

Between-individual and within-individual variation in
the shape of eggs in tree swallows (*Tachycineta*
bicolor).

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Note on authors: Should we add any other authors here? I don't have a strong feeling either way. Some people did help with taking a few pictures, although mostly Tom and I took all the pictures. I guess in the light experiment year Alli and Jenny took pictures at CU4 & turkey hill so they might be the next most obvious people to add (and Alli hasn't been added on as many collaborative papers as others so might make sense if she wants to be on). Of course other people helped in these years with the general field work/monitoring etc. I'm not sure how to differentiate adding any other particular person though, without just adding everyone from those years if we go by general field work contributions (David, Jenn, Monique)... I guess my thought would be if we want to add anyone it is probably: Alli > Jenny > > David > > Cedric = Jenn = Monique in terms of general field contributions in the years here. Lots of students in those years too but I don't think any ever took pictures or really even talked with me about this project.

Bird eggs come in a wide variety of shapes and recent large-scale comparative studies have renewed interest in understanding the factors that generate and maintain this diversity. However, these advances largely overlook the fact that egg shape also varies dramatically within species: between populations, between individuals, and between eggs produced by the same individual. We measured the shape and size of 1382 eggs produced by 205 tree swallows (*Tachycineta bicolor*) in 259 nests with many females having eggs measured in two or three years. We found that intra-specific variation in tree swallow eggs encompassed the mean egg shape of 69% of species reported in a recent comparative study. Variation in shape and size was largely explained by individual identity, as the repeatability of egg size and shape was remarkably high both for eggs produced within a clutch and for clutches produced in successive years. All characteristics of mother and daughter eggs were positively correlated, although with a sample size of only 15 pairs these relationships were not significant. Female mass and structural size were correlated with the size of eggs produced, but not with their shape. Older females produced eggs that were larger, more asymmetrical, and less elliptical; this pattern was driven by a combination of both longitudinal changes in egg characteristics as females aged and by differential overwinter survival of females with particular egg characteristics. We found no evidence that any aspect of shape or size that we measured was related to nestling measurements or fate. Finally, we found that the patterns of covariation in aspects of egg size and shape between-individuals differed from that observed within-individuals. A complete understanding of avian egg shapes will need to incorporate variation at multiple scales and we discuss the interpretation of our results in light of recent large-scale comparative studies that focus only on mean species egg shapes.

Keywords: egg shape; egg size, between-individual variation, scale-dependence

INTRODUCTION

Birds vary enormously in the shape and size of the eggs they produce and explaining this remarkable variation has been a longstanding goal of ornithologists (e.g., Preston, 1969; Thompson, 1908). Recently, advances in the ease of making accurate measurements of egg shape and the ability to conduct large-scale comparative analyses have led to a renewed effort to understand what factors drive variation in egg shape between species (Duursma et al., 2018; Montgomerie et al., 2021; Nagy et al., 2019; Shatkovska et al., 2018; Stoddard et al., 2017). Despite the number of studies of egg shape, relatively few have examined variation in shape between populations, between individuals, or within individuals of the same species (but see Adamou et al., 2018; Bańbura et al., 2018).

Between species, there is general agreement that differences in life history demands and morphology contribute to egg shape variation, though the details of these patterns and their generality across different taxonomic scales is debated (Birkhead et al., 2019; Montgomerie et al., 2021; Stoddard et al., 2019, 2017). At the broadest level, much of the variation in egg shape can be explained by phylogenetic history, body mass, and egg size (Montgomerie et al., 2021; Stoddard et al., 2017). After accounting for these differences, flight ability explains additional variation in egg shape (Stoddard et al., 2017), possibly due to its association with

selection on body shape and mode of locomotion (Montgomerie et al., 2021). Montgomerie et al. (2021) argue that different aspects of shape are driven by different selection pressures, with elongation being largely associated with anatomical constraints while asymmetry is an adaptation to conditions during the incubation period. More targeted studies on narrower taxonomic scales have also identified other correlates of egg shape, including pelvis shape (Shatkovska et al., 2018), climate conditions (Duursma et al., 2018), incubation behavior and chick developmental mode (Birkhead et al., 2019), nest characteristics (Nagy et al., 2019), and egg composition (Deeming, 2018), among others.

While between species variation has received considerable recent research attention, there is also widespread recognition that egg shape varies within species (Adamou et al., 2018; Bańbura et al., 2018). The causes of this variation are less clear, both because few studies measure the shape of many eggs from known individuals over multiple breeding attempts and because it is often unclear how or if explanations for egg shape variation based on between-species life history differences should apply within species or between populations. For example, Stoddard et al. (2017) found that adaptations for flight are an important driver of inter-specific variation, yet this variable is unlikely to differ much between individuals within a population (though it might between populations of a species). Similarly, Birkhead et al. (2018) argue that common murre (*Uria aalge*) eggs are shaped to provide stability on sloping ledges, but this mechanism cannot explain the maintenance of variation between individuals selected for nesting on a similar substrate.

If there is an optimal egg shape for different species (Andersson, 1978; Barta and Székely, 1997) based on differences in life history traits (Montgomerie et al., 2021; e.g., Stoddard et al., 2017), then what mechanism maintains the substantial variation in egg shape within species where life history and ecology are relatively similar between individuals? Reconciling explanations for variation in egg shape between species with the apparently large variation in egg shape that exists within at least some species requires a careful consideration of the scale over which mechanisms operate. A recent debate has focused on the general usefulness of comparing egg shape across all species of birds versus within smaller taxonomic groups that have more similar life histories (Birkhead et al., 2019; Stoddard et al., 2019). Montgomerie et al (2021) show that relationships at the family level can differ in both strength and sign, such that broad comparisons may be subject to Simpson’s paradox because of the heterogeneity of patterns at the family level. Despite the recognition that scale is an important consideration for understanding inferences about egg shape, heterogeneity in egg shape among populations or individuals is not considered in recent comparative studies.

Because phenotypic variation is hierarchically organized (Westneat et al., 2015), the same principle of scale specific inference can be applied to understanding variation in egg shape between populations of a species, individuals within a population, or repeated production of eggs within an individual female (i.e., inferences derived from higher levels can always be subject to Simpson’s paradox or ecological fallacies). Recent comparative studies largely ignore the possibility of different drivers of egg shape variation at these levels by measuring only a small number of eggs per species and by conducting analyses on only a single average value for each species (e.g., Stoddard et al. 2017 and Montgomerie et al. 2021 measured an average of 35.1 and 5.6 eggs per species, respectively). However, there is no guarantee that

relationships observed at broader levels (e.g., family level or across all birds) will explain variation between populations or individuals of the same species. A complete understanding of egg shape variation will require a scale dependent framework (Agrawal, 2020) that makes predictions that explicitly consider the scale, based on an understanding of the mechanism(s) involved. Analyses at these different levels are complementary, rather than contradictory (Stoddard et al., 2019), but at present, very few studies provide even descriptive data on correlates of variation in egg shape within species or individuals (but see Adamou et al., 2018; Bañbura et al., 2018).

In contrast to egg shape, many studies have explored between and within individual variation in egg size or composition as it relates to maternal effects and nestling outcomes (reviewed in Christians, 2002; Groothuis et al., 2019). Christians (2002) comprehensively reviewed studies of individual variation in egg mass and found that the largest egg in a population is typically 1.5 to 2 times larger than the smallest egg. Surprisingly, this enormous variation in egg size tends to be both highly repeatable (generally above $r = 0.6$) and heritable (generally $h^2 > 0.5$, Christians, 2002). Some individual studies demonstrate that egg size changes with dietary supplementation (Hogstedt, 1981; Ramsay and Houston, 1997), ambient temperature (Nager and Van Noordwijk, 1992; Whittingham et al., 2007), and female age (Croxall et al., 1992; Hipfner et al., 1997), but the results of these studies are decidedly mixed and even in significant cases, the amount of variation in egg size explained is typically small (no more than 10-15%, Christians, 2002). Even female mass and size are inconsistently related to egg size variation in these studies (Christians, 2002), despite the fact that these are perhaps the most unambiguous predictors of egg size and shape between species (Montgomerie et al., 2021; Stoddard et al., 2017). While egg mass often predicts early life mass and growth of nestlings, it is less clear whether there are long term fitness consequences of initial egg mass (Christians, 2002; Potti, 1999). Given these patterns, it is possible that much of the variation in intra-specific egg shape might be explained by consistent differences in egg mass, but few studies present the data to address this question and the causes of differences in egg mass themselves remain unclear (Christians, 2002).

To begin to understand variation in egg shape at the between and within individual level, we studied variation in the shape and size of eggs produced by tree swallows (*Tachycineta bicolor*) breeding over three years. Tree swallows are a migratory cavity nesting species with a distribution spanning most of North America that produces clutches typically containing 4-7 eggs (Winkler et al., 2020a). While we aren't aware of prior studies directly measuring egg shape, a number of previous studies in different populations of tree swallows have documented substantial variation in egg mass (Ardia et al., 2006; Bitton et al., 2006; Wiggins, 1990) or yolk characteristics (Whittingham and Schwabl, 2002). These differences are sometimes attributed to variation in temperature, food availability, or body condition (Ardia et al., 2006; Pellerin et al., 2016; Whittingham et al., 2007), but also appear to be predominantly attributable to female identity (Wiggins, 1990).

We measured the shape of eggs of individual females over multiple years. We were initially interested in comparing the degree of variation in egg shape within tree swallows to the degree of variation described between species in comparative studies. If there is generally strong selection for an optimal egg shape matching life history traits, then we expected there

would be relatively little variation in shape within tree swallows, even if there was variation in egg size associated with investment (Ardia et al., 2006; Wiggins, 1990). Next, our multi-year study allowed us to assess individual repeatability and correlates of egg shape and size both within a clutch and across multiple years. We also took advantage of the fact that some female nestlings returned to breed as adults, which allowed us to compare the shape and size of eggs produced by mothers and their daughters. Finally, we asked whether there was any evidence that variation in egg shape or size was related to nestling morphology or fate. We interpret the correlations that we observed within tree swallows in light of the results of recent comparative studies.

METHODS

We studied tree swallows breeding near Ithaca, New York from April to July of 2019 to 2021. Tree swallows at this site have been studied continuously since 1984 and we followed well established protocols for general monitoring of breeding activity (Vitousek et al., 2018; Winkler et al., 2020b). Briefly, we checked all nest boxes every other day during the breeding season to record the timing of the onset of nest building activity, the initiation and completion of egg laying, the timing of hatching and fledging, and the fate of nestlings. This schedule also allowed us to compile accurate information on clutch size and the number of eggs that hatched at each nest, but we did not have information on the laying order of eggs within a nest.

For this study, we visited each nest during the first week of incubation and photographed eggs to measure size and shape (example photographs in Figure 1). During the years of study, many nests at these sites were included in a variety of experiments focused on manipulating environmental stressors (e.g., Injaian et al., 2021; Taff et al., 2021). However, all of these experimental manipulations began during mid-incubation, after eggs had been laid and pictures had been taken. We focus primarily on pre-treatment female and egg characteristics in this study, but we also include an analysis of nestling growth and fate from a subset of 55 nests that were not subject to any experimental manipulations (see below).

Adult females were captured on day 6-8 of incubation between 7 and 10 am. At the time of capture, we took a series of three small blood samples and a set of standard morphological measurements that included mass, flattened wing length, and the length of the head plus bill (Vitousek et al., 2018). Any females captured for the first time were banded with a USGS aluminum leg band. Depending on the experiment, females were captured again later in incubation or provisioning and males were captured during provisioning, but those captures occurred after experimental manipulations and the data are not included in this paper.

Nestlings were banded and measured on day 12 after hatching. At this time, we measured mass, wing length, head plus bill length, and took a small blood sample. Following banding, we avoided checking nests to prevent forced fledging until day 24. We did a final nest check to determine fledging fate for each nestling. Individuals not in the nest at this point were considered fledged and we recorded the band numbers from any dead nestlings recovered. Given our sampling strategy, we cannot link individual egg characteristics to individual

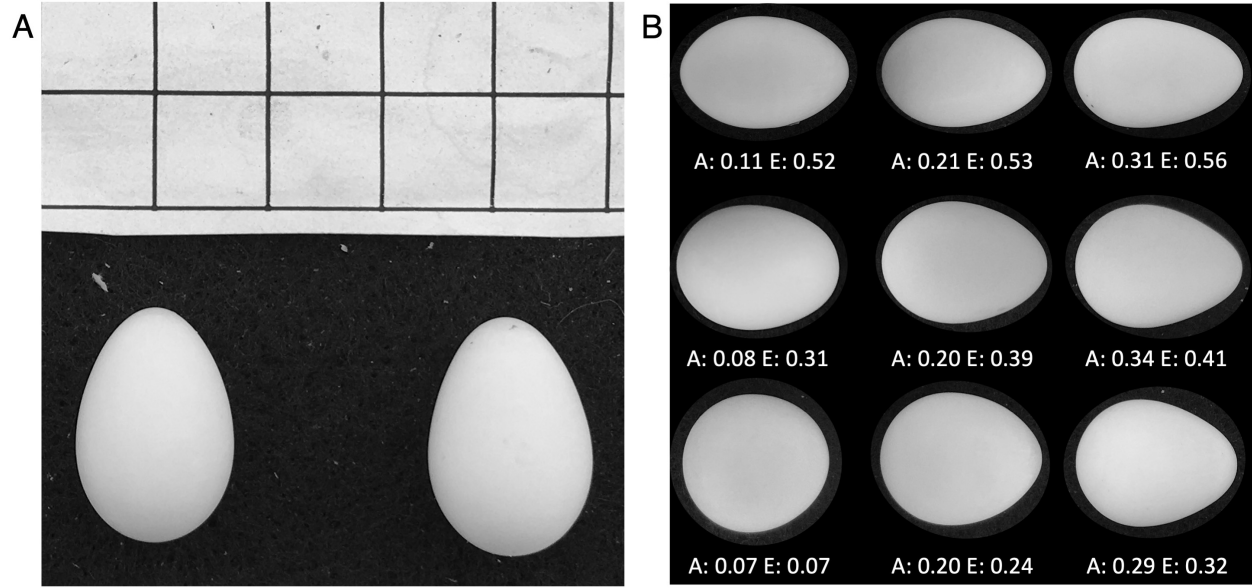


Figure 1: Panel A shows an example of a photograph of two eggs from the same clutch with an included scale grid for measurement. Panel B shows measurements of asymmetry and ellipticity produced from EggxTractor software with a selection of tree swallow eggs from this study. Numbers below each egg indicate the asymmetry and ellipticity. Note that eggs are not shown at scale but are rather shown at a similar size with shape maintained for illustration only.

nestling morphology or fates, but we can explore correlations between average egg and nestling characteristics at the nest level. While nestling characteristics and fates were recorded at every nest, we only included analyses of nests that were not subject to any experimental manipulations.

Egg measurements

Using the photographs described above, we characterized the size and shape of eggs from each nest. To measure shape, we followed the approach described by Stoddard et al. (2017), which results in measures of the degree of ellipticity (deviation from circularity) and asymmetry (difference in shape of the two egg poles) following Baker (2002). The measurements were performed using the **EggxTractor** software in MatLab, provided by Stoddard et al. (2017). While there are a variety of other methods to characterize egg shape that differ slightly, especially in their ability to capture highly pyriform eggs (e.g., Attard et al., 2018; Biggins et al., 2018), our approach performs well for the range of shapes covered by tree swallow eggs (Stoddard et al., 2017). To characterize the size of eggs, we used ImageJ (Schneider et al., 2012). We loaded photographs and set a scale using the scale grid that was included in every image. We then used the straight line segment tool to measure the maximum length from pole to pole (egg length) and the maximum girth (egg width) for each egg.

Data analysis

We initially examined the overall amount of intra-specific variation in egg shape from our study in comparison with the amount of inter-specific variation presented in Stoddard et al. (2017). Given the substantial variation in egg shape between individual tree swallows, we next asked whether aspects of egg shape or size were repeatable within a female. We used linear mixed models implemented in the `rptr` package in R (Stoffel et al., 2017) to assess repeatability in two ways. First, we calculated overall repeatability for each egg characteristic, considering each egg measured for every female. Because eggs laid in a nest are produced under similar conditions, they may be similar to each other due to those shared conditions in addition to being similar due to intrinsic properties of the individual female. Therefore, we also calculated repeatability using average egg characteristics for each year in a subset of 59 females that were observed in multiple years. Finally, after calculating repeatability, we used a subset of 15 mother-daughter pairs that both had eggs measured to ask whether a female’s egg characteristics predicted her daughter’s egg characteristics one or more years later.

We next asked whether individual characteristics of females explained variation in egg shape or size. For these questions, we fit a series of four linear mixed models with egg shape (asymmetry, ellipticity) or size (width, length) as the response variable and with female mass, wing length, head plus bill length, and age as predictors. We included age as a categorical predictor of ‘first-time breeders’ or ‘returning breeders.’ Female tree swallows have delayed plumage maturation and first time breeders can be identified by their brown plumage regardless of prior capture history (Winkler et al., 2020a). Each of these models also included a random effect for female identity and for nest identity (to account for multiple eggs measured from the same nest). We standardized all continuous predictors to a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1 so that effect sizes are directly comparable. Models were fit with the `lme4` package and model diagnostics were examined with the `DHARMA` package in R to ensure appropriate fits (Bates et al., 2015; Hartig, 2021).

After finding that female age was related to some egg characteristics, we asked whether this pattern might be best explained by a longitudinal change in egg characteristics as females age or by the selective return of females with particular egg characteristics. We used a subset of 29 females that were measured in multiple years and that were initially observed as first time breeders to ask whether egg characteristics changed longitudinally within females as they aged using paired t-tests for each egg characteristic. We used the full set of observations from 2019 and 2020 to ask whether any egg characteristics predicted the likelihood of returning to breed in the following year (we could not include 2021 females in this analysis because survival to the next year was not known). We compared the average egg characteristics in year 1 for birds that did or did not return in year 2 using t-tests. Returning the following year is not a perfect proxy for survival because adults may occasionally disperse or go undetected, but in this population previous work using the full historical database has shown that dispersal distance in adulthood is generally very small and detection of returning birds is high (Winkler et al., 2020b).

We analyzed within individual covariation in egg characteristics using a subset of 185 females

that had at least 5 eggs with complete measurements. Using this subset, we calculated the pairwise correlation and R^2 value for each pair of egg characteristics for each individual female and examined the distribution and average value of these correlations across all females. We qualitatively compared the pattern of covariation within females to that observed when using average egg characteristics between females.

To ask whether any aspects of egg characteristics were associated with nestling characteristics, we used a subset of 55 nests that were not part of any experiment. For these nests, we calculated the average egg shape and size and fit simple linear models with average nestling morphology (mass, wing, head plus bill) as response variables and with egg shape and size as predictors. For nestling fate, we fit a single model with the number of nestlings that fledged and the number that did not as the binomial response and with the four egg characteristics as predictors.

All analyses and figures were produced in R version 4.0.2 (R Core Team, 2020). The complete set of code and data required to reproduce all analyses and figures is available at https://github.com/cct663/tres_egg_shape and will be permanently archived on Zenodo upon acceptance.

RESULTS

In total, we measured the shape and size of 1382 eggs produced in 259 nests by 205 unique females. A total of 38 females had eggs measured in two years and 7 females had eggs measured in 3 years. Overall, there was enormous variation in the shape and size tree swallow eggs. A 90% ellipse drawn based on tree swallow eggs measured in this study included the species average egg shapes for 965 out of 1400 (69%) species reported in a recent comparative study (Figure 2; Stoddard et al. (2017)). When comparing average egg characteristics between females, the four measures of egg size and shape that we examined were moderately to strongly correlated with each other, though each characteristic varied at least somewhat independently of the others (Table 1). However, within females there was considerable heterogeneity in the strength and even direction of the correlation between different egg characteristics for most pairs of measurements (Figure 3 A). There was also little similarity between the covariation structure of egg characteristics between-females versus within-females, though the sign of the relationship was the same in all cases (Figure 3 B).

Table 1: Between-individual correlation for each pair of egg characteristics based on the average of each characteristic for each female. Pearson correlation is shown below the diagonal and P-value above the diagonal.

	Asymmetry	Ellipticity	Width	Length
Asymmetry		<0.001	0.74	<0.001
Ellipticity	0.46		<0.001	<0.001
Width	0.02	-0.45		0.004
Length	0.46	0.77	0.2	

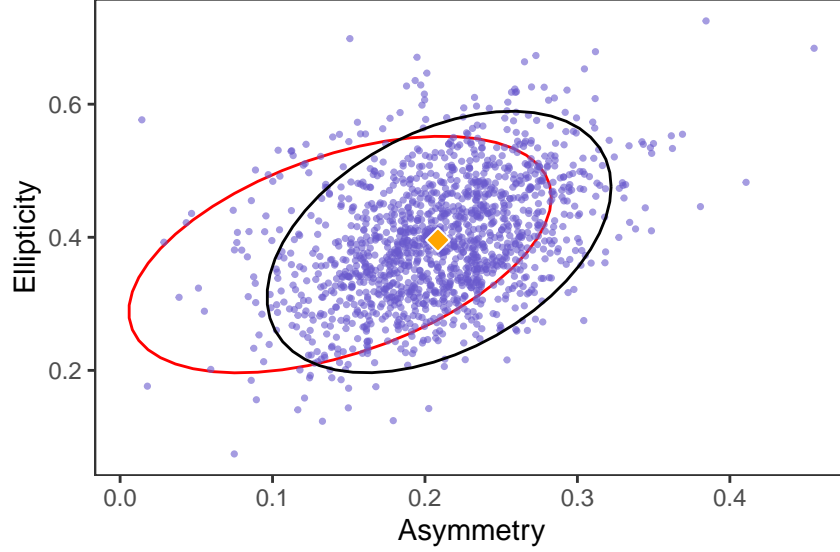


Figure 2: Morphospace of tree swallow egg shapes from 1435 measured eggs. Black ellipse indicates the region containing 90% of eggs. Diamond is the overall average egg shape for tree swallows from this study. The red ellipse contains 90% of the species average egg shapes from 1400 bird species included in Stoddard et al. 2017.

Individual repeatability in egg shape and size

Despite the enormous variation overall, individual females had remarkably high repeatability in the shape and size of eggs they produced. When considering all eggs within a clutch, both shape and size were highly repeatable (asymmetry $r = 0.46$, CI = 0.41 to 0.52, $P < 0.001$; ellipticity $r = 0.54$, CI = 0.49 to 0.59, $P < 0.001$; egg length $r = 0.62$, CI = 0.57 to 0.67, $P < 0.001$; egg width $r = 0.31$, CI = 0.25 to 0.37, $P < 0.001$). Repeatability was even higher when considering only the average egg size and shape in different years for females that returned to breed in multiple years (Figure 4 A-D; asymmetry $r = 0.61$, CI = 0.43 to 0.74, $P < 0.001$; ellipticity $r = 0.65$, CI = 0.47 to 0.78, $P < 0.001$; egg length $r = 0.71$, CI = 0.56 to 0.82, $P < 0.001$; egg width $r = 0.46$, CI = 0.24 to 0.64, $P < 0.001$).

When comparing the eggs of mothers and their daughters, there was a positive association between all egg characteristics (Pearson's correlation between mother and daughter for asymmetry $r = 0.31$; ellipticity $r = 0.28$; width $r = 0.25$; length $r = 0.24$). However, with a sample size of only 15 pairs, none of these relationships was significant (Pearson's correlation test for asymmetry: $t = 1.18$, $df = 13$, $P = 0.26$; ellipticity: $t = 1.06$, $df = 13$, $P = 0.31$; width: $t = 0.94$, $df = 13$, $P = 0.36$; length: $t = 0.89$, $df = 13$, $P = 0.39$).

Predictors of egg shape and size

In linear mixed models, no aspect of female morphology or age was related to egg asymmetry or ellipticity (Table 2). Females head plus bill length was positively correlated with egg width, while female mass was negatively correlated with egg width (Table 2; head plus bill

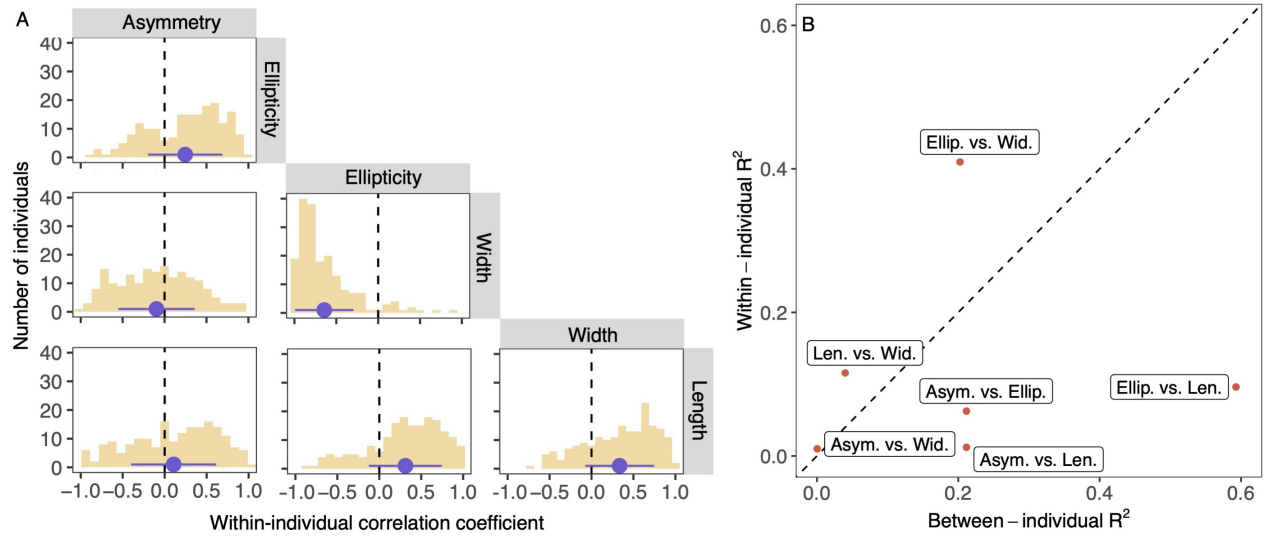


Figure 3: Panel A shows the distribution of Pearson correlation coefficients for within-individual correlations between each pair of egg characteristics. Dashed vertical line indicates no correlation. Blue circle is the mean and blue line denotes 1 SD above and below the mean. Panel B shows the R -squared values for the association between each pair of egg characteristics for between-individual (x-axis) and within-individual (y-axis) comparisons. Diagonal dashed line illustrates a perfect correspondence between the two axes.

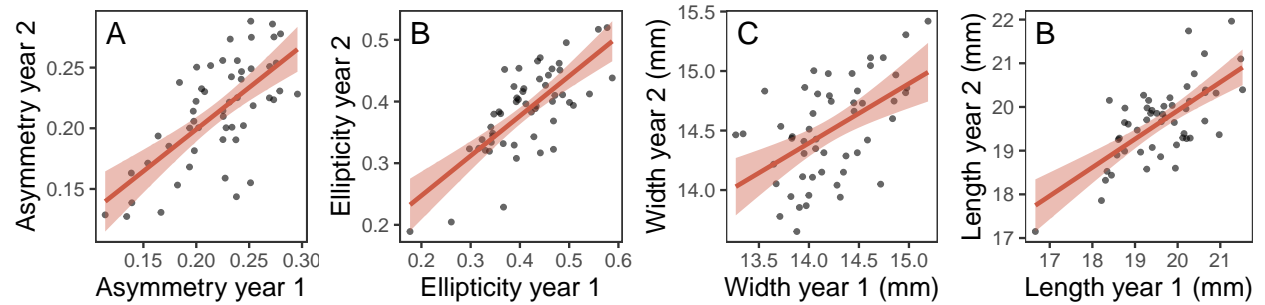


Figure 4: Average asymmetry (A), ellipticity (B), egg width (C), and egg length (D) for females that had egg shape measurements in consecutive years.

length $\beta = 0.08$, $P = 0.01$; mass $\beta = 0.04$, $P = 0.04$). No aspect of female morphology predicted egg length, but older females produced eggs that were both wider and longer (Table 2; female age for egg width $\beta = 0.24$, $P < 0.001$; female age for egg length $\beta = 0.24$, $P < 0.02$). Despite the fact that age was significantly related to egg width and length and that morphology was significantly related to egg width, the overall amount of variation explained by the fixed effects in these models was low (Table 2; egg width full model marginal $R^2 = 0.04$; egg length full model marginal $R^2 = 0.02$).

Table 2: Linear mixed models with female band and nest included as random effects ($n = 1353$ eggs, 254 nests, 202 females).

Response	Predictor	Estimate	CI	P
Asymmetry ^a	Intercept	0.21	0.20 - 0.21	<0.001
	Headbill	0.00	-0.01 - 0.00	0.129
	Wing	0.00	-0.00 - 0.01	0.709
	Mass	0.00	-0.00 - 0.01	0.670
	Age (ASY)	0.00	-0.01 - 0.01	0.785
Ellipticity ^b	Intercept	0.40	0.38 - 0.41	<0.001
	Headbill	0.00	-0.01 - 0.01	0.460
	Wing	-0.01	-0.02 - 0.00	0.097
	Mass	0.01	-0.00 - 0.02	0.141
	Age (ASY)	-0.01	-0.03 - 0.01	0.394
Width ^c	Intercept	14.07	13.98 - 14.16	<0.001
	Headbill	0.08	0.02 - 0.14	0.012
	Wing	0.02	-0.05 - 0.08	0.566
	Mass	-0.07	-0.13 - -0.00	0.037
	Age (ASY)	0.24	0.12 - 0.36	<0.001
Length ^d	Intercept	19.23	19.07 - 19.39	<0.001
	Headbill	0.09	-0.02 - 0.19	0.112
	Wing	-0.10	-0.21 - 0.01	0.088
	Mass	0.02	-0.09 - 0.13	0.776
	Age (ASY)	0.24	0.04 - 0.44	0.021

Note: ^a asymmetry: marginal $R^2 = 0.01$, conditional $R^2 = 0.47$ ^b ellipticity: marginal $R^2 = 0.01$, conditional $R^2 = 0.56$ ^c width: marginal $R^2 = 0.02$, conditional $R^2 = 0.64$ ^d length: marginal $R^2 = 0.04$, conditional $R^2 = 0.32$

Age related changes and overwinter return

The difference in egg size with female age could arise from longitudinal increases in egg size as females age or from selective survival of females that lay larger eggs. Among females that were measured as both first time breeders and in at least one subsequent year, asymmetry did not change longitudinally, but ellipticity decreased slightly (Figure 5 A-B; paired t-test

for asymmetry: $t = -0.34$, $df = 28$, $P = 0.73$; ellipticity: $t = -2.3$, $df = 28$, $P = 0.03$). Both the width and length of eggs increased significantly from a female's first to second breeding year (Figure 5 C-D; paired t-test for width: $t = 5.31$, $df = 28$, $P < 0.001$; length: $t = 2.25$, $df = 28$, $P = 0.03$).

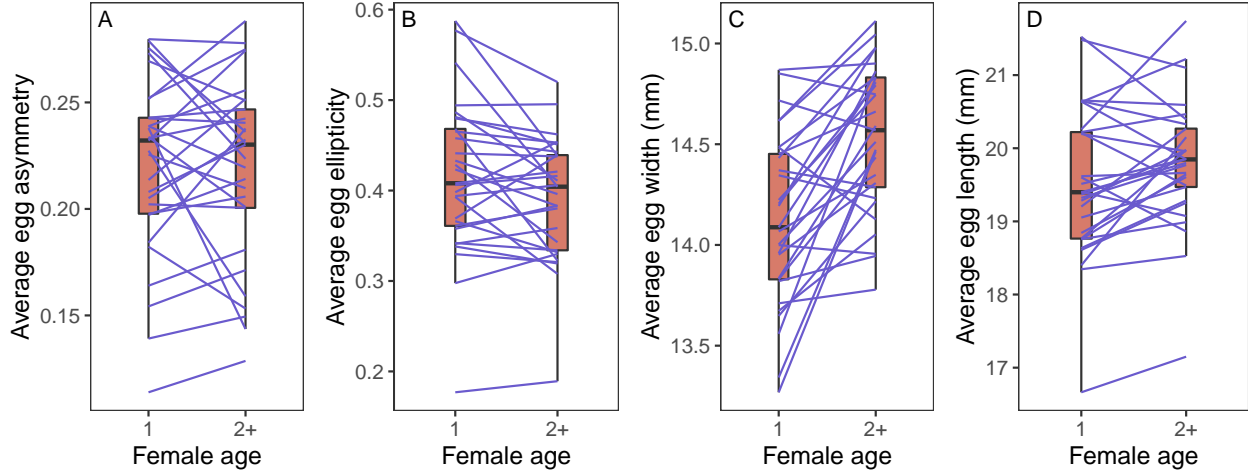


Figure 5: Change in average egg shape (A, B) and size (C, D) for females that were observed as one year olds and again in later breeding seasons. Boxes show the mean and interquartile range for each age group. Lines connect observations from the same individual.

When comparing the average egg characteristics in year 1 between females that did or did not return to our site in year 2, females with more asymmetric eggs were more likely to return the following year (Figure 6 A; Welch two sample t-test: $t = 2.67$, $df = 152$, $P = 0.008$). There was no difference in egg ellipticity between females that did or did not return the following year (Figure 6 B; t-test: $t = 1.01$, $df = 160$, $P = 0.31$). Females that laid wider and longer eggs in year 1 were more likely to return in year 2 (Figure 6 C-D; width: $t = 2.60$, $df = 161$, $P = 0.01$; length: $t = 2.90$, $t = 155$, $P = 0.004$).

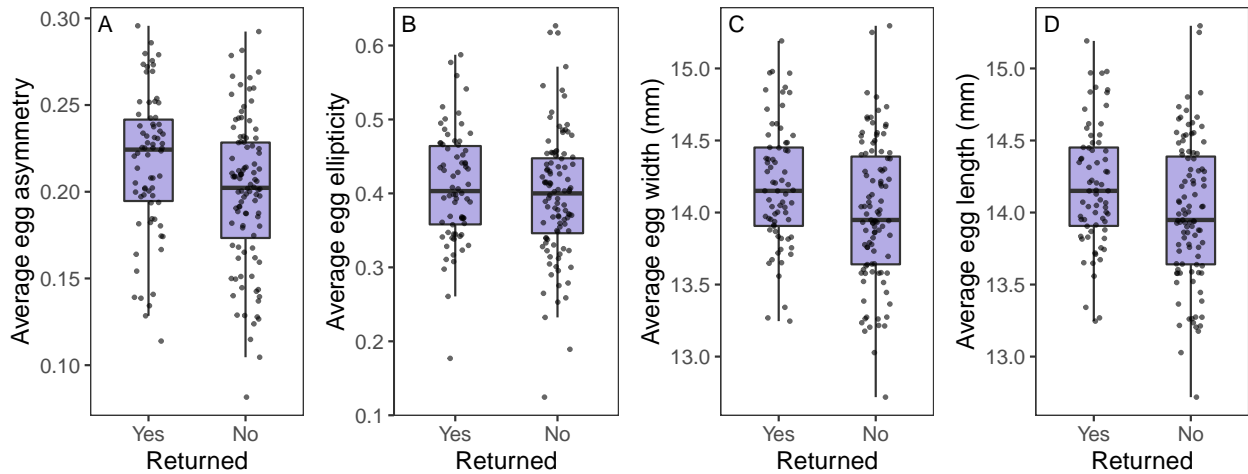


Figure 6: Comparison of average egg shape (A, B) and size (C, D) for females that did or did not return to breed in the following year. Boxes show the mean and interquartile range for each group. Points show average egg characteristics for each female.

Nestling characteristics and fate

There was no evidence that nestling mass or size on day 12 was related to any characteristics of egg shape or size at a nest level (linear model for nestling mass: asymmetry $\beta = 0.74$, $P = 0.13$, ellipticity $\beta = 1.99$, $P = 0.34$, width $\beta = 1.55$, $P = 0.23$, length $\beta = -2.41$, $P = 0.20$; model for head plus bill length: asymmetry $\beta = 0.18$, $P = 0.31$, ellipticity $\beta = 0.55$, $P = 0.47$, width $\beta = 0.39$, $P = 0.41$, length $\beta = -0.58$, $P = 0.40$; model for wing length: asymmetry $\beta = 1.19$, $P = 0.29$, ellipticity $\beta = -0.93$, $P = 0.85$, width $\beta = -0.91$, $P = 0.76$, length $\beta = 1.13$, $P = 0.79$). There was also no evidence that any average egg characteristic predicted the likelihood of survival to fledging among these nests (generalized linear model with binomial response: asymmetry $\beta = -0.22$, $P = 0.60$, ellipticity $\beta = 1.92$, $P = 0.14$, width $\beta = -1.55$, $P = 0.20$, length $\beta = 2.17$, $P = 0.21$).

DISCUSSION

Comparative studies should post the measurements of individual eggs rather than just the species means. Often unclear how measurements of eggs from the same clutch are accounted for or are they just counted as independent data points?

Where does variation come from? Biomechanics of their own physiology.

Heritability but no strong selection on shape: spandrel or by-product of selection on other characteristics with relaxed selection on egg shape itself. Is this common or are tres unique? Possibly because of cavities and no specialized need for particular characteristics they have more variation than other species? But most comparative work focuses only on species means not the amount of variation.

Suggestion of moderate parent offspring correlation and this is without considering any contribution of the fathers genes to egg shape. Not significant here but sample size is very small. Not aware of any studies that calculate heritability of egg shape or size (maybe in chickens?).

Also worth considering range wide variation, tres are widespread and experience drastically different thermal and resource environments plus have gradients of size and clutch size etc. Does that explain shape variation? Perhaps mixing among the population maintains large variation in egg shape and size?

Interesting that despite longitudinal increases in egg size, shape stays very similar for females or at least doesn't change in a consistent way

Maybe just about size and resources devoted to eggs. Some TRES work looking at egg mass.

Resolution of some of the disagreements about explanations at large taxonomic scales (stoddard vs. birkhead). In groups where a clear optimal egg shape exists (alcids?) might expect less variation between individuals because of strong selection for optimal.

Also interesting to think about which of the hypotheses explored to explain egg shape in comparative studies should or could apply at the within species level. Recent studies have explored diet, climate, incubation mode, skeletal size, among others. Often these are interpreted as in larger size = egg characteristic, but no reason that relationships need to be the same or even in the same direction within and between species and analyses much more common at comparative scale whereas within species studies have often focused only on egg mass or maternal effects associated with resource deposition (hormones, yolk)

What about species with larger ranges, more variable conditions, more variation in clutch size, etc. While these might result in varying optimum conditions, we found evidence for extremely high repeatability of egg shape, suggesting that there might be limited ability for female tree swallows in our population to plastically adjust their egg characteristics to match any of those gradients.

Possible that size trumps shape within a species like TRES - producing different size eggs seems tightly linked to shape and so shape variation might just be a by product of different investment. Then the question is why so much variation in investment that is consistent (not plastic) within individuals? While this is an interesting question, lots of research does address this point:

If no real difference in egg shape for optimality, could be used for individual recognition of eggs (no big egg dumping), find your own nest, no evidence that this is the case but not tested. probably not individually unique enough.

How to think about broad scale comparisons? For some species, average egg shape might be very important. For others, variation might be more important or egg shape is a more indirect consequence of selection on morphology or investment decisions. Suggests taking a multi-scale approach looking heirarchically at variation could be useful.

What about developmental effects? Early life conditions have profound effect on grown and size during adulthood and potentially could contribute as a by-product to difference in shape that have no/limited consequences during adulthood.

ETHICAL NOTE

All of the procedures described were approved by the Cornell University Institutional Animal Care & Use Board (IACUC protocol 2019-0023). Captures and sampling was approved by state and federal permits to MNV.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

CCT and TAR conceived the study and collected the field data. CCT measured the photographs, analyzed data, and drafted the manuscript. MNV contributed to funding for the project. All authors provided feedback and editing on the manuscript.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The complete set of code and data required to reproduce all analyses and figures is available at https://github.com/cct663/tres_egg_shape and will be permanently archived on Zenodo upon acceptance.

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