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Songbird ‘cologne’ drives females wild



Songbirds have been written off in terms of using their sense of smell because they have the smallest olfactory bulbs relative to brain size, but recently, they have been found to harbor a high number of olfactory receptors. (Credit: BEACON)

MICHIGAN STATE (US) — Like teenage boys dousing themselves with body spray to woo girls, male songbirds deploy a similar tactic when they release preen oil from a gland at the base of their tail.

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Scents are used in all organisms for a variety of purposes, including finding, attracting, and evaluating mates. Smaller male songbirds will even release more scent to compensate for their small stature.

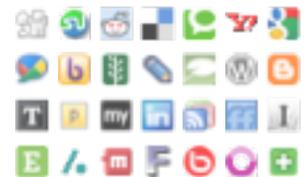
“It’s kind of like the ‘Axe effect,’ in that females were attracted to the scent and didn’t seem to care where it came from, meaning their own population or a different one—even though birds in these populations look and behave differently,” says Danielle Whittaker of [Michigan State University](#).

Straight from the Source

“And I think the males were drawn

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in as an aggressive response to the scent of another male.”

In the past, songbirds have been written off in terms of using their sense of smell because they have the smallest olfactory bulbs relative to brain size among all birds. But recently, songbirds have been found to harbor a high number of olfactory receptors, and are capable of using odors to help find their way.

Whittaker was surprised by the study results, published in the journal [Behavioral Ecology](#), that show how attractive scent was across populations and sexes and that females initially—but only temporarily—preferred the odor of smaller males.

“When they got to see the actual birds, they tended to prefer larger males with larger plumage ornaments,” she says. “I’m hoping to find out how and why small, unattractive males overcompensate by producing greater amounts of an attractive scent.”

Researchers from Indiana University contributed to the study.

More news from Michigan State University: <http://news.msu.edu/>

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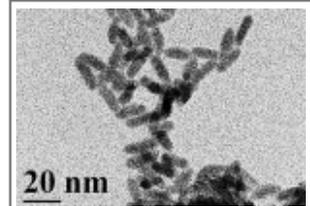
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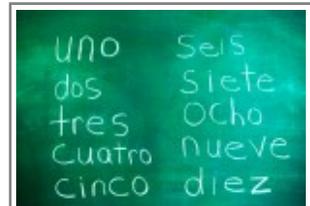
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