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Author(s): Silvasti, Sanni A.; Valkonen, Janne K.; Nokelainen, Ossi

Title: Behavioural thresholds of blue tit colour vision and the effect of background chromatic complexity

Year: 2021

Version: Accepted version (Final draft)

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Please cite the original version:

Silvasti, S. A., Valkonen, J. K., & Nokelainen, O. (2021). Behavioural thresholds of blue tit colour vision and the effect of background chromatic complexity. *Vision Research*, 182, 46-57.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.visres.2020.11.013>

1 **Behavioural thresholds of blue tit colour vision and**
2 **the effect of background chromatic complexity**

3

4 **Authors:**

5 Sanni A. Silvasti^{1*}, Janne K. Valkonen¹ & Ossi Nokelainen¹

6

7 **Addresses:**

8 ¹Department of Biological and Environmental Science, University of Jyväskylä, P.O. Box 35,
9 FI-40014 University of Jyväskylä, Finland

10 * Author for correspondence (sanni.a.silvasti@jyu.fi)

11

12 **Running headline:**

13 Blue tit colour vision just-noticeable-differences

14 ABSTRACT

15 Vision is a vital attribute to foraging, navigation, mate selection and social signalling in
16 animals, which often have a very different colour perception in comparison to humans. For
17 understanding how animal colour perception works, vision models provide the smallest colour
18 difference that animals of a given species are assumed to detect. To determine the just-
19 noticeable-difference, or JND, vision models use Weber fractions that set discrimination
20 thresholds of a stimulus compared to its background. However, although vision models are
21 widely used, they rely on assumptions of Weber fractions since the exact fractions are unknown
22 for most species. Here, we test; i) which Weber fractions in long-, middle- and shortwave (i.e.
23 L, M, S) colour channels best describe the blue tit (*Cyanistes caeruleus*) colour discrimination,
24 ii) how changes in hue of saturated colours and iii) chromatic background noise impair search
25 behaviour in blue tits. We show that the behaviourally verified Weber fractions on achromatic
26 backgrounds were L: 0.05, M: 0.03 and S: 0.03, indicating a high colour sensitivity. In contrast,
27 on saturated chromatic backgrounds, the correct Weber fractions were considerably higher for
28 L: 0.20, M: 0.17 and S: 0.15, indicating a less detailed colour perception. Chromatic complexity
29 of backgrounds affected the longwave channel, while middle- and shortwave channels were
30 mostly unaffected. We caution that using a vision model whereby colour discrimination is
31 determined in achromatic viewing conditions, as they often are, can lead to misleading
32 interpretations of biological interactions in natural – colourful – environments.

33

34 **Key-words:**

35 Avian vision model, *Cyanistes caeruleus*, discrimination thresholds, pavo, receptor-noise,
36 vision testing, Weber fraction

37 1. INTRODUCTION

38 Animal colour vision embodies countless forms of spectral discrimination abilities (Chittka &
39 Menzel 1992, Bowmaker 1998, Kelber & Osorio 2010). Animals use colours to guide their
40 behaviour and to acquire information in their environment (Maynard-Smith & Harper 2003,
41 Stevens 2013), which has been demonstrated extensively in behavioural experiments and
42 observations from nature (Endler 1993, Ham et al. 2006, Kelber and Osorio 2010). Colour
43 vision is utilized for example in foraging, mate choice, signalling and navigation (Hunt et al.
44 1998, Vorobyev 2004, Vincze et al. 2015). To understand how animals with different
45 perceptual capabilities see the world, researchers use vision models that are based on
46 photoreceptor quantum catches and receptor deposition or relative frequencies in the study
47 species' retinas (Gawryszewski 2018). However, in order to verify how well vision models
48 work, it is essential to link the knowledge of well-studied organisms to their behaviour.

49 Avian colour vision is considered one of the most elaborate and well-adjusted systems for
50 sensing colours (Bowmaker et al. 1997, Bowmaker 2008, Osorio and Vorobyev 2008).
51 Typically, the bird retina has rod cells for sensing changes in luminance and four types of single
52 cone cells for sensing of colour with maximum sensitivities roughly in the ultraviolet, blue,
53 green and red (Bowmaker 2008). In addition, birds have double cones which appear to be
54 sensitive to long wavelength light, but are assumed to serve achromatic tasks, such as
55 luminance and motion sensing, instead of chromatic vision (Osorio and Vorobyev 2005). All
56 cone cells in avian retina have either coloured or clear oil droplets (Bowmaker et al. 1997,
57 Bowmaker 2008, Osorio and Vorobyev 2008), which filter shorter wavelengths, generally
58 displacing the maximum sensitivity of each cone cell type to longer wavelengths. The
59 contributions of both chromatic and achromatic vision are important in visual perception, since
60 objects can be visually discriminated from the background and other objects based on the
61 sensed differences in colour or luminance (Lind et al. 2014, Olsson et al. 2018).

62 Blue tits (*Cyanistes caeruleus*), of the tit family Paridae, are small passerine birds whose visual
63 system has been studied in detail, with their visual model used widely (Hart et al. 2000,
64 Stoddard & Stevens 2011, Dell'Aglio et al. 2018, Henze et al. 2018, van den Berg & Troscianko
65 et al. 2020). They are a resident species in Europe, parts of the Middle East and western parts
66 of Russia (IUCN 2017). Information on the physical attributes of the blue tit visual system is
67 based on the study by Hart et al. 2000. The following single and double cone cell ratios and
68 sensitivities were measured from one blue tit. UV sensitive SWS1 cones represent 7.6 % of
69 total cone population, blue sensitive SWS2 cones 14.6 %, MWS cones 20.4 % and LWS cones
70 20.5 %. The remaining 36.9 % of the cone population are double cones. Mean maximum
71 sensitivities for the single cone cells are: SWS1 - 371 nm with transparent oil droplet that cuts
72 off light from < 330 nm, SWS2 - 448 nm with clear oil droplet that cuts off light from 413 nm,
73 MWS - 503 nm with yellow oil droplet that cuts off light from 508 nm and LWS - 563 nm with
74 red droplet that cuts off light from 573 nm. The total spectral sensitivity of blue tits seems to
75 cover wavelengths below 330 nm and above 600 nm; plots of blue tit spectral sensitivity are
76 found in Hart et al. (2000) and Henze et al. (2018).

77 The receptor noise limited (RNL) vision model by Vorobyev and Osorio (1998) is one of the
78 most commonly utilized vision models (Stoddard & Stevens 2011, Outomuro et al. 2017, Caves
79 et al. 2018, Dell'Aglio et al. 2018, Gawryszewski 2018). The RNL model assumes that colour
80 discrimination thresholds are set by light conditions and photoreceptor noise, which limit
81 colour opponency channels controlling the interpretation of colour (Vorobyev and Osorio
82 1998, Kemp et al. 2015, Gawryszewski 2018). An important prerequisite for the model is that
83 the stimulus should be large enough (in terms of size) and measured in bright light, and with
84 the condition that the background of the stimulus is achromatic (Vorobyev & Osorio 1998).
85 The RNL model gives an estimate of the smallest colour difference which study subjects are
86 assumed to distinguish, i.e. the just-noticeable-difference (JND) value. The model enables

87 researchers to deduce how other animals perceive different colours in nature and how apparent
88 colours are for the studied species. In the model, the necessary parameters are photoreceptor
89 sensitivities, photoreceptor proportions in the retina, light quality of the test situation and
90 crucially, information on the smallest differences the study species is assumed to discriminate
91 from the background (i.e. the model parameter called Weber fraction).

92 Here, we use the receptor-noise limited RNL model by Vorobyev and Osorio (1998) to validate
93 how well the vision model predicts animal behaviour in different viewing backgrounds. We
94 conduct a behavioural assessment of colour perception of a widely studied model organism,
95 the Eurasian blue tit (*Cyanistes caeruleus*). The study consists of two parts that are meant to
96 provide us with information on blue tit colour discrimination thresholds (i.e. Weber fractions)
97 and suprathreshold (i.e. signal strength above the threshold for discrimination) colour
98 perception (Fig. 1 a). We shed light onto how the model predicts animal behaviour on
99 chromatic backgrounds, although this is not what the model is designed to do by default. That
100 is, however, how many studies have utilized the model in its common use to interpret biological
101 interactions (Siddiqi et al. 2004, Maan and Cummings 2012, Schultz and Fincke 2013, McLean
102 et al. 2014).

103 We ask: i) which Weber fractions in long-, middle- and shortwave (i.e. L, M, S) colour channels
104 best describe blue tit (*Cyanistes caeruleus*) colour discrimination, ii) how do changes in hue of
105 saturated colours influence signal search behaviour of blue tits and iii) how does background
106 noise (in terms of chromatic complexity) impair signal search behaviour of blue tits in different
107 colour channels? This approach excludes testing of UV sensitivity of the tetrachromatic birds
108 but describes how the three colour bands also visible to humans are perceived through the blue
109 tit visual system. In addition to Weber fractions of blue tits, we examine how signal strength
110 affects signal search in complex chromatic backgrounds and how background noise – inspired

111 by the puzzle video game Tetris (Pajitnov 1984) – affects the search effort of saturated colour
112 signals. We also test how the discrimination thresholds examined in the first experiment
113 describe blue tit behaviour in saturated chromatic environment. As our null hypothesis, we
114 assume that Weber fractions are constant when colour intensity (saturation) is increased and
115 that changes in hue do not change blue tit search behaviour (Fig. 1 a). Also, we hypothesise
116 that background noise impairs blue tit signal search by elongating searching time in all colour
117 channels. This approach, to our knowledge, is the most up-to-date study investigating colour
118 discrimination thresholds in blue tits, whose vision model is broadly used in biological studies
119 without behavioural validation of model assumptions.

120 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

121 2.1 The RNL model and Weber fraction

122 In the RNL model, the information of the smallest differences study subjects can discriminate
123 are given in photoreceptor specific Weber fractions, which in vision studies are considered to
124 be equivalent to (and often referred as) the amount of noise in each photoreceptor type (Lind
125 et al. 2014, Olsson et al. 2018). Weber fractions describe the smallest perceivable intensity
126 difference ΔI – also referred as the just-noticeable-difference (JND) value 1, or as perceptual
127 geometric Euclidean distance (ΔS) value 1 – for a given stimulus of intensity I in a given
128 sensory system. The Weber fraction is a part of a psychophysical rule called the Weber law, in
129 which it is stated that a just-noticeable change in the magnitude of a given stimulus is
130 proportional to the original stimulus (Gescheider 2013). This proportion is called the Weber
131 fraction and is assumed to be constant in all similarly perceived stimuli. When the intensity of
132 a stimulus is higher, the perceivable just-noticeable change is proportionally higher according
133 to the constant Weber fraction.

134
$$\omega = \frac{\Delta I}{I}$$

135 where ω is the Weber fraction, I is the intensity of stimulus and ΔI is the smallest perceivable
 136 intensity difference in that stimulus. In the RNL model, the Weber fraction represents the noise
 137 present in a given receptor channel that combines the output of several photoreceptors of the
 138 same spectral type (Vorobyev and Osorio 1998, Lind et al. 2014). The model combines signals
 139 from several receptor channels in opponent mechanisms in order to deduct chromatic signals.
 140 In the model, intrinsic noise in each single photoreceptor cell is assumed to be equal and the
 141 noise of each receptor channel inversely proportional to receptor densities in the retina.

142
$$e_i = \frac{\sigma_i}{\sqrt{\eta_i}}$$

143 where e is photoreceptor noise, σ is the coefficient of variance of noise in a photoreceptor cell,
 144 η is the relative density of that receptor type in the retina and i the photoreceptor type. Often
 145 the noise of only one photoreceptor type is reported, in which case the noise of other receptors
 146 can be calculated with the knowledge of relative abundances of photoreceptor types (see for
 147 example Olsson et al. 2018).

148 The RNL models are often utilized with Weber fraction parameters that are not validated, in
 149 which case the Weber fractions of 0.05 and 0.10 for long-wave sensitive channel are most
 150 commonly used (Siddiqi et al. 2004, Stoddard and Stevens 2011, Maan and Cummings 2012,
 151 Bitton et al. 2017, Dell'Aglio et al. 2018). The Weber fraction 0.05 for LWS channel was first
 152 introduced by Siddiqi et al. (2004) for their study subject as an intermediate value of human
 153 (0.02) and bird (0.10) LWS channels (Wyszecki and Stiles 1982, Vorobyev and Osorio 1998).
 154 Studies using assumed Weber fractions are considered reliable but they do not accurately
 155 describe how the study species perceive colours in nature, which can be done with Weber

156 fractions that are determined using controlled behavioural experiments. The Weber fractions
157 of a study species can be inferred by testing behavioural discrimination thresholds of different
158 colours (Olsson et al. 2018). Discriminability of the tested colours are then modelled with the
159 RNL model by adjusting the Weber fraction parameter in such a way that the behaviourally
160 validated smallest perceivable intensity difference – the JND 1 – fits the modelled
161 discrimination threshold. Behavioural limits for just-noticeable-difference varies in studies
162 considering visual perception and is commonly chosen between 50-75 % of the population
163 detecting the difference, depending on the style and overall difficulty level of the test for the
164 studied species (Treutwein 1995, Vorobyev et al. 2001, Lind et al. 2014, Olsson et al. 2015,
165 Lind 2016, Cheney and Green et al. 2019). In this study, a limit of 75 % was chosen.

166 2.2 Experimental conditions, preparations and pretraining

167 The experiments were conducted in Konnevesi research station. Wild blue tits were used with
168 permission authorized to the research group of Johanna Mappes from the Central Finland
169 Centre for Economic Development, Transport and Environment (VARELY/294/2015) and
170 license from the National Animal Experiment Board (ESAVI/9114/04.10.07/2014).

171 Blue tits were kept individually in the research station aviary. Food and water were supplied to
172 the birds ad libitum. Birds were sequentially trained to carry out the visual search task prior to
173 the experiments. Training protocol required the birds to 1) retrieve a reward placed on the top
174 of a training stimulus (a printed, highly saturated red, green, blue or black dot on a paper sheet),
175 2) fetch a reward from a hole pierced through the training sheet, 3) search for a reward
176 underneath the sheet (i.e. placed inside wells) with only a small hole pierced through the paper
177 to aid the search, 4) search for a reward only on a visual basis using the coloured stimulus as a
178 cue to the reward placed underneath the sheet. To get the reward birds had to find the visual
179 stimulus and pierce through the sheet to access it.

180 Tests were conducted in a specific experimental arena with customized Philips Hue -light set
181 to ensure daylight resembling light conditions (Fig. A1, Appendix A) excluding UV wave
182 lengths. The experimental arena was a plywood box (circa 60x60x70 cm) which had a front
183 wall of plexiglass for observing the study subject and a cup of water in corner for the birds.
184 Blue tits to be tested were moved into the experimental arena about an hour before testing to
185 let the birds get used to the new space. Test sheets were moved in and out from the experimental
186 arena through a thin slit in the bottom of the front wall, with the help of a sight barrier tray – a
187 tray that had a panel ~15 cm high attached perpendicular to the perch to prevent blue tits from
188 viewing the test before landing on the sight barrier (Fig. 1 c).

189 2.3 Experimental designs

190 2.3.1 Design 1: Blue tit Weber fractions on achromatic white background

191 Fifteen birds were tested in the first part of the behavioural testing of blue tit colour vision
192 during October and November 2018 in Konnevesi research station. In the experiment, blue tit
193 discrimination thresholds were tested for the colours known to humans as red, green, blue and
194 achromatic black from a white background (Fig. 1 b). The stimuli were formatted by selecting
195 seven shades of each colour ranging from very pale to more saturated intensities with the page
196 layout software Swift Publisher 2. Manipulation was done by adjusting the intensity of colour
197 channels (RGB). In RGB increment steps, the maximum value for intensity is 255 (i.e. white
198 corresponds to simultaneous maximum intensity of red, green and blue): varying the RGB
199 levels results in different shades of red, green, blue and black. The RGB values were
200 manipulated channel-specifically by fixing the manipulated colour to its maximum and
201 decreasing the two other colours from their maxima (Table A1). In the most difficult step of
202 colour sets (step 1) the non-manipulated colours were 1 RGB off from white (i.e. RGB 255),
203 thus making the first step RGB value 254, and the following steps 2 RGB further away from

204 the previous step towards more saturated and clearer colour (RGB 252, RGB 250, RGB 248
205 and so forth). A black (or grey) stimulus set was created by decreasing brightness from white
206 (255 RGB) by 1 RGB (of each channel) for the first step and 2 RGBs for every next step
207 resulting in light grey stimuli.

208 The stimuli of each of the four colour sets were printed with a Canon Pixma Pro-10S colour
209 printer on A4 Munken Cream 90g unbleached white printing paper (reflectance curve Fig. A2).
210 One 4 mm diameter stimulus was printed per sheet of paper. With 7 stimuli for all four colour
211 sets and a control (a similar test plate with printed blank paper on it), the whole test totalled 29
212 test sheets (Fig. 1 b). The reflectance of stimuli in each treatment group were measured with a
213 Maya2000 Pro spectrometer and Ocean Optics PX-2 light source, and just-noticeable-
214 difference values (Table A1) calculated with blue tit vision model by Vorobyev and Osorio
215 (1998) in program RStudio 1.2.1335 using package pavo 2.4.0, with illumination measured
216 from the experimental arena (RStudio Team 2019, Maia et al. 2019).

217 Prior to testing, test plates were constructed by taping the printed test sheets on cardboard plates
218 with a 4x3 grid of punctured holes with food rewards in them. The one stimulus dot on each
219 test sheet was always precisely on one of the punctured holes. The 4x3 grid of holes in the
220 cardboard enabled randomizing the location of the stimulus and rule out the possibility that
221 blue tits found the stimuli through means other than visual cues (i.e. smelling or hollow sound
222 of pecking at the location of a puncture).

223 2.3.2 Design 2: Blue tit's ability to discriminate colour from a chromatic background and the 224 effect of chromatic complexity on finding stimuli

225 This experiment was done with 22 blue tits in March and early April 2019. The aim was to test
226 how blue tits discriminate small colour differences from a chromatic background in each colour
227 channel and whether complexity of the background affects the bird's ability to detect stimuli

228 (Fig. 1 d). This test consisted of three colour channels – red, green and blue – which were each
229 manipulated in three levels resulting in 9 different treatments. The basis for the test was similar
230 to the first part of testing: 7 stimuli were chosen from each colour channel in such a way that
231 the difficulty level of the stimuli ranged from those very similar to the chosen background
232 colour to a more obvious colour difference. Discriminability of the 7 stimuli from each colour
233 channel were tested one by one from an A6-sized area with evenly coloured (ideal) background,
234 low chromatic complexity background and high chromatic complexity background (Fig. 1 d).
235 The printer used in this test was a HP Color LaserJet CP2025 with Staples A4 80 g Copy Paper.
236 Test plates were constructed similar to the first experiment. It is notable that different printers
237 may produce different colours from the same data file. Thus, when choosing a printer for
238 producing this test, stimuli and background colours of the test must be measured with a
239 spectrometer and adjusted again for the printer used.

240 Colours for the experiments were chosen and modified with the program Gimp 2.10.8 in LCh
241 (i.e. lightness, chroma, hue) colour space. Ideal treatment (even) background colours in each
242 colour channel were individually chosen so that the channel of chosen colour was adjusted to
243 100 % and two other channels to zero achieving a pure bright shade of red, green and blue.
244 This chosen background colour in each colour channel was always the background for the
245 tested stimuli, even when complexity was added.

246 Colours for the stimuli of each colour channel were planned in LCh colour space with circularly
247 expressed hue steps that range from 0 (shade of pink before red in colour circle) to 360 (shade
248 of pink after blue in colour circle). Stimuli were adjusted so that the first steps JND value was
249 well under 1 – meaning that most of the birds should not be able to discriminate it from the
250 background colour – the second stimulus close to one, the third around 1 and finally the seventh
251 stimulus well discriminable with a JND value of around 3 or more. Discriminability (Table

252 A2) of stimuli against the chosen ideal background colours, and reflectance of all stimuli and
253 backgrounds (Fig. A3), were measured and modelled by following the method of the first
254 experimental design above.

255 Background complexity was manipulated with a combination of shape and differentiating
256 colours, and was inspired by the tile-matching puzzle video game Tetris (Pajitnov 1984).
257 Shapes in the background were similar to the games shape variation of five equally sized
258 angular objects. An A6 sized area was filled with roughly equal amounts of different Tetris-
259 shapes that were coloured either with three different colours for low complexity background
260 or five different colours for high complexity background – one of the colours always being the
261 ideal background colour for each colour channel. The rest of the colours for complex
262 backgrounds were chosen so that the background colours did not resemble stimulus colours too
263 closely.

264 2.4 Testing protocol

265 In the first experiment, behavioural discrimination thresholds for the colours red, green, blue
266 and achromatic black from a white background were tested with 15 blue tits. In the second
267 experiment, discrimination of colours on saturated red, green and blue backgrounds and a
268 chromatic complexity background was tested behaviourally with 22 blue tits.

269 The testing protocol was similar within these two experiments with a few exceptions. The task
270 for the birds was to detect a stimulus by visual cues, breach through the paper sheet at the
271 location and acquire a food reward. In the beginning of both experiments, the most
272 discriminable stimuli of each treatment were given to the birds one by one to ensure that the
273 birds understood the task. Following that, in the first experiment the rest of the tested colour
274 sets were given to the birds in random order, one colour set at a time, so that the remaining six
275 test plates in one colour set were given to the birds in the order of difficulty from easiest to

276 hardest. In the second experiment, the six test plates from all nine treatments were given to the
277 bird randomly. Performance of blue tits with each test plate was marked as success or failure
278 (1 or 0). Blue tits were considered to succeed at finding a stimulus if they pecked the stimulus
279 dot so that the paper was damaged. Latency time was measured from when the bird first landed
280 on the sight barrier and saw the task till finding the stimulus or until the 60 seconds time limit
281 was reached. In addition, in the second experiment the number of times blue tit attempted the
282 task (i.e. approached to look at the test plate) was recorded and the amount of pecks blue tits
283 made while searching the stimulus was counted up to 15 pecks. The number of attempts and
284 pecks were assumed to correlate with the difficulty of the task.

285 2.5 Statistical analysis

286 2.5.1 Determination of Weber fractions

287 To find out behavioural colour discrimination thresholds (Weber fractions) of blue tits on
288 achromatic backgrounds for colours red, green, blue and achromatic black, probability curves
289 of colour channel specific successes at finding stimuli were fitted against JND values modelled
290 with different Weber fractions. Curves were fitted by using generalized linear mixed models
291 with binomial family, logit link function and fit by maximum likelihood in the program
292 RStudio 1.2.1335 using package lme4: bird identity as random variable, success at finding
293 stimuli as dependent and JND values of stimuli calculated with different Weber fractions as an
294 independent variable (RStudio Team 2019, Bates et al. 2015). A bracketing approach (i.e. a
295 technique of taking several different values of the same subject and approximating the best
296 fitting value) was used to narrow down which Weber fraction produced the JND 1 that
297 coincided the probability of 75 % of blue tits seeing the colour difference.

298 To see which Weber fractions in each colour channel described blue tit behaviour the best on
299 saturated chromatic backgrounds, colour specific probability curves of finding stimuli from

300 ideal background treatments were similarly fitted against JND values that were calculated with
301 different Weber fraction settings. The fit was done by using a generalized linear mixed model
302 with binomial family, logit link function and fit by maximum likelihood, again using the lme4
303 package. Bird identification was included as a random variable, success at finding stimuli as a
304 dependent variable, and independent variables were colour channel, treatment type and the
305 JND values determined with different Weber fractions. The Weber fraction that had produced
306 a JND 1 that approximately coincided with 75 % probability of blue tits seeing the colour
307 difference was bracketed in each colour channel.

308 2.5.2 The effect of chromatic complexity in finding prey

309 By analysing the blue tits probability of finding stimuli on each treatment background, we were
310 able to compare how different colour channels and complexity treatments affected stimuli
311 search success. In the analysis of the effect of chromatic complexity, the most discriminable
312 stimulus steps in each treatment group were excluded since they were presented to the birds at
313 the start of the experiments to verify that the birds understood the task at hand. Models for
314 analysing the successes at detecting stimuli in the second experiment in red, green and blue
315 colour channels for ideal, low and high complexity background treatments were done using the
316 exact same parameters as when fitting the curve for determination of Weber fractions on
317 saturated chromatic backgrounds. Model selection was performed with the “drop1” command,
318 with which variables were excluded from the full model (including all possible three- and two-
319 way interactions) until the model with lowest Akaike information criterion score was gained.
320 Analyses were done with the program RStudio version 1.2.1335 and package lme4 (RStudio
321 Team 2019, Bates et al. 2015).

322 Analyses on how chromatic complexity affected the number of pecks, attempts and search
323 latency were done with generalized linear mixed models using package lme4 and model

324 selections for each analysis performed with the “drop1” command, as earlier. When analysing
325 latency, detection success and latency variables were combined with the “cbind” command to
326 create a binomial dataset (time to event). Binomial family with logit link functions and fit by
327 maximum likelihood were used. Random variable was bird identification, independent
328 variables were colour channel, treatment type and colour specific JND values calculated with
329 the newly determined Weber fractions for saturated chromatic backgrounds. For analysing the
330 number of pecks, Poisson distribution was used with a log link function and fit by maximum
331 likelihood. Random variable was bird identification and independent variables were colour
332 channel, treatment type and JND values determined on chromatic background. Analysis for the
333 number of attempts that the blue tits made to find a stimulus were done with similar parameters
334 as the analysis for the number of pecks.

335

336 3. RESULTS

337 3.1 Weber fractions against achromatic and chromatic backgrounds

338 On achromatic backgrounds, the Weber fraction that produced JND value 1 that was perceived
339 by 75 % of blue tits for long wavelengths was 0.05 (Fig. 2). For middle wavelengths the correct
340 Weber fraction was 0.03 and for short wavelengths 0.03 also. The Weber fraction for the
341 achromatic black stimuli was 0.08. The average number of found stimuli and mean latencies
342 of finding stimuli in each colour channel are found in Table 1.

343 On saturated chromatic ideal (evenly coloured) backgrounds, the Weber fraction of blue tits
344 for long wavelengths was 0.20. For middle wavelengths, the correct Weber fraction was 0.17
345 and for short wavelengths 0.15. Thus, Weber fractions for saturated chromatic backgrounds
346 were markedly higher from the ones determined for achromatic background, as well as from

347 the Weber fractions 0.05 and 0.10 commonly used for all colour channels in different receptor-
348 noise based models (Fig. 3) (Vorobyev and Osorio 1998, Troscianko and Stevens 2015, van
349 den Berg & Troscianko et al. 2020). The average number of found stimuli and mean latencies
350 of finding stimuli in each treatment background are found in Table 2.

351

352 3.2 The effect of chromatic complexity in finding prey

353 Chromatic complexity of backgrounds in red, green and blue colour channels affected the
354 visual search task in following ways. In comparison to ideal (non-complex) background, low
355 and high complexity treatments lowered the probability of finding stimuli more in the red
356 colour channel than in green and blue (detection success model selection Table 3, model
357 summary Table 4). In the red colour channel, high complexity treatment lessened the
358 probability of finding stimuli more than low complexity treatment (Table 2 and Fig. 3, top
359 row).

360 Latencies of finding stimuli were longer in the red colour channel compared to blue and green
361 colour channels (Tables B1 and B2, Appendix B). In the red colour channel, complexity
362 treatments elongated latency time and high complexity treatment affected latency more than
363 low complexity treatment (Table 2).

364 The red colour channel increased the number of pecks compared to the colour channels green
365 and blue (Tables B3 and B4). In the red colour channel, blue tits pecked on average 7.51 times
366 (s.d. = 6.57) while searching for stimuli, while in the green colour channel the average count
367 of pecks was 5.98 (s.d. = 6.27) and in blue 6.16 (s.d. = 6.09). Complexity treatments increased
368 the number of pecks only in the red colour channel: in the ideal backgrounds, birds pecked on
369 average 5.73 times, in low complexity backgrounds 7.64 times and in high complexity 9.16

370 times. In the green and blue colour channels, the complexity treatments increased pecking
371 approximately by 1 peck or less.

372 The red colour channel also increased the number of attempts that the birds made to find stimuli
373 in the experiments, and the complexity treatments affected the number of attempts more in the
374 red colour channel than in green and blue (Table B5 and B6). In the red ideal treatment, birds
375 made on average 2.89 attempts, in low complexity 4.04 and high complexity 4.21 attempts,
376 while the average number of attempts remained between 2.52 – 2.76 in green and 3.16 – 3.37
377 in blue colour channel throughout the complexity treatments.

378

379 4. DISCUSSION

380 We highlight that using a vision model in which colour discrimination parameters are
381 determined in ideal viewing conditions, as they are by definition, can lead to misleading
382 interpretations in a more colourful context. More specifically, Weber fractions do not stay
383 constant through colour channels when determined against achromatic in comparison to
384 saturated chromatic backgrounds. Weber fractions measured against achromatic background
385 (L: 0.05, M: 0.03, S: 0.03 and achromatic black: 0.08) were considerably smaller than the
386 Weber fractions for saturated chromatic ideal treatment backgrounds (L: 0.20, M: 0.17, S:
387 0.15). Also, chromatic complexity of backgrounds and changes in hue only affected blue tit
388 search behaviour in the red colour channel. These results suggest that the use of too low Weber
389 fractions in the visual model will lead to too high colour discrimination values in more natural
390 contexts. This can challenge the biological interpretation of the vision model results.

391 The behaviourally estimated amount of noise (Weber fraction) in blue tit long-wave channel
392 measured against achromatic background is lower than most estimates of noise in LW channels

393 of other birds (L: 0.10) (Olsson et al. 2018 Table 1). The result is closest to that of chickens
394 *Gallus gallus*, whose estimate of receptor noise (L: 0.06) was measured in a study where
395 chickens had to discriminate between orange and yellow colours on variable grey backgrounds
396 (Olsson et al. 2015). Olsson et al. (2015) paid attention to the lower receptor noise compared
397 to other birds and suggested – on top of the possibility that chickens simply have less noise in
398 their long-wave channel – that exploitation of natural bird behaviour (i.e. pecking at objects to
399 gain food) may promote better performance in discrimination tasks compared to more artificial
400 methods used in behavioural measurements of receptor noise.

401 Larger Weber fractions against chromatic backgrounds imply that for a stimulus to be seen,
402 there needs to be a larger difference compared to background than in achromatic environments.
403 This finding is very important, especially considering how researchers use different Weber
404 fractions in determining the smallest colour differences their study subjects can perceive in
405 their natural environments. An estimate of noise that is too low produces too high colour
406 discrimination predictions. When the exact Weber fractions are unknown, researchers
407 understandably resort in using the commonly used 0.05 or even 0.02 without confirmation of
408 how these assumptions reflect study animals' behaviour in nature (Siddiqi et al. 2004,
409 Outomuro et al. 2017). Thus, there is an obvious risk of researchers assuming considerably
410 smaller colour differentiation thresholds for study subjects than the subjects truly have.

411 Only the red colour channel was affected by changes in the hue of saturated colours and the
412 noise of viewing background. Quantitatively, blue tits found approximately as many stimuli
413 from the red ideal background as from green and blue (64 % of all stimuli on red ideal
414 backgrounds, 70 % on green and 63 % on blue). However, in red low complexity treatments
415 blue tits only found approximately 24 % and in high complexity treatments 16 % of stimuli,
416 while in green and blue complexity treatments birds were able to find 57 – 61 %.

417 The reason for the lessened detection success of blue tits in the red colour channel could lie in
418 ultimate or proximate mechanisms of colour perception. Less successful performance in the
419 red colour channel could hint of neofobia (fear of new) of the odd combination of saturated
420 colours that were used in this study, or avoidance of colours that are associated with warning
421 signals (Marples and Kelly 1999, Ham et al. 2006, Greggor et al. 2015). Red colour was overall
422 less motivating for the birds, and some of them even expressed reluctance to engage with the
423 red complexity backgrounds. However, both explanations are unlikely here since the birds were
424 trained to hunt profitable, colourful prey in an artificial environment. Nevertheless, hues of red
425 and yellow are often associated with effective warning colours (i.e. aposematism) that can be
426 avoided by insectivorous birds innately but also based on learned experience (Ham et al. 2006,
427 Stevens and Ruxton 2011). The set of red and yellow hues in the red complexity backgrounds
428 might seem appalling for the birds if they associate most of the hues with warning colours. This
429 finding could also suggest that perhaps the high-noise sensitivity of the red channel – that was
430 highlighted by the increased number of pecks and attempts in the complexity treatments –
431 ultimately facilitates the widespread exploiting of this colour channel in the nature and may
432 also render it available for cheating (Stevens & Ruxton 2012, Mökkönen & Lindstedt 2015).

433 Proximate mechanisms behind the lessened detection success in red colour channel could be
434 found in the red and yellow oil droplets on bird LWS and MWS photoreceptors responsible for
435 long- and middle-wave sensing. Blue tit MWS photoreceptor has the peak sensitivity at 503
436 nm and LWS at 563 nm but their oil droplets only pass through light wavelengths longer than
437 the peak sensitivities (cut off for MWS droplet from 508 nm and LWS droplet from 573 nm)
438 (Hart et al. 2000). Generally, the droplets shift the spectral sensitivity peaks to wavelengths
439 approximately 40 nm longer, narrow the spectral bandwidth of the photoreceptors by half and
440 lessen the absolute sensitivity of photoreceptors by around 90 % (Hart and Vorobyev 2005,
441 Wilby and Roberts 2017, Kelber 2019).

442 The result of considerably higher Weber fractions in chromatic environments raises the
443 question of how the noise parameter is used in modelling animal colour vision. As most studies
444 determining the amount of noise in animal visual systems concentrate on achromatic
445 backgrounds, research on validity of the Weber fraction parameter in visual modelling on
446 chromatic environments is scarce. A study by Lind (2016) examined discriminability of colours
447 on contrasting backgrounds. Our results are concordant, as it appears that generally a larger
448 colour difference is needed for discriminating colour changes on chromatic backgrounds
449 compared to achromatic backgrounds. Many studies use the low Weber fractions determined
450 on achromatic backgrounds to infer how animals discriminate colours against chromatic
451 environments (Siddiqi et al 2004, Maan and Cummings 2012, Schultz and Fincke 2013
452 amongst others). Weber fractions which are too low can produce misleading results, for
453 example in studies on crypsis and camouflage where the background of a given signal is mostly
454 chromatic and varying. A low Weber fraction in modelling visual perception of a given
455 predator in camouflage and crypsis studies can lead to a false conclusion that the predator is
456 able to see the camouflaged prey easier than it truly can. Similarly, if the Weber fraction is set
457 too high for a given predator, it might seem like the predator is not able to spot the camouflaged
458 prey through visual cues. What increases the amount of noise in bird visual systems in
459 chromatic environment is still unknown, but Kelber (2019) and Vorobyev and Osorio (1998)
460 suggest that adaptation stage of cone cells can be the reason for less fine colour discrimination
461 in contrasting backgrounds.

462 We conclude that when inferring discrimination abilities of avian vision in natural
463 environments, researchers should carefully select appropriate Weber fraction parameters for
464 modelling. Previously, the Weber fraction of 0.05 has been assumed (van den Berg &
465 Troscianko et al. 2020) safe to use for species whose discrimination thresholds are unknown.
466 However, based on the results of this study with blue tits, we suggest the use of a more

467 conservative Weber fraction of 0.10, at least for studies considering passerine birds. Thus, the
468 RNL model assumption Weber fraction 0.10 originally proposed by Vorobyev and Osorio
469 (1998) could be a valid choice for modelling blue tit colour vision perception in all colour
470 channels, except if the study especially concentrates on red hues, in which case even higher
471 Weber fraction of 0.13 – 0.15 for LWS colour channel may be in order until more accurate
472 information can be obtained.

473 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

474 We thank Johanna Mappes for her support, Konnevesi Research Station for the facilities,

475 Melanie Brien for proofreading and especially Helinä Nisu for taking care of the birds.

476 During the project ON was funded by the Academy of Finland Postdoctoral Research Fellow

477 grant (#21000038821).

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Colour	Average number of found stimuli	SD of found stimuli	Mean latency	SD latency
Red	4.07	3.47	28.35 s	23.51 s
Green	4.93	3.21	22.57 s	22.66 s
Blue	5.40	2.95	17.52 s	19.03 s
Black	3.53	3.52	30.11 s	23.17 s

Table 1. First experiment, discrimination thresholds on white background: the average number of stimuli found by blue tits (i.e. 7 stimuli were tested per colour channel) and mean latency of finding stimuli in each colour channel.

Treatment	Average number of found stimuli	SD of found stimuli	Mean latency	SD latency
Red				
Ideal	4.45	3.37	31.57 s	27.00 s
Low complexity	1.68	2.99	47.49 s	20.81 s
High complexity	1.14	2.59	50.42 s	18.54 s
Green				
Ideal	4.91	3.23	23.94 s	30.21 s
Low complexity	4.27	3.42	26.38 s	25.57 s
High complexity	4.68	3.29	25.07 s	27.13 s
Blue				
Ideal	4.41	3.39	28.80 s	24.92 s
Low complexity	3.91	3.47	31.57 s	23.95 s
High complexity	4.27	3.42	30.16 s	24.80 s

Table 2. Second experiment, discrimination thresholds on chromatic backgrounds and the effect of complexity: the average number of stimuli found by blue tits (i.e. 7 stimuli were tested against each background) and mean latency of finding stimuli in each treatment.

Model: Detection success	Df	AIC	LRT	Pr(Chi)
<u>~C+T+JND+C*T+C*JND+T*JND+C*T*JND+(1 BirdID)</u>		1014.9		
~C+T+JND+C*T+C*JND+T*JND+(1 Bird ID)	4	1012.3	5.441	0.245
<u>~C+T+JND+C*T+C*JND+(1 Bird ID)</u>	2	1010.3	2.002	0.368

Table 3. Model selection for a GLMM estimating the detection success of blue tits in chromatic complexity backgrounds. C = colour, T = treatment type and JND = colour specific just-noticeable-differences determined on chromatic backgrounds. Asterisk denotes interaction term of the variables and + indicates main effects. The selected model is underlined.

Random effects:	Groups	Variance	Std.Dev.	
	Bird ID	0.5831	0.7636	
Fixed effects:	Estimate	Std. Error	z value	Pr(> z)
Intercept	-2.651	0.382	-6.947	<0.001
Colour G	-2.036	0.595	-3.419	<0.001
Colour R	1.906	0.549	3.473	<0.001
Treatment High	-0.164	0.330	-0.498	0.618
Treatment Low	-0.426	0.332	-1.283	0.200
Chromatic JNDs	3.717	0.357	10.416	<0.001
Colour G : Treatment High	-0.107	0.543	-0.198	0.843
Colour R : Treatment High	-2.034	0.455	-4.465	<0.001
Colour G : Treatment Low	-0.635	0.560	-1.134	0.257
Colour R : Treatment Low	-1.288	0.441	-2.921	0.003
Colour G : Chromatic JNDs	1.989	0.616	3.231	0.001
Colour R : Chromatic JNDs	-2.160	0.645	-3.347	<0.001

Table 4. Model summary from the analysis of detection success of blue tits in chromatic complexity backgrounds, where Intercept is the colour blue in ideal treatment background.

Fig. 1. a) Schematic illustration of how the two experiments cover the RGB colour space. Number 1 denotes the first experimental design. Number 2 denotes the second experimental design, where a) is ideal chromatic background, b) low chromatic complexity and c) high chromatic complexity backgrounds.

b) Illustration of the tested colours in the first colour perception experiment. R = red, G = green, B = blue and K = black/grey. Numbers on the left side are the stimulus steps where 1 is the most difficult to detect and 7 the easiest. Dots are circled, larger in size and stimulus colours intensified (squared) in this figure for illustrative reasons.

c) Sight barrier tray, which was used for moving the test sheets in and out of the experimental arena, with a blue high complexity test sheet and blue tit sitting on the sight barrier with a reward.

d) Illustration of the second experimental design inspired by the puzzle video game Tetris (Pajitnov 1984): ideal background in left column, low complexity background in middle and high complexity background in right for red, green and blue colour channel.

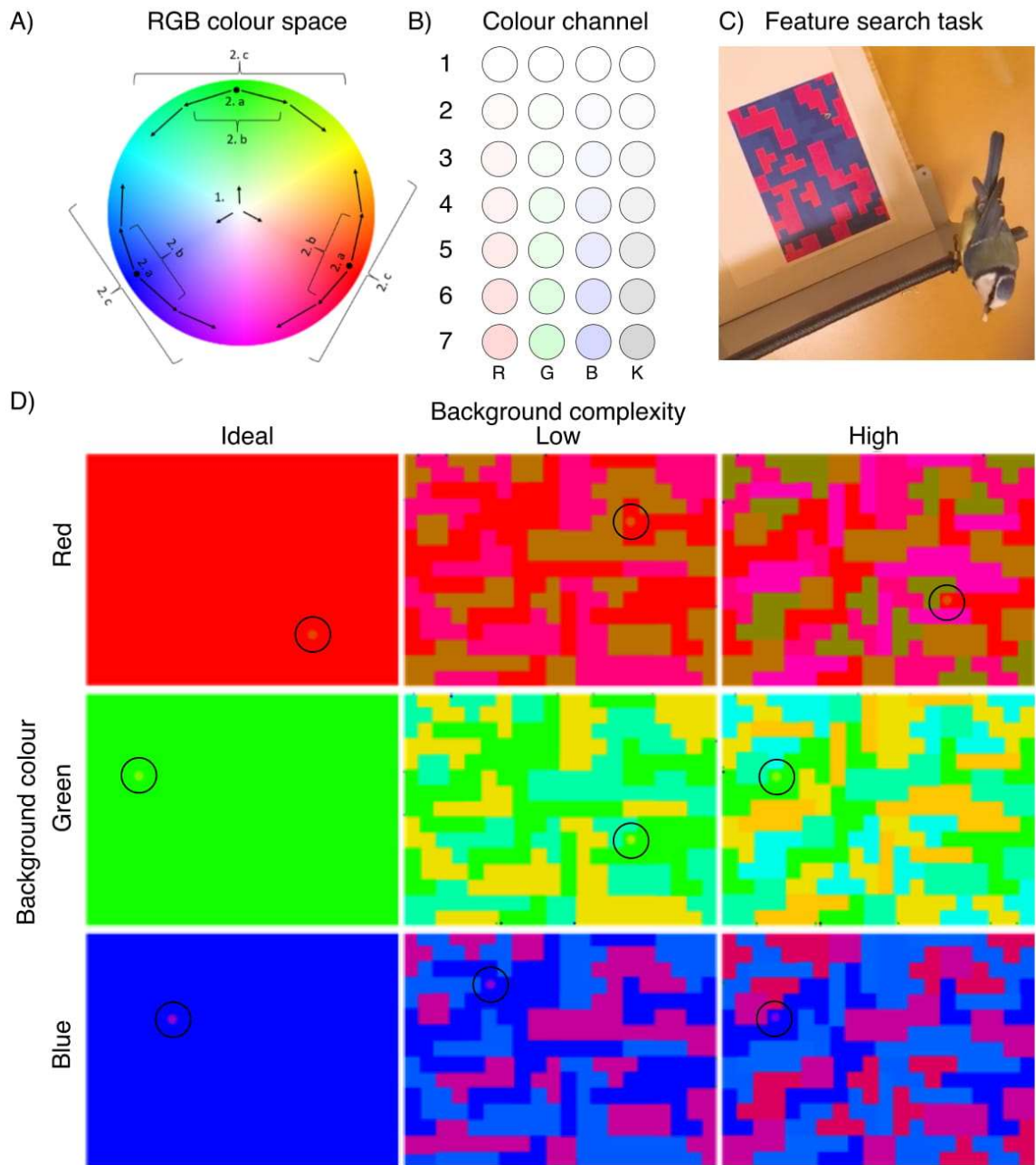


Fig. 2. Illustration of bracketing of Weber fractions on achromatic white backgrounds for the red, green and blue colour channels and achromatic (black) channel. For each colour, the behaviourally validated Weber fraction that produced JND value 1 that was perceived by 75 % of blue tits ($n = 15$) is in the middle. Dashed lines show the positive and negative standard deviations of each probability curve.

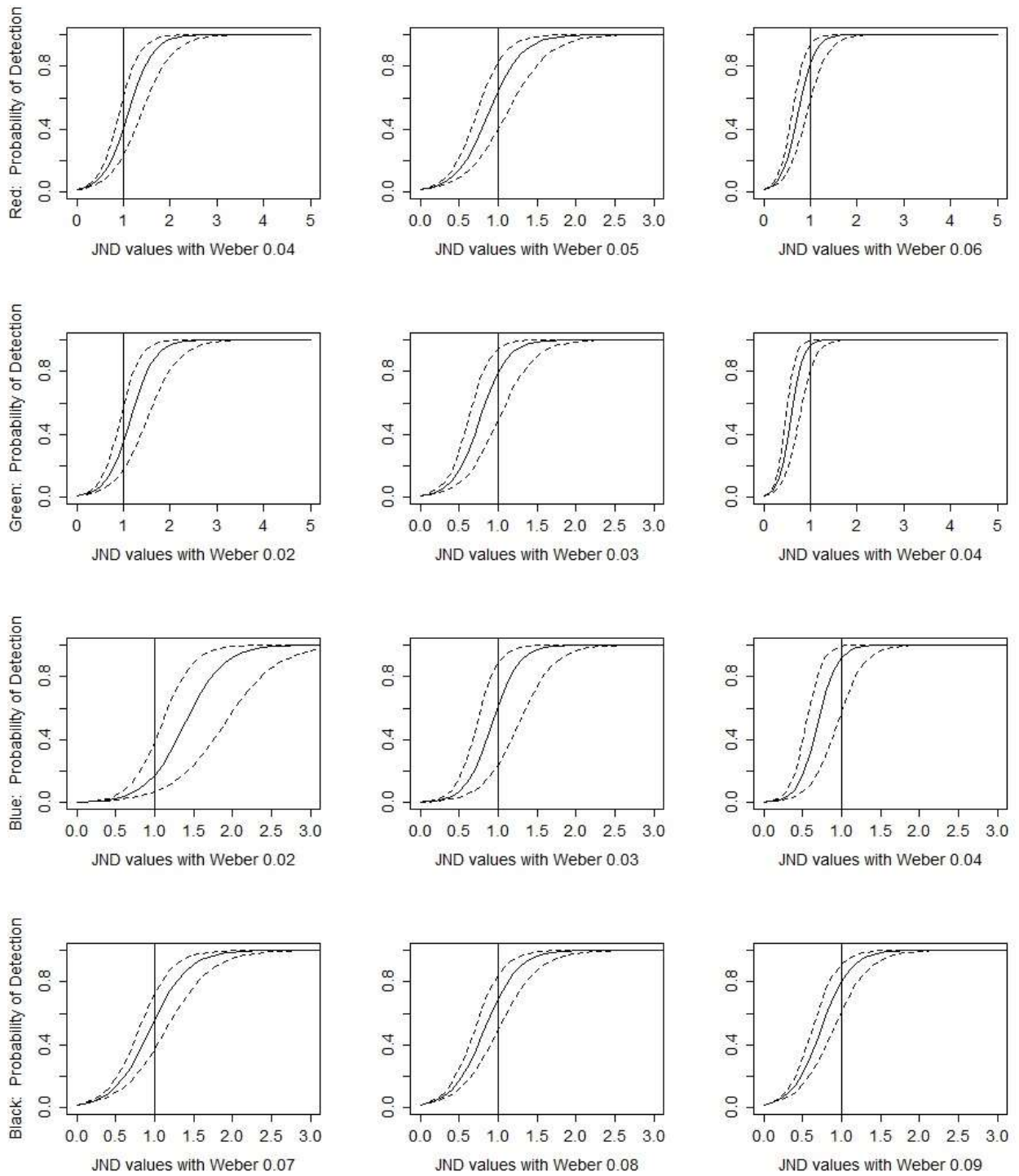
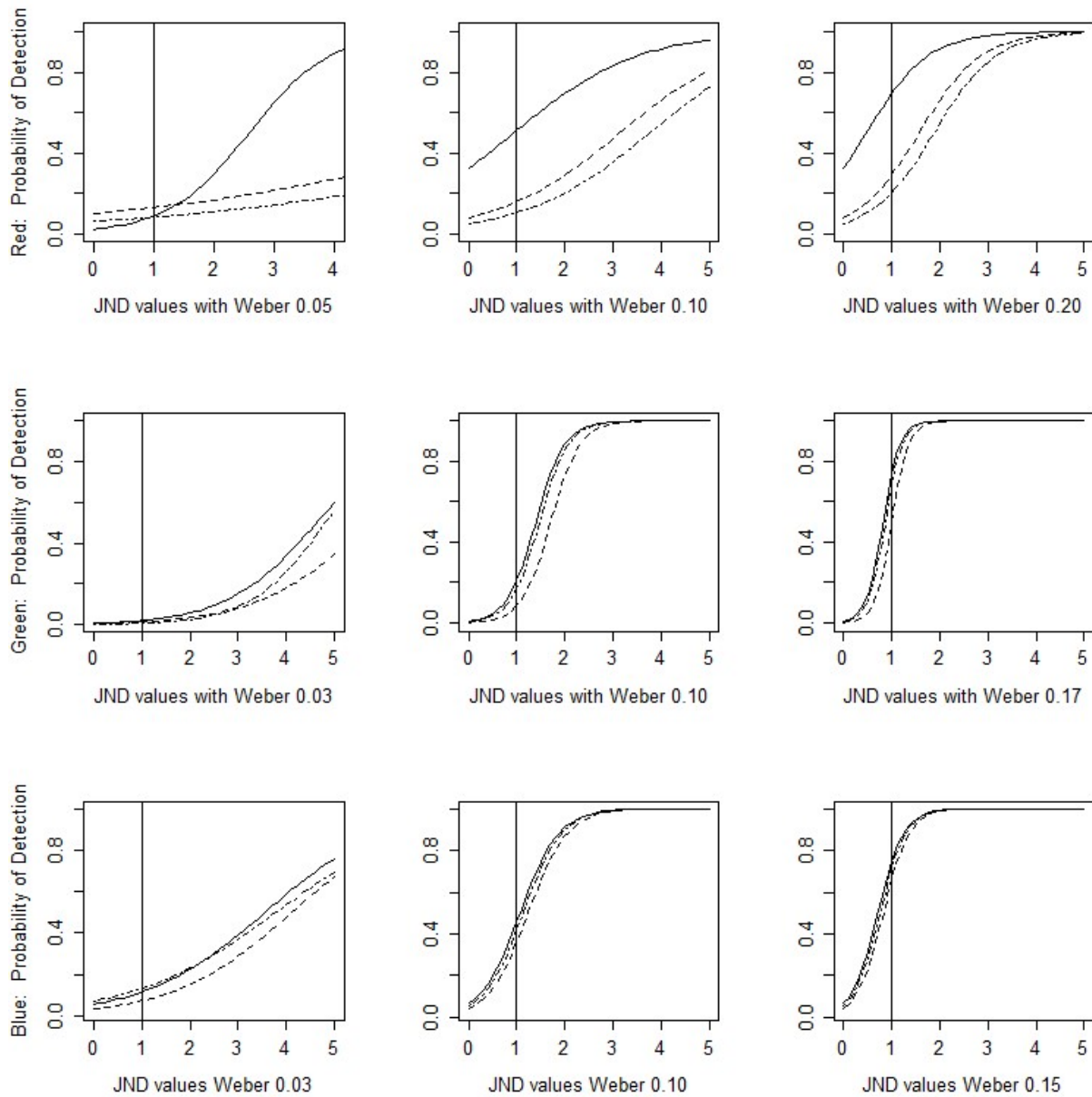


Fig. 3. Comparison of how the just-noticeable-difference (JND) values calculated with different Weber fractions describe blue tit behaviour ($n = 22$) on saturated chromatic backgrounds in red (top row), green (middle) and blue (bottom row) colour channels. In the left column are the channel specific Weber fractions determined against achromatic backgrounds, in the middle a common model assumption Weber fraction 0.10 and on right the Weber fractions that produced JND 1 that corresponds to behaviourally validated 75 % of birds detecting the colour difference against evenly coloured chromatic backgrounds. Solid lines are the probability curve of ideal (evenly coloured) treatment, long dashes are low complexity and short dashes are high complexity treatment.



APPENDIX A

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5	Step 6	Step 7
RGB value	254	252	250	248	246	244	242
JNDs of red stimuli	0.12	0.23	0.39	0.52	0.66	0.80	0.93
JNDs of green stimuli	0.10	0.18	0.30	0.32	0.44	0.50	0.62
JNDs of blue stimuli	0.17	0.28	0.35	0.52	0.70	0.77	0.90
JNDs of black stimuli	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.05	0.04	0.04

Table A1. JND values of stimuli in the red, green, blue and black stimulus sets against white testing backgrounds in experiment 1. RGB value on the top row indicates the value of the two colours in which intensity was decreased to uncover the manipulated colour from white. JNDs were modelled with blue tit vision model in the package pavo 2.4.0 using the default Weber fraction 0.10 and illumination spectra measured from the testing arena (Maia et al. 2019).

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5	Step 6	Step 7
Stimuli JNDs on red	0.66	0.91	1.59	1.74	1.8	1.96	2.9
Stimuli JNDs on green	0.67	0.97	1.48	2.57	2.77	2.95	3.1
Stimuli JNDs on blue	0.28	0.77	0.81	1.49	1.91	2.6	4.7

Table A2. JND values of stimuli against the ideal treatment background of each tested colour in the experiment 2. JNDs were modelled with blue tit vision model in the package pavo 2.4.0 using the default Weber fraction 0.10 and illumination spectra measured from the testing arena (Maia et al. 2019).

Fig. A1. Irradiance curve of the light conditions in experimental setups. The large gap represents an open, fully exposed light environment as described by Endler (1993). Figure shows comparison between the experimental large gap light environment used in the behavioral experiment and the large gap conditions measured from the field.

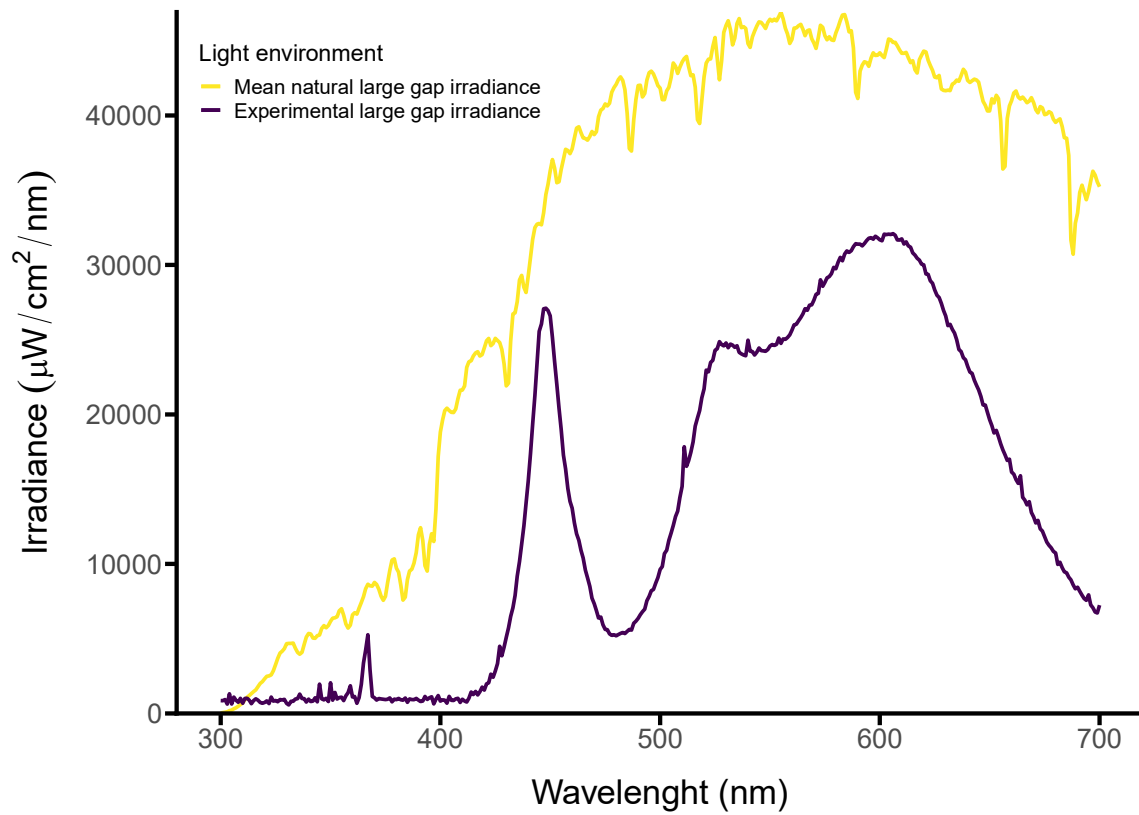


Fig.A2. Reflectance of tested stimuli colours and the background (highest line in each graph) in experiment 1.

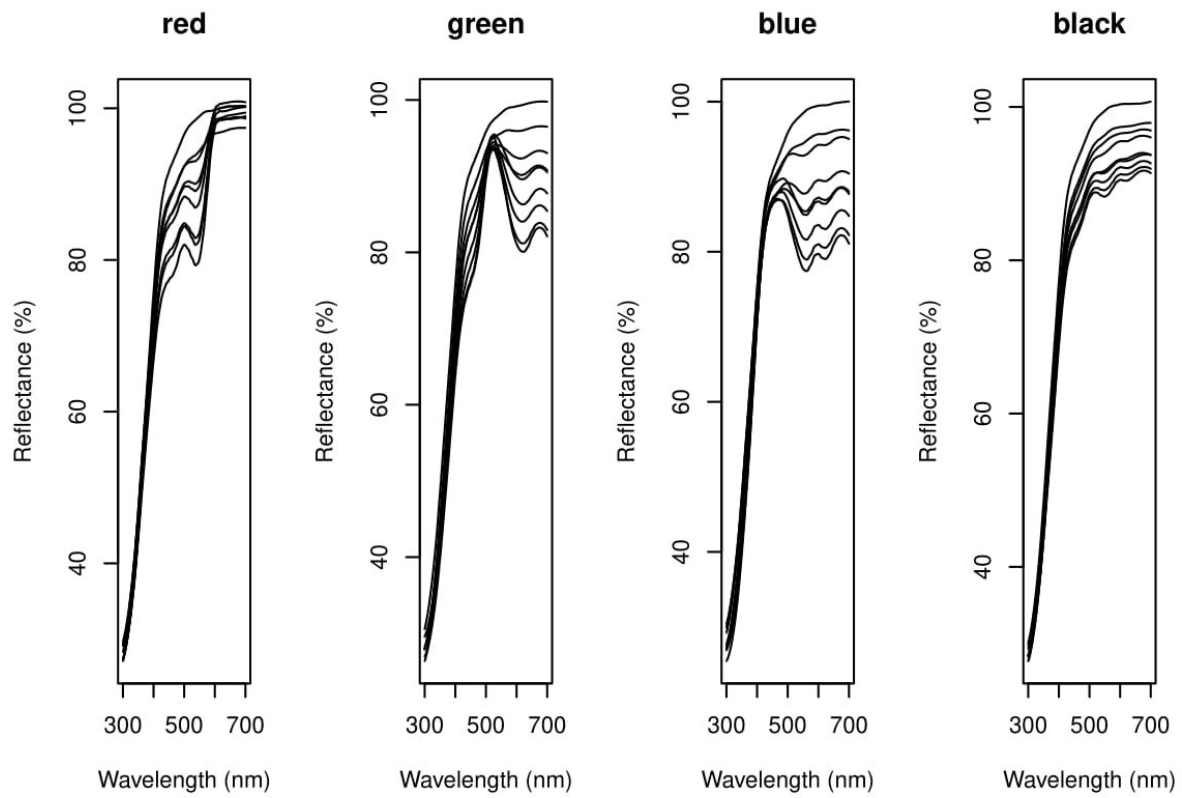
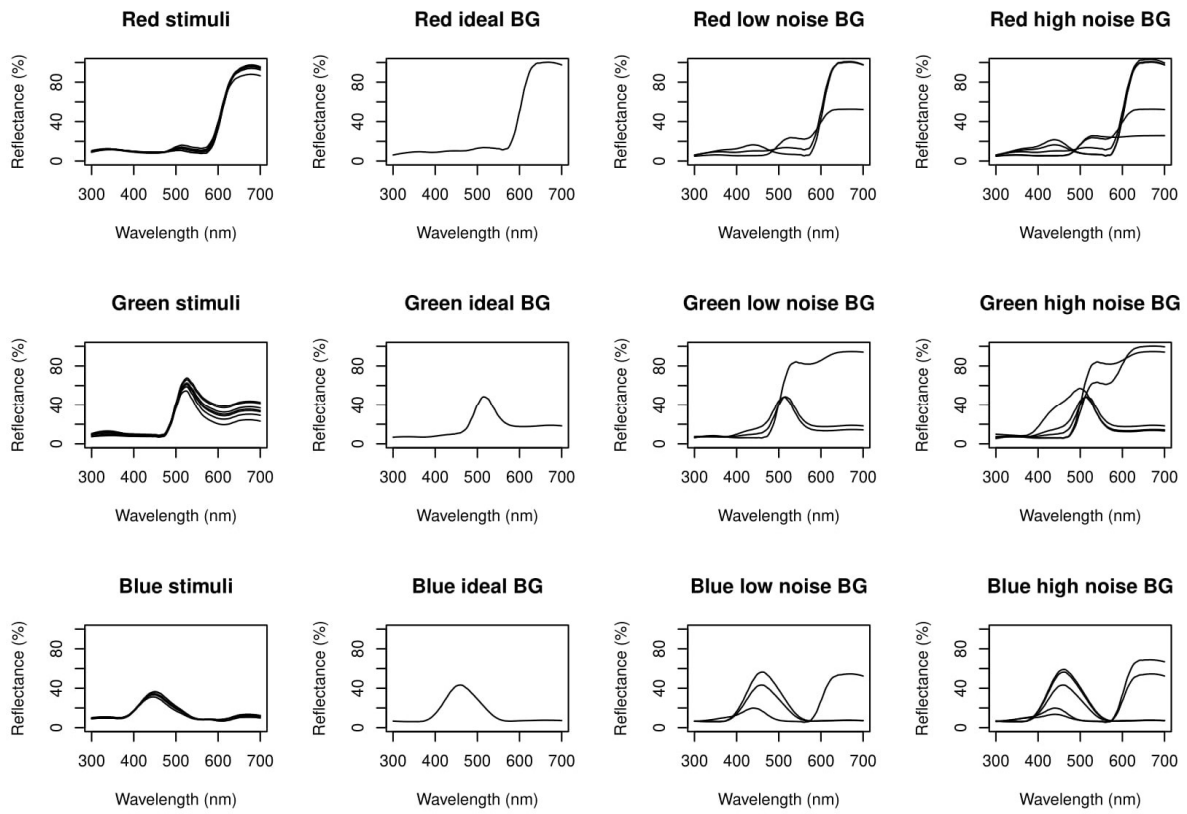


Fig. A3. Reflectance of stimuli and testing background colours in experiment 2.



APPENDIX B

<u>Model: Latency</u>	Df	AIC	LRT	Pr(Chi)
<u>~C+T+JND+C*T+C*JND+T*JND+C*T*JND+(1 BirdID)</u>		2602.9		
~C+T+JND+C*T+C*JND+T*JND+(1 Bird ID)	4	2598.5	3.614	0.461
<u>~C+T+JND+C*T+C*JND+(1 Bird ID)</u>	2	2596.6	2.097	0.350

Table B1. Model selection for a GLMM estimating the latency to finding stimuli of blue tits in chromatic complexity backgrounds. C = colour, T = treatment type and JND = colour specific just-noticeable-differences determined on chromatic backgrounds. Asterisk denotes interaction term of the variables and + indicates main effects. The selected model is underlined.

Random effects:	Groups	Name	Variance	Std.Dev.
	Bird ID	Intercept	0.3207	0.5663
Fixed effects:	Estimate	Std. Error	z value	Pr(> z)
Intercept	-6.109	0.234	-26.122	<0.001
Colour G	-1.274	0.333	-3.831	<0.001
Colour R	1.162	0.373	3.119	0.002
Treatment High	-0.167	0.172	-0.967	0.333
Treatment Low	-0.137	0.177	-0.770	0.441
Chromatic JNDs	2.508	0.142	17.716	<0.001
Colour G : Treatment High	-0.167	0.244	-0.682	0.496
Colour R : Treatment High	-1.667	0.297	-5.605	<0.001
Colour G : Treatment Low	-0.507	0.248	-2.044	0.041
Colour R : Treatment Low	-1.275	0.276	-4.617	<0.001
Colour G : Chromatic JNDs	1.164	0.222	5.239	<0.001
Colour R : Chromatic JNDs	-1.203	0.420	-2.864	0.004

Table B2. Model summary from the analysis of latency of finding a prey, where Intercept is the colour blue in ideal treatment background.

Model: Pecks	Df	AIC	LRT	Pr(Chi)
<u>~C+T+JND+C*T+C*JND+T*JND+C*T*JND+(1 BirdID)</u>		7975.5		
~C+T+JND+C*T+C*JND+T*JND+(1 Bird ID)	4	7981.5	13.96	0.245

Table B3. Model selection for a GLMM estimating the number of pecks of blue tits while searching stimuli on chromatic complexity backgrounds. C = colour, T = treatment type and JND = colour specific just-noticeable-differences determined on chromatic backgrounds. Asterisk denotes interaction term of the variables and + indicates main effects. The selected model is underlined.

Random effects:	Groups	Name	Variance	Std.Dev.
	Bird ID	Intercept	0.215	0.464
Fixed effects:	Estimate	Std. Error	z value	Pr(> z)
Intercept	2.721	0.117	23.362	<0.001
Colour G	0.500	0.098	5.124	<0.001
Colour R	-0.411	0.121	-3.402	<0.001
Treatment High	-0.172	0.086	-1.998	0.046
Treatment Low	-0.040	0.086	-0.465	0.642
Chromatic JNDs	-1.497	0.091	-16.485	<0.001
Colour G : Treatment High	0.077	0.134	0.573	0.567
Colour R : Treatment High	-0.062	0.164	-0.376	0.707
Colour G : Treatment Low	-0.142	0.134	-1.058	0.290
Colour R : Treatment Low	-0.258	0.169	-1.532	0.126
Colour G : Chromatic JNDs	-0.347	0.131	-2.643	0.008
Colour R : Chromatic JNDs	0.556	0.173	3.219	0.001
Treatment High : Ch. JNDs	0.430	0.121	3.555	<0.001
Treatment Low : Ch. JNDs	0.192	0.125	1.541	0.123
Colour G : Treat. H. : Ch. JNDs	-0.056	0.173	-0.325	0.746
Colour R : Treat. H. : Ch. JNDs	0.584	0.226	2.582	0.010
Colour G : Treat. L. : Ch. JNDs	0.271	0.175	1.550	0.121
Colour R : Treat. L. : Ch. JNDs	0.666	0.234	2.844	0.005

Table B4. Model summary from the analysis of the number of pecks while blue tits were searching stimuli on chromatic complexity backgrounds. Intercept is the colour blue in ideal treatment background.

Model: Attempts	Df	AIC	LRT	Pr(Chi)
<u>~C+T+JND+C*T+C*JND+T*JND+C*T*JND+(1 BirdID)</u>		4764.5		
~C+T+JND+C*T+C*JND+T*JND+(1 Bird ID)	4	4770.0	13.48	0.009

Table B5. Model selection for a GLMM estimating the number of attempts of blue tits while searching stimuli on chromatic complexity backgrounds. C = colour, T = treatment type and JND = colour specific just-noticeable-differences determined on chromatic backgrounds. Asterisk denotes interaction term of the variables and + indicates main effects. The selected model is underlined.

Random effects:	Groups	Name	Variance	Std.Dev.
	Bird ID	Intercept	0.274	0.524
Fixed effects:	Estimate	Std. Error	z value	Pr(> z)
Intercept	1.605	0.142	11.318	<0.001
Colour G	0.326	0.140	2.323	0.020
Colour R	-0.199	0.174	-1.146	0.252
Treatment High	-0.099	0.122	-0.808	0.419
Treatment Low	0.089	0.122	0.728	0.467
Chromatic JNDs	-0.770	0.105	-7.350	<0.001
Colour G : Treatment High	0.066	0.197	0.334	0.738
Colour R : Treatment High	0.246	0.233	1.059	0.290
Colour G : Treatment Low	-0.285	0.196	-1.454	0.146
Colour R : Treatment Low	-0.351	0.241	-1.461	0.144
Colour G : Chromatic JNDs	-0.388	0.155	-2.501	0.012
Colour R : Chromatic JNDs	0.077	0.233	0.329	0.742
Treatment High : Ch. JNDs	0.239	0.143	1.671	0.095
Treatment Low : Ch. JNDs	-0.038	0.149	-0.256	0.798
Colour G : Treat. H. : Ch. JNDs	-0.216	0.216	-1.001	0.317
Colour R : Treat. H. : Ch. JNDs	0.095	0.308	0.307	0.759
Colour G : Treat. L. : Ch. JNDs	0.337	0.216	1.564	0.118
Colour R : Treat. L. : Ch. JNDs	0.882	0.316	2.791	0.005

Table B6. Model summary from the analysis of the number of attempts while blue tits were searching stimuli on chromatic complexity backgrounds. Intercept is the colour blue in ideal treatment background.