

Betty the wire-bending crow may have been less insightful than previously believed

August 10 2016, by Bob Yirka



A team of researchers with the Centre for Biological Diversity, School of Biology, University of St Andrews, in the U.K. has found that the seemingly clever wire bending abilities of New Caledonian crow Betty back in 2002 may not have been as impressive as scientists at the time thought. They note in their paper published in *Royal Society Open Science* that while conducting field experiments with other crows of the same species in their native environment, several crows exhibited the same

behavior as Betty, suggesting that her behavior might have been more responsive than insightful.

The video of Betty (made by a team at the University of Oxford) using a wire in attempting to retrieve a bucket of meat from inside a bottle captivated the science community when it was first revealed—after poking at the bucket for a minute or so, she pulled the wire out of the bottle, bent the tip to resemble a fish hook, dropped it back into the bottle and then hooked the handle of the bucket, allowing her to pull the meat up and out so she could eat it. The impression was that the [crow](#) had come up with a completely novel solution to a problem she had never encountered before—all on the spur of the moment. Such an ability was seen as an example of comparative cognition and high intelligence. But now it appears that Betty may have been engaging in an activity that others of her kind have been doing for quite some time.

To gain a better understanding of Betty's abilities, the researchers ventured to New Caledonia, an archipelago in the South Pacific and home to New Caledonian crows. There, they temporarily captured several specimens and placed them in an aviary. Once inside, the birds discovered that food had been placed in multiple hideaway spots and required the use of tools for retrieval. As the team observed, the birds got right to work using twigs as extensions to reach and retrieve the food. But some also bent the twigs in very nearly the same way as Betty had done in the video, which the researchers suggest made retrieval a bit easier.

These findings suggest that rather than using insight, Betty might have simply been following routines regularly used by members of her species, though the team notes, it does not rule out the possibility that she did understand what she was doing while she was doing it, as did the other birds they observed.

More information: Christian Rutz et al. Tool bending in New Caledonian crows, *Royal Society Open Science* (2016). [DOI: 10.1098/rsos.160439](https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.160439)

© 2016 Phys.org

Citation: Betty the wire-bending crow may have been less insightful than previously believed (2016, August 10) retrieved 7 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-08-betty-wire-bending-crow-insightful-previously.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.