

The soft song of the zebra finch

You hardly ever hear zebra finches singing in the wild. Why not? Birds sing loudly to attract a partner or to mark their territory, or so the theory goes. But the zebra finch, an avian model for research on birdsong, challenges this idea. The most extensively researched songbird in the world pretty much whispers, discovered PhD candidate Hugo Loning.

Loning conducted his research on the zebra finch's song in Australia, the home of this little bird, which is also a popular pet. Loning recorded the song and calls of the birds, edited his recordings to obtain a standard sound, and measured how far the different frequencies of that sound carried.

Simultaneous brooding

He then compared the picture he got to the zebra finch's hearing threshold, which had been determined in previous research. And what did he find? Zebra finches cannot

They only hear each other at nine metres away

adds. 'At nine metres, you hear only some of the song.' Loning also studied the distance between the birds when they sing.

That distance averages just one and a half metres, an observation that is supported by the measurements. So the zebra finch's song is too soft to communicate across distances. Which is not something they need to do, as these birds are not territorial. Nor do they use their song to attract a potential mate: zebra finches are monogamous and faithful by

hear each other from more than nine metres away. 'And that is the detection range,' Loning

nature. Most of the singing happens once a partner has already been found. So why do zebra finches sing? Loning: 'My hypothesis is that they time brooding this way. There are advantages to having their young at the same time. It makes it easier for young birds to find mates, for example.' AK

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Photo Hugo Loning