sharp focus and I can hear many more. I have got Goldcrest and Grasshopper Warbler back; admittedly

they have to be singing reasonably close by, but I can hear them.

Along with lots of other birdwatchers, my favourite bit of the hobby is visible migration (*BTO News* 332), seeing hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of birds on the move and picking out the different species by their flight calls, and so far the hearing aids are holding up well – I often pick up calls before my birding buddies, and sometimes at a surprising distance. I can hear lower-pitched calls (Greenfinch, Brambling) from quite a way off. The higher-pitched calls (pipits and Redwing) need to be closer, but I can still hear them.

It is not all plain sailing though. I have great difficulty in locating birds calling overhead, and even sometimes perched in trees. I can hear them clearly enough but sometimes I can't tell whether they are in front of me or behind me. At times like this I quickly ping one of the aids out, which makes each ear different and I can localise the sound. Have I got Roesel's

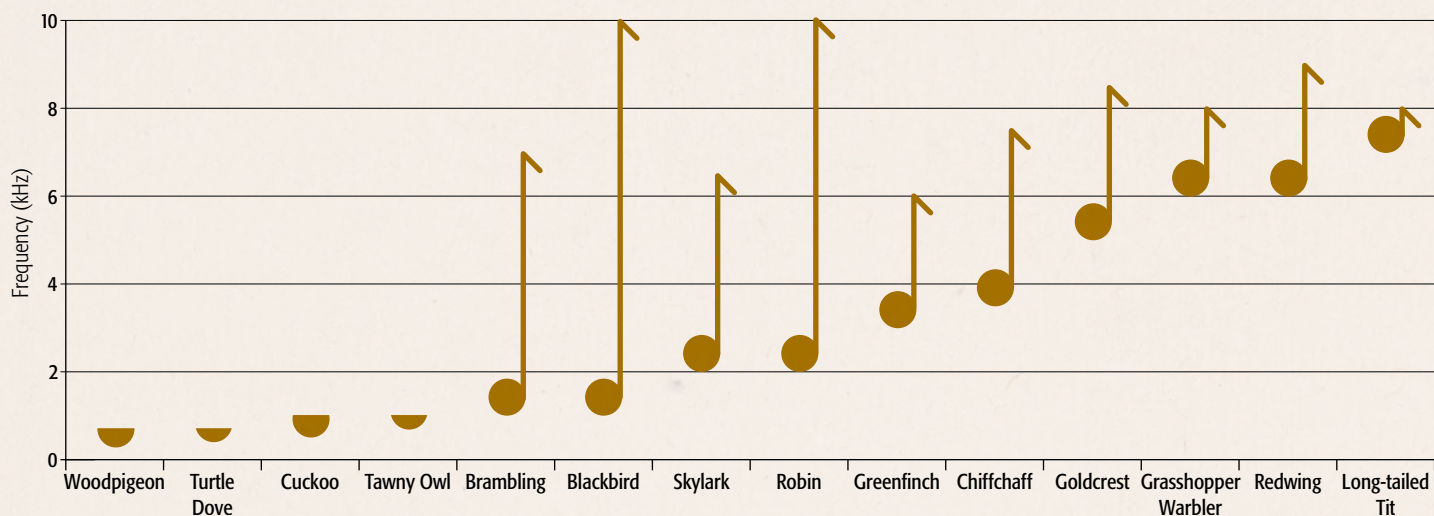
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▼ Much like the stridulating sounds of the Orthoptera they are named after, the ability to detect the song of Grasshopper Warbler can be affected by hearing loss.



BIRD SONG AND CALL FREQUENCY RANGES

Hearing loss may affect a person's ability to hear a species' songs and calls altogether, particularly those that vocalise at high frequencies, or the ability to hear certain parts of a species' vocal range in the case of species like Blackbird, that sing at both high and low frequencies.



Bush-cricket back? Sadly not; my hearing aids are brilliant but they can't give me back the sounds that I have actually lost – those that they do give me back I can still hear, but at such a low level I don't register them without the aids.

LIFE-CHANGING ENHANCEMENT

I got my hearing aids through the wonderful NHS; I am told that privately bought hearing aids might be better, but the NHS ones are more than adequate. It is not as simple as having a hearing test and being prescribed hearing aids – you need a referral from your GP. I was prescribed mine because it was deemed that hearing birds was very important for

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my quality of life. They have broken down a few times but again the NHS is brilliant and the longest I have been without them is four days. I have also been able to continue taking part in BTO surveys in the confidence that my records are sound.

I have been wearing my hearing aids for three years now and love them.

Why did I leave it so long to get my ears tested? I guess vanity played a part but also the admission that I was older than I really wanted to believe. Hearing-aid technology is getting better all the time and I don't doubt that the next generation of them will blow me away in the same way as my existing ones did when I first got them. To be honest, I would still wear them if they were the size of dustbins, such is the joy from being able to hear birds clearly again. ■

Find out more

With or without hearing aids, you can learn more about bird songs and calls with a view to taking part in BTO surveys here: www.bto.org/develop-your-skills

GRASSHOPPER WARBLER: AMY LEWIS/BTO, GOLDCREST: TOM CADWALLENDER/BTO, REDWING: LIZ CUTTING/BTO, PAUL STANCLIFFE: ABIGAIL STANCLIFFE VAUGHAN

