Inquisitory Birds: Thinking through the Ethics and Assumptions of Playback Responses in Birds

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Abstract: *A technique employed by both scientists and birders is the use of song playback to elicit a response from a bird. For birders, the intention is to encourage a hidden bird to reveal itself to the observer. On hearing the recording, the bird reacts with either an aggressive territorial response or inquisitory social approach. While the effects of playback on birds are incompletely understood, repeated exposure appears to influence a bird's subsequent behaviour. Where playback has been widely used, birds sometimes no longer respond to the sounds of their own species, ignore the sound, and thus deviate from their assumed natural behaviour. These effects have raised ethical questions about the use of playback in birding and in some places the practice is banned. This article examines the use of playback in birding and the wider questions this raises. Ethical debates around playback reveal ideas about what birds are, how they can potentially interact with humans, and how the aesthetics of birding are practiced and debated.*

A technique often employed by birders is the use of song or call playback to elicit a response from a bird. For birders, this is normally done to encourage a hidden bird to reveal itself to the observer.[2] On hearing the recording, the bird is thought to react as though the sound is from another of its kind and moves towards its origin, either as an aggressive territorial response or inquisitory interactive approach. Birders are very concerned with trying to see birds[3] and if they are skulking in dense habitats such as forest, the use of playback can make this much easier. In many respects this is the modern technological version of the imitation that hunters have long used to entice their quarry a little closer and into a clearer spot.[4] Birders are not the only people to use playback. It has been widely used by scientists trying to understand bird behaviour[5] and monitor bird populations.[6] Bird banders or ringers will use playback to attract specific species of bird into their traps for ringing.[7] Conservationists also use playback to try to attract birds to their reserves to settle and breed.[8]

Playback has become much easier to do in recent decades because the calls of many birds are readily available on mobile apps or downloads. Playback of almost every bird in the world is now available, often for free, via any smartphone rather than requiring numerous tapes, a player, and speakers. This digital proliferation has generated some concerns. While the long-term effects of playback on birds are not thoroughly understood and relatively few studies have investigated these, repeated exposure can sometimes influence a bird's subsequent behaviour.[9] In places where playback has been widely used, birders claim that some birds no longer respond to the sounds of their own species as previously; they

1 Author's e-mail address: a.whitehouse@abdn.ac.uk.
2 Harris and Haskell 2013.
3 Whitehouse 2013.
4 Feld 1990 [1982]: 61; Magnus and Bhattacharya 2023.
5 See De Rosa et al. 2022.
6 E.g. Marion et al. 1981.
7 E.g. Depino and Areta 2019.
8 E.g. Ward and Schlossberg 2004.
9 See Harris and Haskell 2013.

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become 'played out', ignore the sound and thus deviate from their assumed natural behaviour.[10] These effects have raised ethical questions about the use of playback in birding and in some places the practice is banned or restricted.[11] The use of playback by scientists, ringers, and conservationists is less controversial, perhaps because of the utilitarian view that the stress and disruption caused to birds is outweighed by the gains in knowledge or breeding success. Birders, conversely, are said to use playback merely to enhance their own pleasure, by seeing a new species or getting better views of a bird, and this appears to lead to the practice being viewed as more problematic than uses that are scientific or conservationist. For example, a recent article argued that "[r]esearchers have used playback as an effective survey tool for ornithological research and monitoring, but amateur use is controversial because of potential negative effects on birds."[12] The implication here is that the effects only became negative when playback is used by amateurs, while professional use is seen as ethically unproblematic because the benefits to knowledge outweigh any disturbance and stress.

A potential response to these ethical issues is to say that playback should not be used by birders at all, at least for something as seemingly trivial as seeing a new species of bird for one's list. Others have put forward guidance about how playback might be used in ways that are not harmful to the bird. My intention here is to consider the dynamics of playback use by birders, how these interactions with other species are understood, and what ethical arguments about playback use reveal. These arguments disclose ideas both about how birding should be conducted and why birds might be adversely affected, which in turn demonstrate assumptions about how humans should behave and what birds are really like. Although I do not intend to make claims on the appropriateness of playback use, in exploring its underlying assumptions, new questions can be raised that are relevant to evaluating whether playback should be used by birders.

In a recent article, Anna Tsing discusses the use of playback by birders in Waigeo, an island in West Papua.[13] There, she encountered a group of Raja Ampat Pitohuis (*Pitohui cerviniventris*), which appeared together in response to birders playing a sound recording of its call. She speculates that the appearance of a group rather than an individual suggests that the birds were curious rather than it being a territorial response to repel an invader. This paper supports Tsing's case for curious, inquisitory interactions and adds further explanation. To do this, I begin with the role of territoriality in understanding avian responses to playback. This is followed by discussion of care and skill in playback use, which is significant in explaining how playback can be differentiated into 'good' and 'bad'. I use a case study of an interaction through playback with a largely unknown species, Stresemann's bristlefront, to introduce the idea that some responses may be more inquisitory than strictly territorial. This raises further ontological questions about what the bird understands about playback and how this might differ from assumptions that are made in ethical debates around its use, particularly the concern that overuse of playback leads to birds becoming 'played out' and not responding as they should. A further concern, that playback disrupts the aesthetics of birding, is then addressed through a discussion of arguments about detachment and polite observation. I conclude by reconsidering these themes through perspectives in which birds and animals are considered as ethical subjects who make both positive and negative judgements about the sounds they encounter. The overarching aim is to use these themes to reveal assumptions about birds and human-bird interactions and to examine how the ethics of playback could be considered in new ways if these assumptions are questioned. By considering birds as ethical subjects embedded in infra- and inter-species relations, I also raise possibilities for rethinking the ethical dimensions of playback in ways that avoid Cartesian

10 Benedict 2019.
11 Sibley 2011.
12 Johnson and Maness 2018: 136.
13 Tsing 2022: 28–29.

mechanistic assumptions and utilitarian arguments that reduce birds to bodies that suffer calculable effects.

To address these questions, I draw on a widely read argument about the ethical use of playback by the well-known American ornithologist David Sibley.[14] I also use three recent articles on the use and ethics of playback, the first by David Watson, Elizabeth Znidersic, and Michael Craig[15] on the wider dimensions of playback use in Colombia, the second by Riin Magnus and Sugata Bhattacharya[16] on the use of playback by Estonian birders, and the third by Lauryn Benedict[17] aimed at giving birders an ornithologist's perspective on playback use. My analysis is influenced by the work of Vinciane Despret[18] on the conceptualization of territory in ornithological research. Since responses to playback are normally construed as territorial, how territories and territoriality are conceived has implications for what these responses entail and what lasting effects they might have. The discussion is augmented by my own experiences of playback use, both as a birder myself and together with experienced bird guides, and research conducted as part of the "Listening to Birds" project, which investigated people's relations with birds through sound.[19]

Territorial Responses

Although it is widely assumed that birds sing to establish and maintain a territory, this is challenging to demonstrate scientifically.[20] Various complex experiments have been attempted involving the capture of territorial birds and either removing them altogether and replacing their singing with recordings, or surgically muting the birds. The scientists can then observe whether there are more incursions into territory than previously. What this seems to show is that singing works to repel rivals from a territory. When birds are muted their territories are much more frequently invaded. Interestingly, the recordings of bird song only work to discourage rivals for a short period of time. Eventually other birds realize that although they can hear singing, the male bird is nowhere to be seen. This suggests that song is a first line of defence that needs reinforcing by the physical presence of the bird that is assumed to be its source. This territorial response often makes playback very effective, with birds coming closer to confront what they think is an apparent intruder in their territory, even if they eventually realize that 'the bird' is not really there. The responses of different birds (both individuals and species) can vary a great deal however, and this requires knowledge of the birds for it to be used effectively. By 'the bird', I refer to what is often considered the ontologically 'real' material creature rather than manifestations of its presence, such as the sound itself, or the human/sound unit in combination. These ontological assumptions about what 'the bird' really is have implications that are examined later.

Although using playback effectively is sometimes a straightforward case of pressing a button to play a recording, it is not necessarily lacking in skill. During fieldwork in Brazil in 2008 and elsewhere, I spent a lot of time talking to bird guides about how they use playback. In many cases, this is not simply a matter of playing the sound and waiting for the bird. The most effective use comes through close attention to what the bird is doing and from previous experience of that species or even of individual birds. Guides talk about whether a bird will respond quickly or slowly, whether it will come in low or high or stay for only a short time, and about whether the bird would respond or show at all. This is particularly important if the guide wishes to show the bird to their clients. Sometimes birds will make themselves obvious when they respond to playback but on other occasions the bird will still be elusive by coming

14 Sibley 2011.
15 Watson et al. 2019.
16 Magnus and Bhattacharya 2023.
17 Benedict 2019.
18 Despret 2022.
19 Based in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, this two-year project was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. *Listening to Birds* 2024.
20 Despret 2022.

in quietly or only for an instant. Knowing where and when to look is critical, as are the specifics of when to play the recording, how loud and where to position the speakers. In one case I was given detailed instructions on how I could use playback to see a uniform crake (*Amaurolimnas concolor*), a bird I was informed was among the hardest to see in South America. I should find an open area between two bits of marshy ground and play the call once every five minutes or so to try to replicate the normal pattern of calling from the birds. I should otherwise be very quiet and still and preferably be concealed. I would probably have to wait for at least an hour for the bird to show. I tried it and it never appeared.

So, what if there is no response from the bird? Most discussion of playback revolves around the effects on birds that respond, for example if they become physically stressed.[21] But often, there is no response. Of course, this could be because the bird is not there, but what if it is and chooses not to respond? Naturally, this is something difficult to assess scientifically. The stress of an imperceptible bird cannot be measured. But we must suppose that the effects of playback include these birds. To consider this possibility, I invoke Despret[22] and her discussion of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of deterritorialization. If responding to playback is territorial, could not responding be a form of deterritorialization? This happens, according to Despret, to create possibilities for reterritorialization. Do non-responsive birds begin this process, remaking relations and creating new territories, given the potential new arrival? As Despret puts it, "[o]n reading Deleuze and Guattari, I begin to realize that there is in fact nothing more '*dynamic*' than a territory, no matter how stable its borders might be or how faithful to it the residents may be".[23] The relational ripples of playback through a forest may elicit deterritorializations, even when there is no perceptible response. This is a reminder that playback introduces sounds that can both disrupt and build relations and that, even when care is taken over its use, there will always be effects that are hard to follow. This uncertainty is exacerbated by the ontological questions raised earlier about what the bird takes playback to be and is partly a question of what 'another bird' is to the bird. This may potentially be the sound as much as the physical creature but how convincing the sound itself can be as 'another bird' will vary. As the example above illustrates, sounds that manifest other birds will come from certain places but not others, will emerge in certain patterns and at a particular volume, and will also move in specific ways. This highlights the role of care and skill in playback and its significance to what is deemed to be good practice.

Care and Skill in Playback

Care and skill are essential elements of ethical playback, according to both Sibley[24] and Benedict.[25] Sibley emphasizes that birders should plan ahead, select the right spot, play the recording quietly, check for responses, and stay calm. Skill is thus linked to 'good' playback, which is inherently knowledgeable and responsive. But can playback still be used skilfully in complex encounters with birds that are from poorly known species that the birder has never encountered before? To illustrate this, I recount a story from fieldwork into bird sounds I conducted in Brazil in 2008.

Dave was an English birder who was staying at REGUA, a nature reserve and lodge in southeast Brazil where I was doing fieldwork. He suggested that I go with him on a trip to look for a bird called Stresemann's bristlefront (*Merulaxis stresemanni*).[26] I had never heard of the bird but thought it sounded like an adventure. After two days driving over 1,000 kilometres north, we find ourselves in Mata de Balbina, a small forest remnant and the only place on Earth that Stresemann's bristlefront is still known to be found. Although I had only recently learnt of this bird, I quickly came to know that it is almost mythical: nearly no one has seen it and virtually nothing is known about it. Until the mid-1990s it was only known from two museum specimens. In

21 E.g. Benedict 2019.
22 Despret 2022.
23 Despret 2022: 93.
24 Sibley 2011.
25 Benedict 2019.
26 Cf. Whitehouse 2015.

1995 it was rediscovered at a reserve in Bahia province, but it wasn't seen again at this site. Then in 2005 it was found by a Brazilian scientist at Balbina, and here we were three years later trying to find it.[27]

We have some idea of what the bird might look like from some bad illustrations in field guides, presumably drawn from museum specimens, and one recording of its song downloaded from the Internet.[28] This had been recorded a year earlier by Nick Athanas, an American tour guide who had conducted a trip to stake out the site. But this is all we know. I had listened a few times to the recording and not long after arriving in the forest I think I hear it. I avoid saying anything, and Dave thinks it could be something else. A couple of hours later the bird still eluded us, and so I play the song out through my iPod. We both look at one another and realize this is the sound we had heard earlier. We march back to where we had previously heard the bird and give the song another blast. Not long after we hear a response, initially distant but then closer. We both make recordings[29] of the sound we hear, which is coming from a dense area of scrub by the side of the trail. We play back our own recordings a few times, but it seems like the bristlefront is not going to come out whatever we do. "We'd better go in", says Dave and we scramble through the thick branches and a few metres through the trees.

Dave, who was very experienced at looking for birds in the Brazilian forests, is very precise about how we should go about playing the recordings. We play our recording occasionally, and rather quietly, to fit into a normal pattern of singing without scaring a wary bird with frequent, loud bursts of song. It seems to have a strategy of singing every minute or so for a while, before going quiet again for several minutes and then singing again from a different place, as if it is circling us at a distance. It keeps doing this for perhaps an hour but does not show itself. We decide to switch to the downloaded recording to see if that will work better. Earlier, I had noticed that this sounded different to our bird because it lacked the stuttering, alternating finish. Maybe its response would change with a different song. And, yes, this seems to encourage it to respond more quickly. What's more, it begins to overlap its own song with the recording, coming in at a particular point as if it's duetting.

Eventually I see it, first very briefly, running along the ground, but then much better as it sings. I am surprised to see that the bird is female, or at least has female type plumage. Perhaps this is why it responds in the way it does. I begin to speculate that Stresemann's bristlefront has a duetting song in which the male and female sing different parts. Maybe the bird is more interested in responding to a male song than to its own female song. Could it be that it recognized itself when we played our recordings back to it? Could it be that it recognized the song of the male bird we had downloaded? Perhaps it was its mate and they had sung together in the past. Because there are no descriptions in books of how this species sings, I feel unusually free in my speculation. This was not the 'well-trodden territory'[30] of the international birding community that Tsing describes in Waigeo, which renders most birds and places knowable in advance for globe travelling birders. What developed in the playback encounter was, it seemed, a meeting of songs in which two 'birds' interacted with one another's sound-making to produce a new, overlapping melody. Our jointly inquisitory interaction with the bird had produced a new performance and, it appeared, one the bird liked.

This inquisitory encounter with a poorly known species demonstrates the importance of responsiveness in successful playback use. It also shows that prior experience of elusive birds can suggest possible ways of encouraging a shy species to become curious enough to come in. There was an emphasis on not overdoing playback and changing the approach when things initially failed. These are the kinds of techniques that Sibley[31] emphasizes for 'good' playback. Successful playback, of course, does not mean ethical playback but the emphasis on skill and responsiveness shows an attentiveness to how

27 *Birdlife International* 2024.
28 This recording can be heard at https://xeno-canto.org/15283 [29.02.2024].
29 This recording can be heard at https://xeno-canto.org/22834 [29.02.2024].
30 Tsing 2022: 27.
31 Sibley 2011.

the bird perceives the encounter that is a prerequisite to knowing when playback might be harmful. The resulting inquisitory response suggests an encounter that avoided stressing the bird.

The Ontology of Sound and Bird

An assumption that could be made about the use of playback is that the bird is being fooled. It thinks it is hearing another bird, in most cases of its own kind, and is responding to this as a threat. Of course, what it 'really' hears is a recording played by a human. This rests on assumptions about what the bird can understand about an interaction with humans, or with sound, and these assumptions are also critical to interpretations by humans about those interactions. People, at least birders and scientists, tend to assume that they understand the reality of the interaction much better than the bird, although they must still be careful, knowledgeable, and attentive in what they do to be successful in bringing out the bird in the desired way.

After the encounter with the Stresemann's bristlefront, I was struck by the care we took, the different strategies we attempted, and how we had to constantly think about how the bird might respond to what we were doing. There was a real feeling that, rather than us fooling the bird, we were beholden to the choices it made. It was hearing sounds that it wanted to respond to, that it was interested in, but it was conflicted by its own wariness and its unwillingness to break from cover. It ended with us being surprised by the bird apparently being a female and by the way it was interacting with the sounds we were playing it. The bird's response was seemingly less because of aggressive territoriality than a desire to interact with the sound it could hear.

Perhaps we were still fooling the bird but in what way? The bird was correct to think it was hearing the singing of its own species. One might instead assume it was unable to connect the sound it was hearing and what we took to be its real source: a recording being played through speakers. The bird, we assume, could not understand the way that the sound is being produced and because of this it was being fooled into doing something it would normally avoid, i.e. coming out from cover in the vicinity of human beings. What we were doing was a kind of inquisitory play, in which the sound recording did not represent what the singing would normally stand for. The bird, we assume, took all this literally and had no appreciation either of our understanding of the interaction or even that we are involved in it at all. Unlike a conjuror deceiving an audience with a trick or sleight of hand, there is no amused recognition from the bird that it has been deceived. The idea that this was just a recording is not assumed to have any meaning to the bird. But for both parties to the encounter, their understanding was partial and ambiguous. The bird understands the sound better than the human, but the human understands the source of the sound and the 'deception' involved.

A further ontological dimension concerns the relationship between the sound and the bird. The sound, it is assumed, is made by the bird rather than being the bird. This distinction between doing and being is, I would argue, central to the desire birders have for seeing rather than hearing the bird, that is the reason they use playback in the first place.[32] To perceive 'the bird', birders expect to see it as a discrete and identifiable object. Perceiving only things the bird does, such as making sounds or moving foliage, are not enough for this. These are 'untickable' in birding parlance.[33] More significantly, in this interpretation the bird is assumed to have the same ontological understanding of the relationship between the sound and the bird. The supposed problems with playback are a result of this relationship between the sound and its expected source in another bird being confounded. If this confusion happens regularly then the sound comes to mean something different to the bird and its response becomes

32 See Whitehouse 2013.

33 Birders refer to a new species for them as a 'tick', i.e. to tick off a bird on a list. In many cases, birders do not tick a species if they do not achieve a clear view in which the bird can be identified visually, i.e. 'untickable views'. Species that are only heard may also be 'untickable'.

unnatural to its assumed ontology, i.e. it becomes 'played out' and the song is deterritorialized. This problem is more likely to arise when playback lacks skill because the sound is less likely to emerge in the right way from the bird's perspective, i.e. it will come from the wrong place, move the wrong way, be the wrong volume or the wrong pattern. It will thus become less 'bird-like' for the bird.

The above example of the Stresemann's bristlefront also raises the question of whether this kind of interaction through playback can be understood as communication, and on what basis should such a claim be justified. This was a question that various respondents to the "Listening to Birds" project discussed. In this research, many people wrote to me with stories of their experiences of listening to birds. One wrote:

> I was driving and a blackbird quickly flew just above my car from right to left, but another blackbird flying slightly lower, and following the first, took evasive action to prevent hitting my car. It flew alongside my car, just below my window and gave off the usual displeased call before flying off in a different direction. I took this as my first experience of a bird verbally abusing me over my driving.[34]

Here there are assumed to be two important elements: that the sound the bird made is being directed at the human and that there is a shared understanding that the sound signifies annoyance. In a similar example, a birder I met during the research claimed he only ever properly communicated with a bird on one occasion. This was when he intruded into the territory of a herring gull. The gull flew towards him giving a low, gurgling call, which the birder knew meant he was unwelcome. The bird was telling him to 'get away'; a message he thought he understood in exactly the way the bird intended. This interaction involves both parties assuming a shared idea of what the communication is about. The event was mutually framed not just by the call but by the actions of both the birder and bird. Framing – that is, the tacit communication about communication that emerges through interaction and contextualizes it – is not a capacity unique to humans. Indeed, when Gregory Bateson[35] first introduced the concept, he mainly used examples of animals signalling that 'this is play' through the way that they bit one another. "The playful nip denotes the bite, but does not denote that which would be denoted by the bite",[36] as Bateson puts it. Map and territory are both equated and differentiated.

Bateson's examples explore framing in different species, but he says less about framing in interactions between species. He does, however, note that play amongst animals tends to look like play to us. Of course, anyone who has ever played with a dog or cat will know that the frame 'this is play' can often be shared in interactions between humans and other animals. But what about birds? Do they play? Do they understand playback as a kind of play? If they do not understand that this is a deception, does it mean that this is not real communication between human and bird? Following Despret,[37] I would argue that play can look like aggression but is in fact something else. This gives on to the potential for territorial displays to be 'good play' for birds, and this could include apparently 'aggressive' responses to playback.

Certainly, communication with birds through interactions in sound is imperfect, but it can still enchant. In an interview I conducted with a skilled bird imitator, John 'Jake' Ward, he discussed his experience of interacting with a bird through mimicking its call:

> I'd really love to know, what are these avian colloquialisms we're exchanging… To know really what I'm saying to them… It's great to feel that you can communicate with something that responds to you, albeit fleetingly or briefly. For that little while, you're on the same level as this creature. And that's wonderful.[38]

To Jake there was something profound being exchanged but its meaning, to him at least, remained elusive. The bird presumably had a better grasp of what the interaction involved than he did, even if it was being

34 Anonymous, 2007, E-mail correspondence with the author.
35 Bateson 1972.
36 Bateson 1972: 183.
37 Despret 2022: 121.
38 Ward 2007.

deceived in some respects. Despite the ambiguity of the encounter, Jake felt a kind of enchantment akin to that felt by Veronique Servais's[39] collaborators who swim with dolphins. I too have felt a kind of elation when interacting with birds through sound, particularly when I am able to generate the sounds myself, but also in careful and skilled encounters such as that with the Stresemann's bristlefront.

Playback and the Aesthetics of Birding

The theme of the aesthetics of birding is prominent in ethical discussions of playback, particularly in terms of whether the 'right' way to do birding is to experience nature as a detached observer or through engaged and responsive interaction, as described above. In discussions of the appropriate use of playback, some emphasize that the presence of other birders needs taking into consideration, while others suggest that playback may be regarded as 'cheating'.[40] These concerns arise because the use of playback could confuse other birders (who may wrongly think they are hearing the 'real' bird) or it could disrupt their own experience and ideals of birds and birding. The latter suggests that, in a related way, playback use goes against the proper practice of birding. Playback is, perhaps, impolite, both to birds and other birders. This is echoed in Magnus and Bhattacharya's[41] work with Estonian birders, in which many of the ethical practices discussed involve avoiding disturbance to other birders.

These tensions around politeness and the aesthetics of birding are exemplified in ornithologist and birder Lauryn Benedict's discussion of her own use of playback.

> In my scientific role, I favour the use of playback. We have learned much about the personal communications of birds by using this technique. As a birder, though, I prefer not to use playback. For me, it isn't a moral issue. I recognize that birders can use playback ethically and I support anyone's choice to do so. Instead, it's because when I go birding I just want to see what happens in the natural state of the world. My field experiments are always tightly controlled with a clear process to follow and specific observations to collect. On birding excursions, I want the opposite of that. I want to imagine I'm not a player in the avian dramas that unfold in front of me. I want to spend whatever time it takes to observe whatever I can. Often, I see the most exciting and intimate details by making myself inconspicuous.[42]

Here, there is an acknowledgement that bird sound science needs the interactions that follow the controlled use of playback to elicit revealing behavioural responses, but that birding should, for Benedict at least, involve a sense that the birder is outside 'uncontrolled nature' looking in and the birds behave as if there was no human watching them. As such, playback is partly problematic because it confounds the idea of birders as detached observers. Birding was actively constructed in the middle of the twentieth century, particularly in Britain, as a kind of amateur science in which birders, aided by binoculars and often sitting in hides, would observe the actions of birds in as natural a way as possible because the observers would be invisible to the birds.[43] Birders should be inconspicuous, and the visual technologies of binoculars, telescopes, and cameras create a perceptual experience of birds as separated objects for study in nature rather than as interacting subjects in a shared social world. This aesthetic of birding creates the sense that birds should not be disturbed by skilled birders. Even though there is always likely to be disturbance, particularly where hides are not used, the sense that nature is being experienced without human interference is built into the idea of the birder as detached observer and into the visual emphasis in birding that 'puts the world at a distance'.[44]

39 Servais 2005.
40 Sibley 2011; Benedict 2019.
41 Magnus and Bhattacharya 2023.
42 Benedict 2019: 50–51.
43 Macdonald 2002; Davis 2020.
44 Willerslev 2007.

Comparison can be made here with the scientists who study meerkats, described by Matei Candea.[45] They maintain a polite distance from the animals and do not intrude even when individual lives are threatened. Playback, conversely, is a deliberate intrusion into the bird's life to elicit interaction. Sibley[46] argues that this kind of intrusion is not necessarily a problem, and may even be a good thing, so long as it is done sensitively and not too frequently. Proliferating digital technologies threaten 'good playback' because it becomes easily accessible to large numbers of unskilled users who will play sounds in the wrong way and too frequently to the same birds. Rather than being an occasional, subtly presented intrusion that resembles encounters a bird will sometimes respond to, playback potentially becomes a relentless onslaught of unnaturally loud songs, played too frequently. For Sibley, if playback is not done with care, it can disturb both the bird's nature and the birder's experience of nature. Playback needs to be courteous to both.

Politeness may not necessarily be about detachment, as Barbara Smuts[47] and Donna Haraway[48] have argued. For Smuts researching baboons, she needed to engage with the baboons and be acknowledged by them to allow the baboons to relax. In this context, the baboons perceived the human researcher as a social being in their world and for the researcher to act as if they were outside of that world looking in was the height of impoliteness. But do birds, particularly the small, unobtrusive birds that are often the focus of playback, see humans as part of their social world in the way baboons saw Smuts? The answer to the question might change when we consider birds and humans as interacting in sound rather than through visual perceptions of other bodies.

Birds, even those that are rather solitary, create social worlds through sound. Indeed, by singing their territories, birds collectively as well as individually create a relationally organized space in which different songs give a sense of positionality. Here, I am reminded of Candea's discussion of meerkat calls:

> All the while, however, a constant pattern of quiet calls produces a sort of social echolocation system, keeping individuals aware of each other's position. Crucially, this loose, relaxed form of environmental co-presence is not unlike the kind of tolerant relationship these meerkats have with members of other species: some birds, cattle, and, indeed, human researchers.[49]

Singing is not simply aggressive territoriality[50] but also creates relations of tolerance. In this argument, Despret, following ornithologist James Fisher, emphasizes that birds are social, and that territoriality is thus also inherently social. The 'dear enemy' hypothesis that arises from the sociality of territory means that creating territory also means creating a neighbourhood that can have mutually beneficial effects across territorial relations. As such, being tolerant of neighbours is necessary. Playback can either fit in with these neighbourly relations or it can disrupt them and deterritorialize spaces. In doing so, it can enable new social relations with humans who, for the bird, sound like they themselves do.

There is still a widespread assumption in discussions of playback ethics that birding should involve detached relations that, while creating a sense of observational engagement, do not disturb the birds and do not test their tolerance. Interactions, as happens with playback use, have effects, although these effects can be hard to follow, particularly in the short-term. But effects in more detached observational practices are also hard to detect. Birds may appear tolerant but could be stressed. They may also leave an area unseen simply because of the presence of humans. Indeed, Watson et al.[51] emphasize that although playback may cause disturbance, it can potentially reduce other kinds of disturbance. Since it

45 Candea 2010.
46 Sibley 2011.
47 Smuts 2001.
48 Haraway 2008.
49 Candea 2010: 247.
50 Despret 2022.
51 Watson et al. 2019.

speeds up the process of seeing a species and can be directed at one species alone, birders will spend less time in areas and will potentially disturb the ecosystem and other birds much less.

Birds as Ethical Subjects

Much of the discussion about the ethics of playback and the aesthetics of birding that surrounds it is vague about how birds should be understood and related to. Since the predominant philosophical approach is utilitarian, there is an emphasis on the degree of suffering and disturbance that birds endure because of playback use. In this kind of approach, the effects need to be quantifiable to be knowable. This raises two questions. First, what happens when effects are not measurable? Second, what if birds are not just bodies that are affected in quantifiable ways but ethical subjects that have their own *ethical* view on the interaction? This raises the further question of how birders might come to understand such a view.

Sibley[52] emphasizes that not all birds respond in the same way to playback and sometimes it can attract birds to breed and increase numbers. Even within the same species there are variations, with young birds responding more vigorously than older birds. There are also what appear to be inquisitory birds, such as the female Stresemann's bristlefront I described earlier, who are curious and seem to interact with the sound rather than trying to aggressively repel an intruder. As such, there is no one way that birds will respond, even within the same species. Even if effects are measurable, they are not easily generalizable. This is partly why playback use needs to be careful and responsive.

The question of birds as ethical subjects has the potential to shift the way playback is understood and evaluated. Elizabeth Oriel[53] has considered how animal ethics could develop if principles of other than human subjectivity are introduced, for example along the lines of many indigenous ideas of personhood. In these principles, other-than-human beings of various kinds can be regarded as persons with moral agency who make judgements and act ethically, e.g. in relations of reciprocity. As Paul Nadasdy[54] reports from his research with Kluane in Alaska, they regard it as quite matter of fact for animals to give themselves to hunters, as an injured rabbit apparently did for Nadasdy himself when it appeared at his house having initially escaped a snare that he had set. For many Indigenous peoples, animal personhood emerges relationally through observation of how animals respond to actions.[55] Building on relational ideas of nonhuman personhood and the work of Oriel, I argue that in considering ethical responses to playback it is possible to go beyond models that see animals as either Cartesian machines that react instinctively, or as animal bodies that measurably suffer in response to human actions. Instead, we could begin with different premises that concede that birds may have a view on the sort of interactions engendered by playback and that they respond to playback as part of their own inhabitation of a world that they and their territorial neighbours have relationally established. If we consider the possibility that interactions between humans and wild birds can be viewed positively by birds rather than starting from the premise that it is inherently bad to interfere in nature and natural processes, then new ways of assessing playback could arise. Following Oriel's own encounters with bears,[56] playback could be reimagined as a means of making acquaintance with a bird, and of the bird making our acquaintance. This does not mean that the encounter is inherently good, but it begins by assuming that it is a situation in which both parties are trying to learn something about one another and the sounds they are interacting inquisitively through. What are brought into being through playback are not simply measurable effects on animal bodies but new relations, with all their potential for deterritorialization and reterritorialization. As Anna Tsing notes in her work on matsutake mushrooms, "[d]isturbance can

52 Sibley 2011.
53 Oriel 2014.
54 Nadasdy 2007.
55 Ingold 2021 [2000]: 123; Bird-David 1999.
56 Oriel 2014: 56.

renew ecologies as well as destroy them."[57] What is being disturbed through deterritorialization and reterritorialization is a relational field, but this disturbance can be productive and regenerative if playback is conducted skilfully and in ways that facilitate inquisitory approaches by birds who are curious about their neighbours rather than demonstrating aggressive territoriality.[58]

These themes can also arise when considering the technique known as pishing, another form of human sound-making that elicits an inquisitory response from birds. Pishing is an onomatopoeic term for an easily made 'spish' sound that mimics some scolding alarm calls and encourages a variety of species to investigate. Some authors[59] and birders[60] imply that pishing could be more problematic than playback because it is inherently about getting birds overexcited and stressed and is also general rather than species-specific in its effects. Conversely, the American birder Pete Dunne[61] has written about 'the art of pishing' and claims that investigating the sounds breaks up what is otherwise a boring life of seeking out food. In this sense, humans become a kind of entertainment for birds, as much as they are entertainment for birders. This is a reminder that we can consider the human-bird relations of birding and sound-making as inquisitory and playful rather than inherently stressful and intrusive. The interventions of playback might then be reconceived, if practiced skilfully, as offering potential for a more convivial understanding and more positively interactive relations between humans and birds.

Although responses to playback are assumed to be primarily territorial, the nature of territoriality itself is complex. As Despret has argued through her analysis of ethological research, territoriality is not necessarily aggressive but can involve curiosity and tolerant, relational neighbourliness. Territories are dynamic, so territorial responses to playback are also dynamic and sometimes unpredictable. This means that care and skill are required to use playback effectively and, perhaps, to avoid damaging disturbance. This is because the sound needs to emerge in the right way, by moving correctly, having the right pattern and volume, and being in the right kind of place. The common assumption that the bird is being 'fooled' because it fails to understand the 'real' source of the sound underpins the principal ethical concern of playback use: that overuse leads to birds becoming 'played out' and thus not naturally responsive to territorial intrusion. This argument arises from the ontological separation of the sound and its source, which leads to the bird rejecting the sound from playback because it fails to coincide with the presence of a 'real bird'. However, if the sound is understood ontologically as 'the bird' as much as the material organism is, then playback can be reinterpreted as an inquisitory interaction in sound that is embedded in the intra- and inter-species relations of neighbourly territoriality. Arguments put forward for 'good' playback emphasize that appropriate use of sound is more likely to be taken as a manifestation of a bird because the sound will emerge in a convincingly bird-like way. Another kind of ontological separation is implicated in a second ethical argument against the use of playback: the intrusion of a human into the natural dynamics of bird behaviour. Though in part this reflects a concern to avoid impoliteness to other birders, birding is often envisaged in terms of detached observation in which birds are unaffected by human actions. Thus, ethical arguments about playback reveal an anxiety about the loss of nature, both from a bird that is played out and from an experience of birding that disturbs nature. By reconfiguring birds as ethical subjects, however, new ways of understanding playback encounters with birds emerge. Encounters between two sound-making subjects interacting responsively can build new relations and can be playful, inquisitory and potentially good, for both humans and birds.

57 Tsing 2015: 160.
58 Despret 2022: 143.
59 Johnson and Maness 2018.
60 Magnus and Bhattacharya 2023: 15.
61 Dunne 2006.

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