

1 **Migratory blackcaps tested in Emlen funnels can orient at 85 but not at 88 degrees**  
2 **magnetic inclination**

3 **(Running head: Inclination threshold in blackcaps)**

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11

12 **Summary**

13 Migratory birds are known to use the Earth's magnetic field as an orientation cue on their  
14 tremendous journeys between their breeding and overwintering grounds. The magnetic  
15 compass of migratory birds relies on the magnetic field's inclination, i.e. the angle between  
16 the magnetic field lines and the Earth's surface. As a consequence, vertical or horizontal field  
17 lines corresponding to 0° or 90° inclination should offer no utilizable information on where to  
18 find North or South. So far, very little is known about how small deviations from horizontal  
19 or vertical inclination migratory birds can detect and use as a reference for their magnetic  
20 compass. Here we ask: what is the steepest inclination angle at which a migratory bird, the  
21 Eurasian blackcap (*Sylvia atricapilla*), can still perform magnetic compass orientation in  
22 Emlen funnels? Our results show that blackcaps are able to orient in an Earth's strength  
23 magnetic field with inclination angles of 67° and 85°, but fail to orient in a field with 88°  
24 inclination. This suggests that the steepest inclination angle enabling magnetic compass  
25 orientation in migratory blackcaps tested in Emlen funnels lies between 85 and 88 degrees.

26

27 **Introduction**

28 Since 50 years it is known that birds are able to use the Earth's magnetic field for orientation  
29 (Merkel and Wiltschko, 1965). In contrast to a man-made compass that works on the basis of  
30 the polarity of the magnetic field, the birds' magnetic compass is an inclination compass  
31 (Wiltschko and Wiltschko, 1972; 1995). This means that birds do not differentiate between

32 North and South but between poleward and equatorward (the direction in which the field lines  
33 and the Earth's surface form the smaller angle is defined as equatorward; (Wiltschko and  
34 Wiltschko, 1972; 1995). Therefore, at the magnetic equator or at the magnetic poles, where  
35 the inclination is  $0^\circ$  and  $90^\circ$ , respectively, the birds are faced with the problem that the Earth's  
36 magnetic field provides no or ambiguous directional information. In other words, there is no  
37 larger or smaller inclination angle to detect. Wiltschko and Wiltschko (1992) suggested that  
38 for transequatorial migrants, the crossing of the equator serves as a trigger and changes the  
39 heading from equatorward to poleward. Cochran et al. (2004) has suggested that the magnetic  
40 compass can be calibrated by celestial cues and that this mechanism might help birds to cross  
41 the magnetic equator. Even with these suggestions, it remains an interesting question, how  
42 wide the range around the magnetic poles and the magnetic equator might be where the birds  
43 are unable to use their magnetic compass.

44 Earlier studies showed that migratory wheatears (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) displaced from Sweden  
45 ( $70^\circ$  inclination) to Greenland ( $81^\circ$  inclination) were still able to orient even under total  
46 overcast conditions (Sandberg et al., 1991). Furthermore, Gambel's white-crowned sparrows  
47 (*Zonotrychia leucophrys gambelii*) tested in Emlen funnels in the wild were oriented at  
48 locations with natural inclination angles up to  $88.6^\circ$ , but failed to orient at  $89.7^\circ$  inclination  
49 (Akesson et al., 2001). We wanted to complement these field-based studies by performing  
50 experiments under controlled, constant laboratory conditions. We performed our experiments  
51 with Eurasian blackcaps, since the Eurasian blackcap is an iconic species in the study of  
52 migration (Berthold et al. 1992; Helbig 1996; Berthold 1999), and because it has a more  
53 southerly range than the white-crowned sparrows that Akesson et al. (2001) studied.

54 Knowing how steep an inclination angle migratory birds can use for magnetic compass  
55 orientation under laboratory conditions in Emlen funnels is also important, because "vertical"  
56 fields have often been used in earlier studies whenever a magnetic condition was required that  
57 should not provide directional information to the birds (e.g. Bingman 1987; Able & Able  
58 1997). But how vertical does a field actually have to be to provide no directional information  
59 to the tested birds? This question is particularly relevant because vertical magnetic fields  
60 produced by coil systems will inevitably be vertical only in the exact centre of the coils. Birds  
61 placed in funnels not located in the exact centre of the coil system would be exposed to  
62 magnetic conditions with inclinations, which systematically deviate from  $90^\circ$  (Kirschvink,  
63 1991; Mouritsen, 1998). Depending on the dimensions of the coil system used (the bigger and  
64 more accurately built the better) and on the number of orientation cages placed  
65 simultaneously in each coil system, these deviations from the vertical can become important,

66 so that the birds might in fact have been able to use their magnetic inclination compass in the  
67 vertical field condition. Consequently, random orientation might appear, not because no  
68 useful magnetic information was available to the birds, but because the magnetic field  
69 information pointed in different directions during different tests.

70 Taking the unavoidable heterogeneities created by any coil system into account becomes  
71 particularly important when one wants to test birds' abilities to orient in magnetic fields with  
72 very steep inclinations, since even small heterogeneities in the created fields can flip the  
73 inclination across the 90° point, and thus create a field that should guide the birds in a  
74 completely different direction. Hence, the aim of the present study was to use a very accurate,  
75 three-dimensional, Merritt four-coil per axis system (Zapka et al. 2009; Hein et al. 2010) to  
76 investigate, whether night-migratory blackcaps (*Sylvia atricapilla*) can use their magnetic  
77 compass in a field with 85° and 88° inclination angle when they are tested in Emlen funnels  
78 inside an electromagnetically screened (Engels et al. 2014) wooden hut without access to any  
79 celestial cues.

80

## 81 **Results**

82 A group of very well-oriented blackcaps was tested in a magnetic field, which corresponded  
83 to the local geomagnetic field (Fig. 1a, control, NMF, 67° inclination). They oriented  
84 significantly towards their appropriate autumn migratory direction (group mean orientation  
85  $219 \pm 35^\circ$ , length of the group mean vector  $r = 0.73$ ,  $N = 9$ ,  $p < 0.01$  [Rayleigh test]; Fig. 1a),  
86 and significantly turned their orientation as predicted when the horizontal component of the  
87 field was turned 120° counterclockwise (group mean orientation  $90 \pm 36^\circ$ ,  $r = 0.66$ ,  $N = 9$ ,  $p <$   
88  $0.05$ ; Fig. 1d, control, CMF, 67° inclination). Their orientation direction was significantly  
89 different in the normal (NMF) and changed magnetic field (CMF), as indicated by the lack of  
90 overlap of the 95% confidence intervals.

91 When the inclination was increased to 85°, the birds' magnetic compass orientation  
92 capabilities were unaffected (Fig. 1b, NMF, group mean orientation  $182^\circ \pm 29^\circ$ ,  $r = 0.73$ ,  $N =$   
93  $9$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; and Fig. 1e, CMF, group mean orientation  $87^\circ \pm 31^\circ$ ,  $r = 0.76$ ,  $N = 8$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).  
94 The birds' change of orientation between the NMF and the CMF conditions was significant  
95 (Watson-Williams F-test (WW):  $F = 24.005$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.001$  in the control condition and  
96  $F = 16.152$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = 0.001$  for the 85° inclination condition). The orientation was not  
97 significantly different under 67° and 85° inclination in the NMF (WW:  $F = 2.593$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p =$   
98  $0.127$ ) or in the CMF (WW:  $F = 0.019$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = 0.892$ ) (Batschelet, 1981). The Mardia-

99 Watson-Wheeler (MWW) test confirms these findings (MWW:  $\chi^2=14.664$ ,  $df= 1$ ,  $p< 0.001$  in  
100 the control condition and  $\chi^2=8.044$ ,  $df= 1$ ,  $0.005>p>0.001$  for the  $85^\circ$  inclination condition,  
101 between NMF and CMF respectively; as well as  $\chi^2=0.985$   $df= 1$ ,  $0.5>p>0.25$  between NMF  
102  $67^\circ$  and NMF  $85^\circ$ ;  $\chi^2=2.601$ ,  $df= 1$ ,  $0.25>p>0.1$  between CMF  $67^\circ$  and CMF  $85^\circ$ ) (Batschelet,  
103 1981).

104 However, when the birds were tested in the magnetic field with an inclination of  $88^\circ$ , the  
105 birds' orientation was random (Fig. 1c, NMF, group mean orientation  $2^\circ$ ,  $r = 0.15$ ,  $N = 8$ ,  $p =$   
106  $0.824$ ; and Fig. 1f, CMF, group mean orientation  $216^\circ$ ,  $r = 0.17$ ,  $N= 8$ ,  $p = 0.738$ ).

107 During the experiments, we continuously measured the horizontal direction, the inclination  
108 angle and the total magnetic field strength that our birds experienced. The magnetic field  
109 recordings documented that the magnetic fields our coils produced were extremely accurate  
110 and consistent throughout the testing periods (see Tab.1).

111

112

### 113 **Discussion**

114 Our experiments show that blackcaps tested in Emlen funnels (Emlen and Emlen, 1966;  
115 Mouritsen et al., 2009) are able to orient at an inclination of up to  $85^\circ$ , but fail to orient at an  
116 inclination angle of  $88^\circ$  at magnetic field intensities around 49,300 nT (local magnetic field of  
117 Oldenburg, Germany). Therefore, a deviation of  $5^\circ$  from the vertical still seems to enable  
118 blackcaps to use their magnetic inclination compass to choose and maintain migratory  
119 orientation in a similar direction and with a similar precision to the ones showed at  $67^\circ$   
120 inclination (the direction and length of the group mean vector is similar when the same birds  
121 were tested in  $67^\circ$  and  $85^\circ$  inclination).

122 This is impressive, since it means that their magnetic compass sensory system (Ritz et al.  
123 2000; Mouritsen et al. 2005; Heyers et al. 2007; Zapka et al. 2009; Rodgers & Hore 2009;  
124 Treiber et al. 2012; Mouritsen & Hore 2012) must either be able to distinguish minute angle  
125 differences relative to gravity or be able to detect minute differences in the strength of the  
126 horizontal component of the magnetic field relative to the vertical component of the same  
127 field. How small these differences are can be illustrated with a few simple biological and  
128 trigonometrical considerations.

129 No matter how the birds' magnetic compass is working, somewhere in the nervous system,  
130 the projection of the magnetic vector onto the horizontal (Earth surface) plane or the exact  
131 inclination angle relative to gravity needs to be determined in one form or another since the

132 bird must orient in a compass direction, which is defined in the Earth surface (horizontal)  
 133 plane or relative to gravity. Therefore, the Cartesian coordinate system is useful for a  
 134 principle illustration of why it should be very difficult to determine a migratory direction  
 135 accurately in a geomagnetic field with very steep inclination. Furthermore, the mean  
 136 migratory directions seem to be quite precisely inherited (Berthold et al. 1992; Helbig 1996;  
 137 Berthold 1999) and birds' spatiotemporal orientation programs (Mouritsen & Mouritsen 2000;  
 138 Mouritsen 2003) often involve finer changes in migratory directions along their migratory  
 139 route (Gwinner & Wiltschko 1978, Helbig et al. 1989, Liechti et al. 2012). It is therefore  
 140 important to realize that it would most likely not suffice if a magnetic compass sense only  
 141 distinguishes North from South. Exactly how precisely a night-migratory songbird needs to  
 142 determine its migratory direction with its magnetic compass in the wild is not known.  
 143 However, for the purpose of illustration (Fig. 2), we consider two situations: one requiring  
 144 that birds can determine the difference between North and 15 degrees and one requiring that  
 145 birds can determine the difference between North and 30 degrees. In the following  
 146 calculations we only consider difficulties originating from the sensory system itself. In nature,  
 147 additional spread in actual compass headings will be caused by weather, topography etc.

148 First, we consider the putative situation, where the horizontal component (that is the  
 149 projection of the magnetic vector onto the horizontal x-y plane) is either measured directly by  
 150 the birds' magnetic sensors or this information is calculated somewhere in the brain. One can  
 151 visualize the consequences of this by comparing the "North component" of the projection of  
 152 the geomagnetic field vector onto the horizontal plane when the bird with its magnetic sensors  
 153 points towards North with the same value when the bird with its sensors points 15° or 30° left  
 154 or right of North (see Fig. 2).

155 At 85° magnetic inclination, the horizontal component of the field pointing towards North is

$$156 \quad x = \cos(\alpha) * B \quad (1),$$

157 where  $\alpha$  is the magnetic inclination angle (85°) and B is the magnetic field strength (49,300  
 158 nT in Oldenburg). Thus, in a 49,300 nT field with 85° inclination,  $x$  is 4,297 nT.

159 If the bird with its sensors heads 15° away from North,  $x'$  will be

$$160 \quad x' = \cos(\beta) * x \quad (2),$$

161 where  $\beta$  is the horizontal deviation angle (here 15°) from North. Thus, in a 49,300 nT field  
 162 with 85° inclination,  $x'$  is 4,150 nT. The change ( $\Delta x$ ) in the horizontal magnetic field  
 163 component is

164 
$$\Delta x = x - x'$$
 (3),

165 and therefore just 147 nT in a 49,300 nT field with 85° inclination.

166 At 88° inclination, the horizontal component of the field pointing towards North ( $x$  in Fig. 2)  
167 is 1,720 nT, and when the bird with its sensors turns towards 15°, it is 1,662 nT. The change  
168 ( $\Delta x$ ) in the horizontal component of the field that would need to be measured is just 58 nT.  
169 The values of  $\Delta x$  if we allow for a 30° error in the birds' magnetic compass heading are 576  
170 nT and 231 nT, respectively at 85° and 88° inclination.

171 Second, we consider the putative situation where the inclination angle relative to gravity is  
172 either measured directly by the birds' magnetic sensors or this information is calculated  
173 somewhere in the brain. One can visualize the consequences of this by comparing the  
174 inclination angle of the geomagnetic field vector when the bird with its magnetic sensors  
175 heads towards North with the same value when the bird with its sensors heads 15° or 30° left  
176 or right of North (see Fig. 2).

177 The inclination angle ( $\alpha'$ ) that would be measured if the bird with its magnetic sensors heads  
178 15° away from North is

179 
$$\alpha' = \tan^{-1} \left( \frac{\tan(\alpha)}{\cos(\beta)} \right)$$
 (4),

180 which is 85.17° for  $\alpha = 85^\circ$  and  $\beta = 15^\circ$ , and the difference ( $\Delta\alpha$ ) to the magnetic inclination ( $\alpha$ )  
181 experienced if the bird with its magnetic sensors heads towards magnetic North is given by

182 
$$\Delta\alpha = \alpha' - \alpha$$
 (5),

183 That is just 0.17°. Using the same logic, the change in inclination angle ( $\Delta\alpha$ ) measured if the  
184 bird with its magnetic sensors heads 30° away from North instead of North ( $\beta = 30^\circ$ ) is only  
185 0.67°. At 88° inclination, the change in inclination angle ( $\Delta\alpha$ ) that would need to be measured  
186 when the bird with its magnetic sensors points North-South compared to when it is turned 15°  
187 or 30° away from North would be only 0.07° or 0.27°, respectively (see Fig. 2).

188 The authors want to stress at this point that the model depicted in Figure 2, as well as the  
189 underlying math are by all means man-made and simple theoretical considerations using a  
190 Cartesian coordinate system (or similar to what would be measured by a three-axial  
191 magnetometer) only because such considerations are useful to visualize the problems which  
192 any magneto-sensory system needing to measure the geomagnetic field vector in 3D-space  
193 would face at steep inclinations. Figure 2 and the associated simple calculations, however,  
194 helps illustrate why separating different compass directions at very steep magnetic inclination

195 angles should be difficult. These difficulties become even more obvious when one considers  
196 the natural, rather stochastic variation in the geomagnetic field of typically 30-100 nT in any  
197 direction.

198 Considering these challenges faced at steep inclination angles, birds might have evolved  
199 behaviours and/or sensory strategies that would help them detect these minute differences.  
200 The magnetic compass of night-migratory songbirds is almost certainly embedded in their  
201 visual system (Schulten et al. 1978; Wiltschko et al. 1993; Ritz et al. 2000, 2010; Mouritsen et  
202 al. 2005; Heyers et al. 2007; Zapka et al. 2009, 2010). Mouritsen et al. (2004) observed that  
203 garden warblers (*Sylvia borin*), a species very closely related to the Eurasian blackcap,  
204 performed "head scans" (subsequent  $\sim 90^\circ$  turns of the head, clockwise and counter  
205 clockwise), and that this behaviour is correlated with the birds' magnetic compass orientation  
206 capabilities. During such a head scan, the putatively hazy, magnetically induced, visual image  
207 that the bird might perceive (Ritz et al. 2000, 2010; Solov'yov et al. 2010; Lau et al. 2012)  
208 would move across the retina, and this might facilitate the detection of minute absolute  
209 differences by determining a symmetry plane and/or maxima or minima rather than absolute  
210 value differences in nanotesla (Mouritsen et al., 2004).

211 The abilities of our blackcaps to use magnetic fields with very steep inclinations are exceeded  
212 by the birds tested by Åkesson et al. (2001): their white-crowned sparrows seemed to be well  
213 oriented using their magnetic compass at an inclination angle of  $88.6^\circ$  in a 58,100 nT field  
214 (Fig. 2e in Åkesson et al. (2001)). One possible reason for the apparent ability of white-  
215 crowned sparrows (Åkesson et al. 2001) to utilize steeper inclination angles than blackcaps  
216 (this study) could be that it is a biological adaptation to their respective breeding ranges.  
217 White-crowned sparrows' breeding range extends into areas with inclination angles up to  $84^\circ$   
218 (Hoyo et al., 1992; Cortopassi and Mewaldt, 1965) whereas the northernmost breeding areas  
219 of the Eurasian blackcap (see Fig. 3) feature inclination angles up to  $78^\circ$  (Tromsø in Norway;  
220 McLean et al., 2004; Hoyo et al., 1992).

221 Another possible reason for the apparent difference between the present study and Åkesson et  
222 al. 2001 is that we used the field strength of the geomagnetic field present in Oldenburg for all  
223 inclinations, which is considerably weaker than the polar geomagnetic fields in the  
224 experiments of Åkesson et al. (2001). This difference in field strength would not influence the  
225 angle differences that the birds would need to be able to separate, but in the stronger polar  
226 field, the absolute magnetic field strength projected down onto the horizontal plane would be  
227 larger at any given inclination angle. Thus, everything else being equal, it might be easier to

228 determine a migratory direction in stronger fields with very steep inclinations. Finally, one  
229 cannot completely rule out that the single group of birds tested outdoors at 88.7° inclination  
230 (Åkesson et al. 2001) might have had access to additional cues unavoidable in field  
231 experiments such as light gradients and olfactory cues. One very practical aspect of our study  
232 is that, in experiments where vertical magnetic fields are used as providing no directional  
233 magnetic compass information in Emlen funnels, it seems fairly safe to assume that they  
234 provide no directional information as long as the deviations from 90° do not exceed 2°.

235

236

## 237 **Materials and Methods**

238

### 239 Magnetic fields

240 The magnetic field conditions were generated by a double-wound, 3 axial, Merritt 4-coil  
241 system (Kirschvink, 1991; Zapka et al., 2009), of 2x2x2 m, operated by high-precision,  
242 constant current power supplies (KEPCO BOP 50-4M, Kepco Inc., Flushing, NY, US). The  
243 experiments took place within the center of the coils, where the field homogeneity was better  
244 than 99 % of the applied field.

245 Control experiments were performed in a magnetic field that corresponded to the natural  
246 geomagnetic field (NMF) of Oldenburg and in a magnetic field where magnetic North was  
247 turned 120° counter-clockwise (CMF). The used magnetic fields were very consistent and  
248 homogeneous (NMF and CMF: MF strength = 49,397 nT ± 65 nT [s.d.]; inclination = 67.5° ±  
249 0.2° [s.d.]; deviation from horizontal direction = 360° ± 0.02 [s.d.]). In the experimental  
250 conditions, the inclination was changed to 85° or 88° respectively while the total intensity and  
251 horizontal direction remained the same as in the equivalent control conditions. All conditions  
252 were set and controlled by a custom written computer script (written in MATLAB). During  
253 the experiments with changed inclination (see table 1), the magnetic field was monitored  
254 continuously by a fluxgate magnetometer (Meda FVM-400) and recorded by the software FM  
255 300 Front Panel (Meda, Inc., Dulles, VA, US) to confirm that all tests were run under stable  
256 magnetic field conditions. Due to the slight, unavoidable heterogeneity of the artificial  
257 magnetic fields created by the coils, minor deviations from the intended fields could not be  
258 avoided (see table 1).

259



260

261 Animals

262 10 blackcaps, *Sylvia atricapilla*, were wild-caught in August 2013 within 1km of the  
263 University of Oldenburg, Germany. The birds were housed indoors, two by two in cages  
264 placed in a windowless room under local photoperiodic conditions. The experiments were  
265 conducted during the autumn migratory season in September and October 2013 on the  
266 Wechloy Campus of the University of Oldenburg. This particular group of birds was  
267 unusually well oriented. Therefore, much fewer tests per condition had to be performed in  
268 order to get a well-oriented group in the control condition compared to what is normally  
269 required (Zapka et al., 2009; Hein et al., 2010, 2011; Engels et al., 2012). All animal  
270 procedures were performed in accordance to local and national guidelines for the use of  
271 animals in research and approved by the Animal Care and Use Committees of the LAVES  
272 (Niedersächsisches Landesamt für Verbraucherschutz und Lebensmittelsicherheit, Oldenburg,  
273 Germany).

274

275 Behavioral tests

276 All behavioral tests were performed in wooden huts covered on the inside with electrically  
277 connected aluminum plates, which, when grounded, acted as Faraday cages that shielded  
278 time-dependent electromagnetic disturbances in the frequency range up to ca. 20 MHz by  
279 approximately two orders of magnitude (Engels et al., 2014). All electrical equipment such as  
280 power supplies was placed outside the test-huts in aluminum shielded shelves to minimize  
281 electromagnetic disturbances. Within the test-huts, the static magnetic field was the only  
282 available cue for orientation.

283 All experiments started at sunset ( $\pm 10$  min.). One hour before that, the birds were placed  
284 outdoors in wooden transportation cages fitted with 7 cm diameter mesh-covered peepholes.  
285 Thereby, the birds were enabled to potentially calibrate their magnetic compass from twilight  
286 cues (Cochran et al., 2004; Muheim et al., 2006; but see Chernetsov et al., 2011;  
287 Schmaljohann et al. 2013). Directly thereafter, the birds were placed in modified Emlen  
288 funnels (Emlen and Emlen, 1966), made of aluminum (35 cm diameter, 15 cm high, walls 45°  
289 inclined). The funnels were covered with scratch sensitive paper (Blumberg GmbH, Ratingen,  
290 Germany) so that the birds' migratory restlessness became visible as scratches on the paper  
291 (Mouritsen et al., 2009). All tests were run under dim light conditions (2.5 mW/m<sup>2</sup>) produced  
292 by incandescent bulbs (spectrum in Zapka et al. (2009)).

293 Nine blackcaps were tested simultaneously in one hut twice each night. The second test  
294 started approximately 10 min. ( $\pm 5$  min.) after the end of the first one. In the second round,  
295 each bird was tested in a funnel at a different position, preventing any potential remembrance  
296 and transfer of room features between tests and conditions.

### 297 Orientation data analyses

298 After the end of the experiments, all of the scratch sensitive papers were evaluated relative to  
299 the overlap point. Two researchers, who worked independently from each other, determined  
300 the mean direction of each scratch sensitive paper without knowing the direction of the paper  
301 overlap point. The direction of the overlap point was selected randomly each night between  
302 the four cardinal directions (N, S, E, or W). In cases, where the two observers estimated mean  
303 directions diverging by more than  $30^\circ$ , a third researcher was consulted. If no agreement was  
304 attainable, the respective paper was categorized as random and excluded from further  
305 evaluations. Only after the mean direction had been agreed on relative to the overlap-  
306 direction, this direction was revealed and corrected for. Thereby, the true magnetic direction  
307 was determined and entered into the calculations of the overall individual mean direction.

308 We observed that blackcaps placed in Emlen funnels and removed immediately show less  
309 initial escape behavior than e.g. European robins, *Erithacus rubeluca* and that they typically  
310 leave less than 30 scratches on the paper. Therefore we only considered papers with less than  
311 30 scratches as inactive. Thus, papers with less than 30 scratches were excluded from further  
312 evaluation (compare with Engels et al., 2012, 2014). Only birds, which produced at least two  
313 oriented data points in the given condition, were included in the orientation analyses for that  
314 condition. This resulted in slightly different numbers of tested birds in the different  
315 conditions. To calculate the individual mean orientation in each test condition, the mean  
316 headings of all active and oriented tests of each of the individual birds were added by vector  
317 addition. The group mean vector for each condition was calculated by adding up unit vectors  
318 in each of the individual mean directions in that condition and then dividing by the number of  
319 birds. The group mean vector was tested for significance using the Rayleigh test (Batschelet,  
320 1981). The MWW-test and comparison of confidence intervals were used to test for  
321 significant differences in orientation direction between groups.

322

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324

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328

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332

333

### 334 **Author Contributions**

335

336 Conceived and designed the experiments: NL, DD, HM

337 Performed the experiments: NL, DD, FS

338 Analyzed the data: NL, FS, DD

339 Provided custom written software: NLS, DD

340 Wrote the paper: NL, DD, HM

341

### 342 **List of symbols and abbreviations**

343

344 CMF: Changed Magnetic Field = a magnetic field turned horizontally by  $-120^\circ$  from the  
345 natural magnetic North Pole

346 gN: geographic North

347 MF: Magnetic Field

348 mN: magnetic North

349 NMF: Normal Magnetic Field directed towards the natural magnetic North Pole

350 n.s.: not significant

351

352 **Competing Interests**

353 The authors declare that no competing interests exist.

354

355 **Fig. 1. The orientation of individual blackcaps was tested in magnetic fields with 67°, 85° or 88°**  
 356 **inclination, respectively.** The birds headed in their appropriate autumn migratory direction towards the  
 357 Southwest in the naturally directed magnetic fields (NMF) with 67° (a) and 85° (b) inclination, and they  
 358 responded appropriately to a -120° horizontal turn of the fields with 67° (d) and 85° (e) inclination. In contrast,  
 359 the birds were disoriented in both the normally directed (c) and the -120° turned (f) field when the inclination  
 360 angle was set to 88°. mN = magnetic North. gN = geographical North. The arrows indicate the group mean  
 361 vectors. The inner and outer dashed circles indicate the length of the group mean vector needed for significance  
 362 according to the Rayleigh test ( $p < 0.05$  and  $p < 0.01$  respectively). The lines flanking the group mean vector  
 363 indicate the 95% confidence intervals for the group mean direction.

364

365 **Fig. 2. Scheme illustrating the difficulties associated with using a magnetic inclination compass to**  
 366 **accurately determine a compass direction at very steep inclination angles. A:** B: The magnetic field vector.  
 367 z: the length of the vertical component of the magnetic field vector. x: the true length of the horizontal  
 368 component of the magnetic field vector.  $\alpha$ : the true inclination angle. A turn of the bird with its magnetic sensors  
 369 by the angle  $\beta$  will result in an apparent magnetic field vector  $b'$ , which result in a change in the perceived  
 370 horizontal component of the magnetic field by  $\Delta x$  to  $x'$  and the angle by  $\Delta \alpha$  to  $\alpha'$ . Note that the lines  $B_{\text{pro}}$ ,  $b'_{\text{pro}}$   
 371 and  $x'_{\text{pro}}$  in the XZ-plane indicate the projections of B,  $b'$  and  $x'$  back onto the "North"-plane to enable an  
 372 easier visualization of  $\Delta \alpha$  and  $\Delta x$ . **B:** Comparison of the experienced change of  $\Delta \alpha$  when the inclination angle  
 373 ( $\alpha$ ) was set to 67°, 85° and 88° and when  $\beta$  was set to 15°. **C:** The bars indicate the size of  $\Delta x$ , when the  
 374 inclination angle ( $\alpha$ ) was set to 67°, 85° and 88°, and when  $\beta$  was set to 15°. For explanation see main text and  
 375 equations [1]-[5].

376

377 **Fig. 3. Polar projection of the most northerly breeding ranges of the white-crowned sparrow (dark grey)**  
 378 **and the Eurasian blackcap (medium grey).** The isoclines indicate the angle of the magnetic fields' inclination  
 379 at a particular point on the map. Note that in contrast to the breeding area of the Eurasian blackcap, in the  
 380 northernmost breeding range of white-crowned sparrow, magnetic inclination reaches up to ~85° (Hoyo et al.,  
 381 1992). The inclination was plotted according to the World Magnetic Model 2010 (McLean et al., 2004) with  
 382 MATLAB.

383

384 **Table 1. Variability in the experimental magnetic fields used in the present study.**

385

386 *Footnotes to the table:* <sup>1</sup>Magnetic Inclination <sup>2</sup>Magnetic Declination (horizontal polarity) <sup>3</sup>Magnetic field  
 387 strength. <sup>4</sup>During 10 conducted experiments of condition "85°" and "88°", a magnetometer-probe was positioned  
 388 directly under the test arena in the middle of the coil system, enabling a continuous recording of the displayed

389 magnetic field components. <sup>5</sup>The displayed magnetic field components of all funnel-positions within the test  
390 arena were measured and registered after the experiments, ended each night.

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Table 1

Control	Incl <sup>1</sup> Mean	SD	Decl <sup>2</sup> Mean	SD	Strength <sup>3</sup> Mean	SD
Coil-Center <sup>4</sup>	67.515°	0.19°	0.005°	0.022°	49397 nT	65.508 nT
all Positions <sup>5</sup>	67.667°	0.15°	0.161°	0.547°	49329 nT	52.993 nT
Condition "85°"	Incl <sup>1</sup> Mean	SD	Decl <sup>2</sup> Mean	SD	Strength <sup>3</sup> Mean	SD
Coil-Center <sup>4</sup>	85°	0.019°	0.082°	1.194°	49257 nT	74.839 nT
all Positions <sup>5</sup>	84.928°	0.295°	-0.983°	2.114°	49275 nT	62.328 nT
Condition "88°"	Incl <sup>1</sup> Mean	SD	Decl <sup>2</sup> Mean	SD	Strength <sup>3</sup> Mean	SD
Coil-Center <sup>4</sup>	88°	0.022°	0.12°	2.86°	49281 nT	81.497 nT
all Positions <sup>5</sup>	87.956°	0.305°	-2.667°	5.3°	49257 nT	13.903 nT

517



Control

85° inclination

85° inclination

NSMF

a)



b)



c)



BSMF

d)



e)



f)





