

## Suffering for the love of birds: A scientist's battle to save birds — and now her career

Christine Lattin loves birds. About a decade ago she was working as an environmental education intern with middle-school kids at Glen Helen Outdoor Education Center in Yellow Springs, OH. One of her favorite parts of the job was helping rehab sick and injured birds of prey at the Glen Helen Raptor Center. She quickly noted how different hawk species would respond to the stress of confinement in contrasting ways. Some adapted to their strange captive environments more favorably, leading to rapid recoveries. Others were anxious and skittish up until the day they were released. While she was feeding hawks by hand and returning them to the sky, she never could have anticipated the hostile attacks that would someday target her career — because of her love of birds.

Her passion for understanding animal behavior led her to analyze the song of Blue Grosbeaks, garish thick-billed birds that migrate from South to North America in annual cycles. Again, she saw the important impact of stress on wild animals, observing that a single cold snap changed their singing patterns and put breeding on pause. Even though her undergraduate degree was in linguistics, her connection to nature and keen eye for subtle differences in bird behavior led her to a new career in biology with an interest in how stress influenced avian ecology.

She has tremendous awareness and concern for the challenges that birds face. Destruction of habitat, changing climates, invasive species — these are just a few of the issues that threaten wild animal populations and radically change a species' ability to survive.

Today Lattin finds herself a postdoctoral researcher at Yale University, working there because it permits access to the world's best live-imaging tools that can take her studies from the field to inside the complicated networks of the bird's brain, non-invasively. Her efforts have established new foundations in understanding the fundamental nuts and bolts of bird responses to stress, pathways that are similar in all vertebrate animals, from fish to birds to mammals.

But there are people that actively seek to end her research, and ideally her career. Animal rights activists, led by PETA, have sworn to stop her research, and have resorted to the lowest techniques of savage slander, personal defamation and intimidation ([some can be seen here](#)). Their goal is to tarnish the efforts of this prominent young woman scientist by poisoning her reputation, and tagging her as an animal-torturing, unemployable lightning rod that controversy-fearing universities won't touch.



Christine Lattin checks the tag on a bird to be released as part of her research. Lattin has come under fire from activists that do not understand her work, yet threaten her career with smear campaigns and intimidation.

### **Understanding Bird (and Other Animal) Behavior**

Lattin has published dozens of scholarly papers, including those using innovative imaging techniques, and has positioned herself as an emerging leader in bird behavior and physiology. Her bread and butter lies in techniques that describe the physio-chemical nature of bird neurobiology — hormone levels in plasma and feathers, receptor numbers in the body and brain. She also studies behavior in the lab, and someday soon, she hopes, in the field. With the new imaging technologies she is pioneering, her ultimate goal is to be able to scan birds, tag the birds with RFID so that they may be tracked over time, and then release and retrieve them — gaining valuable information about their movements, their breeding success and their responses to stress.

The central subjects of these studies are house sparrows, an invasive species that competes with the beloved bluebird and other native birds for nesting sites. She can study these birds with no impact on natural ecology. For her current research, birds are typically anesthetized and imaged, sometimes after being treated with various medical-grade chemical tracers that highlight aspects of the brain during imaging.

Every single experiment is performed in compliance with strict protocols approved by Yale's Institutional Animal Care and Use Committees. These are not rubber stamps. They are detailed mandates that ensure ethical and proper treatment of captive animals during experimentation.

From her measurements she can interpret how changes in hormone and receptor levels translate to alterations in behavior, and reveal the associations between different neurobiological and endocrine properties and stress resilience. This research could lead to the development of new medicines and procedures to reduce stress in humans and animals. Understanding how different individuals respond to stress differently could help us prioritize which animals to use in conservation efforts like captive breeding of endangered species. Her innovative imaging work also has the potential to be the catalyst of research in a completely new area of biology.

### **A Curious Target**

Lattin is tall in stature with a gentle smile, a mother that instills her love of nature and her values of protecting endangered animals onto her young son. She is a postdoctoral associate, which means she has spent the first 30-some years of her life dedicated to school, most of the time getting by on loans and low pay associated with these training positions. She grew up poor, the first in her family to go to college and earn a graduate degree, which has made this career path a bit more difficult at times. Her's is a sacrifice that many scholars make, duty now for the future. Her postdoctoral career is a time to invest tremendous efforts in scholarly research with the hope of enticing a major research university to take note, and offer a rare faculty position.

She is at the end of a long trail of dedication to research, positioned well for the next steps. However, this places her into the most vulnerable position on the academic track. PETA knows this. Established faculty in tenure-track positions can usually survive career-threatening defamation. They have insulation from intimidation, and institutions that usually choose to stand behind a faculty member under attack for their work.

Lattin is a prominent woman scientist on the rise, performing cutting-edge work in an important area at the interface of avian ecology and physiology. And this is precisely why she is a target.

Image not found or type unknown

PETA specifically targets a young woman researcher at a critical career precipice. Their goal is to intimidate her out of research as well as induce a spiral of silence to stop other researchers from speaking out or participating in animal research.

## **The Ire of Activists**

Activists have come in throngs to harass Lattin at national meetings, gathering near her and shouting at her by name while she described her work to her colleagues at a poster presentation. They have posted horrible images and false information about her online, and encouraged their followers to bully and harass her on Facebook, on Twitter and over email. They have posted defamatory signs on public bulletin boards around Yale University, misrepresenting her work. They have developed inflammatory online petitions that cast her in the most negative light.

Now they are planning a September 13 demonstration in front of her home.

It is easy to read between the lines. Their goal is to intimidate, or better yet, turn neighbors against her and her family. Their goal is to inspire others to defame, physically provoke, or even to harm a scientist. Their goal is to pollute social media and the wider web with false narratives that leave durable, daily punishment and defamation.

## **PETA's Major Fail**

While many find PETA's tactics reprehensible, their concern for animals is understandable. We all value fair and humane treatment of animals, especially those used in laboratory settings. But in the scope of all animal issues, why focus on Lattin?

The answer is simple- to start the Spiral of Silence. If they intimidate her out of research, or even destroy her presence on Google, they will steal the star of a young researcher on the rise, and that has incredible repercussions throughout the research community. Other young aspiring scientists are collaterally affected by the intimidation. Nobody wants to be a target. If Lattin succumbs to their campaign someone else will be next, and most scientists would rather change projects than deal with threats, intimidation and

harassment. Scientists are thinkers, not typically fighters. Activists with corrupt agendas rely on provocation to drive scientists away from research avenues, and at least out of the conversation. This creates an asymmetrical arena where their unopposed views dominate public sentiment.

By posting her home address they can perhaps inspire action against her, her family, or property. Even if they don't do the dirty work, they may be able to needle someone who can — pushing the buttons of a local troubled person that capitulates to the dangerous message of the activists that Lattin is torturing animals and deserving of retribution.

PETA's tactical error is taking on a researcher who has the benefit of birds in mind. She cares deeply about understanding natural populations in the interest of improving their long-term welfare. By harassing Lattin, they potentially remove an innovative researcher that has the best interests of birds and their ecology in mind.

### **Our Time to Act**

No scientist should ever face harassment, defamation and intimidation because of the work they do, especially when it is performed with the utmost transparency, strict ethical oversight, and rigorous attention to animal care.

No scientist should ever be subject to career-threatening online distortions, false narratives that taint a hard-fought-for career in academic science.

No scientist should ever fear for his or her life, or the safety of their families, because they do their job well.

Activists only succeed if they force change. As a community of scientists, science enthusiasts, journalists, and those concerned with doing what is right, we must insulate Lattin and other scientists from this kind of damaging attack.

Share her story. Use your social media networks to telegraph the bullying efforts of PETA and their attempts to intimidate a young woman researcher that is a leader in her field.

Lattin is a rising star in science with a love of animals and a desire to ensure their future.

We need to stand behind Christine to ensure hers.

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