

## Section 4. ASSOCIATION OF FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS— suggesting that a best student paper award be retracted

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### January 2015

1/24/2015

#### **Kroodsma to Association of Field Ornithologists**

Hello Vicki, Greg, Gary:

I’m writing to each of you because you know something about birdsong, you all have an official status with AFO, and Vicki especially because I think you served as best

paper chair at the 2014 meetings.

I have become involved in the strangest set of circumstances that I could ever have imagined. I went to the AFO/Wilson meetings in a joyful mood, but left troubled by the “clean sweep” of the best student papers by the Podos lab at UMass. I was especially troubled by the Goodwin paper that won AFO best student paper, because I know chipping sparrows, and that paper was not about the birds that I knew. I have since studied the published version of the paper, and find that it is, well, how should I say it . . . it is fiction, with no science. There is not a shred of truth in the study.

I have tried to communicate with Goodwin and Podos about the study, but they refuse to respond to any of my inquiries (professionally unethical by any standards, I believe). After Mike Beecher and his student began inquiring about the paper, and went so far as to suggest a retraction of the published study, Podos stopped all communication with them as well.

The first bit of communication I received from Podos was indirect, by way of the University of Massachusetts police, who threatened me with criminal harassment if I sent them one more email. Pretty sad.

I have since reviewed all of the papers on the topic of “honest signaling” and the Podos graph of trill rate and frequency bandwidth, finding no science that supports the widely held notion that the quality of the song honestly tells of the quality of the male. The idea of honest signaling has been marketed well, but fails any close scrutiny. That review is taking shape, and will be published eventually, someplace, though the path to publication has also been one of the strangest stories I could ever have imagined being involved in.

So why specifically am I writing to you? Given all that I now know about the Goodwin and Podos paper that won the AFO’s best paper award, I’d sickened by the award, as I feel that it not only cheapened the entire scientific meeting, but also cheated some graduate student doing real science out of the award that he or she properly deserved. And given how medals of all kinds are retracted after cheating is discovered, I would advocate retracting the award from Goodwin and Podos and giving it to the next

student in line.

That seems pretty harsh and unprecedented, I know, and you might claim that I'm no longer an impartial judge in this entire matter. All that may well be true.

I send this letter to alert you to what I feel was a great injustice at the AFO meeting in Rhode Island. If you wish to pursue the matter, I could provide you with the documentation that I have accumulated, and you could be the judge. You could, if you wanted, ask Goodwin and Podos to respond to the charges; that would, of course, be the only fair approach, and perhaps under that kind of pressure they would feel compelled to respond to you, when they have refused to respond to me and others.

A happy 2015 to each of you. I remember fondly my involvement with AFO—it's a fine organization, one to be proud of.

Best . . . Don

## **July 2015**

7/8/2015

### **Kroodsma to Association of Field Ornithologists**

Hello Vickie, Gary, and Greg; and Reed, for AFO:

cc: Bob, of WOS

Vickie, Gary, and Greg received the email copied below on January 24. Here is an update:

The courts of justice turn slowly, but in this case rather surely, I believe . . . the published version of Goodwin and Podos (2014), which won best AFO student paper award in Rhode Island, has now been firmly critiqued by Ackay and Beecher (2015) in *Biology Letters*. Goodwin and Podos (2015) responded, staunchly defending their fiction.

I have in turn responded to *Biology Letters*, because Ackay and Beecher's critique, as

damning as it was, was rather lame, and Biology Letters has told me that I will be allowed to address the more severe shortcomings that Ackay and Beecher missed (see my attached draft to Biology Letters).

Given that there was not a word of truth in the Goodwin and Podos presentation at AFO, I am asking that the AFO consider retracting the award given to Goodwin and give it to the next student in line. That is an unprecedented action, I realize, but the paper was just as unprecedented in its lack of truth, and I would hope that AFO would have zero tolerance for this kind of behavior at its scientific meetings. It would not only send a message to Goodwin and Podos, but would also send a message to every graduate student who attends AFO meetings that the AFO is a serious, scientific society.

Podos on his website brags about a "clean sweep" of the student awards at the Rhode Island meetings, as if it were some kind of game being played (and it is, a marketing game, with little attention to truth). I am confident that close study of the WOS award given to Moseley would also reveal little truth to her study (I have not followed up on her paper, as I am unsure which, if any, published paper is based on her WOS award; I have studied other papers of hers and found them also seriously wanting). I'll leave it to WOS if they want to pursue it.

I am going to leave it at that. As a former councilor/officer of AFO, I'd be proud of AFO if it were to take a leadership role in promoting solid science among its graduate students.

Sincerely . . . Don Kroodsma

## **September 2015**

9/17/2015

### **Association of Field Ornithologists to Kroodsma—long-time Podos associate weighs in, discussion ends**

Hi Don, I sent an e-mail to you immediately after the AFO meeting in Nova Scotia and I'm sorry if you did not receive it. We appreciate you keeping us updated on the status of this issue. At the meeting, I provided the council with a copy of the letter you sent to Biology Letters, the original Goodwin-Podos paper, as well as the commentary by AcKay and Beecher and Goodwin and Podos' response. Bernie Lohr, one of our Council members noted that he had previously worked in Steve Nowicki's lab, but was asked to provide some background on the cast of characters. The issue was discussed

in the context of the AFO having awarded Sarah Goodwin a presentation award based on the paper in question. A general discussion by the Council of this issue followed. The consensus of the group was that from the materials provided, we could find no evidence of malfeasance on the part of Goodwin and Podos and that this appeared to be a normal disagreement among scientists in methodological approaches and the interpretation of results. As a result, a motion was put forth that the 2014 AFO Best Student Presentation Award to S. Goodwin stand as awarded and that motion was unanimously approved by Council. Council did note that the decision of Biology Letters would be critical to further consideration of this issue. At the time of our evaluation, no decision had yet been made. Should Biology Letters formally retract this publication, we would certainly revisit this decision.

Sincerely

Reed Bowman

President, AFO

9/30/2015

**Kroodsma to Bernie Lohr, and Association of Field Ornithologists**

Hello Bernie:

I have a challenge for you.

AFO apparently relied on your assessment to relegate the issues I raise to matters of "normal disagreement" among a "cast of characters" (copy of Reed's email below). I find that conclusion unsettling, about as unsettling as the claims that I hear about the earth being flat, or the climate not changing--both matters of opinion, one might say (though who else cares about birdsong?).

Given your role in this decision, especially given that you have spent time in the Nowicki lab and might therefore be expected to be an ally of both Nowicki and his student Podos, I am going to offer you a challenge. Attached is a partial manuscript that addresses Goodwin and Podos (2014), together with figures in a second attachment.

In the Summary, I ask that anyone who defends Goodwin and Podos (2014) as science must explicitly address several matters. Here's the challenge for you: To address those matters and still conclude that Goodwin and Podos (2014) is science and not marketing and advocacy.

You are welcome to share this document with Podos himself. I would do so, but his University Police prevent me from doing that. Get his help in defending his work. I cannot get a peep out of him.

Yes, I am somewhat relentless on this matter. I cherish knowing what birds actually do, the little discoveries about how the world works. I abhor the pseudoscience on birdsong that markets novel, exciting, cutting-edge claims with no truth behind them.

regards . . . Don

## **October 2015**

10/1/2015

### **Kroodsma to Bernie Lohr and AFO representatives**

Hello Bernie (copy to relevant AFO officers):

I have been called many things, and persistent is one of them (inconvenient, and a nuisance are cousins to persistent). Yesterday I offered you a challenge with a relatively long manuscript, but I'd like to simplify that challenge. Attached is a far shorter manuscript focused on just one reason why Goodwin and Podos (2014) is entirely false. My manuscript is based on science, not on a cast of characters who have differences of opinion about how science is done.

If you still think that it is just a matter of opinion, as Reed summarized, I would simply like to have you tell me so. As before, you are welcome to share this document with Podos himself. I dare say the only way you will get a response from Podos, however, is if you tell him that AFO is considering retracting their best student paper award—but I realize that you could not do that without the blessing of AFO council, of course.

Podos has gone to great lengths to avoid responding to these scientific issues (he knows, and I know, that his career and credibility are on the line, as Goodwin and Podos is only the culmination of a series of such papers on his performance hypothesis). First, he engaged the University Police to try to silence me, by threatening me with criminal harassment charges. Then he sent the results of an “institutional

investigation” (“independent, thorough, rigorous,” according to Biology Letters) to Biology Letters, again closing off all lines of communication; the findings of this investigation are top secret and they cannot be shared with me. Never has Podos communicated with me directly, in spite of my repeated attempts to establish a dialogue.

In the interest of science, I would like to see Podos pressed on these matters. He is president-elect of the Animal Behavior Society, for example, which has a strong ethical statement on its website about authors corresponding about their work. AFO was duped into awarding Goodwin and Podos one of its top honors, and AFO therefore, in my opinion, has some responsibility as a credible scientific organization to inquire into matters like this.

Kind regards . . . Don Kroodsmma

Attached: *Goodwin and Podos (2014) refuted in One Figure*

10/1/2015

**Bernie Lohr to Kroodsmma**

Hi Don,

I'm happy to give you my version of what transpired at our AFO Council meeting this past summer. Reed can confirm or elaborate on any of this if my memory isn't completely accurate.

First, I admitted at the start of the Council discussion, in full disclosure, that I knew Jeff Podos and had been a fellow grad student in the Nowicki lab. As I'd spoken with Jeff about the Ackay and Beecher critique, and was familiar with the song performance literature (to a certain extent - I haven't published articles in that context myself, nor have I reviewed any, to the best of my recollection), I was asked to provide some background on the topic. It's an overstatement, however, to say that the AFO relied on my assessment to form their decision. My comments were part of a longer discussion that revolved primarily around the material we'd been provided with in our packet not too long (a week or so?) before the meeting. Other members of the Council, I'm sure, formed

their own impressions based on the overall discussion and material we had in front of us.

My own discussion with Jeff, roughly a year or so earlier, involved much of what was published in the exchange with Ackay and Beecher. I had heard Jeff's side of the story, and relayed it at the meeting, but it should also have been obvious from his rebuttal. At no time did he mention you to me in our discussion, or that you might have concerns about the article as well. There was clearly some history there (which was obvious from the contents of your letter), but I was unaware of your disagreement with Jeff until we got the packet of material for our Council meeting. I mentioned at our discussion that it was inappropriate of me to comment on your interactions with Jeff (or attempts to interact with him) as I knew nothing about that.

The question before us was one of retracting a student award that had been given the previous year. I personally disagree that retracting a student award would be an appropriate way to get a response from Jeff on this issue (as I said, others formed their own views on whether that would be appropriate). Whatever the result of this disagreement, and however his reputation might suffer if he's shown to be wrong on the issue, Jeff's job isn't in jeopardy - he's a tenured professor. Sarah Goodwin on the other hand is a PhD student, just getting started in a career.

That said, you raise some good points in your critique about the way in which chipping sparrows learn song, and about their behavior more generally. I agree for example that tests of song performance are more appropriately made with species that either don't learn their vocal signals, or learn by improvisation or innovation rather than imitation. I would ask (in terms of the second figure you sent which shows relatively faithful copies of a specific neighbor by young birds), how chipping sparrows decide which of their neighbors they'll copy, and whether that might be related to that male's song performance? (with the understanding that song "performance" might be measured in a number of different ways). All questions I would be curious about, but all that is to say that I haven't studied chipping sparrow song or behavior myself. I'm not qualified to decide whether the Goodwin and Podos work is "fiction." As far as I know, however, (and this was a conclusion drawn independently by other members of the Council as well), there was no malfeasance regarding their data. I guess I take the longer view that if Goodwin and Podos' interpretation of their data wasn't correct, or their conclusions didn't



adequately account for what's known about the species, that the truth about that situation will be revealed in time.

I'm wondering if the appropriate venue for your views wouldn't be the literature, as I think it would generate a vigorous and interesting discussion. Why not publish your article (like Ackay and Beecher did)? That's certainly something you've done before. I remember the pseudoreplication debate as a young grad student. You were right about that, and I don't know anyone now who doesn't take pains to replicate their playback design appropriately. Likewise, Byers and Kroodsma 2009 is widely cited, I think, in papers that address the evolution of large repertoires, even if there continues to be a debate about that issue. (And to be honest, I likely put more weight on the value of laboratory choice tests with females than you do in that context, though I agree that it's problematic at best to extrapolate to female preferences in the field). It sounds as if you have similar criticisms of the song performance literature. Jeff and others, depending on the scope of your critique, would likely feel compelled to respond there. Perhaps a broader review of the issues surrounding the song performance literature would be the appropriate place for your specific criticisms of the Goodwin and Podos work?

Regards,

- Bernie

10/2/2015

**Kroodsma to Bernie Lohr, and AFO**

Hello Bernie:

Thank you for your thoughtful response.

There is a larger picture that I haven't conveyed. I have reviewed all of the performance literature, in excruciating detail, and have a lengthy manuscript on it all. The rather inevitable conclusion is that there is nothing there, and that it is promoted relentlessly by all manner of pseudoscience. My manuscript may eventually see the light of day, but it will face stiff opposition because of its message.

I called Podos on his style of 'research' nearly 11 years ago, when I described to him the difference between science and marketing: "Science is the search for truth, regardless of how good the story is; marketing and advertising is the search for a good story, regardless of the truth" (October 2004). Podos is marketing, putting it simply,

searching for the good story, the hook that will get attention. He has refused to communicate with me ever since, now even resorting to using the University Police to threaten me with criminal harassment charges, and hiding a university investigation into his work, provided to Biology Letters, that remains top secret—I am not allowed to see it.

So, when I look at Goodwin and Podos (2014), and the award given by the AFO, given the larger context it was for me the last straw, because that paper is the culmination of a long history of marketing the performance hypothesis. There simply is no truth in that paper, and to see AFO duped to honor it a major award is disheartening. Below is my logic in refuting the paper, the quotes taken from my updated version of “Goodwin and Podos (2014, 2015) Refuted in One Figure”:

### **Discussion**

- 1) The trill rate of a male is determined by the song of his adult tutor, *not* by his relative prowess or “performance ability” (sensu Podos 1997).
- 2) There is no evidence for song learning in any songbird species or especially in chipping sparrows (Liu and Kroodsma 1999, 2006) that a male is in any way limited in what naturally occurring trill rate he can learn.
- 3) The trill rates of ~7 syllables/second for birds 1A and 1B (Figure 1) and trill rates of ~25 for birds 14A and 14B were determined by where the males settled on their first territory and do not reflect a measure of male quality.
- 4) Goodwin and Podos (2014, 2015) omit all reference to how chipping sparrows actually acquire their songs (Liu 2001; Liu and Kroodsma 1999, 2006) and instead falsely assume that a chipping sparrow acquires a song with a trill rate that honestly conveys his performance ability and his overall quality (in line with Podos 1997).
- [5) Goodwin and Podos (2014, 2015) also omit all reference to how male chipping sparrows display competitively in lek-like arenas well off their own territories (Liu 2004, Kroodsma 2007), and instead invent cooperative alliances and coalitions to explain any gathering of singing males.]

*Conclusion: There is no truth in Goodwin and Podos (2014, 2015). There are no precise assessments of mating signal features, no teams of rivals, no alliance formations, and no coalitions.*

The good story is created by ignoring the basic biology of the study animal (items 4 & 5). The good story is also created by discarding all analyses that don't produce a  $p < 0.05$  on which the good story can be built, and even then the statistics that produce the

'good' p value are done wrong.

As for Biology Letters addressing these issues, there is a long history there as well. They have in hand an "institutional investigation" that no one will share with me ("secret," per "university rules"), and the findings of that investigation are "independent, rigorous, thorough," submitted by Podos, signed by a university review panel. Publishing a critique of Goodwin and Podos there is not possible.

I had simply asked AFO to address the science of this matter, and if the science is wanting, and there is no truth in it, I had asked AFO to consider retracting the award. To declare that it is just a matter of opinion as to whether the paper is true or not is ducking the issue, and I will challenge anyone who relies on that simple-minded solution to avoiding the issues.

I will go away now, but probably not for as long as you or others would like.

Kind regards. . . Don

12 July  
2016

**Animal Behavior Society: Did you really try to get a best student paper award to one of Jeff's student's rescinded?**

Don,

Did you really try to get a best student paper award to one of Jeff's student's rescinded?

MY RESPONSE:

Once upon a time, 50 graduate students attended a scientific meeting, all of them competing for the coveted best student paper awards. Winners would be able to boast for the rest of their lives about the quality of their work, and such an award would help propel them into their chosen science career.

Forty-eight of the 50 students, eager to share what they had learned about the birds they loved, worked hard with their scientific advisors to prepare the best scientific talk of their young lives. Two of the Students, however, with the help of their shared Advisor, concocted the most polished and exciting stories they could, with little regard for what the birds actually do.

Unfortunately for everyone involved, especially for the Students and their Advisor, just

by chance a troublemaking Scientist was in the audience. He normally shunned scientific meetings, had retired from academics a decade before, but was required to attend these meetings to receive a Lifetime Achievement Award from one of the Societies. His expertise just happened to be in the same area as that of the Advisor and his two Students. The Awards Committees, never before having been exposed to such polished deception as the Students presented, were blown away by the novel, exciting results of the Students, and promptly awarded them top honors. Their Advisor would later boast on his website of the Students' "clean sweep" at the meetings, as they took both of the awards given to best student papers. But the Scientist knew their work was Fiction.

What should the Scientist do?

Choose your preferred ending:

Ending #1. The Scientist kept his mouth shut, leaving the Cheating Students and their Advisor to rejoice in their success and live happily ever after, the Students in turn training their students how to achieve success in science, and their students theirs, ever after. All of the other graduate students, once realized how they had been cheated out of an opportunity for the awards, prepared their own Stories in the future, and taught their students to do so as well, for they had learned that science didn't really matter.

Ending #2. The Scientist, in a role he had often before found himself, asked for Science to be Science. He asked in a number of ways, at first (July 2014) politely asking the Advisor and one of his Students about their work. The Advisor countered by instructing his students not to respond to the Scientist, and used the University Police to threaten criminal harassment charges if the Scientist tried to communicate with them. In the meantime, the Scientist studied more publications by the Advisor and his Students, finding them all literary masterpieces, but all fiction. He was appalled, and outraged. . . . This story could get very long, but it is worth noting that the Scientist did try to convince a journal that a paper by Student and Advisor should simply be retracted (thwarted by Advisor's secret communications with said journal, signed by a dean of the university who puzzlingly claimed to know nothing of the communication), and did point out to the two scientific Societies that their awards had gone to good literature, but not science, and the Societies could send a very strong message to graduate students about what really mattered if an award were retracted and given to a scientist (thwarted by graduate school office mate of Advisor who was on the deciding Council).

Ending #3. Create your own preferred ending.

Perspectives:

Advisor of two Students: "Scientist is a Villain."

Scientist: "Let's talk science."

Advisors of 48 other students at the scientific meetings, all of whom were cheated out of the running for the awards: "Thank you, Scientist."

Scientists everywhere who value science as a way of knowing about the natural world: Take a guess.

Short answer to your question, Office of the Animal Behavior Society

For mistruths and duplicity and (given a pattern of behavior) what I would call outright fraud, for injustices beyond what I have ever witnessed at a scientific meeting, yes, I did ask the two ornithological societies to take a second look at their awards. I presented my case, and asked them to request a response from Podos. A graduate student office mate of Podos, also a student of Nowicki, intervened, and the case died.

