

◀ Judging success

I am amused when ornithologists, desperate to avoid any whiff of anthropomorphism in their interpretations of birdsong, fall foul of just this when they attempt to 'calibrate' song. In *The Big Question* (May), Jonathan Elphick writes that "an impressive bout of singing conveys the message that a fit male still has it in him to perform well". Impressive to whom – the human listener or other birds?

Length of song, loudness, inventive riffs – which is what I suspect he has in mind by "impressive" – are all human-value templates. We cannot have any idea what counts as impressive in a bird's ear. 'Successful' singers may have acoustic nuances that are imperceptible or incomprehensible to human listeners. Recent German research has shown that the most impressive nightingale singers – those with the longest, loudest and most varied songs – are those that have failed to find a mate.

Richard Mabey
Norfolk

Seeing eye to high

On a recent visit to Chobe National Park, Botswana, I was amazed to wake up every morning and find zebras grazing on the lawn. After passing them on a pre-breakfast stroll down the hotel drive, a pair of giraffes then ambled across the dirt road in front of me.

The smaller of the two giraffes crossed the track and vanished into the scrub, but the larger male paused to look at me. I stared

back, craning my neck to meet the most beautiful pair of eyes I had ever seen. We gazed at each other for a few seconds – a wonderful experience I'll remember forever. Eventually, he decided I was not to be feared, and followed the female into the trees.

Kate Barrett
Via email

Media on trial

Following the uproar over phone hacking, perhaps the media (with the exception of *BBC Wildlife*, of course) should also look at how it reports wildlife issues.

I recently found an article in a national newspaper highlighting the conservation of tigers in a park in China. If the journalist had dug a bit deeper, the truth might have been revealed: the park is a tiger farm that has nothing to do with conservation.

Visitors pay to tour the enclosures in which tigers are kept in unnatural groups, with some even sharing space with lions. These parks are run for profit, whether derived through tourism or from the sale of body parts. That journalist should be reporting on effective conservation projects supported by European zoos.

Simon Marsh
Via email

CROSSWORD COMEBACK

Over the past few months we have been inundated with requests for the return of our wildlife crossword – so from next month you'll once again be able to test your natural-history knowledge against the grid.

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ON SALE 5 JUNE

COYOTE VS WOLF

How the decline and recovery of the wolf has changed coyote society



Alex Bandy/renishphotos.com

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