

'Birds of a feather' may need rewritten

September 28 2010, By Brian Murphy

(PhysOrg.com) -- The old proverb, "Birds of a feather flock together," might be in need of a rewrite, according to University of Alberta findings about chickadees. Researchers have divided chickadees into two personality types and their results could determine if they do, indeed, flock together.

Lead researcher Lauren Guillette says the first step in their research involved looking at how the song [birds](#) check out new territory.

"We characterized our chickadees as fast explorers or slow explorers," said Guillette, and the chickadees were then released into a large room lined with artificial trees. Researchers recorded how many trees, if any, the birds visited. Fast explorers flew to more trees, while slow explorers either stayed at the room entrance or visited only a couple of trees.

Guillette, a PhD provisional candidate in psychology, says fast explorers are bold and go straight for what they want, while slow explorers are shy and take their time.

"Bold animals are generally more aggressive in pursuit of food or a mate," said Guillette. "But a shy or cautious animal might be harder target for [predators](#) and might have a longer life span."

To push their knowledge of how different animal personalities might adapt to situations in the wild, the researchers put the fast and slow exploring chickadees to a learning test.

The birds were offered two separate recorded types of notes of chickadee sounds but only one was associated with a food reward. Guillette says both the fast and slow explorers caught on quickly and learned the rules of the task, but when the food-reward signal was switched to the other type of notes, the shy birds adapted more quickly than the bold chickadees.

“A lot of researchers had theorized that slow exploring birds will adapt faster to a changing environment, but we are among the first to actually put the theory to the test,” said Guillette.

Outside the laboratory in the real world of chickadees, Guillette says a slow explorer’s adaptability advantage shows itself when there’s a change in its environment. That change could be the food supply, which could be affected by something as simple as the temporary absence of a homeowner who routinely filled a backyard bird feeder.

The researchers are cautious about linking bold and shy [chickadees](#) to human characteristics, but study co-author and U of A psychology researcher Chris Sturdy says there could be similarities. “If you wanted to anthropomorphize the research, the bold ones would be the charge straight ahead, go get ‘em type of person.”

Sturdy adds the study helped the team build new bridges in interdisciplinary research. “We wanted to combine techniques of psychological testing to biological phenomenon and it worked.”

More information: The research was published online earlier this month in *Proceedings of the Royal Society, Biological Sciences*.

Provided by University of Alberta

Citation: 'Birds of a feather' may need rewritten (2010, September 28) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-09-birds-feather-rewritten.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.