

<sup>1</sup> DateLife: leveraging databases and analytical tools to reveal the dated Tree of Life

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18 **Abstract**

19 Chronograms –phylogenies with branch lengths proportional to time– represent key  
20 data on evolutionary time frame for the study of natural processes in many areas of biological  
21 research. Chronograms also provide valuable information that can be used for education,  
22 science communication, and policy decisions. Yet, achieving a high-quality reconstruction of  
23 a chronogram is a difficult and resource-consuming task. Here we present DateLife, a service  
24 implemented as an R package and an R Shiny web application available at [www.datelife.org](http://www.datelife.org),  
25 that provides services for efficient and easy discovery, summary, reuse, and reanalysis of node  
26 age data mined from a curated database of expert, peer-reviewed, and openly available  
27 chronograms. The main DateLife workflow starts with one or more scientific taxon names  
28 provided by a user. Names are processed and standardized to a unified taxonomy. Then,  
29 DateLife runs a name match across its local chronogram database that is curated from Open  
30 Tree of Life’s phylogenetic repository, and extracts all chronograms that contain at least two  
31 queried taxon names, along with their metadata. Finally, node ages from matching  
32 chronograms are mapped upon a chosen tree topology using the congruification algorithm.  
33 Congruified node ages are used as secondary calibrations to date the chosen topology, with or  
34 without initial branch lengths, using different phylogenetic dating methods such as BLADJ,  
35 treePL, PATHd8 and MrBayes. We performed a cross-validation test to compare node ages  
36 resulting from a DateLife analysis (i.e, phylogenetic dating using secondary calibrations) to  
37 those from the original chronograms (i.e, obtained with primary calibrations), and found  
38 that DateLife’s node age estimates appear generally correlated to those from the original  
39 chronograms, with the largest variation in ages occurring around topologically deeper nodes.  
40 Software such as DateLife can help increase awareness of the existing variation in alternative  
41 hypothesis of evolutionary time frame for the same organisms, and can support exploration  
42 of the effect of alternative chronogram hypotheses on downstream analyses, providing a

<sup>43</sup> framework for a more informed interpretation of evolutionary results.

<sup>44</sup> *Keywords:* Tree; Phylogeny; Scaling; Dating; Ages; Divergence times; Open Science;  
<sup>45</sup> Congruification; Supertree; Calibrations; Secondary calibrations.

<sup>46</sup> Word count: 5956

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 comparative analysis (Freckleton, Harvey, & Pagel, 2002; Harvey, Pagel, &  
50 others, 1991), developmental biology (Delsuc et al., 2018; Laubichler & Maienschein, 2009),  
51 conservation biology and ecology (Felsenstein, 1985; Webb, 2000), historical biogeography  
52 (Posadas, Crisci, & Katinas, 2006), and species diversification (Magallon & Sanderson, 2001;  
53 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 non-negligible amount of research time, computational resources and funding.

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

## DESCRIPTION

<sup>71</sup> DateLife's core software applications are implemented in the R package `datelife`. Its

72 current stable version – v0.6.6, is available from The Comprehensive R Archive Network  
73 (CRAN) repository (Sanchez-Reyes et al., 2022), and relies on functionalities from other  
74 biological R packages: ape (Paradis, Claude, & Strimmer, 2004), bold (Chamberlain, 2018),  
75 geiger (Pennell et al., 2014), msa (Bodenhofer, Bonatesta, Horejš-Kainrath, & Hochreiter,  
76 2015), paleotree (Bapst, 2012), phyloch (Heibl, 2008), phylocomr (Ooms & Chamberlain,  
77 2018), phytools (Revell, 2012), rotl (Michonneau, Brown, & Winter, 2016), and taxize  
78 (Chamberlain, 2018; Chamberlain & Szöcs, 2013). Figure 1 provides a graphical summary of  
79 the three main steps of the DateLife workflow: creating a search query, searching a database,  
80 and summarizing results from the search.

## 81 Creating a search query

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

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

98 Information (NCBI) taxonomic database (Schoch et al., 2020), the Global Biodiversity  
99 Information Facility (GBIF) taxonomic backbone (GBIF Secretariat, 2022), and the Interim  
100 Register of Marine and Non-marine Genera (IRMNG) database (Rees et al., 2017).

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

### 113 **Searching a chronogram database**

114 At the time of writing of this manuscript (Feb 20, 2023), DateLife’s chronogram  
115 database latest version consist of 253 chronograms published in 187 different studies. It is  
116 curated from OpenTree’s phylogenetic database, the Phylesystem, which constitutes an open  
117 source of expert and peer-reviewed phylogenetic knowledge with rich metadata (McTavish et  
118 al., 2015), which allows automatic and reproducible assembly of our chronogram database.  
119 Datelife’s chronogram database is navigable as an R data object within the `datelife` R  
120 package.

121 A unique feature of the Phylesystem is that any user can add new published,  
122 state-of-the-art chronograms any time, through their curator application

123 (<https://tree.opentreeoflife.org/curator>). As chronograms are added to Phylesystem, they  
124 can be incorporated into the chronogram database of the **datelife** R package, which is  
125 currently manually updated as new chronogram data is added to Phylesystem. The updated  
126 database is assigned a new version number, followed by a package release on CRAN. Users  
127 can directly implement **datelife** functions to trigger an update of the local chronogram  
128 database, to incorporate any new chronograms to their DateLife analysis before an official  
129 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 withing 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**

155 DateLife requires a tree topology to summarize age data upon. We recommend that

156 users provide as input a tree topology from the literature, or one of their own making. If no

157 topology is provided, DateLife automatically extracts one from the OpenTree synthetic tree,

158 a phylogeny currently encompassing 2.3 million taxa across all life, assembled from 1, 239

159 published phylogenetic trees and OpenTree’s unified Taxonomy, OTT (Open Tree Of Life et

160 al., 2019). Alternatively, DateLife can combine topologies from source chronograms using a

161 supertree approach (Criscuolo, Berry, Douzery, & Gascuel, 2006). To do this, DateLife first

162 identifies the source chronograms that form a grove, roughly, a sufficiently overlapping set of

163 taxa between trees, by implementing definition 2.8 for n-overlap from Ané et al. (2009). If

164 the source chronograms do not form a grove, the supertree reconstruction will fail. In rare

165 cases, a group of trees can have multiple groves. By default, DateLife chooses the grove with

166 the most taxa, however, the “criterion = trees” flag allows the user to choose the grove with

167 the most trees instead. The result is a single summary (or supertree) topology, that

168 combines topologies from source chronograms in a grove.

## 169 **Applying secondary calibrations**

170 Once a topology is chosen, DateLife applies the congruification method (Eastman,

171 Harmon, & Tank, 2013) that find nodes belonging to the same clade across source

172 chronograms, and then extracts the corresponding node ages from patristic distance matrices

173 stored as a `datelifeResult` object. Note that by definition, these matrices store total

174 distance (time from tip to tip), assuming that the terminal taxa are coeval and occur at the  
175 present. Hence, node ages correspond to half the values stored in the `datelifeResult`  
176 matrices. A table of congruified node ages that can be used as calibrations for a dating  
177 analysis is stored as a `congruifiedCalibrations` object.

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

188 **Dating a tree topology**

189 **With no branch lengths.** When producing or obtaining a tree with branch lengths  
190 for a group of interest is not possible, DateLife can date a topology without branch lengths,  
191 obtained from OpenTree or by implementing the supertree approach described above, by  
192 implementing the Branch Length Adjuster (BLADJ; Webb et al., 2008; Webb & Donoghue,  
193 2005) algorithm, which requires no initial branch lengths. The algorithm starts by fixing  
194 ages for nodes with calibration data upon the given topology. Then, it distributes time for  
195 nodes with no data evenly between calibrated nodes, minimizing age variance in the  
196 resulting chronogram (Webb et al., 2008), which has proven useful for ecological analyses  
197 that require age data (Webb et al., 2008). When there is conflict between ages of calibrated  
198 nodes, BLADJ ignores node ages that are older than the age of a parent node. The BLADJ  
199 algorithm requires a root age estimate to run. If there is no information on the age of the

200 root in the chronogram database, users can provide an estimate from the literature. If none  
201 is provided, DateLife will not return a dated topology and will provide a warning message  
202 along with suggestions on how the user can provide an age for the root so that a fully dated  
203 tree can be returned.

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

213 **Dating a tree with branch lengths.** Relative branch lengths provide key  
214 information for phylogenetic dating, specifically for nodes without any calibration data  
215 available. While, using initial branch lengths data is the golden standard for phylogenetic  
216 dating analyses, producing such requires assembling and curating a homology hypothesis,  
217 and choosing and implementing a method for phylogenetic inference. DateLife implements a  
218 workflow to streamline this process by leveraging on genetic data from the Barcode of Life  
219 Data System, BOLD (Ratnasingham & Hebert, 2007) to obtain markers for input taxa. By  
220 default, mined genetic sequences are aligned with MUSCLE (Edgar, 2004) using functions  
221 from the msa R package (Bodenhofer et al., 2015). Alternatively, sequences can be aligned  
222 with MAFFT (Katoh, Asimenos, & Toh, 2009), using functions from the ape R package  
223 (Paradis et al., 2004). The BOLD sequence alignment is then used to obtain initial branch  
224 lengths with the accelerated transformation (ACCTRAN) parsimony algorithm, which  
225 resolves ambiguous character optimization by assigning changes along branches of the tree as  
226 close to the root as possible (Agnarsson & Miller, 2008), resulting in older nodes (Forest et

227 al., 2005). The parsimony branch lengths are then optimized using Maximum Likelihood,  
228 given the alignment, the topology and a simple Jukes-Cantor model, producing a BOLD tree  
229 with branch lengths proportional to expected number of substitutions per site. Both  
230 parsimony and ML optimizations are done with functions from the `phangorn` package  
231 (Schliep, 2011). The BOLD workflow is currently only available on DateLife’s R package and  
232 not on the web application.

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

## 240 Visualizing results

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

## 246 Benchmark

247 R package `datelife` code speed was tested on an Apple iMac with one 3.4 GHz Intel  
248 Core i5 processor. We registered variation in computing time of query processing and search  
249 through the database relative to number of queried taxon names. Query processing time  
250 increases roughly linearly with number of input taxon names, and increases considerably if  
251 Taxonomic Name Resolution Service (TNRS) is activated. Up to ten thousand names can be

252 processed and searched in less than 30 minutes with the most time consuming settings. Once  
253 names have been processed as described in methods, a name search through the chronogram  
254 database can be performed in less than a minute, even with a very large number of taxon  
255 names (Fig. 2).

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

## 263 Case studies

264 We illustrate the DateLife workflow using a family within the passeriform birds  
265 encompassing the true finches, Fringillidae, as case study. On a small example, we analysed 6  
266 bird species, and results from each step of the workflow are shown in Fig. 3. As a second  
267 example, we analysed 289 bird species in the family Fringillidae that are included in the  
268 NCBI taxonomy. The resulting summary chronogram is shown in Fig. 5, and results from  
269 previous steps of the workflow are available as Supplementary Figures.

## 270 A small example

271 **Creating a search query.** We chose 6 bird species within the Passeriformes. The  
272 sample includes two species of cardinals: the black-thighed grosbeak – *Pheucticus tibialis*  
273 and the crimson-collared grosbeak – *Rhodothraupis celaeno*; three species of buntings: the  
274 yellowhammer – *Emberiza citrinella*, the pine bunting – *Emberiza leucocephala* and the  
275 yellow-throated bunting – *Emberiza elegans*; and one species of tanager, the vegetarian finch –  
276 *Platyspiza crassirostris*. Processing of input names found that *Emberiza elegans* is synonym

277 for *Schoeniclus elegans* in the default reference taxonomy (OTT v3.3, June 1, 2021). For a  
278 detailed discussion on the state of the synonym, refer to Avibase (Avibase, 2022; Lepage,  
279 2004; Lepage, Vaidya, & Guralnick, 2014). Discovering this synonym allowed assigning five  
280 age data points for the parent node of *Emberiza elegans*, shown as *Schoeniclus elegans* in  
281 figure 3A, which would not have had any data otherwise.

282 **Searching the database.** DateLife used the processed input names to search the  
283 local chronogram database and found 9 matching chronograms in 6 different studies (Fig.  
284 3B). Three studies matched five input names (Barker, Burns, Klicka, Lanyon, & Lovette,  
285 2015; Hedges, Marin, Suleski, Paymer, & Kumar, 2015; Jetz et al., 2012), one study matched  
286 four input names (Hooper & Price, 2017) and two studies matched two input names (Barker,  
287 Burns, Klicka, Lanyon, & Lovette, 2013; Burns et al., 2014). No studies matched all input  
288 names. Together, source chronograms provide 28 unique age data points, covering all nodes  
289 on our chosen tree topology to date (Table 1).

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

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

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

309       **Searching the database.** Next, we used the processed species names in our  
310 DateLife query to identify chronograms with at least two Fringillidae species as tip taxa.  
311 The DateLife search identified 19 chronograms matching this criteria, published in 13  
312 different studies (Barker et al., 2013, 2015; Burns et al., 2014; Claramunt & Cracraft, 2015;  
313 Gibb et al., 2015; Hedges et al., 2015; Hooper & Price, 2017; Jetz et al., 2012; Kimball et al.,  
314 2019; Oliveros et al., 2019; Price et al., 2014; Roquet, Lavergne, & Thuiller, 2014; Uyeda,  
315 Pennell, Miller, Maia, & McClain, 2017). Once identified, DateLife pruned these matching  
316 chronograms to remove tips that do not belong to the queried taxon names, and transformed  
317 these pruned chronograms to pairwise distance matrices, revealing 1, 206 different age data  
318 points available for species within the Fringillidae (Supplementary Table S1).

319       **Summarizing search results.** The final step entailed congruifying and  
320 summarizing the age data available for the Fringillidae species into two single summary  
321 chronograms, using two different types of summary ages, median and SDM. As explained in  
322 the “Description” section, a tree topology to summarize age data upon is required. By  
323 default, DateLife uses the topology from OpenTree’s synthetic tree that contains all taxa  
324 from the search query. According to OpenTree’s synthetic tree, species belonging to the  
325 family Fringillidae do not form a monophyletic group (Fig. 4). Hence, a topology containing

326 only the 289 species from the original query was extracted from Open Tree of Life’s synthetic  
327 tree v12.3 (Open Tree Of Life et al., 2019).

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

### 333                   **Cross-validation test**

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

### 344                   **Discussion**

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

350 A total of 99,474 unique terminal taxa are represented in DateLife’s database.

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

360 While it is known that incorporating at least some data on lineage divergence times  
361 represents a relevant improvement for testing alternative hypothesis using phylogenetic  
362 distance in ecological and conservation biology studies (Webb et al., 2008). Next, we discuss  
363 some particularities of using summarized node age data from a DateLife analysis that users  
364 should be aware of.

### 365 **Age variation in source chronograms**

366 Conflict in estimated ages among alternative studies is common in the literature. See,  
367 for example, the robust ongoing debate about crown group age of angiosperms  
368 (Barba-Montoya, Reis, Schneider, Donoghue, & Yang, 2018; Magallón, Gómez-Acevedo,  
369 Sánchez-Reyes, & Hernández-Hernández, 2015; Ramshaw et al., 1972; Sanderson & Doyle,  
370 2001; Sauquet, Ramírez-Barahona, & Magallón, 2021). Source chronograms available for the  
371 same organisms have potentially been estimated implementing calibrations very differently.  
372 In the Fringillidae example shown here, the chronograms from Burns et al. (2014) were  
373 inferred using molecular substitution rate estimates across birds (Weir & Schluter, 2008),  
374 and have much older age estimates for the same nodes than chronograms that were inferred  
375 using fossils as calibrations (Figs. 5, 6; Supplementary Figs. S1, S5).

Different calibration implementations might also 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 has been proven to significantly affect time of lineage divergence estimates (Sauquet, 2013).

### Primary vs Secondary calibrations

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

It seems that using several (as opposed to just a few) secondary calibrations can provide sufficient information to alleviate or even neutralize potential biases (Sauquet, 2013).

402 Certainly, further studies are required to fully understand the effect of secondary calibrations  
403 on outputs from different tree dating methods, and on downstream analyses. It is possible  
404 that secondary calibrations can be safely used with dating methods that do not require  
405 setting priors, such as penalized likelihood (Sanderson, 2003), with methods that do not  
406 make any assumptions on the ages and fix them to a node on a tree topology, such as  
407 BLADJ (Webb et al., 2008; Webb & Donoghue, 2005), or methods that summarize age data  
408 unto a tree topology.

409 Our cross validation analysis might provide some insight in this regard. When ages are  
410 estimated with secondary calibrations, nodes closer to the root do tend to be slightly  
411 younger than ages estimated with primary calibrations. However, nodes closer to the tip  
412 tend to be older when estimated using secondary calibrations with a dating method that  
413 does not make any prior assumptions on the nature of the calibrations themselves  
414 (Supplementary Figures S2-S20). The only exception to this was observed on cross validation  
415 results of the Burns et al. (2014) chronogram, which displays much younger node ages when  
416 estimated using secondary calibrations (Supplementary Figs. S1, S5).

#### 417 **Summarizing chronograms**

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

425 Some measures that have been proposed are the proportion of lineage sampling and the  
426 number of calibrations used (Magallón, 2010; Magallón et al., 2015). Some characteristics

427 that are often cited in published studies as a measure of improved age estimates as compared  
428 to previously published estimates are: quality of alignment (missing data, GC content),  
429 lineage sampling (strategy and proportion), phylogenetic and dating inference method,  
430 number of fossils used as calibrations, support for nodes and ages, and magnitude of  
431 confidence intervals.

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

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

#### 446 Effects of phylogenetic sampling on downstream analyses

447 Analysis of species diversification using simulated and empirical phylogenies suggest  
448 that using a more completely sampled phylogeny provides estimates that are closer to the  
449 true diversification history than when analysing incompletely sampled phylogenies (Chang,  
450 Rabosky, & Alfaro, 2020; Cusimano, Stadler, & Renner, 2012; Sun et al., 2020). Ideally  
451 phylogenies should be completed using genetic data, but this is a very hard task to achieve

452 for many biological groups. Hence, DateLife's workflow features different ways of assigning  
453 node ages in the absence of calibrations and branch length information for certain taxa.  
454 Completing a phylogeny using a stochastic birth-death politomy resolver and a backbone  
455 taxonomy is a common practice in scientific publications: Jetz et al. (2012), created a  
456 chronogram of all 9, 993 bird species, where 67% had molecular data and the rest was  
457 simulated; Rabosky et al. (2018) created a chronogram of 31, 536 ray-finned fishes, of which  
458 only 37% had molecular data; Smith and Brown (2018) constructed a chronogram of 353, 185  
459 seed plants where only 23% had molecular data. These stochastically resolved chronograms  
460 provide less biased diversification rates estimated with methods that account for sampling  
461 fractions (Chang et al., 2020; Cusimano et al., 2012), but can also introduce spurious  
462 patterns of early bursts of diversification (Cusimano & Renner, 2010; Sun et al., 2020).

463 Taxonomy based politomy resolvers also introduce topological differences. The study of  
464 macroevolutionary processes largely depends on an understanding of the timing of species  
465 diversification events, and different phylogenetic and chronogram hypothesis can provide  
466 very different overviews of the macroevolutionary history of a biological group. For example,  
467 alternative topologies in chronograms from the same biological group can infer very different  
468 species diversification patterns (Rabosky, 2015; Title & Rabosky, 2016). Similarly there are  
469 worries that patterns of morphological evolution cannot be accurately inferred with these  
470 types of phylogenies, as any patterns would be erased by randomization (Rabosky, 2015).  
471 We note that the same applies for geographical and morphological dependent diversification  
472 analysis. Hence, we suggest that these types of randomly resolved phylogenies can be used as  
473 null or neutral models, representing the case of diversification independent of traits and  
474 geographical scenario.

475 While stochastic politomy resolvers have been useful to advance research, notably, risks  
476 come with this practice. Taken to the extreme, one could generate a fully resolved,  
477 calibrated tree of all modern and extinct taxa using a single taxonomy, a single calibration,

478 and assigning branch lengths following a birth-death diversification model. Clearly, this can  
479 lead to a misrepresentation of the true evolutionary history. We urge DateLife users to follow  
480 the example of the large tree papers cited above, by carefully considering the statistical  
481 assumptions being made, potential biases, and assessing the consistency of the results with  
482 prior work.

483

## Conclusions

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

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

502

## Availability

503        The DateLife software is free and open source. It can be used online through its R  
504      shiny web application hosted at <http://www.datelife.org>, and locally through the `datelife`  
505      R package, downloadable from Zenodo (<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.593938>) and the  
506      CRAN repository (Sanchez-Reyes et al., 2022). DateLife's web application is maintained  
507      using RStudio's shiny server and the shiny package open infrastructure, as well as Docker  
508      and OpenTree's infrastructure ([dates.opentreeoflife.org/datelife](https://dates.opentreeoflife.org/datelife)). `datelife`'s stable version  
509      is available for installation from CRAN repository using the command  
510      `install.packages(pkgs = "datelife")` from within R. Development versions are  
511      available from DateLife's GitHub repository (<https://github.com/phylotastic/datelife>) and  
512      can be installed using the command  
513      `devtools::install_github("phylotastic/datelife")`.

514

## Supplementary Material

515        Supplementary material, including code, biological examples, benchmark results, data  
516      files and online-only appendices, can be found in the Dryad data repository  
517      (<https://doi.org/10.5061/dryad.cnp5hqc6w>), as well as in the Zenodo stable repositories that  
518      host the reproducible manuscript (<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7435094>), the biological  
519      examples (<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7435101>), and the software benchmark  
520      (<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7435106>). The corresponding development versions hosted  
521      on GitHub can be found at <https://github.com/LunaSare/datelifeMS1#readme>,  
522      [https://github.com/LunaSare/datelife\\_examples#readme](https://github.com/LunaSare/datelife_examples#readme), and  
523      [https://github.com/LunaSare/datelife\\_benchmark#readme](https://github.com/LunaSare/datelife_benchmark#readme).

524

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542

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838 relationships and generic limits of finches (fringillidae). *Molecular Phylogenetics and  
839 Evolution*, 62(2), 581–596.

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

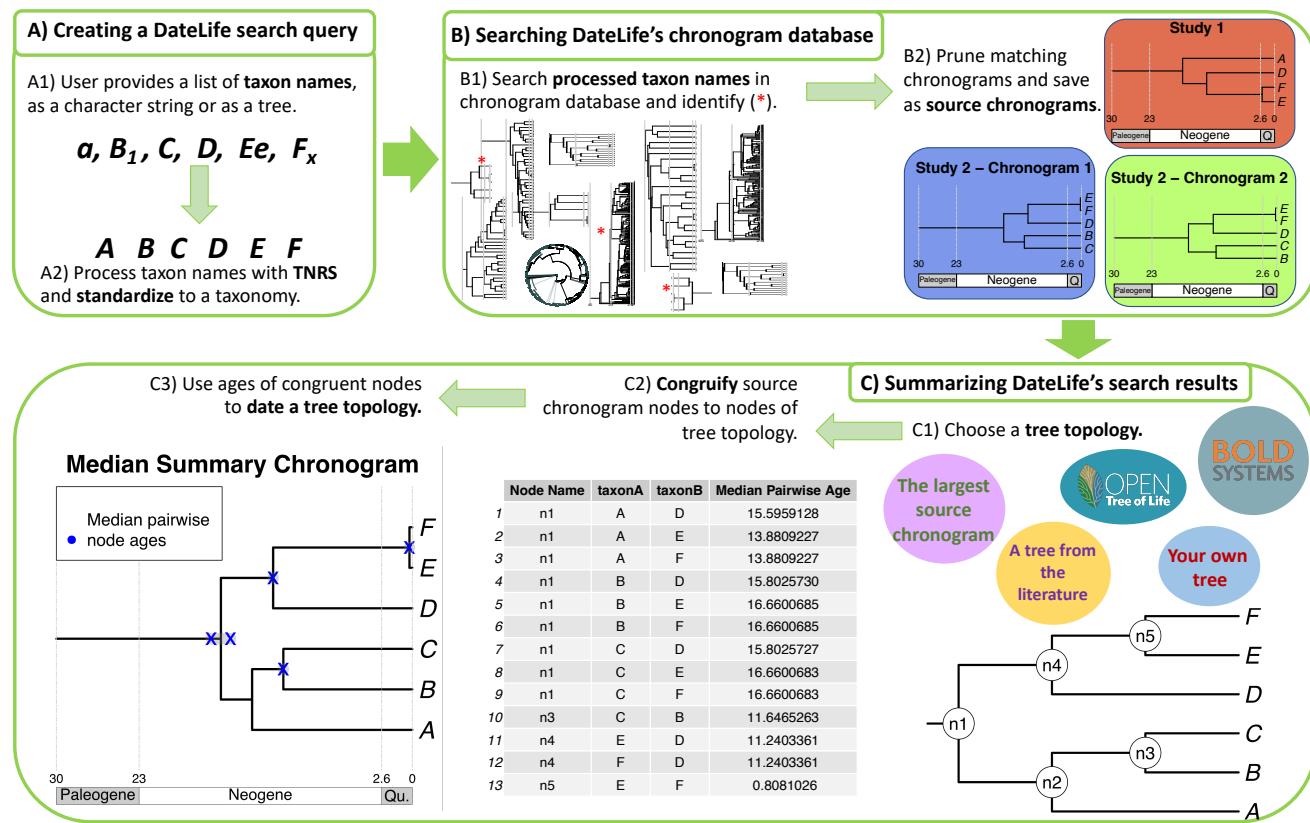
	<b>Node Name</b>	<b>taxon A</b>	<b>taxon B</b>	<b>Node Age</b>	<b>Study chronogram</b>
1	n1	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	<i>Platyspiza crassirostris</i>	9.6509881	Jetz et al. 2012 – chronogram 1
2	n1	<i>Pheucticus tibialis</i>	<i>Schoeniclus elegans</i>	14.3336520	Barker et al. 2015 – chronogram 1
3	n1	<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

841

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

<b>Node Name</b>	<b>Min Age</b>	<b>Q1</b>	<b>Median Age</b>	<b>Mean Age</b>	<b>Q3</b>	<b>Max Age</b>	<b>Variance</b>	<b>SD</b>
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

843



844 FIGURE 1. *Main DateLife workflow. Analyses can be performed via DateLife's interactive*  
845 *website at [www.datelife.org](http://www.datelife.org), or using the `datelife` R package. Details on the R functions used to*  
846 *perform the analyses are available from `datelife`'s R package vignettes at*  
847 *<https://phylotastic.org/datelife>.*

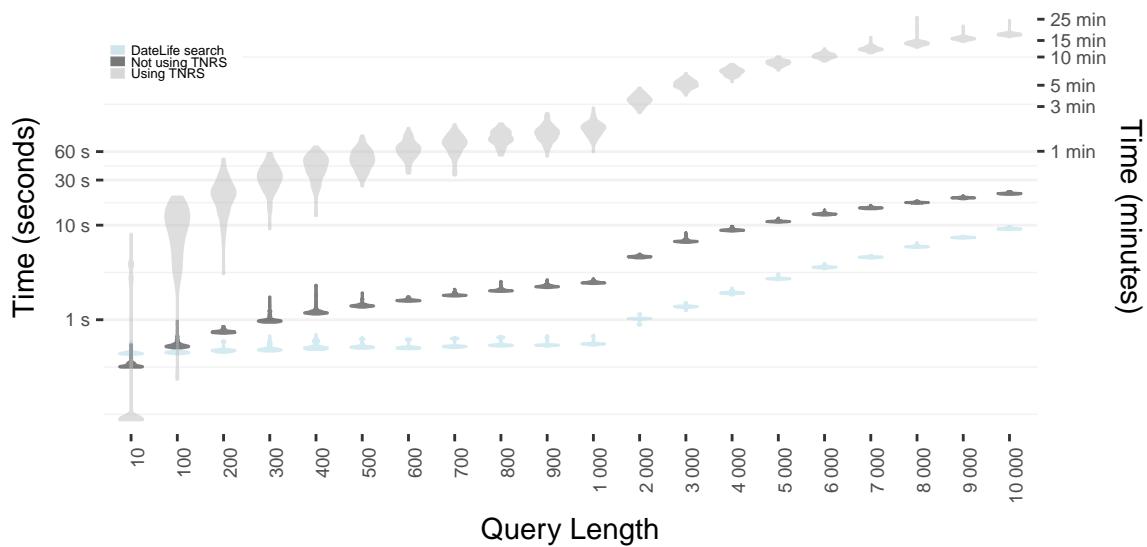
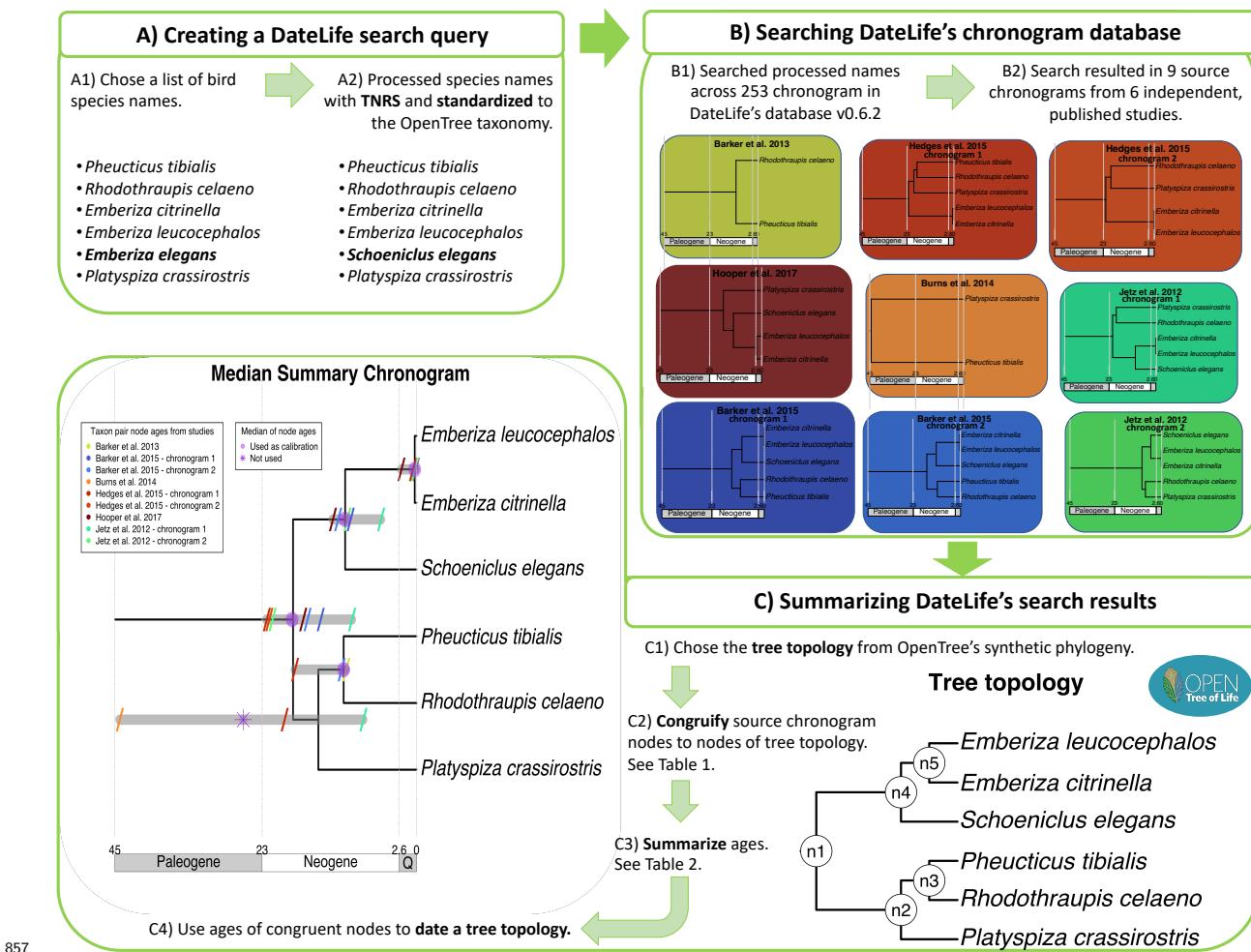


FIGURE 2. *DateLife's* benchmarking results. Computation time used to process a query and a search across *datelife's* chronogram database, relative to number of input taxon names. For each  $N = \{10, 100, 200, \dots, 1\,000, \dots, 9\,000, 10\,000\}$ , we sampled  $N$  species names from the class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



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

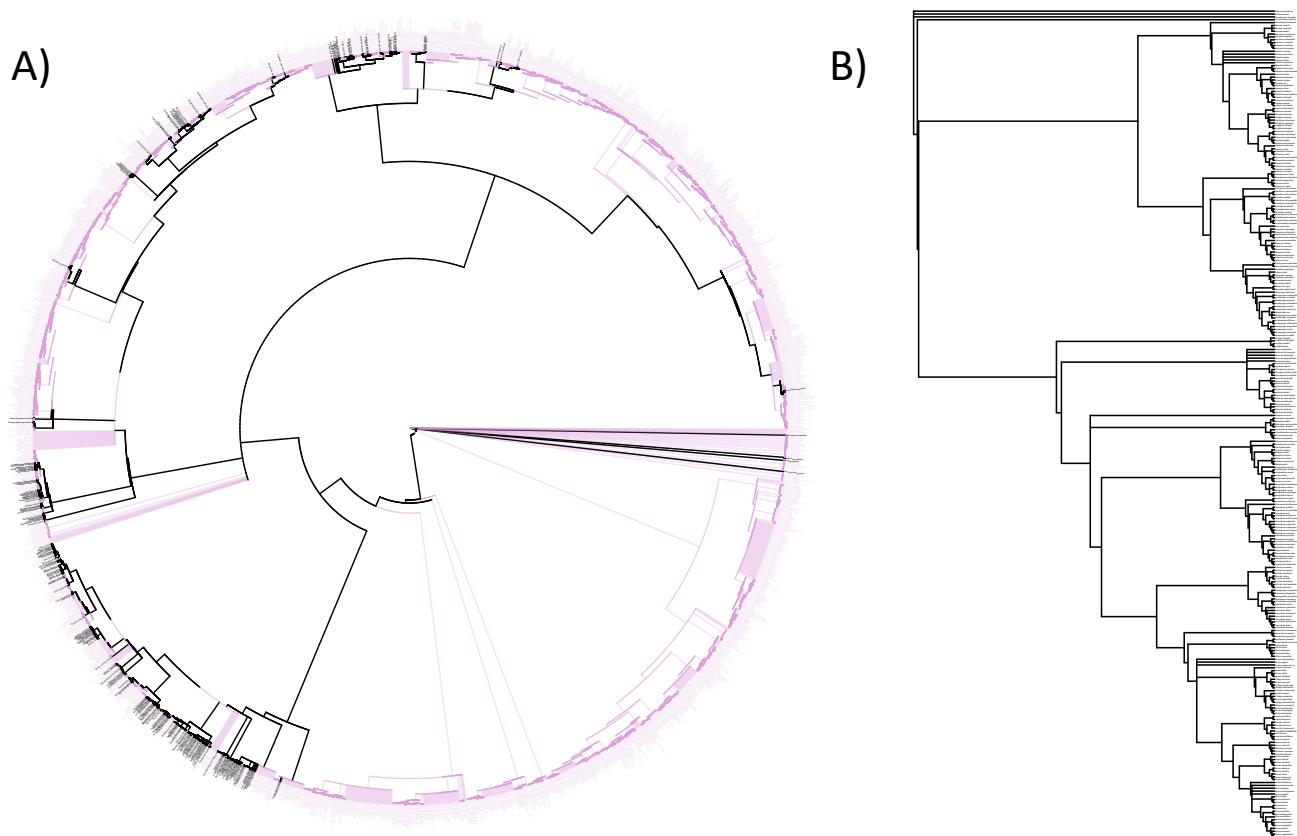
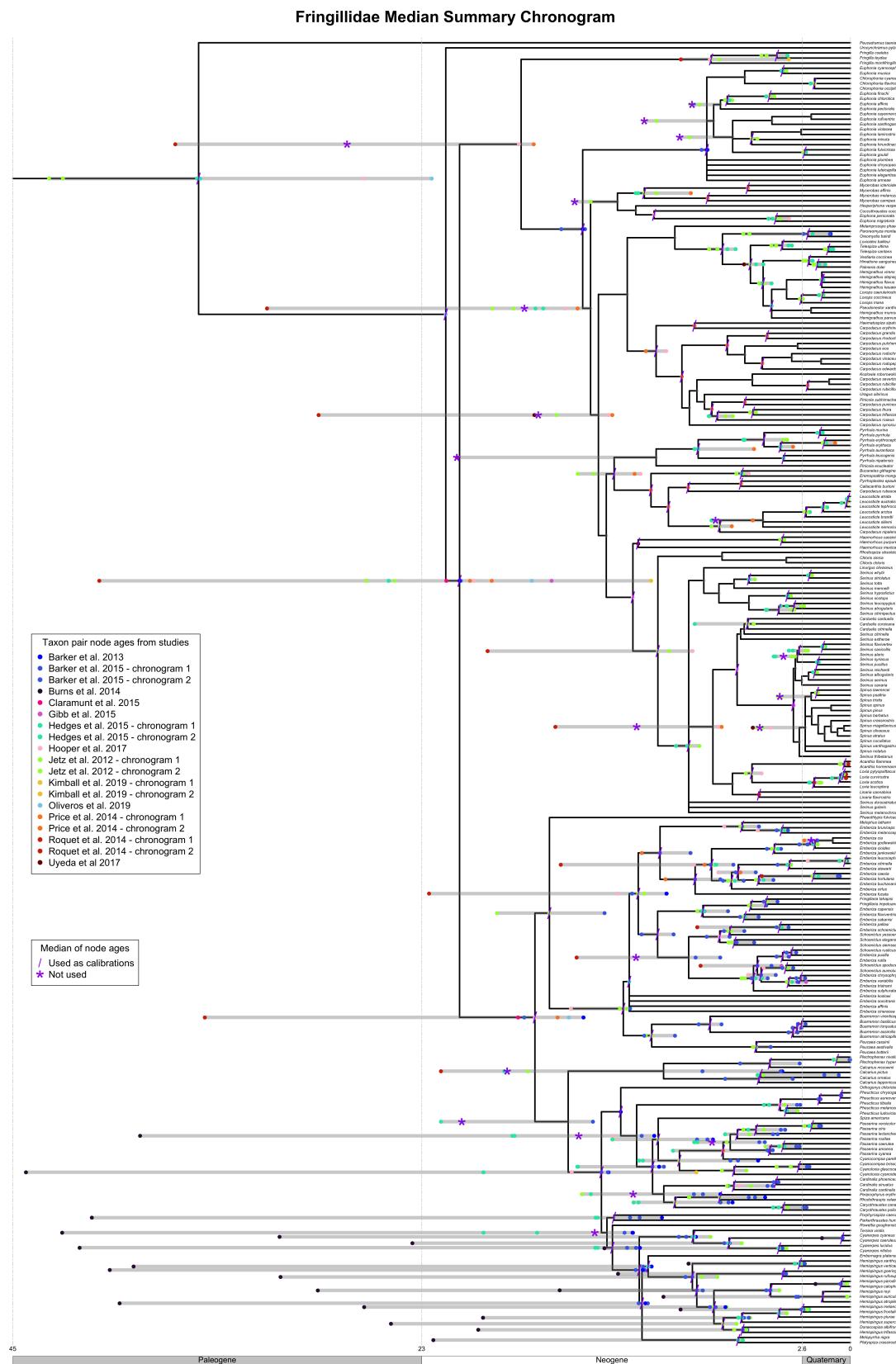


FIGURE 4. Tree topologies extracted from Open Tree of Life's (OpenTree) synthetic phylogenetic tree.  
 865 A) Topology of 2,333 tips and 1,305 internal nodes, encompassing bird species within the family  
 866 Fringillidae following the NCBI taxonomy (black), as well as all other bird species that share the same  
 867 Most Recent Common Ancestor (MRCA) node in OpenTree's synthetic tree (purple). B) Subtree  
 868 topology of 289 tips and 253 internal nodes, resulting from pruning species that do not belong to the  
 869 family Fringillidae according to the NCBI taxonomy (purple branches in topology A). Bird species  
 870 within the Fringillidae are paraphyletic (Alström et al. 2014, Barker, Cibois, Schikler, Feinstein, &  
 871 Cracraft 2004, Barker et al. 2013, Barker 2014, Barker et al. 2015, Beresford, Barker, Ryan, &  
 872 Crowe 2005, Bryson Jr et al. 2014, Burleigh, Kimball, & Braun 2015, Burns et al. 2014, Chaves,  
 873 Hidalgo, & Klicka 2013, Claramunt & Cracraft 2015, Gibb et al. 2015, Hackett et al. 2008, Jetz et al.  
 874 2012, Johansson, Fjeldså, & Bowi 200, Kimball et al. 2019, Klicka et al. 2014, Lamichhaney et al.  
 875 2015, Lerner, Meyer, James, Hofreiter, & Fleischer 2011, Lovette et al. 2010, Moyle et al. 2016,  
 876 Ödeen, Håstad, & Alström 2011, Oliveros et al. 2019, Päckert et al. 2012, Parchman, Benkman, &  
 877 Mezquida 2007, Powell et al. 2014, Price et al. 2014, Pulgarín-R, Smith, Bryson Jr, Spellman, &  
 878 Klicka 2013, Selvatti, Gonzaga, & Moraes Russo 2015, Tietze, Päckert, Martens, Lehmann, & Sun  
 879 2013, Treplin et al. 2008, Zuccon, Prŷs-Jones, Rasmussen, & Ericson 2012).



887

FIGURE 5. *Fringillidae* median summary chronogram generated with DateLife. It has 289 tips and 253 nodes, from which 212 have age data from at least one published chronogram. These nodes have been calibrated from 19 different studies, from 12 different studies (chronogram 1) and 11 different studies (chronogram 2).

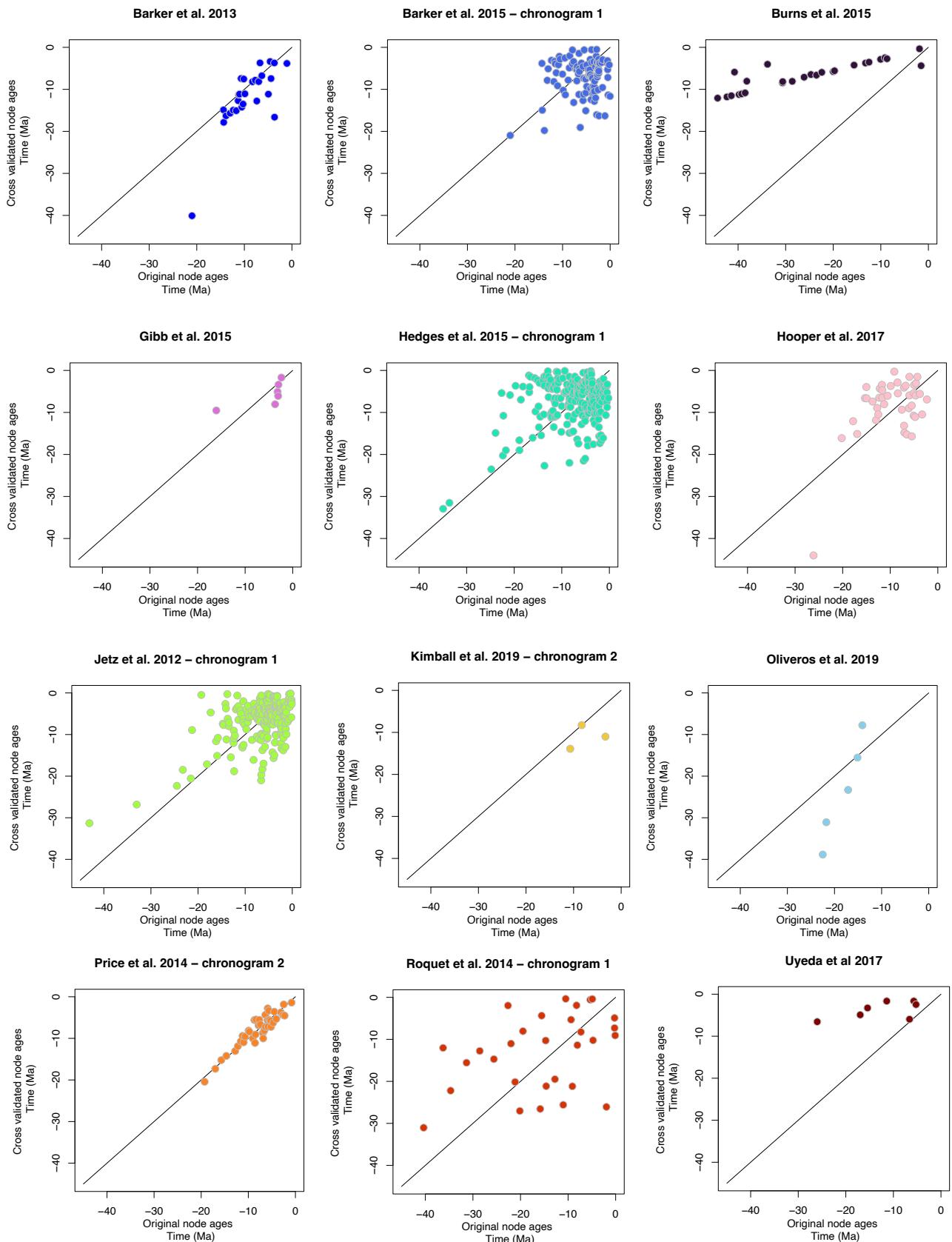


FIGURE 6. Results from cross validation analysis. Each plot compares the original age estimate (x axis) with the age obtained with a DateLife analysis (y axis), per node.