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Seasonal change in the diet composition of the Asian parti-coloured bat *Vespertilio sinensis*

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Abstract. We determined the food habit of the Asian parti-coloured bat *Vespertilio sinensis* from May to August by analysing their faecal samples. Eight orders of insects were identified in the faeces. Lepidoptera, Diptera and Coleoptera had high frequencies of occurrence, but the proportion of each order varied with the sampling period. A comparison between diet composition and relative insect abundance showed that proportions of Coleoptera in the diet were larger than those in insect abundance. This pattern also was true for Lepidoptera in some sampling periods. In contrast, proportions of Diptera in the diet were lower than those in insect abundance, although Diptera was a major prey item. These results suggest that the diet composition of *V. sinensis* may be biased towards larger-sized taxa. Furthermore, the lack of any significant differences between diet composition and insect abundance for the other five orders suggested that the diet composition of *V. sinensis* is also influenced by the seasonal prevalence of each insect taxon.

Key words: diet, faecal analysis, insect abundance, *Vespertilio sinensis*.

Dietary information can provide fundamental insights into the ecology and behaviour of an animal. Food habits of insectivorous bats have been documented by numerous studies (reviewed in Jones and Rydell 2003). These studies have shown that diet composition varies with species, seasons and populations (e.g., Jones 1990; Hamilton and Barclay 1998; Funakoshi and Takeda 1998; Whitaker et al. 1999; Fukui et al. 2009), and reflect their feeding habitat and strategy (Siemers and Swift 2006). Thus, a description of diet for each bat species or population is essential for explaining the patterns of habitat use, and for predicting how major changes in insect communities resulting from human activities, such as pest control or habitat modification, will affect bats. Furthermore, a comparison of diet with insect abundance is necessary to analyse the presumed feeding behaviour. Understanding the diet composition of endangered species is important because population declines may be caused by the lack of prey in some instances. Moreover, information on the diet of bats, which often come into conflict with humans, may also be important for appropriate management of bats to promote their conservation (e.g., alternative artificial roosts for bats could be installed near appropriate feeding habitats).

The Asian parti-coloured bat *Vespertilio sinensis* (formerly *V. superans*) is a medium-sized insectivorous species (forearm length = 43–53 mm [Fukui 2009], body weight = 14–30 g [Maeda 2005]) distributed in China, Mongolia, Ussuri, Korean Peninsula, Taiwan and Japan (Simmons 2005). From May to August, maternity colonies, which usually consist of tens to thousands of individuals, are formed by adult females and their offspring (Mukohyama 1996). It is thought that *V. sinensis* used to roost inside natural structures, such as tree holes and rock crevices; however, because the number of natural roosts has decreased due to recent deforestation, this species has been increasingly roosting in man-made structures (Fukui and Bat Research Group of Centennial Woods Fan Club 2001). Consequently, despite legal protection of bats, homeowners who resent bat noise, feces and urine, have increasingly resorted to extermination (Mukohyama 1996). To avoid such needless killing, appropriate measures could be provided. However, for *V. sinensis*, a large part of the ecological information,
which could be used as baseline for management measures, is lacking. Previous studies have provided data on feeding activity and postnatal growth (Funakoshi and Uchida 1981) and roost preferences (Fukui et al., 2010) of *V. sinensis*. However, although Funakoshi and Uchida (1981) described diet composition during a limited season, seasonal trends in diet composition of this species have not been reported.

The aim of this study was to assess seasonal changes in the diet of *V. sinensis* and compare the diet with insect abundance as determined using light traps.

**Methods**

**Study site**

This study was conducted in Centennial Woods Park, which is an isolated, broad-leaved forest (ca. 25 ha) in Kutchan (42°54'N, 140°45'E, altitude = 180 m), Hokkaido Prefecture, from the middle of May to early August 2000. The mean annual temperature is 6.7°C, and the annual rainfall is 1500 mm. The forest is dominated by Japanese poplar (*Populus maximowiczii*), Japanese white birch (*Betula platyphylla*) and alder (*Alnus japonica*), and is surrounded by extensive agricultural fields. There is a small pond (ca. 100 m²) 30 m from the roost, and a shallow stream (less than 1 m width) runs through the forest. Every year from early May to late August, pregnant females of *V. sinensis* congregate at a nursery roost (in the attic of an old garage) in the forest. The population increases to over 1,000 individuals in early August. From the middle of August to late August, all individuals disperse from the roost to an unknown area (Fukui and Bat Research Group of Centennial Woods Fan Club 2001).

**Diet analysis**

To assess diet composition, we conducted faecal analysis. To collect faecal pellets, a plastic mesh sheet (60 × 300 cm) was placed under the roost entrance. The next day, 50 fresh faecal pellets were collected and stored individually in 70% ethanol until analysis. Sampling was conducted every 10 days from the middle of May to early August. Each faecal pellet was tested after approximately 12 hr in 10% KOH, and arthropod items in the pellets were identified to the level of order using a 40 × binocular microscope. Because digestive efficiency may differ with each insect order and because there was a high proportion of unidentifiable material, it was difficult to measure the volume of consumed prey on the basis of order. As an alternative, the presence or absence of each insect order, was recorded for each pellet. Out of the total sample of 50 pellets, the number in which items of each insect order were found was counted as the frequency of occurrence (*r*). Subsequently, the relative frequency of occurrence (%) of different categories of prey (*R*) was calculated for each sampling period using the following equation, in which the total number of insect orders found is indicated by “*n*”.

\[
R = \frac{r}{n} \times 100
\]

**Insect abundance**

To measure relative abundance of each insect order, eight light traps with black lights were placed 1 m above the ground in open areas, such as grassland and forest edge, and randomly 10 to 100 m from the roost. All trapping sites were >30 m from the water bodies in the forest, and the distance between any pair of traps was greater than 30 m. The traps were not placed in the forest interior because the wing morphology of *V. sinensis* is characteristic of bats that fly mainly in open spaces (Norberg and Rayner 1987; D. Fukui, unpublished data), and that lack the maneuverability required to utilize cluttered spaces as a foraging habitat. At all trapping sites, feeding activities of Asian parti-coloured bats were observed by acoustic monitoring (D. Fukui, personal observation). All trapping sites were fixed throughout the survey period. The light traps consisted of four acrylic panels (100 × 50 cm) assembled in a cross configuration. In the centre of the four panels, a portable fluorescent light with black light (BF-662, National, Osaka) was installed. Trapped insects fell into a plastic bottle containing 70% ethanol through a funnel placed under the trap. Traps were run 3 hr from sunset on the same days as faecal sampling. Samples collected in the light traps were stored in 70% ethanol until analysis. Insect samples were identified to the level of order using a 10 × binocular microscope. Subsequently, the number of individuals of each order was counted as abundance, and the relative proportion of different insect orders was estimated for each sampling period. To estimate mean biomass per insect individual, the wet mass of each order was measured to the nearest 0.01 mg using an electronic balance.

**Statistics**

Chi-square tests were used to compare diet composi-
tion with insect abundance, and also to assess seasonal variation in diet composition and insect abundance. When chi-square tests revealed a difference between diet and insect abundance, the Bonferroni multiple comparison procedure was performed for each insect order as a post-hoc comparison. A value of \( P < 0.05 \) was considered statistically significant. All analyses were performed in the R environment for statistical computing (R Development Core Team 2008).

**Results**

**Diet composition**

A total of 450 faecal pellets were examined. Throughout the survey period, fragments of eight insect orders were found in the faecal pellets of *V. sinensis*. In total, Lepidoptera (mean relative percentage: 32.8%), Diptera (27.5%) and Coleoptera (22.6%) had high frequencies of occurrence (Fig. 1). The proportion of each order varied with the sampling period (\( \chi^2 = 175.0, \text{df} = 32, P < 0.01; \) Fig. 1). Lepidoptera had the highest relative percentage (47.6%) in May, after which its relative percentage gradually decreased. From early June to early July, Diptera was the most frequently occurring (40.7–44.2%) prey order, although Lepidoptera also showed a high frequency of occurrence (22.2–36.0%). From the middle of July to early August, Coleoptera was the highest in the middle of May (94.5%) and decreased gradually during the study period. In contrast, Lepidoptera still showed a high frequency of occurrence (25.2–28.3%). Fragments of Trichoptera were found throughout the survey period and showed a moderate frequency of occurrence (13.1% in the middle of June, 14.6% in the middle of July, 15.0% in late July and 11.3% in early August). In late July and early August, Hymenoptera showed a moderate frequency of occurrence (14.0% and 14.2%, respectively); however, they were found only from the middle of July to early August. Hemiptera were found in pellets from the latter half of the survey period, and the frequency of occurrence (9.3%) peaked in late July. Fragments of Ephemeroptera were found only in the middle of June and late June, and the frequency of occurrence was 5.1% and 2.3%, respectively. Neuroptera fragments were found only rarely in the middle of June and early August, with a frequency of occurrence of 1.0% and 0.9%, respectively.

**Insect abundance**

A total of 27,417 individuals from 10 orders were collected using light traps. Among the 10 orders, two orders (Orthoptera and Psocoptera) were excluded from our results because these two orders were rare (56 individuals) and not found in faecal pellets. No large insects, such as stag beetles, that would obviously not be available as prey for *V. sinensis*, were captured in this study.

There was a seasonal variation in the composition of insects (\( \chi^2 = 266.6, \text{df} = 32, P < 0.01; \) Fig. 2). In total, Diptera was the most abundant (mean relative proportion: 69.2%; Fig. 2). The relative proportion of Diptera was the highest in the middle of May (94.5%) and decreased gradually during the study period. In contrast, Coleoptera was not detected in the middle of May but increased gradually through the study period. Relative proportions of Lepidoptera varied from 4.6% to 43.2% with no distinct seasonal trend. Trichoptera was rare in the middle of May (relative proportion, 0.9%), but increased gradually until peaking in late June (15.5%). Hymenoptera and Hemiptera were relatively rare, but had a moderate frequency of occurrence (10.0% and 14.7%, respectively) in late July. Ephemeroptera were rare with frequencies of occurrence of 0.1% to 0.8% from early July to early August. Neuroptera were also rare with a frequency of occurrence of 0.1% from the
middle of July to early August.

Mean wet mass per individual of Lepidoptera was the highest among the eight orders from May to early July (Fig. 3). From the middle of July, Coleoptera had the highest mean wet mass per individual, while that of Lepidoptera was still higher than most of the other orders. In contrast, mean wet mass per individual of Diptera was the lowest throughout the study period (Fig. 3). The other five insect orders had intermediate mean wet mass, except for Trichoptera in late May, Ephemeroptera in late June and Neuroptera in early August (Fig. 3).

**Comparison between diet and insect abundance**

The results of post-hoc comparisons showed that the relative proportion of Diptera in the diet was significantly lower than that in insect abundance throughout the survey periods (Table 1). In contrast, the proportion of Coleoptera in the diet was significantly higher than that in insect abundance throughout the survey period (Table 1). For Lepidoptera, the proportion in the diet was significantly higher than that in insect abundance in the middle of May, late May, late June, early July and late July, but not significantly different in other survey periods (Table 1). For the remaining insect orders, there were no significant differences in proportions between diet and insect abundance throughout the survey periods (Table 1).

**Discussion**

Numerous studies have assessed prey selectivity of bats in the field (e.g., Barclay 1985; Swift et al. 1985; Brigham 1990; Schultz 2000; Burles et al. 2008). In these studies, comparison between diet composition and insect abundance (resource availability) have been based on the assumption that these data were sampled without bias. However, Kunz (1988) and Whitaker (1995a) both suggested that data on resource availability should be viewed with great caution. There are no satisfactory methods of capture for assessing availability of insects to insectivorous bats (Kunz 1988). Bats feed in areas that cannot be sampled by most insect traps, and even if traps can be used, the insect species that are captured are biased by the types of traps. Moreover, some insects may not be “available” to bats. For example, detectable insect size is restricted by echolocation call structure.
Table 1. Results from post-hoc comparison after chi-squared tests comparing diet composition with insect abundance collected by light traps

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<thead>
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<th></th>
<th>May</th>
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<th>July</th>
<th>August</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Late</td>
<td>Early</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lepidoptera</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diptera</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coleoptera</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trichoptera</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
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<tr>
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<td>n.s.</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hemiptera</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
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<td>Ephemeroptera</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neuroptera</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
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+ or –: significantly higher or lower proportion in the diet, respectively ($P < 0.05$). n.s.: not significant.
small insects. *Vespertilio sinensis*, which emits low-
peak frequency calls (24.2 kHz, Fukui et al. 2004), is
also thought to be unable to detect and consume small
insects. This may be one reason why Lepidoptera and
Coleoptera were consumed more frequently than Diptera.

Despite the prediction mentioned above, Diptera,
which tend to contain small-sized species, were also
frequently found in faecal pellets, especially in June
(Fig. 1); however, relative proportions in the diet were
lower than those in insect abundance (Table 1). Rydell
(1992) found a high proportion of Chironomidae in
faecal pellets from *V. murinus*, which is slightly smaller
than *V. sinensis*. Further, several studies have shown
that bats with low-frequency calls often feed on smaller
prey than theoretically predicted (Rydell 1986; Jones
1995; Waters et al. 1995). With regard to the reasons,
Jones and Rydell (2003) suggested the following two
possibilities: (1) swarming prey may increase their
conspicuousness both visually and acoustically and (2)
bats may have flexible echolocation behaviour and
sometimes make use of higher frequencies than normal.

In addition, because we could not account for prey size,
it is possible that *V. sinensis* consumed only large-sized
Diptera as theoretical work by Houston et al. (2004)
would suggest. In any case, our results showed that
Diptera is one of the important prey categories for *V.
sinesis* in addition to Lepidoptera and Coleoptera.

For the other five orders, there were no significant dif-
fferences between diet composition and insect abundance.
Hymenoptera and Hemiptera were found in both faecal
pellets and light traps, mainly in the latter half of the
survey period (Figs. 1 and 2). Ephemeroptera and
Neuroptera were rarely found in both faecal pellets and
light traps (Figs. 1 and 2). These results suggested that
the diet composition of *V. sinensis* is not only biased
towards larger sized taxa, but is also influenced by the
seasonal prevalence of each insect order.

Our study revealed that *V. sinensis* consume diverse
taxa of insects. The main insect orders Lepidoptera,
Diptera and Coleoptera included many species of hygiene
and agricultural pests. Funakoshi and Uchida (1981)
estimated that daily food intake of lactating females of
this species is about 6.4 g (ca. 36% of pre-feeding body
weight). Our study roost, which consisted of more than
1000 individuals every year, is located in a small patch
of forest, which is surrounded by extensive agricultural
fields. If this species uses these agricultural fields as a
feeding habitat, their ecological function in the agri-
cultural ecosystem might be as influential as has been
shown for other insectivorous bat species (Cleveland et
al. 2006; Federico et al. 2008; Williams-Guillén et al.
2008). In this case the conservation and management of
*V. sinensis* in the study area is important for economic
reasons. Further studies of factors such as population
dynamics, feeding habitat and alternative artificial roosts
(i.e. bat boxes) are needed to determine appropriate
management measures.

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bats (*Tadarida brasiliensis*) as insect predators in transgenic and


