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Songs of Love and War: The Dark Heart of Bird Behaviour

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BOOK REVIEW

Songs of Love and War: The Dark Heart of Bird Behaviour

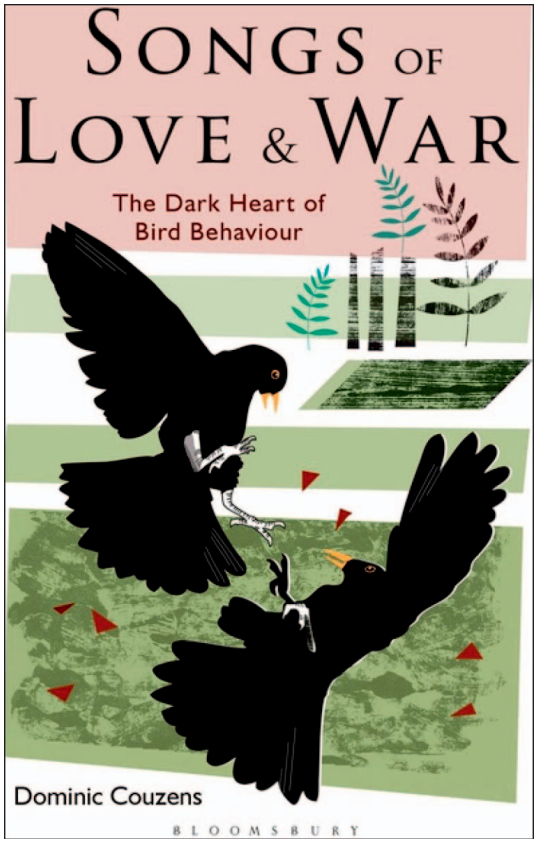
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Songs of Love and War: The Dark Heart of Bird Behaviour by Dominic Couzens. 2017. Bloomsbury, London,UK. 256 pp. $27 (hardcover). ISBN 978-1-4729-0991-6 (ePUB: 978-1-4729-0992-3).

> "The dawn chorus has begun with a lone voice and a whisper, but the first voice is like the first drop of rain in a shower." (p. 21)



Dominic Couzens, an ornithologist and wildlife journalist, beautifully describes many intriguing facets of bird behavior, from mating strategies to how and why birds migrate to nighttime roosting patterns, using classic research papers as his sources. He uses vivid metaphors to enhance the reader's appreciation of topics that could be difficult to convey in prose, for example territorial counter-singing in Common Nightingales (*Luscinia megarhynchos*):

> "…being nightingales, their vocal skirmish was expressed in the most glorious exchanges of song: loud, varied, inventive, egging each other on towards more wondrous creativity. It was like listening to an argument between poetry fans, each yelling ever more complex and noisy extracts from Shakespeare" (p. 34).

The topics covered in detail include, besides those mentioned above, territoriality, mate choice, competition for resources, predation, and brood parasitism. There is also a chapter devoted to the European Robin (*Erithacus rubecula*), the clear favorite in a 2015 online poll of respondents asked about their preference for Britain's National Bird. Apparently, this designation has not yet been officially sanctioned by the government (p. 141).

Couzens integrates his experiences observing and pondering bird behavior with his observations and pondering of human behavior, creating some images that are comical—participants in a spring bird walk on a cold, dark morning were "huddled on a street corner like Emperor Penguins withstanding an Antarctic gale" (p. 19)—and making other points that are more provocative. For example, he wonders about the relative proportion of songbird mortality attributable to Eurasian Magpies (*Pica pica*), which many backyard birders dislike, versus the proportion due to the large number of beloved pet cats that are allowed to roam freely outside day and night.

One of the later chapters, *Recreating the Pastoral Symphony*, is intriguingly presented. At the initial description of a section of Beethoven's sixth symphony, which includes representations of the songs of the nightingale, Common Quail (*Coturnix coturnix*), and Common Cuck-

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oo (*Cuculus canorus*), I was wary about where this was going—throwing in some Beethoven to make things a bit more highbrow? By the end of the chapter, though, I had been won over by the format. Couzens used the co-occurrence of these species in the symphony to discuss the information we can glean from our observations of bird behavior, like the times of day and months of the year birds sing, and the types of habitat important to them. He also used the symphony as a jumping-off point for discussions of the variability in songs sung by a single species, the intricacies of cuckoos' brood-parasitic behavior, and the process of song learning by individual birds. The chapter put listening to the symphony on my to-do list.

The target audience is those members of the general public who are particularly interested in birds and behavior and don't regularly read the scientific literature. Many of the research results described will be familiar to anyone who has taken an animal behavior or ornithology course within the last couple of decades; although some of the references used are from the past decade, the majority are older. References pertinent to particular chapters are not cited in the text but listed at the end of the book, a reasonable format for this type of popular writing. However, it would have been valuable, and not taken much additional text, to list the volume and page numbers for the references in the end-of-the-book list. Along these same lines, I would have recommended providing the scientific names for all the species mentioned (as I have added in this review), even if it was at the end of the book rather than in the body of the text. Although I could generally guess which species he was referring to on the basis of location, there are, for example, several nightingale species in Turkey, and I would have felt more comfortable with a confirmation that I was thinking of the correct one.

The views and research presented come primarily from studies conducted in the temperate zone (many from Europe and, more specifically, the United Kingdom), which colors some of the information presented. For example, although Couzens briefly mentions that some female birds sing, he discounts this point in his focus on male song and its function. Many tropical female birds sing, likely for territory defense, and recent research shows that temperate-zone females also sing, which is given a brief mention later in the book. Thus, a greater emphasis on the contexts where singing occurs, rather than who is doing it, would have been somewhat more informative.

The overarching theme of the book is that, in contrast to humans, "birds are never safe and their lives are brief and violent" (p. 16). I'm not sure this theme serves the book particularly well, given that this perspective, as Couzens appreciates, springs from the perch of many of us in the developed world. I found it difficult to read some of the passages about human society, such as "Starvation is rare, disease and ill health are kept in check, and violent crime—roughly equivalent to predation—has a place on the margins of our reality" (p. 15), without thinking of the many contexts in the world today where this statement is false. The phenomena described, and the clarity of the explanations for the phenomena, would have carried the book without this theme.

The beautiful descriptions of bird behavior, the weaving of these descriptions with Couzens's ponderings about the behavior of his fellow humans, the accessible rendering of research results, and his expression of the intricacy and marvelousness of it all are excellent reasons to read the book.

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