
OPINION Alison Johnston

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During a recent BTO conference I chatted to a couple of members about their favourite birding spots. The professor said she loved Norfolk, whilst the nurse said he preferred Northumberland. If that sentence caused you to pause for some brief mental gymnastics to accommodate a female professor and a male nurse, then you are not alone. All of us have internal generalisations that help us process information quickly, by making subconscious assumptions about the world. However in some situations these stereotypes can also be a barrier.

UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

If we don't make efforts to override our subconscious mind, we will make associations from the information that has seeped into our brain from our culture, the media and the high-profile role models that we know. The prevailing cultural view is that birding is a male activity and this has likely been adopted by our subconscious. I searched Google for images of birdwatchers and found only one female birdwatcher in the first 20 images. In the first 100 images, male birdwatchers appeared in over four times more images than female birdwatchers. One of the pictures with a female birdwatcher was a cartoon about how bad she was at birding. Although it is uncomfortable to admit, and we are probably not aware of this, it is likely that subconsciously most of us think that men have greater interest and skill at birdwatching.

But is it really a problem that birding is seen as a boys' game? Many professional ornithologists were originally inspired by birdwatching. Imagine the potential Christine Packhams or Davina Lindos

that may have been brilliant advocates for nature conservation, but who were discouraged from nurturing their passion for nature or whose career aspirations to be a scientist were gently nudged into the background.

Even girls who do pursue an ecological interest and a degree in a biological science are likely to encounter hurdles at later career stages. There have been a number of recent cases of women reporting assault by their male academic superiors¹ and 26% of female scientists experience sexual assault whilst conducting fieldwork². Women also confront sexist opinions, such as those expressed by the Nobel scientist Tim Hunt³, and they are often judged more harshly when they apply for grants⁴ and jobs⁵, which is likely to be a result of the unconscious bias of all people (men and women) rating men as being better at science⁶. The gender pay gap means that women are often paid less than men for the same job, which may make them more likely to adopt family duties over work. These are just some of the many small hurdles that make it harder for women to succeed in a scientific career.

TACKLING GENDER STEREOTYPES

Many people wonder whether current gender stereotypes are a result of a lag effect from previous generations' more-defined gender roles. Some science fields such as biology now have higher numbers of female undergraduate students than they had in the past, whilst others such as physics and maths are still dominated by men. However, even those subjects that have been attracting a high number of women at undergraduate and PhD levels do not have the same proportion of women progressing to more senior levels.



In business it has been demonstrated that, unless this 'leaky pipeline' is tackled proactively, it will be approximately 70 years before there is gender parity⁷. We cannot sit back and wait for gender inequality in birdwatching and ornithology to fix itself – we have an obligation to do what we can to redress the balance.

It can be difficult to know how to tackle this issue, particularly when many of these ideas about gender are deeply entrenched in our culture. Starting from the grass roots, we can all challenge stereotypes in small ways in our own lives. I now stop myself saying phrases like “boys will be boys!” and try to question others’ use of stereotypes. I am also now aware of the prevalence of the pronoun ‘he’ when people refer to generic professors, managers or high-ranking executives. Previously I often didn’t even notice these comments, as my mindset had been so defined by cultural norms. Although these are small examples, we can all begin to

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change our own thought patterns and those of people around us, by gently altering how we speak about gender.

There are also actions we can take in the professional realm. Female role models can be important for recruiting and retaining women into some careers⁸. To address this in ornithology we can provide female mentors for junior ornithologists and have women represented in high-profile positions. In the 1970s only 9% of BTO Council was female, but since 2000 it has averaged 20%. This is an

important increase and we’re happy to have welcomed Professor Jenny Gill recently as our first female Chair. But there is still a long way to go towards 50% of women in these high-profile positions. Many university departments are working towards the Athena Swann Award, which seeks to level the playing field for all individuals, and there are a number of books that discuss practical actions for organisations and companies⁹.

WHY EQUALITY MATTERS

Equality is important for a number of reasons – I believe we have a moral imperative to provide everybody with the same opportunities, regardless of their gender, race, sexual orientation, disability, religious beliefs, or age. Yet many of these characteristics still lead to barriers in career progression and this is particularly pronounced for people who fit into more than one discriminated category. I also believe that opening up opportunities for all will lead to better solutions for science, for ornithology and for conservation. In this time of unprecedented global environmental change, we need all hands on deck. ■

Alison Johnston is the BTO’s Ecological Statistician. She has written and spoken before on the topic of gender equality in science and conservation.

CITATIONS

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