

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY 2: Barcodes of Life

Every time you go to the grocery store, the cashier swipes the UPC barcode on your items. The result is a beep, then the product is identified and priced by the computer. The black and white lines of the barcode correspond to a number that tells the computer in the cash register exactly what you are buying. This complicated process takes less than a second.

Scientists have begun to catalogue, or identify, animals by their DNA "barcode." Just like the barcodes on all the products in the supermarket are different, so are the DNA "codes" in every living organism.

Usually you can tell the difference between a robin and a blue jay by describing the way each bird looks. Now scientists will also be able to tell the difference by their DNA. Unlike the appearance of an animal--which depends on light and human eyes--DNA is very dependable because it is like a thumbprint, unique to only one creature.

DNA is the building block of the genetic information that determines who you are. It takes 650 letters to make a DNA barcode for an organism. The DNA barcode is like a combination lock. Each combination of letters unlocks a different kind of animal.

Scientists have already identified the DNA barcodes for North American birds and moths. In the next 20 years they hope to have every species catalogued by its DNA.

--Written by [Katheryn Troyer](#)

