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# BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

## 6 Minute English

### Why do gibbons sing duets?



*NB: This is not a word-for-word transcript*

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**Rob**

Hello and welcome to 6 Minute English. I'm Rob...

**Neil**

And hello! I'm Neil.

**Rob**

Hi there Neil. Have you ever had a close encounter with a monkey or an ape?

**Neil**

Well I am sitting right next to you, Rob.

**Rob**

Very funny. No, Neil is referring to the fact that all humans are descended from apes, and apes and monkeys belong to a group of animals called **primates**. The difference is that monkeys have tails, and apes don't.

**Neil**

Well, I didn't know that. On a serious note... I had **a close shave** with some monkeys once in Bali.

**Rob**

A close shave is where you only just manage to avoid a dangerous situation. So Neil, what happened?

**Neil**

I was walking up a mountain on my own and suddenly a bunch of monkeys jumped out of nowhere, blocking my path.

**Rob**

Oh goodness! OK. So what did you do?

**Neil**

After standing there for ages while the monkeys screeched at me, I turned round and walked back the way I came.

**Rob**

OK. If you **screech** at someone it means to make a loud, high and unpleasant sound. So the monkeys won that **face-off**, then!

**Neil**

Absolutely! Yes, they did. And a face-off, by the way, means an argument or fight.

**Rob**

Well, today's show is about gibbons and the different sounds they make. **Gibbons** are small apes that live in South East Asia. And while Neil's monkeys screech unpleasantly, gibbons sound like they are singing.

**Neil**

Musical apes – that's nice! So how about today's quiz question, Rob?

**Rob**

OK, good idea. How far can a gibbon's voice travel through the forest? Is it...

- a) 500m
- b) 1km
- or c) 5km?

**Neil**

Hmm. Well, I have to guess and I'm going to say b) 1km.

**Rob**

You've never heard one.

**Neil**

Never heard one...

**Rob**

OK. We'll find out later in the programme whether you're right or wrong. Now let's listen to what a gibbon really sounds like.

### **Interview with Dr Esther Clarke, researcher at Durham University**

**Interviewer:** Let's just hear this. [gibbons calling] That's an absolutely wonderful, evocative sound, isn't it? Beautiful sound. And what are they doing there then? That is... I said, talking to each other.

**Dr Clarke:** Well this is their... They're singing together. So a male and a female, when they hold a territory together, will sing every morning what they call a duet. All the groups...

**Interviewer:** What we call a duet.

**Dr Clarke:** Yes, absolutely. And they'll all sing together at the same time, and the whole forest will be alive with this cacophony of song.

**Rob**

So the gibbons make an **evocative** sound. If something is evocative it brings strong feelings or memories to mind.

**Neil**

And something that is evocative is usually pleasant, Rob.

**Rob**

It is. And what's also interesting is that the apes are singing in pairs – one male and one female. They are singing **duets** together. So, a duet is a song sung by two people – or in this case, sung by two gibbons!

**Neil**

And a lot of gibbons are singing duets at the same time – which Dr Clarke describes as a **cacophony**. Cacophony means a mix of loud noises, which often sound out of tune.

**Rob**

And that could easily describe us singing together!

**Neil**

Let's not do that.

**Rob**

But what's the reason for the gibbon duets, Neil?

**Neil**

Well, the songs advertise the relationship between the male and the female. And they also help to make clear which **territory** – or bit of land – belongs to a pair or group of gibbons.

**Rob**

Gibbons also use different sounds to **alert** – or warn – other gibbons about danger from **predators** – these are animals that eat other animals. The gibbons use a quiet 'hoo hoo' call to communicate that a leopard is nearby, and an even quieter 'hoo hoo' call for an eagle.

**Neil**

You're very good at that Rob.

**Rob**

Thank you.

**Neil**

Now let's hear more from Dr Clarke about this. How does she describe language?

**Dr Esther Clarke, researcher at Durham University**

Yes, so the idea is that if we find things like context-specific calling in non-human primates, it suggests that way back in time the ancestor that we shared with them also had context-specific calling so basically it just gives us some clues [as] to the evolutionary roots of complex communication like language.

**Rob**

Dr Clarke says that if we go far enough back in time humans and other primates such as monkeys and apes have the same **ancestor**.

**Neil**

Right. And ancestor means an animal – or human – from the past that a modern animal or human has descended from. So if this common ancestor used **context-specific** calls like modern gibbons – then it could have passed on this ability to humans a long time ago.

**Rob**

Context-specific calling means different calls for different situations, for example one call for 'leopard' and another for 'eagle'.

**Neil**

And **evolutionary** means a gradual process of change or development.

**Rob**

OK, let's have the answer to the quiz question. Earlier I asked: How far can a gibbon's voice travel through the forest? Is it: a) 500m b) 1km or c) 5km?

**Neil**

And I said b) 1km.

**Rob**

And you were right! A good guess! Perhaps you do know a lot about gibbons. So well done! Now, can we hear today's words again maybe in a gibbon's voice Neil?

**Neil**

I'm not sure about that. I'll do it in a human voice.

primates

a close shave

screech

face-off

gibbons

evocative

duet

cacophony

territory

alert

predators

ancestor

evolutionary

**Rob**

Thank you. Well, that's the end of today's 6 Minute English. You can hear more 6 Minute English programmes on our website at [bbclearningenglish.com](http://bbclearningenglish.com). Please join us again soon.

**Both**

Bye.

## **Vocabulary**

### **primates**

animals belonging to the same group as humans, which includes monkeys and apes

### **a close shave**

a dangerous or difficult situation you just manage to avoid

### **screech at someone**

a loud, high and unpleasant sound

### **face-off**

argument or fight

### **gibbons**

small apes that live in Southeast Asia

### **evocative**

brings strong feelings or memories to mind

### **duet**

a song sung by two people

### **cacophony**

mix of loud noises, which often sound out of tune

### **territory**

an area of land

### **alert**

warn

### **predators**

animals that kill and eat other animals

### **ancestor**

an animal – or human – from the past that a modern animal or human has descended from

### **evolutionary**

a gradual process of change or development