

Twitter for Ecologists

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(with a little bit of input from @panemma and @BritishEcolSoc)

This time last year I was a self-confessed Twitter sceptic. All the waffling on about it in the media made me suspicious: what could an ecologist possibly have to gain from using something that seems to specialise in inane blatherings of celebrities? Then at the BES conference last year a bunch of my friends started raving about Twitter after seeing science journalist Ed Yong (@edyong209) extolling its virtues. Suddenly they were all using it to follow what was going on around the conference. Back at work I quickly got Twitter envy. I decided to take the plunge and join the cool kids. I signed myself up.

My first forays into the world of Twitter were tentative. Initially it was a steep learning curve, full of jargon that I couldn't get my head round (see *'Twitter Glossary'*). Also all my 'followers' seemed to consist almost entirely of young ladies in bikinis or various states of undress. After my initial excitement at somehow having attracted a flock of rare ecology groupies, I realised that these people were, in fact, spammers who sent me links trying to get me to buy things. I don't know if female Twitter users get 'followed' by men in tiny Speedos trying to sell them things – I suspect not (*nope, we get women in bikinis too – @panemma*). Following this disappointment I decided to hunt down scientists and journalists I knew were on Twitter and 'followed' them. After a week or two one of the many reasons Twitter could be useful began to dawn on me: even if I didn't interact with anyone, it had become my own, personalized ecological news ticker, the equivalent of a 24-hour news channel but only for stuff I was interested in. I was finding out about papers and stories on policy related to conservation and ecology that I would never have come across any other way. On its own this has helped me to broaden my reading, find useful tools for my work and keep in mind the wider context of my research (See Box 1 for more examples of things that I've learnt from Twitter).

However, Twitter isn't just a fancy way of getting personalized news. It can be used to communicate with people in your field from all over the world, even people you don't know. Think of it as an extension of your university department. I find this useful all the time and Twitter allows me to talk about things that I would normally have little outlet for where I'm based. Also, the openness of Twitter means it's less formal than email. Want to know something about tools to produce

Box 1 – 10 things for which Twitter has been invaluable over the last year

1. I educated myself on the issues surrounding the debate on open science and as a result, I attended a live debate at Oxford University
2. I learnt how to avoid giving ugly presentations
3. I followed the debate surrounding the GM trials by Rothamsted researchers with @senseaboutscience
4. I found a tool to correct species names using most recent taxonomy
5. It helped me get increasingly obsessed with evidence-based policy and management after following @Bill_Sutherland, @Ben Goldacre and @TimHarford.
6. I learnt about the 'map of life' project, which aims to bring together disparate sources of species distribution data
7. I learnt about different ways for visualising large networks
8. I learnt that someone has come up with the word 'sustainagility'. Seriously.
9. I informed myself on the debate over organic vs conventional crops
10. I followed the International Congress for Conservation Biology online

phylogenies? Or do you need help with some R code that's giving you trouble? Post them on Twitter and you're sure to get a response. I've been amazed at how useful some of the things I've found on Twitter have been for my work. For example, I recently found a tool that uses the latest taxonomy to correct the species names in my database. This kind of information is invaluable and has actually helped in the analysis for one of my chapters. I would have had no idea where to start with this, had it not been for Twitter.

Twitter can also be great at helping academics engage with the public. For example, my old office mate Tom August (@tomaugust85) was running a project in Wytham Woods near Oxford to study bat social networks, for which he needed volunteers. He regularly used Twitter to post pictures of bats while he was in the field, keeping potential volunteers informed of the project as well as showing them what kind of fieldwork to expect. Though Tom didn't start using Twitter until late on in his PhD, he told me that he wishes he had found it earlier, as it could've helped him to get more volunteers for his fieldwork. This kind of use of Twitter

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has great scope and I would recommend anyone who's doing work similar to Tom's to sign up to Twitter and start promoting their stuff.

Box 2 – 10 Tips for academic twitter users.

1. To avoid too much distraction, only use twitter at certain times of the day. Set up an account with hootsuite (www.hootsuite.com) to allow you to schedule tweets throughout the day.
2. Use a personalised avatar (the little picture that represents you on Twitter). The default 'egg' makes you look like a spammer. Avoid using a photo of you in a bikini (or tiny Speedos), this will also make people think you are a spammer, especially if you're unfeasibly attractive.
3. Vary what you post; just posting links on the same stuff all the time gets dull quickly. By all means tweet about your own work; just don't tweet only about your own work.
4. Use the Twitter search functions to find subjects that are of interest to you, this way you can see what other people are talking about.
5. Learn the 'hashtags' (see *Twitter Glossary*) for your subject area, common ones are #phdchat, #ecology, #biodiversity and #conservation
6. Conduct conversations. Twitter is only half the fun when it feels like you're just shouting into the void.
7. Try to reply to people who tweet you, otherwise you just look rude.
8. Don't be afraid to show your personality, academics are allowed personalities too, despite what you may have heard
9. Tweet from conferences using hashtags, these allow people to learn about talks that they didn't have the chance to go to.
10. Follow me @philip_a_martin – It's the only reason I agreed to write this article in the first place.

The most obvious benefit of Twitter for ecologists is communicating your science to the media, the public and to other scientists. Indeed, a number of ecologists got in touch with me while I was writing this article to tell me about coverage they got in the media and on blogs as a direct result of them being on Twitter: journalists have picked up on anything from a new paper, to a species found during fieldwork that was previously considered locally extinct, to a study still in its planning stages. The great beauty of Twitter

is that even work that is quite 'niche' in its appeal, and might not get mainstream media attention, will have an audience. All this said, to be in a position to promote yourself you need to put in the hard yards and get some followers, otherwise you're simply going to be tweeting to yourself. To do this you'll need to have been on Twitter for a while and people will need a reason to follow you. If you're just promoting yourself on a constant basis, people will probably stop following you. However, if you make what you want to say interesting and useful you'll pick up followers in no time.

There will always be people who are anti-Twitter, saying they haven't got time for such frivolities or that it doesn't offer anything new or useful. That's fine. If you think that, Twitter is probably not for you. But for those of you who would like a personalised source of news, articles and tools, as well as a way to promote your science, give it a go. Just beware of young women in bikinis. They're not worth the risk. At least not on Twitter.

Representative pic of my twitter feed, taken on my tiny netbook screen:



Oh and a picture of me:



Box 3 – A Twitter Glossary (in order of usefulness)

Twitter: An information network made up of 140-character messages from all over the world.

Tweet, tweeting, tweeted: The act of posting a message (a "Tweet") on Twitter.

Tweet (noun): A message posted via Twitter containing 140 characters or fewer

Tweeter, Twitterer, Tweeps: Twitter user(s)

@ is used to call out usernames in tweets, e.g. Hello @panemma! When a username is preceded by the @ sign, it becomes a link to a Twitter profile and the person can see that they've been named in a tweet

Follow someone on Twitter: to subscribe to their Tweets or updates on the site.

Follower: a Twitter user who has followed you

Hashtag: The # symbol is used to mark keywords or topics in a Tweet; it's a way of linking tweets on different subjects and reaching a greater audience.

#FF: "Follow Friday." Twitter users often suggest who others should follow on Fridays by tweeting with the hashtag #FF

RT: Retweet. A Tweet by another user, forwarded to you by someone you follow. Often used to spread news or share valuable findings on Twitter

MT: abbreviation for "Modified Tweet." Placed before the retweeted text when it has been retweeted with modifications

HT or h/t: "hat tip." A way of acknowledging the person who originally shared the content being tweeted

OH: most often means "overheard" in Tweets. Used as a way to quote funny things people overhear

Parody: Twitter users are allowed to create parody Twitter accounts, as well as commentary and fan accounts; the username in this case is often prefaced by 'fake', e.g. @fakeelsevier

BES Tweeps

If you want to give it a go and don't know where to start, here's a list of BES members, groups journals and staff members to follow:

@BritishEcolSoc (us!)

@BES_Invasive (Invasive SIG)

@BESMacroecol (Macroecology SIG)

@BESForests (Forests SIG)

@BES_Tropical (Tropical SIG)

@BESCentenary (profile for the Centenary celebrations)

@KMDevine (Karen, BES Education Officer)

@YoungEcoBES (Profile that supports young ecologists with careers, training and useful info)

@MethodsEcolEvol (BES Methods in Ecology and Evolution)

@AnimalEcology (BES Journal of Animal Ecology)

@JEcology (BES Journal of Ecology)

@FunEcology (BES Functional Ecology)

@JAppliedEcology (BES Journal of Applied Ecology)

@BESPolicy (BES Policy)

@juliagpjones

@Bill_Sutherland

@tomjwebb

@beckerhopper

@drnickisaac

@RobFreckleton

@panemma

and of course:

@Philip_A_Martin