Large-bodied birds are over-represented in opportunistic citizen science data

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ABSTRACT

Citizen science platforms are quickly accumulating hundreds of millions of biodiversity observations around the world annually. Quantifying and correcting for the implicit and explicit biases in citizen science datasets remains an important first step before these data are used to address ecological questions and monitor biodiversity. One source of potential bias among datasets is the difference between those citizen science programs that collect opportunistic observations and those that have semi-structured or structured protocols for submitting observations. To quantify biases in an unstructured citizen science platform, we contrasted bird observations from the iNaturalist platform with that from a semi-structured citizen science platform — eBird — for the continental United States. We tested whether four traits of species (color, group size, body size, and commonness) predicted whether a species was over-represented in the opportunistic dataset. We found strong evidence that large-bodied birds were over-represented in the opportunistic citizen science dataset; moderate evidence that common species were over-represented in the opportunistic data; moderate evidence that species in large groups were over-represented; and no evidence that colorful species were over-represented in opportunistic citizen science data. Our results suggest that biases exist in opportunistic citizen science datasets, likely as a result of the detectability of a species and the inherent recording process. Future research in this space should continue to focus on quantifying and documenting biases in citizen science data, and understanding how these biases differ among unstructured, semi-structured, and structured citizen science platforms.

Keywords: citizen science; biases; opportunistic data; presence-only data, species occurrence data, eBird; iNaturalist; species traits; detectability

INTRODUCTION

Citizen science, or community science, — the involvement of volunteers in scientific endeavors — is increasingly seen as a cost-effective method for biodiversity monitoring and research. Accordingly, the quantity and diversity of citizen science projects in the ecological and environmental sciences is increasing [1]. Such projects are quickly accumulating hundreds of millions of biodiversity observations around the world annually [2,3] expanding the spatial and temporal scope of our understanding in ecology, conservation, and natural resource management [4,5]. Citizen science projects vary widely in their scope, design, and intent [6,7,8]. Projects can range from unstructured (e.g., little training needed to participate and contribute opportunistic/incidental observations) to semi-structured (e.g., with minimal workflows and guidelines, but additional data collected with each observation can be included) to structured (e.g., prescribed sampling in space and time by mostly trained and experienced volunteers). The level of structure consequently influences the overall data quality of a particular project [9,10].

Data quality from citizen science projects has been questioned [11, 12], and such concerns can act as a barrier to the widespread use of citizen science data in ecology and conservation [13]. These concerns arise because citizen science data can be biased temporally, spatially, and/or taxonomically. Temporally, many citizen science datasets are biased because participants frequently sample on weekends [14] or disproportionately during specific times of the year such as spring migration for birds [15]. Spatially, there is often a disproportionate number of sightings from areas with large human populations [16], areas with more accessibility [17], regions with high biodiversity that attract observers [18], and regions of the world with higher socioeconomic status [19]. Taxonomic biases also exist as some taxa receive orders of magnitude more citizen science observations than other taxa, evidenced by the fact that birds represent a disproportionate amount of data in the Global Biodiversity Information Facility [2]. Even within citizen science projects focused on specific taxa, there can be strong taxonomic biases towards particularly charismatic species or those that are readily identified [20, 21]. Such biases are not restricted to citizen science datasets, however, and many of the same biases are also present in professionally-collected data [22], such as those associated with museum specimens [23].

Despite potential biases in citizen science datasets, contrasts of data from volunteer participants to those contributed by professional scientists have shown that citizen science programs can provide reliable data [12, 24]. For example, mark-recapture models of whale sharks are reliable whether using sightings reported by the public or by experienced researchers [25], and volunteers perform comparably with professionals in identifying and monitoring invasive plant species [26]. Moreover, recent research has demonstrated the validity of using citizen science data for ecological questions such as estimating species distributions [27, 28, 29], managing habitat for conservation [30], estimating species richness [31], monitoring pollination services [32], and quantifying population trends [33, 34]. These approaches are improved when using statistical solutions to account for known biases and noise in citizen science data [3, 35, 36].

In addition to being an excellent resource for professional scientists to better understand ecological questions, citizen science projects are beneficial for society by encouraging increased engagement of the general public with science [37, 38]. Many citizen science projects provide learning opportunities for their volunteers. For example, participants in citizen science projects have increased their knowledge about invasive weeds [39, 40, 41], increased their knowledge of bird biology and behavior [42], and even enhanced their conservation awareness and sense of place [42, 43]. The ecological advances derived from citizen science data, combined with the important role it plays in community engagement with science, suggests that citizen science data will continue to play an important role in ecological and conservation research in the future [2, 4, 38, 44]. However, what motivates volunteers to participate in science, and contribute observations, has important implications for the quality of the data obtained [45], particularly if there are biases towards certain species, places, or times of sampling.

To ensure the continued and expanded use of citizen science data in ecology and conservation, it is important to document and understand the different biases present in citizen science datasets. Importantly, the degree of bias in a particular dataset will be influenced by the level of structure of that citizen science project. For example, unstructured projects (e.g., iNaturalist, www.inaturalist.org) or semi-structured projects (e.g., eBird, www.ebird.org) will generally be more spatially biased than structured projects that have pre-defined spatial sampling locations (e.g., Breeding Bird Surveys). Or, a citizen science project that collects incidental presence-only data, such as iNaturalist, is likely more susceptible to individual observer preferences compared with a semi-structured or structured project that requires all species encountered to be recorded by the observers. Charismatic species [21] can be over-represented in citizen science data because observers are more likely to record species that they, or society, consider more interesting or relevant [46]. Similarly, rare species are more likely to be the subject of conservation monitoring or more likely to be actively searched for by amateur naturalists [47, 48] and thus can be over-represented in biodiversity datasets. In contrast, in some citizen science projects, abundant species can form a disproportionate number of records (e.g., [49]) because species' abundance and ease of identification can lead to an increase in the number of records by casual observers [50]. Inherently linked with observer preferences are issues of differences in species detectability [50], and the ease of making the observations. Therefore, species traits (e.g., body size, color, group size) may have an additive effect, influencing both the detectability of a species [51, 52, 53], and in turn, the likelihood of a species being submitted to an opportunistic citizen science database.

Quantifying the implicit and explicit biases in citizen science datasets can help (1) researchers using these data to better account for biases when drawing ecological conclusions, (2) the design and implementation of future citizen science projects, and (3) understand what species or regions may need data collection from professional scientists by understanding the ‘limits’ of citizen science projects [19]. Here, we quantify biases in bird observation data from an unstructured, opportunistic citizen science project — iNaturalist — with that from a semi-structured one — eBird. We restricted our comparison to birds because (1) birds are among the most popular taxa with the non-scientific public, ensuring large sample sizes in both citizen science projects, and (2) data on the species traits that may influence the likelihood of opportunistic observations are readily available for birds. We assessed the over-representation or under-representation of bird species’ observations in the unstructured opportunistic citizen science project compared to the semi-structured project (see Figure 1). We then tested the following predictions: that (1) more colorful species; (2) larger species; (3) species with the ‘least concern’ IUCN status; and (4) more gregarious species (i.e., with larger group sizes) are over-represented in the opportunistic citizen science dataset (iNaturalist) in contrast to the semi-structured citizen science dataset (eBird). Our analysis highlights the importance of considering species’ traits when using citizen science data in ecological research.

METHODS

We made comparisons between iNaturalist (www.inaturalist.org) — an opportunistic unstructured citizen science project — and eBird (www.ebird.org) — a semi-structured citizen science project [15, 54].

iNaturalist citizen science data. iNaturalist is a multi-taxon citizen science project hosted by the California Academy of Sciences. It is an opportunistic citizen science project where volunteers contribute photos or sound recordings through a smart-phone or web-portal. Photos are then identified to the lowest possible taxonomic resolution using a community identification process, and once two-thirds of observers confirm the species-level identification of an organism it is considered “research grade”. Observations that are research grade are then uploaded to the Global Biodiversity Information Facility. We downloaded iNaturalist observations from the Global Biodiversity Information Facility for the contiguous United States [55] for the period from January 2010 to May 2019, on December 3rd, 2019. For more details on the iNaturalist methodology, see here: https://www.inaturalist.org/pages/getting+started.

eBird citizen science data. eBird is one of the most successful citizen science projects in the world, with almost 1 billion bird observations globally. It was launched in 2002 by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and focuses on collecting reliable data on the distributions and relative abundance of birds throughout the world [54]. It is a semi-structured project where volunteers submit ‘checklists’ of all species seen and/or heard on birding outings. These checklists provide the ability to infer absences in the dataset for any species not recorded. Observers can submit checklists at any time and place of their choosing, with no set protocols in place such as how long or how far to search. However, observers are asked to indicate the duration of and distance travelled during the birding outing when submitting their checklist. Filters are set — based on spatiotemporal coordinates — which restrict the species and their associated counts that can be submitted without approval from a regional expert reviewer [56]. We used the eBird basic dataset (version ebd_May-2019) and restricted our analysis to data from the contiguous United States for the period from January 2010 to May 2019. We also restricted the data used to those of the best 'quality' by excluding incomplete checklists, checklists that were incidental or historical, which travelled >5 km, lasted <5 min, and lasted >240 min, minimizing the leverage of outliers on analyses [57, 58].

Filtering and aggregating the citizen science datasets. Although both datasets are global in scope, we restricted our analysis to the contiguous United States as both of these citizen science projects initiated in the United States, and thus the data are most numerous from there. For comparisons, we aggregated data at the state level. This was done to account for differences that may exist throughout the entirety of the United States including differences in user behavior and the species pools that differ geographically. For each state, the eBird and iNaturalist data were summarized, providing a list of species for each state, including the percent of total eBird checklists that a species occurred on or the percent of total observations a species accounted for, respectively. In addition, the total number of observations in that state were summarized for both eBird and iNaturalist.

We used the eBird Clements taxonomy (version 2018) and all species from iNaturalist were matched with this taxonomy. A total of 1,030 species was initially collated from the eBird checklists, but many of these only occurred one or a few times — possibly representing misidentifications that had not yet been fixed by local reviewers or escaped and exotic birds which are incorporated in the eBird dataset but not considered part of the local avifauna or of interest to our analysis here. To account for these biases, we removed species that were on <1% of eBird checklists for a given state; trimming the eBird observations to the 'core' suite of species that occur in a state (*sensu* [57]). After trimming the species and harmonizing the taxonomy with iNaturalist, there were 507 species present and considered in our main analyses presented throughout the results. Although our results here are presented using the 1% cutoff level, we tested the sensitivity of this cutoff level and found comparable results across 0, 0.5, 1, and 1.5% cutoffs.

Species-specific trait data

We tested whether four predictor variables (see Figure 1) would explain the over- or under-representation of bird species in the opportunistic citizen science data. For each species, we used a proxy for their commonness/abundance, categorized according to IUCN status, taken from HBW BirdLife international checklist version 3 (http://datazone.birdlife.org/species/taxonomy). This variable was treated as an ordinal variable in our models (see below) and encompassed Least Concern, Vulnerable, and Near Threatened species. The three species recorded as endangered were removed from this analysis due to a lack of power at this level with so few observations. For each species we used the continuous predictor variables of (1) body size; (2) color; and (3) average group size. Body sizes (adult body mass in grams) were taken from the amniote life history database compiled by [59] and were log-transformed to meet normality assumptions. Color was taken from [60] and was extracted as RGB values for six patches per species. To define a continuum of color where the brightest/most colorful (and likely most detectable species) had the highest value we combined both the 'distance from brown' and the 'brightness' of a species for the data from [60]. Distance from brown was defined as the maximum Euclidian distance in the cubic RGB color space from brown (R = 102, B = 68, G = 0) from either the upper or lower breast patch of a species. Brightness was defined as the maximum relative luminance (i.e., 0.2126R + 0.7152G + 0.0722B) from either the upper or lower breast patch of a species. These two variables were combined and scaled from 0 to 1 for all species in [60] and this value was used as our measure of color. Group size — an approximation of the gregariousness of a species — was taken from eBird as the average number of reported individuals among all checklists where a species was reported, across all data.

Statistical analysis

For the species traits we ran (1) separate models for every trait and (2) a global model with all traits included. This was done because there was much missing data for species' traits and in order to obtain maximum power for each trait, we wanted to fit individual models. For example, of the original 1,030 species detected from eBird we had body size data for 84% of species whereas for color we only had data for 44% of species. This approach allowed us to test both the independent relationships (i.e., each predictor separately against the response variable) and the relationship of a predictor given the other predictor variables (i.e., all predictors against the response variable simultaneously).

In all instances, the response variable was the residual from a log-log linear model fit between the eBird observations and the iNaturalist observations for a given species. In this instance, a species with a high (i.e., positive) residual would be over-represented in iNaturalist relative to eBird, whereas a species with a low (i.e., negative) residual would be under-represented in iNaturalist (Figure 1) relative to eBird. Each model fitted was stratified by state, accounting for differences in (1) the number of observers in a state, (2) the different relative abundance of a species throughout the United States, and (3) any other intrinsic differences that might exist among states that was not of inherent interest in our analysis. Table 1 summarizes the average sample size for the respective models fit among predictor variables. To confirm the robustness of our results at an individual state level, we ran a linear mixed effect model where the response variable was the residuals from a log-log linear model fit between the eBird observations and the iNaturalist observations for a given species, the predictor variables were the respective traits, and the random effect was state. Again, the models varied in sample size among predictor variables (see Table 1).

Data analysis and availability

All analyses were carried out in R software [61] and relied heavily on the tidyverse workflow [62]. Mixed-effects models were fitted using the lme4 package [63] and p-values were extracted using the lmerTest package [64]. Data and code to reproduce these analyses are available in a GitHub repository (https://github.com/coreytcallaghan/inaturalist_preferences) and will be permanently archived in a Zenodo repository upon acceptance of this article.

RESULTS

A total of 507 species across the United States was included in our analysis. These species comprised a total of 255,727,592 eBird and 1,107,224 iNaturalist observations. At the state level, the number of eBird checklists and the number of iNaturalist observations were strongly correlated (Figure 2a; $R^2 = 0.58$, p-value < 0.001). Similarly, at the species level, the total number of iNaturalist observations and eBird observations for a given species was strongly correlated (Figure 2b; $R^2 = 0.9$), and for both datasets the number of observations per species was positively-skewed (Figure S1). We also found that the percent of eBird checklists a species was found on and the percent of total iNaturalist observations a species comprised was strongly correlated among states (Figure S2), suggesting that species are sampled to a similar extent in opportunistic and semi-structured citizen science projects.

Our analyses showed that larger species were more likely to be over-represented in the opportunistic citizen science dataset, with the residuals from the contrast between datasets strongly associated with body size (Figure 3, estimate = 0.11, t = 31.59, p < 0.001). We found no evidence that more colorful birds were over-represented in opportunistic citizen science data (estimate = -0.01, t = -0.413, p = 0.68) and moderate evidence that gregarious species were over-represented in opportunistic citizen science data (estimate=0.033, t=6.118, p < 0.001). There was some evidence that species which are of least concern (with IUCN status treated as an ordinal variable) were more commonly found in the opportunistic citizen science data (Figure 3; Figure S3, estimate = 0.078, t = 7.73, p < 0.001). The results from these individual linear models ran at the state level were confirmed by linear mixed models with state as a random effect. When considering all traits simultaneously in a linear mixed-effects model, the above patterns remained broadly similar (Figure 4).

DISCUSSION

We compared two popular citizen science platforms throughout the continental United States and found that there was strong agreement between the relative number of observations of a species in iNaturalist and eBird, albeit there were about 200 times more observations in eBird than iNaturalist. This suggests that species are observed at similar rates in both citizen science projects — i.e., the inherent processes driving observation in both opportunistic and semi-structured citizen science projects are similar. Nevertheless, in support of our predictions (Figure 1) we found strong evidence that large-bodied birds are over-represented in the opportunistic citizen science dataset compared with the semi-structured dataset. We also found moderate evidence that common species were over-represented in the opportunistic data, and weak evidence that species in large flocks were over-represented. In contrast to our prediction, however, we found no evidence that brightly-colored species were over-represented in opportunistic citizen science data.

Our finding that large-bodied birds were over-represented in an opportunistic citizen science dataset is probably because larger-bodied birds are more detectable [53, 65]. Thus, smaller-bodied taxa are under-represented in citizen science data [66, 67, 68], but this may not be the case for other taxa such as mammals [69]. However, it is difficult to know whether this is an inherent preference shown by users of the opportunistic citizen science data, or if this comes about as part of the recording process (e.g., species' detectability; [50]). Species detectability is complex and can be linked to a species' mobility or habitat preferences of the species themselves; for example, large-bodied wading birds generally occurring in open wetlands are more easily detected than small-bodied songbirds generally occurring in dense forest understory. For amphibians and reptiles, climatic niches are not fully sampled by citizen science datasets due in part to life history and habitat sampling biases [29]. Moreover, in order for an observer to make a record in iNaturalist, usually a photo is uploaded (although sound recordings are also accepted). Because a photo is needed, the detectability process is two-fold — first, it needs to be detected, and second, it needs to be photographed, which is likely easier for many large-bodied birds. Longer lenses, often restricted to serious photographers, may be needed to photograph smaller-bodied birds whereas smartphones can usually capture a sufficient image of a larger-bodied bird. The bias towards large-bodied birds in the opportunistic data is probably a result of detectability and the ability to capture a photograph [53]. This process is similar in insects, for example, which are generally small, but larger insects (e.g., butterflies) are both easier to observe, photograph, and identify — making it likely that the biases we found in birds generalize to insects as well. Indeed, a study of bugs and beetles found that smaller species are typically less represented in citizen science data [68]. Importantly, because this represents a form of systematic bias, it is likely easier to model this bias as we know that this data is not missing at random (e.g., [70]) and thus body size should be included in various modelling processes when using opportunistic citizen science data (e.g., [67]).

Similar to body size, we found that birds which occur in larger groups (i.e., flocks) and those that are of least concern are over-represented in the opportunistic dataset. This, again, may be inherently linked to the recording process, rather than a specific bias or preference of the observers themselves. This is because common birds, that occur in large flocks, are more likely to be seen and thus submitted to the opportunistic citizen science data [65]. A larger flock will likely also provide more opportunities to capture a photograph than when observing a single individual, as has been illustrated in the detectability of animals from aerial surveys by professionals 71. One explanation for the least concern birds being over-represented in iNaturalist is user behavior — eBird data are more likely to be derived from avid birdwatchers (e.g., those that search out uncommon birds and keep serious lists) compared with iNaturalist data which may be derived from more recreational birdwatchers that focus on 'backyard' species. Another important distinction between iNaturalist and eBird is how identifications are made. In eBird, most identifications are made acoustically, whereas a photo is generally required for iNaturalist. Most traits analyzed here are related to visual encounter/identification, thus potentially explaining the differences found between the opportunistic iNaturalist and the semi-structured eBird data.

The lack of signal of the colorfulness of a species in predicting over-representation in iNaturalist could suggest that iNaturalist users are not limited by 'attractiveness/aesthetics' but mostly by detectability, as discussed above (Figure 4). Quantifying the influence of color on detectability remains a challenge (e.g., [72]). In contrast to our results, [68] found that more colorful insect species are more commonly reported, as well as more patterned and morphologically interesting species. This may suggest, at least in the case of insects, that contributors are selecting subjects based on their visual aesthetics, not just their detectability. The discrepancies between our results and that of [68] suggest that the influence of traits may vary between different taxa, making it important to explore these relationships for a range of organisms rather than extrapolating the results of birds, or bugs and beetles, to other groups.

While citizen science data are undoubtedly valuable for ecology and conservation [4, 73, 74], there remain limits to the use of citizen science datasets [13, 75]. The ability to sample remote regions, for example, will likely remain a limitation in citizen science data, and this has been well-recognized [17]. Quantifying the limits of citizen science datasets for use in ecology and conservation remains an important step for the future widespread use of citizen science data in ecology and conservation. Data-integration — where noisy citizen science data are integrated with professionally-curated datasets — will likely be increasingly important in the future use of citizen science data [76, 77]. By knowing the biases present in citizen science data, experts can preferentially generate data that maximize the integration process, for example by collecting data from remote regions. Further, professional scientists should use limited funding to target species that are likely to be under-represented in citizen science datasets — i.e., rare, small-bodied, species.

Ultimately, citizen science data will continue to perform, at least in part, a substantial role in the future of ecology and conservation research [44]. Understanding, documenting, and quantifying the biases associated with these data remains an important first step before the widespread use of these data in answering ecological questions and biodiversity monitoring [5]. Our results highlight that for birds, semi-structured eBird out-samples opportunistic iNaturalist data, but the number of observations recorded per species are strongly correlated between the two platforms. When looking at the differences in this relationship, it is clear that biases exist, likely due to the biases in the opportunistic iNaturalist data. We note that we compared the opportunistic dataset to a semi-structured dataset, and the semi-structured dataset does not necessarily represent the “truth”. The biases found here, could also be present when comparing a semi-structured dataset to true density or abundance of birds in the landscape. To better understand these differences, future research in this space should continue to focus on quantifying and documenting biases in citizen science data, and understanding how these biases change from unstructured to semi-structured to structured citizen science platforms. Nevertheless, our results demonstrate the importance of using species-specific traits, when modelling citizen science datasets [27, 29, 52, 78, 79, 80].

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

CTC conceived and led the study with input from all authors. CTC performed the analyses with input from all authors. CTC wrote the first version of the manuscript and all authors contributed to editing the manuscript.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author(s) declare no competing interests.

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FIGURES

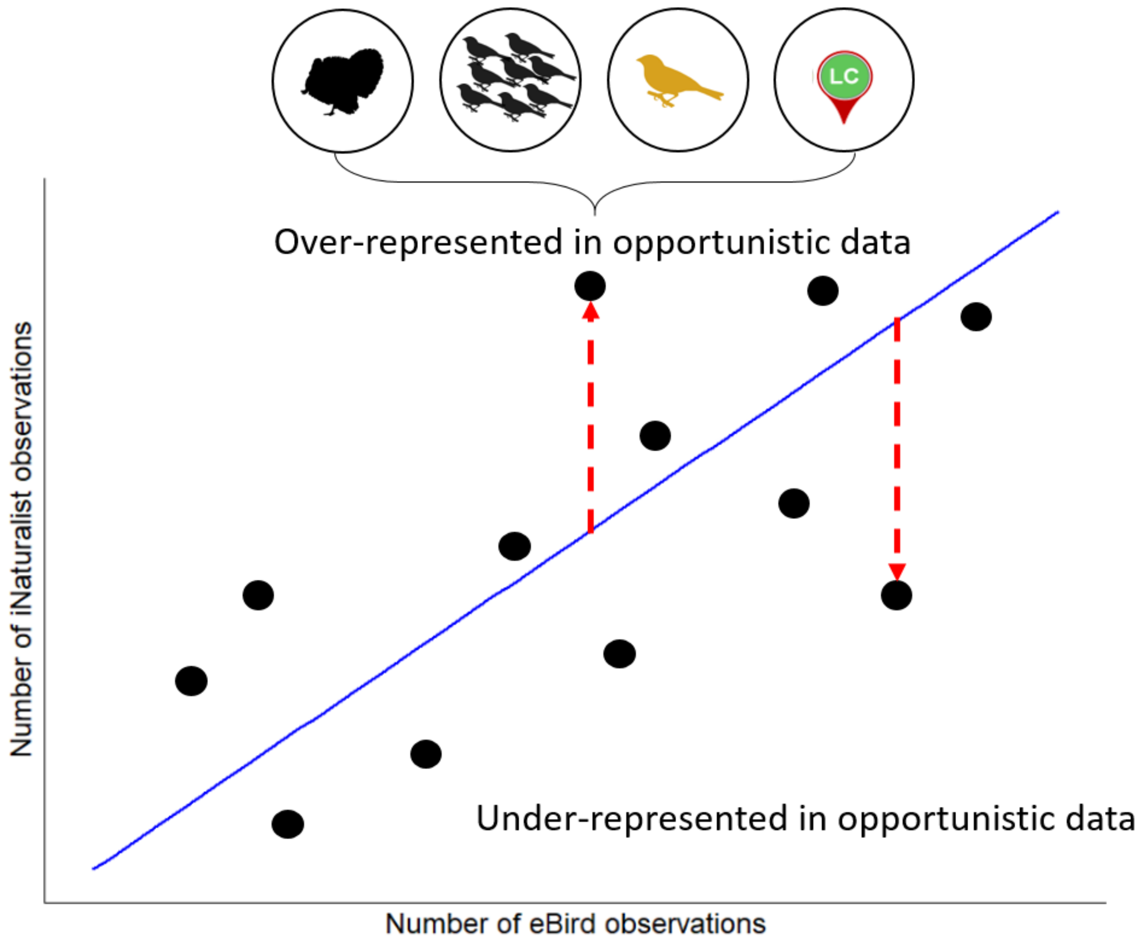

Figure 1. A conceptual figure depicting the methods used in our analysis. We used the residual from the relationship between the number of eBird observations (i.e., semi-structured citizen science observations) and iNaturalist observations (i.e., opportunistic citizen science observations) to quantify the over- or under-representation of a species in opportunistic citizen science data. We predicted that species which were over-represented in opportunistic iNaturalist data would be larger in size, occur more frequently in large flocks, be brighter in color, and be categorized as Least Concern IUCN status (a proxy for commonness).

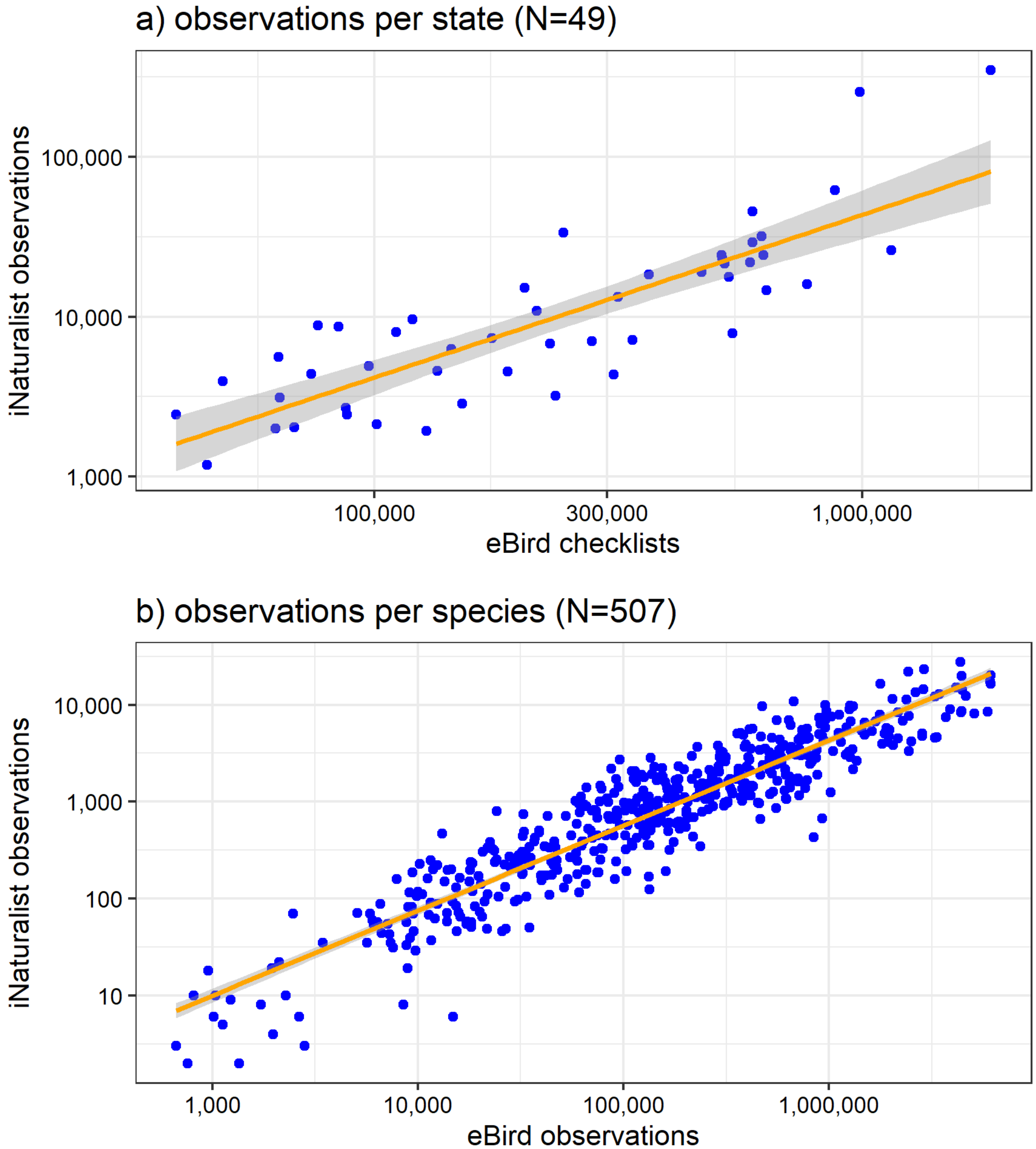

Figure 2. a) The relationship between the total number of eBird checklists and total number of iNaturalist observations for 49 states, including the District of Columbia. There was strong evidence that these variables were correlated (R^2=0.58, p-value <0.001) suggesting that sampling between datasets is correlated among states. b) The relationship between the number of observations for a species from eBird (x-axis) and the number of observations for a species from iNaturalist (y-axis) for only eBird species which were found on >1% of eBird checklists.

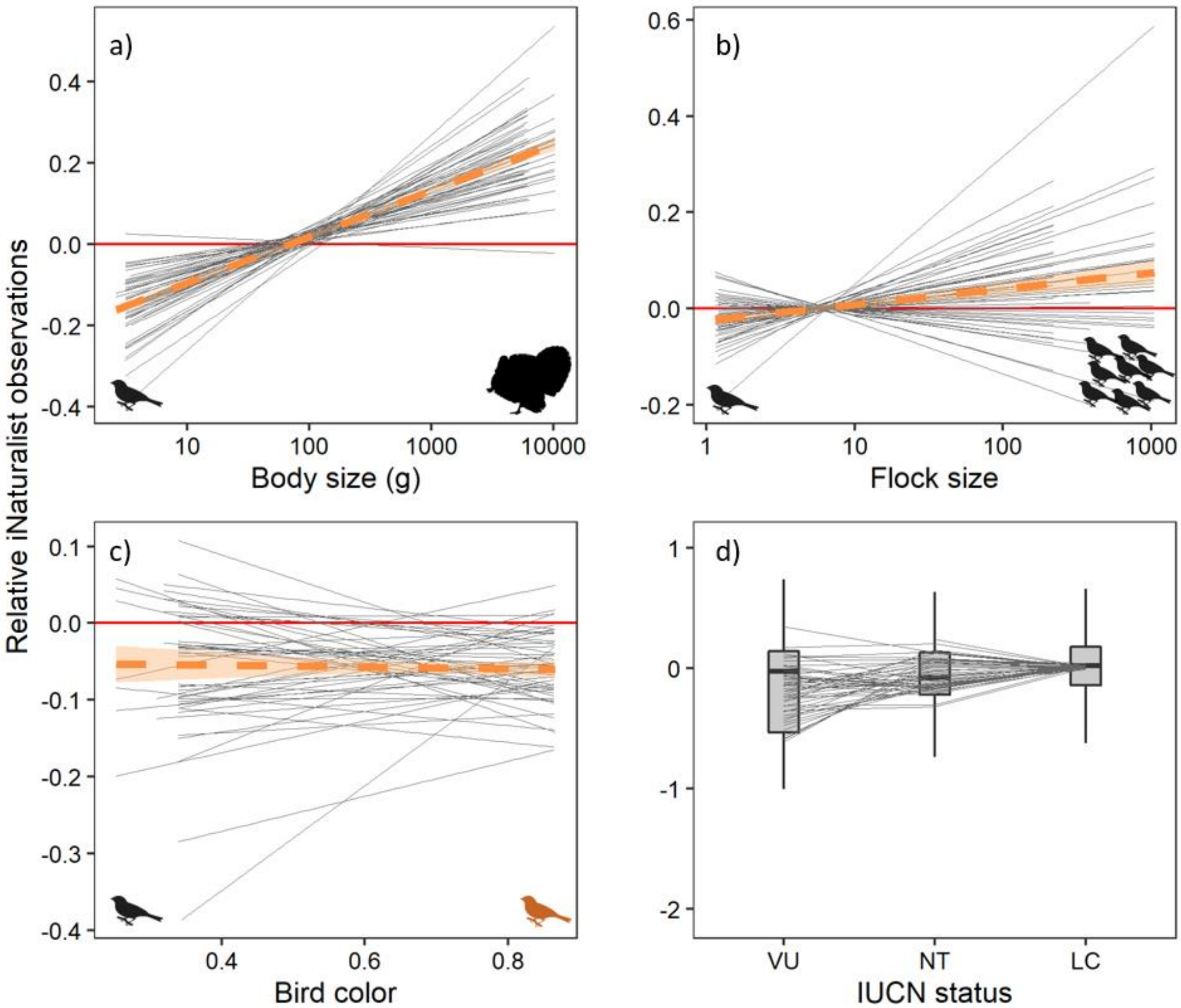

Figure 3. The relationship between a) body size of a species, b) flock size, c) color and d) commonness and the residuals of a linear model fit between iNaturalist and eBird observations (see Figure 1). These results demonstrate that there is a strong bias of body size in iNaturalist compared with eBird. Positive values on the y-axis mean over-represented in iNaturalist and negative values on the y-axis mean under-represented in iNaturalist. Body size and flock size are represented on a log10 scale. Each line represents a state (N=49). For a-c), the overall relationship pooling states is represented by the orange fitted line and 95% confidence interval.

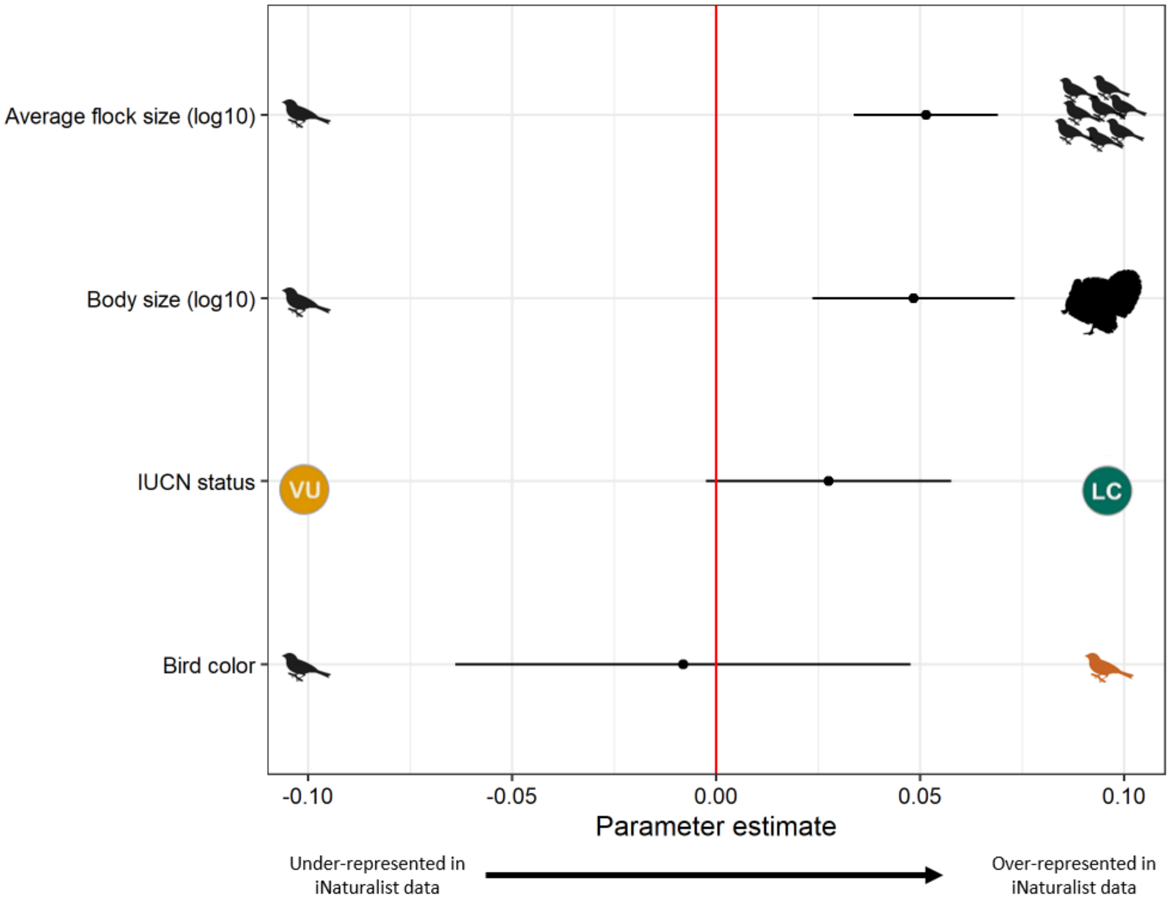

Figure 4. Results of a linear mixed effect model where all four variables were considered simultaneously, and state was a random effect. Strong support was found for body size and flock size (their 95% confidence interval does not overlap 0), whereas moderate support was found for IUCN status, and no support was found for color.

TABLES

Table 1. A summary of the average number of observations in a model among states and the standard deviation of the number of observations in a model. The N for the mixed effects models represents the total number of observations in each model.

State-specific models (N=49)			Mixed effects model
	Mean number of obs	SD of obs	Number of obs
Body size	158.02	18.11	7743
Color	92.69	10.62	4542
Flock size	177.59	21.44	8702
IUCN status	155.76	17.78	7629
All variables			3986

SUPPLEMENTARY FIGURES

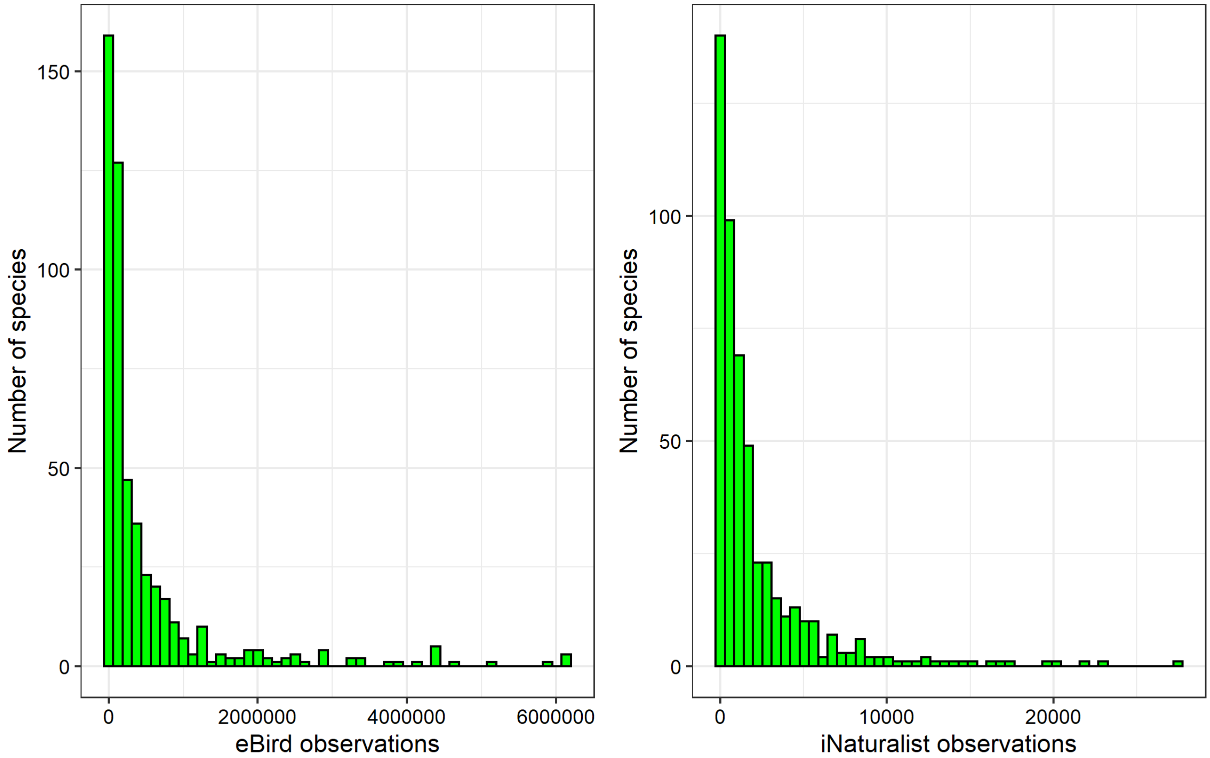

Figure S1. Histograms of the number of observations for a species from both eBird and iNaturalist citizen science projects.

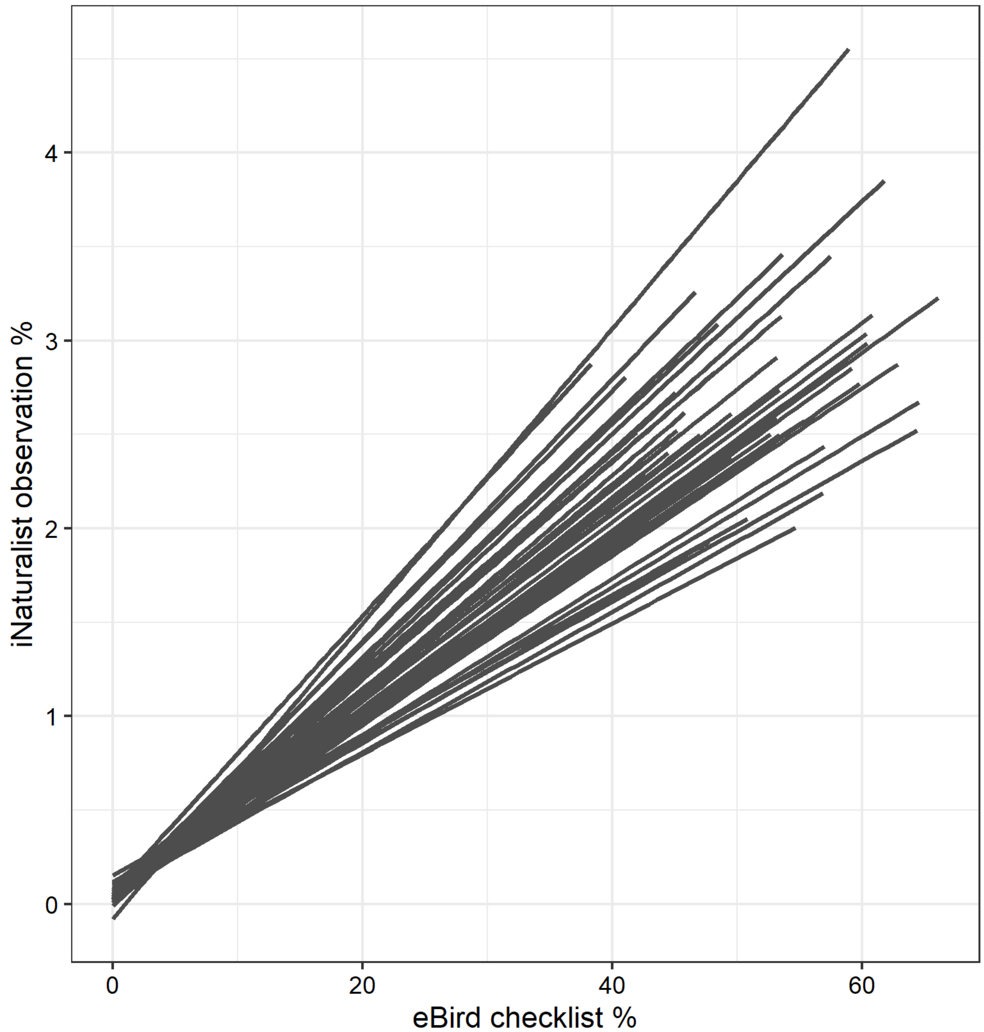

Figure S2. Among states (each line represents a state; N=49) we found that the percent of eBird checklists a species was found on and the percent of all iNaturalist observations a species comprised was strongly correlated.

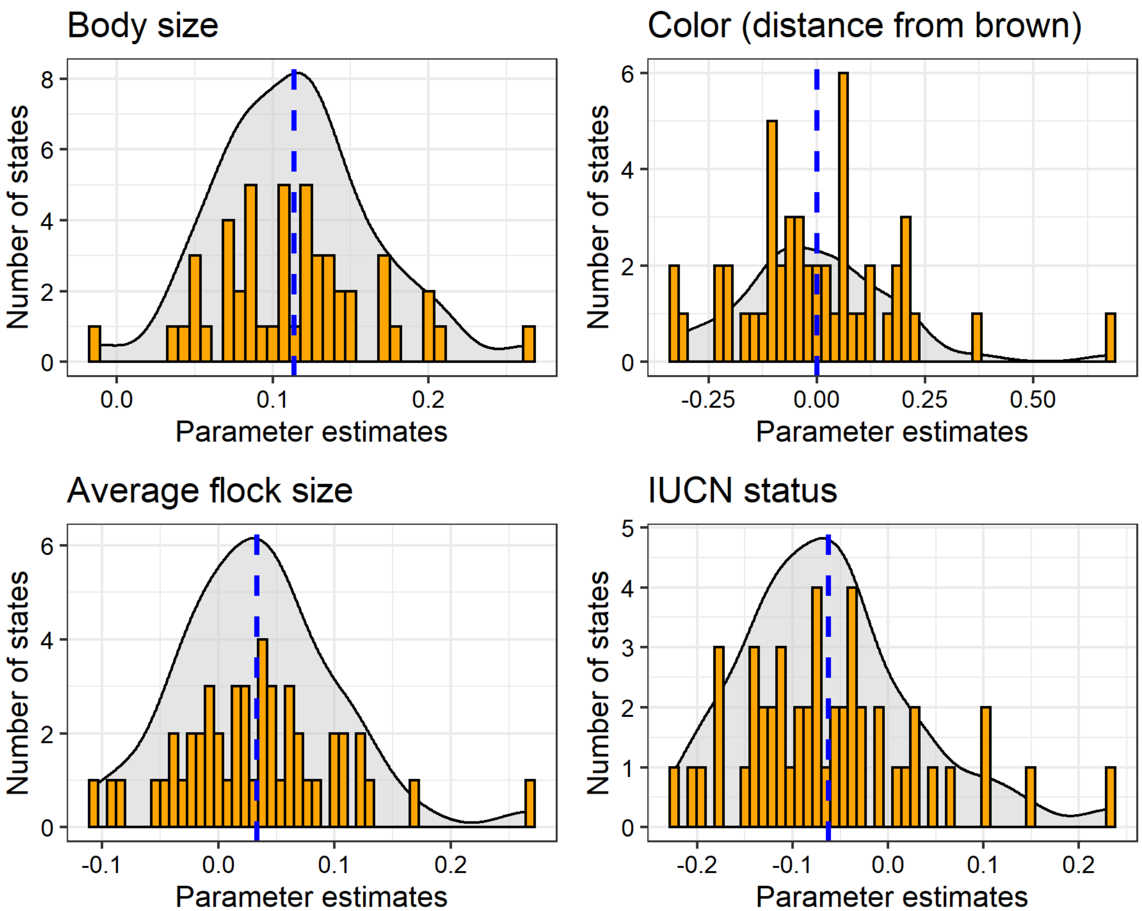

Figure S3. Distributions of parameter estimates of our individual models for our four predictor variables of interest. The x-axis represents the parameter estimate for a linear model between the residuals and the associated predictor variables, and the y-axis represents the number of states (i.e., models) which are associated with that histogram bin.