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Sexing a gender-role-reversed species based on plumage: potential challenges in the red phalarope

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Sex-role reversal, in which males care for offspring, can occur when mate competition is stronger between females than males. Secondary sex traits and mate attracting displays in sex-role-reversed species are usually more pronounced in females than in males. The red phalarope is a textbook example of a sex-role-reversed species. It is generally agreed that males are responsible for all incubation and parental care duties, whereas females typically desert males after having completed a clutch and may pair with new males to lay additional clutches. Breeding plumage of female red phalaropes is usually more brightly colored than male plumage, a reversed sexual dichromatism usually associated with sex-role reversal. Here, we confirm with PCR-based sexing that male red phalaropes can exhibit both the red body plumage typical of a female and the incubation behaviour typical of a male in this sex-role-reversed species. Our result, combined with previous observations of brightly coloured red phalaropes incubating nests at the same arctic location (Igloolik Island, Nunavut, Canada), suggests that plumage dichromatism alone may not be sufficient to distinguish males from females in this breeding population of red phalaropes. This stresses the need for more systematic genetic sexing combined with standardized description of intersexual differences in red phalarope plumages. Determining whether such female-like plumage on males is a result of phenotypic plasticity or genetic variation could contribute to further understanding sex-role reversal strategies in the short Arctic summer.

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Sexing a gender-role-reversed species based on plumage: potential challenges in the red phalarope

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Abstract

Sex-role reversal, in which males care for offspring, can occur when mate competition is stronger between females than males. Secondary sex traits and mate attracting displays in sex-role-reversed species are usually more pronounced in females than in males. The red phalarope is a textbook example of a sex-role-reversed species. It is generally agreed that males are responsible for all incubation and parental care duties, whereas females typically desert males after having completed a clutch and may pair with new males to lay additional clutches. Breeding plumage of female red phalaropes is usually more brightly colored than male plumage, a reversed sexual dichromatism usually associated with sex-role reversal. Here, we confirm with PCR-based sexing that male red phalaropes can exhibit both the red body plumage typical of a female and the incubation behaviour typical of a male in this sex-role-reversed species. Our result, combined with previous observations of brightly coloured red phalaropes incubating nests at the same arctic location (Igloolik Island, Nunavut, Canada), suggests that plumage dichromatism alone may not be sufficient to distinguish males from females in this breeding population of red phalaropes. This stresses the need for more systematic genetic sexing combined with standardized description of intersexual differences in red phalarope plumages. Determining whether such female-like plumage on males is a result of phenotypic plasticity or genetic variation could contribute to further understanding sex-role reversal strategies in the short Arctic summer.

Keywords: Charadriiformes, *Phalaropus fulicarius*, sexual dichromatism, shorebirds, secondary sexual traits

Introduction

Sex-role reversal, in which males care for offspring, can occur when mate competition is stronger between females than males (Eens and Pinxten 2000; Kvarnemo and Ahnesjo 1996). Biases in the intensity of mating competition can result from differences in operational sex ratios (the ratio of males to females ready to mate), which can in turn be associated with biases in potential reproductive rates (Kvarnemo and Ahnesjo 1996). Theory predicts that, as a result of biases in the intensity of mating competition, secondary sex traits and mate attracting displays in sex-role-reversed species will be more pronounced in females than in males (Andersson 1994; Eens and Pinxten 2000; Trivers 1985).

The red phalarope is a textbook example of a sex-role-reversed species (Alcock 2013). It is generally agreed that males are responsible for all incubation and parental care duties, whereas females typically desert males after having completed a clutch and may pair with new males to lay additional clutches (sequential polyandry; Dale et al. 1999; Schamel and Tracy 1977). The mating system of the red phalarope has been described as *female access polyandry*, a system in which females do not defend resources, but rather limit access to males by converging at feeding areas to mate (Emlen and Oring 1977). Breeding plumage of female red phalaropes is usually more brightly colored than male plumage (Tracy et al. 2002; Figure 1), a reversed sexual dichromatism usually associated with sex-role reversal (Heinsohn et al. 2005). It is also recognized that there is considerably more plumage variations between males, and that the most brightly colored males can approach female levels of coloration (Pyle 208; Tracy et al. 2002). However, mottled crowns has been identified as the characteric that was diagnostic of males (Tracy et al. 2002). Such overlap in plumage of male and female red phalarope (Tracy et al.

2002) might explain why previous studies have reported incidental observations of red phalaropes showing typical female plumage either incubating eggs (3 out of 17 nests; Forbes et al. 1992) or brooding chicks (Sutton 1932).

Here, we describe the observation of a red phalarope exhibiting both the red body plumage, the plain black crown, and the incubation behaviour typical of a female on Igloolik Island (Nunavut, Canada), during summer 2014. Our objective was to genetically sex this individual (hereafter referred as the "ambiguous" individual) to determine whether it was a brightly colored male or a female. We determined the sex of the ambiguous bird by using a DNA marker universaly used for sexing birds (Fridolfsson and Ellegren 1999), comparing the band patterns of the ambiguous bird with those obtained with samples of red phalaropes sexed by dissection.

Methods

Study area

We conducted fieldwork on Igloolik Island (Nunavut, Canada; 69°24'N, 81°32'W) between early June and early August in 2014 (Lecomte and Giroux 2015). This island is located in northwest Foxe Basin next to the Melville Peninsula and south from the northern part of Baffin Island. The study area is located in a mosaic of wet (sedge/grass moss wetland), mesic (non-tussock sedge, dwarf-shrub, moss tundra), and dry (prostrate dwarf-shrub, herb tundra) habitat patches interspersed by ponds and lakes. Habitats were identified as per the Circumpolar Arctic Vegetation map (CAVM-Team 2003).

Nest monitoring

We located red phalarope nests by following birds on incubation recesses back to their nests or by flushing nests when walking or dragging a 30-m rope (9-mm-diameter). We searched for nests intensively within a 36-ha and a 24-ha nest plots, and also recorded the presence of nests found opportunistically outside of the nest plots. The location of each nest was recorded with a Global Positioning System (Garmin eTrex), and three nest markers were placed at 1-m, 5-m and 10-m north of the nest to allow nest relocation. We monitored nests according to a 5-day visitation schedule.

Capture

We captured the ambiguous individual using a bownet placed on its nest on June 16th 2014 (1 day before hatching). We marked the bird with a metal band, a unique individual combination of three coloured darvic bands, and a unique site-specific combination of two coloured bands. We measured and recorded its bill length (exposed culmen) using a caliper (±0.1 mm precision), wing length using a ruler (±1 mm), and body mass using a hanging Pesola scale (±1g). We collected blood from the basilic vein using a small gauge (27.5) needle to puncture the vein before drawing the blood into a capillary. Blood was preserved in 95% ethanol. Finally, we took pictures of the general appearance of the bird.

Control individuals

Red phalaropes were opportunistically collected after being found dead during the breeding season at Barrow, Alaska in 2011 (male) and 2012 (female). Sex of those control carcasses was confirmed by visual inspection of their reproductive system. Samples of muscles were collected during dissection, preserved in tissue preservation buffer (240.24g Urea, 100mls 1M Tris HCl

pH 8.0, 11.69g NaCl, 3.72g EDTA, 5 g N-Lauroyl-sarcosine, npH2O to 1 Liter). These samples were used as controls for PCR-based sex determination of the ambiguous individual.

PCR-based sex determination

Three birds were sexed by PCR: one control male, one control female, and the ambiguous bird. A small piece of tissue (close to 1 mm^3) of the control birds was washed with 50 µl sterile water and centrifuged for 3 min at 10,000 rpm. Water was removed and the tissue washed a second time to remove any remaining salts from the preservation buffer that could have interfered with the PCR reaction. The tissue was then broken down using the point of a sterile tip in 50 µl of sterile water. Blood samples of the ambiguous bird were properly mixed and 50 µl were transferred to a new tube and centrifuged for 3 min at 10,000 rpm. Ethanol was removed and pelleted red blood cells were re-suspended in 50 µl DEPC water. The mixtures produced for each bird were incubated for 20 min at 55□C with constant shaking and 5 µl was directly used as DNA template for the PCR reactions.

Sex determination was made according to Fridolfsson and Ellegren (1999), with minor modifications. Reactions were done in 25 µl reactions containing 12.5 µl Amresco Hot Start Taq Master Mix, 2x (Amresco LLC., Solon, Ohio, US), 0.5 µM each primer and 5 µl of the DNA template. Sequences of the primers used were 2550F:5'-GTTACTGATTCGTCTACGAGA–3' and 2718R: 5'-ATTGAAATGATCCAGTGCTTG-3'. PCR conditions were as follows: 94°C for 1 min of initial denaturation, 35 cycles at 94°C for 30 sec, 50°C for 30 sec and 72°C for 1 min, followed by a final extension at 72°C for 5 min. PCR products were finally separated using 1.2% agarose gel electrophoresis with GelRed™ nucleic acid stain (Biotium, Inc., Hayward,

California, US). The sex of the ambiguous bird was determined by comparing the pattern displayed by the control male and female on the electrophoresis.

Permits

Capture techniques and immobilization procedures were approved by the Université de Moncton Animal Care Committee (permit # 14-05) and by Environment Canada (Scientific permit to capture and band migratory birds, #10872). Red phalarope collections in Alaska were done under federal and state permits issued to R. Lanctot. Field research was approved by the Department of Environment – Government of Nunavut (permit # WL-2014-039) and the Canadian Wildlife Service (permits #NUN-SCI-14-04).

Results

Nest density

In summer 2014, the density of red phalarope nests on our study plots averaged 25 nests/km^2 (SD=11, n=12 and 4 nests in the 36 and 24-ha plots, respectively). The ambiguous individual incubated a nest located approximately 0.6 km outside both nest plots.

Nesting behaviour

The nest incubated by the ambiguous individual (Figure 1) was found by flushing the bird on 27 June 2014. The nest was revisited on July 2, July 7, and July 12 when we saw signs of hatching on the eggs. We then visited the nest every 1-2 days until it hatched on July 17. The brightly colored individual was observed incubating the nest at every visit except on June 13 when the nest was not being attended.

Physical characteristics

The ambiguous individual was observed walking with an apparent handicap and upon capture, we noted that two digits of its right foot were missing second phalanges. Its bill and wing lengths overlapped values reported for male and female red phalaropes trapped in Igloolik in a prior study (J. Dale, unpubl. data, in Tracy et al. 2002), while body mass was on average 7.9g and 12.2g lower than those males and females, respectively (Table 1). Plumage patterns indicated the ambiguous bird had red body feathers and plain black crown indicative of a female, but wing feathers possibly resembling a male (Fig. 1).

PCR-based sex determination

The male and female positive controls exhibited the expected discriminative band pattern. The band of the female was smaller than the male's, with sizes close to 300 bp and 550 bp, respectively (Figure 2). The pattern of the ambiguous bird was identical to the one of the control male pattern, namely with a single band around 550 bp (Figure 2).

Discussion

According to the PCR test, the brightly coloured, ambiguous red phalarope was a male. Our result, combined with previous observations of brightly coloured red phalaropes males (Forbes et al. 1992; Tracy et al. 2002), stresses the need for conducting more systematic genetic sexing combined with standardized description of red phalarope plumages. This is especially needed because the characteristic that is considered diagnostic of even the bright males, namely the mottled crown, was not observed in the male described in this study.

There are a variety of reasons why bright male plumages might occur in this species. Johns (1964) showed that the red nuptial feathers in phalaropes could experimentally be induced by an injection of testosterone. Hence, a higher testosterone level during spring moult (April;

169 Tracy et al. 2002) could cause the brighter plumage observed in the male red phalarope in our
170 study. However, there is little information on hormone levels in red phalaropes so the variability
171 of testosterone levels during the molting season remains to be quantified. It is also unknown
172 whether the physiological mechanism (higher testosterone level or another mechanism) behind
173 this feather coloration is a result of phenotypic plasticity, genetic variation or both. It is
174 interesting that our ambiguous male had cryptic wing feathers possibly like his male counterparts
175 (Figure 1); such wing feather coloration would provide the necessary camouflage to avoid
176 predation while incubating a nest. Further studies are required to sex individuals displaying such
177 wing coloration and other potential distinguishing criteria betweeen males and females currently
178 discussed among shorebird biologist but yet unpublished (e.g. tawny stripes on the back).This is
179 especially needed on Igloolik Island as occasional observations conducted during summer 2015
180 on Igloolik Island point to the possibility that male feather coloration is highly variable (Lecomte
181 & Giroux, unpublish. data), suggesting that our ambiguous male is not a singularity.

182 Although redder males are thought to be of higher quality in a species characterized by
183 typical sex roles such as the bar-tailed godwit *Limosa lapponica* (Piersma and Jukema 1993),
184 determining whether a female-like coloration would be associated with any variations in
185 reproductive traits for males remains to be studied in this species (see an equivalent study in
186 ruffs: Küpper et al. 2016). To better understand the mechanisms inducing bright feather
187 coloration in males, further studies are needed to compare physiological parameters and
188 hormonal levels in bright individuals compared to typical bright females and dull males, and
189 mate selection and breeding success of various patterned males.

190 The PCR method used to sex these three individuals is regularly used to sex birds from

different species, and has been shown to be reliable (Fridolfsson and Ellegren 1999). Males of many species tested with this method always have a one-band pattern, characteristic of their ZZ sexual chromosomes. Females, that have ZW sexual chromosomes, usually have two bands, with the biggest band corresponding to the Z-chromosome, as in males. However, females from some species can also display a single band pattern because the W chromosome can sometimes be preferentially amplified against the Z chromosome. In all cases, the single female band is always smaller than the single male band, still allowing the robust discrimination of both sexes (Fridolfsson and Ellegren 1999). As such, the pattern exhibited by the control female in our study is not unexpected and still allows differentiating males from females. Thus we are confident of the sexual assignment of our ambiguous bird as a male.

Our result indicates that in some situations plumage dichromatism alone may not be sufficient to distinguish red phalarope males from females. Identifying diagnostic plumage characteristics of males would require range-wide studies scoring plumage of genetically sexed individuals with standardized protocols (Reynolds 1987; Troscianko and Stevens 2015). We also recommend further work to determine whether these female-like plumages on males are a result of phenotypic plasticity or genetic variation, and brightly colored males derives reproductive benefits from their coloration.

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267

268

269 **Table 1.** Morphometric measurements of red phalaropes captured in Igloolik in a previous study
270 (Tracy et al. 2002) compared to those of the ambiguous individual measured in 2014. Samples
271 sizes are within brackets.

	Previous study	Ambiguous individual
Bill length		
Male	22.2 ± 1.5 (48)	23.5
Female	22.7 ± 1.2 (14)	
Wing length		
Male	128.4 ± 2.3 (48)	130
Female	134.9 ± 2.9 (14)	
Body mass		
Male	52.9 ± 3.8 (45)	45
Female	57.2 ± 4.7 (13)	

272

273

274 **Figure captions**

275 **Fig. 1.** Comparison between the breeding plumage of three red phalaropes: 1) typical male, 2)
276 ambiguous bird (brightly coloured individual incubating), and 3) typical female. All pictures
277 were taken in Igloolik, Nunavut, Canada. Photos: N. Lecomte.

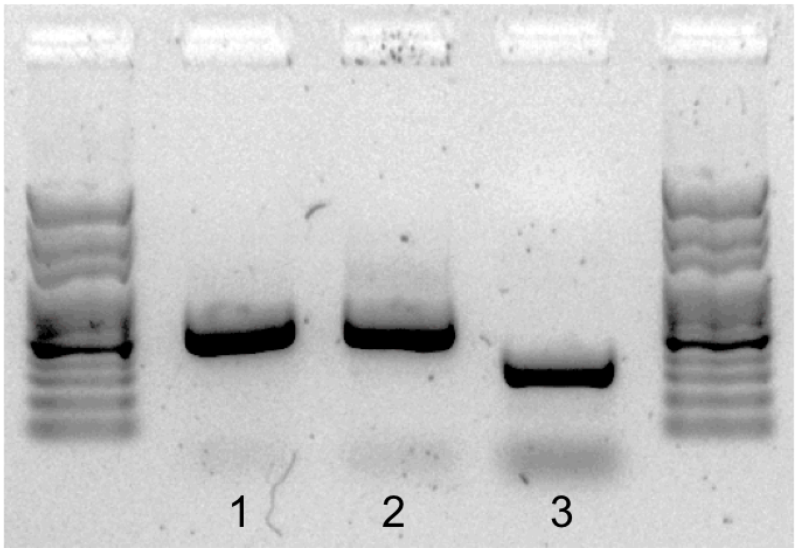
278 **Fig. 2.** PCR sex determination for red phalaropes at Igloolik, Nunavut, Canada and Barrow,
279 Alaska. PCR products were separated with agarose gel electrophoresis and stained with
280 GelRed™ nucleic acid (Biotium, Inc., Hayward, California, US; see methods) using sexing
281 primers specific to birds (2550F/2718R; Fridolfsson & Ellegren 1999). Lanes on sides are for the
282 molecular weight marker while 1) is for a Barrow male (550bp), 2) for the ambiguous bird
283 (550bp), and 3) for typical Barrow female (330 bp).

284

285 **Figure 1**

286 

287 **Figure 2**



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