

Abstract

Despite its prevalence, scavenging is a difficult behaviour to observe in modern day carnivores and impossible to study directly in extinct species. Yet, there are certain intrinsic and environmental features of a species that push it towards a scavenging lifestyle. Chief among these are low-cost locomotion, high detection distances, effective carcass processing and a carrion-producing habitat. We use these four components to highlight the morphologies and environments that would have been conducive to scavenging over geological time by focussing on dominant vertebrate groups of the land, sea and air. The result is a document on the natural history of scavenging, the first to our knowledge. Our idea of a scale of scavenging can be applied to any species at any time to judge the importance of this behaviour in its diet.

1 Introduction

2 Historically, scavengers have not been viewed as the most charismatic of animals. This may
3 go some way to explaining the gap in our knowledge of the prevalence of this behaviour
4 (DeVault et al. 2003). Professor Sanborn Tenney writing in 1877 for *The American Naturalist*
5 had this to say about one well known group, "prominent among the mammalian scavengers
6 are the hyenas, the ugliest in their general appearance of all the flesh eaters." He contrasts
7 these with "nobler kinds" of carnivores such as lions and tigers (Tenney 1877). Even aside
8 from our own subjective biases, scavenging is a difficult behaviour to detect after the fact.
9 Without catching a carnivore in the act of killing we are left to infer how the prey was killed.
10 Some simple heuristics can inform us, for instance, in cases where the prey item was simply
11 too large to have been killed by the ostensible predator (Pobiner 2008). But clearly, a
12 scavenger doesn't only feed on animals too big for it to have hunted. The obvious lack of
13 direct behavioural data compounds the difficulty of discerning scavenging among extinct
14 forms. Indeed, a single species of dinosaur notwithstanding (Carbone et al. 2011), a synthesis
15 describing the natural history of scavengers is absent from the literature. Fortunately,
16 research on scavenging is on the rise (Koenig 2006). As a result, we are now beginning to
17 realise the extent of this behaviour such that, "in some ecosystems, vertebrates have been
18 documented to assimilate as much as 90% of the available carrion" (Beasley et al. 2015).
19 This has profound implications for the trophic ecology of these systems and particularly our
20 models of them. Even Tenney's noble big cats are now known to take in a significant portion
21 of carrion in their diet where some lion populations get over 50% of their meat from
22 carcasses (Jones et al. 2015). By recognising the difficulty in directly observing scavenging,
23 other methods have been turned to to discern the most suitable morphologies, physiologies
24 and environments for a scavenging lifestyle to prosper. Here we chart the natural history of
25 scavenging by assessing the potential for the behaviour in dominant vertebrate groups given

1 their ecology and functional traits.

2 **The Difficulty of Scavenging**

3 The chief hurdle to scavenging is finding a sufficient quantity of food, the occurrence of which
4 is difficult to predict in space and time. Thus, any animal existing as a scavenger must
5 minimise its locomotory costs and maximise its detection capabilities (Ruxton and Houston
6 2004b). Once found, the scavenger has to process the carrion and overcome the agents of
7 decay produced by the action of microorganisms on the carcass in order to take in a sufficient
8 amount of energy (Ruxton et al. 2014). The habitat must also be productive enough to
9 sustain a pool of animal biomass that will eventually produce carcasses. These facets are
10 essentially the key parameters found in the species functional response curves of optimal
11 foraging theory, namely encounter rate, handling time and prey availability (Jeschke et al.
12 2002). Here, we can draw on these aspects to envisage a scavenger moving through its
13 environment, searching for food and trying to process it efficiently as we explore the
14 prevalence of scavenging through time. Our aim is to produce a 'scale of scavenging'
15 whereupon we can place any species, past or present, and assess the importance of
16 scavenging in its diet.

17 **Encounter Rate**

18 **Locomotion**

19 As endotherms, mammals can sustain long bouts of energetically expensive activity (Bennett
20 and Ruben 1979). By contrast, modern reptiles are ectothermic, limiting their activity periods
21 (Bennett and Ruben 1979). This is exacerbated by the sprawling gait seen in many lizards
22 which results in the phenomenon known as Carrier's Constraint such that the animal can't

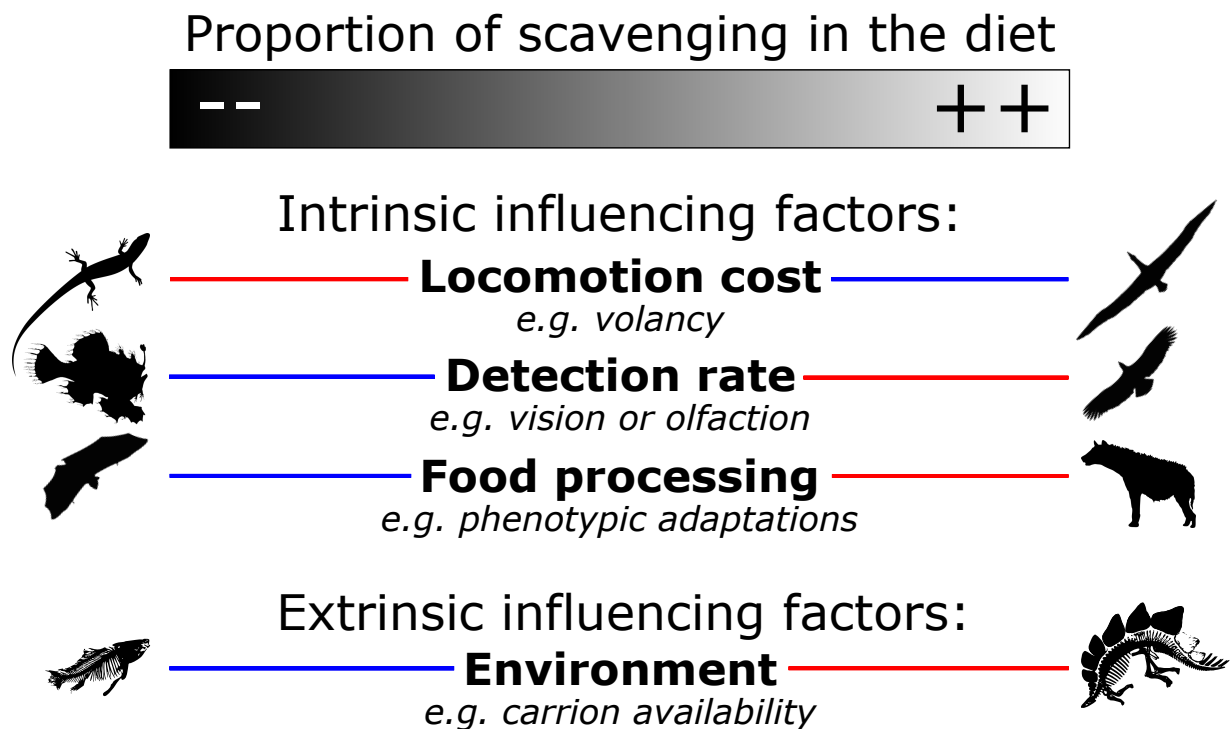


Figure 1: Factors influencing the proportion of scavenging in a vertebrates' diet. Blue lines indicates a reduction in the factor and red lines indicates an increase.

move and breathe at the same time because the lateral movements impedes its lungs (Carrier 1987). These constraints manifest in aspects such as maximum sustainable speed where an equivalent mammal enjoys a six to seven fold increase (Ruben 1995). To quantify this effect with a simple example we can turn to some allometric relationships relating sustainable travelling speed to body mass. In the case of mammals and reptiles these are $1.15 \times \text{body mass (kg)}^{0.12}$ and $0.23 \times \text{body mass (kg)}^{0.12}$ respectively (Ruxton and Houston 2004b). If we insert these into a foraging radius model $\frac{\text{duration} \times \text{speed}}{2} / 1000$ for a 12 hour foraging day which shows that while a 10 kg reptile can range 6.5 km, an equally sized mammal can range nearly 33 km (Enstipp et al. 2006). For a foraging scavenger, this ability translates into a greater area searched for food.

Today, terrestrial scavenging in the mammals is probably best known in an African context where hyenas, jackals and lions all take sizable proportions of carrion in their diet. In

1 the spotted hyena (*Crocuta crocuta*), striped hyena (*Hyaena hyaena*) and brown hyena
2 (*Hyaena brunnea*) it can be over 90% (Jones et al. 2015). And although no contemporary
3 terrestrial vertebrate exists as an obligate scavenger, most, if not all, are facultative to some
4 extent (Beasley et al. 2015). The particular reliance of hyenas on carrion means we can use
5 them as examples of efficient terrestrial scavengers to compare with other forms. In terms of
6 locomotion, they employ a characteristic "rocking horse gait" which allows them to cover
7 great distances efficiently, loping at 10 km/hr (Mills 1989, Jones et al. 2015). Such
8 long-distance travel is apparent in African wild dogs (*Lycaon pictus*) and many other canids
9 (Pennycuick 1995, Janis and Figueirido 2014). In contrast, big cats like leopards (*Panthera*
10 *pardus*) rely on ambush (Pennycuick 1995). This allows us to make a broad distinction
11 between the ambush strategies of cats and the pursuit/ pounce strategies of dogs, the latter
12 being more suited to scavenging (Janis and Figueirido 2014). We can (and have) use(d)
13 these insights to compare extant terrestrial species to their prehistoric forebears given the
14 dominance of mammalian carnivores since the Eocene (56-33.9 Million years ago; Mya) where
15 the order split into the Caniforma and Feliforma (Van Valkenburgh 1987). To take one
16 example, Anyonge (1996) found that *Nimravides*, a genus of sabretooth cat from the
17 Miocene (10.3 to 5.3 Mya) were likely to have been ambush predators which would argue
18 against them taking a lot of carrion.

19 Unsurprisingly, given their enduring appeal, the prevalence of scavenging has been
20 explored in the carnivorous, theropod dinosaurs. They were the dominant terrestrial
21 carnivores for most of the Mesozoic Era (252.17 - 66 Mya) and ranged from the chicken-sized
22 to the whale-sized, all of which were bipedal. They are quite alien to anything we know today
23 which restricts our ability to understand their ecology far more so than extinct mammals
24 (Weishampel et al. 2004). Of relevance, are the questions that still persist about their
25 metabolism, with the latest evidence suggesting they were mesothermic i.e. intermediate to
26 ecto- and endotherms (Grady et al. 2014). We do know that they walked with the erect gait

1 of mammals or birds rather than the sprawling gait of lizards and that they were most likely
2 facultative scavengers (Weishampel et al. 2004, DePalma et al. 2013). Taken together, this
3 implies dinosaurs had a foraging range that fell in between that of modern terrestrial
4 mammals and reptiles.

5 Of course, the importance of terrestrial tetrapods predates the evolution of the dinosaurs.
6 It is during the Permian (298.9 - 252.17 Mya) that we have the earliest evidence of
7 vertebrate scavenging where a temnospondyl amphibian fed on the carcass of *Varanops*, a
8 predatory synapsid of the time (Reisz and Tsuji 2006). And it is with the evolution of
9 endothermy in the therapsid-mammal lineage (Clarke and Pörtner 2010) that terrestrial
10 vertebrates would have gained the ability to range more widely, a vital component in seeking
11 out carrion.

12 Scavenging behaviour may have evolved on land as soon as the first terrestrial tetrapods
13 emerged. In fact, some of the earlier tetrapods tracks dating back to the early Middle
14 Devonian (393.3 - 387.7 Mya) were found in intertidal environments (Niedzwiedzki et al.
15 2010). These environments are isolated from marine systems twice a day leaving potential
16 carrion unexploited by marine vertebrates. Niedzwiedzki et al. (2010) suggest that these
17 environments “would thus have allowed marine ancestors of tetrapods gradually to acquire
18 terrestrial competence while accessing a new and essentially untouched resource.”

19 But it is in the air that we find scavengers *par excellence*. Certainly, scavenging should be
20 particularly attractive to avian predators compared to mammals. The latter can kill prey up
21 to the same body mass as themselves and sometimes an order of magnitude heavier (e.g.
22 socially hunting lions; Owen-Smith and Mills 2008). In contrast, birds of prey tend to kill
23 prey smaller than themselves (Slagsvold and A Sonerud 2007) because of the greater cost of
24 injury and need to carry off their food. Scavenging provides a means for birds to exploit
25 species that would otherwise be too big for them to kill.

26 Flight is a cheaper means of locomotion than either walking or running (Tucker 1975).

1 We know that many extant birds exist as facultative scavengers because storks, raptors and
2 corvids all take substantial quantities of carrion in their diet (Kendall 2013). The advantage
3 of flight can be extended further in larger species that engage in soaring instead of flapping
4 flight, which is even cheaper still for searching the environment (approximately twice the
5 basal metabolic rate; Hedenstrom 1993, Spivey et al. 2014). The benefits this confers are
6 clear from the information we have on the enormous foraging ranges of many vultures
7 (Spiegel et al. 2013) and seabirds (Thaxter et al. 2012). The difficulty inherent in observing
8 marine birds foraging at sea means our knowledge of their feeding habits is limited. But it
9 does seem that albatrosses, who can range many hundreds of kilometres, take a substantial
10 amount of carrion in their diet (Croxall and Prince 1994). This is typically in the form of
11 squid, which float on the surface, allowing the birds to readily pluck their remains out of the
12 water (Croxall and Prince 1994). In vultures, who are more easily observed on land, we have
13 the best known scavengers on Earth. These birds consist of two convergent groups, from the
14 old and the new world where they represent the only example of obligate vertebrate
15 scavengers to date.

16 The two families from which modern vultures arose, the Accipitridae and Cathartidae,
17 appear during the Palaeocene (66 - 56 Mya; Jetz et al. 2012, Jarvis et al. 2014). Yet, avian
18 flight is far older than this and originates in the Late Jurassic (163.5-145 Mya), coincident
19 with the fossils of *Archaeopteryx lithographica*, so many of the benefits of flight would have
20 been realised from that point on for carnivorous birds. Vertebrate flight is much older still,
21 where pterosaurs predate bird origins by a considerable margin in the Late Triassic (235-201.3
22 Mya). Scavenging in this diverse group has been hypothesised many times before (Witton and
23 Naish 2008). Certain clades of these animals could reach enormous sizes (e.g. Azhdarchids
24 with wingspans of 11 metres; Witton and Habib 2010) and, notably, appear to have engaged
25 in soaring flight (Witton and Habib 2010).

26 The only other vertebrate group capable of powered flight are the bats where scavenging

has not been recorded to our knowledge. However, some fossil from the Eocene (56 to 33.9 Mya) suggest the presence of possible scavenging bats. A large bat from the middle to late Eocene (56 to 33.9 Mya) with a robust cranio-mandibular morphology, *Necromatis* (“death-eater”), could have intake carrion as a significant proportion of its diet (Weithofer 1887, Hand et al. 2012). Although, this example might be peculiar to this exceptional fossil given most other remains represent animals less suited to the lifestyle (Eiting and Gunnell 2009).

Similar to aerial species, aquatic scavengers have a locomotory benefit because water is a medium that is conducive to low-cost movement (Tucker 1975). In fact, the cost of swimming is lower than either running or flying (Williams 1999). This has led some researchers to argue for the feasibility of an obligate scavenging fish (Ruxton and Houston 2004a, Ruxton and Bailey 2005). As in aerial and terrestrial environments we have evidence of facultative scavenging among extinct aquatic species. For example, shark teeth have been found in the remains of dinosaurs, mososaurs and 4-million-year-old mysticete whales (Schwimmer et al. 1997, Ehret et al. 2009). Extant White sharks (*Carcharodon carcharias*) too are known to feed on whale carcasses (Fallows et al. 2013).

We might expect then that by combining an aquatic environment and an endothermic metabolism that marine mammals would prosper as scavengers. Fossil pinnipeds and cetaceans from 60 Mya have transitional features indicative of their trajectory to fully aquatic species (Williams 1999). But despite their movement away from land their energetic savings were negligible because the *total* cost incurred by a swimming marine mammal is high (Williams 1999). Indeed, their total energetic cost is similar to an equivalent terrestrial mammal (Williams 1999). This underscores the trade offs between the benefits of endothermy in terms of activity periods and the costs of maintaining such an expensive system.

Detection

It would be pointless to have incredible ranging abilities and not have the sensory architecture to benefit from it. If we came at this from a position of complete ignorance we would predict scavengers to have well-developed senses and indeed, this is what we find. A simplification of terrestrial, vertebrate scavengers in sensory terms is one of them existing in a two-dimensional plane while foraging for carrion directly. They can detect carcasses at a range that is defined by the radius of their sensory organs. As a consequence, they have a much more restricted view of the landscape than do aerial foragers. Hyenas make up for this in their ability to smell a rotting carcass 4 km away and to hear the vocalisations of conspecifics at a distance of 10 km (Mills 1989). If we compare this to the energetics approach by Ruxton and Houston (2004b), they calculated a terrestrial scavenger needs to be able to detect carrion at 500 m in order to survive, which is clearly within the ability of hyenas. Moreover, the senses of many extant (and in all probability extinct) carnivores meet this required distance, making scavenging feasible for terrestrial species (Farlow 1994, Mech and Boitani 2010).

Species capable of flight have effectively added an extra spatial dimension, i.e. the vertical component, to their sensory environment over land animals. This allows them to look down on a landscape where they are unencumbered by obstacles that would obstruct the view of a terrestrial scavenger. Such an ability has obvious benefits in detecting carrion. Vultures are known to have impressive visual acuity, with one estimate indicating Lappet-faced Vultures (*Torgos tracheliotus*) are capable of detecting a 2 metre carcass over 10 km away (Spiegel et al. 2013). Eagles too are known to have highly developed visual abilities (Reymond 1985). It follows from this that the evolution of flight allowed aerial animals to detect far more carrion than their terrestrial counterparts (Lisney et al. 2013). We can contrast this ability with bats, whose visual acuity is famously poor. It also appears that echolocation would not lend itself to discovering immobile carrion. Their small size and poor terrestrial ability would also count against them at a carcass (Riskin et al. 2006).

1 Having a panoramic view means being able to gather a wealth of information from other
2 foragers, be they conspecifics or otherwise (Jackson et al. 2008). Again, returning to
3 vultures, the genus *Gyps* consists of highly social and colonially nesting species
4 (Fernández-Bellon et al. 2015). These behaviours allow them forage far more efficiently
5 because one bird can scrounge information on the location of food from another successful
6 forager (Kane et al. 2014).

7 Aside from sight, many birds have well developed olfactory systems (Lisney et al. 2013)
8 including three species of vultures within the new world family Cathartidae, (genus
9 *Cathartes*). Among them are the Turkey Vultures (*Cathartes aura*) which were able to locate
10 90% of baits set out in a tropical forest (Houston 1986). An attuned sense of smell is
11 obviously useful in detecting decaying carrion from the air.

12 In contrast to the air, aquatic species have to contend with the low-light environment of
13 water where visual detection distances are far lower (< 100 m) than they would be in the air.
14 As such, animals here detect resources through chemo- and mechanoreception more so than
15 through vision (Ruxton and Houston 2004a). This is particularly relevant to extant sharks
16 and aquatic snakes who are deemed as having the most suitable physiology for scavenging. A
17 hypothesis put forth by Sazima and Strüssmann (1990) argued that chemical gradients in
18 water would allow for a relatively easier detection of carrion by snakes. This gained some
19 support from DeVault and Krochmal (2002), who found a preponderance of aquatic snake
20 species in their review of this behaviour. Smell seems to be the primary means of carcass
21 detection in sharks as well. Fallows et al. (2013) found that wind speed determined the
22 number of sharks feeding at whale carcasses, indicating they were dependent on detecting the
23 odours from the decaying whales.

Handling Time

Since carrion is not dispatched directly, often the most easily accessible and choicest components of the carcass will be missing or, if present, will be fought over. Being able to extract nutrients from remnants gives a scavenger a great advantage. Thus, the bone crushing ability of hyenas and others reveals another useful scavenger trait. Osteophagy is known across a range of terrestrial carnivores and given some fat-rich mammalian bones have an energy density (6.7 kJ/g) comparable with that of muscle tissue, it makes skeletal remains an enticing resource (Brown 1989). This ability reached its zenith among hyenas with the evolution of the 110 kg *Pachycrocuta brevirostris* during the Pliocene (3.6 - 2.58 Mya; Palmqvist et al. 2011). Indeed, their extinction has been blamed on the decline of sabretooth cats (Machairodontinae), the unique skull morphology of the latter meant they would leave a large amount of food on a carcass for would-be scavengers (Palmqvist et al. 2011). Earlier in the evolution of mammals, the bone-crushing dogs that evolved during the Oligocene (subfamily Borophaginae; 33.9 - 23.03 Mya) have been compared to hyenas in terms of their feeding ecology as well (Van Valkenburgh et al. 2003, Martín-Serra et al. 2016).

Interestingly, such comparisons have given insight into the feeding ecology of early hominins who, for instance, had the ability to craft tools for breaking open bones (Blasco et al. 2014). The question of where our ancestors placed on the hunter-scavenger axis during the Plio-Pleistocene has been a matter of debate for years (Domínguez-Rodrigo 2002). A recent study investigating potential scavenging opportunities for hominins in Kenya found that, even when discounting bone material, there is a substantial amount of scavengeable meat left on predated remains; sufficient to sustain the requirements of an adult male *Homo erectus* (Pobiner 2015). In some historical hominin-inhabited areas there were a greater number of felids than hyenids. Again, this is significant because hyenas are likely to have left far less flesh on a carcass than a felid such as a sabretooth enabling contemporaneous

1 hominins to benefit (Pobiner 2015). The intelligence, resultant tool-use and cooperative
2 nature of hominins meant they could likely adapt to take on more or less carrion depending
3 on their environment (Moleón et al. 2014).

4 In Mesozoic systems some extremely large theropod dinosaurs had a morphology
5 indicative of an ability to process bone e.g. the robust skull and dentition of *T. rex* (Hone
6 and Rauhut 2010). There is direct evidence that *T. rex* did this in the form of distinctive
7 wear marks on its tooth apices (Farlow and Brinkman 1994, Schubert and Ungar 2005) and
8 the presence of bone fragments in its coprolites (Chin et al. 1998). The animal also had an
9 enormous bite force, with one estimate putting it at 57000 Newtons (Bates and Falkingham
10 2012). This is noted as being powerful enough to break open skeletal material (Rayfield et al.
11 2001).

12 Further, much work has focused on the existence of scavenging in dinosaurs by using
13 simple energetics approaches that typically focused on a single species namely *Tyrannosaurus*
14 *rex* (Ruxton and Houston 2003, Carbone et al. 2011) but a recent modelling study
15 investigated the likely prevalence of scavenging across a range of body sizes. In it the authors
16 demonstrated that species of intermediate body masses (approximately 500 kg) would have
17 gained the most benefit from scavenging. This was the result of gut capacity limitations and
18 the effects of competition at the carcass. At the larger extreme this owes to the fact that gut
19 capacity doesn't scale isometrically with body mass so the benefits of greater mass level off;
20 there's only so much food an individual can consume at a single sitting (Calder 1996). For
21 the smaller species, larger competitors would have prevented their access to carrion.

22 In addition to reducing locomotory costs we would expect adaptations that reduce
23 energetic costs of maintenance to be selected for in scavengers because it would maximise
24 the benefit derived from such a sporadic food source. Extant reptiles possess an advantage
25 here, in that over the course of a year their food requirements can be 30 times lower than an
26 endotherm of equal size (Nagy 2005). DeVault and Krochmal (2002) suggest this is an

avenue for scavenging in snakes because they “exhibit exceedingly low maintenance metabolisms, and most can survive on a few scant feedings per year. It is, therefore, possible for snakes to rely largely on infrequent, less energy-rich meals.” In the same review the authors found occurrences of scavenging spread across five families of snakes and stated that this behaviour is “far more common than currently acknowledged.”(DeVault and Krochmal 2002). The same reasoning can be applied to crocodiles and their allies (Forrest 2003). A sit and wait strategy is viable for an ectotherm. This low existence cost is also realised in many sharks who have coupled low locomotory costs with an ectothermic metabolism. The upshot is that 30 kg of blubber can sustain a White shark for over six weeks (Carey et al. 1982).

Large body size confers substantial dominance and starvation-resistance benefits (Ruxton and Houston 2004b). Thus, we would expect scavengers to have this trait selected for even in the case of weight-constrained fliers. Wandering Albatrosses (*Diomedea exulans*), Cinereous Vultures (*Aegypius monachus*) and condors (*Vultur gryphus*, *Gymnogyps californianus*) all have body masses that can exceed 10 kg and represent some of the heaviest bird species capable of flight (Weimerskirch 1992, Ferguson-Lees and Christie 2001, Donazar et al. 2002).

And as we have noted the Azhdarchid pterosaurs were far bigger again, with estimated body masses of over 200 kg (Witton and Habib 2010). Although Witton and Naish (2008) argued that neck inflexibility and straight, rather than hooked jaw morphology points against pterosaurs existing as *obligate* scavengers, Azhdarchid terrestrial proficiency indicates they would have been comfortable foraging on the ground. Indeed, extant Marabou Storks (*Leptoptilos crumenifer*) have a comparable morphology and are noted facultative scavengers (Monadjem et al. 2012) so it is reasonable to believe that certain pterosaurs behaved similarly.

The competitive ability of even the largest bird is radically diminished in their interactions with mammalian competitors however, and as such they tend to consume carrion rapidly.

1 Houston (1974) observed a group of *Gyps* vultures consuming all of the soft tissue from a 50
2 kg Grant's gazelle (*Nanger granti*) in eight minutes. Their serrated tongues and hooked bills
3 enabling them to achieve this feat (Houston and Cooper 1975). Outside of raptors such as
4 vultures, the specialised beaks of many modern bird lineages hinders their ability to eat meat
5 which is in contrast to the first lineages that did not have this feature (Martyniuk 2012) . As
6 Martyniuk (2012) notes these early birds would thus have been predominantly carnivorous,
7 which implies that scavenging would have been a live opportunity cf. their descendants.

8 Although the observation of Shivik (2006) that "evolutionary pressures favor detection
9 maximizers relative to toxification minimizers in competitive interactions for carcasses."
10 appears sound, the fact remains that overcoming microorganism toxins is still a beneficial
11 adaptation to any scavenger. Avian scavengers have evolved incredibly acidic stomachs that
12 allow them to consume and process putrefied flesh with no ill effects (Houston and Cooper
13 1975, Roggenbuck et al. 2014). This adaptation is not restricted to vultures though, Grémillet
14 et al. (2012) showed wandering albatrosses (*Diomedea exulans*; so-called 'vultures of the
15 seas') had an average pH of 1.5, which enables them to consume fisheries discards and squid
16 carcasses. There is also evidence of selection for 'toxification minimizers' beyond birds among
17 the ectotherms. From our earlier arguments we know that ectotherms are limited in their
18 ability to find carrion as quickly as endotherms. This implies later arrivers would benefit
19 especially from well-developed detoxifying apparatus. Shivik (2006) suggests that "specialized
20 oral structures in snakes may have evolved under pressures associated with scavenging."
21 Moreover, some authorities have charted an evolutionary course from basal fossorial snakes to
22 modern terrestrial species by way of an obligate scavenger intermediate (Bauchot 2006).

23 It is in the ability to process carrion that bats suffer. Big bats (which are better suited for
24 scavenging, following our previous argument) are typically frugivores and therefore lack the
25 adaptations for digesting meat. While carnivorous bats are mainly found in the microbats
26 which are insectivorous (Aguirre et al. 2003).

Prey Availability

Both the biotic and abiotic environment a would-be scavenger finds itself in can influence to degree to which it can depend on carrion. Ruxton and Houston (2004b) suggest a system similar to the Serengeti in productivity could have supported a mammalian or reptilian terrestrial scavenger (Ruxton and Houston 2004b). Indeed, in systems that were dominated by large ectothermic or mesothermic vertebrates, the same primary productivity would have supported a greater biomass (McNab 2009). The upshot of this is there was a higher biomass of herbivores dying and offering scavenging opportunities. Predators were large-bodied too compared to extant mammalian predators (McNab 2009), and so, especially if they were ectothermic, could last longer between meals, rendering scavenging a more attractive behaviour relative to predation. Osteophagy may have been even more viable during the Mesozoic era because of this skewed body mass distribution of herbivores towards larger sizes (O’Gorman and Hone 2012). When we couple this with the fact that skeletal mass scales greater than linearly with body mass (Prange et al. 1979) there would have been a lot of bone material to consume in the environment provided an animal had the biology to process it (Chure and Fiorillo 1997). As we discussed earlier, this ability is often extremely beneficial to a scavenger.

Vultures and eagles tend to soar using thermals and if these air pockets don’t form, say on a cloudy day, the bird is grounded (Mundy et al. 1992). In many habitats (e.g. the arctic) it is simply not possible for sufficiently powerful thermals to form and as a consequence large-bodied vultures cannot exist. The upshot of this is that terrestrial carnivores like bears and wolves take more carrion (DeVault et al. 2003). Certainly, a major difficulty for terrestrial scavengers is competition with vultures. Nocturnal behaviour in the hyaenidae in general has been put forth as an adaptation to reduce competition with these exclusively diurnal birds (Gittleman 2013). If we apply this line of reasoning over evolutionary time-scales, the absence

1 of flying vertebrates in the Palaeozoic may have permitted terrestrial forms to take in a
2 higher proportion of carrion in their diet.

3 Staying in the aquatic setting, the phenomenon of occasional bounties of carrion in the
4 form of whale falls has led some researchers to investigate if a scavenger could survive by
5 seeking out these remains exclusively. Ruxton and Bailey (2005) argued that although this is
6 energetically feasible it's ecologically unlikely. Any animal that could find such whale
7 carcasses is unlikely to have ignored other types of carrion. Although no aquatic species have
8 ever exceeded the size of whales, some enormous animals have evolved in this environment
9 before the evolution of whales, including *Leedsichthys*, a bony fish from the Middle Jurassic
10 (174.1-163.5 Mya), that weighed in excess of 20 tonnes. Thus, the energetic feasibility of a
11 marine scavenger that specialises on large carcasses has a long history. One point of interest
12 is that of the whaling industry, which provided a bonanza of floating carcasses especially
13 during the 20th century (Whitehead and Reeves 2005). This meant Killer Whales (*Orcinus*
14 *orca*) could switch from hunting to scavenging, a switch made that much easier by the noise
15 of the whaling vessels that would effectively ring the "dinner-bells" (Whitehead and Reeves
16 2005). Early whales such as *Basilosaurus* seem to fit into the same niche as Killer Whales
17 and we have some evidence for scavenging in this group as well (Fahlke 2012).

18 Perhaps the greatest environmental driver of scavenging tendency is that of temperature.
19 The geological record shows the Earth has undergone radical fluctuations in temperature over
20 time. This will have had a significant bearing on the availability and persistence of carrion.
21 To illustrate the point, a 10°C increase in ambient temperature can double carcass
22 decomposition rates (Parmenter and MacMahon 2009) and geological evidence indicates that
23 the Mesozoic Earth was at least 6 °C warmer than now (Sellwood and Valdes 2006). In
24 terms of specific habitats, it has been shown that decomposition is greater in warm and moist
25 areas versus more xeric ones (Beasley et al. 2015). Moreover, oceanic productivity and
26 habitat structure are all impacted by climactic conditions. The impacts these can have on

1 scavengers have been empirically supported e.g. Beasley et al. (2015) who point to a series
2 of studies showing how microbes and invertebrates benefit at higher temperatures to the
3 detriment of vertebrate scavengers such that “above 20°C vertebrates were able to detect
4 and consume only 19% of small-mammal carcasses, whereas at temperatures below 18°C,
5 vertebrates consumed 49% of carcasses”.

6 **Conclusion**

7 As is often the case in science, the present provides the key to the past. The animals of
8 today, while often different (sometimes radically so) to their ancestors, can be used to make
9 informed comparisons to extinct species. We have used this technique to give insight into the
10 drivers of scavenging across terrestrial vertebrates through time. In common with any other
11 forager be they grazer, browser or predator, scavengers past and present have had to balance
12 their energetic costs with the gains of food. The main factors we considered namely,
13 encounter rate, handling time and prey availability can be used to create a scale of
14 scavenging whereupon any species can be placed in order to establish the importance of
15 carrion in it diet. We hope this approach will be useful in the effort to explore this most
16 understudied of feeding ecologies.

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