**Lunar illumination shapes small mammal activity in lowland agricultural landscapes**

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**Abstract**

The behavioural patterns of small mammalian prey species have been shown to be widely impacted by predator avoidance. Cues to avoid predation may come from the predator itself or environmental cues, such as moonlight and available vegetative cover. We investigated how the activity of the bank vole *Myodes glareolus*, field vole *Microtus agrestis*, wood mouse *Apodemus sylvaticus* and the common shrew *Sorex araneus* were impacted by changes in habitat and lunar light conditions across a range of habitats (mainly grassland protected sites) in Lincolnshire (UK). Microhabitat vegetation density as well as weather conditions were recorded across all trap sites, with Longworth traps set overnight and the successfully captured species recorded the following morning. Overnight temperature was found to positively influence capture rate across all species. The lunar phase was found to significantly impact capture rate, with the gibbous lunar phase providing the highest capture rate across species. The interaction between illumination and vegetation density was also found to impact activity levels in the bank vole and wood mouse, with the bank vole showing higher activity in thick vegetation at low light levels and across habitats at higher light levels, whereas wood mice were more often captured in intermediate cover at low and intermediate illumination but across a range of habitats at brighter illumination. In combination, it suggests that small mammal activity is altered to potentially reduce predation risk. However, in this community at least, brighter lunar illumination leads to increase activity.

***Keywords:***

predator avoidance; illumination; temperature; small mammal; lunar cycle

**Introduction**

A major force shaping prey behaviour is the avoidance of predators (Lima and Dill, 1990). Predator avoidance can lead to changes in prey’s activity duration, foraging tactics, and micro-habitat selection (Lima and Dill, 1990; Ferrari, Sih and Chaivers, 2009). Prey may use a variety of direct or indirect cues to assess the risk of predation. These cues may come from the predator directly or indirectly (e.g. scent marks, calls) or by using cues from the environment that may relate to heightened predation risk. For nocturnal animals, both predation risk of prey (Mougeot and Bretagnolle, 2000; Griffin et al., 2005) and foraging efficiency of predators (Packer et al.*,* 2011) may cycle with lunar phase. As a consequence, many prey species schedule activity depending on the lunar phase.

Nocturnal species experience significant monthly fluctuations in ambient light levels, between moonless and full moon nights, as well as spatially due to light pollution (Spitschan et al., 2016). In response, both predator and prey may adjust their activity, movement and microhabitat use to track these changes (Penteriani et al., 2013). For example, many nocturnal species, including small mammals, that forage in relatively open habitats respond to moonlight by reducing activity outside their nests or burrows, and by shifting such activity towards areas of relatively dense cover (e.g. Lockard and Owings, 1974; Price et al., 1984; Bowers, 1988; Wolfe and Summerlin, 1989; Kaufman and Kaufman, 1982; Upham and Hafner, 2013; Dell’Agnello et al., 2020; Mori et al., 2020). This reduction in activity due to brighter illumination from moonlight has been widely investigated as a potential cue for increased predation risk (Beier, 2006; Caro, 2005). This negative effect of moonlight on the activity patterns of small prey species is greatest in habitats with areas of little or sparse vegetation such as open grasslands (Prugh and Golden, 2013), as lower cover provided by vegetation affects the vulnerability to aerial predators (Díaz, 1992; Longland and Price, 1991; Wilson, 1992; Mazurkiewicz, 1994). In turn, the hunting success of some predators may be increased on moonlit nights (e.g. barn owls: San-Jose et al., 2019). Not all studies however find that moonlight has a negative effect (Prugh and Brashares, 2010; Prugh and Golden, 2014), and differences may arise between species based on predator detection mechanism.

Small rodents depend on the detection of a predator prior to actual contact. It is known that rodents use a range of differing cues for predation risk, including indirectly from predator odours (Navarro-Castilla and Barja 2014) and directly via calls (Monarca et al., 2015). In response to increased exposure, rodents reduce their activity (Navarro-Castilla and Barja, 2014; Monarca et al., 2015). For nocturnal rodents, visual detection of predators is challenging; increased moonlight can for example, enhance visual detection of predators (Prugh and Golden, 2014), but also predator hunting success (San-Jose et al., 2019).

In this study, we examined whether the activity of a small mammal community was affected by moonlight conditions. The four species, the bank vole *Myodes glareolus*, field vole *Microtus agrestis*, wood mouse *Apodemus sylvaticus* and common shrew *Sorex araneus* are sympatric and share common predators Wróbel and Bogdziewicz, 2015). There are between-study differences in reported activity periods; wood mice are predominantly nocturnal, where as banks voles can be active throughout the day, with peaks of activity at twilight (Miller and Elton, 1955; Brown, 1956; Greenwood, 1978; Halle and Lehmann, 1993). Field voles being much more active during the day time (Brown, 1956; Halle and Lehmann, 1992) and the common shrew which is typically active throughout the day and night (Crowcroft, 1954). In addition, voles and shrews are thought to use cover to avoid predators, whereas wood mice use agility to avoid predators; such patterns should therefore alter preferred microhabitat (Jensen and Honess, 1995). Thus, it might be expected that moonlight and microhabitat are key determinants of small rodent activity (Wróbel and Bogdziewicz, 2015). To test this, we carried out a small mammal trapping study and measured trapping rates across habitats and light lunar light conditions. We predicted that small mammal activity would be greater in dark nights, with greater captures in dense habitat in lighter nights.

**Material and methods**

***Study sites***

Trapping occurred in various locations over Lincolnshire (UK), a largely agricultural county in eastern England (Fig. 1) from the 21st July 2019 till the 16th September 2019. A range of sites were included in the trapping period with a large number of grassland habitats (Mill Hill Quarry(N traps = 13, N trap nights = 26); Candlesby Hill Quarry (N traps = 30, N trap nights = 60); Woodhall Spa Airfield (N traps = 27, N trap nights = 54); Gibraltar Point (N traps = 50 , N trap nights = 100); Whisby Nature Park (N traps = 50, N trap nights = 100); Sotby Meadows (N traps = 27, N trap nights = 54); Saltfleetby-Theddlethorpe Dunes(N traps = 30, N trap nights = 60)), as well as woodland (Sir Joseph Banks Country Park(N traps = 50, N trap nights = 100), Goslings Corner Wood (N traps = 30, N trap nights = 60); Moulton Marsh N traps = , N trap nights = 60), reed heavy scrubland (Wolla Bank Pit (N traps = 27, N trap nights = 54); Boultham Mere (N traps = 47, N trap nights = 54); Tetney Blow Wells(N traps = 30, N trap nights = 60)) and farmland (Leadenhall Farm (N traps = 30, N trap nights = 60)).

***Trapping methodology***

Longworth traps were set individually at 5 or 10 metres intervals. Spacing could not be exact, as we need to ensure that the trap position was safe e.g. not exposed, unlikely to be moved or disturbed, or prevent water ingress to traps, all to prevent potential animal welfare issues (Soulsbury et al., 2020). The majority of traps were set in a linear pattern (N=428), with a subset within sites placed in a grid fashion (N=52 traps), dependent on-site topography. The traps were set up before dusk and contained bedding (straw), mixed bird seeds, soaked carrot pieces and 10 grams of casters (pupated fly larvae). Each trap was set at an angle to prevent water, urine, and faecal matter from running into the nest chamber and onto the bedding and causing possible distress or discomfort for the trapped individual. To avoid potential problems from overheating the traps were placed out of direct sunlight. Surrounding vegetation was used to cover all traps to provide further insulation and reduce the risk of mortality from overnight weather conditions. Furthermore, if the overnight temperature dropped below the minimum required temperature (5°C), then no trapping took place. The location of each of the traps was marked by a bamboo pole with coloured tape attached at the top to ensure that no traps were to be left unchecked or potentially lost.

The morning after, all the traps were checked in the order they were placed. If the trap was successful, the trapped individual within was removed using the polythene bag method and the species was recorded. The amount of time spent within the polythene bag and any handling of the small mammals was kept to a minimum to ensure minimal unnecessary distress. Individuals were released at site of capture to further prevent distress. This process was repeated until all traps at each site were collected. Traps were then removed from the site during the day to ensure equipment was not lost or damaged, and no animals were trapped unintentionally. Trapping occurred for two nights at each location to ensure multiple trap sites were included each week and to reduce the potential of recapturing the same individuals. In total, there were 960 trap nights across all sites.

**Micro-habitat and weather variables**

The habitat factors surrounding each trap were recorded within a 50cm radius (microhabitat). For each trap, a visual estimate of vegetation density was also recorded, using an A4 chequered cardboard sheet divided into 10 equal squares; an estimate of the percentage of the sheet obscured by vegetation was made (Monamy and Fox, 2000). At each location, 4 measurements north, south, east and west of the trap location were taken and an average calculated for the microhabitat. The overnight weather conditions including temperature (°C), lunar phase, and illumination from moonlight (%) were recorded for each trap night and location (World Weather Online, 2019).

**Statistical techniques**

Data was tested for normality using the Anderson-Darling normality test on Minitab 17 (Minitab, LLC, 2010) and, due to the significant departure from normality, the data collected for density was log transformed for analysis. We carried out binomial generalized linear mixed effects models (GLMM). We first tested whether overall trapping success rate differed between traps set in a linear or grid fashion (e.g. Pearson and Ruggerio, 2003), but lack of model convergence meant we could not test this at a species level. We then tested lunar phase (crescent or gibbous) as a factor, with temperature as a covariate, and trap number as a nested random effect with trap location. Capture probability for each species (yes/no) were then tested. Following this, we then tested whether lunar illumination (%), microhabitat density and their interaction effected capture probability. Temperature was again included as a covariate and trap number as a nested random effect with trap location. All analyses were carried out in R version 3.6.3 (R Core Team 2020), using lmerTest and lme4 (Bates et al., 2015; Kuznetsova et al., 2017). Post hoc tests of factors were compared using emmeans (Lenth, 2020).

**Results**

***Summary capture information***

In total, we caught 104 small mammals, which were predominantly bank voles and wood mice (Table 1). Overall average trap rates were 13.3% per night, with bank voles and wood mice being caught an average of 5.3% and 6.2% traps per night respectively. No mortality was recorded during the study period. Overall, there were no difference in capture rates of traps set in linear or grid patterns (Estimate+SE =0.33+0.45, z=-0.74, P=0.458).

***Activity in relation to moon phase***

For all species, temperature had a positive influence on capture rates (Table 2). In addition, lunar phase had a significant positive influence on capture rate (Table 2). Capture rates were greater in the gibbous lunar phase for all species (Fig. 2), but this effect was weakest in wood mice in comparison to other species (Fig. 2).

***Activity in relation to micro-habitat and illumination***

For bank voles and wood mice, there were significant effects of temperature and the interaction between microhabitat thickness and illumination (Table 3). For bank voles, more captures were found in thicker habitats in low light levels, but captures were more evenly spread across habitats at high light levels (Fig. 3a). Wood mice were commonly found at intermediate density at low and medium illumination, but more across all habitats at bright illumination (Fig. 3b).

**Discussion**

This study highlights the importance of temperature, lunar phase and micro-habitat in shaping small mammal activity patterns. Contrary to our predictions, all species were positively affected by lunar phase, and for two species with a greater nocturnal habit (wood mouse and bank vole) were most strongly affected by the interactive effects of lunar illumination and habitat selection, being found in denser microhabitat on dark nights. Our work highlights that lunar illumination and microhabitat must be considered in conjunction (Jacob et al., 2017; Mori et al., 2020). We also found a general positive effect of temperature on small mammal activity, something that has been widely reported (Prochaska and Slade, 1981; Vickery and Bider, 1981; Churchfield, 1982; Wolton, 1983; though see Wróbel and Bogdziewicz, 2015).

Across small mammals, the effect of moon phase and brightness seem to vary greatly, even within species. For example, bank voles have previously been shown to have a significantly higher capture rate with increased moonlight in beech *Fagus sylvatica* stands (Wróbel and Bogdziewicz, 2015). Bank voles are thought to prefer dense vegetation (Plesner Jensen and Honess, 1995); similarly, we found that capture rates were higher in general in dense vegetation, but captures were only found in short vegetation under bright moonlight. Bank voles are more active throughout the day and with peaks of activity at dawn and dusk (e.g. Greenwood 1978), and bank voles are important parts of the diet of diurnal predators such as kestrels *Falco tinnunculus* (Shrubb 1980). Increased activity during moonlit nights may reflect a reduction in diurnal activity and therefore reduced day-time predation risk. For wood mice, we found that differences between lunar phases were small, but the microhabitat was again important. In low illumination nights, wood mice were more active in intermediately dense habitats, whereas they were equally active in all habitats in bright moon illumination. A negative effect of illumination on wood mice has been observed (Wolton, 1983), and being in the open on brightly illuminated nights has been seen to reduce wood mouse activity (Plesner, Jensen and Honess, 1995), but other studies have found no effect (Díaz et al., 2005). We found that wood mice preferred denser habitats, but were more often found in denser habitats on dark nights. Activity of field voles or common shrews showed no relationship between illumination and habitat, though both were caught more often on bright moon phases.

The results showing a positive influence of moon phase on rodent activity is surprising. Barn owls *Tyto alba* are common predators in our study area and their hunting success is greatest in bright moonlight (San Jose et al., 2019). However, visual acuity of prey may also be increased, suggesting more complex influences of moon light on prey behaviour (Prugh and Golden, 2014). In addition, prey may be balancing nocturnal activity in bright moonlight in comparison to predation risk from daylight predators e.g. kestrels. Whilst we measured local microhabitat density, there may be a varying effect at different scalars, e.g. distance to cover, that may be important. Irrespective, the assumption that moonlight suppresses small mammal activity is clearly not always the case.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, it is clear that weather and habitat factors have a significant impact on activity in small mammals. We found that temperature and bright lunar phases positively influence activity, and for bank voles and wood mice, this effect was modified by micro-habitat structure.

**Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank Dave Bromwich, Head of Nature Reserves at the Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust, for granting permission to trap at all locations as well as the wardens who granted permission to trap at each Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust Nature Reserve including: Matt Blissett, Sophie Hawkridge, Grahame Hopwood, Dave Miller, Kevin James, Kevin Wilson and John Oliver. We would also like to thank Ian Willoughby for granting permission to trap at Leadenhall Farm and Adrian Isaac for giving permission to work at Sir Joseph Banks Country Park. Finally, we would like to thank Natural England for granting permission to work on all SSSIs and to Tammy Smalley and Clare Sterling at Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust for their help facilitating this project. The manuscript greatly benefitted from comments from Emiliano Mori and one anonymous reviewer.

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|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Species** | **N caught** | **N mortality (%)** | **Average nightly trap rate (%)** |
| Bank vole | 41 | 0 | 5.3% |
| Wood Mouse | 44 | 0 | 6.2% |
| Common shrew | 23 | 0 | 3.0% |
| Field Vole | 13 | 0 | 1.8% |
| Total | 104 | 0 | 13.3% |

**Table 1:** Summary capture statistics and mortality rates of small mammals in Longworth traps

**Table 2:** Trap success of the wood mouse, bank vole, field vole and common shrew in relation to temperature and lunar phase.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Model | Variables | Estimate+SE | Z value | P value |
| Wood mouse | Temperature | 0.16+0.00 | 48.15 | <0.001 |
|  | Lunar phase (crescent/gibbous) | 0.04+0.00 | 8.46 | <0.001 |
| Bank vole | Temperature | 0.35+0.00 | 89.71 | <0.001 |
|  | Lunar phase (crescent/gibbous) | 3.04+0.53 | 5.73 | <0.001 |
| Common shrew | Temperature | 0.23+0.05 | 4.47 | <0.001 |
|  | Lunar phase (crescent/gibbous) | 1.59+0.05 | 2.67 | <0.001 |
| Field vole | Temperature | 0.07+0.01 | 9.26 | <0.001 |
|  | Lunar phase (crescent/gibbous) | 2.32+0.01 | 294.47 | <0.001 |

**Table 3:** Trap success of the wood mouse, bank vole, field vole and common shrew in relation to temperature, illumination, density and the combined effects of the latter .

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Model | Variables | Estimate+SE | Z value | | P value |
| Wood mouse | Temperature | 0.28+0.06 | 48.15 | <0.001 | |
|  | Illumination | -0.70+0.05 | 8.46 | <0.001 | |
|  | Microhabitat thickness | -0.50+0.05 | -12.47 | <0.001 | |
|  | Illumination \*microhabitat thickness | 0.01+0.00 | 11.04 | <0.001 | |
| Bank vole | Temperature | 0.31+0.01 | 70.71 | <0.001 | |
|  | Illumination | 0.15+0.00 | 22.93 | <0.001 | |
|  | Microhabitat thickness | 0.10+0.00 | 34.29 | <0.001 | |
|  | Illumination \*microhabitat thickness | - 0.00+0.00 | -9.33 | <0.001 | |
| Common shrew | Temperature | 0.24+0.05 | 4.37 | <0.001 | |
|  | Illumination | 0.02+0.02 | 0.67 | 0.908 | |
|  | Microhabitat thickness | -0.00+0.02 | 0.12 | 0.503 | |
|  | Illumination \*microhabitat thickness | 0.00+0.00 | 0.57 | 0.569 | |
| Field vole | Temperature | 0.09+0.07 | 1.41 | 0.159 | |
|  | Illumination | 0.03+0.02 | 1.36 | 0.174 | |
|  | Microhabitat thickness | -0.00+0.02 | -0.16 | 0.875 | |
|  | Illumination \*microhabitat thickness | -0.00+0.00 | -0.66 | 0.508 | |

**Figures Legends**

**Figure 1:** Map of the United Kingdom with an inset map showing trap sites in Lincolnshire: A-Tetney Blow Wells; B- Saltfleetby-Theddlethorpe Dunes; C- Sotby Meadows; D- Goslings Corner Wood; E- Boultham Mere; F- Wolla Bank Pit; G- Mill Hill Quarry; H- Whisby Nature Park; I- Candlesby Hill Quarry; J- Woodhall Spa Airfield; K- Gibraltar Point; L- Sir Joseph Banks Country Park; M- Moulton Marsh; N- Leadenhall Farm.

**Figure 2:** Mean ±SE capture rates of small mammals in relation to either crescent or gibbous lunar phase.

**Figure 3:** Overall trap rates (captures per trap) of (a) bank voles and (b) and wood mice, in relation to habitat density (open=0-33%, medium=33-66%, dense=>66%) and illumination (low=0=33%, medium=33-66%, bright=>66%)

**

Figure 1



Figure 2



1. Bank vole



1. Wood mouse

Figure 3