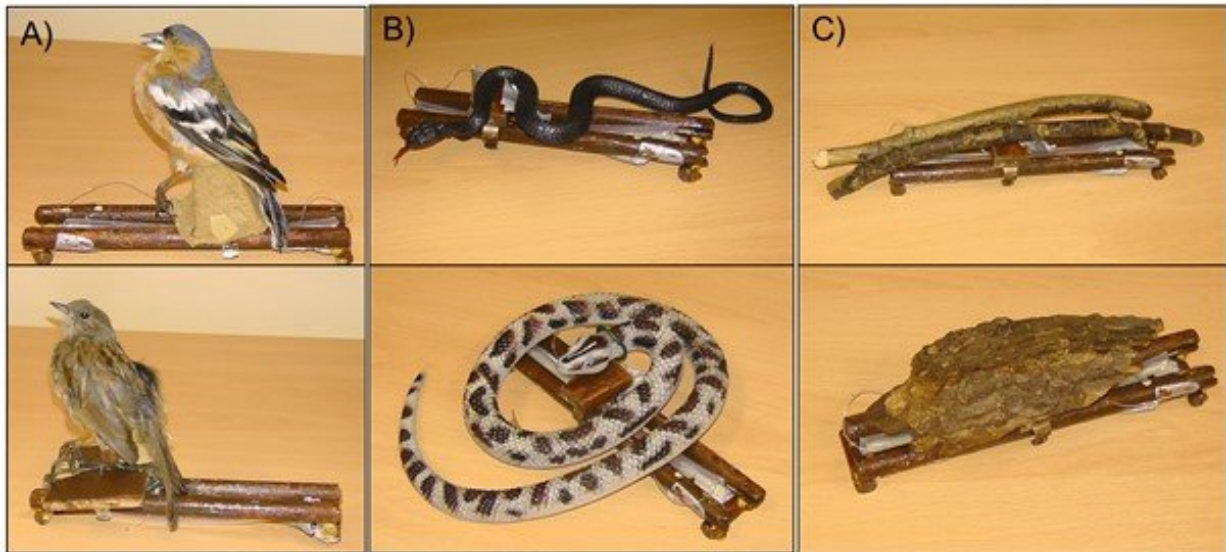


# Birds startled by moving sticks

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The objects used in this research Credit: University of Exeter

Do animals—like humans—divide the world into things that move and things that don't? Are they surprised if an apparently inanimate object jumps to life?

Yes—according to scientists at the universities of Exeter and Cambridge.

The researchers tested how [jackdaws](#) responded to moving [birds](#), moving snakes and moving sticks—and found they were most cautious of the moving sticks.

The study, using remote-controlled objects placed in jackdaws' nests, will help scientists understand how birds perceive potential threats.

"Although as humans we see the divide between animate and inanimate objects as an intuitive one, we've had very little evidence that [wild animals](#) also see the world this way," said lead author Dr. Alison Greggor, formerly of the University of Cambridge and now at the San Diego Zoo Institute for Conservation Research.

"Laboratory studies have shown that human infants and a few other species discriminate between animate and inanimate objects.

"This ability is assumed to have evolved to support social interactions, but its role for wild animals has never been examined.

"Our work extends the potential function of this ability beyond the social realm. It might therefore be a more common ability than previously thought."

By placing remote-controlled objects in jackdaws' nests, the researchers tested how the birds assessed possible threats to their offspring.

Jackdaws were startled by any movement, producing alarm calls, but they delayed longest in entering their nest box after encountering an "inanimate" [object](#) that moved (ie the remote controlled stick).

This suggests they recognised the movement as unexpected and delayed entering the [nest](#) in order to gather more information about the situation.

Dr. Alex Thornton, of the Centre for Ecology and Conversation on the University of Exeter's Penryn Campus in Cornwall, added: "There is still a great deal we do not understand about some of our common bird species.

"Dedicated field experiments, such as ours, can yield insights into their minds, revealing more about how they understand the world."

The paper, published in the journal *Royal Society Open Science*, is entitled: "Wild jackdaws are wary of objects that violate expectations of animacy."

**More information:** Wild jackdaws are wary of objects that violate expectations of animacy, *Royal Society Open Science*, [rsos.royalsocietypublishing.org ... /10.1098/rsos.181070](https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rsos.181070)

Provided by University of Exeter

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