

Can you recognise a fellow birdwatcher at 20 paces? David Lindo thought he could, until an interesting encounter gave him second thoughts.



SOME BIRDS DEFY DESCRIPTION, AND THE SAME can be said about some of the people who watch them. Broadly speaking, there are some people who just look like classic birders – almost as if they were born that way – and there are others who, despite what they tell you, just don't fit in with the conventional stereotypes.

I guess that for a lot of people I didn't fit into any convenient pigeonhole either, especially when I was younger. I fondly remember the days when I was Head of Membership at the BTO, travelling around Britain, giving talks on the work of the Trust. Some of the people I met during my travels visibly raised their eyebrows when they clapped eyes on me. They did not expect to see a funky black dude with short, dyed blond hair (yes, I used to be blond!) with a pair of bins around his neck, chatting about the decline of the Sky Lark!

I too am guilty of stereotyping. The other day, while filming a piece for BBC1's *The One Show*, the director told me that I'd be meeting a doctor of ornithology. When I met the good doctor, I was surprised to be greeted by a cool young guy in his late twenties with shoulder-length hair and several piercings in both ears and left nostril – a far cry from the heavily-bearded, venerable gentleman that I had expected.

I'm sure that you have all experienced situations where a non-birding acquaintance has said: "Hey, you have to meet such and such, he's really into birds like you". Invariably, when you do get to meet such and such, they turn out to be what you expected; either as fanatical as you are (which is rare) or more likely, someone who in their dim, distant past may have mentioned that they liked keeping budgies!

One recent Saturday morning, while I was eating a hearty breakfast with the lads after playing football, I got chatting with a female friend who, at the end of the conversation, dropped in those immortal words: "Oh, you must meet my friend Jane, she's really into birds". Smiling, I wearily told her to get Jane to give me a call sometime – then promptly forgot about it.

Several weeks later, I got a call from Jane, who after exchanging pleasantries invited me over to her house in west London the following day for tea and a 'birdy' chat. In my mind's eye, I had an image of a middle-

aged, middle class housewife who basically wanted someone to chat to about the Robins in her backyard.

The next day saw me parked up outside her detached, modern, swanky townhouse. From the outside it was pretty imposing, with a gated entrance and three cars in the driveway.

As I walked towards the house, I was mentally checking to make sure that I had the right address. I was greeted at the door by a butler. Behind him, sporting the broadest of grins, was a gorgeous, mini-skirted young woman with brown shoulder-length hair. My jaw was trembling. "Hi David, I've been expecting you," she beamed. My jaw hit the floor and began freefalling through the Earth's mantle.

We went into her study, filled wall to wall with bird books. My mind was spinning. Before I could gather my senses, she challenged me to ID her collection of stuffed birds. The first set she pulled out was relatively easy, including superb Goldcrest, Long-tailed Tit and Jay specimens. Then she pulled out her woodpeckers.

I began to sweat as I scanned the unfamiliar European ones. The three British woodpeckers and a beautifully presented Grey-headed Woodpecker were quickly identified and I eventually sussed the White-backed. But I failed miserably on the Middle Spotted, calling it a Syrian. She declared that I had passed the test and earned my cup of tea.

Once in her amazing kitchen I gazed out of her posh, wall-to-wall French windows into the garden, a plot of land that seemed half the size a football pitch. The perimeter of the garden was lined with tall old trees, each furnished with woodpecker-, tit- and bat-boxes. Working the land were a couple of urban gardeners who were planting native flora specially chosen for the sole purpose of attracting wildlife.

I didn't speak much during my visit, due to being totally overwhelmed by her enthusiasm, knowledge and love for birds. How could a young woman who wouldn't look out of place strolling the streets of trendy Chelsea be so much into birding?

I clearly got it totally wrong. From now on, I will look twice, maybe even three times, before I start trying to identify birders.

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