Cell size and basal metabolic rate in hummingbirds

Tamaño celular y tasa metabólica basal en picaflorres

JUAN C. OPAZO1 *, MAURICIO SOTO-GAMBOA2
& MARÍA JOSÉ FERNÁNDEZ3

1 Center for Advanced Studies in Ecology & Biodiversity, Departamento de Ecología, Facultad de Ciencias Biológicas, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Santiago 6513677, Chile
2 Mauricio Soto-Gamboa, Instituto de Zoología, Facultad de Ciencias, Universidad Austral de Chile, Valdivia, Chile
3 Department of Integrative Biology, University of California, Berkeley, California 94720-3140, USA;
* E-mail for corresponding author: jopazo@genetics.wayne.edu

ABSTRACT

Nucleotypic theory suggests that genome size play indirect roles in determining organismal fitness. Among endotherms this theory has been demonstrated by an inverse correlation between basal metabolic rate (BMR) and genome size. Nonetheless, accumulation of variables, especially for some key groups of endotherms, involved in C-value enigma (e.g., cell size) will fortify this theory. In this sense, hummingbird species are of particular interest because they are an energetic extreme in avian and endotherm evolution. Knowing that cell size is proportional to C-value, in this study we tested for a relationship between mean corpuscular volume of red blood cells and BMR in four species of hummingbirds ranging from 4 to 20 g. In comparison with other birds, our hummingbird data show higher BMR and the smallest mean corpuscular volumes, thereby providing further support for the nucleotypic theory.

Key words: hummingbirds, nucleotypic theory, basal metabolic rate, mean corpuscular volume.

RESUMEN

La teoría nucleotípica sugiere que el tamaño del genoma juega un rol indirecto en la adecuación biológica, a través de las variables con las que se relaciona. En endotermos esta teoría ha sido demostrada por la relación inversa entre la tasa metabólica basal y el tamaño del genoma. La acumulación de variables, en grupos claves de endotermos, relacionadas con esta problemática (e.g., tamaño celular) son ideales para poner a prueba esta teoría. En este sentido, los picaflorres son de particular interés ya que son el extremo energético dentro de los endotermos. Sabiendo que el tamaño celular es proporcional al tamaño del genoma, en este trabajo ponemos a prueba la relación del volumen corpuscular medio y la tasa metabólica basal, e indirectamente el tamaño del genoma, en cuatro especies de picaflorres con masas corporales que van desde 4 a 20 g. Los datos de metabolismo mostraron estar dentro de los mayores descritos para aves, asimismo, los tamaños de los eritrocitos fueron los más pequeños dentro de los valores reportados en la literatura, apoyando así lo propuesto por la teoría nucleotípica.

Palabras clave: picaflor, teoría nucleotípica, tasa metabólica basal, tamaño corpuscular medio.

INTRODUCTION

Interspecific variation of C-value (i.e., defined as the amount of DNA contained in a haploid nucleus) was described decades ago by Mirsky & Ris (1951). A clear distinction exists between prokaryotic and eukaryotic organisms (Li 1997). Prokaryotes exhibit a 20-fold variation in DNA content, explained by the number of genes; bigger genomes contain more genes. Nevertheless, this argument fails to explain the five orders of magnitude variation in C-value among eukaryotes (Li 1997). The general non-correspondence between organismal complexity and genome size has been termed the C-value paradox (Thomas 1971). The discovery of non-coding DNA ended the C-value paradox because the differences between species were explained through different amounts of non-coding DNA. However the end of the paradox marked the beginning of the C-value enigma, where several questions were still left to be answered (Gregory 2001a).
Despite the unknown functions of non-coding DNA, correlations have been shown between cell and nucleus sizes with genome size (Olmo 1983). Associated with these correlations are the causative links between genome size and some physiological and developmental traits (Gregory 2002a). The latter could be interpreted as a selectionist view for explaining the existence of non-coding DNA.

Two groups of theories have been developed to explain the existence of this “extra” genetic material. The first group contains the mutation pressure theories (i.e. Selfish and Junk), being the simplest ones. These theories explain the phenomenon as the simple accumulation of DNA throughout evolutionary time up to the point where imposed replication costs are no longer sustainable (Ohno 1972, Doolittle & Sapienza 1980, Orgel & Crick 1980). The other group, termed optimal DNA theories (i.e., nucleoskeletal and nucleotypic) are based on functionalist views of the problem, proposing coevolutionary and causative explanations, respectively (Commoner 1964, Bennett 1971, 1972, Cavalier-Smith 1978).

Particularly for endothermic organisms (birds and mammals) nucleotypic theory discusses the correlation between cell volume (red blood cells) and genome size, based on differences in basal metabolic rate (BMR) (Gregory 2001b). In fact, a marked correlation exists between BMR and genome size in mammals and birds (Vinogradov 1995, Gregory 2002b, Waltari & Edwards 2002, Kozlowski et al. 2003). The connection between red blood cell volume and BMR is based on the hypothesis that higher metabolic demands in endotherms require more efficient systems to supply oxygen to metabolically active tissues (associated with the surface area:volume ratio). Accordingly, among endotherms, birds exhibit higher mass specific BMR and smaller genome sizes than mammals (Gregory 2002b).

More functionalist evidence can be found within the mammals. Species belonging to the order Chiroptera (bats) developed flight ability in a manner functionally similar to birds. Therefore, like birds, bats require higher metabolic rates and more efficient gas transport systems than non-volant mammals. In agreement with the nucleotypic explanation, bats have higher BMR than other mammals (McNab 1969) and smaller genome sizes than non-volant mammals (Burton et al. 1989). Within birds, Hughes (1999) reported a direct test of metabolism as a selective agent for genome size. In his study, bird families were classified into four categories according to their flight abilities (strong fliers, moderate fliers, weak fliers and flightless), and then this classification was correlated with genome size. The results showed that genome size increased as flight ability was lost, suggesting that flight ability is not randomly associated with genome size.

In this framework, data on mean corpuscular volume and basal metabolic rate of hummingbirds represent an important contribution to this debate because their small size (they are among the smallest of endothermic vertebrates) and the high cost of hovering flight make them an energetic extreme in avian evolution (Suárez 1992, Fernández et al. 2002, López-Calleja & Bozinovic 2003). Indeed, the mean body mass of hummingbirds is approximately 5 g, with the exception of the giant hummingbird (Patagona gigas), which at 20 g appears as an outlier in the distribution of hummingbird body sizes. Consequently, in this work we report the mean corpuscular volume of red-blood cells and basal metabolic rate in four species of hummingbirds, including the giant one.

**MATERIAL AND METHODS**

We captured five individuals of *Rhodopis vesper* in Arica (18°29´S, 70°19´W), five *Oreotrochilus estella* in Chusmiza (19°40´S, 69°10´W), three *Sephanoides sephaniodes* in San Carlos de Apoquindo (33°23´S, 70°31´W), and four individuals of *Patagona gigas* in El Pangue (33°31´S, 70°50´W).

Mean corpuscular volume was measured in an automated hematology analyzer (Sysmex KX-21N, Roche) from a blood sample. Measurements of basal metabolic rate (BMR) were made on adults within thermoneutrality (30 ± 0.5 °C), at night in a 1,000 mL steel dark metabolic chambers while animals were resting, inactive and post-absorptive. BMR was measured in a computerized (Datacan V) open-flow respirometry system (Sable Systems, Henderson, Nevada). The metabolic chamber received dried air at a rate of 550 ml/min from mass flow controllers (Sierra Instruments,
Monterey, California). Air passed through CO_2-
absorbent granules of Baralyme and Drierite
before and after passing through the chamber,
and was monitored every 5 s by an Applied
Electrochemistry O_2-analyzer, model S-3A/I
(Ametek, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania). Oxygen
consumption (VO_2) values were calculated
using equation 4a of Withers (1977). Each VO_2
trial was completed between 21:00 and 02:00 h.
Body mass was measured prior to metabolic
measurements using an electronic balance (±
0.1 g). For each measurement period, we used
only the last 2 h of recordings. The initial
period was not considered in the analysis
because of potential variance due to handling
disturbance. We selected the lowest VO_2 values
lasting at least 3 min, during which VO_2 did not
change more than 0.01 % in O_2 concentration.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results are summarized in Table 1. BMR values
for the hummingbird species measured in this
study follow the classic allometric relationship
described for endotherms (R = -0.74, P < 0.001)
(Fig. 1A), in other words, smaller hummingbirds
have higher mass specific metabolic rates than
bigger ones. In addition, among birds
hummingbirds are in the extreme of the curve
(Fig. 1B). Mean corpuscular volume (MCV)
measurements are the smallest so far among 204
bird species reported from 19 orders (Hawkey et
al. 1991). However there are no data yet from
other hummingbird species (Hawkey et al.
1991). MCV has a clearer connection with
metabolic rate, since smaller cells have greater
surface area per unit of volume, making gas
exchange more efficient. In short, our data
showed higher BMR values and the smallest
mean corpuscular volumes among birds, in other
words, higher metabolic demands and the
highest SA: V relationship.

Unfortunately, we can not compare our data
within the genome and erythrocyte size
relationship published by Gregory (2002b),
because, contrarily to us, his data are linear
measurement. Nevertheless, since the mean
corpuscular volume (MCV) of hummingbirds
are the smallest among birds, in agreement with
the relationship of MCV and genome size
(Gregory 2002b) is possible to predict that
hummingbirds would have the smallest genome
sizes of the group. According to this guess,
preliminary data would suggest that
hummingbird’s genome sizes would be at the
left size of the distribution of bird’s genome
sizes (J.C. Opazo unpublished data). The
mechanistic basis of genome size change is
important if we think that in mammals as much
as 20 % of the variance of metabolic rate can
be attributed to genome size differences
(Vinogradov 1995). In this sense, adjustments
in genome size could be used to fine tune
metabolic rates independent of body mass
(Vinogradov 1995). This argument is based on
the restricted variation on genome size among
endotherms, where not greater changes are
allowed (Opazo 2003). In comparison with
mammals, bird’s genome sizes are smaller and
vary between 0.95 to 2.16 pg (Gregory 2001c),
and as a general trend would had been the
result of an optimization process on variables
that are related with genome size (e.g., cell
size), being maintained by stabilizing selection
(Cavalier-Smith 1978).

TABLE 1

Summary statistics of traits measured in hummingbird species; n = number of individuals,
M_b = body mass, BMR = basal metabolic rate, MCV = mean corpuscular volume of red blood cells.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Species</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>M_b(g)</th>
<th>BMR(mL O_2 g^-1 h^-1)</th>
<th>MCV(fl)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rodophis vespertini</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.78 ± 0.56</td>
<td>4.89 ± 0.38</td>
<td>99.32 ± 3.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sephanoides sephaniodes</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.32 ± 0.94</td>
<td>3.68 ± 0.16</td>
<td>91.43 ± 1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oreotrochilus estella</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.35 ± 0.70</td>
<td>3.07 ± 0.37</td>
<td>98.14 ± 2.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patagona gigas</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18.07 ± 2.29</td>
<td>2.88 ± 0.24</td>
<td>108.66 ± 6.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In this sense, hummingbirds represent an excellent model for studying the mechanistic basis of genome size change. Some evidence has shown that birds have shorter introns than mammals, suggesting this mode as a mechanism to change the genome size (Hughes & Hughes 1995). However, Waltary & Edwards (2002) showed that the 66% of introns that are shorter in chickens than in humans are also shorter in *Alligator mississippiensis*, a sister taxon of birds, suggesting that the shortage occurred in the ancestor of archosaurs, and then can not be explained merely by the emergence of flight.

Another way to change the genome size could be by change the length of repetitive DNA. Birds have been shown to have shorter repetitive sequence motifs than mammals, especially dinucleotide ones (CA and CT), for tri or tetra nucleotide motif differences are smaller (Primmer et al. 1997). These results are in agreement with the data reported for bats. Shorter sequences of microsatellites in bats in comparison with non volant mammals were shown by van de Bussche et al. (1995).

As a whole, our results agree with the functionalist view of the genome size enigma, that is smaller cell sizes for higher metabolic rates. Additionally, since hummingbirds are an extreme in the evolution of endothermy, they represent an ideal model to test mechanistic hypotheses dealing with evolutionary changes in genome size.

**Fig. 1:** (A) The relationship between body mass and basal metabolic rate for the hummingbirds used in this study. The continuous line represents a linear regression, and the dotted line indicates the 95% confidence interval. Each point represents one individual. (B) The relationship between body mass and basal metabolic rate in birds, black squares are the hummingbird species used in this study. Data was obtained from Kozlowski et al. (2003).

(A) Relación entre la masa corporal y la tasa metabólica basal en los picafloros usados en este estudio. La línea continua representa la regresión lineal y la segmentada el intervalo de confianza al 95%. Cada punto representa un individuo. (B) Relación entre la masa corporal y la tasa metabólica basal en aves, los cuadrados negros representan las especies de picafloros usadas en este estudio. Los datos fueron obtenidos de Kozlowski et al. (2003).
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LITERATURE CITED


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