testing, testing

Too much knowledge can be a dangerous thing...

We all know that bird identification can be tricky – it's part of the challenge that makes birding such a compelling activity. And there's no doubt that birders differ in their abilities; we've all had a quiet chuckle at some rookie errors and marvelled at how sharp the top birders are. Of course, birding ability is not consistent across the board. There's a strong element of home-ground advantage; even the best birders are humbled when they travel away from home.

Some birders are particularly good at recognising birds from their calls; others favour specific groups. Probably because I got my first binoculars when I was seven, I think that people who begin birding as kids tend to be better birders. I support this conceit by the fact that I'm better with the bird groups I grew up with, such as larks, seabirds and shorebirds, than forest birds, because the Western Cape is not well endowed with forests. But there's also an individual element to the way your birding ability develops. One of my long-standing birding mates is far better at identifying raptors than I am (to be honest, he's way better at most birds, but the gap is greatest for raptors), probably because he had more passion for raptors when we were learning our craft.

Such variability is inevitable in any human endeavour. But for researchers who want to use birders to identify birds for scientific purposes, such differences are a potentially significant bias that need to be assessed. And the more observers you use, the harder it is to ensure consistency among them. Citizen science projects deal with these problems by having protocols to try to weed out unlikely records. For the Southern African Bird Atlas Project, SABAP2 uses data already collected to decide if a particular record is unusual enough to trigger a verification process – an out-of-range form is automatically generated when you report a bird outside its expected range. Completing these forms is a crucial step in quality control for SABAP and we owe a debt of thanks to the Regional Atlas Committee members who assess whether there is enough information to support these records.

The notion of questioning other peoples' identifications is a very sensitive matter. Gaining a reputation as a stringer (someone who – either deliberately or by accident – claims rare birds that don't actually exist) is perhaps the worst fate imaginable for a birder. As an aside, I had a panicky moment while birding in Israel many years ago when I received an electric shock to my head and the thought that flashed through my mind (along with 220 volts) was 'I hope I don't lose my life list!'. I'm more sanguine about such a prospect now; imagine starting birding again – the joy you could get from seeing all the common birds for the first time. Such rationalisation is probably just preparing myself for senility. But I digress.

Fortunately, these days the digital revolution has meant that many people take images of the rare birds they see and so we can rely on more than their description of the bird. Members of rarities committees will confirm that it's much easier to adjudicate a record where there is photographic evidence; anyone who can read a field guide can write a convincing description of a rare bird (which reiterates the importance of having a squeaky-clean reputation). But birds in images can also be tricky to identify and a product of the digital revolution is that we now have people who take images of birds without any idea of the identity of the bird they are photographing.

Which finally brings us to the point of this article. How good are birders at identifying birds from photographs? Can we rely on 'crowd-sourced' identifications of birds to generate information about distribution and abundance? Countless mystery bird competitions show that, just as in real life experiences, identifying birds from images can be challenging. But the advantage in identifying birds from photographs is that you have more control over the process – everyone has the same amount of information on which to make a call. So it was probably inevitable that someone would test how good birders really are.

The study was conducted in the UK, where there are more birders than birds and thus a ready supply of research subjects (bored birders with time on their hands). Nils Bouillard and his colleagues from the Imperial College, London, put together a team including researchers from the University of Brighton and the Durrell Institute of Conservation and Ecology at the University of Kent. They selected a series of 24 images of common British birds for an online test that asked birders to rate their birding ability on a scale of 1 (novice) to 5 (expert) and then to identify the species. The questionnaire generated almost 2700 responses; you can still view the survey at *https://goo.gl/forms/cjFXoVjjAREcNxLL2*

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The Common Starling (juvenile shown) was one of six British bird species used to test entrants in the online ID quiz.

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Unsurprisingly, birders who rated themselves as experts tended to correctly identify more images than those birders who rated their expertise more modestly. Novices misidentified (or couldn't identify) 65 per cent of all images, whereas experts only misidentified five per cent. However, experts were also more likely to misidentify common birds as rarities. Overall, four per cent of respondents identified at least one bird in the quiz as a rarity, including species not yet recorded in the UK, despite the questionnaire specifically stating that it was a test of ability to identify common British birds.

The study suggested that the desire to 'tick' as many species as possible might account for this pattern and warned that 'records of rare species should always be considered with caution even if the reporters consider themselves to be experts'. I quote this directly, because I don't want to be accused of suggesting that self-proclaimed experts should be doubted – this is the conclusion of the Imperial College study!

Anyone who's chased a rare bird can attest to the confirmation bias that can occur at twitches. A few years ago I drove out to Stilbaai to look for the Red-necked Buzzard that spent a few weeks in the area. I arrived to find a group of birders congratulating each other on seeing what turned out to be a Peregrine sitting on a distant powerline! They were very relieved when the actual bird pitched up half an hour later. Sometimes we see what we want to see, not what's right in front of us.

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above *Birders often display their ability (or at least their commitment to birding) through the array of optical equipment they lug around.*