DETERMINATION OF NESTLING AGE AND LAYING DATE IN TENGMALM'S OWL: USE OF WING LENGTH AND BODY MASS

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Laying date is a central parameter in many ecological studies on birds. The date of the first egg is commonly estimated by backdating during laying from number of eggs and laying interval. Alternatively, laying dates of first egg can be calculated by backdating from age of oldest nestlings and length of the incubation period. The latter method may be advantageous, for example, in birds which are sensitive to disturbances during the early phase of breeding. Wing length is a good indicator of age in nestlings of, for example, Willow Grouse (Lagopus lagopus) (Myrberget 1975), House Martin (Delichon urbica) (Bryant 1975), Ural Owl (Strix uralensis) (Eriksson et al. 1984), Red-tailed Hawk (Buteo jamaicensis) (Bechard et al. 1985), and Northern Harrier (Circus cyaneus) (Saunders and Hansen 1989). For Tengmalm's Owl (Aegolius funereus) nestlings, Korppimäki (1981) presented data on wing length and mass for a few nestlings, suggesting that wing length is a good estimator of age in this species.

Tengmalm's Owl is a cavity breeder readily accepting nest boxes. In northern Sweden, voles are the most important prey, and the breeding success of the owls reflects vole abundance (Lijfgren et al. 1986, Homfeldt et al. 1990). Voles fluctuate in a three- or four-year cycle (e.g., Homfeldt 1978, 1994; Hijmfeldt et al. 1986). Here, we present age-wing length and age-mass curves for wild Tengmalm's Owl nestlings in northern Sweden. The results were obtained by measuring nestlings during two years, characterized by different food (vole) supply. We explore the consistency of these parameters in different years and thus the usefulness of wing length and mass for aging nestlings and determining laying dates.

MATERIALS AND METHODS
The study was carried out in the county of Västerbotten, northern Sweden (approximately 64°N, 20°E), as
part of a long-term study on the ecology of Tengmalm's Owl (e.g. Löfgren et al. 1986, Carlsson et al. 1987, Hörfeldt et al. 1990). The owls bred in nest boxes of standardized size (20 × 20 cm bottom area). Within the long-term study area boxes were usually inspected at intervals of three to four weeks during March to June.

In two seasons, 1981 and 1982, we used nestlings within an intense-study area about 1,300 km² to construct age-wing length and age-mass curves. Wing length (mm) of nestlings was measured with a ruler according to the maximum length method (Svensson 1975). Mass (g) was measured with a Pesola spring balance (100 g or 300 g). Nests in the intense study area were visited most frequently around hatching and about 10 days onwards, every third or fourth day in 1981 and at daily intervals in 1982. In 1981, 104 nestlings (from 22 nests) and in 1982, 82 nestlings (from 20 nests) were studied from 16 April to 10 June and 27 April to 17 June, respectively.

In the long-term study area, vole abundance was monitored by snap trapping twice a year, in late May and in late September. Trappings were made in 58 regularly distributed 1-ha-plots. The trapping effort was

![Graph showing trapping indices for voles during the nestling size study period in 1981-1982.](image)


![Graphs showing wing length in relation to age of wild Tengmalm's Owl nestlings.](images)

FIGURE 2. Wing length in relation to age of wild Tengmalm's Owl nestlings in 1981 (n = 104) (a), 1982 (n = 82) (b), and 1981-1982 (pooled data) (n = 186) (c). Mean ± SE is given for each day of age. Total number of measurements was 622, 828 and 1450, respectively.
normally 150 trap nights per 1-ha-plot and the average total trapping effort per period was about 8,470 trap nights (range: 8,340–8,505) in 1980–1982. As an index of vole density, number of voles trapped per 100 trap nights was calculated. We used the pooled number of Clethrionomys glareolus, C. rufocanus, and Microtus agrestis, which together made up >90% in the trap-pings and in the owl’s breeding time diet (Hörnfelt et al. 1990). Vole indices were similar in spring in 1981 and 1982 (Fig. 1). Still, 1981 can be characterized as a peak and 1982 as a decline year. This is because indices suggested a steeper decline in density in the winter of 1981/1982 than in 1980/1981, and densities increased in summer 1981, while they stayed low in summer 1982 (Fig. 1; see also Hörnfelt et al. 1990; Hörnfelt 1994).

We compared laying dates for clutches backdated from both the ‘laying method’ and ‘wing-length method’, using the available nestling data from the long-term study area in 1981–1982 and 1984–1985. The laying method was used as a reference because it is likely to contain less errors of estimation. A prerequisite for these comparisons was that we knew the wing length of the oldest nestling. Thus, we only used nests where no nestling mortality had occurred at time of visits. The ‘laying method’ required that nests were visited before laying ended. Then laying date was back-dated by using a laying interval of two days (Korpimäki 1981) and by assuming that the last egg was laid on the day it was found. Thus, this method has an inherent error of at most two days in estimating laying date. The ‘wing-length method’ required that nests were visited during brood rearing before fledging. Then laying date was backdated after aging the oldest nestling by its wing length (see below) and adding the length of the average incubation period (29 days; Korpimäki 1981). Thus, this method has two inherent errors in estimating laying date, i.e. relating to estimates of length of incubating period and of age of the oldest nestling.

RESULTS

Wing lengths (mean ± SE) of birds of known age during day one to day eight in 1982 were: 12.1 ± 0.1 mm (n = 49), 13.2 ± 0.2 mm (n = 39), 14.0 ± 0.2 mm (n = 34), 15.7 ± 0.2 mm (n = 45), 17.6 ± 0.2 mm (n = 42), 19.3 ± 0.3 mm (n = 43), 21.4 ± 0.4 mm (n = 38), and 24.9 ± 0.4 mm (n = 37), respectively. From these values we interpolated the age of all young nestlings in 1981, that were first measured at an age of ≤4 days, and for about 28% of the nestlings in 1982. Nestlings in 1981 and 1982 showed similar wing growth rates throughout the nestling period (compare Figs. 2a and 2b). The differences between mean wing lengths at each day throughout the nestling period were small between years, and they were only significantly different at four out of 32 days (Fig. 3a). These overall large similarities between years justified combining age-wing length curves for the two years as a basis of practical reference (Fig. 2c). The relationship between age and wing length was best described by two separate equations for wing lengths (WL) < 27 mm (1) and for wing lengths ≥27 mm (2), respectively:

\[
\text{Age (days)} = \frac{-1.023 + \log(WL)}{0.044} \quad (1)
\]

\[
\text{Age (days)} = 53.73 - \sqrt{2887 - (33.70 + WL)/0.06855} \quad (2)
\]

Laying dates backdated by the wing length and laying methods (see MATERIALS AND METHODS) showed small differences both among years, characterized by different food situations (Fig. 1; Hörnfelt et al. 1990), length curves, mass curves leveled out before fledging. In addition, the mass curve leveled out at a lower mass in 1982 than in 1981 (Fig. 4a, b). Mass was significantly or marginally significantly different at nestling ages 24–
FIGURE 4. Body mass in relation to age of wild Tengmalm’s Owl nestlings in (a) 1981 (n = 104) and in (b) 1982 (n = 82). Mean ± SE is given for each day of age. Total number of measurements was 618 and 827, respectively. Food supply (voles) was at a peak in 1981 and declined in 1982.

TABLE 1. Comparison of laying dates for clutches determined by both the laying and wing length method, in relation to year and time of season (years combined). Number of clutches in parentheses. Level of significance (P) according to Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Mean ± SE</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>-0.1 ± 0.4</td>
<td>(27)</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>1.1 ± 0.3</td>
<td>(36)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>1.3 ± 0.4</td>
<td>(12)</td>
<td>&lt;0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>1.1 ± 0.6</td>
<td>(9)</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before 20 April</td>
<td>0.2 ± 0.3</td>
<td>(56)</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After 20 April</td>
<td>1.8 ± 0.2</td>
<td>(28)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
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32 days (Fig. 3b). In addition to marked annual differences and a shorter growth period, mass also showed larger overlap among ages than did wing length.

DISCUSSION

It was more reliable to age Tengmalm’s Owl nestlings by wing length than by mass, presumably because mass gain was more sensitive to annual variation in food supply than was growth of wing length. When vole numbers were declining in 1982, nestling mass leveled out at a lower value than when food was more abundant in 1981 (Fig. 3b, 4; compare Fig. 1). Comparisons of laying dates determined by the wing length and laying methods gave similar results. The small differences were subtle and they were partly explained by our conservative assumption that laying females had laid the most recent egg on the day it was found. For the laying method, this underestimated laying date by about one day, compared with the more realistic assumption that this egg was laid one day earlier (the laying interval is two days; Korpimäki 1981). Also, differences were influenced by other assumptions for backdating. The length of the incubation period, for example, is likely to decrease somewhat with increasing ambient temperature (cf. König 1969). This is likely to yield somewhat too early laying dates for the wing length than for the laying method late in the season (Table 1). In conclusion, the wing length method is appropriate for determining laying dates and clearly is a suitable alternative to using laying data. In our ecological studies of Tengmalm’s Owl, we have used both of these methods for determining laying dates (e.g., Carlsson et al. 1987, Hörmfeldt et al. 1990). However, the wing length method may be preferable since it is likely to cause less disturbance by reducing the necessity of inspections in the more sensitive laying phase. In principle it seems likely that this method can also be applied for other A. funereus populations. However, we recommend researchers in other areas to check, with a sample of known-age nestlings’ wing length, whether they must modify the method.

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LITERATURE CITED


BEHAVIOR AND VOCALIZATIONS OF GYALOPHYLAX AND MEGAXENOPS (FURNARIIDAE), TWO LITTLE-KNOWN GENERA ENDEMIC TO NORTHEASTERN BRAZIL

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Among the least-known members of the large and diverse family Furnariidae are two locally distributed, monotypic genera endemic to northeastern Brazil: Gyalophylax Peters (1950) and Megaxenops Reiser (1905). In September 1991 and November 1993, as part of an avifaunal survey of Ceará, western Pernambuco, and northern Bahia, we observed the habitat, behavior, and vocalizations of the Red-shouldered Spinetail (Gyalophylax hellmayri) and the Great Xenops (Megaxenops parnaguae). Our observations are the most detailed to date on these birds, and allow a more informed elucidation of intra-familial relationships than has been possible in the past.

Terminology for foraging behavior follows Remsen and Robinson (1990). Tape recordings were made with Nagra 4.2 and Sony TCM-5000 tape recorders, and Sennheiser ME-80 shotgun microphones. All tape recordings have been, or will be, archived at the Library of Natural Sounds (LNS), Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, Ithaca, New York, and the Arquivo Sonoro.

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