

Shrike code

If anyone wants to get to know the Great Grey Shrike, they should look at its tail, the artist Martin Brandsma discovered. Each bird has its own barcode. Scientists know how to interpret this.

Martin Brandsma: 'The Great Grey Shrike is a beautiful and fascinating bird.' Brandsma also chose the Great Grey Shrike as the starting point for his visual work because of the bird's distinguishing graphic markings, the clearly defined black-white proportions. What also helped is the limited number of Great Grey Shrikes available; with something like the Great Tit, his project would have been impracticable. This year, Brandsma rounded off a long-running project, known as the Black Code Project. He made 198 drawings of the tail-patterns of all the Great Grey Shrikes in the Dutch collections, especially from Naturalis Biodiversity Center, Leiden, The Netherlands.

If you look at the overall picture of those drawings, you see bar codes and think of DNA profiles. And this is of course done intentionally. 'You see 198 patterns that are broadly speaking the same, but they are in fact all different.' The idea is that these patterns say something about the identity of the individual birds.

Brandsma says that he has no scientific pretensions at all with this work. 'I only want to show how things are.' But last year something strange happened. Scientists discovered his project; they found data in the feathers of 'his' Great Grey Shrikes about the condition of the individual birds: whether they are strong, weak, young or old. According to the Israeli and Polish shrike researchers, something can be learned from the feather patterns about the fitness of the birds and even about sexual selection for great grey shrikes. This has to do with the degree of symmetry of the patterns, combined with data about the speed at which the feathers grow. 'The more symmetry, the fitter the bird, and the greater its chances of reproductive success', is in any event what Brandsma picked up from this. He thinks this is a good example of how art and science can meet.

There is an ironic side to this, though. Brandsma: 'My work is about identity and individuality. In my view, nothing is the same. On the basis of my project, however, these scientists immediately went in search of all kinds of links and similarities. Perhaps that is just where the difference lies between art and science.'

Text: Caspar Janssen, 'Ekstercode', Volkskrant, 16 October 2015 / Translation: Kathryn Westerveld