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Bird song diversity influences young people's appreciation of urban landscapes

Marcus Hedblom ¹, Erik Heyman, Henrik Antonsson and Bengt Gunnarsson

Department of Biological and Environmental Sciences, University of Gothenburg, Box 461,
SE 40530 Göteborg, Sweden

¹ Present address: Department of Forest Resource Management, Swedish University of
Agricultural Sciences, Box 7044, SE 75007 Uppsala, Sweden

Correspondence:

Bengt Gunnarsson

bengt.gunnarsson@bioenv.gu.se

Short title:

Bird song in urban settings

1 **Abstract**

2 Increased losses of green areas in cities reduce people's experience of flora and fauna. Earlier
3 studies have shown that biodiversity has benefits for urban inhabitants but the influence of
4 animal sounds on people's experience of green space is poorly known. A sample of young
5 urban people (N=227) rated their reactions – positive or negative – to three bird song
6 combinations (House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*), Willow Warbler (*Phylloscopus*
7 *trochilus*), 7 spp i.e. Willow Warbler, Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*), Blue Tit (*Cyanistes*
8 *caeruleus*), Great Tit (*Parus major*), European Robin (*Erithacus rubecula*), Common
9 Blackbird (*Turdus merula*), Great Spotted Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos major*), three urban
10 settings (residential areas with varying amount of greenery) and nine combinations of song
11 and setting. Bird song was generally considered positive and singing by several species was
12 more highly rated than singing by a single species. On average, urban settings combined with
13 bird song were more highly appreciated than the settings alone and even more so where there
14 was singing by several species rather than just one. We conclude that our data support the
15 idea that bird song contributes to positive values associated with urban green space. Urban
16 planners should consider preserving a variety of habitats in cities for hosting a diversity of
17 birds and thereby boost conservation of songbird diversity and recreational experiences for
18 urban people.

19

20 **Keywords:** biodiversity, green space, passerines, songbirds, urban soundscape, urban
21 woodland

22

23 **Introduction**

24 Ecosystem services provided by green space in cities may become even more vital when
25 humans become increasingly urbanized. Although the high societal value of green space in
26 urban areas has long been acknowledged (Ulrich 1984; Kaplan 1995), there is an increasing
27 need for detailed knowledge about the interaction between biodiversity and the built
28 environment in cities (James et al. 2009). For instance, certain biodiversity components can
29 add to the well-being of urban residents (Fuller et al. 2007; Luck et al. 2011). Maintaining
30 highly diverse ecosystems in the parks of densely populated cities can be a critical investment
31 in improving the quality of life of the inhabitants (Dean et al. 2011). This task may be urgent,
32 because green urban area per capita is declining rapidly in e.g. European cities with high
33 population density (Fuller and Gaston 2009) and future urbanization will reduce green areas
34 and biodiversity hotspots worldwide (Seto et al. 2012).

35 The total environment perceived by urban inhabitants includes visual stimuli, sounds
36 and smells. Earlier studies have stressed the interdependence of visual and acoustic stimuli
37 (Carles et al. 1999; Viollon et al. 2002). For instance, in a study of scenes from national
38 parks, anthropogenic sounds (e.g. air or ground traffic) seemed to disrupt the experience of
39 beautiful landscapes whereas natural sounds (e.g. birds, wind in foliage) did not have negative
40 effects on assessment of the settings (Benfield et al. 2010). Urban soundscape is often
41 dominated by areas with man-made sounds that are perceived as less pleasant than sites with
42 natural sounds (Carles et al. 1999; Viollon et al. 2002; Irvine et al. 2009). Although many
43 studies of how people experience soundscape have included natural sounds like birds (e.g.
44 Carles et al. 1999; Viollon et al. 2002; Irvine et al. 2009; Benfield et al. 2010), there are few
45 studies that distinguish between bird species (e.g. Björk 1985) and none that evaluates species
46 diversity.

47 In the present study, we examined how young, urban-dwelling people rated different
48 bird songs and how song influences the assessment of urban landscapes. Special attention was
49 paid to singing by passerines (order Passeriformes) because such birds are an obvious part of
50 everyday life in most European cities with parks, woodlands and other green spaces. Here,
51 our focus is urban woodlands close to residential areas. We are not aware of any other study
52 exploring the importance of diversity of wild bird song and hypothesize that this diversity
53 affects human evaluation of urban settings. Our hypotheses were: first, bird song is normally
54 seen as positive. Second, bird song with high species diversity is more highly appreciated
55 than song with low diversity. Third, bird song influences how urban settings are valued.

56

57 **Methods**

58 *Participants*

59 The study was conducted in Gothenburg (population ca 500 000), Sweden, in February 2011.
60 The voluntary participants were trainee teachers and engineering students (N=227, average
61 age 23.2 years; 54% women) at the University of Gothenburg and Chalmers University of
62 Technology, respectively. An incentive of a sandwich lunch and a chance to win 10 cinema
63 tickets in a lottery was provided.

64

65 *Ethics*

66 In our study, participation was fully anonymous and without any risk to participants. Concise
67 verbal information of the broad aims of the research was given and participants were free to
68 leave at any time during each session.

69

70 *Experiments*

71 Tests were conducted in a lecture hall with a sloping gallery in five sessions. In front of the
72 participants were two loud speakers (KRK systems power Rokit 8) placed at a 60° angle to
73 and 5.5 m from the nearest participant, at 108 cm above the floor. Sound levels were similar
74 at all sessions. Pictures were shown on a white screen (approximately 3 m x 2 m). Daylight
75 was blocked and a dim light in the hall enabled the participants to see the questionnaires. At
76 the back of the hall a sound level meter (Brüel and Kjær 2260 ½-in. microphone) measured
77 decibel level continuously. Average sound level in the lecture hall with people and bird sound
78 was 34-38 dB in different sessions.

79 All groups of participants were asked to rate the different displays regarding how
80 positive, or negative, they found the bird songs, settings and combinations of the two. The
81 rating scale was graded from -7, "very negative", to +7, "very positive", with a possible
82 neutral judgement of 0 (zero). The scale included both numbers and words. First, the
83 participants were presented with three settings, then three bird songs, and finally nine
84 combinations of setting and song, without rating the items. The sequence was then repeated
85 but now with rating of the 15 items. Each item was displayed for 30 sec with a 5 s break
86 between the items. The settings were shown in the same order at each session but songs and
87 the combination of songs and settings was randomized between sessions. The entire
88 procedure of each session lasted ca 20-25 min and time for the complete sequence was 17.5
89 min.

90 Bird song combinations were established using the recording software Steinberg Cubase
91 5. The song strophes were taken from the CD "Fågelsång", recorded in Sweden. We used
92 three recordings: (HS) House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus* L.); (WW) Willow Warbler
93 (*Phylloscopus trochilus* L.); (7 spp) Willow Warbler, Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs* L.), Blue
94 Tit (*Cyanistes caeruleus* L.), Great Tit (*Parus major* L.), European Robin (*Erithacus rubecula*
95 L.), Common Blackbird (*Turdus merula* L.), Great Spotted Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos major*

96 L., drumming heard). All species are common in suburban woodlands in SW Sweden
97 (Hedblom and Söderström 2010; Heyman 2010), except for the House Sparrow, which
98 mainly breeds in urban habitats such as hedges. The three song combinations had
99 approximately similar song rates occupying 30 s with songs coming in sequence and
100 sometimes overlapping (Appendix 1). The three songs used were originally selected from six
101 song combinations that were tested on students and a panel of field biologists (Appendix 1).

102 Photos of residential areas (three-storey buildings) from two cities in the southern part
103 of Sweden (ca 400 km NE of Gothenburg) were used to illustrate the settings of increasing
104 greenery – low (LG), medium (MG), high (HG) – which consisted mainly of shrubs and trees
105 (Fig. 1). The settings selected were based on pilot tests with panels of students and staff of the
106 department. We did not show photos from Gothenburg, so the probability that the respondents
107 would recognize the settings was very low. The settings were without humans, the sky of each
108 photo was retouched into similar nuances and the landscape was shown from an eye level
109 perspective. The photos served as examples of different urban settings, i.e. the tests were not
110 designed for evaluating differences in the effect of greenery.

111

112 *Statistics*

113 The rating scale is ordinal and the non-parametric Friedman two-way analysis of variance by
114 ranks was therefore used (Siegel and Castellan 1988). The post hoc tests were pairwise
115 multiple comparisons with significance level $\alpha < 0.05$, which was adjusted due to multiple
116 tests (Siegel and Castellan 1988). Forty-two of 105 possible comparisons were used (Fig. 2),
117 testing differences between three bird songs and three settings on their own, and, the nine
118 combinations of song and setting, both relative to each other and song on its own (eighteen
119 comparisons) and to setting on their own (a further eighteen). All statistical calculations were
120 performed using the software SPSS Statistics ver. 19.

121

122 **Results**

123 We tested our hypotheses by multiple comparisons of the scores given by 227 students.

124 Overall, the difference in scoring of the three urban settings, three bird songs, and nine
125 combinations of song and setting was highly significant ($F_r = 1081.21$, $df = 14$, $p < 0.001$).126 Bird songs on their own (without settings, Figs 2, 3) showed significant differences for
127 three pair wise comparisons (all $p < 0.001$). Participants rated the bird song with 7 spp as most
128 positive, followed by WW; the least preferred was HS (Fig. 3). On average, the three songs
129 were considered positive, but 13.6% of respondents disliked one or two of the songs.130 Pairwise comparisons of the three urban settings on their own (Fig. 2) revealed that
131 participants rated them significantly differently from each other (all $p \leq 0.013$) with the MG
132 setting scoring highest, followed by settings HG and LG (Fig. 3).133 Comparisons of combinations of song and setting were related to bird song and setting,
134 respectively (Fig. 2). First, we tested the effect of setting variation on the valuation of
135 different bird songs (Fig. 4). HS was rated lower when combined with LG (but not with MG
136 and HG). WW and 7 spp rated lower in all combinations with LG, MG and HG than when on
137 their own. Thus, in seven cases out of nine, bird songs were more highly valued ($p \leq 0.001$ in
138 all 7 cases) on their own than in combination with a setting. All bird songs were valued
139 significantly lower in combination with the setting LG than in combination with settings MG
140 and HG ($p < 0.001$ in 6 cases, Fig. 4).141 Second, we tested how different bird songs influenced the valuation of settings. Setting
142 LG was higher or equal with any of the bird songs (Fig. 5). All settings were rated highest
143 with 7 spp in four ($p < 0.001$ in all 4 cases) out of six cases, followed by WW and HS. Bird
144 song combined with settings was in no case valued below the score given to a setting alone.
145 Adding HS song to settings made no difference to rating. But combinations of settings with

146 WW and 7 spp songs gained a rating significantly higher in five ($p < 0.001$ in all 5 cases) out
147 of six comparisons than did the settings on their own (Fig. 5).

148

149 **Discussion**

150 From our test, we conclude that the participants generally liked passerine song, more so when
151 provided by several species than by a single species, and that song often improved the rating
152 given to urban settings in residential areas. We interpret these data as support for the idea that
153 bird song enhances people's experience of urban environments.

154 In two previous studies, presence of birds has been identified as important components
155 of biodiversity, contributing to the well-being of urban citizens (Fuller et al. 2007; Luck et al.
156 2011). The cause of the subjective feeling of well-being associated with birds remains to be
157 explored but our data suggest that bird song is part of the mechanism. Song by several species
158 was highly valued, suggesting that variation and/or high species richness contributed to
159 positive attitudes. Interestingly, recent data suggest that well-being may be positively related
160 to subjectively perceived species richness and not necessarily actual richness (Dallimer et al.
161 2012). Bird song by several species is possibly quite easy to identify correctly as high species
162 richness.

163 Not all bird sound is considered attractive, e.g. that of gulls, geese or ducks (Björk
164 1985; Bjerke and Østdahl 2004). Among songs of single species in our experiment, House
165 Sparrow was the lowest rated but still considered positive. We speculate that the melody per
166 se may be important because the song of the arboreal Willow Warbler was rated higher and
167 possibly perceived as more pleasant than House Sparrow.

168 Why do young urban people like bird song? Brain pathways for vocal learning in
169 humans and birds are surprisingly similar (Jarvis 2004). The evidence of parallels in the
170 evolution of human language and bird song is increasing (Balter 2010), which may suggest

171 that convergence has facilitated human perception (and appreciation) of avian vocal
172 information. Young people also often have a keen interest in music, which may influence
173 their judgment. There is, of course, a multitude of alternative hypotheses ranging from a
174 positive subjective association between bird song and nice spring weather in the minds of
175 participants to possible evolutionary reasons. Future investigations of the human perception
176 of bird song will be needed to evaluate such hypotheses. However, small songbirds seem to
177 stand out among animals as highly appreciated species (Bjerke and Østdahl 2004). We
178 suggest that bird song, especially by several species, contributes to this positive attitude.
179 Moreover, recent experimental studies support the hypothesis that nature sounds, including
180 birds, facilitate stress recovery and well-being (Alvarsson et al. 2010; Annerstedt 2011), and
181 thus corroborating Björk's (1986) observation that at least some types of bird singing are
182 associated with relaxation.

183 In southern Sweden, the bird songs used in our test are commonly heard in urban
184 woodlands adjacent to the three types of residential settings. However, it is more likely to
185 hear House Sparrow in the "low greenery" setting and seven species in the "high greenery"
186 setting. In earlier studies, differences in the rating of soundscape and landscape were
187 explained by the level of coherence between sound and setting (e.g. Carles et al. 1999;
188 Viollon et al. 2002). If bird songs were not perceived as fully congruent with the settings
189 shown in e.g. previous studies this may in part explain the difference between song alone and
190 in a particular setting. But in our study, settings in combination with bird song were in nearly
191 all cases more positively perceived than "silent" settings. Perhaps singing by birds is
192 associated with relaxation (Björk 1986) and positive feelings and therefore indirectly
193 enhances the rating of settings.

194 A number of natural sounds, other than bird song, can be perceived as pleasant, e.g.
195 streaming water (Carles et al. 1999). Unspecified bird song can influence the rating of how

196 pleasant or relaxing various sound combinations be perceived (Viollon et al. 2002). Our study
197 suggests that diversity of bird song also contributes to how natural sounds are valued, i.e. it
198 matters which combination of species that is heard. However, we recognize that our study is
199 focused on a narrow part of variation in respect to bird song and urban settings. More
200 investigations about songbird species variation and various urban environments and their
201 influence on urban inhabitants are needed to fully evaluate our hypotheses. Combinations of
202 various sounds can be tested by, e.g., a Perceived Restorativeness Soundscape Scale (PRSS)
203 to evaluate the restorative potential (Payne 2013).

204 The contribution to ecosystem services by birds is diverse (Wenny et al. 2011). For
205 instance, in suburban areas birds can be important for seed dispersal (Hougnier et al. 2006)
206 and regulation of arboreal arthropods (Heyman and Gunnarsson 2011). But in city centers the
207 function related to recreation and well-being is probably of great significance (Fuller et al.
208 2007; Irvine et al. 2009). Both loss of habitats for birds in cities (Hedblom and Söderström
209 2010) and management of surviving habitats affect the configuration of birds (Heyman 2010;
210 Mörtberg and Wallentinus 2000) and thereby indirectly the frequency of bird song. Human
211 disturbance on bioacoustics, especially in urban environments, may contribute to habitat
212 fragmentation and cause severe effects on animal populations (Lailo 2010). Several steps can
213 be taken in urban planning and green space management to promote diverse bird populations
214 in cities, including mimicking natural environments and developing high variation of
215 vegetation in urban habitats (Taylor et al. 2013). We suggest that management of urban green
216 space that includes areas with a mixture of suitable songbird habitats and a minimum of
217 unpleasant sounds will help to produce sustainable cities (Irvine et al. 2009). Anthropogenic
218 sounds are often being valued as unpleasant but a natural soundscape will instead be
219 considered neutral or positive (e.g. Viollon et al. 2002; Benfield et al. 2010). Thus, urban

220 planners can boost both conservation of songbird diversity and recreational experiences for
221 urban people.

222 Green space in urban environments can generally be far more important to human
223 health than previously thought (e.g. Grahn and Stigsdotter 2003; Ward Thompson et al. 2012;
224 White et al. 2013). Our results suggest that singing birds can be one important component of
225 biodiversity in urban green space that contributes to well-being of the city inhabitants.

226

227

228 **Acknowledgments**

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230 Planning (FORMAS) for financial support (to B.G.), K. Wiklander and M. Östensson for
231 statistical advice, K. Persson Waye and A. Agge for lending sound level meter, S. Toresson,
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233 Society for Nature Conservation for allowing us to use bird songs from their CD, D. Arlt, B.
234 Söderström, B. and T. Vowles for comments on the manuscript and anonymous reviewers for
235 helpful assistance.

236

237 **Appendix 1**

238 In our experiment, three bird song combinations were played for 30 sec each.

239 (1) House Sparrow (HS). 22 song verses (strophes/syllables) or chatterings from a single bird
240 and a background flock 1-10 s and 13-26 s.

241 (2) Willow Warbler (WW). 12 song verses with occasional overlaps between songs.

242 (3) Seven species (7 spp). 17 song verses: Willow Warbler 3, Chaffinch 2, Blue Tit 4, Great
243 Tit 1, European Robin 2, Common Blackbird 5, plus 2 drummings by Great Spotted

244 Woodpecker, with occasional overlaps between songs.

245 The three song combinations as MP3 files can be downloaded from the following website:
246 <http://www.slu.se/en/departments/ecology/hemsidor/hedblom-marcus/>
247

248 In a pilot test, 44 students of environmental science were rating six different bird song
249 combinations. Each song was played for 45 sec. The following sequence, from low to high
250 average preference, was obtained: House Sparrow 33 song verses; Willow Warbler 8 song
251 verses; Willow Warbler 23 song verses; Five species (Willow Warbler, Chaffinch, Blue Tit,
252 Great Tit, European Robin) 8 song verses; Five species 15 song verses; Seven species
253 (addition of Common Blackbird and Great Spotted Woodpecker). A panel of three
254 experienced field biologists also gave their opinions about bird song combinations. Based on
255 the results of the pilot test and comments from the field biologists, three bird songs were
256 selected (see above). However, the playing time for songs was changed and set to 30 s each in
257 the present study.

258

259

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- 336
- 337

338 Figure legends

339

340 Figure 1. Photos of residential settings with low greenery (LG, top), medium greenery (MG,
341 middle) and high greenery (HG, bottom) used in preference tests.

342 Figure 2. Design of statistical analysis by pairwise, multiple comparisons in a Friedman
343 ANOVA of scores given to 15 items in preference test. Abbreviations: LG, MG, HG - low,
344 medium, high greenery (settings), respectively; HS - House Sparrow, WW - Willow Warbler;
345 7spp - Seven species (songs, see Methods for detailed description); LG+HS, etc, are
346 combinations of setting and song.

347 Figure 3. Comparisons between scores given to settings and bird songs. Mean (\pm s.e.) and
348 median (dark bar) are shown. High score indicates a high positive valuation. N= 227 students.
349 Abbreviations, see Fig. 2. N.B! LG had a zero median. Design of tests of "Setting" and "Bird
350 song", cf Fig. 2. Statistical comparisons between items are shown by arrows, * $p < 0.05$,
351 *** $p < 0.001$.

352 Figure 4. Comparisons between scores given to bird songs and nine combinations of setting
353 and song. Mean (\pm s.e.) and median (dark bar) are shown Abbreviations and design of tests of
354 "Setting and song vs song alone" , cf Fig. 2. *** $p < 0.001$, n.s not significant.

355 Figure 5. Comparisons between scores given to settings and nine combinations of setting and
356 song. Mean (\pm s.e.) and median (dark bar) are shown Abbreviations and design of tests of
357 "Setting and song vs setting alone" , cf Fig. 2. ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$, n.s not significant.

358

359

Figure 1



Figure 2

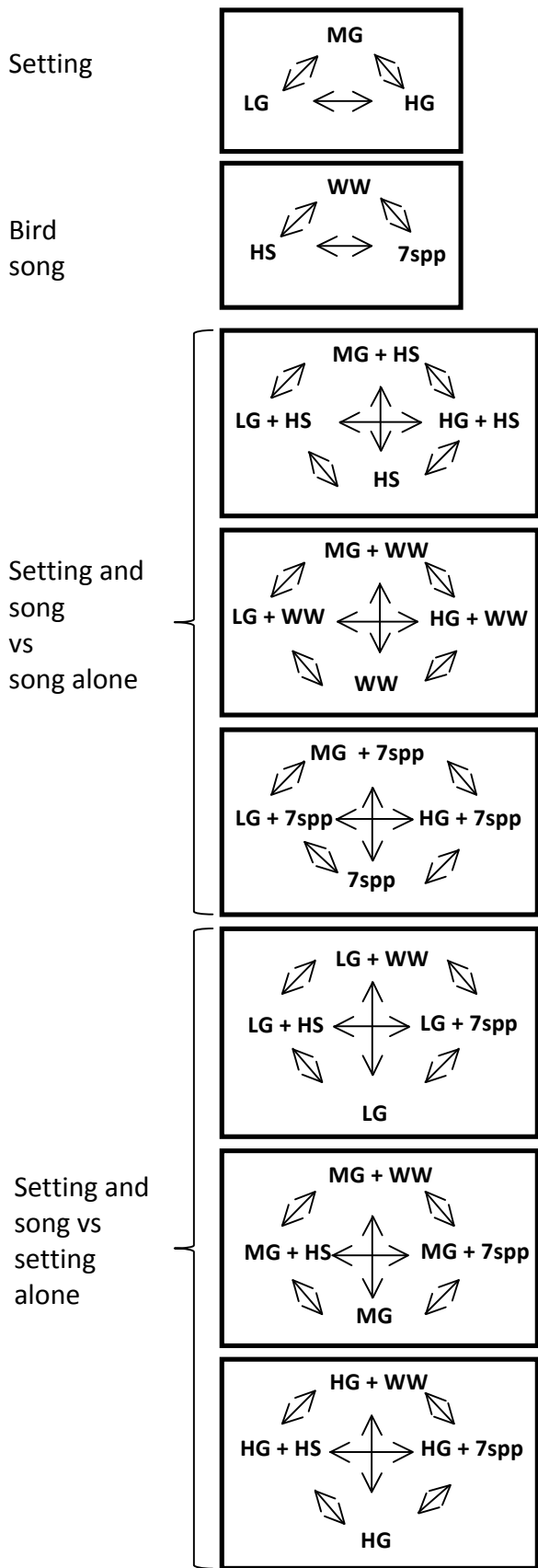


Figure 3

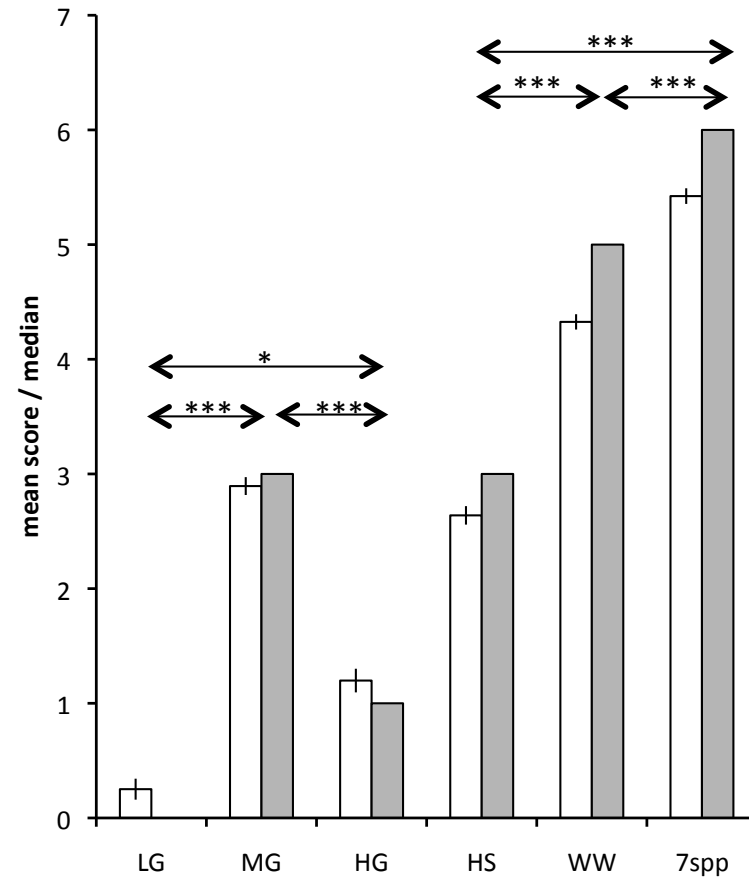


Figure 4

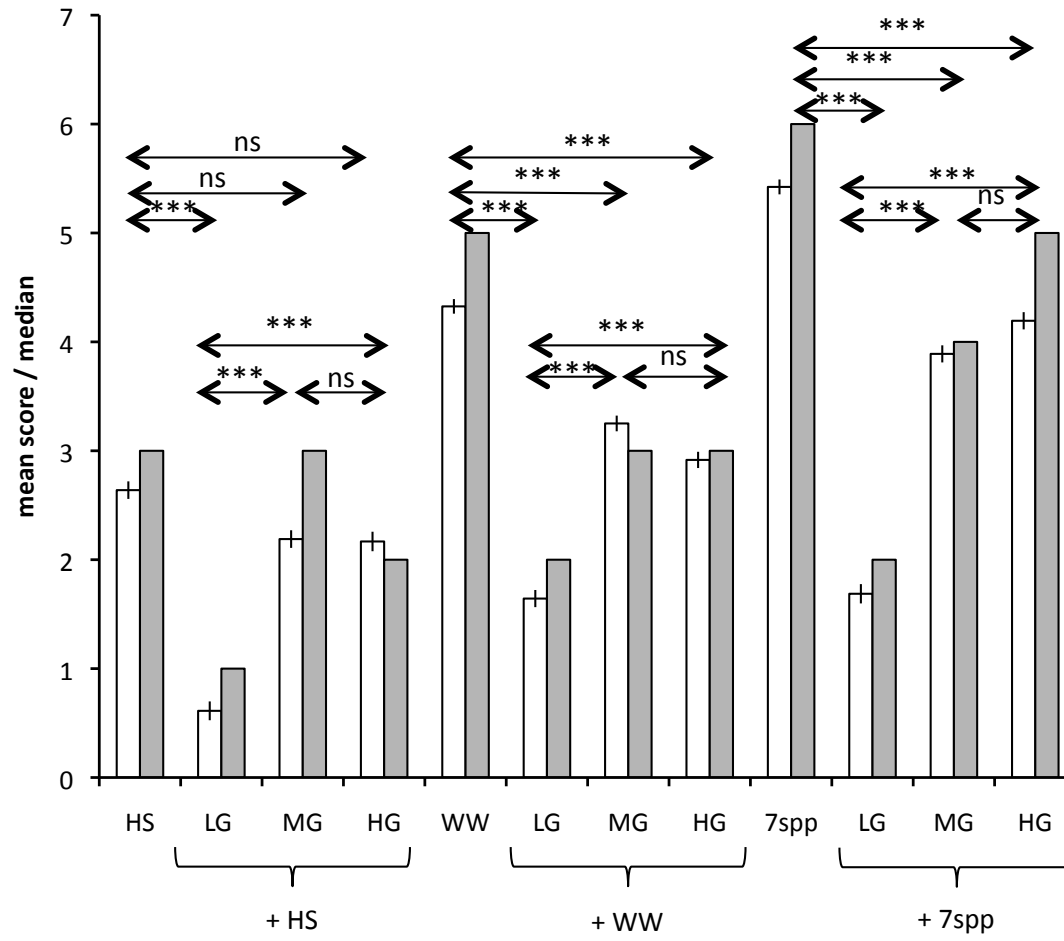


Figure 5

