

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

2 Luna L. Sánchez Reyes<sup>1,2</sup>, Emily Jane McTavish<sup>1</sup>, & Brian O'Meara<sup>2</sup>

3 <sup>1</sup> University of California, Merced, USA

4 <sup>2</sup> University of Tennessee, Knoxville, USA

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

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

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

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Luna L. Sánchez Reyes, .  
E-mail: [sanchez.reyes.luna@gmail.com](mailto:sanchez.reyes.luna@gmail.com)

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## Abstract

Chronograms –phylogenies with branch lengths proportional to time– represent key data on timing of evolutionary events for the study of natural processes in many areas of biological research. Chronograms also provide valuable information that can be used for education, science communication, and conservation policy decisions. Yet, achieving a high-quality reconstruction of a chronogram is a difficult and resource-consuming task. Here we present DateLife, a service implemented as an R package and an R Shiny web application available at [www.datelife.org](http://www.datelife.org), that provides services for efficient and easy discovery, summary, reuse, and reanalysis of node age data mined from a curated database of expert, peer-reviewed, and openly available chronograms. The main DateLife workflow starts with one or more scientific taxon names provided by a user. Names are processed and standardized to a unified taxonomy, allowing DateLife to run a name match across its local chronogram database that is curated from Open Tree of Life’s phylogenetic repository, and extract all chronograms that contain at least two queried taxon names, along with their metadata. Finally, node ages from matching chronograms are mapped to corresponding nodes from a chosen tree topology using the congruification algorithm. Congruified node ages are used as secondary calibrations to date the chosen topology, with or without initial branch lengths, using different phylogenetic dating methods such as BLADJ, treePL, PATHd8 and MrBayes. We performed a cross-validation test to compare node ages resulting from a DateLife analysis (i.e, phylogenetic dating using secondary calibrations) to those from the original chronograms (i.e, obtained with primary calibrations), and found that DateLife’s node age estimates are consistent with the age estimates from the original chronograms, with the largest variation in ages occurring around topologically deeper nodes. Results from any software for scientific analysis can only be as good as the data used as input, we highlight the importance of considering the results of a DateLife analysis in the context of the input

chronograms. We encourage the use of DateLife to help increase awareness of the existing disparities among alternative hypotheses of dates for the same diversification events, and to support exploration of the effect of alternative chronogram hypotheses on downstream analyses, providing a framework for a more informed interpretation of evolutionary results.

*Keywords:* Tree; Phylogeny; Scaling; Dating; Ages; Divergence times; Open Science; Congruification; Supertree; Calibrations; Secondary calibrations.

Word count: 6715

Chronograms –phylogenies with branch lengths proportional to time– provide key data on evolutionary time frame for the study of natural processes in many areas of biological research, such as comparative analysis (Freckleton, Harvey, & Pagel, 2002; Harvey, Pagel, & others, 1991), developmental biology (Delsuc et al., 2018; Laubichler & Maienschein, 2009), conservation biology and ecology (Felsenstein, 1985; Webb, 2000), historical biogeography (Posadas, Crisci, & Katinas, 2006), and species diversification (Magallon & Sanderson, 2001; Morlon, 2014).

Building a chronogram is not an easy task. It requires obtaining and curating a homology hypothesis to construct a phylogeny, selecting and placing appropriate calibrations on the phylogeny using independent age data points from the fossil record or other dated events, and inferring a full dated tree. All of this entails specialized biological training, taxonomic domain knowledge, and a significant amount of research time, computational resources and funding.

Here we present the DateLife project which has the main goal of extracting and exposing age data from published chronograms, making age data readily accessible to the wider community for reuse and reanalysis in research, teaching, science communication and conservation policy. DateLife’s core software application is available as an R package (Sanchez-Reyes et al., 2022), and as an online Rshiny interactive website at [www.datelife.org](http://www.datelife.org). It features key elements for scientific reproducibility, such as a curated, versioned, open and fully public chronogram database (McTavish et al., 2015) that stores data in a computer-readable format (Vos et al., 2012); automated and programmatic ways of accessing and downloading the data, also in a computer-readable format (Stoltzfus et al., 2013); and methods to summarize and compare the data.

## DESCRIPTION

DateLife’s core software applications are implemented in the R package `datelife`, and

relies on functionalities from other biological R packages: *ape* (Paradis, Claude, & Strimmer, 2004), *bold* (Chamberlain, 2018), *geiger* (Pennell et al., 2014), *msa* (Bodenhofer, Bonatesta, Horejš-Kainrath, & Hochreiter, 2015), *paleotree* (Bapst, 2012), *phyloch* (Heibl, 2008), *phylocomr* (Ooms & Chamberlain, 2018), *phytools* (Revell, 2012), *rotl* (Michonneau, Brown, & Winter, 2016), and *taxize* (Chamberlain, 2018; Chamberlain & Szöcs, 2013). Figure 1 provides a graphical summary of the three main steps of the DateLife workflow: creating a search query, searching a database, and summarizing results from the search.

### *Creating a Search Query*

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

DateLife processes input scientific names using a Taxonomic Name Resolution Service (TNRS), which increases the probability of correctly finding the queried taxon names in the chronogram database. TNRS detects, corrects and standardizes name misspellings and typos, variant spellings and authorities, and nomenclatural synonyms to a single taxonomic standard (Boyle et al., 2013). TNRS also allows to correctly choose between homonyms, by considering other taxa provided as input to infer the taxonomic context of the homonym. DateLife implements TNRS using the Open Tree of Life (OpenTree) unified Taxonomy (OTT, Open Tree Of Life et al., 2016; Rees & Cranston, 2017) as standard, storing taxonomic identification numbers (OTT ids) for further processing and analysis. Other taxonomies currently supported by DateLife are the National Center of Biotechnology Information (NCBI) taxonomic database (Schoch et al., 2020), the Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF) taxonomic backbone (GBIF Secretariat, 2022), and the Interim

Register of Marine and Non-marine Genera (IRMNG) database (Rees et al., 2017).

Besides binomial species names, DateLife accepts scientific names from any inclusive taxonomic group (e.g., genus, family, tribe), as well as subspecific taxonomic variants (e.g., subspecies, variants, strains). If a taxon name belongs to an inclusive taxonomic group, DateLife has two alternative behaviors defined by the “get species from taxon” flag. If the flag is active, DateLife retrieves all species names within a taxonomic group provided, from a standard taxonomy of choice, and adds them to the search query. In this case, subspecific variants are excluded. If the flag is inactive, DateLife excludes inclusive taxon names from the search query, and species and subspecific variant names are processed as provided by the user. The processed taxon names are saved as an R object of a newly defined class, `datelifeQuery`, that is used in the following steps. This object contains the input names standardized to a taxonomy of choice (OTT by default), the corresponding OTT id numbers, and the topology of an input tree, if one was provided.

### *Searching a Chronogram Database*

At the time of writing of this manuscript (May 15, 2023), DateLife’s chronogram database latest version consist of 253 chronograms published in 187 different studies. It is curated from OpenTree’s phylogenetic database, the Phylsystem, which constitutes an open source of expert and peer-reviewed phylogenetic knowledge with rich metadata (McTavish et al., 2015), which allows automatic and reproducible assembly of our chronogram database. Datelife’s chronogram database is navigable as an R data object within the `datelife` R package.

A unique feature of the Phylsystem is that any user can add new published, state-of-the-art chronograms any time, through OpenTree’s curator application (<https://tree.opentreeoflife.org/curator>). As chronograms are added to Phylsystem, they can be incorporated into the chronogram database of the `datelife` R package, which is

currently manually updated as new chronogram data is added to Phylsystem. The updated database is assigned a new version number, followed by a package release on CRAN. Users can directly run `datelife` functions to trigger an update of their local chronogram database, to incorporate any new chronograms to their DateLife analysis before an official database update is released on CRAN.

A DateLife search is implemented by matching processed taxon names provided by the user to tip labels in the chronogram database. Chronograms with at least two matching taxon names on their tip labels are identified and pruned down to preserve only the matched taxa. These matching pruned chronograms are referred to as source chronograms. Total distance in units of million years (Myr) between taxon pairs within each source chronogram are stored as a patristic distance matrix (Fig. 1). The matrix format speeds up extraction of pairwise taxon ages of any queried taxa, as opposed to searching the ancestor node of a pair of taxa in a “phylo” object or newick string. Finally, the patristic matrices are associated to the study citation where the original chronogram was published, and stored as an R object of the newly defined class `datelifeResult`.

### *Summarizing Search Results*

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

1. The matching pruned chronograms as newick strings or “phylo” objects.
2. The ages of the root of all source chronograms. These ages can correspond to the age of the most recent common ancestor (mrca) of the user’s group of interest if the source chronograms have all taxa belonging to the group. If not, the root corresponds to the mrca of a subgroup within the group of interest.
3. Study citations where original chronograms were published.



4. A report of input taxon names matches across source chronograms.
5. The source chronogram(s) with the most input taxon names.
6. Various single summary chronograms resulting from summarizing age data, generated using the methodology described next.

### *Choosing a Topology*

DateLife requires a tree topology to summarize age data upon. We recommend that users provide as input a tree topology from the literature, or one of their own making. If no topology is provided, DateLife automatically extracts one from the OpenTree synthetic tree, a phylogeny currently encompassing 2.3 million taxa across all life, assembled from 1, 239 published phylogenetic trees and OpenTree’s unified Taxonomy, OTT (Open Tree Of Life et al., 2019). Alternatively, DateLife can combine topologies from source chronograms using a supertree approach (Criscuolo, Berry, Douzery, & Gascuel, 2006). To do this, DateLife first identifies the source chronograms that form a grove, roughly, a sufficiently overlapping set of taxa between trees, by implementing definition 2.8 for n-overlap from Ané et al. (2009). If the source chronograms do not form a grove, the supertree reconstruction will fail. In rare cases, a group of trees can have multiple groves. By default, DateLife chooses the grove with the most taxa, however, the “criterion = trees” flag allows the user to choose the grove with the most trees instead. The result is a single summary (or supertree) topology, that combines topologies from source chronograms in a grove.

### *Applying Secondary Calibrations*

Once a topology is chosen, DateLife applies the congruification method (Eastman, Harmon, & Tank, 2013) that find nodes belonging to the same clade across source chronograms, and then extracts the corresponding node ages from patristic distance matrices stored as a `datelifeResult` object. Note that by definition, these matrices store total distance (time from tip to tip), assuming that the terminal taxa are coeval and occur at the

present. Hence, node ages correspond to half the values stored in the `datelifeResult` matrices. A table of congruified node ages that can be used as calibrations for a dating analysis is stored as a `congruifiedCalibrations` object.

For each congruent node, the pairwise distances that traverse that node are summarized into a single summary matrix using classic summary statistics (i.e., mean, median, minimum and maximum ages), and the Supermatrix Distance Method (SDM; Criscuolo et al., 2006), which deforms patristic distance matrices by minimizing variance and then averaging them. These single summary taxon pair age matrices are stored as summarized calibrations that can be used as secondary calibrations to date a tree topology - with or without initial branch lengths, using phylogenetic dating methods currently supported within DateLife: BLADJ (Webb, Ackerly, & Kembel, 2008; Webb & Donoghue, 2005), MrBayes (Huelsenbeck & Ronquist, 2001; Ronquist & Huelsenbeck, 2003), PATHd8 (Britton, Anderson, Jacquet, Lundqvist, & Bremer, 2007), and treePL (Smith & O'Meara, 2012).

### *Dating a Tree Topology*

***Dating a tree with no branch lengths.***— When producing or obtaining a tree with branch lengths for a group of interest is not possible, DateLife can date a topology without branch lengths, obtained from OpenTree or by implementing the supertree approach described above, by applying the Branch Length Adjuster (BLADJ; Webb et al., 2008; Webb & Donoghue, 2005) algorithm, which requires no initial branch lengths. The algorithm starts by fixing ages for nodes with calibration data upon the given topology. Then, it distributes time for nodes with no data evenly between calibrated nodes, minimizing age variance in the resulting chronogram. This approach has proven useful for ecological analyses that require a phylogenetic time context (Webb et al., 2008). When there is conflict between ages of calibrated nodes, BLADJ ignores node ages that are older than the age of a parent node. The BLADJ algorithm requires a root age estimate to run. If there is no information on the age of the root in the chronogram database, users can provide an estimate from the

literature. If none is provided, DateLife will not return a dated topology and will provide a warning message along with suggestions on how the user can provide an age for the root so that a fully dated tree can be returned.

In the absence of genetic data, BLADJ is a very agnostic way to assign ages to nodes with no available data, as it does not require any assumptions on the underlying model of branch length distribution. It is however common practice in the literature to use a birth-death model to assign ages to nodes with no genetic data (Jetz, Thomas, Joy, Hartmann, & Mooers, 2012; Rabosky et al., 2018; Smith & Brown, 2018). To do so, DateLife implements MrBayes (Huelsenbeck & Ronquist, 2001; Ronquist & Huelsenbeck, 2003), using nodes with published age data as calibration priors on a fixed topology, a simple birth-death model with parameters that can be determined by the user, and no genetic data.

***Dating a tree with branch lengths.***—Relative branch lengths can provide key information for phylogenetic dating, specifically for nodes without any calibration data available. While using initial branch length data is the golden standard for phylogenetic dating analyses, estimating trees with branch lengths proportional to substitution rates per site requires obtaining primary data, assembling and curating a homology hypothesis, and choosing and implementing a method for phylogenetic inference. DateLife implements a workflow to streamline this process by applying open data from the Barcode of Life Data System, BOLD (Ratnasingham & Hebert, 2007) to obtain genetic markers for input taxa. By default, BOLD genetic sequences are aligned with MUSCLE (Edgar, 2004) using functions from the msa R package (Bodenhofer et al., 2015). Alternatively, sequences can be aligned with MAFFT (Katoh, Asimenos, & Toh, 2009), using functions from the ape R package (Paradis et al., 2004). The BOLD sequence alignment is then used to obtain initial branch lengths with the accelerated transformation (ACCTRAN) parsimony algorithm, which resolves ambiguous character optimization by assigning changes along branches of the tree as close to the root as possible (Agnarsson & Miller, 2008), resulting in older internal

nodes as compared to other parsimony algorithms (Forest et al., 2005). The parsimony branch lengths are then optimized using Maximum Likelihood, given the alignment, the topology and a simple Jukes-Cantor model, producing a BOLD tree with branch lengths proportional to expected number of substitutions per site. Both parsimony and ML optimizations are done with functions from the **phangorn** package (Schliep, 2011). Due to the computing load it requires, the BOLD workflow is currently only supported through DateLife’s R package. It is not yet available through the web application.

Phylogenetic dating methods supported in DateLife that incorporate branch length information from the input topology in combination with the secondary calibrations include: PATHd8, a non-clock, rate-smoothing method to date trees (Britton et al., 2007); treePL (Smith & O’Meara, 2012), a semi-parametric, rate-smoothing, penalized likelihood dating method (Sanderson, 2002); and MrBayes (Huelsenbeck & Ronquist, 2001; Ronquist & Huelsenbeck, 2003), a Bayesian inference program implementing Markov chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) methods to estimate a posterior distribution of model parameters.

### *Visualizing Results*

Finally, users can save all source and summary chronograms in formats allowing for reuse and reanalysis, such as newick and the R “phylo” format. Input and summary chronograms can be visualized and compared graphically, and users can construct their own graphs using DateLife’s chronogram plot generation functions available from the R package **datelifeplot** (Sanchez-Reyes & O’Meara, 2022).

## BENCHMARK

R package **datelife** code speed was tested on an Apple iMac with one 3.4 GHz Intel Core i5 processor. We registered variation in computing time of query processing and search through the database relative to number of queried taxon names. Query processing time increases roughly linearly with number of input taxon names, and increases considerably if

Taxonomic Name Resolution Service (TNRS) is activated. Up to ten thousand names can be processed and searched in less than 30 minutes with the most time consuming settings. Once names have been processed as described in methods, a name search through the chronogram database can be performed in less than a minute, even with a very large number of taxon names (Fig. 2).

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

## CASE STUDIES

We illustrate the DateLife workflow using a family within the passeriform birds encompassing the true finches, Fringillidae, as case study. On a small example, we analysed 6 bird species, and results from each step of the workflow are shown in Figure 3. As a second example, we analysed 289 bird species in the family Fringillidae that are included in the NCBI taxonomy. The resulting summary chronogram is shown in Figure 4, and results from previous steps of the workflow are available as Supplementary Figures.

### *A Small Example*

**Creating a search query.** – We chose 6 bird species within the Passeriformes. The sample includes two species of cardinals: the black-thighed grosbeak – *Pheucticus tibialis* and the crimson-collared grosbeak – *Rhodothraupis celaeno*; three species of buntings: the yellowhammer – *Emberiza citrinella*, the pine bunting – *Emberiza leucocephalos* and the yellow-throated bunting – *Emberiza elegans*; and one species of tanager, the vegetarian finch –

*Platyspiza crassirostris*. Processing of input names found that *Emberiza elegans* is synonym for *Schoenichus elegans* in the default reference taxonomy (OTT v3.3, June 1, 2021). For a detailed discussion on the state of the synonym, refer to Avibase (Avibase, 2022; Lepage, 2004; Lepage, Vaidya, & Guralnick, 2014). Discovering this synonym allowed assigning five age data points for the parent node of *Emberiza elegans*, shown as *Schoenichus elegans* in Figure 3A, which would not have had any data otherwise.

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

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

*An Example with the Family of True Finches*

***Creating a query.***— To obtain ages for all species within the family of true finches, Fringillidae, we ran a DateLife query using the “get species from taxon” flag, which gets all recognized species names within a named group from a taxonomy of choice. Following the NCBI taxonomy, our DateLife query has 289 Fringillidae species names. This taxon-constrained approach implies that the full DateLife analysis will be performed using a tree topology and ages available for species names from a given taxonomic group, which do not necessarily correspond to a monophyletic group. Users can change this behavior by providing all species names corresponding to a monophyletic group as input for a DateLife search, or a monophyletic tree to construct a DateLife summary.

***Searching the database.***— Next, we used the processed species names in our DateLife query to identify chronograms with at least two Fringillidae species as tip taxa. The DateLife search identified 19 chronograms matching this criteria, published in 13 different studies (Barker et al., 2013, 2015; Burns et al., 2014; Claramunt & Cracraft, 2015; Gibb et al., 2015; Hedges et al., 2015; Hooper & Price, 2017; Jetz et al., 2012; Kimball et al., 2019; Oliveros et al., 2019; Price et al., 2014; Roquet, Lavergne, & Thuiller, 2014; Uyeda, Pennell, Miller, Maia, & McClain, 2017). Once identified, DateLife pruned these matching chronograms to remove tips that do not belong to the queried taxon names, and transformed these pruned chronograms to pairwise distance matrices, revealing 1, 206 different age data points available for species within the Fringillidae (Supplementary Table S1).

***Summarizing search results.***— The final step entailed congruifying and summarizing the age data available for the Fringillidae species into two single summary chronograms, using two different types of summary ages, median and SDM. As explained in the “Description” section, a tree topology to summarize age data upon is required. By default, DateLife uses the topology from OpenTree’s synthetic tree that contains all taxa from the search query. According to OpenTree’s synthetic tree, species belonging to the

family Fringillidae do not form a monophyletic group (Fig. 5). Hence, a topology containing only the 289 species from the original query was extracted from Open Tree of Life’s synthetic tree v12.3 (Open Tree Of Life et al., 2019).

Age data from source chronograms was congruified to OpenTree’s topology (Fig. 5B), reducing the age data set to 818 different data points (Supplementary Table S2). For each congruent node, age summary statistics were calculated and used as fixed secondary calibrations over the chosen tree topology, to obtain a fully dated phylogeny with the program BLADJ (Fig. 4).

## CROSS-VALIDATION TEST

We performed a cross validation test of a DateLife analysis using the Fringillidae source chronograms obtained above (Supplementary Figs. S2-S20). We used as inputs for a DateLife analysis all individual tree topologies from each of the 19 source chronograms from 13 studies, treating their node ages as unknown. We congruified node ages extracted from chronograms from all other studies upon the individual topologies, effectively excluding original ages from each topology. Finally, average node ages per node were applied as secondary calibrations and smoothed with the BLADJ algorithm. We found that node ages from the original studies, and ages estimated using all other age data available are largely correlated (Fig. 5). For five studies, DateLife tended to underestimate ages for topologically deeper nodes (those with many descendant taxa, aka “closer to the root”) relative to the original estimate, and overestimate ages for nodes closer to the tips. Accordingly, root ages are generally older in the original study than estimated using cross-validated ages (Supplementary Fig. S1). In general, topologically deeper nodes display the largest age variation between node ages from the original chronograms and ages summarized with DateLife.

## DISCUSSION



DateLife’s goal is to improve availability and accessibility of state-of-the-art data on evolutionary time frame of organisms, to allow users from all areas of science and with all levels of expertise to compare, reuse, and reanalyse expert age data for their own applications. As such, it is designed as an open service that does not require any expert biological knowledge –besides the scientific names of the species or group users want to work with, to use any of its functionalities.

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

As we envision that DateLife will have many interesting applications in research and beyond, we emphasize that DateLife’s results –as well as any insights gleaned from them, largely depend on the quality of the source chronograms: low quality chronograms will produce low quality results. This “garbage in, garbage out” problem has long been recognised in supertree methods for summarizing phylogenetic trees (Bininda-Emonds et al., 2004). We note that this is a surfacing issue of any automated tool for biological data analysis. For example, DNA riddled with sequencing errors will produce generally poor alignments that will return biased evolutionary hypothesis, independently of the quality of the analysis software used. Again, we urge readers and DateLife users to explore all input chronograms before using a summary chronogram resulting from a DateLife workflow.

Finally, uncertainty and variability of chronogram node age estimates might pose larger issues in some research areas than others. For example, in ecological and conservation biology studies, it has been shown that incorporating some chronogram data provides better results than when not using any age data at all, even if the node ages are not good quality (Webb et al., 2008). In the following sections we discuss the particularities of divergence times from DateLife’s summary chronograms and their impact on certain evolutionary analyses, for consideration of the readers and users in different research areas.

### *Age Variation in Source Chronograms*

Conflict in estimated ages among alternative studies is common in the literature. See, for example, the robust ongoing debate about crown group age of angiosperms (Barba-Montoya, Reis, Schneider, Donoghue, & Yang, 2018; Magallón, Gómez-Acevedo, Sánchez-Reyes, & Hernández-Hernández, 2015; Ramshaw et al., 1972; Sanderson & Doyle, 2001; Sauquet, Ramírez-Barahona, & Magallón, 2021). Alternative source chronograms available for the same taxa have potentially been estimated implementing different types of calibrations, which affects the resulting node age estimates. For example, in the DateLife analysis of the Fringillidae shown above, the chronograms from one study (Burns et al., 2014) were inferred using molecular substitution rate estimates across birds (Weir & Schluter, 2008), and have much older age estimates for the same nodes than chronograms that were inferred using fossil calibrations (Figs. 4, 5; Supplementary Figs. S1, S5). Another source of conflict in estimated node ages can arise from different placements for the same calibration, which would imply fundamentally distinct evolutionary hypotheses (Antonelli et al., 2017). For example, two independent researchers working on the same clade should both carefully select and justify their choices of fossil calibration placement. Yet, if one researcher concludes that a fossil should calibrate the ingroup of a clade, while another researcher concludes that the same fossil should calibrate the outgroup of the clade, the resulting age estimates will differ, as the placement of calibrations as stem or crown group is known to significantly affect

estimates of time of lineage divergence (Sauquet, 2013). Finally, placement of calibrations also affects uncertainty of node age estimates. For example, nodes that are sandwiched between a calibrated node and a calibrated root have less freedom of movement and hence narrower confidence intervals (Vos & Mooers, 2004), which inflates precision for nodes without calibrations but does not necessarily improve accuracy of the estimated ages.

DateLife’s summary chronograms are intended to represent all variation in estimated node ages from source chronograms. Node age distribution ranges allow to visually explore ages from source chronograms individually and contextualize and compare them against other chronograms. Researchers that wish to use summary chronograms in downstream evolutionary analysis may select multiple trees sampled from the summary distribution of node ages, to account for variation in source chronograms.

### *Primary vs Secondary Calibrations*

While most chronograms in DateLife’s database are constructed using primary calibrations, i.e., molecular substitution rates or absolute ages in Myr obtained from the fossil record or geological events, DateLife also constructs summary chronograms using secondary calibrations, i.e., node ages in Myr extracted from existing chronograms. The scientific community has generally more confidence in chronograms generated from a single analysis, where carefully chosen primary calibrations constitute the main source of absolute time information used in the dating analysis (Antonelli et al., 2017; Garzón-Orduña, Silva-Brandão, Willmott, Freitas, & Brower, 2015; Graur & Martin, 2004; Sauquet, 2013; Sauquet et al., 2012; Schenk, 2016; Shaul & Graur, 2002). However, implementation of primary calibrations does not come without difficulties: it requires high expertise and training to discover, place and apply calibrations appropriately (Hipsley & Müller, 2014; Ksepka et al., 2011). One way around it is to use fossils that have been widely discussed and previously curated as calibrations to date other trees (Ksepka et al., 2011; Sauquet, 2013), and making sure that all data reflect a coherent evolutionary history (Sauquet, 2013), as for

example done by Antonelli et al. (2017). The Fossil Calibration Database provides availability of 220 primary calibration points encompassing flowering plants and metazoans, that have been curated by experts and used for dating analysis in peer-reviewed publications (Ksepka et al., 2015). This database facilitates the use of expert primary fossil calibrations in new phylogenetic dating analyses. Yet, users still require the expertise to locate appropriate nodes in their phylogenies to corresponding fossils available in the database, potentially delaying increased usage of the database in research. Open databases for effective reuse of fossil calibration data still have room to grow and should constitute a key addition to the phylogenetics tool set.

In some cases, secondary calibrations might represent the only information available for a dating analysis (e.g., groups with a poor fossil record). Recently, Powell, Waskin, and Battistuzzi (2020) showed in a simulation analysis that secondary calibrations are as good as primary calibrations. It seems that using several secondary calibrations (as opposed to just one) can provide sufficient information to alleviate or even neutralize potential biases described before (Graur & Martin, 2004; Sauquet, 2013; Shaul & Graur, 2002). Our cross validation analysis also provides some insight into the application of secondary calibrations. In general, node ages summarized with DateLife and those from the original studies appear positively correlated (Supplementary Figs. S2-S20). We also note that nodes closer to the root tend to be slightly younger than ages from the original studies. In contrast, nodes closer to the tips tend to be slightly older when estimated using secondary calibrations than ages from the original studies. The only exception to this trend was observed in Burns et al. (2014) chronogram, which generally displays much younger node ages when estimated using secondary calibrations than the original study (Supplementary Figs. S1, S5), supporting previous observations (Sauquet et al., 2012; Schenk, 2016).

We unite to the call of our colleagues: further research is needed to fully understand the effects of using secondary calibrations with alternative tree dating methods, as well as

usage of resulting chronograms in downstream analyses (Hipsley & Müller, 2014; Powell et al., 2020; Schenk, 2016; Shaul & Graur, 2002). It is possible that secondary calibrations can be used successfully with dating methods that do not require setting priors, such as penalized likelihood (Sanderson, 2003); with methods that do not make any assumptions on the ages and fix them to a node on a tree topology, such as BLADJ (Webb et al., 2008; Webb & Donoghue, 2005); and with methods that summarize age data unto a tree topology, such as DateLife.

### *Sumarizing Chronograms*

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

Some measures that have been proposed are the proportion of lineage sampling and the number of calibrations used (Magallón, 2010; Magallón et al., 2015). Some characteristics that are often cited in published studies as a measure of improved age estimates as compared to previously published estimates are: quality of alignment (missing data, GC content), lineage sampling (strategy and proportion), phylogenetic and dating inference method, number of fossils used as calibrations, support for nodes and ages, and magnitude of confidence intervals.

DateLife provides an opportunity to capture concordance and conflict among date estimates, which can also be used as a metric for chronogram reliability. Its open database of chronograms allows other researchers to do such analyses themselves reproducibly, and

without needing permission. Though, of course, they should follow proper citation practices, especially for the source chronogram studies.

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

### *Effects of Taxon Sampling on Downstream Analyses*

Analysis of species diversification of simulated and empirical phylogenies suggest that using a more completely sampled phylogeny provides estimates that are closer to the true diversification history than when analysing incompletely sampled phylogenies (Chang, Rabosky, & Alfaro, 2020; Cusimano, Stadler, & Renner, 2012; Sun et al., 2020). Ideally, phylogenies should be completed using genetic data, but this is a time-consuming and difficult task to achieve for many biological groups. Hence, DateLife's workflow features different ways of assigning divergence times to taxa with missing the absence of branch length data and calibrations and branch lengths for certain taxa.

Completing a phylogeny using a stochastic birth-death polytomy resolver and a backbone taxonomy is a common practice in scientific publications: Jetz et al. (2012), created a chronogram of all 9, 993 bird species, where 67% had molecular data and the rest was simulated; Rabosky et al. (2018) created a chronogram of 31, 536 ray-finned fishes, of which only 37% had molecular data; Smith and Brown (2018) constructed a chronogram of

353, 185 seed plants where only 23% had molecular data. These stochastically resolved  
chronograms return diversification rates estimates that appear less biased than those  
estimated from their incompletely sampled counterparts, even with methods that account for  
missing lineages by using sampling fractions (Chang et al., 2020; Cusimano et al., 2012), but  
can also introduce spurious patterns of early bursts of diversification (Cusimano & Renner,  
2010; Sun et al., 2020).

Taxonomy-based stochastic polytomy resolvers also introduce topological differences in  
phylogenetic trees. The study of macroevolutionary processes largely depends on an  
understanding of the timing of species diversification events, and different phylogenetic and  
chronogram hypothesis can provide very different overviews of the macroevolutionary history  
of a biological group. For example, alternative topologies in chronograms from the same  
biological group can infer very different species diversification patterns (Rabosky, 2015; Title  
& Rabosky, 2016). Similarly, there are worries that patterns of morphological evolution  
cannot be accurately inferred with phylogenies that have been resolved stochastically over a  
taxonomic backbone, as any patterns would be erased by randomization (Rabosky, 2015).  
We note that the same applies for geography- and morphology-dependent diversification  
analysis. Hence, we suggest that phylogenies that have been processed with taxonomy-based  
stochastic polytomy resolvers, including certain summary chronograms from a DateLife  
analysis, can be useful as null or neutral models, representing the case of a diversification  
process that is independent of traits and geographical scenario.

Taxonomy-based stochastic polytomy resolvers have been used to advance research in  
evolution, still, risks come with this practice. Taken to the extreme, one could generate a  
fully resolved, calibrated tree of all modern and extinct taxa using a single taxonomy, a  
single calibration, and assigning branch lengths following a birth-death diversification model.  
Clearly, this can lead to a misrepresentation of the true evolutionary history. We urge  
DateLife users to follow the example of the large tree papers cited above, by carefully

considering the statistical assumptions being made, potential biases, and assessing the consistency of DateLife’s results with prior work.

## CONCLUSIONS

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

The DateLife project allows for easy and fast summarization of public and state-of-the-art data on time of lineage divergence. It provides a straightforward way to get an informed idea on the state of knowledge of the time frame of evolution of different regions of the tree of life, and allows identifying regions that require more research, or that have conflicting information. It is available as an R package, and as a web-based R shiny application at [www.datelife.org](http://www.datelife.org). Both summary and newly generated trees are useful to evaluate evolutionary hypotheses in different areas of research. The DateLife project will improve awareness of the existing variation in expert estimations time of divergence data, and foster exploration of the effect of alternative divergence time hypotheses on the results of analyses, nurturing a culture of more cautious interpretation of evolutionary results.

## AVAILABILITY

The DateLife software is free and open source. It can be used online through its R shiny web application hosted at <http://www.datelife.org>, and locally through the **datelife** R package, available from Zenodo (<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.593938>) and the CRAN



repository (Sanchez-Reyes et al., 2022). DateLife’s web application is maintained using RStudio’s shiny server and the shiny package open infrastructure, as well as Docker and OpenTree’s infrastructure (datelife.opentreeoflife.org). `datelife`’s stable version can be installed from the CRAN repository using the command `install.packages(pkgs = "datelife")` from within R. Development versions are available from DateLife’s GitHub repository (<https://github.com/phylotastic/datelife>) and can be installed using the command `devtools::install_github("phylotastic/datelife")`.

## SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Supplementary Figures can be viewed and downloaded from their Zenodo repository (<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6683667>). Supplementary material, including code, biological examples, benchmark results, data files and online-only appendices, can be downloaded from the Dryad data repository (<https://doi.org/10.5061/dryad.cnp5hqc6w>), as well as in the Zenodo stable repositories that host the reproducible manuscript (<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7435094>), the biological examples (<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7435101>), and the software benchmark (<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7435106>). Development versions corresponding to all of the above are hosted on GitHub, accesible at <https://github.com/LunaSare/datelifeMS1>, [https://github.com/LunaSare/datelife\\_examples](https://github.com/LunaSare/datelife_examples), and [https://github.com/LunaSare/datelife\\_benchmark](https://github.com/LunaSare/datelife_benchmark).

## FUNDING

Funding was provided by the US National Science Foundation (NSF) grants ABI-1458603 to the DateLife project; DBI-0905606 to the National Evolutionary Synthesis Center (NESCent); ABI-1458572 to the Phylotastic project; and ABI-1759846 to the Open Tree of Life project.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank Isabel Sanmartín, Daniele Silvestro, Rutger Vos and an anonymous reviewer, for comments that greatly improved this manuscript. The DateLife project was born as a prototype tool aiming to provide the services describe in this paper, and was initially developed over a series of hackathons at the National Evolutionary Synthesis Center, NC, USA (Stoltzfus et al., 2013). We thank colleagues from the O’Meara Lab at the University of Tennessee Knoxville for suggestions, discussions and software testing. The late National Evolutionary Synthesis Center (NESCent), which sponsored hackathons that led to initial work on this project. The team that assembled DateLife’s first proof of concept: Tracy Heath, Jonathan Eastman, Peter Midford, Joseph Brown, Matt Pennell, Mike Alfaro, and Luke Harmon. The Open Tree of Life project that provides the open, metadata rich repository of trees used to construct DateLife’s chronogram database. The many scientists who publish their chronograms in an open, reusable form, and the scientists who curate them for deposition in the Open Tree of Life repository. The NSF for funding nearly all the above, in addition to the ABI grant that funded this project itself.

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