



Observations of the Owl (33)

# Ranting about Granting

Ahhh, what a night! First a squirrel, then a shrew and finally – that one particular wood mouse. For more than a week now this furry little critter had been fooling me. Every single night I had spotted him; always scrabbling about under the same dogwood bush. And every night, this little creature suddenly dashed off at a sprint to reach the elder bush on the other side of the mead-

ow. Each time I immediately took off from my branch, shooting through the dark like an arrow – only to miss that damned perky ball of fluff. Until this night, when good old Owl has finally proven too clever to be mocked over and over again by some cheeky little mouse. See, what I did was the following... I.... hrrm.... on second thoughts, I think at that point I'd better spare your sensitive human minds the gruesome details.

So I am now sitting on my branch, completely stuffed and waiting to choke up a giant hairy and bony pellet. That's always the downside of such successful hunting nights. By the holy Phoenix, how often have I cursed evolution that our owl genes still haven't been sufficiently selected for producing digestive enzymes that once and for all release us from this evil? I can tell you, you wimpy human beings would probably keel over. But anyway, at least I know that some of our brightest bird scientists are already working on this problem.

So, I'm sure you can imagine that waiting to cough out our hairy-bony pellets is not exactly the time for particularly bright and breezy thoughts. Interestingly, my thoughts during such "regurgitation periods" quite often drift back to the numerous and mostly dark experiences my friends and I had made with grant applications. (Perhaps you recall, one such particularly sad story surrounding my old friend Hawk I briefly covered in my last "Observations").

The first in a whole series of strange experiences began with my very first application. I had just finished my PhD in flight muscle physiology and wanted to switch my research completely to avian genetics. Back then, I was struck by the idea for a certain project that had formed in my brain over months of stimulating discussions as well as extensive study of the relevant literature. Therefore, I finally elaborated a thorough and straightforward research plan and sent the respective funding application to the Avian Research Society (ARC).

The result was shattering. Those cocky and ignorant Grinches that call themselves reviewers rejected the application without writing one single sentence on the project itself. As if they hadn't even attempted to understand its meaning and value. In fact, they basically just reduced their "efforts" to the silly statement that, as a trained muscle physiologist, without any publication in avian genetics so far, I ought to stay in the field I had already started with. "Cobbler, stick to your last", as you humans say.

So, what did I do? I furiously tore the review letters into tiny pieces and gave the shreds to one of the neighbouring spar-

row pairs for nest-building (they take everything they can get). I couldn't help myself but at that time it gave my ranty, owl nature some grim satisfaction to imagine that soon after, some young sparrow nestlings would be shitting on the reviewers' comments.

One by one, I subsequently sent the application to other funding organisations: The Wellfly Trust, The Griffin Foundation (TGF), The BirdBio Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) ... and, and, and, ... However, the results were all the same: "Stick to your muscle physiology business" – and a lot of paper was shredded for sparrows' nests.

But owls don't only like a good old rant, they are also stubborn and stiff-necked. And so, I was finally lucky with my application at a small and almost unknown foundation under the name The Macaw Wasting Disease Association. This Organisation was run by parrots to fund research into the deadly Macaw Wasting Disease, also called Proventricular Dilatation Disease (PDD), which almost exclusively affects those exotic fellows. Luckily, I had recognised that my genetic approach could also open up a reasonable chance to identify potential PPD target genes. Therefore, I added to my application a couple of specific "PPD sentences" (you know what I mean, just the usual flowery medical application phrases) and sent it off. And, as you might have guessed by now, the parrots didn't mind my muscle physiology background – they only and *really* saw the project and its potential.

Unfortunately, the grant didn't pay off for the parrots. I wasn't able to find any PPD target gene. However, it did pay off for me.

My idea nevertheless proved robust and, therefore, I was able to produce a couple of nice papers. Those papers back then were the basis to establish my standing as a well-respected avian geneticist and this, in turn, suddenly pushed the doors wide open to subsequent funding from ARC, BBRSC, Wellfly Trust and co. All this, only because some strange parrots' organisation once saved my project.

It is not without irony that The Griffin Foundation (TGF) very quickly changed attitudes and – according to the motto "Why should I care about the rubbish I talked yesterday?" – soon selected me for their Grant Review Board. What happened next was deplorable and completely insensitive; right from the start, they sent me piles and piles of grant applications for review, sometimes up to eight a month. Until again my "ranting genes" were overexpressed. Without further ado, I returned the remaining applications back unread and wrote them the following lines, "Let's cut a deal. From now on, you no longer send me *your* applications and I promise you in return to no longer send you *my* applications."

Luckily, I had already learned of many alternative granting agencies at the time.

**"No longer send me your applications and... I'll no longer send you mine."**

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