

## What knowledge is "jizz"?

*Vilken typ av kunskap menas med begreppet "jizz"?*

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### Abstract

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Jizz is used by many birders to identify bird species. The definition of jizz differs between authors, but concerns aspects of the bird that are not always easy to define scientifically or describe in objective terms. Rather, impressions of the bird are favoured, including size, shape, behavior and appearance. Here we try to show that jizz is a term worth studying in detail, since its use offers insights in how to identify species, why there are differences among observers in bird surveys and why traditional knowledge about biological diversity might be worth saving when preserving species.

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### Introduction

Field identification of birds among birders<sup>1</sup> could be considered a strict, systematic comparison of a number of specific characters from a field guide to the actual bird observed (for an example of such a scientific account, see Andersson 2012). Such characters include color of specific parts of the bird, the shape of dots on the plumage, the length and shape of the bill, etc. An alternative approach to field identification is using a perhaps less precise method, such as movement patterns or posture, which might be as characteristic, but harder to specify. This latter approach, which is mainly based on general impressions rather than specific characters, is often referred to as *jizz*.

The relevance of *jizz* in birdwatching has been discussed (see, for example, Sharrock 1984) and has important implications within scientific studies, for example when evaluating bird surveys. The results from two different observers within a study might differ if one bases his identifications mainly on *jizz*, while the other uses distinct characters for identification.

However, *jizz* is not exclusively used among birders, it is also used for other species groups such as mosses, plants and bats (de Jong 1994, Ellis 2011). *Jizz* based on size and movement patterns might also be used to distinguish species within other groups, such as butterflies and mammals other than bats.

The discussion of *jizz* also brings insights into the scientific discussion of knowledge, in particular lay people knowledge, as opposed to scientific knowledge (see Lerner and Tunón 2010 for one example of this distinction).

This study will analyze the meaning of some of the definitions of *jizz* that exist, and discuss the implication of these definitions to birdwatching. Also, a comparison with other kinds of knowledge important in conservation biology or ornithology, such as traditional knowledge, will be made.

The research questions are:

How is *jizz* defined and what kind of knowledge is *jizz*?

Is the knowledge of *jizz* transferable to others and is it possible to give a strict and systematic account of *jizz*?

What are the implications of acknowledging *jizz* as knowledge used for bird surveys and knowledge studies?

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<sup>1</sup> Sometimes a distinction is made between birders and birdwatchers, where birders are those that strive for many species and see birdwatching as a sport (Nilsson 2006). Consequently, we use the word birders throughout the paper for clarity reasons, however our discussion might apply to both groups, if such a distinction is necessary.

## Definition of jizz

The coining of the term jizz is ascribed to Thomas Alfred Coward in his *Bird Haunts and Nature Memories* from 1922 (Weaver 1981, Campbell & Lack 1985).<sup>2</sup> One attempt to characterize jizz in Coward's text is the following passage:

*"At a distance, too far away to see details of form, colour, or pattern, so precious in the eyes of the systematist, he sees a bird and recognises it. He says that it is a chaffinch, a lark, or a sparrow; but how does he know? Shape, size, manner of flight, or maybe note, is the reply. Yes, but there is something more; something definite yet undefinable, something which instantly registers identity in the brain, though how or what is seen remains unspecified. It is its jizz."* (Coward, 1922).

Crucial in Coward's thoughts, and echoed in the further discussion of jizz, is that jizz is based on experience. Since then, there seems to have evolved several interpretations of the term and an analysis of these is required.

Jizz depends on specific characters that could be observed scientifically, but jizz is rather a conglomerate of several characters together with the overall impression (which might not be strictly scientific, but still leads to a correct identification). This is characterized in the two following quotations defining jizz:

Jizz = *"the overall impression which a bird gives an observer, enabling an experienced birdwatcher at least to suspect its identity, even if plumage details and other diagnostic features cannot be seen. Jizz consists of a combination of colour, size, shape and movement."* (Weaver 1981)

Jizz = *"is not created by any particular feature of plumage, nor by behavioural traits or even by shape, though much does depend on shape. Jizz is rather a combination of ill-defined elements which allows a bird to be labeled as 'elegant', 'powerful', 'impressive' etc. Despite its abstract connotations, jizz can enable a bird to be recognised instantly without recourse to critical examination of such things as wingtips etc., and this is one of the most important characters of all to look for."* (Harrison 1983, p. 20)

A "majestic", "elegant" or "powerful" impression is hard to translate into specific characters. Other characters, for example if the bird seems to lack any distinctive plumage features, could be seen as an approximation of facts about plumage

<sup>2</sup> However, other etymological roots have also been suggested, such as the use of the word "giss" during the Second World War when spotting military aircrafts (see McDonald 1996 for a good introduction to the etymology of the word jizz).

taken from a field guide. Furthermore, there seem to be wider, as well as narrower, interpretations of the term, with reference of the amount of characters included. As an example of a narrow interpretation, van Duivendijk (2010) defines the term in his glossary:

Jizz = *"general impression of size and posture"* (van Duivendijk 2010, p. 7)

Svensson (1995) favors a slightly wider interpretation, but also questions the widest interpretations as being too wide:

Jizz (Habitus) = *"'size, proportions and posture' (i.e. roughly 'gestalt'), but could also include 'movement pattern' and style"* (Svensson 1995, our translation from Swedish).<sup>3</sup>

As an example of the widest interpretations, Blomdahl et al. (2003) present the following definition in their book on seabirds:

Jizz = *"the overall impression, created by size, flight, plumage, behavior and general appearance."* (Blomdahl et al. 2003, p. 13, our translation from Swedish).<sup>4</sup>

Another version of a wide interpretation is offered by Ullman (1995):

Jizz (Habitus) = *"the combination and the general impression of a bird's size, structure, and proportions, the colours and the pattern of colours of the bird, the movement and where it moves – habitat, altitude etc. – size of flock, flock composition, which bird chases it, how it reacts to different weather situations etc. All these outer factors contribute to create a complex general impression of the bird, its habitus."* (Ullman 1995, our translation from Swedish)<sup>5</sup>

In this latter definition, more than just the bird is included in the evaluation, such as the surroundings. The surroundings might be an implicit part even of the other more narrow definitions. For example, birders at their well-known site can evaluate size more easily than when at a novel site.

<sup>3</sup> Jizz (Habitus) = "storlek, proportioner och hållning" (dvs. ungefär "gestalt") men kan även innefatta "rörelseschema" och "stil" (Svensson 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Jizz = omfattar det samlade intrycket av en fågel, som skapas av storlek, flykt, dräkt, beteende och allmänt uppträdande. (Blomdahl et al. 2003)

<sup>5</sup> Jizz (Habitus) = kombinationen och helheten av en fågels storlek, byggnad och proportioner, dess färger och mönster, dess sätt att röra sig och var den rör sig – i vilken miljö, på vilken höjd etc. – flockstorlek, flocksammansättning, vem den jagas av, hur den reagerar på olika vädersituationer etc. Alla dessa yttre faktorer bidrar till att skapa en komplicerad helhetsbild av fågeln, dess habitus. (Ullman 1995)

## The importance of jizz

In birdwatching, there are at least three explanations for the importance of jizz in species identification. First, jizz is paramount<sup>6</sup> in field identification of birds; second, jizz can be used diagnostically as a starting point; third, jizz is an aid to solve dilemmas when a bird of a certain species deviates from the “normal” characters.

In particular types of birdwatching, jizz might be paramount in species identification. Jizz seems to be heavily relied on when counting sea birds (Bister 2002; Blomdahl et al. 2003), and, according to Harrison (1983), jizz is one of the most important characters when watching seabirds. In both Blomdahl et al. (2003) and Harrison (1983) there are explicit jizz descriptions for species groups, or species. This is due to the fact that seabirds are often seen for a short period of time, in stormy conditions, and/or across long distances. Counting of species on migration could also rely on jizz, especially when large flocks of mixed species pass the observer during short time periods. Ullman (1995) also claims that for easily distinguished species, jizz might be proper to use as the only guidance in species identification.

The method of using jizz as “finding that odd-one-out” (Sharrock 1984, Blomdahl et al. 2003) seems to be important when looking for rare birds. A study in which experienced Swedish birders participated, jizz was considered crucial by several of them in choosing which individual in a flock that might be a rare species (Bister 2002). Without mentioning the term jizz, David Sibley talks in a similar manner (Penn 2002). Jizz is then used as the first step and specific characters are then used to fully decide or prove which species it is (Bister 2002; Bourne 1984).

Jizz can also be used to confirm variation within a bird species. An odd-looking or odd-sounding individual that has the jizz typical for a well-known species could then be properly identified as belonging to the well-known species (Anders Eriksson in Bister 2002). For example, by using jizz, a melanistic Common Skylark *Alauda arvensis*, would not be misidentified as a Black Lark *Melanocorypha yeltoniensis*.

Still, one has to be cautious interpreting jizz. An example is observations of odd flush behavior in Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* (Lerner 2011). The overall impression of the flush behavior was intermediate between Common Snipe and Great Snipe *Gallinago media*. Some aspects of jizz,

for example a short flush distance, resembled Great Snipe, whereas zigzagging flight indicated Common Snipe. In this case, specific plumage characters were needed to clearly identify these birds as actually belonging to Common Snipe.

Clearly jizz recognition does not constitute an absolute solution for definite identification of all species and on all occasions, but in some situations it is likely to be fully adequate. Consequently in other situations we will need more distinct characters to make a certain species identification.

Use of jizz might be more important in birdwatching than in other branches of species watching. With regard to plants and mosses, Ellis (2011) observes that in the end, specific characters are more important than jizz. There is an important difference between studies of plants and mosses on the one hand, and birds on the other. Standing plants provide far more opportunities for close inspection than moving animals. This implies that for bird surveys of flying/distant birds, observers cannot avoid being forced to rely on jizz to a certain extent.

## Implications for evaluating bird survey techniques

The variability among observers in species identification during bird surveys has previously been discussed (see, for example, Faanes & Bystrak 1981; Robbins & Stallcup 1981). In the compilation of types of identification problems made by Robbins & Stallcup (1981), reliability of jizz was not mentioned, although experience among observers was discussed. A certain level of training seems to reduce observer variability (Faanes & Bystrak 1981). If such training means that one rely more on jizz, as stated by Coward (1922), the number of species identified by jizz and the number of observations taken using jizz needs to be stated for each observer, so that observer variability can be evaluated. If identification by jizz is allowed in a specific study, it will favor experienced, older observers in bird surveys. On the other hand, an older observer might have reduced hearing and/or vision compared to a younger observer (Faanes & Bystrak 1981).

## The nature of jizz as knowledge

Jizz is a practically acquired, experience-based knowledge mainly held by skilled birders. Jizz is a continuum from basic, shallow statements such as “it’s a small bird”, to almost precise characters

<sup>6</sup> See also Sharrock 1984, who considers jizz to be “a real aid” which is not as strong as our term “paramount”.

of the plumage or proportions. The knowledge is dynamic, based on earlier experiences and created from the sum of all the observations of birds by an observer. By definition, jizz is more precise and more useful with a well-experienced birder than a less experienced birder. One should always be cautious using jizz, understanding that species identification always has an element of not seeing all details (Penn 2002). On the other hand, it seems that the more one knows, the more one relies on jizz (Coward 1922). Consequently, it is likely that the less-experienced birder will be more heavily reliant on detail characteristics, than on jizz.

Besides scientific knowledge, other kinds of knowledge are important for conservation biology or ornithology. These include the experience-based knowledge of skilled birders as well as the traditional knowledge of people with close relationships with biological diversity. The skilled birders' knowledge is for example important in distinguishing species and recording occurrence. This is exemplified by this discussion about jizz. Traditional knowledge or rather traditional ecological knowledge is one term of many regarding the knowledge of local and indigenous communities about nature (see Lerner & Tunón 2010 for a further discussion on the various terms). It is most often seen as a general term for experience-based knowledge concerning biodiversity and the local environment held by hunters, trappers, artisanal fishermen, etc., that helps them to survive in an area. Traditional knowledge and customary use of the landscape is highlighted as an important component of conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity in several contexts, for example the UN Convention on Biological Diversity<sup>7</sup>. People with a direct, intense and close relationship with biological resources and the surrounding landscape gather vast knowledge of biological importance, even if it is not strictly scientific. During 2012, an international body, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES)<sup>8</sup>, was formed with the purpose of gathering and combining knowledge from different sources and people, to produce a solid basis for planning and evaluating sustainable use, and conservation, of biological diversity.

There are similarities between jizz knowledge, and traditional knowledge, as they are both examples of knowledge held by 'lay people'. It is, however, worth pointing out that birders, no matter how skilled they are, in many cases are to be considered

as lay people and not academic professionals in ornithology or field surveys. It is mainly a matter of one's perspective on who are professional or lay people. However, both terms could be defined wide and narrow and the meaning of the concept is hard to explicitly define.

### **Transferable knowledge?**

Is knowledge of jizz transferable between birders, and if so, how should this be achieved? Some, like Ellis (2011), hold this knowledge to be something mystic, and therefore non-transferable. Blomdahl et al. (2003) describes it both as "unique" and non-replaceable "by any book". Still, we would like to argue that at least some aspects of jizz are transferable, either orally or through written text. We base this on evidence of the use of jizz in field guides.

In seabird identification guides, both Harrison (1983) and Blomdahl et al. (2003) describe jizz in a technical manner, which means that some aspects of the knowledge could be transferable to others. In general field guides, aspects of jizz are often mentioned but not explicitly stated as a description of jizz (see for example Svensson et al. 2009). However, in a recent field guide (Gejl 2012), jizz is explicitly stated with a description for each species under the heading "jizz".

This implies that jizz as knowledge is transferable in at least some aspects. The best way to transfer this knowledge may be difficult to state; some jizz is probably possible to transfer through written form, while other aspects might best be orally transferred in the field, especially when comparing with birds actually observed. Still, a large proportion of jizz is dependent on individual experience, for example to understand the descriptions in the field guide. As such, jizz should perhaps be considered a mixture of transferable parts and details acquired through one's own experience.

### **Implications for knowledge studies**

The concept of jizz is interesting, as it can be viewed as an example of academic/professional knowledge based on extensive field experiences rather than scholarly learning. However, while jizz can be considered a component of academic knowledge, it is gathered in the same manner as local and traditional knowledge. A skilled hunter gathers a vast knowledge about the behavior of game through long term practical experience while hunting. He does not take notes or analyse the result with statistics (neither do most field ornithologists when it comes

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.cbd.int/traditional/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.ipbes.net/>

to field characteristics), most of the knowledge is stored in the mind of the individual.

Traditional knowledge is often referred to as silent or tacit knowledge, since it is seldom easy to describe in words. It has, however, been argued that it might just be a matter of the researcher having a relevant and deep enough insight into the subject studied. To be able to study and describe the subject in words, one needs to have both the academic skills to study the phenomenon and a practical experience and insight of the actual craft, e.g. birdwatching, hunting or handy-craft. In a sense, jizz is a similarly silent knowledge, and consequently difficult to grasp and understand by people unacquainted with birdwatching. Even though field identification of birds seems to be sub-conscious, it is most likely an active, but reflexive, analysis of the presence or absence of a number of specific characteristics. Afterwards, the explanations of how different bird species are distinguished are simple to communicate between birders, but often very hard to penetrate for non-birders. This, however, constitutes a possible problem in validating results. How do you critically review the field identification process and the use of “subconscious” determination of species?

## Conclusion

To conclude, birders always rely, more or less, on jizz in their identification of species. However, this might be a factor that needs to be compensated for in studies where several different observers are used. Furthermore, jizz is experience-based knowledge, which only to some extent is transferable between birders. While there has been some discussion as to the value of jizz for species identification, for some activities, such as counting seabirds, jizz is regarded as an important and reliable method of species identification. Consequently, jizz has a practical value in scientific studies and what this value constitutes might need additional clarification.

We have also tried to show that the discussion of jizz as a source of knowledge might also have implications for the debate on the value of traditional knowledge and other kinds of lay people’s knowledge in conservation biology and other scientific disciplines.

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## Sammanfattning

Artbestämning av fåglar kan antingen baseras på en systematisk och noggrann analys av specifika karaktärer ur en fågelhandbok, såsom näbbform och näbbfärg, eller också genom en mer ospecifik metod som tar hänsyn till kroppshållning och den allmänna känslan man får av fågeln. Det senare benämns ofta internationellt som jizz eller på svenska habitus.

Den här studien avser att studera hur ordet jizz definieras samt vilken typ av kunskap det är. Dessutom analyserar vi om kunskapen går att överföra mellan skådare och jizz betydelse för artbestämning, fågelinventeringar och studier av kunskapsbegreppet.

Jizz som begrepp introducerades 1922 av Thomas Alfred Coward (Coward 1922), som redan från början klargjorde att jizz var erfarenhetsbaserat och bestod av en sammanlagd känsla av hur fågeln upplevdes. Senare har det utvecklats en snäv definition som kan beskrivas som en sammanlagd känsla av storlek och hållning (van Duivendijk 2010) och vidare definitioner som tar hänsyn även till aspekter som flyktsätt och habitat (Blomdahl m.fl. 2003, Ullman 1995).

### *Betydelsen av jizz*

I litteraturen framhålls att jizz inom fågelskådning kan användas på tre sätt; att vara avgörande för artidentifiering, att vara ett diagnostiskt verktyg för att hitta rariteter eller en hjälp att lösa dilemman när det finns motstridiga karaktärer hos en okänd fågel.

Det första sättet har stöd av havsfågelskådning och i viss mån sträckräkning, där observationstiden och -betingelserna ofta innebär att färre karaktärer kan uppfattas. Det andra sättet förespråkas bland artjägare som en användbar metod att hitta rariteter i stora flockar. När individen skiljts ut fortsätter fågelskådaren att pröva de olika karaktärerna. Det tredje sättet kommer till användning exempelvis när felfärgade fåglar studeras. Som ett exempel på svårigheten med jizz kan vara observationer av intermediära beteenden mellan arter (Lerner 2011).

Jizz verkar vara mer värdefullt inom fågelskådning än inom andra aktiviteter där arter studeras. Ellis (2011) har i sin studie kring växt- och mosskådning sett att i slutändan så är det ändå karaktärerna som blir avgörande. Med växter föreligger dock en helt annan möjlighet att studera dem i detalj än vad det gör med rörliga fåglar.

### *Konsekvenser för inventeringar*

Omfattningen av hur mycket man använder sig av jizz varierar mellan olika fågelskådare och kan därför komma att påverka resultaten från inventeringar som bygger på flera observatörer. Andelen jizz-bestämda fåglar i relation till andelen karaktär-bestämda fåglar per observatör bör vara något som tas hänsyn till i samband med utvärderingar av inventeringar.

### *Vad är jizz för kunskap?*

Kunskap om jizz är praktisk och erfarenhetsbaserad. Dess uttryck varierar mellan att omfatta ytliga associationer som ”det är en liten fågel” till nästan precisa karaktärer med avseende på dräkt eller proportioner. Kunskapen är dynamisk och utvecklas i takt med ökad erfarenhet.

Jizz är mer användbart hos en erfaren fågelskådare än en oerfaren eftersom bredden på kunskapen ökar med erfarenheten. Försiktighet bör iaktas vid användandet av jizz då varje observation av en fågel har ett drag av att inte visa alla fullständiga karaktärer hos fågeln (Penn 2002). Coward (1922) hävdar dock att med ökad erfarenhet så förlitar skådaren sig mer på jizz. Alltså, den oerfarna skådaren förlitar sig mer på specifika detaljer, medan den erfarna förlitar sig mer på *upplevelsen*, jizz.

Vid sidan av vetenskaplig kunskap så finns det andra typer av kunskap som kan vara viktiga inom naturvården. Vi har här belyst fågelskådares jizz-kunskap men det finns också traditionell kunskap som enligt FN:s Konvention om biologisk mångfald kan vara värdefull och ska bevaras (för en inblick i begreppet traditionell kunskap se Lerner & Tunón 2010).

Traditionell kunskap är en samlingsterm för erfarenhetsbaserad kunskap med avseende på biologisk mångfald och dess omgivning. Jizz-kunskap och traditionell kunskap påminner om varandra på flera sätt, t.ex. att dess bärare ofta är icke-akademiskt skolade i dessa områden och att de till en stor del utgår från den praktiska erfarenheten.

### *Är jizz-kunskap överförbar?*

Är jizz-kunskap överförbar? Trots att det finns argument mot, då erfarenheter skiljer sig mellan skådare, vill vi hävda att åtminstone delar av kunskapen är överförbar mellan skådare. Vi grundar detta i att beskrivningar av jizz förekommer både i specifika bestämningsguider för havsfåglar som i vissa mer generella fälthandböcker (Gejl 2012).

Det krävs dock en grundkunskap för att kunna förstå och ta emot förmedlad kunskap.

*Konsekvenser för studier av olika sorters kunskap*  
Jizz-kunskap är intressant att studera eftersom den utgörs av ett mellanting mellan vetenskaplig kunskap och traditionell kunskap. De har vetenskapliga drag eller drag av expertis, men är byggda på egen praktisk erfarenhet. Precis som traditionell

kunskap stannar den oftast inom fågelskådaren och är svår att förmedla till en utomstående. Dock visar denna studie på vikten av att tydliggöra denna tysta kunskap.

Sammanfattningsvis hävdar vi att det är viktigt att vetenskapligt studera innebörden av begreppet jizz för att bättre förstå dels hur fåglar artbestäms och dels hur vi ska se på vetenskapen och dess relation till andra kunskapssystem.