



# NVG NEWSLETTER 31.1

December 2021

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## Foreword

*By Kat Bebbington*

With the end of 2021 in sight, it falls to me as the newly-sworn-in website and PR coordinator of the NVG board to provide our membership with the traditional end-of-year newsletter. A new face in the board is just one small change in a year that has been full of so many, but it's my fond hope that (unlike many of the changes in 2021) my involvement in the society will continue for many years and will provide me with lots of opportunities to get to know as many of the NVG's membership as possible.

Happily, and against what seemed like insurmountable odds at the beginning of November, I already had the pleasure of meeting a portion of that membership face-to-face in a real-life, 3D, fully immersive conference last month. More on that in just a moment, but as a brief introduction for others: I'm currently working on a Veni Fellowship at the Universities of Groningen and Wageningen, and my main research line involves trying to understand how social interactions, and especially those between family members, shape the evolution of behaviour and life history in birds. Lately, I'm starting to focus more on how sudden and unpredictable environmental changes influence how individuals interact with each other; something that I feel we have all become expert on in 2021. Constantly changing societal rules, rescinded and then abruptly re-introduced restrictions on movement, sudden emergences of new mutations – perhaps the human experience is in some ways much closer to the natural selection imposed on other animals right now than it has been for many years. And yet, at the heart of it all, I can't help but be impressed by how the general population, and the scientific community in particular, has taken this environmental uncertainty in its stride with a commendable resilience and a decent amount of good humour. How fitting, then, that we were rewarded with a brief window within which we could finally take part in what is for many of us a great perk of the job – a real-life conference, complete with communal dining, drinks at the bar, bracing walks on the beach and a huge helping of stimulating and inspiring scientific discussion. A wonderful way to end another turbulent year; I couldn't have asked for a more welcoming introduction to the board of the NVG!

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### Report of the 2021 PhD workshop

*By Bawan Amin*

We made it. More than 16 months after the first lockdown, we were finally able to do a live meeting. And just barely, since more restrictions are about to be enforced soon due to the rapidly rising number of COVID-cases. The meeting could luckily go on, with some adjustments to adhere to government guidelines, ensuring a safe environment for all. And a good thing it did. Everyone was very happy to finally be able to meet peers and other researchers in person. For most it was the first scientific event, with in person attendance, since the start of the pandemic. This year, we had the pleasure of having Dr. Steve Nowicki and Dr. Mirjam Knörnschild as invited guests. Dr. Nowicki was present in person, whereas Dr. Knörnschild attended virtually, along with some of the other PhD-attendees who were not able to make it in person due to various reasons. The meeting was kicked off by Dr. Nowicki, who immediately was able to create a relaxed environment with some of his famous jokes. I will not evaluate the quality of said jokes here, but let's just say that they were very successful in improving the atmosphere. Dr. Nowicki talked about how important it was to replicate and follow the data, rather than staring blindly on hypotheses. But science was not the only thing discussed. The importance of being a good mentor and supporting your colleagues was also emphasized. This would be a recurring theme throughout the meeting. Even though the hybrid setting had some technical issues here and there, I would say that it was pretty successful.

After a break, it was Dr. Knörnschild who took the stage. She talked about her career and how it definitely did not go as smooth as one may think based on her cv. The word that she used as an encompassing theme throughout her career was therefore also not hard work nor ambition (although clearly she did not lack either of those). No, the word she chose was serendipity. The path she took was definitely not linear and not without setbacks, but she followed it one step at a time. She talked about how she got fascinated by bats and basically let her study subjects guide her research, showing how you can be organism driven (instead of question driven) and end up with great science.

It was then time for some lunch, after which it was up to the PhD-students to present. Everyone had to give a 5-10 minute presentation, without slides, talking about who they were, what they studied and what they wanted in the future. It was great to be able to share ones worries with peers, and it soon became clear that most of us struggle with the same things. Serious topics such as imposter syndrome, job insecurity and parenting were discussed. Although usually these issues are mostly experienced by ECR's, it was very warming to see how both Dr. Nowicki and Dr. Knörnschild were trying their very best as established academics to also improve the situation. In the end, for change to happen, it has to be a process that is initiated both bottom-up as top-down.

Of course, there are problems and of course there are setbacks. But it was clear that we also had another thing in common. We all are fascinated by the science and by nature. This is the common driving force, explaining why we are here. Quite some of us would never have



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gussed that they would be doing a PhD in biology ten years ago. But the curiosity and fascination have taken us over and, in the end, we have chosen to follow that despite the hardships. In a way, I think the best description of our historical path and the paths that we will follow in the future are indeed best described by the same word that Dr. Knörrschild used. Serendipity.

## Report of the online Annual NVG-meeting

The 2021 NVG meeting was held on the 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> of November in Hotel Zuiderduin in Egmond-aan-Zee. We welcomed approximately 100 participants at the venue and many more were able to view the talks online via zoom link. Aside from some extra pandemic-related admin such as the checking of QR codes, delegates enjoyed a delicious dinner and drinks in the hotel restaurant. To kick off the official scientific programme, we were treated to a fantastic Dobberke lecture on the first evening by Prof. Dr. Mirjam Knörrschild who, in spite of being unable to travel due to covid restrictions, gave a fantastic talk about her ongoing study of song learning in bats. Aside from some fascinating information about how bat pups learn to “talk” in a similar way to humans, we heard about how acoustic differences can contribute to dialects and ultimately speciation.



*Conference registration with a covid twist: delegates show their vaccination and test QR codes.*



*Conference delegates listen to one of the talks in the hotel's main events hall*

The next morning's session began with another stimulating talk from keynote speaker Dr Lysanne Snijders, who showed a series of fascinating results from her work on social foraging behaviour in wild guppies. The rest of the morning's two sessions on social behaviour and individual variation were filled with talks from many different taxa and levels of study from personality to brain size, temporal movement patterns to extra-pair matings. After a very windy lunch break spent by the braver delegates on the blustery beach (and the rest of us snuggled into the comfy hotel chairs), we moved on to the second keynote lecture of the day by newly-appointed

professor Dr. Frederick Verbruggen, who presented his exciting future plans for exploring how stress and incentives influence the learning process. In the afternoon sessions we heard from many more speakers about early life development, learning processes and cognition, before delegates moved to the poster session in the hallway, which showcased a variety of studies



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currently being performed at Dutch and Belgian institutes. After the evening meal, the BRILL Baerends lecture was given by Prof. Steve Nowicki, who travelled all the way from the U.S. (no small thing in November of 2021) to attend the conference. His lecture on avian signalling systems offered fascinating insights into how continuous signals can be processed by receivers into discrete categories and in some cases possess regional and context-dependent information that is typically thought only to occur in human speech.



*Friday's keynote speaker, Dr. Burdfield-Steel, demonstrates the evolution underlying the vast diversity in tiger moth colouration.*

Friday's programme, headed by Dr. Emily Burdfield-Steel's "colourful" keynote lecture on colour polymorphisms in tiger moths (apologies for the bad pun), brought the conference to a close with another round of stimulating talks from students, post-docs and professors on a range of topics on animal communication.

After another windy lunch break, delegates gathered together for one final but very important event: the announcement of prize winners for the best student talk and the best poster. Congratulations to all those who made

posters and gave talks – the standard was incredibly high – but in the end the judges were able to give the following students recognition for bringing across their research in a truly original and exceptional way:

## Winners of the NVG presentation prizes 2021

### NVG poster prize 2021:

**Hanna de Waele:** The Evolution of cognition – an experimental approach in guppies  
Hanne de Waele, Marc Naguib and Alex Kotrschal

### NVG oral presentation prize 2021:

Winner

**Bawan Amin:** The development of animal personality in a wild large mammal

Runner up:

**Alexander Schlatmann** No evidence for olfactory kin discrimination in begging blue tit nestlings



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## Announcement: help wanted for organising a joint meeting with the Brain Cognition Behaviour Network in 2022

NVG is part of a new network of societies in the Netherlands, the Brain Cognition Behaviour network (BCB-NL; <https://neurolab.nl/en/bcb-nl-2-2/> ). BCB-NL is an umbrella platform between the Dutch associations and networks for research into brain, cognition and behaviour. This platform aims to join forces and promote the interests of brain, cognition and behavioural research in the Netherlands and the social issues related to this field.

The network is planning a range of activities allowing interested members of the societies to interact with each other. Currently there is a combined event being planned in the spring / early summer of 2022. The focus of the event will be on younger / early career researchers in our field.

To organize this event, NVG has been asked if a society member wants to be part of the event organization team. The team wants to meet very soon, so if you are interested, please contact Marc Naguib ([marc.naguib@wur.nl](mailto:marc.naguib@wur.nl)) as soon as possible.

**The next newsletter is planned for Spring 2022**