

¹ DateLife: leveraging databases and analytical tools to reveal the dated Tree of Life

² Luna L. Sánchez Reyes^{1,2}, Emily Jane McTavish¹, & Brian O'Meara²

³ ¹ University of California, Merced, USA

⁴ ² University of Tennessee, Knoxville, USA

⁵ Author Note

⁶ School of Natural Sciences, University of California, Merced, 258 Science and
⁷ Engineering Building 1, Merced, CA 95340, USA.

⁸ Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, University of Tennessee, Knoxville,
⁹ 446 Hesler Biology Building, Knoxville, TN 37996, USA.

¹⁰ The authors made the following contributions. Luna L. Sánchez Reyes: Data curation,
¹¹ Investigation, Software, Visualization, Validation, Writing - Original Draft Preparation,
¹² Writing - Review & Editing; Emily Jane McTavish: Resources, Software, Writing - Review &
¹³ Editing; Brian O'Meara: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Resources,
¹⁴ Software, Supervision, Writing - Review & Editing.

¹⁵ Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Luna L. Sánchez Reyes, .
¹⁶ E-mail: sanchez.reyes.luna@gmail.com

17

Abstract

18 Achieving a high-quality reconstruction of a phylogenetic tree with branch lengths
19 proportional to absolute time (chronogram) is a difficult and time-consuming task. But the
20 increased availability of fossil and molecular data, and time-efficient analytical techniques
21 has resulted in many recent publications of large chronograms for a large number and wide
22 diversity of organisms. Knowledge of the evolutionary time frame of organisms is key for
23 research in the natural sciences. It also represent valuable information for education, science
24 communication, and policy decisions. When chronograms are shared in public, open
25 databases this wealth of expertly-curated and peer-reviewed data on evolutionary timeframe
26 is exposed in a programmatic and reusable way, as intensive and localized efforts have
27 improved data sharing practices, as well as incentivized open science in biology. Here we
28 present DateLife, a service implemented as an R package and an R Shiny website application
29 available at www.datelife.org, that provides functionalities for efficient and easy finding,
30 summary, reuse, and reanalysis of expert, peer-reviewed, public data on time frame of
31 evolution. The main DateLife workflow constructs a chronogram for any given combination
32 of taxon names by searching a local chronogram database constructed and curated from the
33 Open Tree of Life Phylesystem phylogenetic database, which incorporates phylogenetic data
34 from the TreeBASE database as well. We implement and test methods for summarizing time
35 data from multiple source chronograms using supertree and congruification algorithms, and
36 using age data extracted from source chronograms as secondary calibration points to add
37 branch lengths proportional to absolute time to a tree topology. DateLife will be useful to
38 increase awareness of the existing variation in alternative hypothesis of evolutionary time for
39 the same organisms, and can foster exploration of the effect of alternative evolutionary
40 timing hypotheses on the results of downstream analyses, providing a framework for a more
41 informed interpretation of evolutionary results.

42

Keywords: Tree; Phylogeny; Scaling; Dating; Ages; Divergence times; Open Science;

⁴³ Congruification; Supertree; Calibrations; Secondary calibrations

⁴⁴ Word count: 4924

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46 **Introduction**

47 Chronograms –phylogenies with branch lengths proportional to time– provide key data
48 on evolutionary time frame for the study of natural processes in many areas of biological
49 research, such as developmental biology (Delsuc et al., 2018; Laubichler & Maienschein,
50 2009), conservation biology (Felsenstein, 1985; Webb, 2000), historical biogeography
51 (Posadas, Crisci, & Katinas, 2006), and species diversification (Magallon & Sanderson, 2001;
52 Morlon, 2014).

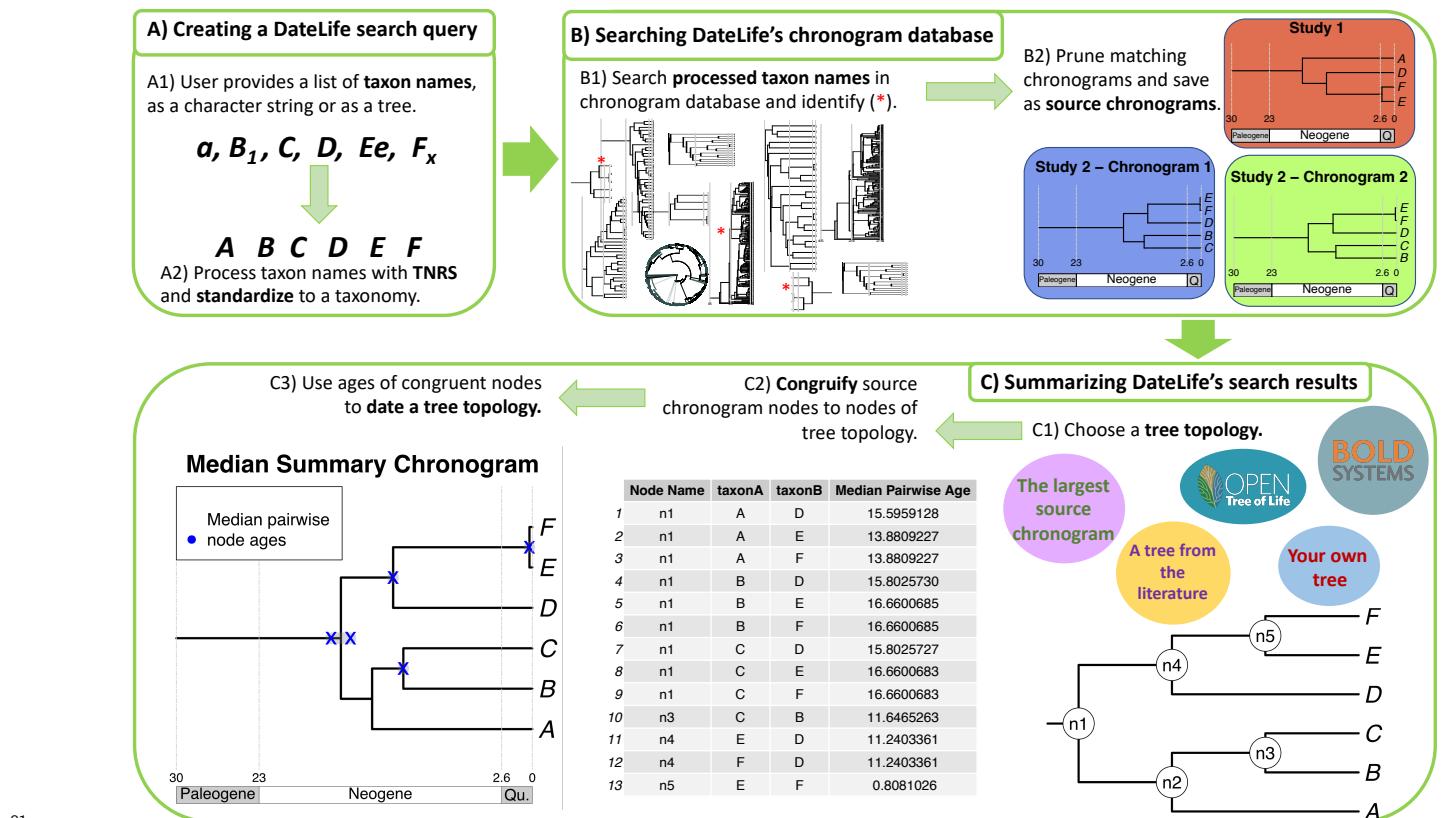
53 Building a chronogram is not an easy task. It requires obtaining and curating data to
54 construct a phylogeny, selecting and placing appropriate calibrations on the phylogeny using
55 independent age data points from the fossil record or other dated events, and inferring the
56 full dated tree; it also generally requires specialized biological training, taxonomic domain
57 knowledge, and a non-negligible amount of research time, computational resources and
58 funding.

59 Here we present the DateLife project which has the main goal of capturing age data
60 from published chronograms, and making these data readily accessible to the community for
61 reuse and reanalysis, for research, teaching, and science communication and policy.
62 DateLife’s core software application is available as an R package (Sanchez-Reyes et al., 2022),
63 and as an online Rshiny interactive website at www.datelife.org. It features key elements for
64 scientific reproducibility, such as a versioned, open and fully public source database
65 (McTavish et al., 2015), data stored and available in a computer readable format (Vos et al.,
66 2012), automated and programmatic ways of accessing the data (Stoltzfus et al., 2013) and
67 methods to summarize and compare the data.

68

Description

69 DateLife's core software application consists of the R package `datelife`. Its current
 70 stable version – v0.6.5, is available from the The Comprehensive R Archive Network (CRAN)
 71 repository (Sanchez-Reyes et al., 2022), and relies on functionalities from various biological
 72 R packages: ape (Paradis, Claude, & Strimmer, 2004), bold (Chamberlain et al., 2019),
 73 geiger (Pennell et al., 2014), paleotree (Bapst, 2012), phyloch (Heibl, 2008), phylocomr
 74 (Ooms & Chamberlain, 2018), phytools (Revell, 2012), rotl (Michonneau, Brown, & Winter,
 75 2016), and taxize (Chamberlain & Szöcs, 2013; Chamberlain et al., 2019). Figure 1 provides
 76 a graphical summary of the three main steps of the DateLife workflow: creating a search
 77 query, searching a database, and summarizing results from the search.



81

78 FIGURE 1. *Main DateLife workflow. Analyses can be performed via DateLife's interactive website*
 79 *at www.datelife.org, or using the `datelife` R package. Details on the R functions used to perform*
 80 *the analyses are available from `datelife`'s R package vignettes at phylotastic.org/datelife.*

82 Creating a search query

83 DateLife starts by processing an input consisting of at least two taxon names, which
84 can be provided as a comma separated character string or as tip labels on a tree. If the input
85 is a tree, it can be provided as a classic newick character string (Archie et al., 1986), or as a
86 “phylo” R object (Paradis et al., 2004). The input tree is not required to have branch lengths,
87 and its topology is used in the summary steps described in the next section.

88 DateLife accepts scientific names that can belong to any inclusive taxonomic group
89 (e.g., genus, family, tribe, etc.) or a binomial species name. Subspecies and variants are
90 ignored. If an input taxon name belongs to an inclusive taxonomic group, DateLife has two
91 alternative behaviors defined by the “get species from taxon” flag. If the flag is active,
92 DateLife retrieves all species names within the inclusive taxonomic group following a
93 standard taxonomy of choice, and adds them to the input string. Taxonomies currently
94 supported by DateLife are Open Tree of Life (OpenTree) unified Taxonomy (OTT, Rees &
95 Cranston, 2017), the National Center of Biotechnology Information (NCBI) taxonomic
96 database (Schoch et al., 2020), the Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF)
97 taxonomic backbone (GBIF Secretariat, 2022), and the Interim Register of Marine and
98 Nonmarine Genera (IRMNG) database (Rees, Vandepitte, Decock, & Vanhoorne, 2017). If
99 the flag is inactive, DateLife excludes any taxon names above the species level from the
100 search query.

101 DateLife processes input scientific names using a Taxonomic Name Resolution Service
102 (TNRS), which increases the probability of correctly finding the queried taxon names in the
103 chronogram database. TNRS detects, corrects and standardizes name misspellings and typos,
104 variant spellings and authorities, and nomenclatural synonyms to a single taxonomic
105 standard (Boyle et al., 2013). DateLife implements TNRS with OTT as standard (Open
106 Tree Of Life et al., 2016; Rees & Cranston, 2017), storing taxonomic identification numbers
107 for further processing.

108 The processed input taxon names are saved as an R object of a newly defined class,

109 `datelifeQuery`, that is used in the following steps. This object contains the standardized

110 names, the corresponding OTT identification numbers, and the topology of the input tree if

111 any was provided.

112 **Searching a chronogram database**

113 At the time of writing of this manuscript (Jun 22, 2022), DateLife's chronogram

114 database latest version consist of 253 chronograms published in 187 different studies. It is

115 curated from OpenTree's phylogenetic database, the Phylesystem, which constitutes an open

116 source of expert and peer-reviewed phylogenetic knowledge with rich metadata (McTavish et

117 al., 2015), which allows automatic and reproducible assembly of our chronogram database.

118 Datelife's chronogram database is navigable as an R data object within the `datelife` R

119 package.

120 A unique feature of the Phylesystem is that any user can add new published,

121 state-of-the-art chronograms any time, through their curator application

122 (<https://tree.opentreeoflife.org/curator>). As chronograms are added to Phylesystem, they are

123 incorporated into the chronogram database of the `datelife` package. The updated database

124 is assigned a new version number, followed by a package release on CRAN. `datelife`'s

125 chronogram database is updated as new chronogram data is added to Phylesystem, at a

126 minimum of once a month and a maximum of every 6 months. Users can also implement

127 functions from the `datelife` R package to trigger an update of the local chronogram

128 database, to incorporate any new chronograms to the user's DateLife analysis before an

129 official database update is released on CRAN.

130 A DateLife search is implemented by matching processed taxon names provided by the

131 user to tip labels in the chronogram database. Chronograms with at least two matching

132 taxon names on their tip labels are identified and pruned down to preserve only the matched

133 taxa. These matching pruned chronograms are referred to as source chronograms. Total
134 distance (in units of millions of years) between taxon pairs within each source chronogram
135 are stored as a patristic distance matrix (Figure 1). The matrix format speeds up extraction
136 of pairwise taxon ages of any queried taxa, as opposed to searching the ancestor node of a
137 pair of taxa in a “phylo” object or newick string. Finally, the patristic matrices are
138 associated to the study citation where the original chronogram was published, and stored as
139 an R object of the newly defined class `datelifeResult`.

140 **Summarizing search results**

141 Summary information is extracted from the `datelifeResult` object to inform
142 decisions for subsequent steps in the analysis workflow. Basic summary information available
143 to the user is:

- 144 1. The matching pruned chronograms as newick strings or “phylo” objects.
- 145 2. The ages of the root of all source chronograms. These ages can correspond to the age
146 of the most recent common ancestor (mrca) of the user’s group of interest if the source
147 chronograms have all taxa belonging to the group. If not, the root corresponds to the
148 mrca of a subgroup within the group of interest.
- 149 3. Study citations where original chronograms were published.
- 150 4. A report of input taxon names matches across source chronograms.
- 151 5. The source chronogram(s) with the most input taxon names.
- 152 6. Various single summary chronograms resulting from summarizing age data, generated
153 using the methodology described next.

154 ***Choosing a topology.***— DateLife requires a tree topology to summarize age data
155 upon. We recommend that users provide a tree topology as input from the literature, or one
156 of their own making. If no topology is provided, DateLife automatically extracts one from
157 the OpenTree synthetic tree, a phylogeny encompassing 2.3 million taxa across all life,

158 assembled from 1, 239 published phylogenetic trees and OpenTree’s unified Taxonomy, OTT
159 (Open Tree Of Life et al., 2019). Alternatively, DateLife can combine topologies from source
160 chronograms using a supertree approach. To combine topologies from source chronograms
161 into a single summary (or supertree) topology, the DateLife workflow identifies the source
162 chronograms that form a grove, roughly, a sufficiently overlapping set of taxa between trees,
163 by implementing definition 2.8 for n-overlap from Ané et al. (2009). In rare cases, a group of
164 trees can have multiple groves. By default, DateLife chooses the grove with the most taxa,
165 however, the “criterion = trees” flag allows the user to choose the grove with the most trees
166 instead. If source chronograms do not form a grove, the supertree reconstruction will fail.

167 **Dating the topology.**— Input topologies from OpenTree or the supertree approach
168 described above do not include branch length estimates of any kind. Optionally, to estimate
169 branch lengths proportional to substitution rates on these topologies, DateLife can mine the
170 Barcode of Life Data System, BOLD (Ratnasingham & Hebert, 2007) to obtain genetic
171 markers for the input taxa. These markers are aligned with MUSCLE (Edgar, 2004) (by
172 default) or MAFFT (Katoh, Asimenos, & Toh, 2009). This alignment can be used to
173 estimate branch lengths on input topologies that lack branch lengths. Currently, branch
174 length reconstruction in DateLife is performed using parsimony and the likelihood of the
175 phylogenetic tree given a sequence alignment is computed (Schliep, 2011). While relative
176 branch length information provides additional data for nodes without secondary date
177 calibrations, topologies without branch lengths can also be dated.

178 Once a topology is chosen, DateLife applies the congruification method (Eastman,
179 Harmon, & Tank, 2013) to find nodes belonging to the same clade across source
180 chronograms, and extract the corresponding node ages from the patristic distance matrices
181 stored as `datelifeResult`. By definition, the matrices store total distance (time from tip to
182 tip), hence, node ages correspond to half the values stored in the patristic distance matrices.
183 This assumes that the terminal taxa are coeval and occur at the present. A table of

184 congruified node ages that can be used as calibrations for a dating analysis is stored as a
185 `congruifiedCalibrations` object.

186 For each congruent node, the pairwise distances that traverse that node are
187 summarized into a single summary matrix using classic summary statistics (i.e., mean,
188 median, minimum and maximum ages), and the Supermatrix Distance Method [SDM;
189 Criscuolo, Berry, Douzery, and Gascuel (2006)], which deforms patristic distance matrices by
190 minimizing variance and then averaging them. These single summary taxon pair age
191 matrices (Summarized calibrations) can be applied as calibrations to date a tree topology,
192 using different dating methods currently supported within DateLife: MrBayes (Huelsenbeck
193 & Ronquist, 2001; Ronquist & Huelsenbeck, 2003), PATHd8 (Britton, Anderson, Jacquet,
194 Lundqvist, & Bremer, 2007), BLADJ (Webb, Ackerly, & Kembel, 2008; Webb & Donoghue,
195 2005), and treePL (Smith & O'Meara, 2012).

196 By default, DateLife implements the Branch Length Adjuster (BLADJ) algorithm to
197 obtain a fully dated topology. BLADJ fixes node ages that have calibration data, and
198 distributes time between nodes with no data evenly between nodes with calibration data.
199 This minimizes age variance in the resulting chronogram (Webb et al., 2008). BLADJ does
200 not use branch lengths even when they are present in the input tree or summarizing
201 topology. When there is conflict in ages between nodes with calibration data, BLADJ
202 ignores node ages that are older than the age of a parent node. BLADJ requires a root age
203 estimate. If there is no information on the age of the root in the chronogram database, users
204 can provide an estimate from the literature. If none is provided, DateLife assigns an
205 arbitrary age to the root as 10% older than the oldest age available within the group.

206 Alternative phylogenetic dating options supported in DateLife (MrBayes, PATHD8,
207 TreePL) incorporate branch length information from the input topology in combination with
208 the calibrations. PATHd8 is a non-clock, rate-smoothing method (Britton et al., 2007) to
209 date trees. treePL (Smith & O'Meara, 2012), is a semi-parametric, rate-smoothing,

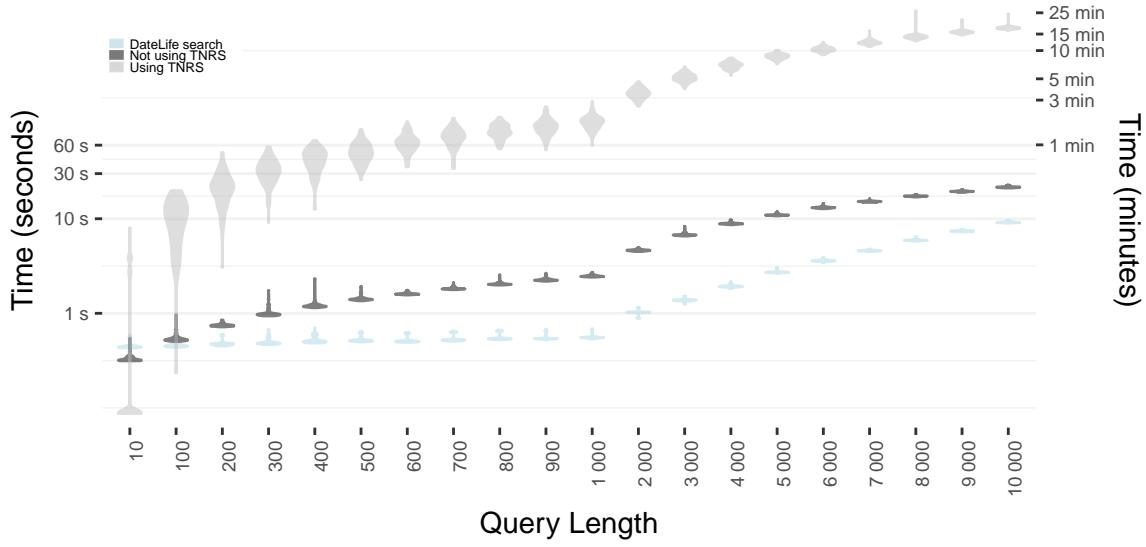
210 penalized likelihood dating method (Sanderson, 2002). The MrBayes (Huelsenbeck &
211 Ronquist, 2001; Ronquist & Huelsenbeck, 2003) approach in DateLife uses the calibrations as
212 priors on node ages.

213 ***Visualizing results.***— Finally, users can save all source and summary chronograms in
214 formats that permit reuse and reanalyses (newick and R “phylo” format), as well as visualize
215 and compare results graphically, or construct their own graphs using DateLife’s chronogram
216 plot generation functions available from the R package `datelifeplot` (Sanchez-Reyes &
217 O’Meara, 2022).

218

Benchmark

219 *datelife*'s R package code speed was tested on an Apple iMac with one 3.4 GHz Intel
 220 Core i5 processor. We registered variation in computing time of query processing and search
 221 through the database relative to number of queried taxon names. Query processing time
 222 increases roughly linearly with number of input taxon names, and increases considerably if
 223 Taxonomic Name Resolution Service (TNRS) is activated. Up to ten thousand names can be
 224 processed and searched in less than 30 minutes with the most time consuming settings. Once
 225 names have been processed as described in methods, a name search through the chronogram
 226 database can be performed in less than a minute, even with a very large number of taxon
 227 names (Fig. 2).



228

229 FIGURE 2. *DateLife*'s benchmarking results. Computation time used to process a query and a
 230 search across *datelife*'s chronogram database, relative to number of input taxon names. For
 231 each $N = \{10, 100, 200, \dots, 1\,000, \dots, 9\,000, 10\,000\}$, we sampled N species names from
 232 the class Aves a hundred times, and then performed a *datelife* search processing the input
 233 names with Taxon Names Resolution Service (TNRS; light gray), and without processing
 234 names (dark gray). For comparison, we performed a search using an input that had been
 235 pre-processed with TNRS (light blue).

236 `datelife`'s code performance was evaluated with a set of unit tests designed and
237 implemented with the R package `testthat` (R Core Team, 2018) that were run both locally
238 with the `devtools` package (R Core Team, 2018), and on a public server using the continuous
239 integration tool of GitHub actions (<https://docs.github.com/en/actions>). At present, unit
240 tests cover more than 40% of `datelife`'s code (<https://codecov.io/gh/phylotastic/datelife>).
241 Unit testing helps identify potential issues as code is updated or, more critically, as services
242 code relies upon may change.

243 **Case studies**

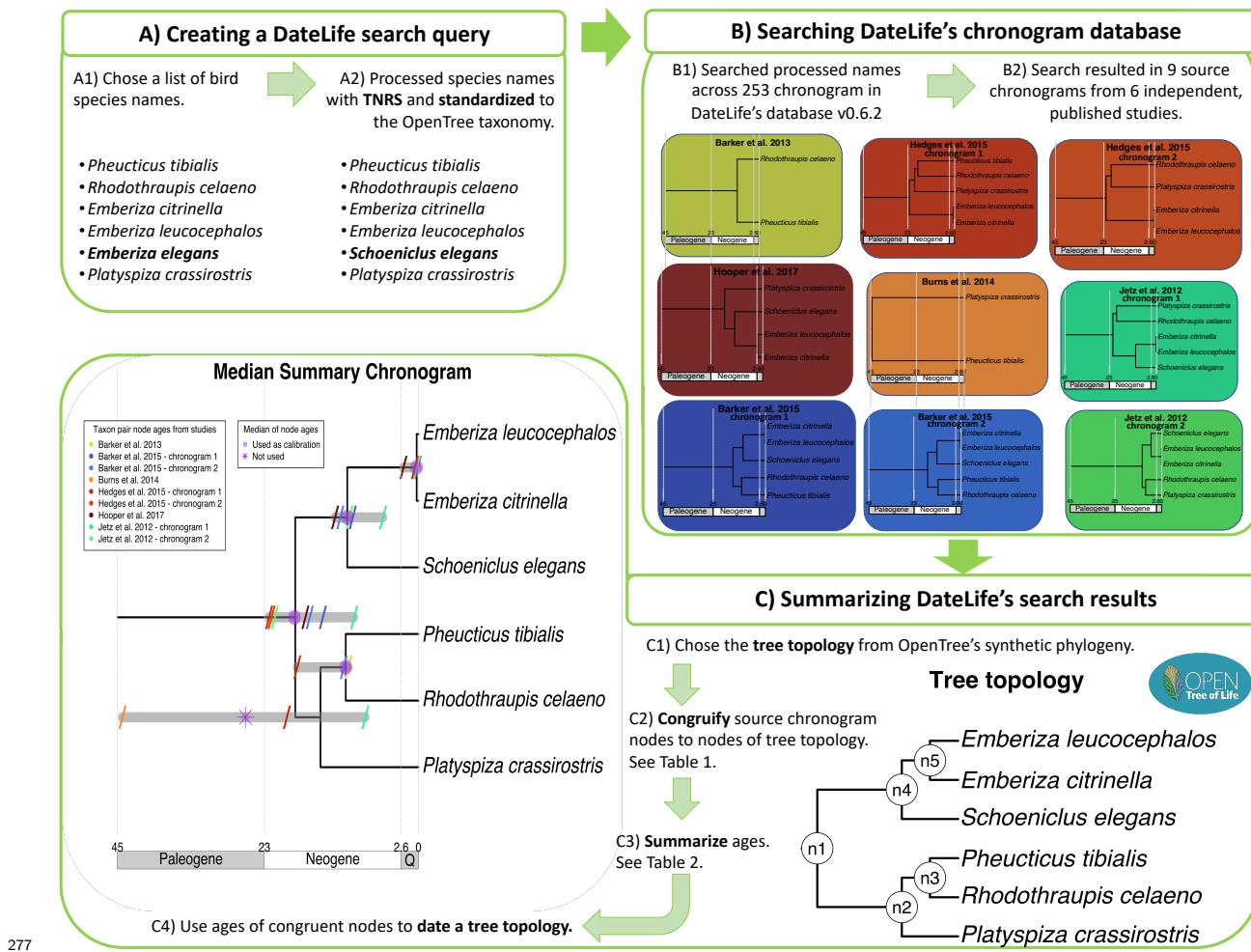
244 We illustrate the DateLife workflow using a family within the Passeriform birds
245 encompassing the true finches, Fringillidae, as case study. The first example analyses 6 bird
246 species and shows all steps of the workflow. The second example is an analysis of 289 species
247 in the family Fringillidae that are included in the NCBI taxonomy.

248 **A small example**

249 **Creating a search query.** We chose 6 bird species within the Passeriformes. The sample
250 includes two species of cardinals: the black-thighed grosbeak – *Pheucticus tibialis* and the
251 crimson-collared grosbeak – *Rhodothraupis celaeno*; three species of buntings: the
252 yellowhammer – *Emberiza citrinella*, the pine bunting – *Emberiza leucocephalos* and the
253 yellow-throated bunting – *Emberiza elegans*; and one species of tanager, the vegetarian finch –
254 *Platyspiza crassirostris*. Processing of input names found that *Emberiza elegans* is synonym
255 for *Schoeniclus elegans* in the default reference taxonomy (OTT v3.3, June 1, 2021). For a
256 detailed discussion on the state of the synonym, refer to Avibase (Avibase, 2022; Lepage,
257 2004; Lepage, Vaidya, & Guralnick, 2014). Discovering this synonym allowed assigning five
258 age data points for the parent node of *Emberiza elegans*, shown as *Schoeniclus elegans* in
259 figure 3A, which would not have had any data otherwise.

260 **Searching the database.** DateLife used the processed input names to search the local
261 chronogram database and found 9 matching chronograms in 6 different studies (Fig. 3B).
262 Three studies matched five input names (Barker, Burns, Klicka, Lanyon, & Lovette, 2015;
263 Hedges, Marin, Suleski, Paymer, & Kumar, 2015; Jetz, Thomas, Joy, Hartmann, & Mooers,
264 2012), one study matched four input names (Hooper & Price, 2017) and two studies matched
265 two input names (Barker, Burns, Klicka, Lanyon, & Lovette, 2013; Burns et al., 2014). No
266 studies matched all input names. Together, source chronograms provide 28 unique age data
267 points, covering all nodes on our chosen tree topology to date (Table 1).

268 **Summarizing search results.** DateLife obtained OpenTree’s synthetic tree topology for
269 these taxa (Fig. 3C), and congruified and mapped age data to nodes in this chosen topology
270 (Table 1). The name processing step allowed including five data points for node “n4” (parent
271 of *Schoeniclus elegans*; Fig. 3A) that would not have had any data otherwise due to name
272 mismatch. Age summary statistics per node were calculated (Table 2) and used as
273 calibrations to date the tree topology using the BLADJ algorithm. As expected, more
274 inclusive nodes (e.g., node “n1”) have more variance in age data than less inclusive nodes
275 (e.g., node “n5”). Summary age data for node “n2” were excluded as final calibration
276 because they are older than age data of the more inclusive node, “n1” (Fig. 3C4).



277

278 FIGURE 3. *DateLife analysis results for a small sample of A) 6 bird species within the*
279 *Passeriformes. B) Processed species names were found across 9 chronograms within 6*
280 *independent studies (Barker et al. (2012), Barker et al. (2015), Burns et al. (2014), Hedges*
281 *et al. (2015), Hooper and Price (2017), Jetz et al. (2012).) C) This revealed 28 source*
282 *age data points for the queried species names. Summarized age data is used as secondary*
283 *calibrations to date a tree topology obtained from OpenTree's synthetic tree, resulting in a*
284 *summary chronogram of source ages.*

285 TABLE 1. Ages of congruified nodes. See Figure 3, step C2.

	Node Name	taxon A	taxon B	Node Age	Study chronogram
1	n1	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	<i>Platyspiza crassirostris</i>	9.6509881	Jetz et al. 2012 – chronogram 1
2	n1	<i>Pheucticus tibialis</i>	<i>Schoeniclus elegans</i>	14.3336520	Barker et al. 2015 – chronogram 1
3	n1	<i>Rhodothraupis celaeno</i>	<i>Schoeniclus elegans</i>	16.2984859	Barker et al. 2015 – chronogram 2
4	n1	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	<i>Platyspiza crassirostris</i>	16.9499615	Hooper et al. 2017
5	n1	<i>Rhodothraupis celaeno</i>	<i>Schoeniclus elegans</i>	21.5140867	Jetz et al. 2012 – chronogram 2
6	n1	<i>Emberiza leucocephalos</i>	<i>Platyspiza crassirostris</i>	22.0000000	Hedges et al. 2015 – chronogram 2
7	n1	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	<i>Platyspiza crassirostris</i>	22.3757277	Hedges et al. 2015 – chronogram 1
8	n2	<i>Platyspiza crassirostris</i>	<i>Rhodothraupis celaeno</i>	7.9691925	Jetz et al. 2012 – chronogram 1
9	n2	<i>Platyspiza crassirostris</i>	<i>Rhodothraupis celaeno</i>	19.7085830	Jetz et al. 2012 – chronogram 2
10	n2	<i>Platyspiza crassirostris</i>	<i>Rhodothraupis celaeno</i>	19.7085900	Hedges et al. 2015 – chronogram 2
11	n2	<i>Platyspiza crassirostris</i>	<i>Rhodothraupis celaeno</i>	19.7128363	Hedges et al. 2015 – chronogram 1
12	n2	<i>Pheucticus tibialis</i>	<i>Platyspiza crassirostris</i>	44.2958603	Burns et al. 2014
13	n3	<i>Pheucticus tibialis</i>	<i>Rhodothraupis celaeno</i>	10.5304440	Barker et al. 2015 – chronogram 1
14	n3	<i>Pheucticus tibialis</i>	<i>Rhodothraupis celaeno</i>	10.5379092	Barker et al. 2013
15	n3	<i>Pheucticus tibialis</i>	<i>Rhodothraupis celaeno</i>	11.2095375	Barker et al. 2015 – chronogram 2
16	n3	<i>Pheucticus tibialis</i>	<i>Rhodothraupis celaeno</i>	18.1570685	Hedges et al. 2015 – chronogram 1
17	n4	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	<i>Schoeniclus elegans</i>	5.3238969	Jetz et al. 2012 – chronogram 1
18	n4	<i>Emberiza leucocephalos</i>	<i>Schoeniclus elegans</i>	9.8622460	Barker et al. 2015 – chronogram 1
19	n4	<i>Emberiza leucocephalos</i>	<i>Schoeniclus elegans</i>	10.3391445	Jetz et al. 2012 – chronogram 2
20	n4	<i>Emberiza leucocephalos</i>	<i>Schoeniclus elegans</i>	11.7317630	Barker et al. 2015 – chronogram 2
21	n4	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	<i>Schoeniclus elegans</i>	12.5133870	Hooper et al. 2017
22	n5	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	<i>Emberiza leucocephalos</i>	0.1407015	Jetz et al. 2012 – chronogram 1
23	n5	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	<i>Emberiza leucocephalos</i>	0.1516230	Hedges et al. 2015 – chronogram 2
24	n5	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	<i>Emberiza leucocephalos</i>	0.2011990	Barker et al. 2015 – chronogram 1
25	n5	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	<i>Emberiza leucocephalos</i>	0.2409300	Barker et al. 2015 – chronogram 2
26	n5	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	<i>Emberiza leucocephalos</i>	0.2732460	Jetz et al. 2012 – chronogram 2
27	n5	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	<i>Emberiza leucocephalos</i>	0.5760260	Hedges et al. 2015 – chronogram 1
28	n5	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	<i>Emberiza leucocephalos</i>	2.2898230	Hooper et al. 2017

286

287 TABLE 2. Summary of congruified nodes ages. See Figure 3, step C3.

Node Name	Min Age	Q1	Median Age	Mean Age	Q3	Max Age	Variance	SD
n1	9.6509881	15.316069	16.94996	17.5889860	21.757043	22.375728	22.2431847	4.7162681
n2	7.9691925	19.708583	19.70859	22.2790124	19.712836	44.295860	177.3279940	13.3164558
n3	10.5304440	10.536043	10.87372	12.6087398	12.946420	18.157069	13.7831237	3.7125630
n4	5.3238969	9.862246	10.33914	9.9540875	11.731763	12.513387	7.8263782	2.7975665
n5	0.1407015	0.176411	0.24093	0.5533641	0.424636	2.289823	0.6079318	0.7796998

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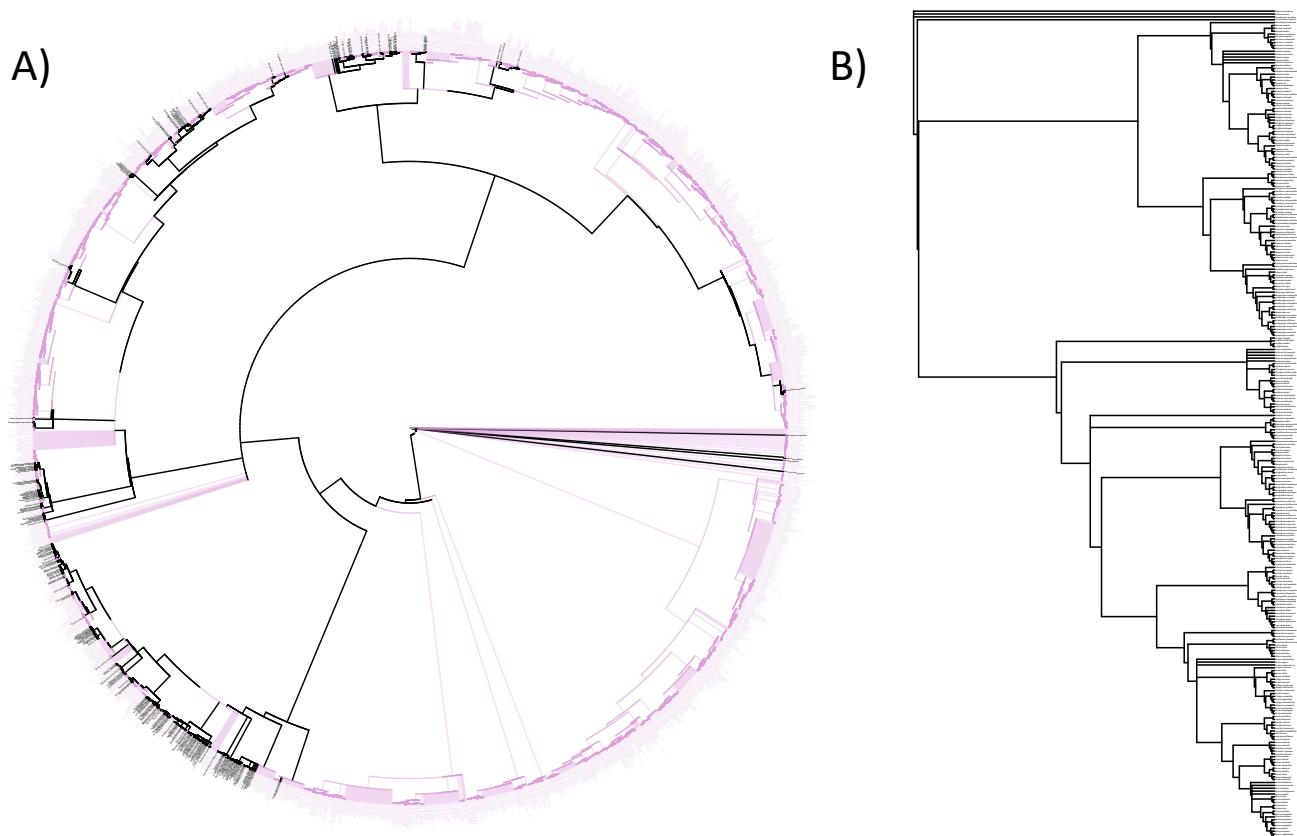
289 **An example with the family of true finches**

290 **Creating a query.** To obtain ages for all species within the family of true finches,
291 Fringillidae, we ran a DateLife query using the “get species from taxon” flag, which gets all
292 recognized species names within a named group from a taxonomy of choice. Following the
293 NCBI taxonomy, our DateLife query has 289 Fringillidae species. This taxon-constrained
294 approach implies that the final results of a full DateLife analysis will be done using a tree
295 topology and ages for the species in a named group, which do not necessarily correspond to a
296 monophyletic group. Users can change this behaviour by providing a monophyletic tree as
297 input for a DateLife search, or as a tree topology for a DateLife summary.

298 **Searching the database.** Next, we used the processed species names in our DateLife
299 query to identify chronograms with at least two Fringillidae species. The DateLife search
300 identified 13 chronograms containing at least two Fringillidae species, published in 9 different
301 studies (Barker et al., 2013, 2015; Burns et al., 2014; Claramunt & Cracraft, 2015; Gibb et
302 al., 2015; Hedges et al., 2015; Hooper & Price, 2017; Jetz et al., 2012; Price et al., 2014).

303 Once identified, DateLife pruned matching chronograms to keep Fringillidae species names
304 on tips only, and transformed these pruned chronograms to pairwise distance matrices,
305 revealing 1, 206 different age data points available for species within the Fringillidae
306 (Supplementray Table 1).

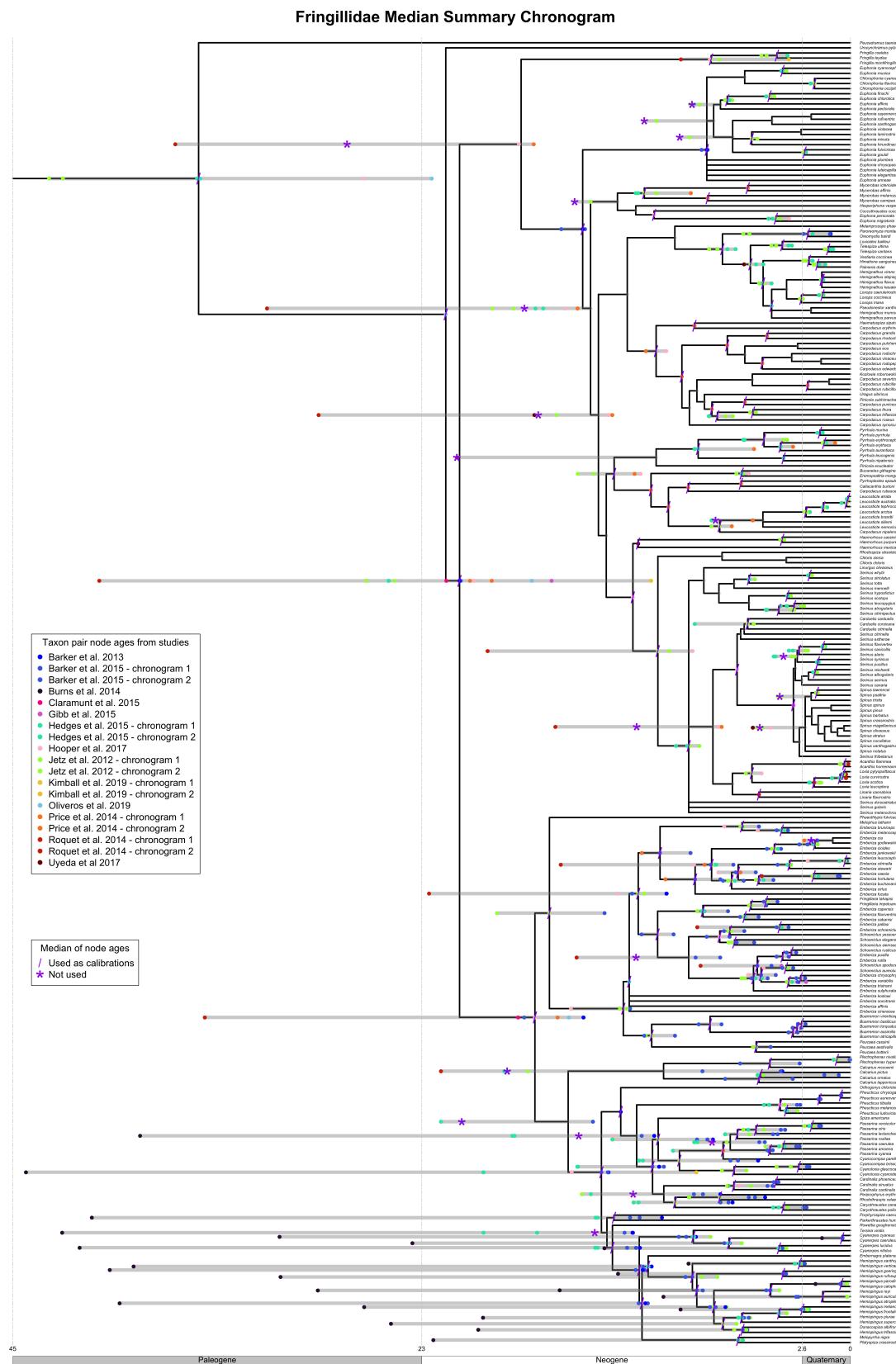
307 **Summarizing search results.** The final step is to congruify and summarize the age data
308 available for the Fringillidae species into single summary chronograms, using different types
309 of summary ages, median and SDM. As explained in the “Description” section, a tree
310 topology to summarize age data upon is required. By default, DateLife uses the topology
311 from OpenTree’s synthetic tree that contains the species in the search query to summarize
312 age data upon. According to OpenTree’s synthetic tree, species belonging to the family
313 Fringillidae do not form a monophyletic group (Fig. 4).



314 FIGURE 4. Tree topologies extracted from Open Tree of Life's (OpenTree) synthetic phylogenetic tree.

315 A) Topology of 2,333 tips and 1,305 internal nodes, encompassing bird species within the family
 316 Fringillidae following the NCBI taxonomy (black), as well as all other bird species that share the same
 317 Most Recent Common Ancestor (MRCA) node in OpenTree's synthetic tree (purple). B) Subtree
 318 topology of 289 tips and 253 internal nodes, resulting from pruning species that do not belong to the
 319 family Fringillidae according to the NCBI taxonomy (purple branches in topology A). Bird species
 320 within the Fringillidae are paraphyletic (Alström et al. 2014, Barker, Cibois, Schikler, Feinstein, &
 321 Cracraft 2004, Barker et al. 2013, Barker 2014, Barker et al. 2015, Beresford, Barker, Ryan, &
 322 Crowe 2005, Bryson Jr et al. 2014, Burleigh, Kimball, & Braun 2015, Burns et al. 2014, Chaves,
 323 Hidalgo, & Klicka 2013, Claramunt & Cracraft 2015, Gibb et al. 2015, Hackett et al. 2008, Jetz et al.
 324 2012, Johansson, Fjeldså, & Bowi 200, Kimball et al. 2019, Klicka et al. 2014, Lamichhaney et al.
 325 2015, Lerner, Meyer, James, Hofreiter, & Fleischer 2011, Lovette et al. 2010, Moyle et al. 2016,
 326 Ödeen, Håstad, & Alström 2011, Oliveros et al. 2019, Päckert et al. 2012, Parchman, Benkman, &
 327 Mezquida 2007, Powell et al. 2014, Price et al. 2014, Pulgarín-R, Smith, Bryson Jr, Spellman, &
 328 Klicka 2013, Selvatti, Gonzaga, & Moraes Russo 2015, Tietze, Päckert, Martens, Lehmann, & Sun
 329 2013, Treplin et al. 2008, Zuccon, Prŷs-Jones, Rasmussen, & Ericson 2012).

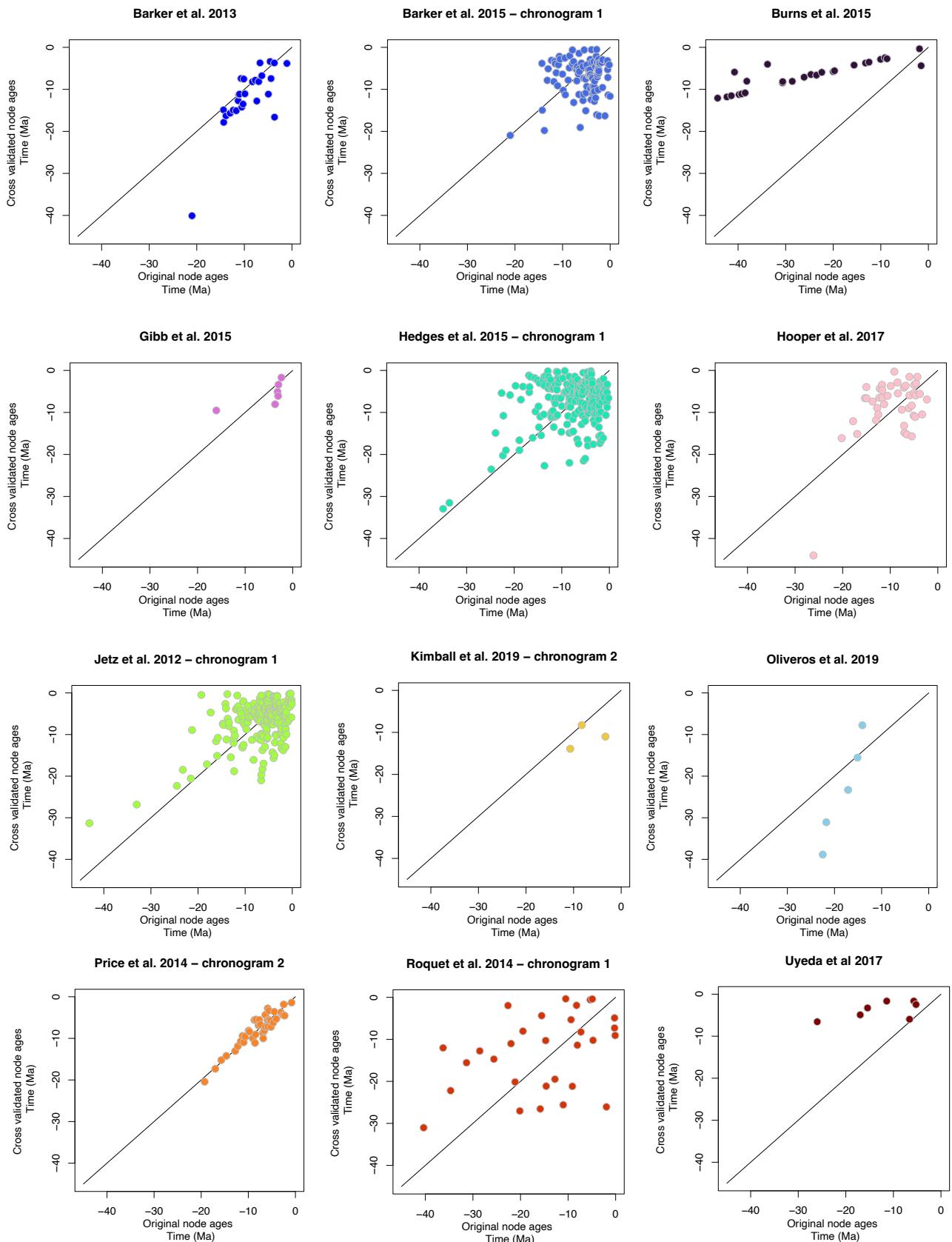
331 Age data from source chronograms was congruified to OpenTree's topology (Fig. 4B),
332 reducing the age data set to 818 different data points (Supplementray Table 2). For each
333 congruent node, age summary statistics were calculated and used as fixed secondary
334 calibrations over the chosen tree topology, to obtain a fully dated phylogeny with the
335 program BLADJ (Fig. 5).

336 FIGURE 5. *Fringillidae median summary chronogram generated with DateLife. It has 256 tips and*337 *233 nodes, from which 212 have age data from at least one published chronogram.*

339

Cross-validation test

340 We performed a cross validation analysis of the DateLife workflow using the Fringillidae
341 chronograms. We used the individual tree topologies from each of the 19 source chronograms
342 from 13 studies as inputs, treating their node ages as unknown. We then estimated dates for
343 these topologies using the node ages from the chronograms from the other studies as
344 calibrations and smoothing using BLADJ. We found that node ages from original study, and
345 ages estimated using all other age data available are correlated (Fig. 6). For five studies,
346 Datelife tended to underestimate ages for topologically deeper nodes (those with many
347 descendant taxa, aka ‘closer to the root’) relative to the original estimate, and overestimate
348 ages for nodes closer to the tips. Accordingly, root ages are generally older in the original
349 study than estimated using cross-validated ages (Supplementary Fig. S1).



350 FIGURE 6. Results from cross validation analysis. Each plot compares the original age estimate (x
 351 axis) with the age obtained with a DateLife analysis (y axis), per node.

353

Discussion

354 DateLife makes state-of-the-art data on evolutionary time frame easily accessible for
355 comparison, reuse, and reanalysis, to researchers in all areas of science and with all levels of
356 expertise in the matter. It is an open service that does not require any expert biological
357 knowledge from users –besides the names of the species or group they want to work with, for
358 any of its functionality.

359 A total of 99,474 unique terminal taxa are represented in DateLife’s database. Incorporation
360 of more chronograms into the database will continue to improve DateLife’s services. One
361 option to increase the number of chronograms in the DateLife database is the Dryad data
362 repository. Methods to automatically mine chronograms from Dryad could be designed and
363 implemented. However, Dryad’s metadata system has no information to automatically detect
364 branch length units, and those would still need to be determined manually by a human
365 curator. We would like to emphasize on the importance of sharing chronogram data,
366 including systematically curated metadata, into open repositories, such as OpenTree’s
367 Phylesystem (McTavish et al., 2015) for the benefit of the scientific community as a whole.

368 **Age variation in source chronograms**

369 Conflict in estimated ages among alternative studies is common in the literature. See, for
370 example, the robust ongoing debate about crown group age of angiosperms (Barba-Montoya,
371 Reis, Schneider, Donoghue, & Yang, 2018; Magallón, Gómez-Acevedo, Sánchez-Reyes, &
372 Hernández-Hernández, 2015; Ramshaw et al., 1972; Sanderson & Doyle, 2001; Sauquet,
373 Ramírez-Barahona, & Magallón, 2021). Source chronograms available for the same
374 organisms have potentially been estimated implementing calibrations very differently. For
375 example, the chronograms from Burns et al. (2014) were inferred using molecular
376 substitution rate estimates across birds (Weir & Schluter, 2008), and have much older age
377 estimates for the same nodes than chronograms that were inferred using fossils as
378 calibrations (Figs. 5, 6; Supplementary Figs. S1, S4).

379 Different calibration implementations might also imply fundamentally distinct evolutionary
380 hypotheses (Antonelli et al., 2017). For example, two independent researchers working on
381 the same clade should both carefully select and justify their choices of fossil calibration
382 placement. Yet, if one researcher concludes that a fossil should calibrate the ingroup of a
383 clade, while another researcher concludes that the same fossil should calibrate the outgroup
384 of the clade, the resulting age estimates will differ, as the placement of calibrations as stem
385 or crown group has been proven to significantly affect time of lineage divergence estimates
386 (Sauquet, 2013).

387 **Primary vs Secondary calibrations.** While most chronograms in DateLife's database
388 are constructed using primary calibrations (molecular substitution rates or ages obtained
389 from the fossil record or geological events), DateLife summarizes chronograms using
390 secondary calibrations (ages coming from other chronograms). Graur and Martin (2004)
391 cautioned on the increased error and uncertainty in estimated ages when using secondary
392 calibrations in dating analyses. Schenk (2016) showed that, in simulations, divergence times
393 inferred using secondary calibrations are significantly younger than those inferred with
394 primary calibrations, when obtained with Bayesian inference methods, and when priors are
395 implemented in similar ways in both analyses. Accordingly, the scientific community seems
396 to have more confidence in chronograms obtained from a single analysis, using fossil data as
397 primary sources of calibrations (Schenk, 2016), and using fossils that have been widely
398 discussed and curated as calibrations to date other trees, making sure that all data reflect a
399 coherent evolutionary history (Sauquet, 2013), as for example done by Antonelli et al.
400 (2017). There have been attempts to create fossil calibration databases (Ksepka et al., 2015),
401 though these still have room to grow.

402 It seems that using several (as opposed to just a few) secondary calibrations can provide
403 sufficient information to alleviate or even neutralize potential biases (Sauquet, 2013).
404 Certainly, further studies are required to fully understand the effect of secondary calibrations
405 on outputs from different tree dating methods, and on downstream analyses. It is possible

406 that secondary calibrations can be safely used with dating methods that do not require
407 setting priors, such as penalized likelihood (Sanderson, 2003), with methods that do not
408 make any assumptions on the ages and fix them to a node on a tree topology, such as
409 BLADJ (Webb et al., 2008; Webb & Donoghue, 2005), or methods that summarize age data
410 unto a tree topology.

411 Our cross validation analysis might provide some insight in this regard. When ages are
412 estimated with secondary calibrations, nodes closer to the root do tend to be slightly younger
413 than ages estimated with primary calibrations. However, nodes closer to the tip tend to be
414 older when estimated using secondary calibrations with a dating method that does not make
415 any prior assumptions on the nature of the calibrations themselves (Supplementary Figures
416 S2-S9). The only exception to this was observed on results of the cross validation analysis of
417 the Burns et al. (2014) chronogram, which results in much younger node ages when
418 estimated using secondary calibrations (Supplementary Figs. S1 and S4).

419 Sumarizing chronograms

420 By default, DateLife currently summarizes all source chronograms that overlap with at least
421 two species names. Users can exclude source chronograms if they have reasons to do so.
422 Strictly speaking, a good chronogram should reflect the real time of lineage divergence
423 accurately and precisely. To our knowledge, there are no tested measures to determine
424 independently when a chronogram is better than another. Yet, several characteristics of the
425 data used for dating analyses, as well as from the output chronogram itself, could be used to
426 score the quality of source chronograms.

427 Some measures that have been proposed are the proportion of lineage sampling and the
428 number of calibrations used Magallón et al. (2015). Some characteristics that are often cited
429 in published studies as a measure of improved age estimates as compared to previously
430 published estimates are: quality of alignment (missing data, GC content), lineage sampling
431 (strategy and proportion), phylogenetic and dating inference method, number of fossils used

432 as calibrations, support for nodes and ages, and magnitude of confidence intervals.
433 DateLife provides an opportunity to capture concordance and conflict among date estimates,
434 which can also be used as a metric for chronogram reliability. Its open database of
435 chronograms allows other researchers to do such analyses themselves reproducibly, and
436 without needing permission. Though, of course, they should follow proper citation practices,
437 especially for the source chronogram studies.

438 The exercise of summarizing age data from across multiple studies provides the opportunity
439 to work with a more inclusive chronogram, that reflects a unified evolutionary history for a
440 lineage, by putting together evidence from different hypotheses. The largest, and
441 taxonomically broadest chronogram currently available from OpenTree was constructed
442 summarizing age data from 2,274 published chronograms using NCBI's taxonomic tree as
443 backbone (Hedges et al., 2015). A summarizing exercise may also amplify the effect of
444 uncertainty and errors in source data, and blur parts of the evolutionary history of a lineage
445 that might only be reflected in source chronograms and lost on the summary chronogram
446 (Sauquet et al., 2021).

447 Effects on downstream analyses

448 For downstream analyses, using alternative chronogram may deeply affect our inferences
449 (Title & Rabosky, 2016), particularly when studying phenomena dependent on the timing of
450 species diversification events, such as macroevolutionary processes.
451 In ecology and conservation biology, incorporating at least some data on lineage divergence
452 times represents a relevant improvement for testing alternative hypothesis using phylogenetic
453 distance (Webb et al., 2008). Hence, DateLife's workflow features different ways of
454 estimating node ages in the absence of calibrations and branch length information for certain
455 taxa. “Making up” branch lengths is a common practice in scientific publications: Jetz et al.
456 (2012), created a chronogram of all 9, 993 bird species, where 67% had molecular data and
457 the rest was simulated; Rabosky et al. (2018) created a chronogram of 31, 536 ray-finned

458 fishes, of which only 37% had molecular data; Smith and Brown (2018) constructed a
459 chronogram of 353, 185 seed plants where only 23% had molecular data.
460 Notably, risks come with this practice. Taken to the extreme, one could make a fully
461 resolved, calibrated tree of all modern and extinct taxa using a single taxonomy and a single
462 calibration, using polytomy resolution and branch estimation methods. There has yet to be
463 a thorough analysis of what can go wrong when one extends inferences beyond the data in
464 this way, so we urge caution; we also urge readers to follow the example of the large tree
465 papers cited above, by carefully considering the statistical assumptions being made, and
466 assessing the consistency of the results with prior work.

467 Conclusions

468 Knowledge of the evolutionary time frame of organisms is key to many research areas: trait
469 evolution, species diversification, biogeography, macroecology and more. It is also crucial for
470 education, science communication and policy, but generating chronograms is difficult,
471 especially for those who want to use phylogenies but who are not systematists, or do not
472 have the time to acquire and develop the necessary knowledge and skills to construct them
473 on their own. Importantly, years of primarily public funded research have resulted in vast
474 amounts of chronograms that are already available on scientific publications, but hidden to
475 the public and scientific community for reuse.

476 The DateLife project allows for easy and fast summary of public and state-of-the-art data on
477 time of lineage divergence. It provides a straightforward way to get an informed idea on the
478 state of knowledge of the time frame of evolution of different regions of the tree of life, and
479 allows identification of regions that require more research, or that have conflicting
480 information. It is available as an R package, and as a web-based R shiny application at
481 www.datelife.org Both summary and newly generated trees are useful to evaluate
482 evolutionary hypotheses in different areas of research. The DateLife project helps with
483 awareness of the existing variation in expert time of divergence data, and will foster

484 exploration of the effect of alternative divergence time hypothesis on the results of analyses,
485 nurturing a culture of more cautious interpretation of evolutionary results.

486 **Availability**

487 The DateLife software is free and open source and it can be used through its R shiny web
488 application at <http://www.datelife.org>, through the `datelife` R package, and through
489 Phylotastic's project web portal <https://phylo.cs.nmsu.edu/>. DateLife's web application is
490 maintained using RStudio's shiny server and the shiny package open infrastructure, as well
491 as Docker and OpenTree's infrastructure ([dates.opentreeoflife.org/datelife](https://opentreeoflife.org/datelife)). `datelife`'s R
492 package stable version is available for installation from the CRAN repository
493 (<https://cran.r-project.org/package=datelife>) using the command `install.packages(pkgs`
494 `= "datelife"`) from within R. Development versions are available from the GitHub
495 repository (<https://github.com/phylotastic/datelife>) and can be installed using the
496 command `devtools::install_github("phylotastic/datelife")`.

497 **Supplementary Material**

498 Code used to generate all versions of this manuscript, the biological examples, as well as the
499 benchmark of functionalities are available at datelifeMS1, datelife_examples, and
500 datelife_benchmark repositories in LLSR's GitHub account.

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518

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