

Points of view

Opinions expressed in this feature are not necessarily those of 'British Birds'

3 The presentation of statistics in ornithological papers

Many birdwatchers tell me that they find the statistical statements and diagrams that so frequently litter ornithological papers both unintelligible and irritating. I share this view. It cannot be denied that statistics is unintelligible if one has never studied it, but the issue goes deeper than this. If a fairly well thought out idea does indeed receive support from a statistical analysis, then this is a fascinating fact which should be mentioned somewhere in the resulting paper. Sometimes, however, a deep and healthy suspicion is aroused.

If statistics are to enter into a paper which aims to be widely read, then the techniques supporting statements in the text should be relegated to a short, small-print appendix, or placed minimally in brackets. I have every faith in the competence of dedicated biological statisticians and I and many others are quite ready to accept that they have done their homework correctly, so that their hieroglyphics and other paraphernalia can safely be left unpublished. The philosophy (or lack of it) underlying statistics is of far more interest to an average reader of intelligent literature than the all too pervasive presentation of far-flung arithmetical manipulations.

L. J. DAVENPORT
68 First Avenue, Gillingham, Kent ME7 2LG