

Sleeping with the light on



Koen Hiemstra with one of the nesting boxes that he lit with bike lights to see if that put birds off. Photo Guy Ackermans

Can birds sleep with the light on? Yes they can, is the cautious conclusion of an experiment on campus.

The experiment was carried out by Koen Hiemstra during the winter months for his research on the roosting behaviour of birds. Anyone on campus in that period might have seen him on his daily rounds (except at weekends and during holidays), checking the nesting boxes spread around the campus. It took him three and a half hours to check all 99 boxes to see whether they were inhabited.

Birds use nesting boxes for more than just nesting. They are also nice places

for an overnight stay. And an overnight stay involves pooping, so the birds leave their visiting cards behind. And that is what Hiemstra, a Master's student of Forest and Nature Conservation, kept careful track of, armed with a beer crate to stand on, pen and paper and a putty knife to scrape off the poop.

Bike light

The research question behind all this is about light pollution. Do birds find artificial light so disturbing that they avoid such places at night? To literally shed light on this question, Hiemstra lit some of the nesting boxes by hanging little bicycle lights inside them. He assumed the birds would stay away because light disturbs sleep. But that was not the case.

Of the 18 nesting boxes used regularly overnight, nine were fitted with a light. Birds continued to use four of the nine lit boxes. 'That is not hard evidence, because the numbers are too small for that, but it is striking,' says Hiemstra. He reckons that whether or not the

birds stay depends on their character. 'The bolder birds stay, the shyer birds leave.'

Mild winter

The fact that there are only signs of use in one in five nesting boxes is explained by the winter, says Hiemstra. 'It was relatively mild so the birds had less need of somewhere to roost for the night.' The birds in question are most probably great tits. 'The nesting boxes were designed for great tits, with openings of 32 millimetres.' And he twice found a dead bird in the boxes. The illuminated nesting boxes attracted puzzled glances. And not just glances: six lights were stolen during the experiment. Hiemstra's research was supervised by Anouschka Hof, who teaches in the Wildlife Ecology and Conservation chair group. Before his Master's in Wageningen, Hiemstra did Applied Biology at the HAS University of Applied Sciences in Den Bosch. FK

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