

# Wild chickadees confound scientific theory

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Canadian researchers studying the spatial memory of wild mountain chickadees have found the birds contradict prior research showing how they navigate.

The University of Alberta study of wild birds is the first to reveal a different pattern. Previously, only animals raised in human-made enclosures had been tested.

Scientists say humans and other animals often are guided by the geometrical shape of their environment. For example, humans can easily distinguish doors at the ends of a hallway from those located in the middle. But they may confuse doors at the two ends, such as when they re-enter a hallway in a hotel.

Study co-author Chris Sturdy, a psychology professor, said, "This has been observed in every species tested, even when landmarks alone could be used, suggesting that animals are predisposed to go by geometry."

But the wild-caught chickadees differed by ignoring angular environmental features, instead following landmarks. Although able to learn geometry when guiding themselves to food in lab experiments, the birds consistently ignored the concept when a prominent landmark was present, Sturdy said.

The findings are published in the July issue of *Biology Letters*.

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