

Family size dynamics in wintering geese

Introduction

Families are important components of animal groups. Living in groups entails both costs and benefits for individuals. Group members benefit from more social interactions, and from the increased sensory and physical capabilities of the group (Krause and Ruxton 2002). For example, geese in larger flocks spend less time on the lookout for predators and have more time to feed (Roberts 1996). Among the costs of group living is the increased competition for limited resources in larger groups (Krause and Ruxton 2002). Living in families offers all the benefits of groups, while costs are shared with relatives. Animals may lose some direct fitness in family groups, but this is offset by the inclusive fitness gained from related group members (Hamilton 1964, Rodman 1981). Thus animal societies composed of one or more families are common across taxa: from eusocial insects (Crozier and Pamilo 1996) to large herbivores (Archie et al. 2006) and cooperative carnivores (Van Horn et al. 2004).

Waterfowl such as geese also live in groups composed of families. This is most apparent in winter, when families gather to form migratory flocks (Elder and Elder 1949). Maintaining family bonds within flocks confers benefits since families are dominant over pairs and individuals, and family dominance rank increases with the number of members, for example in Canada geese *Branta canadensis* (Hanson 1953), snow geese *Anser caerulescens* (Gregoire and Ankney 1990), and barnacle geese *B. leucopsis* (Loonen et al. 1999). This allows larger families to occupy optimal foraging positions in wintering flocks at lesser cost, and win access to better resources (Black et al. 1992). Both parents and offspring benefit from family bonds maintained across seasons. Juveniles gain access to more uninterrupted feeding in winter (Black and Owen 1989), while parents benefit in summer from the presence of nest-attending sub-adults (Fox and Stroud 1988). Barnacle geese that are associated with their young through a winter, for example, are more likely to return with a brood the next year (Black and Owen 1989).

The development of family bonds within a winter is, however, not fully understood, and appears to be variable. Small species, such as Ross' geese *A. rossii* show weak family bonds in winter, perhaps because these confer no dominance benefit against much larger snow geese with which they form mixed flocks (Jónsson and Afton 2008). Similarly, cackling geese *B. hutchinsii* show weak pair and family associations in winter likely because they graze in large, dense flocks with high levels of disturbance. As cackling geese move to areas

with less disturbance prior to spring migration, pair bonds strengthen (Johnson and Raveling 1988). In contrast, larger taxa such as giant Canada geese *B. canadensis maxima* and Greenland white-fronted geese *A. albifrons flavirostris* show strong, extended family bonds (Warren et al. 1993). In general, small, grazing species tend to dissolve families in winter (Johnson and Raveling 1988), while large species that need to teach juveniles to locate and handle high quality foods tend to maintain them (Warren et al. 1993, Kruckenberg (2005)).

Preferences for patchily distributed energy-rich foods can make geese faithful to wintering sites (Wilson et al. 1991). How accompanying juveniles influence where families winter is not well understood. For instance, juvenile dark-bellied brent geese *Branta b. bernicla* undertaking the autumn migration with parents affect their flight speed, so some effect is expected (Green and Alerstam 2000). Like other birds, geese can be differentially migratory with different population classes occupying different wintering areas (Cristol et al. 1999). For example, the white and blue morphs of snow geese show longitudinal separation during migration (Cooke et al. 1975). Further, more juveniles of Pacific black brent geese *B. b. nigricans* winter closer to the breeding grounds (Schamber et al. 2007). However, the question of what space-use decisions adult geese make when leading related juveniles on migration has not been well explored.

Though the maintenance of family bonds in geese is beneficial, separation of juveniles from parents is the norm among geese. Juveniles leave the family as spring approaches (Prevett and MacInnes 1980, Johnson and Raveling 1988, Black and Owen 1989). In the smaller *Branta* geese, parents become increasingly aggressive towards young and intentionally chase them off (Black and Owen 1989, Poisbleau et al. 2008). This is also reported in larger greylag geese *A. anser* (Scheiber et al. 2013). However, family splits in winter are not well studied. In wintering snow geese, family separation is held to be caused by a lack of coordination between members during chaotic take-offs in large flocks, and is thus seen as accidental (Prevett and MacInnes 1980). Separated birds attempt to locate their families, and similar behaviour is observed in Canada geese (Elder and Elder 1949). Investigating the role of flight events in family size dynamics requires accurate, fine-scale knowledge of individual positions, and obtaining such data for whole families of highly mobile species has historically presented challenges.

Observational studies of goose family sizes must account for summer conditions on the breeding grounds. Rodent abundance cycles - primarily of lemmings *Lemmus spp.* and *Di-*

crotonyx spp. - have a significant impact on the breeding success of Arctic birds. Lemmings have 3 - 4 year cycles of abundance, with 'peak' years of high density followed by 'crash' years of scarcity. Arctic predators preferentially target lemmings and shift to bird eggs and young as alternative prey when lemmings are scarce (Angelstam et al. 1984). This effect is most pronounced when a lemming peak is followed by a crash: predation pressure on geese increases as predators multiply in the peak year and then target birds in the crash year (Dhondt 1987). This causes marked decreases in the proportion of first winter juveniles in both waders *Charadrii* and geese wintering in Europe (Summers and Underhill 1987). However, the mechanism by which predation pressure at the family level translates into population level effects is not well understood.

Greater white-fronted geese *Anser albifrons albifrons*, hereafter whitefronts, are among the most populous geese wintering in continental western Europe (Fox and Madsen 2017), and offer an interesting opportunity to investigate the wintertime dynamics of goose families. Accounts suggest that in the Baltic-North Sea flyway population of whitefronts (Philippona 1972), larger families winter farther west than smaller ones. Further, these families are observed in smaller flocks, but this may be an artefact of smaller flocks observed farther west. Family bonds reportedly weaken within winters, contrary to the trend expected for large geese (Warren et al. 1993, Kruckenberg (2005)). We draw on long-term field observations and high frequency GPS tracks of whole families of whitefronts from their wintering grounds in the Netherlands and northern Germany (Mooij 1991) to test the hypotheses that: 1. Larger families winter to the west, further from the breeding grounds 2. Larger families winter in smaller flocks, 3. Families decrease in size over the winter, 4 Family size in winter is dependent on summer predation pressure, and 5 Family separation is predicted by the number, frequency, and time since take-off.

Methods

Within the wintering area of whitefronts (Mooij 1991, Madsen and Cracknell 1999, Fox et al. 2010), we collected the following classes of data from between the period autumn 2000 - spring 2017: (A) Flock counts in which observers censused flocks of whitefronts, (B) Family counts in which observers counted the sizes of successful families with at least one first winter juvenile (hereafter, juvenile) within a subset of the flocks above, and (C) Observations of marked geese in pairs or with juveniles. These data were filtered to exclude records outside the spatial and temporal limits of our study.

We also collected (D) positions of goose families fitted with GPS loggers (2013, 2014: e-obs GmbH, Grünwald, Germany, & 2016: madebytheo, Amsterdam, Netherlands). 2016 loggers collected position data from take-off events. For all families, we identified days on which splits occurred. We counted

the number of movements over 1km every day, and defined these as flights. For 2016 families, we identified the half-hour when they split, and used the available take-off data to find the time since the last take-off at each half-hour.

We also collected records of flock flight intensity from Trek-tellen (trektellen.org) sites across the Netherlands. We excluded flight activity records from sites close to night roosts, and records which did not match the direction of migration appropriate to the season. We used these data to find the beginning and end of the goose winter, which we took to begin with the first mass arrival of geese in autumn, and to end with the last mass departure in spring.

Following previous studies (Blomqvist et al. 2002, Jongejans et al. 2015, Nolet et al. (2013)) we estimated an index of summer predation for the breeding grounds of this population from rodent abundance data available online (arcticbirds.net). We calculated a pooled mean of 0 - 2 (low - high) lemming indices from sites in the region, taking care to include a value of 0 in each year to reflect absence of a lemming cycle in the core breeding area on Kolguyev. The index takes into account the change in lemming abundance, with higher values when lemming abundance had decreased from the previous year reflecting the increased predation pressure on Arctic birds from abundant predators switching to alternative prey.

We first tested whether (1) the number of juveniles, which determines family size, explained the distance from the breeding grounds at which families were recorded. Within flocks, we tested whether (2.a) family sizes, and (2.b) the total number of families were explained by the number of birds in the flock, hereafter flock size, the number of days since the arrival of geese in autumn, and the level of summer predation. To add context, we searched for (3) an effect on flock size of distance from the breeding grounds, the number of days since arrival, and summer predation, and examined whether (4) the proportion of juveniles in flocks was explained by the flock size, distance from the breeding grounds, number of days since arrival, and summer predation.

Further, we examined whether (5.a) the daily split probability was predicted by the days since arrival, the number of flights, the cumulative number of flights, the daily distance travelled, the cumulative distance travelled, and the family size. For the 2016 families where we had true flight data, we examined (5.b) the half-hourly split probability in relation to the time since the last take-off and the distance travelled in the previous half hour. All analyses were performed in the R environment (R Core Team 2017).

We used *lme4* (Bates et al. 2015) generalised linear mixed models (GLMMs) to test 1, 2.a, 3, 5.a and 5.b, where we expected linear relationships. In cases 2.b and 4, we used *mgcv* (Wood 2013) generalised additive mixed models (GAMMs) to include smooth functions of the flocksize (2.b) and the number of days since winter (4, 5.b) as predictors. We assessed the importance of each predictor using Type II Wald χ^2 tests.

Results

After filtering census data (A, B, C) (mapped in Fig.1), we obtained 7,149 flock counts from 75 observers at 123 geocoded sites. Of these, 1,884 flocks counted by 17 observers at 64 sites yielded 51,037 successful families. A further 10,635 marked geese were observed at 8,416 sites. We could not obtain data on the habitat type, flock size, and observer identity for these records.

Half-hourly positions from 64 individual geese (13 adult pairs, 38 juveniles) in 13 families were recorded in the winters of 2013 ($n = 3$), 2014 ($n = 4$), and 2016 ($n = 6$). 2016 families carried accelerometer coupled position loggers which recorded 0.5 Hz flight bursts. On average, families were tracked for 78 days (range: 34 - 135), travelling 11 km per day (range: 0 - 306). At the daily scale, we defined flights as movements of above 1000 metres. Families flew a mean of twice (range: 0 - 10) per day, and 98 times (range: 63 - 367) over the tracking period. For 2016 families, we identified true flight activity, which occurred on average 5 times (range: 1 - 15) times a day, and 470 times (range: 328 - 659) over the tracking period. 21 family splits occurred and were not restricted to juveniles.

Flock flight intensity records from 84 spring and 180 autumn sites (overlap = 72) yielded 6,266 days of data. Geese began to arrive between September 26 and October 30, and the last geese left between March 03 and April 01, resulting in a mean goose winter of 165 days. Lemming abundance from the breeding grounds transformed into a predation index ranged between 1.17 and 1.9, with very low variance between years ($\sigma^2 = 0.048$).

As seen in Fig.2, we found no influence of the number of juveniles in a family on how far from the breeding grounds a family wintered in the first sixty days after arrival (datasets B and C, model 1, $\chi^2 B = 1.135$, $p B = 0.286$, $\chi^2 C = 2.007$, $p C = 0.157$). Later in the winter, larger families from dataset B wintered farther west ($\chi^2 = 4.194$, $p = 0.041$), while dataset C did not reveal any influence of juvenile number on wintering site ($\chi^2 = 0.27$, $p = 0.6033$). In all cases, geese were found farther west later in the winter ($\chi^2 = 116.5641$, $p = 2 \times 10^{-16}$).

The number of juveniles in a family (dataset B, model 2.a) was insensitive to flock size ($\chi^2 = 0.270$, $p = 0.6033$) and summer predation ($\chi^2 = 0.337$, $p = 0.562$), but decreased through the winter ($\chi^2 = 74.166$, $p = 2 \times 10^{-16}$). Family sizes of marked geese (dataset C) decreased over time ($\chi^2 = 19.936$, $p = 8.01 \times 10^{-6}$), but showed an increase with the level of summer predation ($\chi^2 = 12.935$, $p = 3.2 \times 10^{-4}$). We tested whether the exclusion of unsuccessful pairs from family counts in flocks biased the data by similarly excluding such records from observations of marked geese. We confirmed this bias in sampling method by failing to find any effect of summer predation after excluding unsuccessful pairs from data C ($\chi^2 = 0.1321$, $p = 0.716$, see Fig.3). The number of successful families in flocks increased with flock size ($\chi^2 = 7162$, $p = 2 \times 10^{-16}$),

and the number of days since goose arrival in autumn ($\chi^2 = 171.3$, $p = 2 \times 10^{-16}$, see Fig.4), but was unaffected by summer predation ($\chi^2 = 0$, $p = 0.98$). Further, there were more successful families in flocks farther from the breeding grounds ($\chi^2 = 12.73$, $p = 0.0004$, see Fig.5).

Flocks were significantly smaller farther from the breeding grounds ($\chi^2 = 66599$, $p = 2 \times 10^{-16}$, see Fig.6), and grew slightly over the winter ($\chi^2 = 4975$, $p = 2 \times 10^{-16}$). Within flocks, juvenile proportions increased through the winter ($\chi^2 = 19.43$, $p = 0.001$, see Fig.7), and decreased with increasing flock size ($\chi^2 = 5.921$, $p = 0.015$), but did not show any effect of distance from the breeding grounds ($\chi^2 = 1.015$, $p = 0.314$), or of summer predation ($\chi^2 = 0.021$, $p = 0.883$). The same results were obtained using data published in Kokorev and Kuksov (2002) ($\chi^2 = 1.835$, $p = 0.175$).

The daily probability of families separating (see Fig.8) was significantly lower later in the winter ($\chi^2 = 8.314$, $p = 0.004$), and lower in larger families ($\chi^2 = 11.41$, $p = 7.32 \times 10^{-4}$). There was no effect of the daily number of flights ($\chi^2 = 0.018$, $p = 0.893$), nor the daily distance moved ($\chi^2 = 2.99$, $p = 0.083$). Split probability was higher in families that made more flights in total ($\chi^2 = 143.23$, $p = 2 \times 10^{-16}$), but decreased in families that moved more overall ($\chi^2 = 182.63$, $p = 2 \times 10^{-16}$). At the half-hour scale, split probability increased with time since the previous flight ($\chi^2 = 6.07$, $p = 0.014$), but was not related to the distance travelled in the previous half hour ($\chi^2 = 0.389$, $p = 0.533$).

Discussion

We studied how the size of whitefront families is related to where, when and with how many flockmates they are seen in the wintering grounds. We found support for the effect of the size of successful families on how far they migrate from the breeding grounds, but only later in winter. We also confirmed that family size decreases over the winter, but found that it is insensitive to flock size, and shows mixed responses to summer predation. We found that the number of successful families increased with flock size and was higher in the west. We also confirmed that flocks are smaller farther from the breeding grounds, and found that they increase in size over the winter. The proportion of first year birds in flocks is lower in larger flocks, but increases as winter progresses. Families are less likely to split later in winter, and with increasing family size. We found only indirect evidence that flights are responsible for family splits in winter.

Our results support the hypothesis that larger families winter to the west, farther from the breeding grounds. This is in accordance with findings that social status influences goose wintering sites (Vangilder and Smith 1985). Dominant social units displace subordinate ones from optimal wintering locations (Schamber et al. 2007), and we suggest that the spatial distribution of whitefront families reflects habitat suitability

in this area. Geese can exploit most of the highly productive landscape (Koffijberg et al. 2017), and thus likely only avoid conditions that impede foraging, such as snow and ice cover coupled with strong winds (Philippson 1966). Geese can tolerate snow depths of ca. 15cm, conditions in excess of which are not noted here before midwinter (Philippson 1966). This may also be why spatial assortment of family classes is apparent only later in winter. Western areas near the North Sea coast may be expected to benefit from its moderating effect on temperature, and this could explain why adults with juveniles would choose to winter there after midwinter.

We find support for the hypothesis that the number of juveniles with adults decreases through the winter. We suggest that the juvenile independence dynamic reported across goose taxa (eg. Prevett and MacInnes 1980, Johnson and Raveling 1988, Black and Owen 1989) begins earlier than previously thought in this species that is known for extended parent-offspring bonds (Ely 1979, Warren et al. 1993, Kruckenberg 2005). The dissociation of juveniles from parents should result in some families losing their only offspring, thus reducing the number of successful families counted in flocks over time. Our finding that the number of families seen in flocks increases with time contradicts this expectation. An explanation would be that social status predicts variation in spring migration timing, as it does the autumn arrival (Jongejans et al. 2015). However, previous studies have not found such an effect (Madsen 2001, Bêty et al. 2004), and we suggest this may be a novel result.

Our findings regarding the relation, or lack thereof, between family sizes and juvenile proportion and summer predation are at odds with previous studies which link breeding success in Arctic birds to the abundance of Arctic rodents (Angelstam et al. 1984, Summers 1986, Summers and Underhill 1987, Blomqvist et al. 2002 etc.). However, more recent studies indicate that since the 2000s, North Sea flyway whitefront breeding success no longer seems to be correlated with summer predation (Jongejans et al. 2015). The causes for this effect are not well known. It is suggested that more whitefronts now breed on the lemming-free island of Kolguyev where they experience a constant level of predation (Kruckenberg et al. 2008). Further, it has been suggested that an expanded whitefront breeding range results in the entire population not being uniformly affected by predation, since lemming cycles are not expected to be synchronised across regions. This could allow whitefronts from low predation areas to have larger families than the mean, even as those facing increased predation do poorly (Jongejans et al. 2015). A large breeding range also means that variation in predation pressure is lost due to year-wise averaging across the breeding range. This requires future models to account for the yearly summering site of families, not a feasible task. Further, lemming cycles are faltering overall and this could also explain why cyclicity in goose breeding success is reduced (Nolet et al. 2013).

Our result that marked goose families increase in size with

the level of predation suggests that facing high predation pressure, geese either fledge large families or fail entirely. This could be the case if geese more effective at repelling predators also have higher fecundity. Body size may be an important driver. Larger emperor geese *A. canagica* and whitefronts are better than smaller species at defending clutches (Thompson and Raveling 1987), and larger black brent and lesser snow geese have higher fecundity than smaller ones (Davies et al. 1988, Sedinger et al. 1995). We posit that migration mortality might also be a significant factor in the decoupling of family size and summer predation. We found that in 2016, families of geese observed approx. one month pre-migration on Kolguyev were significantly larger (mean = 2.25) than successful families (mean = 1.72) (GLM, $z = -4.285$, $p = 1.83 \times 10^{-5}$) and all families (mean = 0.46) (GLM, $z = -14.511$, $p = 2 \times 10^{-16}$) recorded in the first two months following their arrival on the wintering grounds.

Our finding that flocks are smaller to the west of the wintering area (approx. $3 - 4^\circ\text{E}$) is in accordance with prior knowledge that the main whitefront wintering areas are in the Lower Rhine region on the Dutch-German border (approx. 7°E , 51.5°E) (Mooij 1991). Bird migration is strictly constrained by metabolic factors. Energy reserves and water balance especially determine how far and how fast a bird can fly, and thus where it must stop-over, and by extension, terminate migration (Klaassen 1996). In this context, it is not surprising that fewer geese would choose to winter farther west when sites to the east are suitable. Our results that larger flocks had a lower proportion of first-year birds must be considered in the context of the previous outcome that larger families winter in the west, where flocks are smaller and have more successful families. This likely results in a higher juvenile proportion from small flocks, producing the trend we see.

Consequently, one would expect a higher proportion of juveniles in westerly flocks, but we did not find that flock juvenile proportion varies over the study site. This is contrary to the expectation that goose families selecting for optimal sites drive variation in juvenile proportion over wintering areas (eg. Schamber et al. 2007). However, independent juveniles observed in wintering flocks (eg. Hanson 1953, Gregoire and Ankney 1990, Loonen et al. 1999) may dampen any variation to non-significance. The result that flock juvenile proportion rises non-linearly over the winter is in line with the previous finding that the number of successful families in flocks increases with time. However, this trend may be due in larger part to whitefronts being age-differentially migratory, with pairs without young leaving the breeding grounds earlier than families and juveniles. An effect of age on spring departure timing has been unsuccessfully sought for in similar species (pink-footed geese Madsen 2001, snow geese, Bêty et al. 2004). In snow geese, the continued influx of juveniles to the breeding grounds for some weeks after the arrival of the breeding population does suggest that independent juveniles follow a different migration schedule (Prevett

and MacInnes 1980). The question of age-differential migration would ideally be resolved with age-ratios of flocks on spring migration, not an easy task. The population cannot receive an influx of juveniles from any source towards the end of winter, forcing us to conclude that juveniles do indeed leave later than adults in spring.

Finally, our findings that daily split probability decreases with the size of the family, with the distance travelled, and is reduced later in winter are largely novel. They contradict the consensus that geese become independent towards spring (Prevett and MacInnes 1980, Johnson and Raveling 1988, Black and Owen 1989, Scheiber et al. 2013). We also did not differentiate between juvenile separation, juvenile death, and separation of breeding pair in our analysis, and this coupled with our low sample size of 13 families could have biased the results. Nonetheless, our results that the number of flights undertaken by a family were a good predictor of whether it would split are in accordance with the idea that flights are disruptive events that contribute to separation (Prevett and MacInnes 1980).

References