Sexual selection and the risk of extinction in birds

Edward H. Morrow1* and Trevor E. Pitcher2

1Uppsala University, Evolutionary Biology Centre, Department of Animal Ecology, Norbyvägen 18D, SE-752 36 Uppsala, Sweden
2Department of Zoology, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario M5S 3G5, Canada

The relationship between sexual selection and extinction risk has rarely been investigated. This is unfortunate because extinction plays a key role in determining the patterns of species richness seen in extant clades, which form the basis of comparative studies into the role that sexual selection may play in promoting speciation. We investigate the extent to which the perceived risk of extinction relates to four different estimates of sexual selection in 1030 species of birds. We find no evidence that the number of threatened species is distributed unevenly according to a social mating system, and neither of our two measures of pre-mating sexual selection (sexual dimorphism and dichromatism) was related to extinction risk, after controlling for phylogenetic inertia. However, threatened species apparently experience more intense post-mating sexual selection, measured as testis size, than non-threatened species. These results persisted after including body size as a covariate in the analysis, and became even stronger after controlling for clutch size (two known correlates of extinction risk). Sexual selection may therefore be a double-edged process—promoting speciation on one hand but promoting extinction on the other. Furthermore, we suggest that it is post-mating sexual selection, in particular, that is responsible for the negative effect of sexual selection on clade size. Why this might be is unclear, but the mean population fitness of species with high intensities of post-mating sexual selection may be especially low if costs associated with multiple mating are high or if the selection load imposed by post-mating selection is higher relative to that of pre-mating sexual selection.

Keywords: species richness; biodiversity; testis size; dichromatism; dimorphism; conservation status

1. INTRODUCTION

The role that sexual selection plays in determining patterns of species richness has been of great interest during the past 20 years. Patterns of species richness are of course the result of two processes—speciation and extinction. Of these two processes, sexual selection’s effect upon speciation has received the greater share of attention from investigators (reviewed by Panhuis et al. 2001). Most of this work has been theoretical, with many models predicting that sexual selection should promote speciation by generating prezygotic isolation (e.g. West-Eberhard 1983; Turner & Burrows 1995; Payne & Krakauer 1997; Price 1998; Higashi et al. 1999; reviews by Turelli et al. 2001; Kirkpatrick & Rognve 2002). Furthermore, sexual conflict is also predicted by theory to stimulate cladogenesis (Rice 1996, 1998; Rice & Holland 1997; Parker & Partridge 1998; Gavrilets 2000; Gavrilets et al. 2001). Several comparative studies provide some support for these theories by using data collected from birds (see Baraclough et al. 1995; Mitra et al. 1996; Möller & Cuervo 1998; Owens et al. 1999) and insects (see Arnvist et al. 2000; Katzourakis et al. 2001). However, other studies using data from mammals, butterflies and spiders (see Gage et al. 2002), as well as birds (see Morrow et al. 2003) failed to find any evidence.

In contrast to speculation, sexual selection’s impact on rates of extinction has rarely been investigated, either theoretically or empirically. This is unfortunate because imbalances in clade size observed today are the product of both past speciation and extinction events. Several authors have suggested that the selection load, generated by the evolution of extravagant traits via sexual selection, is higher in species with more intense sexual selection, thereby increasing the risk that these species will go extinct (Dawkins & Krebs 1979; Lande 1980; Kirkpatrick 1982; McLain 1993; Tanaka 1996; Möller 2000). Darwin was probably the first to allude to this idea when he framed his model of trait evolution via sexual selection (Darwin 1871) as directly opposing the evolution of traits via natural selection (Darwin 1859). In simple terms, ornamental traits could never evolve by natural selection alone, owing to their inherent extravagance. Although there is theoretical evidence that sexual selection may increase the likelihood that beneficial alleles will become fixed (Whitlock 2000), there is empirical evidence that sexual selection does not affect the rate of adaptation to a novel environment (Holland 2002), and that the selection load is real. For example, in Drosophila melanogaster, Wilkinson (1987) elegantly showed, experimentally, that there exists an equilibrium between the opposing forces of natural and sexual selection. Subsequently, several artificial selection experiments in the same species have directly demonstrated that absolute population fitness increases significantly when sexual selection is relaxed or removed (Rice 1996; Holland & Rice 1999; Pitnick et al. 2001). There are also several other lines of evidence that suggest sexual selection may relate positively to extinction risk. For example, two comparative studies of birds have shown that male survival rates are lower in sexually dimorphic species compared with sexually monomorphic species (Promislow et al. 1992, 1994). Several introductions of
bird species to islands have also indicated that extinction rates are higher for sexually dimorphic compared with sexually monomorphic species (see McLain et al. 1995, 1999; Sorci et al. 1998). A comparative study in mammals (Moore & Wilson 2002) found that the level of male-biased parasitism is positively associated with the intensity of sexual selection (measured as the degree of sexual size dimorphism or mating system). Finally, in the guppy, Brooks (2000) recently demonstrated experimentally that there exists a negative genetic correlation between the sexual attractiveness of males and their probabilities of survival. In addition, problems caused when populations become very small (such as inbreeding depression; Saccheri et al. 1998; Keller & Waller 2002) will be compounded in species with intense sexual selection, owing to the stronger reproductive skew, because only a subset of the population actually contributes to the genetic variance of the next generation (Sorci et al. 1998).

The combined weight of this theoretical, experimental and comparative evidence suggests that sexual selection may be double-edged: increasing the evolutionary rate of reproductive isolation, but also increasing the probability of extinction of the same lineages. It is therefore unclear what the net effect of sexual selection may be on patterns of species richness, and tests of the hypothesis that sexual selection increases the likelihood of extinction are clearly needed (Kokko & Brooks 2003). The aim of this study, therefore, was to examine whether species of birds that are currently under a high potential risk of extinction also undergo a greater intensity of sexual selection than species that are at a lower risk. Risk of extinction was inferred from the conservation status of each species as stated in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (IUCN 2002). Species present on this list were classified as facing a perceived threat of extinction, whereas those that were absent from the list were deemed to be at a lower risk— all known species of birds having been assessed by the IUCN for inclusion or exclusion on this list (see Hilton-Taylor 2000 (compiler)).

First, we investigated whether the conservation status of each species was related to their social mating system. Second, we employed a comparative method to examine how patterns of extinction risk across birds relate to three measures of the intensity of sexual selection. We used two surrogate indices of pre-mating sexual selection: (i) sexual dichromatism in plumage; and (ii) sexual size dimorphism; and one measure of post-mating sexual selection— testis size. All three are presumed to be good measures of the intensity of sexual selection that a species experiences (Moller & Briskie 1995; Owens & Hartley 1998; Dunn et al. 2001). A previous comparative study in birds has shown that extinction risk is positively correlated with body size and negatively correlated with clutch size (Bennett & Owens 1997). We therefore also examined how these covariates influenced the patterns of extinction risk in relation to the three sexual selection indices.

### 2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

Data on social mating systems, body size, sexual size dimorphism and sexual dichromatism were largely collated from Dunn et al. (2001).

**(a) Social mating system**

Following the methods of Dunn et al. (2001), species were assigned to one of six mating system categories: (i) polyandry; (ii) monogamy (less than 5% polygyny); (iii) mostly monogamy but occasional polygyny (5–15% polygyny); (iv) mostly polygynous (more than 15% polygyny); (v) cooperative breeding; and (vi) lek or promiscuous. This last category includes lekking species as well as eyebirds, bowerbirds and most birds of paradise. These assignments were made according to standard references (see Dunn et al. 2001 and references therein).

**(b) Body size and sexual size dimorphism**

Data on total body mass were obtained from museum specimens (see Acknowledgements) and from the literature (Ridgeway 1901–1946; Cramp & Simmons 1977, 1980, 1983; Cramp 1985, 1988, 1992; Cramp & Perrins 1993, 1994a,b). Where the literature reported a range of body masses for each sex, midpoints of these ranges were used. Dimorphism in size was then calculated from residuals of a regression between $\log_{10}$ male body mass on $\log_{10}$ female body mass. Dimorphism is known to vary geographically within the range of a species (e.g. Mayr 1942) and we thus attempted to use data from the same location wherever possible.

**Sexual dichromatism**

Plumage dichromatism was scored on a scale from 0 (monomorphic) to 10 (maximum dichromatism) following Owens & Bennett (1994). For each species, the difference in plumage between the sexes was scored over five regions of the body (head, nape–rump, throat–belly, tail and wings) using three scores (0, no difference between the sexes; 1, difference in shade or intensity; 2, difference in colour or pattern). Average dichromatism was then obtained for each species from the scores of two observers.

**Testis mass**

Testis mass for each species was obtained from published compilations (Moller 1991; Moller & Briskie 1995; Stutchbury & Morton 1995; Dunn et al. 2001) or from museum specimens (see Acknowledgements), which consisted of testis length and width measurements. Testis mass was calculated as the mean testis mass for each species, where $a$ and $b$ are the width and length of each testis (see also Moller & Briskie 1995). In cases where more than one estimate was available for the same species, we used the average of available estimates. Testis mass was calculated as the mean testis value from at least 10 breeding males, and up to 2500 in some cases (e.g. Moller 1991; Moller & Briskie 1995). Owing to extreme seasonal variation in testis size (Murton & Westwood 1977; Wingfield 1984), testis size was recorded for adult specimens that were in breeding condition or collected during the appropriate breeding season (see Dunn et al. 2001 for details).

**Clutch size**

Table 1. The distribution of threatened and unthreatened species divided into six social mating systems (21 species had an unknown mating system).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>mating system</th>
<th>number of species</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>polyandry</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>monogamy</td>
<td>741</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5–15% polygyny</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cooperative breeding</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lek or promiscuous</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total</td>
<td>978</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. The distribution of threatened and unthreatened species divided into six social mating systems (21 species had an unknown mating system).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>mating system</th>
<th>n unthreatened species</th>
<th>n threatened species</th>
<th>proportion threatened</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>polyandry</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>monogamy</td>
<td>741</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5–15% polygyny</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cooperative breeding</td>
<td>49</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lek or promiscuous</td>
<td>96</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total</td>
<td>978</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(7) Conservation status of species

The conservation status of each species was determined according to whether the species did or did not appear on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (IUCN 2002), which is available as a Web-based searchable database at http://www.redlist.org/. The compilers of this list have assessed all known species of birds, so species not appearing on the list can be reasonably assumed to be at a lower risk (Hilton-Taylor 2000 (compiler)). The list also gives additional information about how severe the threat is (on a six-point scale from ‘Lower Risk’ to ‘Extinct’) based upon the IUCN Red List categories and criteria (IUCN 1994). Subdividing the threatened species into these categories reduced the sample size considerably and so we were not able to use this potentially more fine-scaled measure of threat in our present analyses.

(g) Comparative methods

We analysed our data by using both raw species values and phylogenetically independent contrasts. To calculate the phylogenetically independent standardized contrasts we used the computer program Comparative Analysis of Independent Contrasts (CAIC) (Purvis & Rambaut 1995). This controls for the effects of shared evolutionary history by using the methods developed by Pagel (1992) and Felsenstein (1985). We assumed equal branch lengths, representing a punctuated model of evolution (Harvey & Pagel 1991). The phylogeny used was based upon the molecular phylogeny developed by Sibley & Ahlquist (1990). We used the BRUNCH procedure within CAIC because our measures of the conservation status of species is a binary variable (threatened or non-threatened). The null hypothesis, that the mean of the contrasts does not differ from zero, was then tested using a t-test. All means below are given ±1 standard error.

3. RESULTS

A G-test (with the William’s correction; Sokal & Rohlf 1995) examining the distribution of 1099 threatened or unthreatened species among the six mating system categories was not significant ($G_{adj} = 9.61; \ d.f. = 5; p = 0.087$), suggesting that whether a species is threatened or not is unrelated to the social mating system of the species (table 1). When species were treated independently, there was no significant difference in mean testis size, plumage dichromatism or size dimorphism between species that are recorded as being threatened, versus those that are not (table 2). However, when controlling for phylogenetic inertia, species that are currently under a higher risk of extinction were found to have a larger residual testis size than non-threatened species (contrast mean = 0.094 ± 0.045, d.f. = 25, $t = 2.09, p = 0.047$), but there was no difference in the degree of sexual dichromatism or sexual dimorphism between the threatened and non-threatened groups (see table 3). Note that it was possible to obtain a significant result from the contrasts despite the raw species data not giving a significant result, because the variance around the contrast mean became reduced (whereas the difference between the threatened and non-threatened groups from the raw species data, and the difference between the contrast mean of the threatened group and 0, remained similar). Body size and clutch size have both previously been shown to be related to extinction risk (Bennett & Owens 1997). We therefore repeated these latter analyses by using body mass and clutch size as covariates (both variables were log$_{10}$ transformed before analysis). Although we did not find that extinction risk was greater for species with larger bodies (mean = 0.066 ± 0.007, d.f. = 25, $t = 0.87, p = 0.39$), it was positively related to smaller clutch sizes (mean = −0.033 ± 0.013, d.f. = 20, $t = −2.51, p = 0.02$). None of our results changed qualitatively when body mass was included as a covariate alongside each of the indices of sexual selection (see table 3). However, the significance of the relationship between risk of extinction and testis size became stronger after including clutch size as a covariate (the power of this test was 0.81; table 3). Including clutch size as a covariate had no effect upon the significance of the relationship between extinction risk and sexual dimorphism or dichromatism (table 3). Finally, we checked what relationship, if any, our measures of pre-mating sexual selection had with that of post-mating sexual selection. We found that neither the contrasts of sexual dichromatism ($r = −0.05, n = 461, p = 0.27$) nor dimorphism ($r = −0.03, n = 300, p = 0.63$) were related to testis size.

4. DISCUSSION

We have shown that species experiencing a greater threat of extinction are also those with a greater intensity of post-mating sexual selection, but that the intensity of pre-mating sexual selection does not significantly relate to whether a species is threatened or not. These results become stronger when a known ecological correlate of extinction risk (clutch size) was included in the analyses as a covariate, although body size (another known correlate of extinction risk; Bennett & Owens 1997) did not alter our results. The distribution of threatened versus non-threatened species was found to be even for the kind of mating system that predominates in a species, although this test was rather weak. Theoretical studies showing that sexual selection should promote speciation are numerous (reviewed by Kirkpatrick & Ravigne 2002), and although the number of studies demonstrating this empirically is limited (both in number and in taxonomic breadth; see §1); at present the general view is that sexual selection promotes cladogenesis. By contrast, our results suggest that the intensity of sexual selection is also linked to the
likelihood that a lineage will become extinct. Although this suggestion was explicitly made some time ago (Lande 1980; Kirkpatrick 1982), theoretical models in support of it are limited, partly because this question has been largely neglected by theoreticians. None the less, Tanaka (1996) showed that population extinction is more likely during environmental change if sexual selection is more intense. Specifically, Tanaka (1996) showed that an additional natural selection load exists when the model population had a sexual or social communication system, making the population more likely to go extinct owing to the cumulative or long-term effect of this load. There is good evidence that this load exists (e.g. Wilkinson 1987), and it has been shown experimentally that removal of sexual selection has a profound effect upon mean population fitness (Rice 1996; Holland & Rice 1999; Pitnick 1999). In plants, species richness—encouraging both the conception and termination of species. This balancing effect could explain why some recent comparative studies have failed to find any relationship between species richness and the intensity of sexual selection, despite having large sample sizes and using powerful comparative methodologies (Gage et al. 2002; Morrow et al. 2003).

Given the apparent differences in how extinction risk relates to our indices of either pre- or post-mating sexual selection, our results also suggest that pre- and post-mating sexual selection may operate in different ways with respect to patterns of extinction. We can see three possible explanations for this difference. First, it is possible that there is no difference between the impact of pre- and post-mating sexual selection upon extinction risk, instead residual testis size is simply a better surrogate measure of sexual selection intensity than sexual dimorphism or dichromatism. We believe this is unlikely because although these traits indicate different components of sexual selection, despite having large sample sizes and using powerful comparative methodologies (Gage et al. 2002; Morrow et al. 2003).

A second possible explanation of why species with higher intensities of post-mating sexual selection, as opposed to pre-mating sexual selection, are under a greater threat of extinction, is that species with higher intensities of post-mating sexual selection (such as sperm competition) may also experience higher costs associated with multiple mating, such as the incidence of socially or sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), or that they may be more sensitive to inbreeding depression than more.

Table 2. Using raw species data, there were no significant differences in the mean trait values (± s.e.m.) for unthreatened and threatened species (sample sizes given in parentheses).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>trait</th>
<th>unthreatened</th>
<th>threatened</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>d.f.</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>testis size</td>
<td>0.00 ± 0.01 (980)</td>
<td>0.11 ± 0.08 (30)</td>
<td>−1.31</td>
<td>1008</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dichromatism</td>
<td>1.79 ± 0.09 (999)</td>
<td>2.28 ± 0.11 (31)</td>
<td>−0.92</td>
<td>1028</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dimorphism</td>
<td>0.00 ± 0.04 (505)</td>
<td>0.02 ± 0.01 (14)</td>
<td>−0.94</td>
<td>517</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Phylogenetically independent contrast means generated by CAIC, either with or without a covariate (body size or clutch size) were examined by using t-tests (where $H_0$: mean = 0).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>analysis</th>
<th>trait</th>
<th>contrast mean (± s.e.m.)</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>d.f.</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>without covariates</td>
<td>testis size</td>
<td>0.094 ± 0.045</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.047</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dichromatism</td>
<td>−0.040 ± 0.252</td>
<td>−1.16</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.870</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dimorphism</td>
<td>0.005 ± 0.007</td>
<td>10.64</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>body size as a covariate</td>
<td>testis size</td>
<td>0.094 ± 0.045</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.047</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dichromatism</td>
<td>0.012 ± 0.226</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.960</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dimorphism</td>
<td>0.005 ± 0.007</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>clutch size as a covariate</td>
<td>testis size</td>
<td>0.129 ± 0.043</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dichromatism</td>
<td>−0.019 ± 0.306</td>
<td>−0.06</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dimorphism</td>
<td>0.003 ± 0.008</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.700</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clearly, the question of how sexual selection relates to extinction risk needs closer attention from both theoreticians and empiricists, but considering all the available evidence, a cautious conclusion is that sexual selection may have a double-edged effect upon patterns of species richness—encouraging both the conception and termination of species.
monogamous species (a problem that will be compounded at small population sizes). Species with high levels of sperm competition typically copulate more frequently and with many more partners (Birkhead & Moller 1998; Simmons 2001). This behaviour could be immunologically or energetically costly for both females and males. Alternatively, frequent multiple matings could increase the rate of horizontal transfer of pathogens between individuals in a population (see discussions in Moller 1998; Thrall et al. 2000). This latter argument is intuitively appealing, but higher infection rates may not necessarily translate into a lower population fitness, because there is likely to be host-parasite coevolution, with selection favouring the evolution of less virulent STDs (Knell 1999). None the less, when population sizes are small, those with higher rates of multiple mating may be more vulnerable to the spread of novel infectious agents than those populations that mate more monogamously. Empirical evidence that STD transmission rates and copulation frequency are related is somewhat limited (see Moller 1998), but a recent comparative study in primates has shown that female white blood cell counts are positively related to the degree of female promiscuity, across 41 species (Nunn et al. 2000). Thus, although there is limited evidence that post-mating sexual selection magnifies the incidence of disease, very few studies have specifically looked into this question.

Third, there could be a fundamental difference in the size of the selection load imposed by pre- and post-mating sexual selection. One possible scenario is that the energetic, immunological and/or developmental costs generated by testes or sperm production, high copulation frequencies, or of traits involved in female cryptic choice or post-mating sexual antagonism, may be considerably greater than those arising from traits associated with pre-mating sexual selection. Although it is broadly accepted that mate acquisition and mating are costly, despite any direct or indirect benefits that females may accrue by mating multiply (Andersson 1994; Arnvist et al. 2000; Jennions & Petrie 2000), we know of no studies that have attempted to quantify the relative costs of pre- and post-mating sexual selection. Kotiaho (2001) recently questioned whether there existed any good evidence that sexually selected traits are costly, but most, if not all of the sexual traits reviewed were involved in pre-mating selection. A recent model of the dynamics of the coevolution between mate choice and display trait by Houle & Kondrashov (2002), indicates that under some apparently realistic circumstances, exaggeration of the display trait may continue indefinitely—even up to the point of extinction. It seems possible then, that the cost of traits under post-mating sexual selection may rise to similarly high levels, assuming the benefits accrued are similarly large. However, there does not seem to be any a priori reason why the cost of traits under pre-mating sexual selection versus those under post-mating selection would differ quantitatively in terms of the magnitude of these costs. We suggest that in species with more intense post-mating relative to pre-mating sexual selection, either the absolute population fitness is lower, or the overall selection load is higher. Either of these mechanisms could then have a bearing on how vulnerable a population is to becoming extinct.

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REFERENCES


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