CLAIRE SPOTTISWOODE

NEW COLLABORATION

between southern Africa and Germany

SABINE SPEHN

In southern Germany, between Munich and the Alps, lies a scientific institute alongside a lake surrounded by forest and meadows. The raucous calls of Black Woodpeckers can be heard from the woods and Black Redstarts broadcast their crackling songs above their nest boxes among the office buildings. This is Seewiesen, home of the Max Planck Institute for Biological Intelligence (MPI-BI), the result of a merger between the Max Planck Institute of Behavioural Physiology and the Max Planck Institute of Ornithology. Seewiesen has a rich history of scientific discovery, continuing to this day in a vibrant community of field and lab ornithologists who work on ecology, evolution and neurobiology.

How does this relate to the FitzPatrick Institute? For the first time in Africa, and only the second in the Global South, a new and prestigious Max Planck Society 'virtual centre of excellence' has been established under the directorship of Professor Claire Spottiswoode at the Fitz and Professor Bart Kempenaers at the MPI-BI. Known as the Max Planck–University of Cape Town Centre for Behaviour and Coevolution, the Centre will initially run for five years, with funding from the Max Planck Foundation and a matching contribution from UCT.

The Centre was officially launched with a ceremony and scientific workshop at the MPI-BI in Seewiesen in mid-June. Fitz staff and students travelled to Germany for the occasion, marking the first opportunity for us as a team to meet our MPI-BI colleagues and further discuss our collaboration. The opening ceremony was attended by the President of the Max Planck Society, Professor Patrick Cramer, a delegation from the South African Consulate in Germany and representatives of the Max Planck Foundation. It was followed by a week of scientific talks, discussions and local outings.

This new partnership between the FitzPatrick Institute and the MPI-BI will enable us to undertake an array of diverse research projects, including studies on the effects of fire on bird movements; how bird eggs avoid overheating in a warming world; and how African birds adjust their breeding seasons in response to a changing climate. Other projects explore the role of learning in co-evolutionary arms races between brood-parasitic birds and their hosts, and the interactions between people across Africa and the Greater Honeyguides that guide them to bees' nests.

The Centre will foster collaboration and discovery by combining the complementary skills and scientific knowledge of the Fitz and the MPI-BI, and by facilitating the exchange of early-career researchers and scientists.

ABOVE, LEFT Scientists and students from the Fitz and the MPI-BI birding in Seewiesen.

ABOVE Fitz, MPI-BI and Max Planck Foundation representatives at the opening ceremony in Germany.

For instance, the MPI-BI in Seewiesen offers state-of-the-art aviaries where FitzPatrick Institute scientists and students will conduct experiments. Likewise, MPI-BI researchers are collaborating with Fitz teams at our unique field sites in South Africa, Zambia and Mozambique. The new Centre will support numerous graduate students and several post-doctoral fellows and junior research team leaders at the Fitz, while also providing internships for students from Zambia and Mozambique.

We are excited to see how these projects evolve in the coming years and look forward to sharing the discoveries that result from this groundbreaking collaboration.

GABRIEL JAMIE, CLAIRE SPOTTISWOODE AND SUSAN MILLER

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