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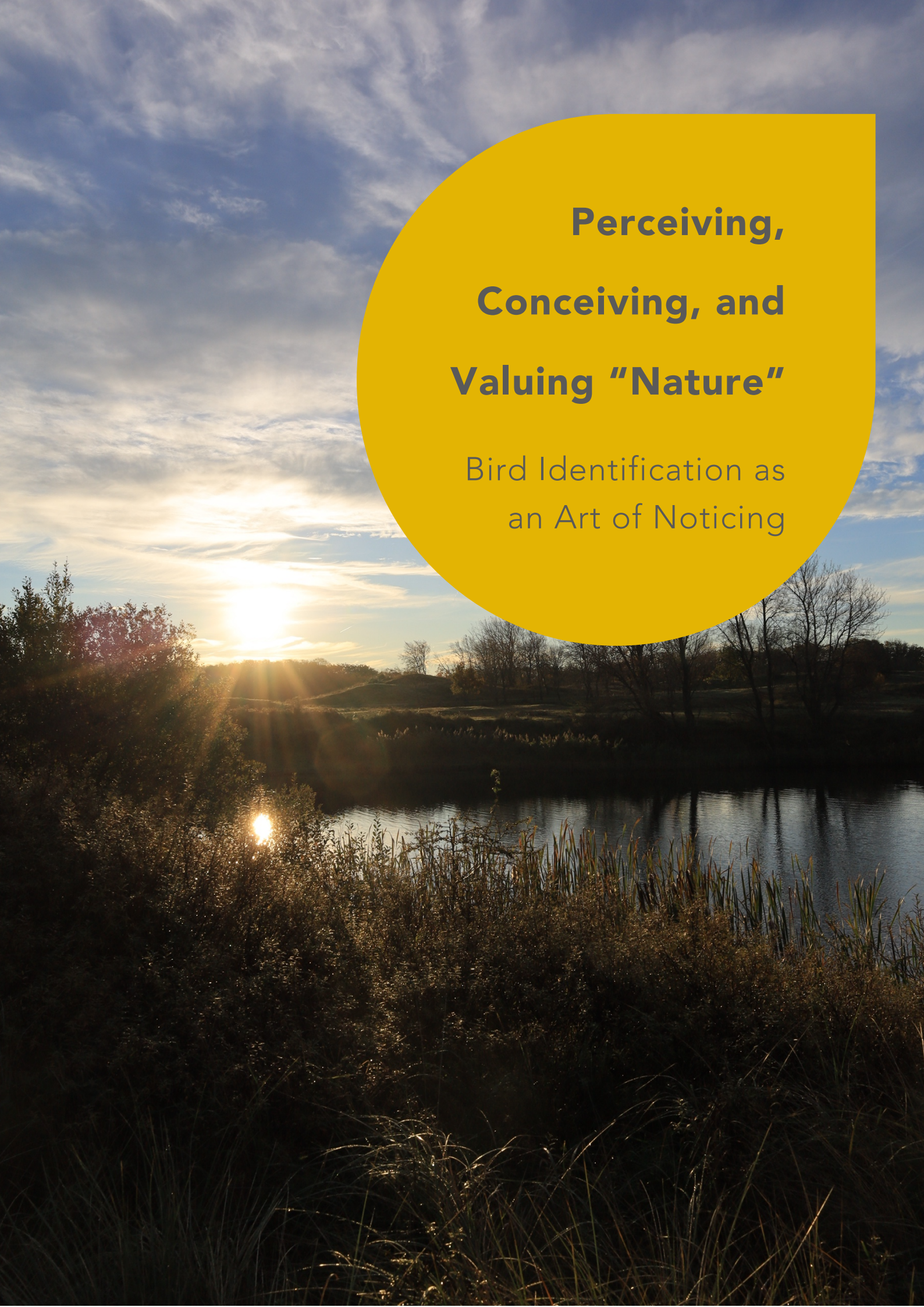

Perceiving, Conceiving, and Valuing "Nature"

Bird Identification as an Art of Noticing

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Abstract

Birds are very prominent parts of nature; if you pay attention, you can hear them in many places all year round. This article describes bird identification activities as arts of noticing, particular ways of seeing things - in this case, bird species - that remain invisible to others. Through qualitative research methods and audio-visual methods, this study explores how different practices of bird identification at the Amsterdamse Waterleidingduinen, the Netherlands, shape how bird identifiers perceive, conceive, and value local ecologies. Different bird identifiers have a different idea of what nature is or could be - especially within the Dutch context, where people often say that "real" nature does not exist. Therefore, studying how bird identifiers conceptualise local ecologies is essential for understanding how they see themselves concerning non-human entities and how they interact with and treat the nonhuman.

By discussing how bird identification practices shape embodied encounters with nature through skilled vision and listening, this study examines how particular conceptions of Dutch socio-ecological systems and subsequent pro-environmental behaviour arise from a specific art of noticing, i.e., bird identification. Apart from a written output, this study also consists of an audio-visual part. While in the written part of my thesis, I mainly focus on academic literature, applied research methods, and the results arising from those methods, my audio-visual output will focus on how bird identifiers are birding. I.e. in the audio-visual section of this thesis, I aim to show rather than write about how (professional) bird identifiers carry out bird identification and how their ways of seeing birds establish their conceptions and perceptions of local ecologies.

Keywords: bird identification, arts of noticing, skilled vision, skilled listening, nature-culture, pro-environmental behaviour, embodiment.

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Introduction

As I write this introduction, I sit at my kitchen table and look outside. I hear several chirping sounds of birds flying around my street in the busy city of Amsterdam coming from outside. I recognise the sounds; great tits, blue tits, a chiffchaff and rose-ringed parakeets. Now that I am paying conscious attention to the spring sounds around me, listening to and watching these bird species and recognising the sounds makes me feel a bit like a *birder*. But, when I think of birders, the first thing that comes to mind is the news articles I occasionally see. For example, in October 2022, the rare yellow-browed bunting was seen in Bunne, The Netherlands (RTV Drenthe 2022). This bird from eastern Siberia has only been seen once before in the Netherlands, on Schiermonnikoog in 1982 (ibid.). About 40 years later, this little bird is a unique phenomenon for many bird identifiers. Photos taken in Bunne show a large group of bird identifiers equipped with cameras, binoculars and telescopes. So then, how do these bird identifiers look at the rare yellow-browed bunting differently from how I enjoy the common bird species in my street?

Schaffner (2009) distinguishes between three forms of bird identification: 'bird-watching, birding, and twitching' (Schaffner 2009: 208). While bird identifiers within all three categories are concerned with identifying and classifying birds, birders and twitchers are more advanced and competitive than bird-watchers (ibid.). Bird-watching is mainly done by amateurs who identify birds in their spare time for pleasure (ibid.). Field guides and binoculars are often used during bird-watching, as with birding and twitching (ibid.). However, besides field guides and binoculars, more sophisticated equipment such as telescopes is also used during birding and twitching (ibid.). Schaffner (2009) elucidates that while bird-watchers identify birds as a leisure activity, birders and twitchers are more passionate as they engage in 'listing' (ibid.).

Law & Lynch (1988) argue that listing is an essential part of birding where the birder keeps track of, for example, which species they have seen within a specific time or area (Law & Lynch 1988: 274). The last category of bird identification activity mentioned by Schaffner (2009) is the twitcher (Schaffner 2009: 209). What makes twitching different from bird-watching and birding is that twitchers focus on finding birds that have hardly or never been

seen in a particular area - i.e., rarities (ibid.). A twitcher will do anything to cross a new species off their list, making this type of bird identification more like a sport than bird-watching and birding (ibid.).

The different forms of bird identification indicated by Schaffner (2009) correspond to the question I asked earlier about how different ways of looking at birds result in different ways of appreciating bird species. While as an amateur and for my enjoyment, I look at and listen to the birds around me without documenting or noting them, the people who went to Bunne to see the yellow-browed bunting are mainly occupied with listing a rare bird. According to Law & Lynch (1988), there is a link between perception and listing (Law & Lynch 1988: 274). Because birders and twitchers may want to see certain bird species in a particular area to cross these off their list, the authors argue that these types of bird identifiers are more likely to visit those areas and designate these as valuable when an unusual sighting has occurred there (ibid.). In other words, there is a connection between list-keeping and representation and observation in that listing determines which places to visit and shows what observations birders and twitchers have made (ibid.).

The events in Bunne and the arguments of various authors mentioned above made me think about how different forms of bird identification might treat certain bird species, such as rarities, differently: What value do different forms of bird identification attach to certain bird species? Does a particular way of bird identification result in a specific manner of experiencing local ecologies? Subsequently, how do different forms of bird identification relate to conservation efforts and *vice versa*?

Krause & Robinson (2017) show that in drafting conservation efforts, more attention is paid to certain species - i.e., charismatic species - than others (Krause & Robinson 2017: 313). By charismatic species, the authors refer to species that would deserve more care because they look cute, such as a kingfisher, which many bird identifiers like because of its pretty and bright colours (ibid.: 314). Furthermore, the authors argue that psychological and cultural reasoning is vital in focusing on particular species within conservation efforts (ibid.). Due to the steeped popularity of bird identification activity, birds are often prioritised in international conservation initiatives (ibid.: 315). However, charismatically conducting conservation efforts can lead to some implemented solutions not always being well researched and alternative solutions not being considered either (ibid.: 318). Put differently,

how some species are perceived culturally or psychologically has far-reaching consequences. The way a colourful kingfisher is treated compared to common bird species in the Netherlands, such as a blackbird, thus shows an area of tension consistent with the arguments of Krause & Robinson (2017) and shows the importance of understanding the possible pitfalls and promises of bird identification activities. In this article, I ask whether different bird identification practices shape how bird identifiers perceive, conceive, and value Dutch socio-ecological systems.

The academic literature that I used as this article's theoretical foundation consists of entries about the embodied encounters with the nonhuman (Couper 2018, Humberstone 2023, Stevenson & Farrell 2018), value attachment to places and species (Augé 1995, Booth et al. 2011, Randler et al. 2023, Schaffner 2009), and ways of seeing and listening (Descola 2014, Grasseni 2004, Grasseni 2021, Hendrickson 2019, Littlejohn 2021, Tsing 2010). Little research has been done on how these different components are interconnected. Subsequently, through ethnographic fieldwork from January 2023 to mid-March 2023, I studied participants of and those guiding excursions organised by the company 'Dagje in de Natuur' at the Amsterdamse Waterleidingduinen, the Netherlands. I joined 15 excursions of four hours each starting at sunrise in this period. I used observations, semi-structured interviewing, the go-along method, photo-elicitations, drawing/mental mapping, and audio-visual recording to study how bird identifiers understand "nature". Outside this fieldwork period, I did additional interviews and shot footage.

My case study shows that different bird identification activities result in different ways of perceiving, conceiving, and valuing local ecologies. This article discusses why and how people are involved in bird identification practices and the role of the senses in these activities. One of my main arguments is that how Dutch socio-ecological systems are perceived, conceived, and valued by those engaging in bird identification activities paints the bigger picture of how they interact with nature and show pro-environmental behaviour. Subsequently, the main research question I address in this article is: *How do different kinds of bird identification as embodied practices relate to how bird identifiers at the Amsterdamse Waterleidingduinen perceive, conceive, and value Dutch socio-ecological systems*?

In the following section, I will provide context about the Amsterdamse Waterleidingduinen; I will discuss the function and issues within this area and the relevance

of this location to my research. After I clarify the context of my study, a theoretical framework will follow in which I discuss academic literature that connects to my research. I will then reflexively discuss the qualitative and audio-visual methods I used to answer my research question(s). To answer my main question, I have also drafted three sub-questions. Based on my gathered data and academic literature, I will address these three sub-questions after the methodology section in three separate sections. Finally, a conclusion follows in which I will summarise all my findings and answer my research questions.

In addition to this written output, my thesis also consists of an audio-visual output that makes this thesis a multimodal production. The added value of the audio-visual work to this written article is to show *how* bird identifiers watch birds. The ethnographic film I made is about three (professional) bird identifiers and guides of 'Dagje in de Natuur' who take paying participants in birdwatching. I show what these excursions look like and how the three main characters identify birds. I alternate these images with interviews to discuss why they identify birds and how they perceive, conceive, and value Dutch socio-ecological systems. Since in this article, I lay the theoretical foundation for the topics covered in my audio-visual output, the order of my thesis is to read this written article and then watch my ethnographic film. Throughout this written thesis, I will also reflect on how I used audio-visual methods, what these methods offered me compared to other (qualitative) methods, and the added value of visual ethnography to this text.

Finally, my research occurred within a commercial company. As mentioned in the previous section, my study's main interlocutors are bird identifiers and guides taking a group of paying people on an excursion. Therefore, how they perceive nature and attach value to it is linked to themselves as (professional) bird identifiers and the company they guide for. Confident choices they make during excursions may be less likely or unlikely to occur as individual bird identifiers, making their perceptions, conceptions and values attached to nature also context specific. In this written article, I will elaborate on the tensions I encountered while conducting fieldwork within a company.

Context

My fieldwork occurred in the Amsterdamse Waterleidingduinen - i.e., the Amsterdam Water Supply Dunes. This water reclamation area is located between Noordwijk and Zandvoort, which is 5 kilometres wide and 10 kilometres long (Waternet s.a.). The purpose of the Amsterdamse Waterleidingduinen since 1853 is to use the dunes as a purifier of water for the people of Amsterdam (Amsterdamse Waterleidingduinen s.a.). Today, Waternet ensures that 70 million m3 of water is treated yearly (ibid.). Besides its water treatment function, the Amsterdamse Waterleidingduinen also serve as a nature reserve where activities and excursions are organised (Waternet s.a.).

One company that organises such excursions is 'Dagje in de Natuur'. As good friends, Jesse Zwart and Lars Buckx started this company together to share their passion for the outdoors with others. Most excursions offered by 'Dagje in de Natuur' - in places and by guides in the whole of the Netherlands - are bird-oriented. Besides being the company's owners, Lars and Jesse are guides who regularly go out with a group in, for example, the Amsterdamse Waterleidingduinen. I know the company through one of their guides, Arjan Dwarshuis, whom I often listen to in the Vogelspotcast podcast. Therefore, for this research, in which I aim to explore how bird identifiers perceive, conceive, and value nature, 'Dagje in de Natuur' seemed to me the ideal opportunity to meet several different groups of bird identifiers. In addition to the participants of these excursions, my research also centres on Jesse and Lars as owners of 'Dagje in de Natuur' and Arjan Dwarshuis, who, apart from being a guide for the company, is also an advanced bird identifier.

For several reasons, I also conducted my research in the Amsterdamse Waterleidingduinen within 'Dagje in de Natuur'. First, this area differs from other nature reserves in the Netherlands because visitors can wander here. Instead of being obliged to stay on the paths, it is allowed to walk everywhere. Secondly, an exciting combination between nature and water purification has been initiated in the Amsterdamse Waterleidingduinen. On the one hand, this area is Natura 2000, which means it is European-protected nature; on the other hand, the site has the function of purifying water from the

dunes for the inhabitants of Amsterdam (Van der Spek 2023). But precisely because the Amsterdamse Waterleidngduinen is a water extraction area, and therefore it is not built up, all nature still exists and is free to take its course (ibid.). In turn, the diversity of wildlife in this area ensures that water purification occurs naturally since all present ecosystems are aligned (ibid.). Finally, there are also interesting ecological problems in this area, such as fallow deer and nitrogen which disrupt the presence of biodiversity in both fauna and flora.

Fallow deer roam freely in the Amsterdamse Waterleidingduinen. For several years, however, these animals have been shot (Van der Spek 2023). They were once illegally released in this area, and they have multiplied so fast that they are a significant problem for biodiversity as they eat the area bare (ibid.). Furthermore, excess nitrogen in the Netherlands is causing natural flora and fauna in the dunes to disappear (ibid.). This disappearance of flora and fauna happens because the dunes are a nutrient-poor area, meaning only particular things can grow within these areas, making this area unique (ibid.) However, nitrogen turns such an area into a nutrient-rich place, allowing other species to survive in this area and overpower the original vegetation (ibid.).

What is still important to dwell on is that more than 50% of Dutch flora and fauna are found in the dunes, occupying only 1% of the entire land area (Van der Spek 2023). So, this shows well why the fallow deer and nitrogen issues are so damaging to the Amsterdamse Waterleidingduinen. A study concerning birder's perceptions, conceptions, and values attached to nature thus seemed ideal in the Amsterdamse Waterleidingduinen. This area is a unique location where humans significantly interfere, water purification and nature reinforce each other, and releasing a species and excess nitrogen have inestimable consequences. In short, an area where the influence of humans on non-humans cannot be denied and thus where an examination of the human experience of non-humans fits perfectly.

Theoretical foundation

Nature-culture dichotomy

Whatmore (2014) refers to the 'culture-nature binary' as a way of thinking that assumes that things either fall under the umbrella of nature or culture (Whatmore 2014: 152, 153). According to the culture-nature binary, nature is far from "us" Europeans - e.g., national parks or wilderness (ibid.: 153). In other words, nature is that which is beyond human control (ibid.). However, this thinking no longer holds up (ibid.). Indeed, as Whatmore (2014) describes, we as humans influence everything (ibid.). Look at the Amsterdamse Waterleidingduinen, for example. In the previous section, I discussed how this area is entirely Man-maintained. Whereas one could cram this area into the 'nature' pigeonhole because of its biodiversity and lack of infrastructure, humans designed and maintained it. So, as mentioned earlier in the previous section, the Amsterdamse Waterleidingduinen are an ideal location to explore the tensions between nature and culture. Accordingly, Whatmore (2014) refers to nature as a 'social construction' (ibid.). The social construction of nature implies that the definition of nature is not a given (ibid.: 156). Instead, nature is a concept everyone defines and values in their way (ibid.). In short, there is no one-size-fits-all meaning to nature because how nature is defined is Man-made (ibid.).

If the definition of nature is fluid since it is understood by people in different ways, then what we see as nature is a product of culture (Whatmore 2014: 156). Therefore, Whatmore (2014) argues that nature and culture cannot be seen as separate but as parts of each other (ibid.). Cronon's (1996) arguments confirm those of Whatmore (2014). However, compared to Whatmore (2014), Cronon (1996) addresses the concept of 'wilderness'. According to Cronon (1996), wilderness thinking separates nature and culture (Cronon 1996: 7). Indeed, wilderness is often associated with pristine nature excluded from human societies, whereas the concept itself has been created and given value by humans (ibid.). Cronon (1996) further explains that wildernesses throughout history were seen as places where people preferred not to go because they associated it with fear (ibid.: 9). However, Cronon (1996) elucidates that the way wilderness is romanticised today as a sacred place is problematic – indicating that the way wilderness was viewed in the past compared to today is controversial

(ibid.: 10). Indeed, according to him, 'wilderness poses a serious threat to responsible environmentalism' (Cronon 1996: 17). Because wilderness thinking separates nature and culture, it also fails to recognise human responsibility and influence on nature (ibid.).

A subsequent critique on wilderness thinking that Cronon (1996) explains ties in with my arguments discussed earlier in the introduction to this article regarding valuing the nonhuman. Cronon (1996) stresses that by romanticising wildernesses, we idealise the landscapes immediately around us less (Cronon 1996: 21). Since most environmental concerns occur right around us, it is important also to appreciate our immediate environment to be then able to see nearby environmental problems (ibid.). Just as charismatic species get more attention in international conservation initiatives (Krause & Robinson 2017), some ecologies get more appreciation than others which 'is likely to reinforce environmentally irresponsible behavior' (Cronon 1996: 22). In addition, what I argue is that it is not only problematic to appreciate certain parts of nature more than others, but that there is also a danger of assuming that we as humans can bend every part of nature to our will.

Drenthen (2015) confirms my argument by stressing that nonhumans quickly take over territories no longer dominated solely by humans (Drenthen 2015: 318). According to him, the wolf's return to the Netherlands in 2015 is a form of 'resurging wildness' (ibid.: 319). These arguments and those mentioned earlier in this section show the tension between nature and culture. On the one hand, we see nature as something far away from us that we cannot and should not influence. Yet, on the other hand, we are sometimes unexpectedly confronted with nature by, for example, the wolf's retreat in the Netherlands. The following section will elaborate on how humans and nonhumans interrelate. In addition, I will elaborate on how multispecies interrelations determine how humans understand "nature" and their position toward it.

Multispecies interrelations

Within anthropology, human-nonhuman interconnections are receiving increasing attention resulting in the emergence of a new form of research: 'multispecies ethnography' (Kirksey & Helmreich 2010: 545). According to Kirksey & Helmreich (2010), multispecies ethnography explores how humans and nonhumans interact (ibid.). These include so-called 'contact zones' where humans and nonhumans come together and where 'becomings' - i.e., relationships

between humans and nonhumans - occur (ibid.: 546). I consider multispecies ethnography as an addition to more 'human-centred' ethnography since multispecies ethnography recognises the connections between humans and non-humans and gives autonomy to non-humans. An example of research establishing itself within multispecies ethnography is by Van Dooren (2019).

In *The Wake of Crows: Living and Dying in Shared Worlds*, Van Dooren (2019) confirms the arguments mentioned above regarding the undeniable impact of humans on nonhumans (Van Dooren 2019: 2). By focusing on the interrelations between humans and crows in five different places in the world, the author shows how today's worlds of humans and nonhumans are inextricably linked. I position my research as one fitting within multispecies ethnography as well. Even though my study concerns people engaging in bird identification activities, this article aims not to examine particular interrelations between bird species and humans. Instead, I focus on arguments concerning how bird identifiers relate to the nonhuman and how they conceive, perceive, and value nonhuman entities. In this way, my research complements that of Van Dooren (2019) because I study interconnections between humans and nonhumans and how the two come together through embodiment.

Embodiment

Barratt (2011) discusses embodiment in the light of climbers' dependence upon their climbing assemblage when climbing (Barratt 2011: 1). In this manner, climbing technologies become part of the human body (ibid.). According to Barratt (2011), humans experience the world around them through their bodies (ibid.: 3). The author additionally discusses that climbing technologies change the way people see the world as they transcend the limitations of the human body (ibid.: 4). In other words, by recognising the agency of the nonhuman - in this case climbing assemblage - Barratt (2011) demonstrates how embodiment brings together the human and nonhuman (ibid.: 7).

Couper's (2017) arguments are similar to those of Barratt (2011). Additionally, in line with Cronon's (1996) views, Couper (2017) discusses her understanding of nature as far away and sublime, as well as her desire to go to nature (Couper 2017: 289). Her arguments centre mainly on boat sailing, with which the author argues to feel the presence of nature more (ibid.: 294). In this way, Couper (2017) stresses that space is experienced differently when on

a boat. According to her, the water beneath you is an 'Other' that humans do not understand but to which humans can feel connected through our bodies - i.e. 'embodied spatialities of being' (Couper 2017: 294). In contrast to the previously named authors, Couper (2017), similarly to Barratt (2011), approaches the nonhuman from an embodiment lens.

Both Barratt (2011) and Couper (2017) argue that our bodies are ways of understanding the world around us (Barratt 2011: 3, Couper 2017: 289). In this way, specific bodily actions - even as gear (Barrat 2011) - can become part of the human body (Couper 2017: 290). In addition, according to Couper (2017), changing the ''normal' means of inhabiting the world' can yield a sense of Otherness, as discussed in the previous paragraph (Couper 2017: 292). While Barratt (2011) bases his arguments on the position of climbers and Couper (2017) addresses the relationship between sailing and embodiment, I nevertheless see an overlap between my research and these authors' arguments. Indeed, how bird identifiers use gear such as binoculars and telescopes, for example, and move their bodies through their bird identification practices affects how they understand nonhuman entities. In the next section, I will elaborate on how academics describe the connection between bird identifiers and nonhumans and how this way of thinking connects to my case study.

Bird identification activities

Bonta (2010) writes about the interconnections between bird identification activities and embodiment. Through the concept of 'becoming-bird' - drawing back on previous arguments relating to multispecies ethnography - Bonta (2010) shows that bird identifiers can become one with birds and thus be less human (Bonta 2010: 149). Bonta (2010) addresses the connection between bird identifiers as well as birds and examines the experience of place (ibid.: 146). According to him, bird identifiers can see places like sewage ponds or garbage dumps as beautiful areas (ibid.). These arguments by Bonta (2010) may sound positive at first glance because they presuppose that bird identifiers may see certain nonhuman entities as beautiful while they are seen as not beautiful by average humans. However, Schaffner (2009) shows that this optimistic view on bird identifiers is not as positive as it seems.

According to Schaffner (2009), bird identification activities are inextricably linked to environmental well-being and degradation (Schaffner 2009: 207). While in the introduction, I discussed how Schaffner (2009) distinguishes between three forms of bird identification

practices; in this section, I will focus on how these practices normalise environmental degradation according to him. Schaffner (2009) elucidates that bird identifiers depend on a diverse and significant presence of bird species and therefore are interested in ecological well-being (ibid.: 210). Yet this dependency does not immediately mean that bird identifiers are environmentalists (ibid.). On the contrary, according to Schaffner (2009), bird identifiers even contribute to normalising environmentally dangerous places such as toxic sites as these places allow them to see a vast amount of bird species (ibid.: 212).

While Bonta (2010) shows that bird identifiers can appreciate even ugly parts of the nonhuman, Schaffner (2009), on the other hand, shows that this appreciation does not always imply good consequences for environmental protection. The arguments I highlight in this section align with the promises and risks I discussed in the introduction to this article. In the next section, I will refer to bird identification activities as 'arts of noticing' (Tsing 2010).

Arts of noticing

Tsing (2010) introduces taxonomy as an 'art of noticing' (Tsing 2010: 192). She argues that mushroom lovers can see the underground city where fungi live, whereas most humans are ignorant towards it (ibid.: 191). As a result, her argumentation continues, by building cities, people have destroyed the cosmopolitanism of fungi cities without noticing (ibid.). In other words, while most people are not even aware of the existence of this underground city, mushroom lovers know through, e.g., taxonomy, how humans are affecting this city (ibid.). These arguments presented by Tsing (2010) link back to the statements by Cronon (1996) discussed in the first part of this section. Cronon (1996) explains that wilderness thinking causes people to be less concerned with their immediate environment and are, therefore, less likely to notice environmental issues (Cronon 1996: 21). When applying the arguments of Tsing (2010) and Cronon (1996) to the context of bird identifiers, I argue that bird identifiers can notice in a similar way to mushroom lovers. Like mushroom pickers, bird identifiers also see a world that remains invisible to many people, namely, the world of birds. In addition, as discussed by Cronon (1996), bird identification practices allow people to better understand the environment around them and, therefore, notice the pain in this landscape.

In this way, I consider bird identification practices to shape how people understand the world around them – i.e., to shape people's being in the world. Descola (2014) refers to

the concept of ‘worlding’ by which he counters the way of thinking that assumes that differences in human perception are shaped by culture (Descola 2014: 272). Instead, as Descola (2014) argues, worlding means that differences in human perception are a product of the different historical paths that shape how societies conceptualise specific categories differently (ibid.). For example, as discussed earlier in this section, the concepts of 'nature' and 'culture' have different meanings. So, to follow Descola's (2014) argument, these differences can be explained by other societies’ backgrounds and histories. To build my argument, I combine Descola's (2014) arguments and those concerning embodiment I have already discussed. On this basis, I argue that bird identifiers develop a specific understanding of the natural world through their physical connection to nature. In the next section, I elaborate on how senses play a role in bird identification activities.

Skilled vision and listening

In the previous section, I discussed how bird identifiers understand nonhumans in a certain way through the embodied practice of bird identification activities. However, Tsing (2010) names that seeing the nonhuman can be challenging. In the context of mushroom pickers, she shows that fungi are always underground, making them sometimes difficult to see (Tsing 2010: 193). Birds are only occasionally easy to see, too. In most cases, bird identifiers hear birds rather than see them. So, a particular skill is involved in seeing fungi and birds. In this article, I name these skills ‘skilled vision’ (Grasseni 2021) and ‘skilled listening’ (Littlejohn 2021).

Grasseni (2021) describes skilled vision as a consequence of 'learning to see' (Grasseni 2021: 13). Through an example of a cattle breeder, she shows that a cattle breeder may see different things looking at the same animal than someone else (ibid.: 15). In other words, because this cattle breeder has learned to look at animals in a certain way, they developed a particular skill in looking at these animals (ibid.). So, how we understand the world around us is based on how we bring together everything we see (Descola 2014) and how we have learned to see (Grasseni 2021). According to Grasseni (2021), a skilled vision is additionally something an individual can enhance (Grasseni 2021: 16). For example, a trained twitcher is probably more likely to notice certain birds species than a birdwatcher who identifies birds for fun.

Apart from skilled vision, Littlejohn (2021) addresses the importance of skilled listening. He argues that what we hear and the value we attach to it depends on culture, skilled listening and our positionality (Littlejohn 2021: 41). In short, just as skilled vision makes people see different things when they look at the same thing, skilled listening, among others, makes us hear different things when we listen to the same thing and also makes us attach varying values to this sound (Grasseni 2021, Littlejohn 2021). In the case of bird identifiers, besides skilled vision and listening, gear is another aspect that helps them, especially with watching. Drawing back on Barratt (2011), the author writes that gear is an essential part of climbing because gear allows climbers to do what they adore (Barratt 2011: 1). The same is true for bird identifiers. Therefore, it is not just that bird identifiers need gear - e.g., binoculars, telescopes, field guides, etc. - to identify birds; gear additionally helps them see. In other words, gear is necessary and an extension of the body (ibid.). In the following sections, I will elaborate on the abovementioned concepts based on my fieldwork.

Methods and (audio-visual) techniques of research

This study focuses on how different bird identification practices shape how bird identifiers perceive, conceive, and value Dutch socio-ecological systems. To answer this central question, I drafted three sub-questions:

- Why and how do bird identifiers at the Amsterdamse Waterleidingduinen watch birds?
- How do bird identifiers learn about, conceptualise, and value local environments?
- What value do Dutch socio-ecological systems have to bird identifiers at the Amsterdamse Waterleidingduinen?

This study's underpinning is a 'constructivist ontology' (Bryman 2012: 32). As discussed in the theoretical framework, this research assumes that "nature" is a socially constructed entity that acquires meaning that individuals give to it (ibid.). I.e., "nature" is thus not a concept that people cannot influence; instead, its meaning is continuously reconsidered (ibid.: 33). For this reason, I am conscious of the fact that I am defining "nature" within my research that is tied to a particular context (ibid.). Therefore, I do not represent a fixed meaning of "nature" but instead present a reality in which a specific view of "nature" plays a role (ibid.). In the following paragraphs, I will discuss how I conducted my research with constructionism in mind. The methods I will discuss are observation, semi-structured qualitative interviewing, the go-along method, photo-elicitation, drawing/mental mapping, and audio-visual recording. At the end of this section, I will dedicate several paragraphs to the ethical considerations I took while conducting this study and my positionality.

Observation

According to Bryman (2012), 'participant observation' involves a researcher observing a group of people for a given time by watching their behaviour and asking questions based on attended events (Bryman 2012: 432). Bryman (2012) further explains that as a researcher, it is essential to gain access to where you would like to conduct your research (ibid.: 433). A researcher could then adopt what is known as an 'overt role' or 'covert role' (ibid.). Since,

within my research, I have always been open to my interlocutors about my position as a researcher and the aims and goals of my study, I have adopted the overt role (ibid.). As I mentioned earlier, I conducted research within the business 'Dagje in de Natuur'. In my case, it was no struggle to gain access. After sending an email, I immediately got good news; I could join all organised excursions. Therefore, participant observation is a method that I applied fully during these excursions. At the beginning of my research, I wrote down everything I noticed as 'field notes' (Bryman 2012).

Bryman (2012) defines field notes as notes taken by the researcher while observing that address what the researcher observed and how the researcher interprets these observations (Bryman 2012: 447). According to him, there are several kinds of field notes, e.g., 'mental notes', 'jotted notes', and 'full field notes', all of which I made during my research (Bryman 2012: 450). Mental notes are sometimes used when the researcher has no space or opportunity to write things down (ibid.). For example, I mainly used mental notes during my research when I started using audio-visual methods. Because I was then constantly holding a tripod with a camera on it and continuously filming what happened during an excursion, I tried to remember as many important events as possible through mental notes. On the other hand, I mainly made jotted notes when I went on an excursion solely to observe and ask participants questions. According to Emerson et al. (2007), jotted notes are the researcher's quick notes *in situ* (Emerson et al. 2007: 356). The authors explain that one risk of making jotted notes in the field is that some interlocutors may become irritated when everything they do is written down (ibid.: 357).

Yet, taking field notes during excursions worked very well during my research. Before the start of each excursion, participants did not know that I would come along and ask them questions. Besides, I was only sometimes introduced by one of the guides. As a result, I found it difficult to start asking questions to participants suddenly. I soon discovered that bringing a clipboard to write my field notes attracted attention. Some participants came up to me and asked me what I was doing, upon which I could explain what my research entailed and ask them directly if I could conduct a short interview with them. Thus, my open role as a researcher and openly writing field notes during my research allowed me access to interlocutors. Upon returning home, I turned my jotted field notes into full field notes by detailing my written down keywords (Bryman 2012: 450). The data my field notes, in whatever

form, brought me mainly relates to the embodiment aspect of my research - on which I will elaborate further in the following sections. By observing, I explored how different bird identifiers watch birds through skilled vision and listening, and I gained an overall understanding of what an excursion looked like.

Semi-structured qualitative interviewing

Based on the field notes I took while observing excursions, I drafted questions I asked during semi-structured qualitative interviews. Bryman (2012) describes a semi-structured interview as one in which the researcher asks questions to interlocutors prepared in advance, where the interview structure is partially fixed but where there is also room for follow-up questions and deviation from the predetermined questions (Bryman 2012: 471). In this manner, for interlocutors, an ethnographic interview could feel like a casual conversation (Spradley 1979: 464). Spradley (1979) identifies three main elements of an ethnographic interview: 'explicit purpose', 'ethnographic explanations', and 'ethnographic questions' (Spradley 1979: 465). According to Spradley (1979), a researcher must make the purpose of the study explicit to the interlocutors the researcher is interviewing (ibid.).

I conducted four extensive semi-structured qualitative interviews ranging from 30 minutes to an hour. I additionally held conversations with 41 participants of organised excursions - about 5-20 minutes each - during which I explained where the interview would go at the beginning of each interview. Besides, I also used 'ethnographic explanations' by telling what my research was about and why I made notes and recorded and filmed the interviews (ibid.). In addition, by drafting questions in advance that I needed the answers to for my research, I could draw - to stay in Spradley's (1979) terms - 'ethnographic questions' that addressed all facets of my study (ibid.: 466).

I recorded all four extensive semi-structured interviews to listen to them later and not worry about noting down everything my interlocutors told me during the interview (Bryman 2012: 482). Three of these interviews were additionally recorded on camera. After conducting these extensive semi-structured qualitative interviews, I manually transcribed and coded them to analyse the data I gathered. During my short conversations with excursion participants, I wrote down everything they said as jotted field notes (Emerson et al. 2007). The last seven interviews I conducted with excursion participants were recorded with my phone to

determine whether that way of working would be more efficient. However, I found out that since all interviews were recorded outside, these interviews could not be listened back to correctly because of the strong wind. The questionnaires I had prepared for the extensive semi-structured interviews and those for the excursion participants were designed so that the answers to these questions would lead to solutions for my sub-questions and, ultimately, the main question.

The go-along method

Having focused in the paragraphs written above on how I applied participant observation and semi-structured interviewing and what these methods brought me, I will discuss the encountered limitations of these research methods in the following paragraphs. First, Kusenbach (2003) writes that participant observation leaves little room to study how research participants understand and conceive their everyday environments since observations occur from the researcher's eyes (Kusenbach 2003: 460). She further stresses that although interviewing can go outside the limits of just observable events, this method also has drawbacks (ibid.: 462). For example, interviews cannot address every topic relevant to the researcher's research (ibid.). In addition, interviewing ensures that interlocutors are removed from their everyday environment (ibid.). Based on these limitations, Kusenbach (2003) proposes the 'go-along method' as an addition to interviewing and observation.

The go-along method is where the researcher goes along with interlocutors within their everyday environment to explore their day-to-day activities and understandings through questioning and observation (Kusenbach 2003: 463). Even though Kusenbach (2003) strongly supports the use of the go-along method, she also indicates that this method is anything but natural, as a go-along will not be a daily activity of many informants (ibid.: 464). I have used the go-along method in my research mainly through 'walk alongs' (Kusenbach 2003: 464). During my research, I walked along on excursions and occasionally asked questions - not part of the semi-structured interviews - to the guides and participants. In addition, I went on individual outings with each guide I followed - i.e., Arjan, Jesse, and Lars. During these walk alongs, I always brought my camera to film what was happening. Like observation, the go-along method has mainly answered my research questions about embodiment. For example,

I learnt how bird identifiers identify birds by going along with my informants when they went identifying birds.

Photo-elicitation

In addition to semi-structured interviewing, in which I asked predetermined questions to my research participants, I also conducted interviews in which imagery played an important role. Bryman (2012) refers to these kinds of interviews as 'photo-elicitations', during which the researcher questions interlocutors about the value and meaning of the images being used (Bryman 2012: 455). For example, I held a photo-elicitation with Jesse, Lars, and Arjan in which I asked them in advance to select imagery valuable to them within bird identification activities. The main reason for using this research method is my curiosity about the type of images they would show me and what exactly they meant to them. The pictures they had chosen were primarily photos and videos of moments when they had seen a unique species or pictures of birds they liked from the Internet. During the photo-elicitations, I asked them to explain why they chose these images and what they meant to them.

Drawing/mental mapping

Drawing back on Bryman (2012) and Emerson et al. (2007) and their thoughts on field notes, Hendrickson (2019) pays attention to an additional type of field note; 'visual field notes' (Hendrickson 2019: 198). According to her, visual field notes mainly reinforce the feeling of 'being there' and convey that experience through, e.g., drawings (ibid.: 200). She describes a situation during her fieldwork in which she was out with her colleagues being experienced bird identifiers. At the same time, she was inexperienced (ibid.: 204). As Hendrickson (2019) recounts, her colleagues saw bird species while she wondered where these birds were sitting (ibid.). Like my reasoning in this article, Hendrickson (2019) also uses the concept of skilled vision to elucidate how her colleagues could see the birds, whereas she could not (ibid.: 205). She is, therefore, left with asking herself how she could capture these species invisible to her (ibid.: 206).

Based on Hendrickson's (2019) experience described above, I became inspired to use drawings as a research method within my study. However, I chose to do this in a different way than Hendrickson (2019) did. My three main interlocutors made these drawings instead

of making drawings myself - i.e., visual field notes - during my fieldwork. Since, like Hendrickson (2019), I am an inexperienced bird identifier, I wondered what gear and elements play an essential role in bird identification. Therefore, I asked Jesse, Arjan, and Lars to identify what equipment they use when identifying birds. I also asked all three to make a map during these drawing sessions. I refer to this latter research method as 'mental mapping' following the arguments presented in Götz & Holmén (2018).

Since all maps are made by mapmakers who have made certain decisions about the content and layout of maps, according to Götz & Holmén (2018), all maps are so-called 'mental maps' (Götz & Holmén 2018: 157). As stated by the authors, mental maps do not have a function to show the way in an area but function more to convey how a particular place is experienced by its creator (ibid.: 158). In other words, mental maps show how people interpret the world around them (ibid.). During my fieldwork, I asked Jesse, Arjan, and Lars to map an area of their choice and indicate valuable and unique places. In this way, I tried to find out how professional bird identifiers look at specific locations and what they pay attention to when mapping them.

Audio-visual recording

Now that I have discussed the qualitative methods I used in my research, the following paragraphs will focus on the audio-visual techniques and their reasoning and inspiration. These sections are mainly based on the arguments of Grasseni (2021). According to her, anthropologists often aim to understand the everyday environments of groups of people (Grasseni 2021: 13). However, to see like others requires 'learning to see' (Grasseni 2021: 13). According to Grasseni (2021), audio-visual methods are not only beneficial in showing the lifeworlds of others but also to visualise this process of learning to see (ibid.). In other words, the human body and a camera provide ‘a tool for analytic observation of sensory engagement’ (Grasseni 2021: 13). Through the already discussed concept of skilled vision, Grasseni (2021) shows that people see different things when they look at the same phenomenon, which is why images do not function as a way of showing the seeing of others (ibid.: 15). The importance of learning how others see, as Grasseni (2021) describes, is to make people understand each other better - something I am also trying to achieve with my thesis (ibid.: 16).

My final thesis aims to produce knowledge centred around bird identifiers' skilled vision and listening, conceptions of local ecologies, and pro-environmental behaviour relating to their value to these local ecologies. Using the qualitative research methods outlined above, my study aims to elucidate how different forms of bird identification shape how bird identifiers perceive, conceive, and value Dutch socio-ecological systems and how these perceptions, conceptions, and values shape their practice of pro-environmental behaviour. In addition, using audio-visual methods also illustrates how different forms of bird identification shape skills in both listening and hearing. Combined, the qualitative research methods and the use of audio-visual methods as part of my final thesis produce declarative and sensory knowledge concerned with the themes of conceptions of "nature", skilled vision/listening, and pro-environmental behaviour.

Since my audio-visual part and the written part of my final thesis are centred around the same topics, the two complement one another. For example, whereas this written output elaborates on how academics researched and defined skilled vision/listening, my audio-visual work shows how my research participants - as professional bird identifiers - experience skilled vision and listening through their bird identification practice. In addition, whereas my audio-visual output will outline how my research participants conceptualise, perceive, and value "nature", my written work will elaborate on how I have learned that kind of knowledge through qualitative research methods. In this way, my outcomes centre around the same themes but complement each other more than trying to tell the same thing. My research, therefore, clearly shows that a written thesis combined with audio-visual methods is not mutually exclusive.

On the contrary, I show that specific knowledge - such as skilled vision/listening - cannot be clearly expressed merely through the written word, audio-visual methods, and *vice versa*. Applying semi-structured qualitative interviews and the go-along method combined with audio-visual techniques - i.e., film - my audio-visual output shows how three interlocutors look at birds as professional bird identifiers. The latter involves how they see sensorially and perceive the local ecosystems around them.

Because my research highlights how a combination of qualitative research methods and audio-visual methods can generate particular kinds of knowledge by combining the two, my work fits within multimodal anthropology. My research involves applying various audio-

visual techniques such as film, drawing, mental mapping and photo-elicitation. By using experimental forms of filmmaking within the audio-visual part of my thesis - e.g., taking images through a telescope and binoculars - my film also falls within 'experimental ethnography'. Russell (1999) elucidates that experimental ethnography challenges the objectivity that ethnography is often associated with (Russell 1999: xi). My audio-visual output tries to achieve this mainly by adding shots that may not always be aesthetically beautiful or in which much is explained, but instead applying things like split screens where the viewer is taken through the eyes of a professional bird identifier - relating to the arguments presented by Grasseni (2021) above.

I further consider my study falling within 'collaborative ethnography' as I actively collaborated with my research participants by, for example, making certain shots in the film together and adding private footage made by them in the final film. Finally, my audio-visual output is characterised by influences from 'sensory ethnography', which focuses mainly on how senses and embodiment play a role in how people understand their environment (Pink 2015: xi). My audio-visual output shows how bird identifiers use skilled vision and listening to make sense of the world, which fits within sensory ethnography. So, my final thesis fits within experimental, collaborative, and sensory ethnography by using different qualitative and audio-visual methods that go against the traditional way of using them and reflect a collaborative and sensorial approach between my research participants and me.

Ethics and positionality

During my research, I used the ethics guidelines as defined by the American Anthropological Association (AAA) (s.a.) and Marion & Crowder (2013). I mainly followed the guidelines of the AAA (s.a.) while using qualitative research methods. In contrast, I primarily used those of Marion & Crowder (2013) for the audio-visual part of my study. The main ethical guideline the AAA (s.a.) appoints is not to harm interlocutors, which I have therefore tried to pursue fully (American Anthropological Association s.a.). Furthermore, during my research, I ensured that I was open and honest with my interlocutors regarding the aims and objectives of my research and sought their continuous confirmation of informed consent - especially while filming during excursions (ibid.). Finally, I aim to share my study's written and audio-visual outputs with them and stay in close contact even after completing my research (ibid.).

Regarding the audio-visual output of my study, a sentence that struck me is that 'images are among the most powerful communicative symbols' (Marion & Crowder 2013: 3). For me, this sentence meant not only that in some cases, images can say more than words, but also that this is precisely why it is crucial to treat images ethically since they can say so much. Marion & Crowder (2013) refer to seven considerations of visual ethics, most of which I considered applicable to my fieldwork. For example, the authors stress that it is important to be reflexive about who determines from which angle images are taken (ibid.: 6).

In addition, Marion & Crowder (2013) also mention the importance of thinking about how images are applied and who makes decisions about them (Marion & Crowder 2013: 6). While creating the audio-visual output of my research, I took these points into account by occasionally sending edits to my interlocutors to ask if they agreed with these images. In addition, I have been aware that the intention of the pictures I had in my mind may not match those of others (ibid.). Therefore, based on the advice of Marion & Crowder (2013), I regularly showed images to loved ones to ask them how they interpreted and understood them (ibid.). So, to summarise these paragraphs on ethics, during my fieldwork, I tried to be as concerned as possible with what is ethical for my interlocutors rather than with my own goals of completing the research well (ibid.: 7). Furthermore, I also paid attention to observing my positionality within my study and that of my research in general.

As a young woman who grew up in the Netherlands with a passion for hiking and being outdoors, this research is very close to my heart. The feelings I experience, when I am outside hiking, photographing, or climbing, are indescribable. However, I did not want to let these feelings get in the way of my research. I did not want to let my vision of what nature is for me dominate my thoughts but rather be utterly open to those of my interlocutors. It was also essential to reflect on the location of my research. By this, I do not mean the Amsterdamse Waterleidingduinen, but rather 'Dagje in de Natuur' as a company where I could conduct my research. I want to stress that I am aware that 'Dagje in de Natuur' is a profit-making business that a particular group of people is attracted to and that this group of people also pays a fair amount for. During my research, I never intended to tout 'Dagje in de Natuur' nor to disadvantage them. Instead, I aimed to critically examine how both affect my results based on my positionality and that of 'Dagje in de Natuur' during this research.

‘Horen is scoren’: skilled vision and listening during bird identification

The title of this section introduces a quote: 'horen is scoren’, which means 'hearing is scoring' in English. This quote was used regularly during the ‘Dagje in de Natuur’ excursions I joined. The quote implies that bird species may be counted on a list when a bird identifier hears rather than sees a bird during bird identification. In other words, if you hear a bird without seeing it, that is also sufficient. This quote is unique because it shows how essential listening is during bird identification. During the field trips I attended, I also noticed that the guides - Jesse, Arjan, and Lars - often hear a bird first and then look for it to show it to the participants. During conversations with participants, it also occasionally appeared that they had difficulty listening during bird identification. For example, one of the participants said to me that she is terrible at listening during bird identification and that she felt she would never learn this part, either. However, she did mention that excursions such as those organised by 'Dagje in de Natuur’ help to see more species. Several other participants confirmed the latter point. For example, one of these participants said:

“Without Arjan, I wouldn't have seen half of it; you must hear it”.

Similar talking points emerged during the semi-structured interview I conducted with Arjan. He explained the following:

“Well, you just notice that if you spend all your life doing that, your senses are just more turned on than with other people. [...] If you start doing it later in life, even in your twenties, you don't catch up”.

Arjan’s views matched Lars’s:

"You hear that continuously. [...] You just keep paying attention to it, so it's also an extra focus you always have with you, which doesn't turn off anymore. So that stays; I don't think I can ever turn it off".

Combined, Arjan and Lars show that the way they can identify birds has been trained from an early age, and therefore they have better-trained senses that cannot be turned off anymore. Arjan's quote about these trained senses not being learnable later in life is confirmed by one of the participants. She told me that she is sometimes discouraged by bird books that list so many species. In addition, she said to me that she finds it challenging to distinguish birds from each other because of their summer and winter plumage. Another participant said that one could see more birds with "someone like that", referring to one of the guides. She added that this is why she considers - in this case - Lars to be an actual bird identifier.

The quotes I have named so far symbolise the concepts of skilled vision and listening that I discussed earlier in this article. The way Arjan described how his senses are better trained than other people's since he identified birds at a young age fits with 'learning to see' as defined by Grasseni (2021). According to her, seeing can be learned through training (Grasseni 2021: 13). In other words, through learning to see, a skilled vision, even as listening, can be acquired (ibid.). What struck me during the excursions is that because of the skilled vision and listening of Arjan, Lars, and Jesse, excursion participants did not see themselves as "real" bird identifiers, if at all. For example, when I asked each participant whether they saw themselves as bird identifiers, one participant said that she thinks 'bird identifier' is a big word but enjoys watching birds. Another participant said he did not see himself as a 'bird identifier-bird identifier'. Whenever a participant told me they did not see themselves as a "real" bird identifier, I wondered why and what makes someone an actual bird identifier. Until one of the participants said the following when I asked him if he considered himself a bird identifier:

"Well, when I walk with the boys, I don't. You become very humble then".

Then I realised that the participants with whom I had been interacting all this time might have been comparing themselves to the skilled vision and listening of Arjan, Jesse, and Lars and therefore saw themselves as a lesser bird identifier. Indeed, the participants I spoke with indicated that they looked at birds primarily as hobbyists, recreationists, novices, amateurs, and enthusiasts - to name a few forms. Returning to the different types of bird identifiers called by Schaffner (2009) - i.e., the bird-watcher, the birder, and the twitcher - the participants I had interacted with were mainly bird-watchers and birders. In short, those identifying birds mainly as a hobby and leisure activity and perhaps occasionally keep a list of the species they have found and where (Schaffner 2009: 208).

Whether the participants of the excursions I have attended see themselves as a true bird-identifier or not is context specific. In the context of an excursion in which Arjan, Jesse, and Lars continuously named all the birds they heard or saw, these participants considered themselves as less of an actual bird identifier. Yet these participants might consider themselves (actual) bird identifiers in contexts where they would be with friends with no birding experience, for example. Indeed, the same participant who said that he does not consider himself a real birder when he is with 'the boys' - i.e., Lars, Arjan and Jesse - said he could bird pretty well. In other words, outside of such an excursion, he might see himself as a bird identifier.

Arjan, Jesse, and Lars indicated during my interviews with them that they watch birds primarily to find rarities - and that they used to be twitchers as well. However, they do this differently than Schaffner (2009) describes the activities of a twitcher. Instead of knowing where a rare species is and driving to it in the car to see it - like the bird identifiers in Bunne discussed in the introduction - Arjan, Jesse, and Lars use the so-called '*zelf-ontdeklijst*', i.e., 'self-discovery list'. The self-discovery list lists all the bird species they have seen or heard, provided they have discovered them themselves. During my research, I did not come into contact with twitchers. The reason for this is where my research took place and the season. In the Dutch winters on the Amsterdamse Waterleidingduinen, there is little chance of finding a rarity - the thing twitchers are looking for. Also, I was in a group as part of an excursion which meant I was mainly focused on the people participating in these excursions. Because of their search for rarities, twitchers will also not join an excursion for novice birders to learn to recognise, for example, bluetits and blackbirds.

Considering the concepts of skilled vision and listening and this self-discovery list used by Arjan, Jesse, and Lars, I would like to add to the categories of bird identifiers named by Schaffner (2009). I talked not only to people who watch birds for their pleasure and keep lists or, like what Arjan, Jesse, and Lars used to do, look for rarities. Instead, Arjan, Jesse, and Lars have become bird identifiers who watch birds, aim to see rarities but want to find them themselves - in my words, 'the self-discoverers'. The euphoria these bird identifiers feel when they then find a rarity can be described by no one better than Jesse:

"It is; I am a bird identifier with a healthy addiction. So, I hunt rare species but must find them myself. Driving somewhere because a rare bird is reported by someone else doesn't interest me; it makes my heart rate go down rather than up. And, when we find it, I do 26 backflips and have a heart rate of 230".

In this article section, I focused on why bird identifiers watch birds and how they do so. I found many more types of bird identification activity beyond the categories Schaffner (2009) named, such as recreational, hobbyist, novice, enthusiast, amateur, professional, and self-discoverer. Self-discoverers like Jesse, Arjan, or Lars, using skilled vision and listening, will go to a place where they know a particular rarity might be without knowing if it is there. A question I ask myself here is how they view the world around them. For example, do they see the nonhuman as merely those rarities they seek? Besides, how do bird identifiers conceive the nonhuman based on the kind of bird identifier they are? And, do certain bird identification activities harm nonhumans by treating or valuing them differently? I will address these posed questions in the next section of this article. I will additionally discuss how bird identification practices might form interconnections between humans and nonhumans.

“Nature” in inverted commas in the Dutch context

On Saturday, January 28th 2023, I joined an excursion at the Amsterdamse Waterleidingduinen, where Lars was the guide. The Amsterdamse Waterleidingduinen is close to Zandvoort, where the Zandvoort circuit is located. On this day, the wind was in a specific direction, making it easy to hear the track's sounds during the excursion. One of the participants mentioned that he thought it was typical of Dutch nature. As a nature lover who grew up in the Netherlands, I immediately knew what this participant meant by that remark. I interpreted his comment as indicating the inexistence of shielded, detached nature in the Netherlands; buildings have been built everywhere you look. The sound of the Zandvoort circuit and the tops of buildings rising above the dunes may have confirmed to this participant that there would be no untouched nature in the Netherlands. This comment reminded me of an earlier comment by a participant who said that nature should be in inverted commas in the Dutch context. Hence the title of this thesis section in which I will discuss how the bird identifiers I spoke with during my fieldwork learn about, conceptualise, and value local environments.

In his book *Natuur in mensenland: Essays over ons nieuwe cultuurlandschap*, Drenthen (2018) describes a similar statement to the ones I described above. According to him, many Dutch people believe that untouched nature cannot be found in the Netherlands and that the Dutch landscape is Man-made - a so-called ‘cultural landscape’ (Drenthen 2018: 9). Drenthen (2018) also stresses that this way of thinking separates nature and culture by assuming that real nature can only emerge without human influence (ibid.: 94). Conversations I had with bird identifiers who had booked an excursion at ‘Dagje in de Natuur’ revealed a similar way of thinking.

For example, one participant said he considers nature a piece of land you do nothing about - untouched. For him, the Amsterdamse Waterleidingduinen are not nature but a park. Another word I regularly heard from participants is *oernatuur* - i.e., ‘primal nature’. One participant told me that she thinks primaeval nature is the most beautiful and that she does not find this in the Netherlands. However, in Poland, she did experience primal nature because, according to her, it is not as neatly juxtaposed there as in the Netherlands. Finally,

another participant said he thinks the Amsterdamse Waterleidingduinen are also a park and nature does not exist. According to him, nature is what we come from, our origin. For me, the highlighted arguments of participants dovetailed with the views mentioned above by Drenthen (2018). These participants see nature mainly as something wild that can no longer be found in the Netherlands.

I interpreted their arguments as most problematic. When you say something does not exist, you do not have to take responsibility for preserving it. For example, if you do not consider the Amsterdamse Waterleidingduinen as nature, why should we humans do our best to protect it? Cronon (1996), therefore, states that 'wilderness poses a serious threat to responsible environmentalism' (Cronon 1996: 17). In other words, by seeing nature as something wild that is removed from human influence, we do not take any chance in protecting it. Cronon (1996) further stresses that wilderness became a recreational site in this way (ibid.: 15). I also recognise his arguments within 'Dagje in de Natuur'. By emphasising that people can take a day in nature, you indirectly imply that nature is something people can go to, something wild that is far away from, say, an urban environment. However, when I asked Arjan, Lars, and Jesse how they saw nature, I got to hear very different answers compared to the participants of their excursions.

When I asked Arjan how he would describe nature, he related to the arguments discussed above that the Netherlands would have no real nature:

"That's tricky because some people say "In the Netherlands, we don't have nature; It's all Man-made". But I don't want to say that. [...] let's say, where I can see birds, I consider a bush in my courtyard garden as nature. So I'm not that purist, but of course, you have all kinds of gradations."

Jesse's arguments were in line with Arjan's:

"And I think nature in the broad sense I think everything is a bit of nature, but there are different gradations in it. So if you go from zero to ten, you would say that urban nature, for example, in terms of real nature, is maybe a three or a four and a vast nature reserve like

the Oostvaardersplassen a nine or a ten. But I wouldn't put nature in a pigeonhole of 'you go to nature'. Nature is everywhere. Just in different gradations."

Finally, Lars said the following:

"Bird identifiers have a bit of a crazy image of nature. Because I think the dunes are obviously stunning, but the Zuidpier where I also like to bird, if you ask an average person "What is nature?", I do not think they would say Zuidpier. But that is a wonderful place rich in nature, or at least rich in birds, which I consider nature. [...] So, nature for me is not necessarily trees and greenery and things like that, but more places where I can see those birds."

What struck me most about the description of nature that Arjan, Jesse, and Lars gave me is that it is fiercely opposed to the name of the company for which they are guides - of which Lars and Jesse are the owners. Indeed, 'Dagje in de Natuur' - i.e. 'Day in Nature' - implies that nature is something you go to, an experience being commercialised. The company's name was first 'Dagje vogelen' - 'Day birding' - but since Lars and Jesse also wanted to organise excursions that were not just about birds - such as excursions about fossils and mammals - they changed the name. In addition, the way Arjan, Jesse and Lars describe nature is related to Schaffner's (2009) arguments about the harmful view of bird identifiers on the environment.

Indeed, Schaffner (2009) demonstrates that some forms of bird identification, such as birding and twitching, take place at places that are harmful to the environment - such as toxic sites - as a result of which bird identifiers often ignore the negative aspects of these sites (Schaffner 2009: 218). While Lars states with a somewhat optimistic tone that he sees places like the Zuidpier as nature because many birds come there, he pays no attention to that an extremely polluting company like Tata Steel is around the corner from the Zuidpier. As a bird identifier walking on the Zuidpier with your binoculars and telescope to see seabirds, the plumes of smoke from Tata Steel rise behind your back.

As I discussed in the previous section of this article, the categories of bird identifiers I spoke to were mainly bird-watchers and birders, and self-discoverers. The latter category of

bird identifiers is an empirical category that followed my research. This bird identification category includes those looking for rarities but wanting and needing to discover them themselves, as Lars, Arjan, and Jesse do. When I compare the named arguments of my interlocutors so far, what emerges is that self-discoverers associate nature mainly with birds. While the bird-watchers and birders especially emphasise the robustness and pristine wilderness, the self-discoverers mainly express that nature is everywhere - but in different gradations. I, therefore, argue that for the bird-watchers and birders I spoke to, nature is something further away from them, while for the observed self-discoverers who master skilled vision and listening, nature is closer to them.

In addition, it is also essential to consider that bird identifiers are not 'flies on the wall' - i.e., through bird identification activities, bird identifiers use ecosystem services. Kronenberg (2014) defines ecosystem services as services made available by the environment for people to use, such as water and recreational services (Kronenberg 2014: 617-618). The author also stresses that bird identifiers are a group of people who use these ecosystem services, leading to environmental damage (ibid.: 623). However, Kronenberg (2014) elucidates that the different types of bird identification utilise ecosystem services in different ways (ibid.). He explains, for example, that, just as Schaffner (2009) mentioned, bird identifiers sometimes visit parts of nature where no infrastructure has been constructed and, as a result, disturb the birds in this environment (ibid.: 624). In addition, many tours are also given - e.g., by 'Dagje in de Natuur' - and bird identifiers purchase gear - e.g., binoculars, field guides and telescopes - which can negatively affect nature (ibid.: 625).

These arguments of Kronenberg (2014) reminded me of this article's introduction, in which I wondered whether avid birdwatchers such as twitchers view and appreciate nature differently because of their focus on finding rarities. In the next section, I will elaborate on this question by exploring how Arjan, Jesse, and Lars, during excursions, did things that are not emphatically good for nature. In doing so, I want to show that their view of nature as individuals, as bird identifiers, differs from that of them as guides. In addition, I examine the promises characterising bird identification.

Attaching value to a multitude of meanings

On Saturday, 23 January 2023, I joined Jesse's excursion at the Amsterdamse Waterleidingduinen. It was an excursion where we heard, on average, more bird songs than last week which showed that spring was on its way. Moreover, on this foggy morning, we saw a kingfisher at one point. During the previous excursions I joined, it had already become clear to me that the kingfisher is a big attraction on excursions; participants often find this a beautiful bird that they do not readily see in their daily lives. Arjan once referred to the kingfisher as a bird that is a so-called 'spark bird' for many people - i.e., a bird that prompts people to start bird identification. And since we had already not seen many birds due to the fog, it was very nice that the kingfisher showed himself that morning.

When Jesse tried to put this kingfisher in his telescope so the participants could see it, a man approached from behind with his camera. Since he wanted to walk past us, which would probably cause the kingfisher to fly away from its spot, Jesse asked this man if he might want to stay behind the group until all participants had seen the kingfisher through the telescope. However, the man refused because he wanted to get closer to the kingfisher to take its picture. Jesse reacted irritably to this man. Later during the excursion, Jesse came up to me to say that this way of interacting with nature would be interesting within my research. When I held brief conversations with participants for my study during the same excursion, one of them said that twitchers mainly focus on seeing rare species but, as a result, do not appreciate the common species or appreciate them less. The vignette described above, and the comment by this participant about twitchers got me thinking. These events made me wonder whether photographers and twitchers value bird species differently than other bird identification activities.

Schaffner's (2009) arguments are consistent with the reasoning that twitchers look at nature differently from other bird identifiers. According to Schaffner (2009), what characterises a twitcher is that they mainly focus on finding rare bird species (Schaffner 2009: 209). Because these rarities are often found in unusual places such as sewage ponds and landfills, in this way, according to Schaffner (2009), twitchers ensure that these spots become visible but that the environmental hazards these spots cause are not unveiled (ibid.: 212).

Thus, what is clear from Schaffner's (2009) arguments is that certain forms of bird identification not only value places that are harmful to the environment because they can see rare birds there but also mask the impacts these places have on the environment. However, it is not as black and white as it seems.

During the semi-structured interview, Arjan said he considers a photographer mainly a picture collector and less a nature lover. However, he also stressed the importance of not pointing fingers at photographers or twitchers. I made a bridge to the photographer who walked through the image of the telescope during Jesse's excursion, to which Arjan responded the following:

"But of course, it's still hypocritical because Jesse and I also walk on Vlieland, stomping through the foredunes, and all sorts of things fly up because we want to discover a rare bird. So, then you are more disruptive than a photographer walking towards a kingfisher. So, it's also hypocritical and self-serving that you get angry because you're guiding an excursion".

Arjan's quote mainly goes against an observation I mentioned earlier in this article about the guides within my research possessing skilled vision and listening and, as a result, being closer to nature. Arjan shows with this quote that they, too, exhibit behaviour that is harmful to the environment. Besides these guides using their skilled vision and listening for commercial purposes, I have also observed species being hunted during excursions to show them to participants. The jack snipe, a rather shy bird that likes to hide in reedbeds, is an example of a bird species being hunted down during excursions. On several occasions during the excursions I attended, I have seen one of the guides walk into such a marshy reedbed to scare the jack snipe so that it would fly up and the participants could see it.

All in all, this example, combined with Arjan's quote, shows that guides on excursions not only use their skilled vision and listening for commercial purposes but also, in their own time, sometimes do harmful things to the environment to be able to see certain bird species. For this reason, Jesse, Arjan, and Lars are not only bird identifiers or self-discoverers but also guides providing a service to a group of well-paying participants. So, it is not that twitchers

and photographers are the so-called "bad guys"; the guides also exhibit environmentally damaging behaviour.

Even though, for example, Kronenberg (2014) argues that more professional and obsessive forms of bird identification do more significant damage to the environment through these practices, it is also essential to consider how nature lovers and amateurs value nature (Kronenberg 2014: 623). Indeed, birders and bird-watchers can also cause birds to be disturbed during the breeding season (ibid.: 624). Yet Kronenberg (2014) shows that bird identifiers generally see environmental issues earlier, not only because they benefit when birds are doing well but mainly because of their interest in birds (ibid.: 626). For example, when I asked participants during excursions what value they place on nature, participants emphasised that nature is fundamental to them. One participant said nature is essential because it brings him happiness and enrichment. Another participant said she is happiest when she is in nature. Yet another participant said that nature is the greatest good in life, which ties in with another participant's comment about nature being something more important than humans.

From this section and the sections above, it has become clear that different forms of bird identification conceive nature differently and value nature based on their perceptions of nature. As mentioned earlier, I did not talk to twitchers within this study. Still, I did discuss the possible promises and risks of multiple forms of bird identification and guiding for commercial purposes. Indeed, for most people I talked to, consciously engaging with nature is the most normal thing in the world. The phrase "doing what's right" was common and shows that for many interlocutors, nature conservation is part of their daily activities.

However, it is important to stress - and even one of the participants said this to me - that I did talk to a specific group of people during this research. Namely, these people have chosen to pay for birding excursions with professional bird identifiers. So, this is a group of people who already show additional interest in nature and thus are already a group that is consciously engaged in nature. It is, therefore, not surprising that many participants indicated that they are concerned with the state of nature. Furthermore, it is essential to add that these affluent white people have the privilege to book excursions and adjust their lifestyles to live more sustainably.

Conclusion

This study aimed to show how bird identifiers at the Amsterdamse Waterleidingduinen perceive, conceive and value Dutch socio-ecological systems. Since this research consists of a written output and an audio-visual output, I have also emphasised in this paper how both reinforce and complement each other and what the purpose of each is. Through filmmaking, I showed how (professional) bird identifiers apply skilled vision and listening, what the field trips I attended looked like, and how the protagonists of my film experience the embodiment of nature. As Grasseni (2021) argues, I showed in my film how my interlocutors learned to see in a certain way.

As a (visual) anthropologist, using ethnographic filmmaking as both an observational and documenting anthropological practice, I have also gone through the process of 'learning to see' myself (Grasseni 2021: 13). I noticed that the longer I was in contact with my interlocutors and the more excursions I attended, the easier I recognised bird species. Arjan once joked that I should take over his excursion if something unexpected came up for him. In my daily life, I learned skilled vision and listening. I look and listen to the birds around me more often and can recognise them. When I am woken up during a camping weekend by the sounds of birds that have just started their day, at least now I know what species they are. Based on my observations, one of the main arguments within this paper is that once you have learned a particular way of seeing, you conceive nature in a certain way. I.e. skilled vision and listening result in a certain way of perceiving nature, leading to you appreciating nature in a particular manner.

How different forms of bird identification – e.g., bird-watching, birding, twitching, self-discovery – performed by bird identifiers at the Amsterdamse Waterleidingduinen relate to how they perceive, conceive and value nature stems from three pillars. Firstly, skilled vision and listening are learned skills that vary by and within forms of bird identification, making some bird identifiers better at identifying nonhuman entities - in this case, birds. Secondly, this way of looking and listening ensures that bird identifiers differ in how they conceive and perceive local ecologies. While for some novice or amateur bird identifiers, nature primarily

symbolises greenery and lack of human influences, self-discoverers see nature, for example, as everything around them.

Finally, the way bird identifiers perceive nature also determines how they value nature. For instance, the participants of excursions I interviewed indicated that they saw the birding "other" - i.e. the twitcher - as someone more concerned with accumulating rarities and less about the state of nature. However, I have shown within this article that any bird identification activity requires socio-ecological systems, putting pressure on these ecosystems. So, it is not so that guides like Arjan, Jesse, or Lars, through their skilled vision and listening, do nothing harmful to nature; they, too, through their commercial use of their senses, hunted down species during excursions to show these to participants. The latter makes them bird identifiers and, at the same time, guides for a company that organises excursions where participants expect to observe many bird species.

This study is a tiny glimpse into the lives of bird identifiers. I conducted my research within the company 'Dagje in de Natuur', ensuring I only came into contact with a particular group of bird identifiers. Furthermore, I could not speak to twitchers, for example, or have extensive conversations during my interviews with excursion participants. I, therefore, see further research into how skilled vision and listening, perceptions and conceptions of nature, and value attachment to nature come together as an addition to my research.

Further research can reinforce the conclusions of this study. Indeed, learning a particular way of looking at and appreciating nonhumans can bring us closer to nonhumans as human beings. Especially since human influence on nature can no longer be denied by events such as the climate crisis, it is increasingly important to understand how humans and local ecologies connect and how humans use ecosystem services. With my thesis consisting of this paper and a film, I want to let my protagonists speak for themselves. To let them inspire you to look around you more. Enjoy the bird species you hear and do your best to recognise them. In this way, you will become less irritated when you are jerked out of your sleep by a group of starlings, but instead, be open to what they are doing and be able to enjoy the beauty of nature - whatever that means to you.

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