

## AN OVERVIEW OF EARLY COMMERCIAL WILDLIFE RECORDINGS AT THE BRITISH LIBRARY

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The British Library holds one of the most important and impressive audio collections in the world. The scope of this archive is vast, with recordings representing several musical genres, oral history, drama and literature, radio and wildlife.

The wildlife collection is internationally renowned as one of the best public resources for species and habitat recordings available today. It is best known for its wealth of unpublished recordings that cover all animal groups, from birds and mammals to amphibians and invertebrates. The breadth and depth of this section of the archive has allowed the Library to successfully support academic research, educational programmes and artistic expression for over four decades.

There is another section of the archive, however, that is perhaps less familiar yet provides a fascinating insight into the history of wildlife sound recording, from its infancy in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. Initial efforts were restricted to recording captive animals but through technological developments, inventiveness and a good measure of determination, equipment could soon be taken out into the great outdoors and wildlife sound recording in the field began. The efforts of the early pioneers who tackled the various challenges of location recording in order to produce publications for the commercial market, paved the way for fields such as bioacoustics, which are now respected areas of the scientific community.

This paper seeks to provide an overview of the British Library's collection of published wildlife recordings from the gramophone era. Much change was seen during this period and the following examples demonstrate how the genre of wildlife sound recording evolved during its first fifty years.

### The birth of wildlife sound recording

Ludwig Koch is described as the father of wildlife sound recording and is arguably the greatest pioneer in this field. He made the first ever recording of a bird in 1889, at the tender age of eight, when his father brought home an Edison Phonograph and a box of cylinders. The subject of Koch's experiment was his pet Indian Shama, a species whose rich, melodious song made it a popular cage bird. Koch would go on to play a significant role in the development of wildlife sound recording, but the credit for producing the first ever commercial wildlife recording would go to fellow German, Carl Reich.

In 1910 the German branch of the Gramophone Company released 'Actual Bird Record made by a Captive Nightingale'. The list of new records published by the Gramophone Co. Ltd in August 1910 described the recorded Nightingale as being a famed songster that was "taken about through Germany by its proud possessor for show purposes". The bird in question belonged to canary breeder and bird collector, Carl Reich, who kept an aviary in Bremen, Germany and was to have a recording career that spanned almost thirty years. Eight separate recordings of the Nightingale were collected by audio engineer Max Hampe, who had travelled to Reich's base in May 1910 to conduct this acoustic experiment. Each recording was originally released in Germany in single-sided form and copies were soon available in many European countries, including the United Kingdom, as well as the USA, Russia and even Australia (Figure 1).

The Gramophone Co. Ltd actually explained the recording process in their list of 1910, which reinforces the significance of this recording achievement. According to the promotional passage, "The cage was suspended in front of the horn, and as soon as the recording motor was set in motion, the bird began singing and did not stop when it should, as will be seen by the last note of the record, which clearly shows the bird went on singing after the instrument stopped recording."



Figure 1. One of Reich's early captive Nightingale releases (The Gramophone Co. Ltd, 1913)

Reich was to dominate the commercial arm of wildlife sound recording for the next decade, with further recordings of singing Nightingales being released in 1912. The scope of this publishing programme was then widened and other birds in Reich's collection were recorded. Successful takes were published by the Gramophone Company and Zonophone, with titles such as 'Actual Bird Record made by a Captive Thrush' (1913) and 'Duet: Mock Nightingale, Garden Warbler' (1926) being released in several countries.


The birds of Reich's recordings were all chosen based on their reputation as versatile and talented songsters. Species such as the Nightingale, Blackbird and Domestic Canary are renowned for their sustained singing bouts and the variation, tonal quality and frequency of these songs would clearly make these popular recording subjects for both the engineers charged with recording the songs and the public listener.

For the first time ever, people could listen to a recording of an actual bird, albeit a captive one, from the comfort of their own home. This moment signified the birth of a completely new variety of sound recording for the commercial market and presented a fresh way of appreciating wildlife. No longer did the natural history hobbyist have to make do with a collection of monographs, illustrations or inanimate specimens. Sound recordings of wildlife had now come onto the scene and there was to be no looking back.

### Recording in the wild

Cherry Kearton was responsible for the first recordings of wild birds when he captured the song of a Nightingale and a few phrases from a Song Thrush in England in 1900.

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The first commercial recordings of a wild animal came about, not through the tireless work of a naturalist, but through the suggestion of a musician. Beatrice Harrison was a respected British cellist who had made broadcasting history in 1924 when the sounds of her playing alongside a wild Nightingale in Oxted, Surrey were transmitted live by the BBC. Harrison believed the Nightingales were stimulated by the sound of her cello and the popularity of this first broadcast led to several similar programmes being made over the next few years. The Gramophone Company agreed to publish a selection of pieces featuring Beatrice Harrison with “her” Nightingales and in May 1927 the label’s mobile van recorded what would become five double-sided discs that were widely circulated around the world. We will never know whether the birds were encouraged to sing by Harrison’s cello or were simply delivering their musical messages at times of the day when they would be most vocally active anyway. What we do know is that these recordings represent another key landmark in the history of wildlife sound recording.

### **Novelty acts and canary choirs**

The tradition of keeping canaries as cage birds is a long one. Their strong, varied songs and penchant for imitation made them extremely desirable as pets. The German canary trade was one of the most respected in Europe and birds reared in Germany were highly sort after. Richard Avis said in his book of 1872, *The Canary: its history, varieties, management, and breeding*, “The Germans, who care little for either the form or colour of their birds, pay great attention to their song and we advise all those who wish to fully develop the good qualities of young canaries to place them under the tuition of a German bird” (p35).

Carl Reich kept canaries in his Bremen aviary and several of these birds were recorded for publication. In some cases, the canary recordings were combined with folk songs and these records from the late 1920s represent some of the earliest examples of fusion between music and wildlife recordings for the commercial market.

Musical Dawson’s Famous Choir of Canaries became the star ingredient of eleven records released in the UK from 1932 – 1933. Dawson’s singing canaries were recorded and then mixed with a pre-recorded small orchestra to create unique versions of ‘The Blue Danube’, ‘O Sole Mio’ and ‘Tales of Hoffman’ among others. A wonderful British Pathé newsreel film from 1938 showed Musical Dawson accompanied by a choir of nine caged canaries while he played ‘In a Monastery Garden’.

In the USA, Lorraine Evon & The Golden Bird became a popular Vaudeville act in the 1920s. A photograph of the young Miss Evon posing with the canary perched on the end of her violin can be found in the photographic collection of the drama critic and theatre promoter James Willis Sayre, who collected images of stars performing in Seattle from around 1900 to 1955. Brunswick released a double-sided record of the duo in 1930, which featured ‘The Canary Polka’ and ‘The Birds and the Brook’ (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Disc label for 'The Birds and the Brook' (Brunswick, 1930)

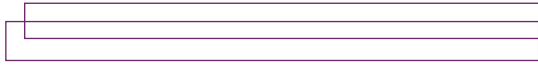
An equivalent music hall act in Britain was The Auklands and Little Tweet. Little Tweet was dubbed the 'Canary Caruso' in light of his vocal virtuosity and skill, and the Auklands toured the music hall circuit from 1924 onwards. The singing canary would accompany Betty Aukland on the concertina and proved to be such an entertaining act that a record of Little Tweet performing 'Bells of St Mary's' and Londonderry Air' with the Auklands was released by Edison Bell in 1929. This feathered performer became quite the celebrity and was used in marketing campaigns to endorse products such as Capern's bird food.

### Mimicry

The focus of the first wildlife publications was, unsurprisingly, birdsong. Each disc would normally contain one uninterrupted recording of a singing bird (or one on each side for double-sided discs), which had been selected based on the aesthetic nature of its song. No additional information was offered explaining the role of birdsong in the life of a species, and only the most pleasing vocalisations were deemed worthy of publication.

Within a few years the evolution of this genre had begun to slowly gain momentum and it was not long before publishers and recordists recognised the potential for expansion and began to look beyond the simple beauty of birdsong. Sound recording could be used to demonstrate various elements of acoustic communication and in doing so, could add a scientific element to the listening experience.

Reich had touched briefly on the subject of mimicry in birdsong when 'Canary – taught to sing like a Nightingale' was published in 1913. The first dedicated study of mimicry appeared almost two decades later when 'The Song of the Lyrebird' was released in Australia. 'The Song of the Lyrebird' (1932), recorded under the supervision of amateur film maker Ray Littlejohns, included a spoken commentary which guided the listener through the various imitations performed by a Superb Lyrebird. This species has long been considered one of the finest songsters to be found in Australia and its ability to mimic other sounds is second to none. This record was also significant because the songs featured on this disc were the first ever recordings to be made



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in the Australian bush of a wild bird in its natural habitat. This talented individual mimicked species such as the Kookaburra, Australian Thrush and Eastern Whipbird to perfection and as both the natural and imitated songs produced by the Superb Lyrebird are pleasant to listen to, this clearly made the song an ideal recording subject. The repertoire of other notable mimics such as the Northern Mockingbird of North America would be used to create similar records that celebrated mimicry in birdsong over the coming years.

The ability of particular cage birds to accurately mimic the human voice led to several gramophone records being published in the early – mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hearing a Budgerigar recite nursery rhymes or give his home address created a novel listening experience and seemed to capture the curiosity of the general public. The vast majority of publications focused on one individual, for example ‘Billy Peach, the Talking Budgerigar’ (1940) and ‘Joey the Budgie’ (1952), but ‘I’ll Give you Talk Like This’ (1938) included several short excerpts of talking birds.

The most famous talking Budgerigar of them all was Sparkie Williams. This incredible Guinness World Record holder was said to have a vocabulary of more than five hundred words and won the BBC International Cage Word Contest in 1958. His winning performance led to a record being produced of edited dialogue between himself and a human interviewer (Philip Marsden) which is quite something even today. His owner was Newcastle-born Mattie Williams who applied an almost military approach to Sparkie’s vocal training. When listening to ‘Sparkie Williams, the 1958 Champion Talking Budgerigar’, traces of his Geordie accent are clearly audible.

### **Vocabulary and the meaning of sounds**

In 1934 Ludwig Koch and Lutz Heck (Director of the Berlin Zoological Gardens) worked together on the first commercial publication to focus on the vocabulary of a specific mammal. One side of ‘Der Wald Erschallt’ (published by Verlag Knorr & Hirth in 1934) was completely devoted to the various call types of the Red Deer. Koch and Heck were possibly taking a risk by focusing on this species because, unlike birds, mammals are not renowned for the musicality or attractiveness of their vocalisations. The popular appeal and obvious market for birdsong may have contributed to the decision to feature a montage of thirteen birds, including the much beloved Golden Oriole, Nightingale and Song Thrush, on the opposite side of this disc.

Documenting a species’ vocabulary incorporated an important scientific element into the publication as it illustrated that animals could utilise many different vocalisations to express specific functions and meanings. Possibly the best example of this was ‘Animal Language’, a sound book by Ludwig Koch and the evolutionary biologist Sir Julian Huxley in 1938. The publication was constructed in such a way that the disc complimented the book and vice versa, and neither could be fully appreciated without the other. This unison of text, image and sound created the first detailed consideration of animal behaviour available to the general public, with particular emphasis placed on the importance of acoustic communication within the animal kingdom. It also allowed the authors to explain the process of wildlife sound recording with all of its challenges and requirements. Ludwig Koch travelled around Whipsnade and London Zoos for several months in late 1937 – early 1938 using a portable recording studio in the form of a seven ton van. A microphone connected to a long lead would be attached to the required enclosure, meaning that the van could be positioned out of view so as not to disturb the animal in question. The book contains a wonderful passage that will resonate with all wildlife recordists and tells the tale of Koch’s attempts to record wolves at Whipsnade. Huxley wrote:

The wolf pack at Whipsnade can only be described as disobliging. As the head keeper explained, the wolves usually start their concerted howling when they hear a particular siren which goes at five each afternoon. But when the microphone was put in position, the siren failed to elicit any response. The wolves looked towards Mr Koch, who was standing by it, with a sort of sly defiance, but remained entirely mute.

One can sympathise.

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## Identification guides

The sole function of the earliest published wildlife recordings was to entertain and amaze the listener and this general purpose was sustained until the early 1930s when the first identification guides came onto the market. The role of the identification guide was to aid both the amateur and professional ornithologist in learning to recognise the songs and calls of commonly heard species. The first collection of wild bird recordings to be brought together on one disc was 'Bird Songs Recorded from Nature' by Albert R. Brand and M. Peter Keane, released in the USA in 1931. Brand came to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology in 1929 after leaving his job as a broker on the New York Stock Exchange. Studying ornithology under the lab's founder, Dr Arthur Allen, allowed Brand to pursue his interest in sound recording and together with undergraduate Peter Keane, they began to build up a collection of American bird voices. Cornell would go on to produce notable North American field guides such as the six disc set 'American Bird Songs' which was released in 1942.

Another pioneer field recordist was the self-taught Danish ornithologist Carl Weismann. During his lifetime, Weismann recorded a wealth of material and published a number of recordings, many through his own record label. In the early 1930s, Weismann approached the recently founded Dansk Stats Radiofonien (Danish State Radio) and enquired as to whether they possessed equipment that would be suitable for recording wildlife in the field. As wildlife sound recording was still largely unexplored at the time, Weismann must have put forward a convincing argument because the following spring saw him setting up dynamic microphones in the Danish countryside. Microphone signals were transmitted to a radio studio via telegraph wires which ran alongside a railway line and cut into wax discs which would later be used to create permanent records of Weismann's efforts. The Thrush Nightingale was the first species to be immortalised using this method and many more birds were to follow over the coming years.

Five discs were published as an untitled set at the end of 1934 and distributed to schools across Denmark. Weismann would go on to compile an impressive collection of wildlife recordings, many of which were published on the Carl Weismann record label. 'Voice Recordings of Danish Birds' was a collection of eleven discs released from 1939-1955, which featured 66 species and introduced the concept of geographical variation within the songs of birds such as the Yellowhammer and Chaffinch.

Weismann produced other identification guides that covered a range of birds, mammals and amphibians as well as discs specifically aimed at children. Weismann's singing dog orchestra is perhaps his best known achievement outside of the ornithological community, with 'The Singing Dogs' making it to number 22 on the Billboard chart in 1955.

Ludwig Koch had begun his wildlife recording career in Germany, working with Berlin Zoological Gardens Director, Lutz Heck, on 'Schrei der Steppe' (1933) and 'Der Wald Erschallt' (1934). In 1935 Koch worked with ornithologist Dr Oskar Heinroth on 'Gefiederte Meistersänger', which comprised three double-sided discs featuring the songs and, in several cases, the calls of twenty five German birds. The discs were accompanied by a ninety-six page illustrated book which provided in depth information on each species. A second three disc volume was released by Heinroth in 1937, at which point Koch had fled Nazi Germany and taken up residence in the UK.

Shortly after his arrival, Koch was introduced to the well known publisher Harry Witherby, and alongside ornithologist Max Nicholson, the trio began work on a sound guide to the voices of common British birds. 'Songs of Wild Birds' was released in 1936 (Figure 3) and was the first of several notable identification guides to be championed by Koch. 'More Songs of Wild Birds' was released in 1937 and the four disc set 'Songs of British Birds' appeared in 1953. This guide, produced in collaboration with the BBC, was the first to group species according to habitat.





Figure 3. Box set cover illustration for 'Songs of Wild Birds' (Witherby, 1936)

The Swedish Broadcasting Corporation (Radiojanst, then Sveriges Radio), began a programme of natural history location recording at the beginning of 1925. The aim was to compile a collection of Swedish bird recordings for broadcasts and publication that would encourage a greater appreciation and interest in the natural world. The first publications to be compiled were a series of five double-sided discs that featured twenty three common bird species including the Skylark, Blackbird and Cuckoo. The discs were prepared specifically for Swedish schools and were available by December 1937. A Marconi steel tape recorder was used to make these initial recordings as it allowed up to thirty minutes of uninterrupted recording. Useful segments from that thirty minute window of sound could then be copied on to disc.

In 1938, Radiojanst obtained its first mobile recording van and this signalled the beginning of an immense recording programme undertaken by Gunnar Lekander and Sture Palmér which resulted in no less than sixty five discs containing the voices of one hundred eighty three species being released from 1938 to 1956.

Tsuruhiko Kabaya and Kasuke Hoshino were responsible for the first published collection of bird sounds from the Palearctic region to be recorded outside Europe. 'Japanese Bird Songs' was published in 1954 by the Japanese Victor Company and comprised nine discs of vocalisations and general bird choruses.

Witherby's Sound-Guide to British Birds was the greatest achievement in avian identification guides when it was published in 1969. The compilation consisted of thirteen double-sided discs featuring one hundred ninety four species (over three hundred individual recordings) and became the first comprehensive guide to British bird vocalisations. Myles North and Eric Simms (the then Director of wildlife sound recording projects at the BBC)

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co-authored the set and together produced one of the finest natural history publications ever released. Broadcaster and naturalist James Fisher described the collection as being “a milestone on the golden road of ornithology” and represented “the most important instrument for the advance of our art, sport and science that has been made since the Handbook of British Birds appeared in 1938-41” (pv).

### The demise of the 78

After a life span of around fifty years, the 78 rpm disc was gradually replaced by newer formats that offered features such as improved signal to noise ratio, wider frequency and dynamic range, longer playing times and increased substrate flexibility. By 1960 the gramophone record was largely out of production and the era of the 78 had come to an end.

### Conclusion

A complete description of all commercial wildlife recordings released during the gramophone era is beyond the scope of this article. The intention has been to highlight some of the key events in the history of early wildlife sound publications and celebrate those early pioneers who played critical roles in the development of this genre. Many of these publications formed the foundations of natural history sound archives such as those located at the British Library and the BBC. In the early days of archiving wildlife sounds, the proportion of published recordings to unpublished was much higher than it is today. The emergence of portable recording equipment at affordable prices allowed individuals to start building their own personal collections and this resulted in the proliferation of unpublished recordings. Recordings produced for non-commercial purposes now greatly outweigh published items in the British Library's wildlife sound collection. Commercial recordings still make a valuable contribution to the archive as they help document technological developments, express the change in popular tastes and demonstrate the continued evolution of an audio field.

Almost all publications discussed in this paper are archived and available for listening at the British Library. A selection of early wildlife recordings can also be found on the British Library's website <http://sounds.bl.uk/>.

The Library continues to seek out items that are not represented in the archive and strives to possess a complete collection of commercial wildlife recordings from 1910 to the present day.

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