

What makes you a scientist is the way you look at things': ornithology and the observer 1930-1955.

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“What makes you a scientist is the way you look at things”TM:
ornithology and the observer 1930–1955

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Abstract

In the late 1930s networks of amateur observers across Britain were collecting data on birds (British Trust for Ornithology), aircraft (Royal Observer Corps) and society itself (Mass Observation). This paper concentrates on birdwatching practice in the period 1930–1955. Through an examination of the construction of birdwatching's subjects, the Observers, and their objects, birds, it is argued that amateur strategies of scientific observation and record reflected, and were part-constitutive of, particular versions of ecological, national and social identity in this period. The paper examines how conflicts between a rural, organicist Britishness and a modern, planner-preservationist Britishness were elaborated and contained within the figure of the birdwatcher and within the

institutional epistemologies of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the British Trust for Ornithology. Such conflicts are shown to be embedded in the structuring of visual perception in different strategies of bird and aircraft identification, particularly between analytic and gestalt methods; the paper examines, using the related "field-science"™ of aircraft recognition, the importance of identificatory processes in the construction of the Observer, and concludes by examining whether tensions between organicist and scientific discourses were in any sense resolved by the end of this period.



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Keywords

Birdwatching; Gestalt perception; Fieldwork; Nationalism; WWII; Ecology

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