A male white-crowned sparrow sings to protect his territory and attract mates in San Francisco.

As the streets of San Francisco emptied out in the first months of the pandemic, the city's male birds began singing more softly and improving their vocal range, making them "sexier" to females, according to a new study published Thursday.

"When the city was loud, they were singing really loudly," Elizabeth Derryberry, a behavioral ecologist at the University of Tennessee, who led the study published in Science, told AFP.

The number of vehicles on the Golden Gate Bridge collapsed to 1954 levels, the researchers found. They compared birdsong data they had collected from previous years to recordings made at the same sites from April to May 2020, finding the sparrows were now singing far more quietly, and were able to hit much lower notes, which in turn expanded their range and enhanced their overall performance.

Imagine going to a party at a friend's house: at the start of the night you speak at a normal volume, but as the place fills up you have to raise your voice to be heard.

"When you're shouting at a cocktail party, your voice is not at its best," said Derryberry, adding that it was similar for birds.

As noise pollution decreased, "their songs also sounded better, they sounded sexier," she said.

"They were better competitors, and they sounded like better mates to females."

But as traffic ground to a halt following a statewide shelter-in-place order in spring, noise levels fell by 50 percent, she said.
behaviors to the Covid-19 shutdowns

The scientists were surprised by just how far the volume of their songs had dropped—almost a third.

The authors said their research showed just how quickly birds can adapt to changing environments, and suggest that finding long-term solutions to curbing noise pollution might lead to other positive outcomes like higher species diversity.


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Species factfile on the white-capped sparrows.

But despite this, the sparrows' trills could still be heard from twice as far away compared to before the shutdown, tying in with anecdotal reports of birdsongs becoming more conspicuous to humans.

Singing through the lockdown

Study finds that reduced noise during lockdown led to improved quality of birdsong among San Francisco’s population of white-crowned sparrows

Quiet streets

How they changed their song
Drop in vocal amplitude
- Singing less loudly

Reduction in minimum frequencies
- Reaching lower notes

The changes amount to an improvement in the quality of the performance, according to researchers

Study: E.P. Derryberry et al, Science, September 24

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