Holstonia Bigfoot Investigations
Foundations Series No. 2

Detection Limits and Biological Inference Under Structured Uncertainty

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Version of Record: This document constitutes the authoritative version of this work. Please cite the version available at holstonia-investigations.org. Revised editions, if issued, will be explicitly identified.

Abstract

The study of rare or unverified organisms is governed as much by the physics of detection as by the biology of the organisms themselves. Across ecological research, it is well established that species may persist undetected when encounter probability is low, sampling is incomplete, or behavioral and environmental factors suppress observability. Failure to detect an organism therefore cannot be interpreted without reference to detection constraints.

This paper synthesizes detection theory, occupancy modeling, and inferential logic to establish a framework for evaluating biological claims under conditions of imperfect observation. Emphasis is placed on proportional inference: conclusions must not exceed the informational content permitted by the detection environment. By clarifying the relationship between observability and inference, this analysis provides methodological grounding for subsequent treatments of evidentiary interpretation, ecological modeling, and non-detection.

The objective is neither to defend nor to dismiss any specific biological claim, but to ensure that inference proceeds within the limits imposed by detectability itself.

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1. Introduction

Scientific observation is often treated as a transparent window onto biological reality. Yet decades of ecological research have demonstrated that detection is neither automatic nor guaranteed. Organisms may occupy landscapes without being observed, sometimes for extended periods, when encounter processes are constrained by rarity, behavior, terrain, or sampling effort.

The distinction between **presence** and **detectability** is therefore foundational to responsible biological inference. When detection probability is less than one—a condition common in wildlife research—non-observation cannot be interpreted as straightforward evidence of absence (MacKenzie et al., 2002).

Despite its centrality within ecology, this principle is frequently underappreciated in discussions of anomalous biological claims. Observational scarcity is often treated as self-interpreting rather than as a statistical and ecological condition requiring analysis. The resulting inferences risk exceeding what the detection environment can support.

This paper argues that detection limits should be understood as a governing constraint on biological reasoning under uncertainty. Before evaluating evidence, modeling populations, or interpreting non-detection, investigators must first establish the conditions under which observation is expected to occur.

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2. Detection as a Probabilistic Process

Observation is not a binary event but a probabilistic one. Modern occupancy frameworks formalize this insight by distinguishing the probability that a site is occupied from the probability that the species is detected given occupancy (MacKenzie et al., 2006).

Expressed simply:

Presence ≠ Detection
Non-detection ≠ Absence

This distinction has reshaped ecological monitoring by demonstrating that repeated surveys are often required before strong conclusions can be drawn about species distribution. Even well-studied animals may go undetected when densities are low or detection mechanisms are weak.

Detection probability is influenced by multiple interacting variables:

- organism abundance
- behavioral crypticity
- temporal activity patterns
- habitat complexity
- observer skill
- sampling technology

Failure to model these variables invites inferential overreach.

Recognizing detection as probabilistic shifts the analytical question from *"Was the organism observed?"* to *"Given the detection environment, how likely was observation?"*

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3. Sources of Detection Constraint

Detection is shaped not only by organism traits but by the structure of the landscape and the limits of observers.

Rarity

Low-density species inherently produce fewer encounter opportunities. Rediscoveries of organisms once presumed extinct demonstrate that populations may persist below intuitive detection thresholds for decades (Scheffers et al., 2011).

Behavioral Avoidance

Many species actively minimize exposure through nocturnality, habitat selection, or flight responses. Predator-sensitive taxa, in particular, may alter movement patterns in ways that suppress detectability.

Environmental Occlusion

Dense vegetation, rugged terrain, and limited sightlines reduce encounter probability independently of species abundance.

Sampling Limitations

No monitoring regime samples continuously across space and time. Detection is therefore conditioned on where observers are not present as much as where they are.

Together, these constraints form what may be termed the **detection environment**—the total set of conditions governing whether observation is likely to occur.

Inference that ignores this environment risks conflating observational silence with biological absence.

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4. The Base-Rate Problem in Encounter Interpretation

Human intuition is poorly calibrated for reasoning about rare events. When base rates are low, even long sequences of non-observation may remain statistically compatible with persistence.

Research on rediscovered species suggests that apparent disappearances often reflect monitoring gaps rather than true extinction (Fisher & Blomberg, 2011). Statistical treatments further demonstrate that extinction cannot be inferred confidently without modeling the probability of observation itself (Solow, 2005).

The relevant question is therefore not whether detection has occurred, but whether detection **should reasonably have been expected** under the sampling regime in place.

Absent that expectation, non-detection carries limited inferential weight.

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5. Strong Inference and Detection Logic

Durable scientific progress depends upon the systematic evaluation of competing hypotheses rather than reliance on single explanatory frames (Platt, 1964). Within detection-limited contexts, this principle requires investigators to consider multiple pathways capable of producing observational scarcity.

For example, low encounter rates may reflect:

- true absence
- extreme rarity
- behavioral avoidance

- spatial mismatch between organism and observer
- technological insufficiency

Each mechanism generates different predictions. The role of scientific reasoning is not to select prematurely among them, but to narrow the field through structured observation.

Such restraint aligns with the broader logic of falsifiability: hypotheses gain strength only insofar as they survive exposure to conditions under which detection would be expected (Popper, 1959).

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6. Detection Limits as an Inferential Boundary

Detection constraints function as an evidentiary ceiling. Conclusions cannot legitimately exceed what the detection environment permits.

This does not imply that all claims are equally plausible, nor that uncertainty should be preserved indefinitely. Rather, it establishes proportionality as the governing rule of inference. Evidence must be interpreted within the informational bandwidth available.

Philosophical treatments of scientific reasoning emphasize that evidential support is comparative rather than absolute; hypotheses are weighed against alternatives in light of available data (Sober, 2008). Detection limits therefore do not suspend evaluation—they structure it.

Understanding where the ceiling lies is itself a form of knowledge.

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7. Technological Optimism and Its Limits

Advances in camera trapping, environmental DNA, passive acoustic monitoring, and remote sensing have transformed wildlife detection. Yet technological expansion does not eliminate uncertainty. Tools extend observational reach unevenly across taxa and landscapes.

Camera traps, for example, remain sensitive to placement strategy and animal movement patterns. Environmental DNA depends on shedding rates, transport processes, and degradation dynamics. Acoustic detection presumes signal production within the monitored frequency range.

Technology alters detection probability; it does not render detection inevitable.

Assuming otherwise risks substituting technological confidence for inferential discipline.

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8. Implications for the Study of Rare or Contested Organisms

Recognizing detection limits has several implications for responsible inquiry:

- Observational scarcity must be interpreted within modeled detection environments.
- Sampling effort should be treated as analytically meaningful rather than incidental.
- Claims of presence require evidentiary support; claims of absence require demonstrated detection adequacy.
- Research programs should specify the conditions under which detection would reasonably be expected.

These commitments shift debate away from intuition and toward measurable constraints.

Importantly, detection logic is portable. It applies equally to cryptic carnivores, rediscovered amphibians, elusive primates, and other taxa occupying the margins of observability. Treating anomalous biological claims within this broader framework situates their study inside established scientific practice rather than outside it.

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9. From Detection to Inference

Detection limits do not resolve biological questions, but they determine the boundaries within which resolution becomes possible. Establishing these limits is therefore not preliminary to science—it is part of science itself.

When investigators calibrate expectations to the detection environment, uncertainty becomes structured rather than indeterminate. Observations gain context. Non-observations acquire meaning only when detection probability has been sufficiently constrained.

Inference, in this sense, is not the opposite of uncertainty but its disciplined expression.

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10. Conclusion

Biological inference under uncertainty begins not with evidence but with observability. Detection limits define the informational horizon within which claims may responsibly expand or contract.

Recognizing these limits does not protect hypotheses from scrutiny; it ensures that scrutiny proceeds within the architecture of ecological reality. Observation must be expected before it can be required.

By foregrounding detection as a governing constraint, investigators cultivate a posture of proportional reasoning—one that neither outruns the data nor mistakes silence for resolution. Such discipline allows inquiry to proceed without premature closure while preserving the capacity for decisive inference when conditions warrant.

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