

Trait correlates of distribution trends in the Odonata of Britain and Ireland

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A major challenge in ecology is understanding why certain species persist, while others decline, in response to environmental change. Trait-based comparative analyses are useful in this regard as they can help identify the key drivers of decline, and highlight traits that promote resistance to change. Despite their popularity trait-based comparative analyses tend to focus on explaining variation in range shift and extinction risk, seldom being applied to actual measures of species decline. Furthermore they have tended to be taxonomically restricted to birds, mammals, plants and butterflies. Here we utilise a novel approach to estimate occurrence trends for the Odonata in Britain and Ireland, and examine trait correlates of these trends using a recently available trait dataset. We found the dragonfly fauna in Britain and Ireland has undergone considerable change between 1980 and 2012, with 22 and 53% of species declining and increasing respectively. Distribution region, habitat specialism and range size were the key traits associated with these trends, where habitat generalists that occupy southern Britain tend to have increased in comparison to the declining narrow-ranged specialist species. In combination with previous evidence, we conclude that the lower trend estimates for the narrow-ranged specialists could be a sign of biotic homogenization with ecological specialists being replaced by warm-adapted generalists.

1 Trait correlates of distribution trends in the Odonata of Britain and Ireland

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11

12 Abstract

13 A major challenge in ecology is understanding what enables certain species to persist, while others
14 decline in response to environmental change. Trait-based comparative analyses are useful in this regard
15 as they can help identify the key drivers of decline, and highlight traits that promote resistance to
16 change. Despite their popularity trait-based comparative analyses tend to focus on explaining variation
17 in range shift and extinction risk, seldom being applied to actual measures of species decline.
18 Furthermore they have tended to be taxonomically restricted to birds, mammals, plants and butterflies.
19 Here we utilise a novel approach to estimate occurrence trends for the Odonata in Britain and Ireland,
20 and examine trait correlates of these trends using a recently available trait dataset. We found the
21 dragonfly fauna in Britain and Ireland has undergone considerable change between 1980 and 2012, with
22 22 and 53% of species declining and increasing respectively. Distribution region, habitat specialism and
23 range size were the key traits associated with these trends, where habitat generalists that occupy

24 southern Britain tend to have increased in comparison to the declining narrow-ranged specialist species.
25 In combination with previous evidence, we conclude that the lower trend estimates for the narrow-
26 ranged specialists could be a sign of biotic homogenization with ecological specialists being replaced by
27 warm-adapted generalists.

28

29 **Introduction**

30 Defaunation, the loss of species and populations (Dirzo *et al.*, 2014), is occurring at an alarming rate with
31 recent estimates suggesting that the current extinction rate is 1000 times that of the historical natural
32 background rate (De Vos *et al.*, 2014). These declines are driven by environmental change, particularly
33 habitat loss and climate change, and can be measured in a number of ways, e.g. changes in distribution
34 and abundance (Thomas *et al.*, 2004; Biesmeijer *et al.*, 2006; Butchart *et al.*, 2010; Chen *et al.*, 2011).
35 Variation in species responses to environmental change has been found across broad taxonomic groups
36 (Hickling *et al.*, 2006; Angert *et al.*, 2011) but also within taxonomic groups, i.e. between species within
37 an order (Hickling *et al.*, 2005). A major challenge in conservation ecology is to gain a better
38 understanding of this interspecific variation in response to environmental change, i.e. what enables
39 certain species to persist while others decline?

40

41 Species traits play an important role in determining species' ability to resist environmental change. For
42 example, several studies have shown that ecological generalists out-perform specialists in times of
43 environmental change (Walker & Preston, 2006; Ozinga *et al.*, 2012; Newbold *et al.*, 2013). Such
44 comparative trait-based analyses are popular, as the models help to identify the main drivers of change
45 and allow the prediction of future biodiversity changes based on environmental forecasts (Fisher &

46 Owens, 2004; Cardillo *et al.*, 2006). Previous comparative trait analyses have tended to focus on
47 explaining variation in range shift (Angert *et al.*, 2011; Mattila *et al.*, 2011; Grewe *et al.*, 2012) and
48 extinction risk (Purvis *et al.*, 2000; Koh *et al.*, 2004; Cardillo *et al.*, 2008; Cooper *et al.*, 2008; Fritz *et al.*,
49 2009). Despite its popularity, the comparative trait-based approach has seldom been applied to direct
50 measures of species' changing status (i.e. rates of decline or increase). Currently data on such measures
51 of decline are rare, particularly at large (e.g. national) scales and across multiple species. With the
52 increase in public participation in biological recording, the availability of large-scale distribution datasets
53 has increased (Silvertown, 2009). Such data tend to be collected without systematic protocols and thus
54 contain many forms of sampling bias and noise, making it hard to detect genuine signals of change
55 (Tingley & Beissinger, 2009; Hassall & Thompson, 2010; Isaac *et al.*, 2014b). However, recent advances
56 in analytical approaches have improved our ability to estimate reliable trends from these unstructured
57 biological records (Isaac *et al.*, 2014). In this study we utilise these novel approaches to estimate trends
58 in occurrence for the Odonata in Britain and Ireland, and use species traits to test hypotheses for the
59 interspecific variation in trends.

60

61 We chose to examine Odonata for a number of reasons. Firstly, previous trait-based comparative
62 analyses have tended to focus on birds, mammals, plants and butterflies. Despite being highly species
63 rich and their crucial role across ecosystems, the non-butterfly invertebrate fauna are comparatively
64 poorly studied (IUCN, 2001; Dirzo *et al.*, 2014). Secondly, Odonata are thought to be excellent
65 bioindicators as they are sensitive to degradation of water ecosystems (Samways & Steytler, 1996;
66 Sahlén & Ekestubbe, 2001; Lee Foote & Rice Hornung, 2005). Thirdly, they provide a valuable ecosystem
67 service as they feed on many insect pests (Brooks & Lewington, 2007). Finally, the publication of a new
68 atlas (Cham *et al.*, 2014) and trait datasets (Powney *et al.*, 2014) for British Odonata together constitute

69 some of the best quality data of any non-butterfly invertebrate group. Previous research based on
70 Odonata occurrence data has focussed on the impact of climate change on phenology and distribution.
71 For example Hassall *et al.* (2007) discovered that emergence from overwintering had significantly
72 advanced over the past 50 years, while Hickling *et al.* (2005) showed that the upper latitudinal margin
73 shifted north between 1960 and 1995. Outside Britain, Bush *et al.* (2014) used species distribution
74 models (SDMs) to predict which Australian odonates were under threat from climate change.

75

76 Several studies have utilised traits to explain variation in several aspects of Odonata ecology, but
77 typically focus on explaining variation in species response to climate change. In terms of phenological
78 advancement, Hassall *et al.* (2007) noted that spring species and those without egg diapause exhibited
79 increased phenological shifts. Angert *et al.* (2011) examined trait correlates of range shift across
80 multiple taxonomic groups, finding that exophytic Odonata species in Britain shifted further north, on
81 average, than endophytic species. These insights, combined with extensive knowledge about their
82 natural history (Brooks & Lewington, 2007), form the basis of seven competing hypotheses (outlined
83 below) that aim to explain the interspecific variation in the distribution trends among British Odonata.

84

85 All traits included in the analysis have been shown to affect species' ability to respond to environmental
86 change. Habitat breadth is frequently related to species trends, where habitat generalists outperform
87 specialists due to their greater ability to adapt to novel environmental conditions (Fisher & Owens,
88 2004; Menéndez *et al.*, 2006; Botts *et al.*, 2012). Ball-Damerow *et al.*, (2014) found evidence of the
89 widespread expansion of habitat generalists which has led to biotic homogenization in the dragonfly
90 fauna of California and Nevada over the last century. We test the hypothesis that Odonata in Britain
91 and Ireland follow the patterns outlined above, with generalists out-performing specialists. Dispersal

92 ability affects species' ability to respond to environmental pressures, with higher dispersal ability linked
93 to an enhanced ability to respond (Thomas *et al.*, 2001; Pöyry *et al.*, 2011; Grewe *et al.*, 2012). Using
94 SDMs, Hof *et al.* (2012) found lentic (i.e. pond and lake dwelling) species had a greater ability to track
95 changes in their climatic niche. This was linked to greater dispersal ability, which is essential given the
96 ephemeral nature of their breeding sites (Hof *et al.*, 2006). We predict lentic species will have higher
97 (more positive) trend estimates than lotic species as their increased dispersal ability enables them to
98 persist during times of environmental change through the efficient relocation to newly suitable areas.
99 Geographic range size and body size are both frequently used as surrogates for a whole host of traits
100 associated with ecological specialism and competitive ability (Gittleman, 1985; Gaston, 2003; Angert *et*
101 *al.*, 2011). We predict that widespread species and the larger, therefore more competitive species, are
102 likely to show positive trends. Climate warming has increased the suitability of the landscape to those
103 species that were previously limited by their lower thermal tolerance threshold (Devictor *et al.*, 2008;
104 Dingemans & Kalkman, 2008; Bellard *et al.*, 2012), and evidence of the loss of northern species has
105 been seen in a variety of taxonomic groups across a variety of geographic regions (Hill *et al.*, 2002;
106 Devictor *et al.*, 2008; Myers *et al.*, 2009; Fofopoulos *et al.*, 2011). We therefore predict that southerly
107 distributed species will show the most positive trend estimates. An additional aspect of climate change
108 that has been linked with trends in Odonata is the increase in flood events in Britain. Species which
109 overwinter as larvae are particularly vulnerable to flooding as they can be swept away from ideal habitat
110 areas to unsuitable regions in which they cannot persist (Cham *et al.*, 2014). As a result we predict
111 species that overwinter as larvae will have undergone the greatest declines. Finally we test the
112 hypothesis that flight period will be positively related with species' trend. Grewe *et al.*, (2012) argued
113 that species with longer flight periods have increased dispersal ability, and therefore have a greater
114 capacity to adapt in response to environmental change.

115

116 **Materials & Methods**

117 *Occurrence trends*

118 Trends were estimated from Odonata distribution records in Britain and Ireland collected by the
119 Dragonfly Recording Network and coordinated by the British Dragonfly Society. Our analyses are based
120 on 588,480 records of 36 native species collected between 1980 and 2012 where the recording date is
121 known and the location was recorded to 1 km² precision or better. As these occurrence records were
122 collected without a specific sampling design they contain a variety of bias which inhibit their use in
123 estimating reliable trends. For example, the number of records collected each year has increased
124 dramatically over time (Cham *et al.*, 2014), such that simply counting the number of occupied sites
125 would produce biased trend estimates (Prendergast *et al.*, 1993; Isaac *et al.*, 2014). To account for these
126 biases we estimated species trends using an approach based on Bayesian occupancy modelling (van
127 Strien *et al.*, 2013; Isaac *et al.*, 2014). We first arranged the records into 212,574 visits, which were
128 defined as unique combinations of date and 1 km² grid cell (site). For each visit, each of the 36 species
129 was coded as either recorded (1) or not-recorded (0). We then selected sites with at least three years of
130 data, ensuring we retained only the well-sampled sites (Figure 1). Our final dataset contains 467,899
131 records from 157,507 visits to 11,435 sites (64,005 site-year combinations). We ran occupancy models
132 for each species based on the methodology of Van Strien *et al.* (2013) and Isaac *et al.* (2014). The
133 approach uses two hierarchically coupled sub-models, one, the state model, governs the true
134 presence/absence of a species at a site in a given year, the second, the observation model, governs the
135 probably of detecting that species given its presence or absence, and is therefore conditional on the
136 state model. The detection probability per visit is a function of the number of species recorded on that
137 visit (the 'list length': see appendix 1 for detailed model description). For each site-year combination
138 the model estimates presence or absence for the species in question given variation in detection

139 probability: from this the proportion of occupied sites ('occupancy') was estimated for each year.
140 Finally, within the Bayesian framework, a linear trend was fitted to these annual proportions to identify
141 a temporal trend in species occupancy. The slope of this regression of occupancy against year was used
142 as the species-specific trend measure in the cross-species comparative analysis.

143

144 *Species' trait data*

145 We included data on seven traits extracted from Powney *et al.* (2014) (Table 1). Two traits were based
146 on characteristics of a species' distribution pattern, the first, species status, was measured as an ordinal
147 variable based on distribution size, moving from very rare through to very widespread. Secondly,
148 distribution region was a categorical variable that defined a species broad climatic restriction, with
149 species classified into one of four levels, northern, southern (which included continental species from
150 the original classification), oceanic or widespread based on their distribution pattern. We included a
151 single morphological trait, thorax length (mm), which was taken as the mean of multiple measurements
152 from museum specimens. Flight period duration was measured as the number of months during which
153 adults are typically recorded in flight. We included two habitat based traits, habitat breadth measured
154 the number of broad habitats a species can utilise (maximum of 6), while breeding habitat classified
155 species based on breeding habitat preference, lentic, lotic or both. Finally, we classified species based
156 on their overwintering stage, either eggs, larvae or both. Distribution status was coded as an ordinal
157 variable: very rare = -1.5, rare = -1, scarce = -0.5, local = 0.5, widespread = 1, very widespread = 1.5, and
158 modelled as a continuous term in the analysis (as opposed to a factor). All continuous traits were
159 centred on zero prior to the analysis.

160

161 *Comparative analysis*

162 We used the *pgls* function from the R package *caper* (Orme, 2012) to run phylogenetically informed
163 linear models to examine trait-trend relationships while accounting for phylogenetic non-independence
164 (Freckleton *et al.*, 2002). In all phylogenetically informed models, the level of phylogenetic correction
165 (Pagel's λ) was estimated via maximum likelihood (Pagel, 1999; Freckleton *et al.*, 2002). Due to data
166 limitations we used a phylogeny based on taxonomy for the analyses. The phylogeny was built using the
167 *as.phylo* function from the R package *ape* (Paradis *et al.*, 2005) with nodes based on Suborder, Family,
168 Genus and Species, and all branch lengths were set to one.

169

170 We tested seven hypotheses about the drivers of species' trends whilst incorporating uncertainty in the
171 trend estimates of each species. To do this, we fitted 10,000 trait-trend models: in each model we
172 selected, at random, one value from the posterior distribution of trend estimates for each species. In all
173 10,000 models we estimated the coefficients for each of the seven traits (described above) as fixed
174 effects. From these models, we then calculated the mean and 95% confidence intervals for the trait-
175 trend parameter estimates across all iterations.

176

177 **Results**

178 We found substantial variation in the trend estimates between species. Of 36 species included in the
179 analysis, 8 had negative trends and 19 had positive trends where the 95 percentiles (2.5 and 97.5
180 percentiles) did not bridge zero (Appendix 2). Species that showed the greatest declines included:
181 *Aeshna juncea* and *Sympetrum danae*, while *Anax imperator* and *Aeshna mixta* showed the greatest
182 increases.

183

184 Key results from the comparative trait-analysis (Table 2 and Figure 2) showed distribution status, habitat
185 breadth and thorax length were positively associated with species trend, while species with longer flight
186 periods tended to have lower trend estimates (i.e. they declined relative to species with short flight
187 periods). Distribution region was an important predictor of species trend, where southern species
188 increased relative to oceanic and widespread species. Notable exceptions to this trend include the
189 declines in *Ischnura pumilio* and *Gomphus vulgatissimus* both of which were classified as southern
190 species. Northern species showed the largest increases, although this result is highly uncertain
191 (reflected in the wide 95% CI across the 10,000 iterations). Lentic species tended to have lower trend
192 estimates than lotic species and those species that utilise both breeding habitat strategies. Finally, there
193 appeared to be little evidence of an influence of overwintering stage on species trend. Trends tended to
194 be similar between species that overwinter as eggs and those that overwinter as larvae. Species that
195 can overwinter as both eggs and larvae had the lowest average trend estimates, however this category
196 was comprised of four species only. In general, the phylogenetic signal across the model iterations was
197 low, with a mean of 0.035 (0.0 – 0.36).

198

199 Discussion

200 We found that the dragonfly fauna in Britain and Ireland has undergone considerable change during
201 recent decades, with high levels of interspecific variation in occurrence trends. We found 8 species
202 (22%) had declined, whereas 19 species (53%) showed increasing trends. The large number of species
203 with positive trends is likely to reflect the recovery of dragonfly populations in response to increased
204 water quality in Britain since the mid-20th Century. Although a greater number of species increasing
205 than declining is good news for conservation, this could reflect biotic homogenization, i.e. the fauna

206 becoming dominated by a certain group of species, leading to the erosion of local and regional
207 difference between communities (Keith *et al.*, 2009).
208
209 We found distribution region was a key correlate of Odonata occurrence trends, with southern species
210 tending to have higher trend estimates than the oceanic and widespread species (Figure 2). This result
211 is in line with our hypothesis that increased temperatures has increased the climate suitability of Britain
212 and Ireland for southerly distributed species. A variety of studies have provided evidence of this
213 relationship, i.e. Devictor *et al.* (2008) found bird communities in France between 1989 and 2006 were
214 increasingly dominated by species that prefer warmer conditions, while Lima *et al.* (2007) found
215 evidence of northward range expansions in warm-water adapted Portuguese algae. Hickling *et al.*
216 (2005) used distribution region to explain variation in range shift and expansion in British Odonata,
217 finding that southern species showed greater poleward shifts and expansions compared to northern
218 species. We found little evidence of a difference between northern and southern species, however this
219 is likely due the low number of northern species ($n = 4$) included in our dataset. Interestingly, Angert *et al.*
220 (2011) found no correlation between range shift and position of the northern range limit (which is
221 related to our measure of distribution region). Despite the wealth of evidence that points to climate
222 change as the likely driver of increases in southern species, we cannot ignore the role of improved water
223 quality and standing water availability in southern Britain (Hickling *et al.*, 2005; Vaughan & Ormerod,
224 2012; Cham *et al.*, 2014). Durance & Ormerod (2009) noted that improved water quality can confound
225 attempts to detect the impact of climate change on freshwater macroinvertebrates. Southern species
226 are likely to have benefitted from both the increased water quality in southern Britain and improved
227 climate suitability, while the former was the main positive driver for widespread species, this could
228 explain the greater increases in southern compared to widespread species. Not all southern species

229 showed positive trends (notably *Ischnura pumilio* and *Gomphus vulgatissimus*), here the limited
230 expansion is likely due to a lack of suitable habitat.

231

232 Numerous studies have related habitat breadth to species trends and tend to find that habitat
233 generalists outperform specialists (Fisher & Owens, 2004; Menéndez *et al.*, 2006; Botts *et al.*, 2012).
234 Much of the evidence of this relationship is based on studies of terrestrial organisms (Biesmeijer *et al.*,
235 2006; Ozinga *et al.*, 2012; Newbold *et al.*, 2013), with a notable exception from Ball-Damerow *et al.*,
236 (2014). Here, we found that the relationship holds in the Odonata fauna of the UK as habitat breadth
237 was positively correlated with occurrence trend. The likely cause of this relationship is that habitat
238 generalists have a greater ability to adapt to novel environmental conditions, which is particularly
239 important in our current climate of anthropogenically driven environmental change (Travis, 2003;
240 Newbold *et al.*, 2013). Thorax length and distribution status (used here as a measure of range size) were
241 positively related to occurrence trends, i.e. narrow ranged, “rare”, small sized species tended to have
242 lower trend estimates than wider ranging, larger species. Geographic range size and thorax length are
243 often used as surrogates for traits associated with ecological specialism and competitive ability
244 (Gittleman, 1985; Gaston, 2003; Angert *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, as with habitat specialism above, we
245 believe this result is driven by the greater ability of competitive ecological generalists to adapt to
246 environmental change than specialists.

247

248 Hof *et al.* (2012) found lentic (i.e. pond and lake dwelling) species had a greater ability to track changes
249 in their climatic niche due to their greater dispersal ability, essential given the ephemeral nature of their
250 breeding sites. We hypothesised that the greater dispersal ability of lentic species would promote their
251 resilience to environmental change leading to a higher average trend estimate than lotic species. The

252 results in this study do not support our hypothesis as lentic species tended to have lower trend
253 estimates than lotic species. Differences in mean trend between lentic and lotic species are likely due to
254 differences in the impact environmental stressors (e.g. climate change, eutrophication and other forms
255 of habitat degradation), interactions between them and subsequent restoration between rivers and
256 lakes (Vaughan & Ormerod, 2012). A study aimed at improving our understanding of the variation
257 between lentic and lotic species is a prime candidate for future work.

258

259 Finally we found that flight period was negatively related to occurrence trend, a result contrary to
260 expectations. As with the lentic/lotic hypothesis, initially we suspected that species with greater
261 dispersal ability would show higher trends as increased dispersal capacity increases the ability to
262 mitigate the negative effects of environmental. We used flight period as a surrogate of dispersal ability
263 on the premise that the longer the flight season the more time a species has to disperse (Grewe *et al.*,
264 2012). It is plausible that the use of a more direct measure of dispersal ability would have produced a
265 result that is consistent with the literature on dispersal ability and species trends. It is worth noting that
266 the reliability of the trait-trend results depend on the accuracy of the underlying trait and trend data,
267 and we note that within a given species, traits can vary spatially. One such plastic trait includes flight
268 period that has been shown to vary with latitude (Corbet, 2004). Summarising this variation into a single
269 value per trait per species is a common approach but can create noise in model results.

270

271 In conclusion, we found that a large number of dragonfly species have increased in the UK between
272 1980 and 2012, and is likely a response to increased water quality. We found that habitat generalists
273 that occupy southern Britain tend to have increased in comparison to the narrow-ranged specialist
274 species of dragonfly. We believe this reflects the impact of environmental change, particularly climate

275 change, as the increased ambient temperature in Britain and Ireland better suits species that are
276 adapted to warmer conditions. The lower trend estimates for specialist species is a cause of
277 conservation concern as this result combined with evidence in previous studies could be a sign of biotic
278 homogenization with ecological specialists being replaced by warm-adapted generalists.

279

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285

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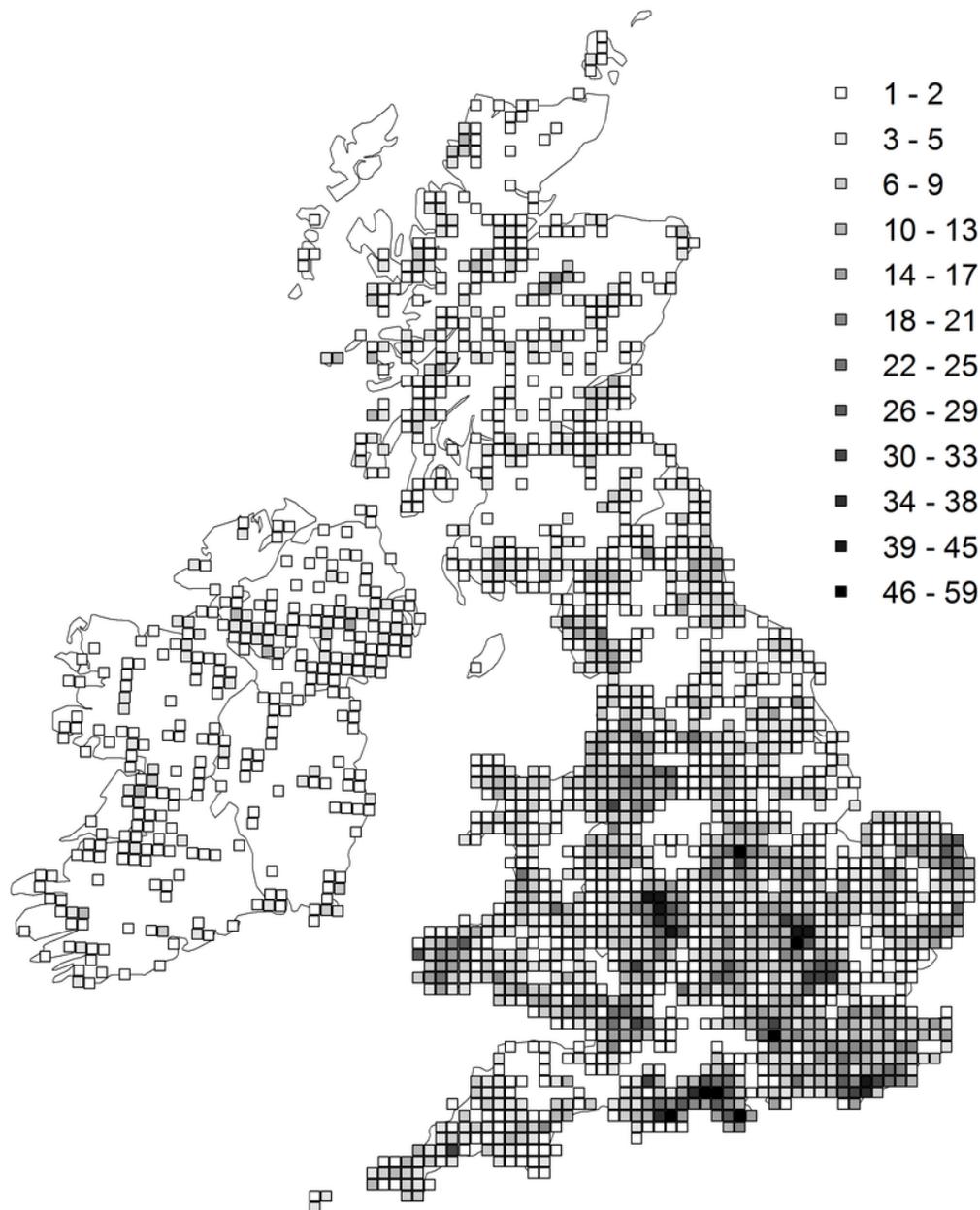
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1

Figure 1 The distribution and density of sites (monads) from which the trend estimates were derived.

The shading represents the number of unique sites within the hectad that were included in the analysis.



2

Figure 2 The mean and 95 percentiles of the trait coefficients across 10,000 model iterations.

Each categorical variable had a reference category which had a parameter estimate set to 0. The reference categories were as follows: region = "southern", breeding habitat = "lentic", and for overwintering stage = "eggs".

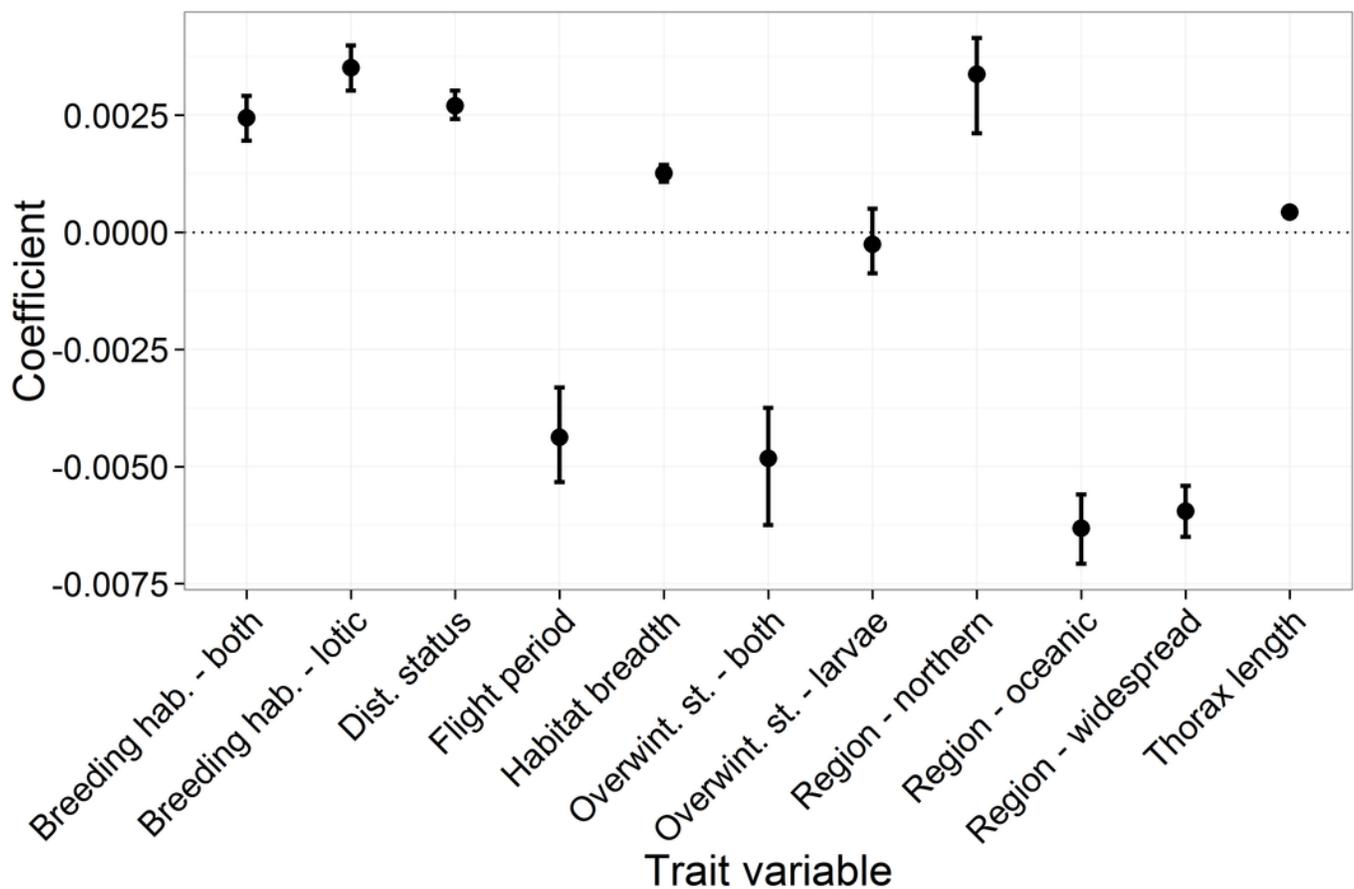


Table 1 (on next page)

Table 1. An overview of the Odonata traits included in the comparative analysis.

Trait	Description	Class
Species status	Species categorised on distribution size: very widespread, widespread, local, scarce, rare, and very rare.	Ordinal
Distribution region	Broad climatic categorisation of species: widespread, southern, northern or oceanic.	Categorical
Thorax length	Mean thorax length based on 10 adult (5 male and 5 female) museum specimens (mm).	Continuous
Flight period	The duration of the flight period in months.	Continuous
Habitat breadth	A count of the number of habitat types utilised by the species.	
Breeding habitat	Species were classified on their preferred breeding habitat, either lentic, lotic or both.	Categorical
Overwint. stage	Species categorised as overwintering as larvae, eggs, or both.	Categorical

1

2

Table 2 (on next page)

Table 2 The mean and 95 percentiles of the trait coefficients estimated from 10,000 model iterations.

The coefficients for the categorical variables (overwintering stage, region and breeding habitat) are shown as contrasts to the reference category (eggs, southern and lentic, respectively). The mean level of phylogenetic signal (λ) across the 10,000 iterations is presented alongside its 95 percentiles.

1

Parameter	Mean coef.	95 Percentile	
		0.025	0.975
Thorax length	4.87×10^{-4}	4.15×10^{-4}	5.65×10^{-4}
Overwintering stage - both	-0.005	-0.006	-0.004
Overwintering stage - larvae	-2.82×10^{-4}	-9.58×10^{-4}	6.78×10^{-4}
Flight period duration	-0.004	-0.005	-0.002
Distribution status	0.003	0.002	0.003
Region - Northern	0.003	0.001	0.004
Region - Oceanic	-0.007	-0.007	-0.006
Region - Widespread	-0.005	-0.007	-0.005
Habitat breadth	0.001	0.001	0.001
Breeding habitat - both	0.003	0.002	0.003
Breeding habitat - lotic	0.004	0.003	0.004
λ (phylo. signal)	0.035	<0.001	0.36

2