

## Avian hide and seek

'Quick, she's gone to get the milk out of the fridge for her cereal, there's time for a few of you to have a go!'

A small squadron of sparrows took their chances while her back was turned, alighting on the feeder and pecking furiously at beakfuls of sunflower hearts. The human shook her head as she sat back down, convinced that the flash at the edge of her eyelid was a glimpse of retreating feathers. Around the side of the house, unseen, an occasional chirrup focused her gaze again, but the garden remained frustratingly bare.

'Is it our turn next?' chimed half a dozen blue tits. 'Those fatballs look really tasty, and we're peckish.'

'What about us?' this from a couple of ground-feeding blackbirds who only got the dregs of whatever the smaller species spat out.

'I don't know why you won't let me in on the act,' complained a jay, 'I'll make myself as inconspicuous as possible, honest.'

'But there are more of us,' sang a whole family of starlings, 'and we're starving!'

'Yes, and you took all the best bits yesterday,' moaned a tiny siskin, 'I don't stand a chance.'

'Well, those larger chaps need more to fill them up, don't they?' came the backchat from a blackcap.

'Will you for goodness sake pipe down or she's going to get suspicious,' continued the owl, yawning with the effort of his extended nightshift. 'You sound more like a Greek chorus than a dawn one. Cut out the squabbling!'

'Why the secrecy all of a sudden? Normally we can come and go as free as a, well, bird.'

'Oh Robin, she's doing the annual bird count, don't you ever learn? It's only for an hour.'

'I know, but surely it's a good thing if we give her the encouragement and enjoyment of seeing our beautiful selves flitting about her garden?'

'On any other day of the week, yes, but she's going to report these figures back and we can't have them getting too complacent, can we? We want them to make sure they continue to look out for us, feed us in the winter, that sort of thing. If you boisterous lot charge in looking all hale and hearty, they might think it's all hunky-dory. Treat 'em mean, keep 'em keen on bird count day. Understand?'

Robin, tight-beaked, looked a bit dubious but continued to keep out of sight, against his better nature.

'You can have a go now, anyway,' urged the owl, 'she's concentrating on buttering her toast.'

Once the marmalade was spread to her satisfaction, the human glanced up to see that the empty birdfeeders were distinctly swinging. And there wasn't a breath of wind. 'Oh well, time's up.'

The owl peered tentatively round the edge of the window. Putting binoculars to his already powerful eyes, he homed in on the scoresheet. Scarcely any tally against pictures of the usual suspects, 'Hang on, what's this? "Any other species: one sparrowhawk".'

'Run away!'