

**Birds of a Feather: Promoting Diversity in Birding, with Sorrel Lyall (S01E06)**  
**Not Another Science Podcast**  
**November 11th, 2020**

**Introduction**

**[Tom Edwick]** Welcome to Not Another Science Podcast. I'm Tom.

**[Helena Cornu]** And I'm Helena!

*Intro music plays.*

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**[Helena]** Tom, who are we talking to this week?

**[Tom]** So this week, we're talking to my good friend and also president of the Edinburgh University Ornithological Society, also known as BirdSoc, Sorrel Lyall. She's super lovely. We met over the summer on a research project doing field work together. And yeah, she's just a really cool person.

**[Helena]** This is the thing that you were on this summer with the sausage grip. That's like the main thing that I remember from that conversation.

**[Tom]** *laughs* Yeah, the sausage grip, sneaking around in the bushes, scaring dog walkers. It's that project.

Yeah, she's an insanely talented birder. She does a lot of work trying to get young people engaged in nature and bird watching, which is super cool. And she's also really pushing diversity in birding as well. So yeah, she's just an insanely talented person with a lot of very cool things to say.

*Transition music plays.*

**Main**

**[Tom]** How's it going?

**[Sorrel Lyall]** Good! Oh, I just... It hit 4:00 o'clock and I just want to sit on the sofa under the duvet and just... Yeah, can't do anything.

[Tom] *laughs*

[Sorrel] {...} but it's not too bad.

[Tom] Honestly, that's just me after lunch like... I eat lunch and I'm like: "Aah, food coma is inbound..."

[Sorrel] I know, you get really sleepy.

[Tom] ... there's no way I can make it through the rest of the afternoon.

How are you finding the online learning situation?

[Sorrel] It's OK. Now I kind of have a... I know what I'm required to do each week, it's fine, but when... Like the first couple of weeks you don't really know what you're doing, it was a bit all over the place.

[Tom] So I thought we could start the podcast talking about how we met on the blue tit project, 'cause I've got some hilarious stories from that. How did you get involved with that project?

[Sorrel] So I was supposed to do my exams actually, which is why I couldn't do the blue tit project to start with, because it sort of coincided with the end of the uni term and then... I can't remember what my plans were for this summer. It seems so long ago. There was something in the pipeline, some volunteering thing that couldn't happen. But yeah, so I ended up doing the work with Jared on the blue tits, which was a lot of fun.

[Tom] Yeah, it was kind of nice to like... have something to do.

[Sorrel] Yeah, and be outside everyday.

[Tom] Yes, oh my God, it was a dream. It was an absolute dream.

So just for the listeners who may not know: we were working on a project looking at blue tits and part of the research... We had to catch the adults so that we could take DNA samples, and you know, all that sort of jazz. But that involved wearing these insane camouflage ghillie suits, and like crawling around in the undergrowth. Which was kind of weird, but also hilarious.

[Sorrel] Yeah, it was good, though I remember the day when I was walking along the path and I heard your voice and I was like: "Wait, I can't see Tom anywhere. Where is he?" And then I nearly stood on you.

*They both laugh.*

**[Sorrel]** I'm sorry.

**[Tom]** Yeah, I definitely terrified a lot of people 'cause there was like dog walkers who would be coming through and I think at this... By this point they knew we would be there somewhere hiding in the bushes. They were just on edge the whole time.

I don't know if you had any funny experiences when you were hiding in the undergrowth.

**[Sorrel]** I fell over quite a lot of times. There's one time I was hiding and then ran to the box and completely just tanked it over this log and did like a little roll in the brambles. {...} cut my arm. But yeah, definitely scared quite a few dog walkers.

So I didn't do a lot of the adult catching. You guys did most of that. I'm kind of grateful, that was very high pressure.

*Both laugh.*

**[Tom]** Yeah, it was intense and I remember there was one point I was hiding out, and then I heard these two dog walkers screaming around the corner. I think they had discovered Jared hiding in the bushes and they were terrified, it was so funny.

But it was intense 'cause we had a number to hit.

**[Sorrel]** Yeah, that was pressure, yeah.

**[Tom]** It was, it was real.

How did you get into birding in the 1st place? I know your grandparents introduced you, right?

**[Sorrel]** Yeah, so my grandparents are birders and that's kind of... Well that's how I got into it. And then, I didn't really know about conservation careers — it's not really something you're taught about in school, it's not a traditional career path that's particularly advertised or whatever. But I did find out about ecology as a career, I think when I was about 16 and then kind of realised: "Oh yeah, that's for me. That's... I'll try and make my hobby into a career so we'll see how that goes."

Yeah, and I started taking it all more seriously. Took the bird watching more seriously and tried to develop my skills more and tried to start getting experience in

different things. And yeah it kind of went from there really.

**[Tom]** And what are your early memories of doing it with your grandparents?

**[Sorrel]** I remember first learning the difference between male and female blackbirds. That, for some reason that sticks in my brain. I don't know why it was like my first little identification thing. Yeah, there's some, there's some nice cringey photos of me looking through a scope in some awful like 2007 fashion. *laughs*

Yeah, and just visiting nature reserves with my grandparents, lots of fun memories there, for sure. And then doing the big garden birdwatch with my mum and stuff like that.

**[Tom]** What are your best experiences of birding? Is there any like really funky bird that you've seen that just sticks in your mind or anything which is super cool?

**[Sorrel]** Oh... There's lots of things. I feel really lucky to live in Scotland and have access to some awesome places. I went around the Highlands this summer when we were allowed to, and just bumping into wildlife all around... Like we were up on the Northwest Coast and there'd just be flocks of twite everywhere. Which is really cool, but twite are a species, they're a small finch, that are restricted to upland areas where they breed, and pretty remote areas of Scotland. So they're not a species I encounter very often, so just bumping into them when we were sort of camping and things is great.

And then, all of a sudden a merlin would like, absolutely just whoosh through the flock and just go for it. And it was great. It's just amazing to see stuff like that.

**[Tom]** Yeah.

**[Sorrel]** So, yeah, I mean I see some rare things in the UK and some cool birds abroad, but it's like certain encounters that stick with you. I've had some amazing experiences watching golden eagles earlier this year. We actually watched them mating, which I think is a pretty rare thing to see.

**[Tom]** Yeah!

**[Sorrel]** ... kind of mad.

And just like, yeah, just getting really cool views of things, of like display flights and stuff like that. It's

just cool behaviour that you don't see very often at all. They're the kind of things that stick with me.

[Tom] I'm so jealous of your trip, that sounds so cool.

[Sorrel] I know! Two weeks of full sun, camped every night, didn't get rained on. That's never ever gonna happen again.

[Tom] How were the midges?

[Sorrel] Yeah, the midges were bad. We went in August so it was... Yeah not great, but worth it for the good weather I think.

[Tom] My friend has one of those hats that has one of the nets that comes down over your head.

[Sorrel] Yeah, we had midge hoods. It's quite a look. Although mine, I didn't realize mine is a mosquito hood not a midge hood, so the holes are actually too big and eventually the midges get in. Which is worse, then they're trapped in with you. Yeah, freaked out a couple of times, but it's not too bad.

[Tom] I've heard they're good for keeping the midges at bay, but if you wanna eat food or take a drink...

[Sorrel] Yeah, then then it gets challenging.

[Tom] What is it in particular that attracted you to birding in the first place? What's the thing that you love the most about doing it? What do you get from that experience?

[Sorrel] That's a tough one. I think there's so much to it and... I think it started off as a fascination. They're these really cool creatures going about their own lives. It's so interesting to watch them just doing what they do and learn about them and learn about all different behaviour strategies, different migration patterns, different... How birds feed and how birds use habitats. And it's just fascinating. I remember watching, I think it was a Chris Packham documentary, when I was quite young, about the interconnectedness of Nature and that's when it really clicked, I was like: "whoa, OK. Yeah, everything is interconnected. Everything is linked. If we lose one thing, it affects everything else."

And then that kind of spurred me on this ecology journey. Yeah, and then now it's definitely more of the mental health benefits and the general wellbeing benefits for me, like it's so important for me to be outside and in Nature

and watching birds and observing, and like you can just immerse yourself in it. And it takes your concentration away from anything else, 'cause you're just focused on what's there in the present. And it's great and I need to remember to do that more, which, with lock down {...}. I need to go outside and carry on birding 'cause... It's easy to forget how helpful it is when you're locked inside trying to do uni work all day but...

Quite a lot of young birders start off as just birders and then we kind of branch out into other things. So there was a phase a few years ago when everyone started getting into moth wrapping, and then in summer we all start doing dragonflies and stuff. So yeah, it's definitely like a gateway into the world of Nature for a lot of people.

*They both laugh.*

**[Tom]** Birding is the gateway drug to Nature. You heard it here first guys.

**[Sorrel]** It's true! Yeah, no, definitely. I think it's... I think, for a lot of... Well a lot of the young birders I know, birding is our main passion. But yeah, I mean obviously Nature is all interconnected as I said, and everything fits... has its place in the ecosystem, so learning about it all together and how it all works together, and then doing that university is super interesting.

**[Tom]** And I guess that kind of stresses the importance of getting people engaged and going into Nature. I think it's super important to get people just engaged, you know, as early as possible.

**[Sorrel]** Yeah, definitely, I think... Well, engagement for young people is huge. I don't think it's pushed enough in schools and hopefully things are starting to change with that I think. Also, I think conservation charities are seeing more the kind of social science side of conservation and using... Yeah, the sort of psychology side of things to bring more people into Nature and this kind of mental health and wellbeing... These benefits, showing that it is multidisciplinary and that's how we can get more people involved and engage more people.

**[Tom]** How many years ago was it that you started the BirdSoc?

**[Sorrel]** BirdSoc, we actually had our first official event a year ago, literally a year ago yesterday or something

like that. So yeah, so I'm in my third year of uni Now, but I came to uni knowing one other birder here – that's Gav. He was our president of BirdSoc last year. And then we met Phoebe the next year, who is also a birder here at uni. And then we were, like: "Right. There's three of us. Let's set up a society. See if there's any other young birders here at uni."

Thankfully, they were. We've had some pretty good turn out at our events. Considering it's a very nice hobby, specially for young people. Yeah, it's been great. So it's weird thinking it's only been a year since we run our first official event. Yeah, I feel like a lot has happened in that last year.

**[Tom]** Yeah.

**[Sorrel]** Yeah, it's been really good fun, actually. Stressful at times. Trying to get society off the ground was harder than I was expecting.

**[Tom]** Yeah.

**[Sorrel]** But yeah, we've... Like our trips and our local days out and birding days have been well attended and we've got a really nice community now of... A really supportive, friendly community of – or at least I'd like to think so, I hope so –

*They both laugh.*

of young birders here at uni, everyone giving advice to each other and responding to identification queries and like: "Oh, what book should I read next?" and stuff like that. And it's just... It's a very wholesome environment. It's lovely.

**[Tom]** Yeah. And have you found that there's quite a lot of interest? Was there more or less than you thought there would be?

**[Sorrel]** There's more than I thought it would be! Yeah, we had almost 40 people at one workshop event, which kind of blew me away at the time. So yeah, I've been really surprised. 'Cause, I mean, growing up, at school as the only one interested in birds, I didn't know anyone else my age. I knew maybe three other people in my County that were interested in birds that were under the age of 25 and then coming to Edinburgh, I knew one other person – that was Gav. So then to have like 40 people at our event was pretty crazy and yeah.

And then I met more and more people – well, like yourself – and made more friends in birding here. Yeah, so it's been great.

**[Tom]** Yeah! Do you think that it's becoming more of a mainstream kind of hobby, especially amongst the younger generation?

**[Sorrel]** It's hard to say 'cause I... I'm aware that I'm definitely in a bubble with my social media and my sort of friendship circles and stuff. Definitely in a bubble of ecology people, but I think it's becoming more normalized. I think. I can't speak for what it's like in schools now, if things have changed. Well, there's things like talk of a Natural History GCSE, and people are trying to get that off the ground. So when, if things like that happen then it's just going to make Nature just more normal for young people, which I think is really important and not seen as this uncool, uncool hobby that only old people do.

**[Tom]** Yeah.

**[Sorrel]** Yeah, I think it is becoming more and more mainstream, especially as more people are getting involved with the mental health side of it and seeing the benefits of Nature in that way. And actually, I saw on the news this week, the RSPB has partnered up with Edinburgh local health care to start prescribing birdsoc and Nature to patients which is really exciting.

**[Tom]** Wow!

**[Sorrel]** Yeah, it's a trial at the moment or it will be a trial. But yeah, things like that just show like it is becoming more mainstream, which is pretty exciting.

**[Tom]** Yeah, that's really cool. I actually I remember my first BirdSoc event. I think it was probably like the first or second thing that you guys had run. It was a trip out to Musselburgh and my mum was up for the weekend. So we went along with my flatmate and yeah there was such a huge group of people there and I was like this is wild. This is like so cool and everyone was like "Look there's like a velvet scoter" and at the time I had no idea what that was. I was like Oh cool, yeah, I agree – that is a velvet scoter. And then when I met you over the summer, I had no idea that you were like Big Dog in BirdSoc. I didn't realize you were like founding member. And I was like 'Hey Sorrel have you heard of this like BirdSoc thing?' It's kind of crazy and you're like 'Yeah, I started it?'. .



*They both laugh.*

**[Tom]** Yeah, I mean, how has it been kind of adjusting to all the restrictions, coronavirus restrictions?

**[Sorrel]** Yeah, that's been really hard, and I know a lot of societies have found it really hard, especially... Well for birding, it's obviously... Our events are centered around being in a group together, learning from each other, being outside, and it's been quite frustrating that we can't run events. Like completely understand it, and I get why we can't run events, but it is frustrating, so we're trying our best to do online engagement on our blog at the moment, and we have an active Facebook group for members where people are having discussions quite regularly, which is really nice, but it is hard to engage new members and I really feel for people looking for societies at the moment, and don't know exactly... Yeah, they want to meet new people and things like that. It must be really tricky, 'cause it's really tricky for us as a society to put things on and run events.

And Zoom events have their difficulties. We had a pub quiz at the start of the year and the technology was not working for us and it was really annoying. 'cause you put a lot of effort into these events and then the technology lets you down. And so yeah, there's been a lot of, a lot of adjusting. But yeah, I think it's OK.

I'd love to have more events, but it is just really hard to kind of just keep things up and running, but hopefully we'll be able to run in-person things again soon and I mean, we're trying to encourage our members to get out and bird as much as possible, and hopefully will do some online training things and workshops. That's the plan.

**[Tom]** Well you've had some successful events like just yesterday at the time of recording. If you could tell us a bit about that.

**[Sorrel]** Yeah, so we had a mindful birding and stress awareness workshop called Beating the Blues with Birdwatching. I can't claim that title. I didn't come up with it, but I quite liked it. It was a really interesting evening actually. So we had someone from Health In Mind which is a Scotland based mental health charity deliver a stress awareness workshop for us. And then we centered it around well, the mindfulness of birding 'cause it's something we've talked about quite a lot in BirdSoc Committee about how mindful birding can be when you're not stressed and looking for a rarity, birding is is really

quite distressing and relaxing and mindful. And yeah, like immersing yourself in Nature really just takes away from everything else. So we really just wanted to explore that for people. And it was, yeah it was a really interesting event and lots of discussion. And definitely it's the first time we've run something like that. And the first time I've ever done a stress workshop, over Zoom as well. So it's interesting to see what works well and what kind of is harder to do over an online platform.

We had a Wellness wall throughout the event and thought about how Birding fits into the five ways to Wellness, which are things like Give, Connect, Be Active, Take Notice and, I can't remember the fifth one off the top of my head. Yeah, and how birding fits into them. Oh! Keep Learning, that was the other one, which is obviously a big part of birding 'cause there's always more to learn. Yeah, so yeah it was. It was very interesting. I think I'd like to run more things like that.

**[Tom]** Yeah, that sounds really cool. We touched on kind of getting more people into things like birding at a younger age, a little bit earlier. I wondered if you could talk a little bit about the work you do with the BTO Youth Advisory Panel.

**[Sorrel]** Yeah, so this year I've been involved with the BTO, which is the British Trust for Ornithology and their new youth advisory panel, which is a group of ten of us from the age of 16 to 25 I believe, from all around the UK.

And we have regular meetings and we've been sort of discussing how to implement youth engagement in the BTO strategy going forward, which is really exciting {that} a national organization with big following, a big membership is really pushing for this youth engagement, which is wonderful. So yeah, we've had lots of discussions about things, lots of bouncing ideas back and forth about how to engage young people.

We sent out a survey and got people, young people's responses. So what barriers young people face to getting into birding and things like transport is a big one. Nature places are often quite hard to get to without your own transport. Having time like fitting Nature into your busy like education life is really quite challenging. And then money, binoculars and things like that. Equipment is expensive and that definitely presents a big barrier to young people, so it's been interesting exploring those and

how we can address those. So we've actually just started implementing our ideas, which is really exciting. We decided to run a youth representative scheme where we recruit youth reps. Currently going to go through a trial period, but... like a pilot, but we have youth reps to do on the ground engagement working in their region with local schools and universities and local bird clubs to facilitate connections and get more young people engaged with birding and Nature but also engaged with the science side of things. BTO is a bird science charity and all about the recording of birds and gathering data and citizen science data and using that to inform conservation policy, which is hugely important. So yeah, it's been really interesting working with this advisory panel and trying to yes! engage more young people and getting organizations to include young people in their visions for the future and their strategy going forward. Yeah, we've had meetings with the BTO Board which are a bit scary, but good, and like BTO CEOs. Yeah, so it's good. It's really exciting. And I know the RSPB has got something similar, they've got their Youth Council so it's great that organizations are taking more steps on this.

**[Tom]** Yeah, I think that's really cool. I know, especially just over the summer there was a lot of... With the Black Lives Matter Protests and things, all these issues that were thrown up about making people feel welcome in Nature and how organizations like BTO or the RSPB, can you know, really, take proactive steps to kind of tackle those issues? Do you feel like this could potentially be a way to do that by getting more young people involved? At an earlier age and growing the diversity of people that take part.

**[Sorrel]** Yeah, so as part of the youth engagement we're doing, diversity is really at the heart of that and we want to start off, you know, on the best foot. Start off as inclusive as we can. Because yeah, off the back of the Black Lives Matter movement in the summer I was seeing some... Well, it just came across to me like... Well it became apparent to me that the birding community is... Can be quite narrow minded and excludes people and... So I'm half Indian, half white, British and growing up as like a young birder, I'd walk into a conference room and there's no one... It's all old white males generally at these events and it is daunting and so it's become like ever clearer that there is a diversity issue in birding.

But yeah, so these organizations are starting to have these conversations more and more. I think this summer's really seen a turning point, and it's been really interesting. Lots of organizations now have like diversity working groups and are starting to talk about these issues with their staff and their members and listening to the voices of minority groups, which is hugely important.

I sent out an anonymous survey earlier in the summer on Twitter asking for the opinions of minority group birders, and it was just sort of a personal exploration, and to sort of inform some of the decisions we were making in BirdSoc, which is how to make BirdSoc as inclusive as possible and they kind of snowballed and completely escalated and then ended up sending the feedback to lots of different conservation organizations across the UK because there were some really quite eye opening responses to the survey about people, how people feel excluded in birding. It also received a lot of negative feedback. I forget that Twitter can be a nasty place sometimes, and there was a lot of gaslighting and people responding saying, 'Oh, this is virtue signaling' and stuff like that, which sets you back a bit, but it makes you realize that you know you need to have. We need to have these conversations more and more about the lack of diversity in birding and people saying, 'Oh, this is just an issue with the whole of the UK. It's not specific to birding.' It's like 'No but, if we're here in birding organizations, in Nature organizations, and in this Nature community, surely we should be doing something in our own communities, in our own, like spheres of influence to try and tackle these issues'. Like 'No, I can't tackle racism across the UK, but I can try and start some conversations up in the sort of Twitter conservation world.'

So I think yeah, there's been a lot of things to think about in terms of these issues over summer, but it's really encouraging that more organizations are taking action and talking about things. And there's just more publicity about it now. But I think we gotta remember that change isn't going to be instant. We're not instantly going to see a hugely diverse conservation sector. And that was actually something that came up when we were recruiting youth representatives for the BTO. We didn't have a very diverse group of applicants at all and we were talking about that in our meetings. And yeah, I think it's just important to remember that it's not going to be an instant solution, but it's about changing attitudes, and over time, people feeling more comfortable to get involved

with the conservation community because they... Over time they won't, there'll be less barriers to people and we want to take down those barriers. So I think that's what's key.

**[Tom]** Yeah.

**[Sorrel]** Yeah, so yes. A lot of interesting, quite heavy discussions going on recently and I found it pretty draining, especially with uni going on as well. Yeah, I, it's hard to know what to prioritize sometimes, but, yeah.

**[Tom]** I think that's tough because often, for whatever reasons, the burden seems to fall on the people who are affected by it, so the people who are out there not necessarily feeling fully welcomed in these environments. And it's kind of not... it's not how it should be, you know, but I guess it's just like an unfortunate... it's just the way that these things play out.

But I guess the good thing about these bigger organizations taking note and really taking some kind of proactive steps in the right direction. I think now the onus is on them.

**[Sorrel]** Yeah, yeah, exactly. I think the problem at the moment is that there's so few people of colour in conservation and organizations that the... everyone goes to them for their advice or whatever. But we don't know the ins and outs of these issues exactly. We're just talking about personal experiences or I was relaying peoples experiences that they shared with me through the survey. So I'm not an expert in this by any means and it does feel like there is this burden of 'Oh, you need to come up with all the answers' but actually no, it's on the senior leadership of these organizations to find the answers and take action. And yeah, there's... I've been talking to a few women of colour in the industry and it's really nice to have that support from other people that they get it. You don't need to explain yourself too. And yeah, we're feeling a lot of the same kind of pressures, that people keep coming to you for advice which is really nice, but at the same time it's like, it's a lot. When it's also a voluntary role that we're doing on top of work or education.

**[Tom]** You also are a very talented Artiste.

**[Sorrel]** Oh, thank you.

**[Tom]** Did you begin kind of drawing and painting from an early age 'cause I've seen some of your work. I think shortly after we met I followed you on Twitter and then we became friends on Facebook and I saw you post some of your stuff and I was like 'This is wild! How is anyone this talented, it's so unfair.'

**[Sorrel]** Thanks so much! Yeah, I don't know, I've liked art for since forever. I did it at school and things like that. But then I started painting birds when I was maybe 16 and then kind of just kept practicing. Kept doing it. Realized I really like this. I can paint the things that I love to watch. You know I can... It's like all my hobbies are just one big hobby. Hopefully my career is my hobby and yeah. Yeah so I just started painting more and more and I started selling them and it's hard to fit in with uni. I'm a bit behind on some commissions but yeah it's a good way to relax.

#### Outro

*Outro music starts.*

**[Tom]** You can find Sorrel's work on her website [sorrellallwildlife.weebly.com](http://sorrellallwildlife.weebly.com), where she publishes prints, photographs and her blog. She's super talented so make sure to check it out. We'll pop the link in the show notes as usual.

And a massive thank you to Sorrel for coming on the show. If you're keen on bird watching, keep your eyes peeled for upcoming BirdSoc events.

**[Helena]** You can find the BirdSoc or the Edinburgh University Ornithological Society on Twitter, on Instagram, on Facebook. You can also follow Sorrel on Twitter @SorrelLlyall and if you're interested in the issue of diversity in birding, I highly recommend a recent piece that Sorrel wrote for Rare Bird Alert, and the talk that she recently gave for the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust. We'll add those links in the show notes as well.

**[Tom]** This podcast is brought to you by Edinburgh University Science Magazine. In each episode we explore fascinating themes and ideas, talk to awesome researchers about their work, and find out about the science being done by our very own staff and students here at the University.

**[Helena]** If you'd like to get in touch with a question, suggestion, or if you want to be featured on the podcast and we are looking for people for Season 2, so please do get in touch. You can reach us on

our Facebook page at Edinburgh University Science Media or at our Twitter @EUSCI, that's @-E-U-S-C-I. You can also drop us an email at eusci.podcast@gmail.com and you can find the show notes and the latest issues of the magazine at eusci.org.uk.

**[Tom]** This episode was edited by my partner in crime Helena Cornu. The podcast logo was designed by Eusci chief editor Apple Chew, and the awesome podcast episode art was designed by Heather Jones, our social media and marketing genius. The intro music is an edited version of Funkorama and the outro music is an edited version of Funk Game Loop both by Kevin McLeod. I've been your host Tom Edwick and until next time, keep it science.

#### Post-outro shenanigans

**[Helena]** Wonderful!

**[Tom]** Yes!

**[Helena]** Amazing!

**[Tom]** Smashed it!