**Running Header:** *Seasonal morphology in Malagasy bats*

**Title:** Reproductive calendars, seasonal morphological changes, and juvenile growth rates for three endemic Malagasy fruit bats

**Authors:**

Angelo Andrianiaina1\*, Santino Andry2\*, Anecia Gentles3, Sarah Guth4, Jean-Michel Héraud5,6, Hafaliana Christian Ranaivoson1,5, Ny Anjara Fifi Ravelomanantsoa1, Timothy Treuer7, and Cara E. Brook4,8✝

**Affiliations:**

1Department of Zoology and Animal Biodiversity, University of Antananarivo, Antananarivo, Madagascar. [angelo.andrianiaina@gmail.com](mailto:angelo.andrianiaina@gmail.com) (AA); [gammarinema@gmail.com](mailto:gammarinema@gmail.com) (HCR); [ravelomanantsoafifi@gmail.com](mailto:ravelomanantsoafifi@gmail.com) (NAFR).

2Department of Entomology, University of Antananarivo, Antananarivo, Madagascar. [andrysantino2@gmail.com](mailto:andrysantino2@gmail.com) (AA).

3Odum School of Ecology, University of Georgia, Athens, GA, USA. [gentles@uga.edu](mailto:gentles@uga.edu) (AG).

4Department of Integrative Biology, University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, CA, USA. [sarah\_guth@berkeley.edu](mailto:sarah_guth@berkeley.edu) (SG).

5Virology Unit, Institut Pasteur of Madagascar, Antananarivo, Madagascar. [jean-Michel.HERAUD@pasteur.sn](mailto:jean-Michel.HERAUD@pasteur.sn) (JMH).

6Virology Department, Institut Pasteur de Dakar, Dakar, Senegal.

7Gund Institute for Environment, The University of Vermont, Burlington, VT, USA. [timothy.treuer@uvm.edu](mailto:timothy.treuer@uvm.edu) (TT)

8Department of Ecology and Evolution, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA. [cbrook@uchicago.edu](mailto:cbrook@uchicago.edu) (CEB).

\**These first authors contributed equally and are listed alphabetically.*

**Keywords:** Pteropodidae, pteropodid, fruit bat, Madagascar, morphology, seasonality, *Pteropus rufus, Eidolon dupreanum, Rousettus madagascariensis*

✝**Correspondent:**

Dr. Cara E. Brook, [cbrook@uchicago.edu](mailto:cbrook@uchicago.edu)

The island nation of Madagascar is home to three endemic species of Old World Fruit Bat in the family Pteropodidae: *Pteropus rufus, Eidolon dupreanum,* and *Rousettus madagascariensis,* all three of which are IUCN Red Listed under some category of threat. To inform conservation efforts to model population viability for these threatened species, as well understand the mechanisms underpinning persistence of several potentially zoonotic pathogens hosted by these bats, we here define the seasonal limits of a staggered annual birth pulse across the three Malagasy pteropodids. Our field studies in central-eastern Madagascar indicate that this annual birth pulse takes place in September/October for *P. rufus,* November for *E. dupreanum,* and December for *R. madagascariensis,* followed by variable juvenile development periods which result in near-synchronous weaning of pups for all three species in late January-February at the height of the fruiting season in this region. We additionally document the size range in morphological features for the Malagasy fruit bats, which span the range of those known for pteropodids more broadly, with *P. rufus* and *E. dupreanum* among the larger of recorded species and *R. madagascariensis* among the smaller. We demonstrate a positive, exponential relationship between mass and forearm length across our dataset, which varies seasonally as pregnant females add weight during staggered gestation periods and males lose weight during the nutritionally-deficit Malagasy winter. Finally, we quantify forearm, tibia, and ear length growth rates in juvenile Malagasy pteropodids, demonstrating both faster growth and more protracted development times for the largest-bodied *P. rufus.* The longer development period for the already-threatened *P. rufus* places further jeopardizes their conservation status as human hunting of bats for subsistence is particularly detrimental to species population viability during reproductive periods. The more extreme seasonal variation in the mass to forearm relationship for *P. rufus* likely also modulates immune function, an important consideration given these bats’ roles as reservoir hosts for several high profile viral families known to cause severe disease in humans. Our work highlights the importance of longitudinal field studies in collecting critical data for mammalian conservation efforts and human public health alike.

The Old World Fruit Bat family Pteropodidae, known colloquially as the ‘flying foxes,’ makes up one of the most endangered groups of mammals on Earth, with some 35% of species either extinct or threatened with extinction, a proportion almost three times higher than that reported (12%) for all other bat families combined (Species IUCN Red List Threat. 2018). Fruit bats experience disproportionate rates of persecution, likely as a result of their propensity for small island endemism (Jones et al. 2009) and their large sizes, which make them targets for the bushmeat trade (Craig et al. 1994; Brooke 2002; Oleksy et al. 2003; Jenkins and Racey 2008; Kamins et al. 2011; Openshaw et al. 2016; Peel et al. 2017). Fruit bat wingspans can reach up to two meters in the case of *Pteropus vampyrus,* the world’s largest bat (Corbet and Hill 1992). The diverse ecosystem services offered by pteropodids have been reviewed before: these bats play important roles in the pollination and seed dispersal of numerous plant species across the Old World, particularly in island ecosystems often depauperate in other frugivores (McConkey and Drake 2006; Kunz et al. 2011).

Madagascar is one such island ecosystem recognized for its unusually depauperate frugivorous fauna (Dewar and Richard 2007). Primates (lemurs), rather than birds, are considered the primary seed dispersers on the island (Langrand n.d.; Wright et al. 2011), in contrast to otherwise comparable tropical ecosystems in the New World (Terborgh 1983, 1986). In addition to lemurs, Madagascar is home to three endemic species of frugivorous bats from the family Pteropodidae, *Pteropus rufus, Eidolon dupreanum,* and *Rousettus madagascariensis,* all of which have been shown to pollinate flowers and disperse seeds from both native Malagasy and exotic plants (Bollen and Elsacker 2002; Andriafidison et al. 2006; Long and Racey 2007; Picot et al. 2007; Andrianaivoarivelo et al. 2011; Oleksy et al. 2015, 2017). To date, the relative contributions of fruit bats vs. frugivorous lemurs to community assembly have yet to be rigorously quantified in a specific Malagasy ecosystem. Importantly, *E. dupreanum* may be the only extant pollinator of the endangered, endemic Malagasy baobab, *Adansonia suarezensis* (Andriafidison et al. 2006).

Despite their value, Madagascar’s fruit bats are heavily persecuted. All three species are consumed across the island as a source of human food (Oleksy et al. 2003; Jenkins and Racey 2008; Cardiff et al. 2009; Randrianandrianina et al. 2010; Golden et al. 2014; Fernández-Llamazares et al. 2018; Brook et al. 2019a), and *P. rufus,* the largest and most heavily hunted, is sometimes targeted in response to its largely inaccurate characterization as a predator of human fruit crops (Raharimihaja et al. 2016). Respectively, *P. rufus, E. dupreanum,* and *R. madagascariensis* are currently IUCN Red-listed as ‘Vulnerable,’ ‘Vulnerable,’ and ‘Near-Threatened’ species (Species IUCN Red List Threat. 2018), though recent population viability analyses suggest that *P. rufus*, in particular, may be experiencing more severe population declines than have been previously reported (Brook et al. 2019a). Globally, anti-bat sentiments have been on the rise as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Rocha et al. 2020); though no specific instances of COVID-related persecution have yet been documented for the Malagasy fruit bats, all three species are known to host potentially zoonotic pathogens (Iehlé et al. 2007; Razafindratsimandresy et al. 2009; Reynes et al. 2011a; Wilkinson et al. 2012a; Brook et al. 2015; Razanajatovo et al. 2015; Brook et al. 2019b; Ranaivoson et al. 2019), posing risks that negative public reactions may arise in the future.

All three Malagasy fruit bats are thought to reproduce seasonally in species-specific annual birth pulses (MacKinnon et al. 2003; Brook et al. 2019a), and previous work suggests that roost population sizes and survival rates vary across the year for these three species, as well (Brook et al. 2019a; Noroalintseheno Lalarivoniaina et al. 2019). Temporal fluctuations in nutritional status may alter bat immune responses, thus influencing pathogen dynamics (Brook et al. 2019b), as well as modulate bats’ vulnerability to seasonally variable hunting pressures (Brook et al. 2019a). We sought to expand existing knowledge of seasonal variation in the reproductive calendar and nutritional status of all three Malagasy fruit bat species, in order to facilitate future conservation assessments and studies aimed at deciphering the dynamics of bat-hosted infections. In particular, we aimed to (a) quantify life history traits needed for population modeling for these three species, (b) document seasonal variation in their morphometrics and body conditions, and (c) calculate juvenile growth rates throughout the post-reproductive period. Our work emphasizes the importance of longitudinal field studies in accurately describing the ecology of frugivorous bats.

**Materials and Methods**

*Study periods and sites—*Field studies were carried out between 2013 and 2020 in part with previously published work examining population viability for (Brook et al. 2019a) and the dynamics of potentially zoonotic infections circulating in Malagasy fruit bats (Brook et al. 2015, 2019b; Ranaivoson et al. 2019). Bats were captured periodically throughout each year, with sampling spanning all months and all seasons (dry, wet, shoulder), interspersed with some gaps in temporal continuity. Captures took place in several regions of Madagascar: (1) Ankarana National Park in the northwest (-12.9S, 49.1E), (2) Makira Natural Park in the northeast (-15.1S, 49.6E), (3) Mahabo forest in the center-west (-20.5S, 44.7E), and (4) several sub-localities of the Moramanga District in the center-east, including: the fragmented forests of Ambakoana (-18.5, 48.2), Mangarivotra (-18.3S, 48.2E), Marotsipohy (-18.4S,48.1E), Marovitsika (-18.8S,48.1E), Lakato (-19.2S, 48.4E), and Mahialambo (-18.1S, 48.2E) , the special reserves of Angavokely (-18.9S, 47.8E) and Angavobe (-18.9S), 47.9E, and the new protected area of Maromizaha (-18.9S, 48.5E).

*Netting—*Mist nets were deployed from 6:00 p.m. to midnight and from 3:00 a.m. to 8:00 a.m. around roosting or feeding sites of *P. rufus*, *E. dupreanum* and *R. madagascariensis* and monitored continuously. Captured bats were placed in individual clean cloth bags while awaiting processing for infectious disease studies, as has been previously described (Brook et al. 2015, 2019b; Ranaivoson et al. 2019). For each sampling session, we conducted between 1 and 10 nights of netting, ending sessions early when 30 individuals of each species present at the site were captured. Upon capture, all bats were weighed (in grams) with a Pesola scale attached to the cloth bag and forearm, tibia, and ear were measured with a caliper or tape measure (in mm). Bats were classed by sex and age (juvenile vs. adult) and, for females, reproductive class (non-reproductive, pregnant, lactating). For females captured roughly within the period of possible gestation for each species, abdominal palpitation was used to determine whether or not females were pregnant. All raw data used in this study are accessible in our open-access GitHub repository at: github.com/brooklabteam/Mada-Bat-Morphology.

This study was carried out ﻿in strict accordance with research permits obtained from the Madagascar Ministry of Forest and the Environment (permit numbers 251/13, 166/14, 075/15, 258/16, 170/18, 019/18, 170/18, 007/19, 14/20) and under guidelines posted by the American Veterinary Medical Association. All field protocols employed were pre-approved by the Princeton University and UC Berkeley Institutes for Animal Care and Use Committees (respectively, IACUC Protocol #1926 and ACUC Protocol # AUP-2017-10-10393), and every effort was made to minimize discomfort to animals.

*Literature review—*To place our Malagasy bats in a broader context, we compiled information from the literature concerning the morphology of other bats in the family Pteropodidae. From the ‘Bat Species of the World’ database (NB and Cirranello 2020), we compiled a list of 201 previously described pteropodid species, then searched GoogleScholar and Web of Science for any records documenting the mass, forearm, tibia, and ear length of each species. We only collected records that were sex-specific, and where possible, we documented the sample size from which those records were derived, if reported as an average. In cases where no sample size was reported, we assumed that sample size to be one individual. All raw data and references are accessible in our open-access GitHub repository at: github.com/brooklabteam/Mada-Bat-Morphology.

*Statistical analysis—*Data analysis was performed using R v.4.0.3 (R Core Team, 2020). All raw data and corresponding code for these analyses can be accessed in our GitHub repository at. Additional details of statistical output are compiled in various supplementary tables in Appendix 1.

First, we aimed to define the seasonal limits of the reproductive calendar for each of the three Malagasy fruit bat species. To this end, we restricted our analyses to our most complete cross-species time series from roost sites in the District of Moramanga, Madagascar and queried the data subset for the following metrics, unique for each species: (a) the earliest calendar day on which a pregnant female was observed, (b) the earliest calendar day on which a juvenile was observed, and (c) the latest calendar day on which a lactating female was observed. Metrics (a) and (b) corresponded to the date limits of gestation for each species, while metrics (b) and (c) corresponded to the date limits of lactation for each species. Because fruit bats of many species are known to delay embryonic implantation and fetal development for months after fertilization (Mutere 1967; Heideman 1988; Heideman and Powell 1998; Meenakumari and Krishna 2005), we assumed that abdominal palpitation to determine reproductive status in the field would likely miss early-stage pregnancies in the three Malagasy species. To this end, we additionally searched the literature for records of gestation length in closely-related pteropodids to compare against our records of observed gestation in Malagasy species.

We next sought to document morphological variation in adult *P. rufus, E. dupreanum,* and *R. madagascariensis,* as compared with other bats in family Pteropodidae. To this end, we calculated the sex-specific median and interquartile range of reported measurements of mean tibia and ear length (in mm) for adult pteropodids globally, as well as the range of values recorded for individuals within our dataset. We additionally compared sex-specific forearm length and mass at a species-level for pteropodids surveyed in the literature against the range reported in individuals for all three species recorded from our own field data. Assuming variation and error for measures of both forearm length and mass, we fit a type-2 exponential regression model using the standard major axis method SMA in the R package lmodel2 (Legendre 2014), to the resulting data to describe the correlation of mass with forearm length, both at a mean species-level for pteropodids globally and within our own dataset, separated by sex (Appendix 1).

Next, we explored seasonal variation in the regression of body mass per forearm across our three Malagasy species by calculating the residual of each individual’s observed mass in the data against that predicted from the exponential regression. This generated the equivalent of a body mass index metric for bats: individuals with positive mass:forearm residuals corresponded to those with higher masses than predicted by body size (broadly indicative of better nutritional conditions), while individuals with negative mass:forearm residuals corresponded to those with lower masses than predicted by body size (broadly indicative of poorer nutritional conditions). To assess seasonal variation in body condition, as represented by the mass:forearm residual, we last fit a generalized additive model (GAM), using the mgcv package in R (Wood 2001), to the seasonal time series of mass:forearm residual, separately across each discrete species-sex subset of the data. We modeled mass:forearm residual as the response variable predicted by day of year as a cyclic cubic (“cc”) spline, with the number of smoothing knots (“k”) fixed at seven, as recommended by the package author (Wood 2001). Cyclic cubic splines can be used to capture annual seasonality, as the seasonal smoother on January 1 is modeled as a continuation from December 31.

Finally, we explored juvenile growth rates for forearm, tibia and ear across all three Malagasy fruit bat species, calculating the age in days since birth of each juvenile bat in our dataset with “day 0” set equal to the first date of an observed juvenile in the dataset for each species, as described above. We then fit another GAM to the resulting correlation of forearm length, tibia length and ear length with age in days, across the three species. We modeled the morphological metric (forearm, tibia, or ear length) as the response variable against the smoothing predictor of age in days, using a thinplate smoothing spline (“tp”) with the number of smoothing knots fixed again at seven. After fitting each model, we then calculated the age-varying derivative of each fitted curved using the ‘gratia’ package in R to facilitate comparison of growth rates across different species and morphological features.

**Results**

*Field captures—* In total, 2160 fruit bats were captured and processed between August 2013 and March 2020 (**Fig. 1A**). The majority of bats (n=1700) were captured in roost sites located in the District of Moramanga in central-eastern Madagascar (*P. rufus* n=316; *E. dupreanum* n=732; *R. madagascariensis* n=652), followed by Ankarana National Park in the northwest (n=380; *E. dupreanum* n= 172; *R. madagascariensis* n =208), Makira Natural Park in the northeast (n=47; *P. rufus* n=15; *R. madagascariensis* n=32), and Mahabo forest in the center-west (n= 33; *P. rufus* n=19; *E. dupreanum* n=14).

*Fruit bat reproductive calendars—*Longitudinal data collected in the District of Moramanga allowed us define the seasonal limits of a single annual reproduction event for all three fruit bat species (**Fig. 1B**). We calculated the earliest calendar day on which a pregnant female was observed, respectively, for *P. rufus, E. dupreanum,* and *R. madagascariensis*, as July 7, August 3, and September 11; the earliest calendar day on which a juvenile was observed as September 29, November 16, and December 12; and the latest calendar day on which a lactating female was observed as January 21, February 2, and February 19 (**Table S1**)*.* These dates allowed us to define the approximate duration of the observed gestation and lactation period for each species (observed gestation: *P. rufus* = ~80 days*, E. dupreanum=* ~105 days*,* and *R. madagascariensis =* ~90 days; observed lactation: *P. rufus* = ~115 days*, E. dupreanum=* ~80 days*,* and *R. madagascariensis =* ~60 days). Because gestation was observed through abdominal palpitation in the field, we presumed that early stage pregnancies for all three species might not be visible. To account for this, we compared our observed gestation period for all three fruit bat species against that which has been previously described for closely-related species: *Pteropus alecto, Pteropus policephalus,* and *Pteropus scapulatus* (sister species to *P. rufus*) demonstrate a ~180 day gestation period on the Australian continent (McIlwee and Martin 2002), while *Eidolon helvum* (sister species to *E. dupreanum*)and *Rousettus aegyptiacus* (sister species to *R. madagascariensis*) both demonstrate gestation periods of ~120 days on the African continent (Odukoya et al. 2008; Barclay and Jacobs 2011). Extension of the gestation period for the three Malagasy species back in time from the birth pulse to match those recorded for sister species elsewhere would place the mating period for *P. rufus* in the month of April, for *E. dupreanum* in the month of July, and for *R. madagascariensis* in the month of August. These estimates of mating period are consistent with previous reporting for *P. rufus* (Long and Racey 2007) and *R. madagascariensis* (Noroalintseheno Lalarivoniaina et al. 2019); to our knowledge, no previous records of the reproductive calendar for *E. dupreanum* have been published.

In sum, we observed the longest gestation and lactation period for *P. rufus,* which births first of the three Malagasy fruit bat species, followed by *E. dupreanum,* and *R. madagascariensis,* in order of decreasing body size. Despite differences in the timing and duration of gestation, however, lactating mothers for all three species weaned pups around the same time of the year (~late January – February), at the onset of peak fruit abundance in the hot-wet season in the District of Moramanga.

*Morphological patterns—*After searching the literature, we successfully compiled mass records from 103 pteropodid species for females and 106 species for males; forearm records from 146 species for females and 140 species for males; tibia records from 64 species for females and 64 species for males; and ear length records from 101 species for females and 99 species for males. We compared these records against morphological patterns witnessed in our own longitudinally-collected field data.

For Malagasy fruit bats, we observed large differences in morphology across species but few significant differences by sex. The Malagasy fruit bat species ranked in size, from largest to smallest: *P. rufus, E. dupreanum,* and *R. madagascariensis,* with the size ranges of each species roughly spanning the range in ear length, tibia length, and forearm length as the mean values for all non-Malagasy pteropdid bats surveyed across the literature (**Fig. 2A-C**). Specific morphological ranges for tibia length and forearm length matched the size distributions of the three species, scaling downward from *P. rufus* to *E. dupreanum* to *R. madagascariensis.* For ear lengths, *P. rufus* and *E. dupreanum* distributions were largely overlapping, while *R. madagascariensis* were smaller; species-specific interquartile ranges for each morphological trait are summarized in **Table S2**. Length distributions for most traits were not significantly different by sex, except in the case of forearm lengths for *P. rufus* and tibia and forearm lengths for *R. madagascariensis,* which were all significantly larger in females than in males (*Welch’s 2-sample t-test p<0.001;* Table S2). The larger literature-derived species-level means roughly approximated the range spanned from the *R. madagascariensis* minimum to the *P. rufus* maximum for tibia, ear, and forearm length, with the median falling in between that of *R. madagascariensis* and *E. dupreanum* across all three metrics.

We additionally computed a type-2 exponential regression of the correlation of increasing body mass with forearm length across a joint dataset incorporating all three Malagasy species and another across the literature-derived dataset, both separated by sex. All four exponential regressions demonstrated a good fit to the data with *R2* values > .95 and roughly comparable slopes, indicating 20-30 fold increases in bat mass (in grams) corresponding to every 10-fold increase in forearm length (in mm) across all species and sexes (Fig 2C; **Table S3**).

*Seasonality of mass:forearm relationships—*Restricting our analyses to the Madagascar field data only, we next explored seasonal variation in the mass:forearm relationships realized in Fig. 2C, fitting disparate species- and sex-specific GAMs to the residual of the observed mass:forearm from the modeled prediction. GAMs indicated a significant seasonal smoothing predictor of mass:forearm residual for both male and female subsets of the *P. rufus* and *E. dupreanum* data and for the female subset of the *R. madagascariensis* data (*p-value<0.001;* **Table S4**). Only male *R. madagascariensis* demonstrated no seasonal variation in mass:forearm residual. Finally, we plotted the GAM-predicted mass for each species and sex across, respectively, the reproductive and nutritional calendars for female and male fruit bats of the three Malagasy species (**Fig. 3**). As expected, we observed a seasonal peak in adult female mass:forearm which overlapped the staggered period of observed gestation for each species from Fig. 1, followed by a deficit overlapping the corresponding, species-specific lactation period. We also observed a less extreme mass deficit which overlapped the resource-poor winter for male *P. rufus* and *E. dupreanum* but occurred earlier in the season for *E. dupreanum* than for *P. rufus.*

*Juvenile growth rates—*In our final analysis, we compared juvenile growth rates in forearm, tibia, and ear length across all three Malagasy fruit bat species. GAMs fitted to the response variable of each morphological trait demonstrated highly significant smoothing predictors of days since birth across all three metrics and all three species (**Fig. 4; Table S5**). Quantification of the derivative of each fitted GAM across the range of observed days since birth allowed us to compare growth rates across traits and species: in general, we observed the largest slopes, corresponding to the fastest growth rates for forearm lengths, then tibia lengths, and finally, ear lengths of all three species. *P. rufus* grew at the fastest rate (largest slope in growth curve) for all three morphological traits, followed by *E. dupreanum* and then *R. madagascariensis.* Despite faster growth rates, as the largest of the three species, *P. rufus* bats also demonstrated the most protracted development phase, approaching adult size (10-day average slope for forearm growth <.1) approximately six months after birth (180 days), as compared to two months (53 days) for *E. dupreanum* and 2.5 months (81 days) for *R. madagascariensis.* Species- and metric-specific growth rates from our fitted GAMs across the first year of life are summarized in **Table S6**; all raw values are available on our open-access GitHub repository.

**Discussion**

Here, we explore spatial-temporal and seasonal variation in morphological features for three endemic Malagasy bats in the Old World Fruit Bat family, Pteropodidae: *P. rufus, E. dupreanum,* and *R. madagascariensis*. Our work confirms that *P. rufus, E. dupreanum,* and *R. madagascariensis* birth in a single annual, species-specific pulse in Madagascar, which is temporally staggered across the three species. In the District of Moramanga in Madagascar’s center-east where we conducted the bulk of our field studies, the *P. rufus* birth pulse occurred firstin the months of September/October, followed by *E. dupreanum* in November, and *R. madagascariensis* in December. It is possible that the timing of this birth pulse may vary latitudinally based on climatic differences across the island (e.g. occurring earlier in warmer climates or later in cooler regions), though our birth pulse projections align well with previous records of the mating season for *P. rufus* in southeastern Madagascar (Long and Racey 2007) and *R. madagascariensis* in northwestern Madagascar (Noroalintseheno Lalarivoniaina et al. 2019); to our knowledge, no previous records defining the reproductive calendar for *E. dupreanum* have been published (Shi et al. 2014). Nonetheless, climate-related variation in birth pulse timing is well-described for populations of *Eidolon helvum,* which range across the entirety of the African continent (Peel et al. 2013, 2017). Documentation of the timing of this birth pulse for Malagasy fruit bats is important for understanding their vulnerability to seasonally-varying population pressures: previous work describes how seasonal variation in hunting pressure for Malagasy lemurs poses elevated risks to species when directly overlapping their annual birth pulse (Brook et al. 2018). Fruit bats are legally hunted during the Malagasy winter ﻿(1 May – 1 September), which overlaps the gestation period observed here for all three species, but most significantly for *P. rufus,* a species already known to be experiencing severe population declines due to anthropogenic threats (Golden et al. 2014; Brook et al. 2019a). Critically, the Malagasy fruit bat lactation periods are varied in duration such that, despite staggered birth pulses, juvenile weaning occurs largely coincidentally at the onset of the peak fruiting season in the hot-wet Malagasy summer, a pattern recapitulated across numerous species of frugivorous lemur, as well (Wright et al. 2005).

In addition to its importance for conservation efforts to quantify fruit bat population viability, defining the temporal limits of each fruit bat species-specific birth pulse is essential to understanding the mechanisms which underpin the maintenance and persistence of numerous infectious agents that these bats host (Iehlé et al. 2007; Razafindratsimandresy et al. 2009; Reynes et al. 2011b; Wilkinson et al. 2012b; Brook et al. 2015, 2019b; Ranaivoson et al. 2019). Isolated *E. helvum* populations on islands off the west coast of Africa have been shown to support circulation of potentially zoonotic henipaviruses at population sizes well below the established critical community size (CCS) for closely-related paramyxoviruses in other systems (Bartlett 1957, 1960; Swinton et al. 1998; Peel et al. 2012). Some work has suggested that seasonally-staggered births allowing for a protracted introduction of juvenile susceptibles into the host population could play a role in pathogen persistence in these systems (Peel et al. 2013, 2014; Hayman 2015). In Madagascar, seasonally-staggered birth pulses across the three fruit bat species could support the persistence of multi-species pathogens, such as bat-borne coronaviruses, which frequently transmit and recombine amongst different species of bats that co-roost in the same caves (Hu et al. 2017). Among Malagasy pteropodids, *E. dupreanum* and *R. madagascariensis* are known to share cave roosts, sometimes with insectivorous bats, while *P. rufus* inhabits single-species arboreal roosts (MacKinnon et al. 2003). Previous work suggests that sympatric cave-roosting likely plays a role in pathogen-sharing of diverse paramyxoviruses among Malagasy bats (Mélade et al. 2016), but considerable evidence also supports a largely single-host-species-to-single-pathogen relationship for many other bat-borne infections, including those described in Madagascar (Ng et al. 2015; Lagadec et al. 2016; Brook et al. 2019b; Joffrin et al. 2019). It is likely that diverse inter- and intra-species dynamics underpin the population-level persistence of different pathogen types.

Because the dynamics of pathogen shedding and zoonotic spillover have been linked to reproductive and nutritional calendars across several bat-virus systems (Plowright et al. 2008; Amman et al. 2012; Schmidt et al. 2017; Brook et al. 2019b), documentation of seasonal variation in bat body condition and nutrition also has important implications for understanding immunity and pathogen maintenance. We here highlight significant seasonal changes observed in body condition for Malagasy fruit bats, largely modulated by reproduction for females and corresponding more closely to the nutritional calendar for males. Additional research elucidating seasonal and cross-species variation in fruit bat diet—and its impact on bat health—would do much to elucidate the observed discrepancy in the timing of the seasonal mass:forearm deficit for in *E. dupreanum* (June-July)vs. *P. rufus* (September) males. No seasonal pattern was found for male *R. madagascariensis* bats in our dataset, which could result from a lack of statistical power to identify differences across a smaller body size range for this species, or which may signify perpetually abundant food resources for this species in the Moramanga District.

Beyond the observed seasonality in body mass:forearm residual, which tracked reproduction for females and nutrition for males, we documented little significant sexual dimorphism in morphological traits for Malagasy fruit bat species—a pattern which our literature search indicated was consistent with that exhibited by pteropodids more generally. We did uncover some slight evidence of larger forearm and tibia lengths in female vs. male adult *P. rufus* and *E. dupreanum*, but further research is needed to determine whether these patterns hold across the entire Madagascar range, as previous work indicates that sexual dimorphism in pteropodids in other systems can vary with latitude (Storz et al. 2001). Nonetheless, our study confirms that the size distribution of Malagasy pteropodids spans the range of that documented globally, with *P. rufus* and *E. dupreanum* falling among the larger 50% of previously described species and *R. madagascariensis* among the smaller. Mirroring adult size distributions, juvenile growth rates were highest and developmental periods longest in *P. rufus,* followed by *E. dupreanum* and *R. madagascariensis.* The rapid ~two month juvenile growth window witnessed for *E. dupreanum* in our dataset suggests that this species may actually birth earlier than is recorded here; additional, intensive sampling throughout the reproduction period is needed to confirm the seasonal limits of each developmental stage for these three fruit bat species. Our study emphasizes the importance of longitudinal field studies in uncovering seasonal variability in ecological data, with critical implications for understanding of both population viability and infectious disease dynamics alike.

**Acknowledgements**

The authors thank Kimberly Rivera, Katie Fitzgerald, and Samantha Kreling for help in the field, the Virology Unit at the Institut Pasteur de Madagascar for logistical support, the Department of Zoology and Animal Biodiversity at the University of Antananarivo for help in obtaining research permits, and the Brook lab at the University of Chicago for helpful contributions to the manuscript. We acknowledge funding from the National Institutes of Health (﻿1R01AI129822-01 grant JMH and CEB), DARPA (﻿PREEMPT Program Cooperative Agreement no. D18AC00031 to CEB), the ﻿Adolph C. and Mary Sprague Miller Institute for Basic Research in Science (postdoctoral fellowship to CEB), and the Branco Weiss Society in Science (fellowship to CEB).

**Literature Cited**

Amman, B. R. et al. 2012. Seasonal pulses of Marburg virus circulation in juvenile *Rousettus aegyptiacus* bats coincide with periods of increased risk of human infection. PLoS Pathogens 8:e1002877.

Andriafidison, D. et al. 2006. Nectarivory by endemic Malagasy fruit bats during the dry season. Biotropica 38:85–90.

Andrianaivoarivelo, R. A., R. Olga, P. A. Racey, and R. K. B. Jenkins. 2011. Feeding ecology, habitat use and reproduction of Rousettus madagascariensis Grandidier, 1928 (Chiroptera : Pteropodidae) in eastern Madagascar. Mammalia 75:69–78.

Barclay, R. M. R., and D. S. Jacobs. 2011. Differences in the foraging behaviour of male and female egyptian fruit bats (*Rousettus aegyptiacus*). Canadian Journal of Zoology 89:466–473.

Bartlett, M. S. 1957. Measles periodicity and community size. Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, Series A 120:48–70.

Bartlett, M. S. 1960. The critical community size for measles in the United States. Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, Series A 123:37–44.

Bollen, A., and L. Van Elsacker. 2002. Feeding ecology of *Pteropus rufus* (Pteropodidae) in the littoral forest of Sainte Luce, SE Madagascar. Acta Chiropterologica 4:33–47.

Brook, C. E. et al. 2015. *Bartonella* spp. in fruit bats and blood-feeding ectoparasites in Madagascar. PLoS Neglected Tropical Diseases 10:e0003532.

Brook, C. E. et al. 2018. Population viability and harvest sustainability for Madagascar lemurs. Conservation Biology 0:1–13.

Brook, C. E. et al. 2019a. Population trends for two Malagasy fruit bats. Biological Conservation 234:165–171.

Brook, C. E. et al. 2019b. Disentangling serology to elucidate henipa- and filovirus transmission in Madagascar fruit bats. Journal of Animal Ecology 00:1– 16.

Brooke, A. 2002. Threats from overhunting to the flying fox,< i> Pteropus tonganus</i>,(Chiroptera: Pteropodidae) on Niue Island, South Pacific Ocean. Biological Conservation 103:343–348.

Cardiff, S. G., F. H. Ratrimomanarivo, G. Rembert, and S. M. Goodman. 2009. Hunting, disturbance and roost persistence of bats in caves at Ankarana, northern Madagascar. African Journal of Ecology 47:640–649.

Corbet, G. B., and J. E. Hill. 1992. The mammals of the Indo‐Malayan region. Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK.

Craig, P., P. Trail, and T. E. Morrell. 1994. The decline of fruit bats in American Samoa due to hurricanes and overhunting. Biological Conservation 69:261–266.

Dewar, R. E., and A. F. Richard. 2007. Evolution in the hypervariable environment of Madagascar. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 104:13723–13727.

Fernández-Llamazares, Á. et al. 2018. Are sacred caves still safe havens for the endemic bats of Madagascar? Oryx:1–5.

Golden, C. D., M. H. Bonds, J. S. Brashares, B. J. Rodolph Rasolofoniaina, and C. Kremen. 2014. Economic valuation of subsistence harvest of wildlife in Madagascar. Conservation Biology:1–10.

Hayman, D. T. S. 2015. Biannual birth pulses allow filoviruses to persist in bat populations. Proceedings of the Royal Society B 282.

Heideman, P. D. 1988. The timing of reproduction in the fruit bat *Haplonycteris fischeri*  (Pteropodidae): geographic variation and delayed development. Journal of Zoology 215:577–595.

Heideman, P. D., and K. S. Powell. 1998. Age-specific reproductive strategies and delayed embryonic development in an old world fruit bat, *Ptenochirus jagori*. Journal of Mammalogy 79:295–311.

Hu, B. et al. 2017. Discovery of a rich gene pool of bat SARS-related coronaviruses provides new insights into the origin of SARS coronavirus. PLoS Pathogens 13:1–27.

Iehlé, C., G. Razafitrimo, J. Razainirina, N. Andriaholinirina, S. M. Goodman, and C. Faure. 2007. Henipavirus and Tioman virus antibodies in Pteropodid bats, Madagascar. Emerging Infectious Diseases 13:159–161.

Jenkins, R. K. B., and P. A. Racey. 2008. Bats as bushmeat in Madagascar. Madagascar Conservation and Development 3:22–30.

Joffrin, L. et al. 2019. Bat coronavirus phylogeography in the western Indian Ocean. Scientific Reports:742866.

Jones, K. E., S. P. Mickleburgh, W. Sechrest, and A. L. Walsh. 2009. Global overview of the conservation of island bats: Importance, challenges and opportunities. Island Bats: Evolution, Ecology & Conservation:496–531.

Kamins, A. O. et al. 2011. Uncovering the fruit bat bushmeat commodity chain and the true extent of fruit bat hunting in Ghana, West Africa. Biological Conservation 144:3000–3008.

Kunz, T. H., E. Braun de Torrez, D. Bauer, T. Lobova, and T. H. Fleming. 2011. Ecosystem services provided by bats. Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences 1223:1–38.

Lagadec, E. et al. 2016. Identification of Tenrec ecaudatus, a Wild Mammal Introduced to Mayotte Island, as a Reservoir of the Newly Identified Human Pathogenic Leptospira mayottensis. PLOS Neglected Tropical Diseases 10:e0004933.

Langrand. no date. The birds of Madagascar. 1990. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.

Legendre, P. 2014. lmodel2: Model II Regression. R package version 1.7-2.

Long, E., and P. a. Racey. 2007. An exotic plantation crop as a keystone resource for an endemic megachiropteran, Pteropus rufus, in Madagascar. Journal of Tropical Ecology 23:397.

MacKinnon, J. L., C. E. Hawkins, and P. A. Racey. 2003. Pteropodidae, Fruit Bats, Fanihy, Angavo. Pp. 1299–1302 in The Natural History of Madagascar (S. M. Goodman & J. P. Benstead, eds.). The Universit of Chicago Press.

McConkey, K. R., and D. R. Drake. 2006. Flying foxes cease to function as seed dispersers long before they become rare. Ecology 87:271–276.

McIlwee, A. P., and L. Martin. 2002. On the intrinsic capacity for increase of Australian flying-foxes (*Pteropus spp., Megachiroptera* ). Australian Zoologist 32:76–100.

Meenakumari, K. J., and A. Krishna. 2005. Delayed embryonic development in the Indian short-nosed fruit bat, *Cynopterus sphinx*. Zoology 108:131–140.

Mélade, J. et al. 2016. Serological Evidence of Lyssaviruses among Bats on Southwestern Indian Ocean Islands. Plos One 11:e0160553.

Mutere, F. A. 1967. The breeding biology of equatorial vertebrates: reproduction in the fruit bat, *Eidolon helvum*, at latitude 0°20′N. Journal of Zoology 153:153–161.

NB, S., and A. Cirranello. 2020. Bat species of the world: A taxonomic and geographic database. <https://batnames.org/> (11 July 2020).

Ng, M. et al. 2015. NPC1 contributes to species-specific patterns of Ebola virus infection in bats. eLife 4:e11785.

Noroalintseheno Lalarivoniaina, O. S., F. I. Rajemison, R. V. Ramanantsalama, A. Andrianarimisa, and S. M. Goodman. 2019. Population size and survival of the Malagasy fruit bat *Rousettus madagascariensis* (Pteropodidae) in Ankarana, Northern Madagascar. Acta Chiropterologica 21:103–113.

Odukoya, S. A. et al. 2008. Histological investigation of the pregnant and non pregnant uterine limbs of the frugivorous bat (*Eidolon helvum*). International Journal of Integrative Biology 3:169–174.

Oleksy, R., L. Giuggioli, T. J. McKetterick, P. A. Racey, and G. Jones. 2017. Flying foxes create extensive seed shadows and enhance germination success of pioneer plant species in deforested Madagascan landscapes. PLoS ONE 12:1–17.

Oleksy, R., P. A. Racey, and G. Jones. 2015. High-resolution GPS tracking reveals habitat selection and the potential for long-distance seed dispersal by Madagascan flying foxes Pteropus rufus. Global Ecology and Conservation.

Oleksy, R., F. Randrianandrianina, and R. K. B. Jenkins. 2003. Commercial hunting of foraging fruit bats in Western Madagascar. African Bat Conservation News 37:239–246.

Openshaw, J. J. et al. 2016. Bat Hunting and Bat-Human Interactions in Bangladeshi Villages: Implications for Zoonotic Disease Transmission and Bat Conservation. Transboundary and Emerging Diseases:1–7.

Peel, A. J. et al. 2012. Henipavirus neutralising antibodies in an isolated island population of African fruit bats. PloS One 7:e30346.

Peel, A. J. et al. 2013. Continent-wide panmixia of an African fruit bat facilitates transmission of potentially zoonotic viruses. Nature Communications 4:2770.

Peel, A. J. et al. 2014. The effect of seasonal birth pulses on pathogen persistence in wild mammal populations. Proceedings of the Royal Society B 281:20132962.

Peel, A. J. et al. 2017. How does Africa’s most hunted bat vary across the continent? Population traits of the Straw-Coloured Fruit Bat (*Eidolon helvum*) and its interactions with humans. Acta Chiropterologica 19:77–92.

Picot, M., R. K. B. Jenkins, O. Ramilijaona, P. A. Racey, and S. M. Carrie. 2007. The feeding ecology of *Eidolon dupreanum* (Pteropodidae) in eastern Madagascar. African Journal of Ecology 45:645–650.

Plowright, R. K. et al. 2008. Reproduction and nutritional stress are risk factors for Hendra virus infection in little red flying foxes (*Pteropus scapulatus*). Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences 275:861–9.

Raharimihaja, T. E. A., J. L. M. Rakotoarison, P. A. Racey, and R. A. Andrianaivoarivelo. 2016. A comparison of the effectiveness of methods of deterring Pteropodid bats from feeding on commercial fruit in Madagascar. Jornal of Threatened Taxa 8:9512–9524.

Ranaivoson, H. C., J.-M. Héraud, H. K. Goethert, S. R. Telford III, L. Rabetafika, and C. E. Brook. 2019. Babesial infection in the Madagascan flying fox, *Pteropus rufus* É. Geoffroy, 1803. Parasites & Vectors:1–13.

Randrianandrianina, F. H., P. a. Racey, and R. K. B. Jenkins. 2010. Hunting and consumption of mammals and birds by people in urban areas of western Madagascar. Oryx 44:411–415.

Razafindratsimandresy, R., E. M. Jeanmaire, D. Counor, P. F. Vasconcelos, A. A. Sall, and J.-M. Reynes. 2009. Partial molecular characterization of alphaherpesviruses isolated from tropical bats. The Journal of General Virology 90:44–7.

Razanajatovo, N. H. et al. 2015. Detection of new genetic variants of Betacoronaviruses in endemic frugivorous bats of Madagascar. Virology Journal 12.

Reynes, J.-M. et al. 2011a. Laboratory surveillance of rabies in humans, domestic animals, and bats in madagascar from 2005 to 2010. Advances in preventive medicine 2011:727821.

Reynes, J.-M. et al. 2011b. Laboratory surveillance of rabies in humans, domestic animals, and bats in Madagascar from 2005 to 2010. Advances in preventive medicine 2011:727821.

Rocha, R. et al. 2020. Bat conservation and zoonotic disease risk: a research agenda to prevent misguided persecution in the aftermath of COVID-19. Animal Conservation:1–5.

Schmidt, J. P., A. W. Park, A. M. Kramer, B. A. Han, L. W. Alexander, and J. M. Drake. 2017. Spatiotemporal fluctuations and triggers of Ebola virus spillover. Emerging Infectious Diseases 23:415–422.

Shi, J. J., L. M. Chan, A. J. Peel, R. Lai, A. D. Yoder, and S. M. Goodman. 2014. A deep divergence time between sister species of *Eidolon* (Pteropodidae) with evidence for widespread panmixia. Acta Chiropterologica 16:279–292.

Species IUCN Red List Threat. 2018. IUCN 2018. Version 2018-2. *IUCN Red List*. .

Storz, J. F. et al. 2001. Clinal variation in body size and sexual dimorphism in an Indian fruit bat, *Cynopterus sphinx* (Chiroptera: Pteropodidae). Biological Journal of the Linnean Society 72:17–31.

Swinton, J., J. Harwood, B. T. Grenfell, and C. A. Gilligan. 1998. Persistence thresholds for phocine distemper virus infection in harbour seal *Phoca vitulina* metapopulations. Journal of Animal Ecology 67:54–68.

Terborgh, J. 1983. Five New World primates: a study in comparative ecology. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.

Terborgh, J. 1986. Keystone plant resources in the tropical forest. Pp. 330–344 in Conservation biology: the science of scarcity and diversity (M. Soule, ed.). Sunderland Sinauer Associates, Inc.

Wilkinson, D. A. et al. 2012a. Identification of novel paramyxoviruses in insectivorous bats of the Southwest Indian Ocean. Virus Research 170:159–63.

Wilkinson, D. A. et al. 2012b. Identification of novel paramyxoviruses in insectivorous bats of the Southwest Indian Ocean. Virus Research 170:159–63.

Wood, S. N. 2001. mgcv: GAMs and Generalized Ridge Regression for R. R News 1/2:20–24.

Wright, P. C., S. R. Tecot, E. M. Erhart, A. L. Baden, S. J. King, and C. Grassi. 2011. Frugivory in four sympatric lemurs: Implications for the future of Madagascar’s forests. American Journal of Primatology 73:585–602.

Wright, P. C., R. Vololontiana, and S. T. Pochron. 2005. The key to Madagascar frugivores. Pp. 121–138 in Tropical Fruits and Frugivores: The Search for Strong Interactors (J. L. Dew & J. P. Boubli, eds.). Springer, The Netherlands.

**Figure Legends**

**Fig. 1.** A. Map of field sites and distribution of bat captures for *P. rufus, E. dupreanum,* and *R. madagascariensis* in Madagascar. Pie size corresponds to total bats captured at each site: 1700 in the District of Moramanga (*P. rufus* n=317; *E. dupreanum* n=732; *R. madagascariensis* n=653), 380 in Ankarana National Park (*E. dupreanum* n= 172; *R. madagascariensis* n =208), 47 in Makira Natural Park (*P. rufus* n=15; *R. madagascariensis* n=32), and 33 in Mahabo forest (*P. rufus* n=19; *E. dupreanum* n=14). B. Gestation and lactation periods across the three Madagascar fruit bat species, calculated from the field data (observed) and reported in the literature (assumed). Respectively, for *P. rufus, E. dupreanum,* and *R. madagascariensis*, observed gestation begins on: July 7, August 3, and September 11; birth occurs on: September 29, November 16, and December 12; and lactation ceases on: January 21, February 2, and February 19 (Table S1).

**Fig. 2**. A. Tibia, and B., ear length across fruit bat species from the literature (left) and from our Madagascar field data (right), colored by genera according to legend; data are grouped by sex (upper=females, lower=males). Violin plots show range and 25, 50, and 75% quantiles for each distribution. B. Type-2 exponential regression of body mass (in grams, y-axis) by forearm length (in mm, x-axis) across pteropodids from the literature (left) and from our Madagascar field data (right), colored by genera according to legend; data are grouped by sex (upper=females, lower=males). Solid line corresponds to predictions from the fitted model (R2: All Pteropodids, M= .96, F=.95; Malagasy Pteropodids, M=.96, F=.97). Data are summarized in Table S2, S3.

**Fig. 3.** Seasonal variation in mass:forearm residual by sex (females = left, males = right) and species. Raw data are shown as open circles with prediction from fitted GAM model as solid line; 95% confidence intervals by standard error are shown by shading in gray (Table S4). For female plots, pink shading corresponds to the species-specific gestation period; for male plots, blue shading corresponds to the winter dry season in Madagascar.

**Fig. 4.** Variation in juvenile forearm, tibia, and ear length with days since birth, corresponding to the date of first observed juvenile for each of three Madagascar species (Sep-29 for *P. rufus,* Nov-16 for *E. dupreanum,* Dec-12 for *R. madagascariensis*). Raw data are shown in grey (females = triangles, males= circles), with predictions fitted GAM model overlain as colored lines; 95% confidence intervals by standard error are shown by translucent shading (Table S5). The slope (derivative) of each fitted GAM at day 30 is identified in the bottom right; derivative results across the first year are summarized in Table S6.

**Appendices**