

1 **The role of chromatic and achromatic signals for fruit detection by birds**

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5 **Behavioural Ecology 2006 in press**

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17 Running head: Fruit detection by birds

18 **Abstract**

19 Fruit color changes during ripening are typically viewed as an adaptation to increase
20 signal efficacy to seed dispersers. Plants can increase signal efficacy by enhancing
21 chromatic (wavelength-related) and/or achromatic (intensity-related) contrasts between
22 fruit and background. To assess how these contrasts determine the detectability of fruit
23 signals, we conducted two experiments with free-flying crows (*Corvus ossifragus*)
24 under semi-natural conditions in a 2025m² aviary. Crows searched first for artificial red
25 and black fruits and detected red fruits from a larger distance. Because artificial red
26 fruits had higher chromatic and lower achromatic contrasts against foliage than artificial
27 black fruits, crows apparently prioritized chromatic contrasts. Thus, the common change
28 in fruit color from red to black during ripening does not increase signal efficacy to
29 crows. In a second trial, crows searched for UV-reflecting and black blueberries
30 (*Vaccinium myrtillus*) against backgrounds of foliage and sand. Against foliage, UV-
31 reflecting berries had higher chromatic and achromatic contrasts than black berries and
32 crows detected them from a larger distance. Against sand, UV-reflecting berries had low
33 achromatic contrasts and black berries low chromatic contrasts. Crows detected both
34 fruit types equally, suggesting that they used chromatic contrasts to detect UV-
35 reflecting berries and achromatic contrasts to detect black berries. Birds prioritized
36 chromatic contrasts when searching for artificial red fruits in foliage but not when
37 searching for blueberries on sand. We suggest that the relative importance of chromatic
38 and achromatic contrasts is contingent on the chromatic and achromatic variance of the
39 background. Models of signal perception can be improved by incorporating
40 background-specific effects.

41 Keywords: fruit color, perception, seed dispersal, vision, eye model, frugivory

Introduction

Organisms use signals to communicate information about their phenotypic or genotypic quality. Simulation models predict that receivers select for easily detectable and honest signals (Schluter and Price, 1993). Thus, hypotheses on signal evolution focus on efficacy (detectability) of signals and on reliability of the information transferred by signals (Endler, 2000; Guilford and Dawkins, 1991). Although it is usually assumed that plants use conspicuous colors to attract animal vectors to fruits and flowers (Borges et al., 2003; Schaefer and Schmidt, 2004), it remains unclear how most animals perceive those signals (Endler, 1993). This is important because differences in perception by different animal taxa may underlie widespread patterns in fruit and flower color (Schaefer et al., 2004).

Two recent studies concluded that birds, the largest taxon of seed dispersers, prefer high contrast over low contrast fruit signals (Burns and Dalen, 2002; Schmidt et al., 2004). A limitation of these studies is that contrasts were not quantified according to avian visual perception. Physiological models of eye function (Hart, 2001; Vorobyev et al., 2001; Vorobyev and Osorio, 1998) increasingly allow such quantification (Heiling et al., 2003; e.g., They and Casas, 2002).

Although models of avian vision are widely used to explain color patterns in prey (Bruce et al., 2005; Siddiqi et al., 2004; They et al., 2005), their ability to predict birds' detection of colored stimuli under natural conditions is untested. Such a test is important because eye models make no predictions on signal detectability if the intensity of illuminating light varies (Vorobyev and Osorio, 1998) or if targets differ in size and distance to the signal receiver. Of particular relevance, color signals may be conspicuous at close range and cryptic when viewed from a distance (Endler and They,

1996; Heindl and Winkler, 2003; Marshall, 2000). Moreover, even in constant conditions, both birds and insects apparently use different signal parameters depending on the size of the target. Chromatic (wavelength-related) aspects of color are important for the detection of large objects, whereas achromatic (intensity-related) aspects are important for the detection of small objects (Osorio et al., 1999; Spaethe et al., 2001). The relative importance of chromatic and achromatic contrasts is not incorporated into eye models for assessing signal efficacy. There is, however, indirect evidence that birds primarily attend to chromatic contrasts because avian predators select for reduced chromatic but not achromatic contrasts in prey (Håstad et al., 2005; Stuart-Fox et al., 2004).

We conducted two experiments on avian fruit detection in a large (2025m²) semi-natural aviary. Our goals were: (1) to test predictions of physiological eye models under field conditions and (2) to test the relative importance of chromatic and achromatic contrasts in signal detection. Specifically, we observed the distance at which crows (*Corvus ossifragus*) detected red vs. black fruits and UV-reflecting vs. black (non-UV-reflecting) fruits. We tested detection of red and black fruits because those colors are the most common colors of bird-dispersed fruits and because many fruits change from red to black during ripening (Wheelwright and Janson, 1985; Willson and Whelan, 1990). Assuming that fruit color changes during ripening are adaptive in the context of signal theory (i.e., if color changes increase detectability), we predict that black fruits will be detected from a larger distance than red fruits.

We tested for detection of UV reflection because many bird-dispersed fruits have a UV “bloom” that is assumed to target avian seed dispersers, which can perceive UV (Altshuler, 2001; Burkhardt, 1982). Comparing fruit detection of UV-reflecting and

black fruits against foliage, also allowed us to test the core prediction of an avian eye model (Vorobyev et al., 2001) that targets (fruits) with higher chromatic and achromatic contrasts will be detected at a larger distance than targets with lower contrasts. We also used a second type of background, sand, because UV-reflecting fruits were only distinguishable from sand by chromatic contrasts and black fruits only by achromatic contrasts. This design allowed us to test the relative importance of these contrasts for fruit detection. If birds prioritize one type of contrast over the other, we predicted differences in the distance from which UV-reflecting and black fruits would be detected against sand.

Methods

Species selection

We chose crows as a study species because they commonly consume fruits and adapt well to the large aviary we used. Furthermore, their relatively large size made it possible for us to keep them in sight and to closely observe their foraging behavior.

Diurnal birds use four retinal cone types for color vision and are classified into two distinct groups by the peak sensitivity of the short-wave cone (Endler and Mielke, 2005; Ödeen and Håstad, 2003). In the U-system group, peak sensitivity is shifted to the ultraviolet part of the spectrum and in the V-system it is shifted to the violet part of the spectrum (Ödeen and Håstad 2003). Each group contains frugivorous birds. Crows have been assigned to the V-system group, based on molecular data (Ödeen and Håstad, 2003). Knowledge of cone sensitivities in different bird species is limited (Hart, 2001), but interspecific variability in each group is considered relatively small (Håstad et al.,

2005). Therefore, our results are likely to apply to other frugivorous species with the V-system. We caution against applying them to species with the U-system.

Experimental design

From December 2003 to February 2004, we captured 23 crows in Alachua County, Florida, (USA), using a modified Australian crow trap (Gadd, 1996). We maintained crows in groups of 2-4 in cages (1.2 x 1.2 x 1.8m) at the National Wildlife Research Field Station in Gainesville, Florida. Birds were caught no more than six weeks prior to trials and were released immediately afterwards. Nine days prior to a given crow's trial, the bird was placed alone in a cage and provided with two black and two red beads (artificial fruits; see below) that were wired together and attached to a food cup, allowing the crow to associate the color signal with a food reward without developing a color preference. Food cups were hung in front of palm leaves. After seven days of habituation, crows were released singly into a large semi-natural aviary (45 x 45 x 5m), which contained various non-fruiting bushes and trees, including 22 lady palms (*Rhaphis* spp; height 2-2.5m) that were regularly spaced on a large patch (30 x 30m) of bare sand.

We conducted two experiments on fruit detection. In both trials, we defined detection distance as the distance between a fruit display and where a crow started to fly or walk directly towards that display. If, however, the crow did not consume the nutritional reward associated with the display within one minute (usually much less) after moving towards it, we assumed the display had not been detected. This happened only five times. In most cases, abrupt head movements and an instant alteration of flight or gait reliably indicated when and where detection occurred. All cases in which the point of detection was uncertain were omitted from analyses. Both experiments ended

when the crow had discovered half of the displays or after 90min.

In the first experiment, we compared detection of red and black fruits. Anthocyanins are the pigments that impart red color at low concentrations and dark purple to black color at high concentrations (Lancaster et al., 1997). Because anthocyanins possess high antioxidant capacity, they might be selected by crows as nutritional rewards (Cipollini, 2000; Schaefer et al., 2004). Thus, to isolate color cues from nutritional cues, we used artificial fruit displays, which consisted of four 1.2cm (diameter) wood beads painted either red or black. For a nutritional reward, we attached one piece of dog food (ca. 5mm) to the end of a thin (<1mm) green metal wire projecting from the bottom of each artificial infructescence. The dog food was placed inconspicuously beneath the infructescence to reduce the possibility that crows might use the reward to detect displays rather than vice versa. The night before a trial, we placed eight infructescences (four black and four red) into eight randomly chosen palms. Thus, all infructescences were displayed against a standardized and natural background in an otherwise unpredictable manner. We used palms as a background because many species of palm, including several species native to Florida, produce red or black fruits that attract avian frugivores. At dawn, as soon as the crow started to forage, we watched from a blind outside the aviary as it searched for fruits, recording detection distances and the color of detected fruits. Birds readily detected the displays and consumed the dog food.

At the end of the first experiment, two observers entered the aviary. Within five minutes, one person placed one blueberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*; 1cm diameter) in each of eight randomly chosen palms at the end of a wire protruding approximately 3cm from the leaves, and eight blueberries in random locations on the sand. At the same

time, the other person distracted the crow to prevent it from observing where the fruits were placed. The UV reflecting waxy bloom of four blueberries in each set of eight was rubbed off so that half of the berries had their peak reflectance in the UV (“UV+”) and the other half did not (“black”).

We used sand as second type of standardized background because blueberries exhibit strikingly different chromatic and achromatic contrasts against foliage and sand. Importantly, sand is a natural background for native blueberry species that grow in the dry and sandy pine flatwoods of northern Florida. It is not uncommon for blueberries of these species to fall to the ground and be consumed. Regardless of how frequently this occurs, however, the intent of this experiment was to present blueberries against two types of background with substantially different contrasts, not to perfectly mimic the species-specific backgrounds. To keep fruit traits constant, we only used blueberries that were of similar shape, size and ripeness. Crows in north-central Florida regularly encounter and consume blueberries; in fact, they are considered a major pest by blueberry farmers (Avery et al., 1992).

Fruit color measurements

We measured the color of 20 blueberries, 10 artificial red and 10 black fruits and 20 background structures (10 palm leaves and 10 patches of sand) with an Ocean Optics USB2000 diode-array spectrometer. We used a Top Sensor System Deuterium-Halogen DH-2000 lamp as a standardized light source and a coaxial fiber cable (QR400-7, Ocean Optics) that was mounted inside a matt black plastic tube to exclude ambient light. Reflectance was measured as the proportion of a standard white reference tile (Top Sensor Systems WS-2). The angle of illumination and reflection was fixed at 45° to

minimize glare. Spectra were processed with SpectraWin 4.0 software and calculated in 5nm intervals from 300 - 730nm. The reflectance spectra of the artificial fruits matched those of natural temperate fruits, including those that occur in Florida (100 species in total; unpubl. data; Fig. 1). In blueberries, the removal of the bloom led to a significant reduction in UV and overall reflectance (Fig. 2). Chromatic contrasts of the mean reflectance of fruits and the different background measurements were calculated by Misha Vorobyev (University of Brisbane) following the calculations detailed in Siddiqi et al. (2004). For this analysis, we used an eye model of the peacock (*Pavo cristatus*) (Hart, 2002) because it most likely estimates the vision of crows (Ödeen and Håstad, 2003). Contrasts were characterized in units of “just noticeable differences” (jnds), following Vorobyev’s models (for details, see Vorobyev et al., 2001; Vorobyev et al., 1998). One jnd is at the threshold of discrimination for birds, values <1 jnd indicate that two colors are indistinguishable and values >1 jnd indicate how much above this threshold a pair of spectra is discriminated (Osorio and Vorobyev, 1996). Similar to the chromatic contrasts, we calculated achromatic contrasts for the double cone of birds, assuming a Weber fraction of 0.05 (for details, see Siddiqi et al., 2004).

Depending on the outcome of the trials, we had 1-4 measurements of detection distances for the different fruit types on each background for each individual crow. For statistical analyses, we used the mean detection distance of individual crows for each fruit type and background. We analyzed the 2x2 factorial design of the blueberry trial with a three-way ANOVA. The dependent variable was mean detection distance, while fruit color (UV+, black) and background (palm, sand) were entered as fixed factors and individual crows as random factors. When necessary, we transformed variables to meet the assumption of homoscedascity.

Results

Nineteen of 23 crows found the artificial red and black fruit displays rapidly (mean trial length = 18 ± 2 min); the remaining four crows found only two or three displays before they stopped foraging. All birds consumed the dog food immediately after initially approaching a fruit display, indicating that they associated the artificial infructescence with a food reward. The distance from which the fruit signals were detected differed. Crows detected artificial red fruits from a larger median distance (6.0m) than artificial black fruits (3.7m; t-test: $n=23$, $t= -2.353$, $p < 0.05$; Fig. 3) corresponding to a 60% increase in detection distance. The difference in detection distance is explainable because artificial red and black fruits differed in their achromatic and chromatic contrasts against leaves (t-test: $t= 193.41$ and $t= 128.56$, respectively; both $p < 0.001$). Achromatic contrasts of red fruits were below the threshold of discrimination (0.8 ± 0.1 jnds; mean \pm S.E.), whereas achromatic contrasts of black fruits were well above the threshold (11.0 ± 0.1 jnds). Conversely, red fruits had higher chromatic contrasts (22.3 ± 0.2 jnds) than black fruits (16.0 ± 0.1 jnds). The larger detection distance of artificial red fruits suggests that crows attended primarily to chromatic cues.

When blueberries were presented against foliage, most crows (17 out of 23) found eight fruits within 41min (± 7 min); the remaining birds found only 4-6 fruits before they stopped foraging. Crows' detection of blueberries depended on fruit colors, the type of background and the interaction between both factors, but not on crow identity (three-way ANOVA $F= 7.59$, $p < 0.001$). Overall, blueberries were detected from a larger distance against palms compared to sand ($F= 12.53$, $p < 0.001$) and UV-reflecting fruits from a larger distance than black fruits ($F= 5.66$, $p < 0.05$). The

interaction between color and background ($F= 5.11$, $p< 0.05$) indicates that fruit contrasts are important in explaining fruit detection. Against foliage, crows detected UV+ fruits from a greater distance than black fruits. The difference in detection distance was large -- UV+ fruits were detected from 60% further than black fruits (median UV+: 5.7m, black: 3.1m; Fig 4). The difference in detection distance resulted in a higher consumption of UV-reflecting blueberries (t-test, $t= 3.37$, $p< 0.01$). That crows found UV-reflecting blueberries from further away is consistent with the core prediction of the eye model because UV+ blueberries had stronger chromatic (19.7 ± 0.1 jnds) and achromatic (10.8 ± 0.1 jnds) contrasts against foliage than black blueberries (16.7 ± 0.1 and 9.1 ± 0.1 jnds, respectively; t-test, $t= 123.72$ and $t= 108.65$, both $p< 0.001$).

On sand, the distance from which crows detected both fruit types did not differ (Fig 4) and crows consumed equal numbers of UV-reflecting and black blueberries (t-test, $t= -0.14$, $p> 0.05$). UV+ fruits were indistinguishable from background by achromatic contrasts (0.8 ± 0.1 jnds) and black fruits were difficult to detect by chromatic contrasts (1.0 ± 0.1 jnds). UV+ fruits had higher chromatic contrasts than black fruits (5.6 ± 0.6 jnds vs. 1.0 ± 0.1 jnds, respectively; t-test, $t= 84.53$, $p< 0.001$) and black fruits had higher achromatic contrasts than UV+ fruits (17.0 ± 0.2 jnds vs. 0.8 ± 0.1 jnds, respectively; t-test, $t= 110.43$, $p< 0.001$). These results suggest that both chromatic and achromatic cues were important for detecting fruits against sand.

Discussion

Results from the experiment with artificial red and black fruits do not agree with the prediction that black fruits have higher detectability than red fruits. In fact, we found the opposite result: artificial red fruits were detected from a greater distance than artificial

black fruits. Thus, the color shift from red to black during fruit ripening cannot be attributed to increased detectability.

Importance of chromatic and achromatic contrasts for signal detection

Results from the second trial generally validate the avian eye model (Vorobyev et al., 2001; Vorobyev and Osorio, 1998). In an environment with natural lighting, blueberries with higher chromatic and achromatic contrasts (UV+ against foliage) were detected at much greater distances than blueberries with lower chromatic and achromatic contrasts (black against foliage). When one fruit was only detectable by chromatic contrast (UV+ against sand) and the other fruit only by achromatic contrast (black against sand), birds detected both fruit types equally. This result does not match those from the first trial, in which artificial red fruits were detected at much larger distances than artificial black fruits, despite the higher achromatic contrasts of black fruits. Because achromatic contrasts are thought to be more important than chromatic contrasts for the detection of small objects (Osorio et al., 1999), this inconsistency between trials might be explainable by differences in fruit presentation. In trial 1, instead of presenting a single fruit (as in trial 2), we used four beads that exceeded blueberries in size. The large size of the beads may have caused crows to attend primarily to chromatic cues when searching for artificial infructescences.

Results of the three-way ANOVA illustrate a significant effect of background on fruit detection: blueberries were detected from larger distances when displayed against palm leaves than against sand. The difference might be explainable by the stronger contrasts of blueberries against palm leaves. Crows detected the single spherical berry of our presentation from various angles (in flight, from perches and from the ground) on

both backgrounds. We consider it therefore unlikely that the orientation of that berry (vertical in palms and horizontal on sand) influenced fruit detection. For example, a vertically displayed fruit in palms becomes a horizontal display (as on sand) if detected in flight. Likewise, it is unlikely that the background-specific effect on fruit detection is explicable by an association of food rewards with palms from trial 1, because crows did not find blueberries faster on palms compared to on sand (data not shown).

We suggest that the relative importance of chromatic and achromatic contrasts is contingent on the background, a conjecture that has not been incorporated into current models of visual detection and signal theory. It is generally believed that achromatic contrasts are important for edge or pattern discrimination and more frequently used for long-distance detection (Osorio et al., 1999). However, because illumination (i.e., light intensity) can vary drastically, intensity-related achromatic contrasts are considered to be less reliable for object identification (Kelber et al., 2003). This logic is especially applicable to foliage, because the patterns of sun flecks and shadows that characterize a background of foliage produce high variation in illumination.

Sumner and Mollon (2000) discussed the importance of this effect for the detectability of fruits. Analyzing fruit perception in frugivorous primates, they concluded that achromatic fruit signals are difficult to detect for primates because of large achromatic variance in foliage. Variation in the chromatic composition of illumination is comparatively small, and the chromatic aspect of a signal might therefore be a more reliable cue under variable light conditions (Troost, 1998). This might explain why crows detected artificial red fruits from a larger distance (our study) or why hawkmoths appear to base foraging decisions on chromatic, not achromatic, contrasts (Kelber, 2005).

Our results suggest, however, that crows do not generally prioritize chromatic over achromatic contrasts. Crows probably attended to both types of contrasts when detecting UV-reflecting and black blueberries on sand. On sand, UV+ fruits were indistinguishable by achromatic contrasts and had low chromatic contrasts -- conditions that might have favored the use of achromatic contrasts to detect the alternative black blueberries. Also, sand has lower variance in brightness than foliage, which might result in a higher detectability of the achromatic fruit signal and thus explain the seemingly contradictory results between trial 1 and 2. However, to pinpoint the effect of background heterogeneity on signal detection in birds, a study including a larger number of bird species, colored targets and backgrounds is needed.

Fruit signals

Both a previous study on primates (Sumner and Mollon, 2000) and our study conclude that color changes from red to black during fruit ripening are apparently not an adaptation to increase fruits' conspicuousness to seed dispersers because of the high importance of chromatic red signals. If fruit detection by crows is representative of that of other seed dispersers, the color shift during ripening is not explicable by signal theory. The high frequency of black fruits (up to 40%) in bird-dispersed plants (Wheelwright and Janson, 1985) might rather be explained by physiological processes within the plant (see Schaefer and Rolshausen, 2006; Schaefer and Wilkinson, 2004) or by pleiotropy (Whitney and Stanton, 2004). Because black fruits are more common than red fruits in the flora of Florida (Long, 1971), we consider it unlikely that crows detected red fruits from a larger distance because they had previously developed a search image for red fruits.

To the best of our knowledge, our experiments are the first behavioral validation of the applicability of an avian eye model under conditions that mimic what birds encounter in the wild. Eye models are based on the molecular data of retina composition (Hart, 2001) as well as on the behavioral data of a sophisticated laboratory experiment (Maier, 1992). Our results show that predictions based on these models, which are widely used to explain the proximate selective pressures in signal evolution, probably also apply to more natural conditions. Thus, using such models provides a powerful tool for assessing the evolutionary ecology of signals.

Signal perception in crows, for example, might provide a functional explanation for the occurrence of accessory signals such as pre-ripe red fruits or red bracts in fruit displays (Burns and Dalen, 2002; Stiles, 1982; Wheelwright and Janson, 1985). Such accessory signals increase the conspicuousness of fruit displays (Schaefer et al., in press). Adding pre-ripe red fruits to fruit displays increased birds' removal rates of ripe black fruits in solitary infructescences but not in clumped infructescences (Morden-Moore and Willson, 1982; Willson and Melampy, 1983). Red fruits presumably enhance fruit conspicuousness in both presentations, but the effect of enhanced detectability is not apparent if black fruits are presented at sufficiently short distances in clumped distributions, which enable birds to easily perceive the achromatic signal. We caution, however, that our results pertain to the specific conditions of our study. It is currently unknown whether the search behavior of crows in the simplified habitat of a large aviary more generally reflects the detection of colored targets in birds.

Like other studies (Siddiqi et al., 2004; They et al., 2005), we based our analysis on signal detectability entirely on the cone sensitivities of the avian retina, assuming that the double cone functions to detect achromatic signals. It is still unknown

how birds process chromatic and achromatic signals and how neuronal processing affects signal detectability. While future studies might shed light on this question, an emerging lesson of our study is that visual signals are more complex than commonly assumed and that the relative importance of chromatic and achromatic contrasts is contingent on the background.

Acknowledgements

Crows were trapped and maintained under US Fish and Wildlife Service permit MB019065 and University of Florida IACUC protocol D412. The experimental protocol met the ASAB guidelines for the ethical treatment of animals. We thank particularly Misha Vorobyev for contrast calculations, Kandy L. Keacher and W. E. Bruce for bird maintenance and Erick Smith (University of Florida, Physical Plant Division) for loan of the lady palms. Comments by Kevin Burns and an anonymous reviewer greatly improved the manuscript.

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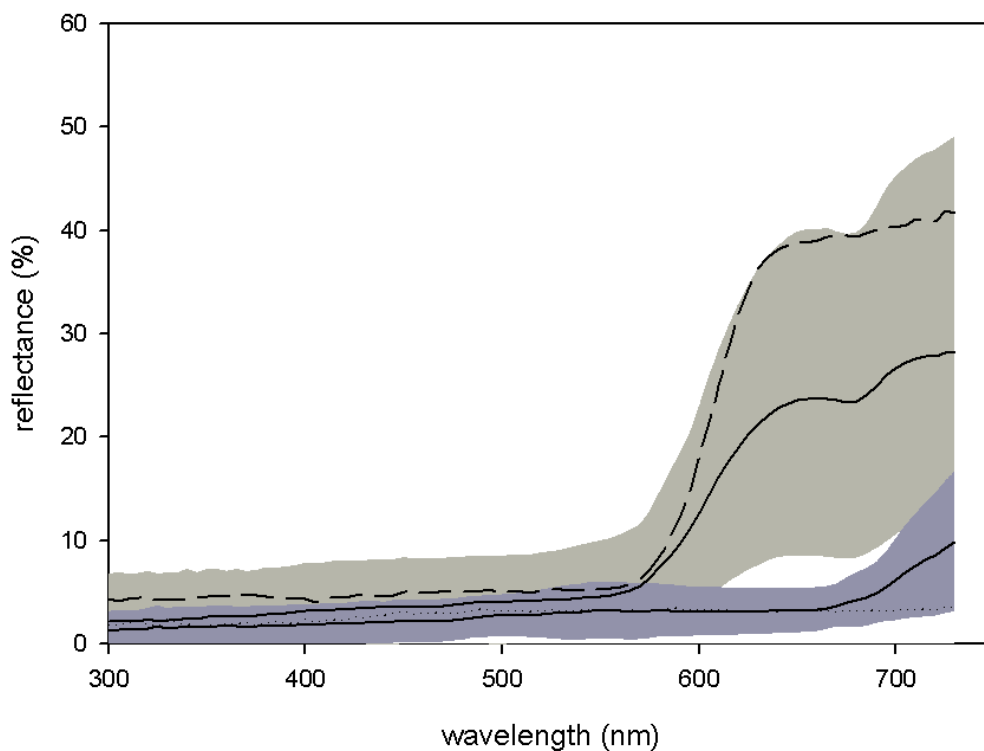


Figure 1: Reflectance spectra of artificial and natural red ($n= 62$) and black ($n= 38$) fruits. Solid lines denote the mean reflectance of natural red and black fruits, the long-dashed line denotes artificial red fruits, and the dotted line denotes artificial black fruits. The light grey area shows the standard deviation of natural red fruits and the dark grey area shows the standard deviation of natural black fruits. Note that the reflectance spectra of artificial fruits matched those of natural fruits -- i.e., they lie within the standard deviation.

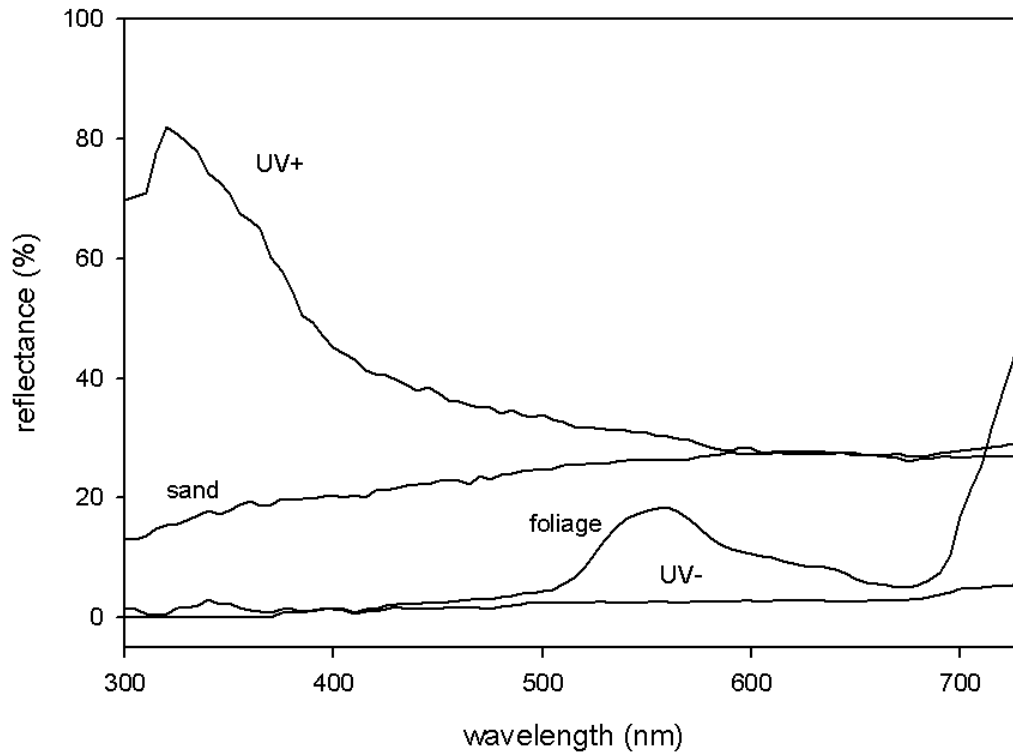


Figure 2 Reflectance spectra of UV-reflecting (UV+) and black blueberries and background structures over the range of wavelengths visible to birds.

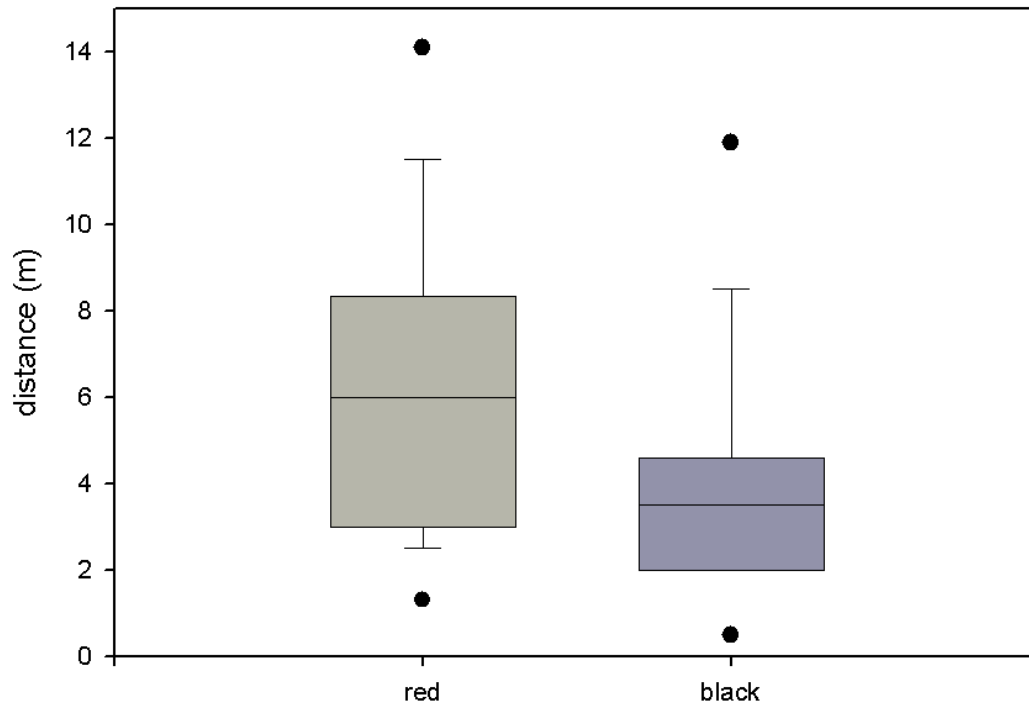


Figure 3: Artificial red fruits were detected from a larger distance than artificial black fruits; illustrated are medians, mid-quartiles and 90th and 10th percentiles and 95th and 5th percentiles as outliers.

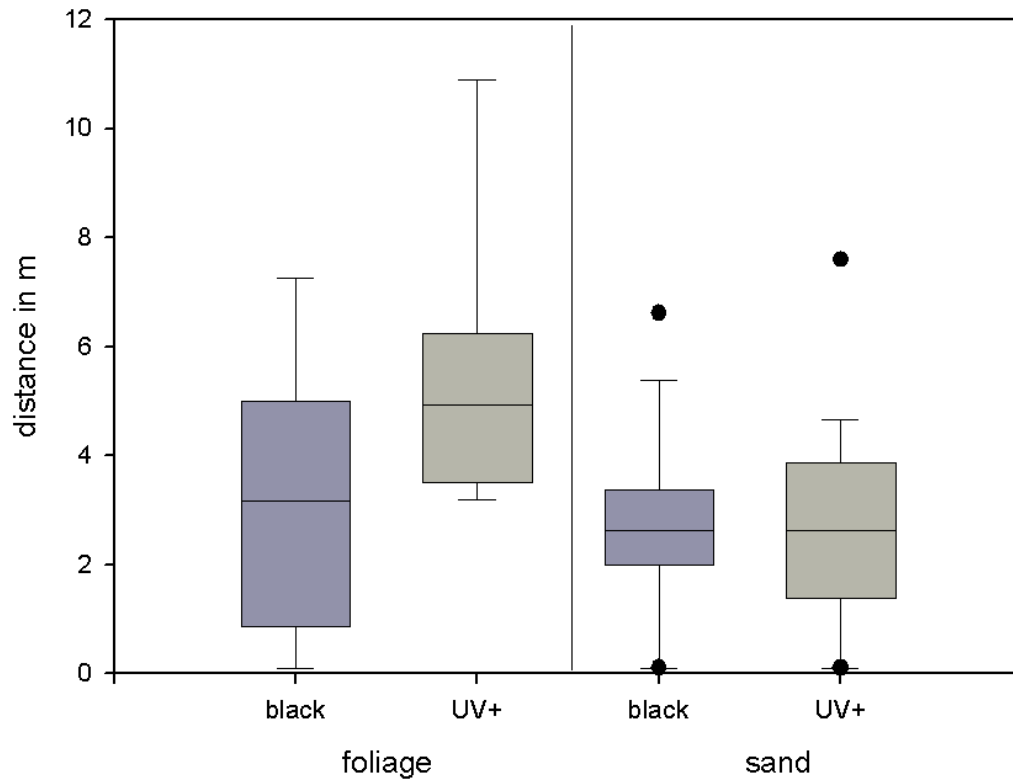


Figure 4: Crows detected UV-reflecting (UV+) fruits from a larger distance than black fruits against a background of foliage but not against that of sand. Illustrated are medians, mid-quartiles, 90th and 10th percentiles, and 95th and 5th percentiles as outliers.