# Quick guide: colour polymorphism

Thomas E. White1, Darrell J. Kemp1

1Department of Biological Science, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia 2109  
**Phone:** +61 2 9850 6279  
**E-mail:** thomas.white@mq.edu.au

***What is colour polymorphism?***

Colour polymorphism is the presence of multiple discretely coloured variants within a population, the rarest of which is too common to be a product of recurrent mutation. That the variation be genetic is often specified to distinguish polymorphism from polyphenism, which describes variation arising from interactions between a single genotype and varied environments. Purely ontogenetic colour variation and reversible colour change are also implicitly excluded. While polymorphism requires the coexistence of at least two morphs, the total number of variants within a population can vary considerably. Dramatic examples include the exuberantly polymorphic Hawaiian happy-face spider *Theridion grallator*, with some 12 morphs coexisting across four Hawaiian islands, and the poison strawberry frog *Oophaga pumilio*, with over 20 true-breeding morphs across their Central American distribution (Figure 1).

***How do they develop?***

Colour in nature is typically a combined product of pigments that absorb light, and physical structures that reflect it. Both are highly sensitive to changes in their chemical and/or physical structure, and so relatively subtle alterations of the underlying protein-coding and regulatory genes can have dramatic phenotypic effects. Unsurprisingly, the genetic architecture and development of colour polymorphisms vary in complexity. In simple cases, morphs may be determined by allelic variation at a single locus that regulates the means of colour production. The Midas cichlids *Amphilophus* spp., for example, exhibit a pigmentary dark-versus-gold polymorphism across both sexes that is controlled by a single locus with two alleles. In early life, both morphs are similarly dark thanks to black, melanin-packed cells called melanophores. In the ten percent of individuals that are homozygous for the recessive allele, however, those cells degrade through ontogeny to expose the characteristic yellow-gold hue of underlying xanthophores.

Recent advances in sequencing have uncovered more complex examples, such as when polymorphisms are controlled by clusters of loci that segregate as single supergenes. This physical linking of suites of genes allows for the maintenance of complex colour pattern variation while precluding less fit intermediates. Supergenes are particularly well documented among the strikingly ornamented, and often-mimetic *Heloconius* butterflies. In *H. numata*, each of seven morphs is determined by variation at a single locus. Unlike the Midas cichlids, though, this single locus is the switch for a supergene—constructed of numerous colour-coding loci—that controls large scale chromosomal rearrangements corresponding to discrete wing colour patterns.

***Is it common?***

Colour polymorphisms are relatively rare, but are ecologically, taxonomically, and functionally widespread. They occur in species that inhabit the majority of terrestrial and aquatic habitats, and are found in most major groups of animals (Figure 1), as well as among flowering plants. Polymorphisms have been documented in all almost all functional contexts that involve colour, including sexual signalling, mimicry, aposematism, mutualism, crypsis, thermoregulation and deception.

***Why are colour polymorphisms puzzling?***

The colour of organisms is often under strong selection because of its importance in biotic and abiotic interactions. We may naively expect purifying selection to erode such conspicuous variation, so colour polymorphisms raise questions about the processes that generate and maintain phenotypic variation; the fuel for adaptive evolution......ran out of steam with this one sorry! It doesn’t need much.

***So how is polymorphism maintained?***

Stable polymorphisms are thought to require balancing selection to maintain equal fitness (on average) between morphs, lest a population be driven to monomorphism. There are several possible mechanisms, with varying degrees of empirical and theoretical support. Perhaps the best supported is negative frequency dependent selection, which occurs when rare forms enjoy a selective advantage. This translates into greater relative fitness that, in turn, increases the rarer morphs' frequency until it becomes the more common variant. The process is particularly common in the contexts of crypsis, in which predators more readily form ‘search images’ of the common morph, and in sexual systems, in which colour morphs often correlate with discrete mating strategies. The side-blotched lizard *Uta stansburiana* is a classic example. Males occur in three forms—blue, orange, and yellow throated—that map onto distinct strategies for territory defence. Importantly, each enjoys a rare-morph advantage over only one other morph. Blue males are susceptible to invasion from orange, who lose territory to yellow individuals, who, to complete the rock-paper-scissors dynamic, cede territory to blue males. Their relative abundance predictably oscillates over short time scales, and the three-morph system appears to be evolutionarily stable.

Heterozygote advantage—where individuals that are heterozygotic at a given locus are fitter than their homozygous counterparts—is a well-established driver of allelic variation at large. Although historically thought to play a role in the maintenance of colour polymorphisms specifically, the possibility has found little direct support to date. Geographic and temporal variation in selection has also frequently been associated with colour polymorphisms, particularly in the context of communication. Theory suggests that such variation may create distinct niches that favour the evolution of polymorphic signaling solutions. This is particularly common in visual communication systems where viewing environments, and hence the appearance of colour signals, may change over small spatial and temporal scales. Again it remains unclear whether such variation is sufficient unto itself to maintain polymorphism, and recent theoretical work suggests that it may need to act in concert with other processes such as sexual selection.

Ultimately, polymorphic populations will be subject to a suite of selective and neutral drivers. Disruptive selection, secondary contact, hybridisation, gene flow, non-random mating, and genetic drift, as well as those processes mentioned above, have all be associated with colour polymorphic systems to some extent. Understanding the full complement of processes that maintain polymorphism, and quantifying their relative strength, is an ongoing challenge that has been achieved in very few systems.

***What are the consequences of colour polymorphism?***

Polymorphic populations often vary in more than just colour, because traits can become linked through correlational or epistatic selection, or shared developmental pathways. Between-morph differences in life history characters, behaviour, physiology, and morphology are all well documented. In such cases, discrete colour variation is essentially just one visible component of increased genetic diversity, which itself can enable range expansions, habitat colonization, and the persistence of populations across spatially and temporally variable environments. These predictions are supported by indirect theoretical and empirical evidence drawn from population and evolutionary genetics, but have been directly tested in few colour polymorphic systems. More broadly, it remains an open question as to how often colour polymorphisms arise via selection directly on colour, as opposed to selection on suites of traits associated with or including colour variation.

The most extreme evolutionary consequence of polymorphism is speciation, which may be realized through several paths. For one, reproductive isolation can occur in sympatry when disruptive selection acts on a trait that also (directly, or indirectly through genetic correlation) leads to assortative mating. Colour polymorphisms are excellent candidates for such ‘magic traits’ and, although thought to be extremely rare in nature, promising examples have been tentatively identified among *Heliconius* butterflies, as well as in sticklebacks and African cichlids*.* Although colour polymorphisms, by definition, occur within a single population, speciation need not be sympatric. Morph frequencies often vary geographically along a cline, and individuals at either end of a populations’ range can experience very different selection regimes. This can lead to reproductive isolation between such individuals and, hence, parapatric speciation. Some 20% of polymorphic birds show clinal variation in morph frequencies, and colour polymorphism has been empirically linked to accelerated rates of phenotypic evolution and speciation in these systems. Alternately, geographic variation in the composition of morphs may be a result of secondary contact. This occurs when selection favours alternate phenotypes in allopatric populations that subsequently come into contact. If there are costs associated with hybridization, such as when intermediate phenotypes are maladaptive in a given environment, selection is predicted to favour assortative mating within morphs. This process is known as reinforcement, and such polymorphisms will necessarily be transient, culminating in the emergence of monomorphic daughter species.

***Where can I find more?***

Bond, A. B. (2007) The evolution of color polymorphism: Crypticity, searching images, and apostatic selection. *Ann. Rev. Ecol. Evol Syst. 38*, 489–514.

Ford, E.B. (1945) Polymorphism. *Biol Rev* *20*, 73–88.

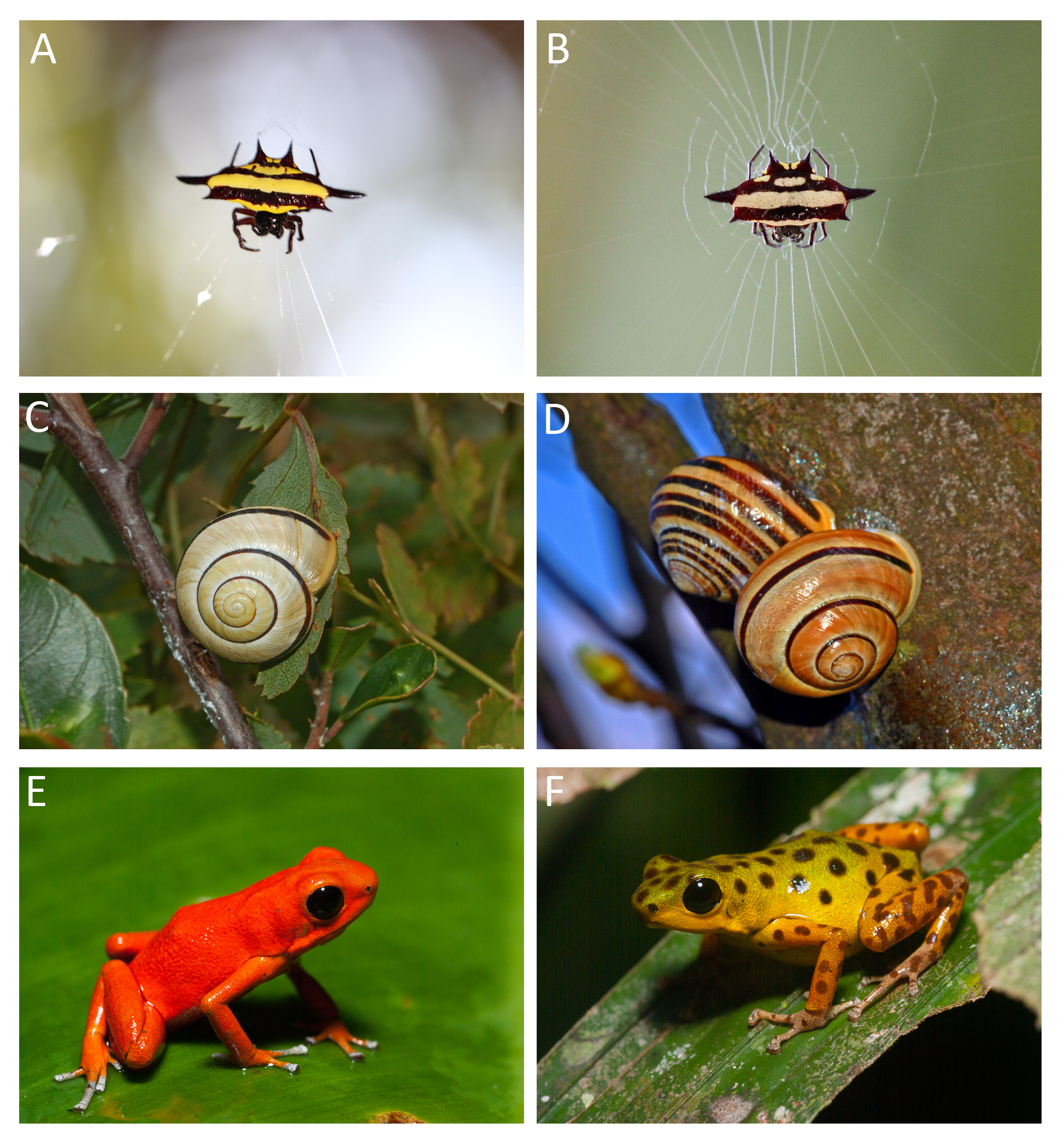
Gray, S.M., and McKinnon, J.S. (2007) Linking color polymorphism maintenance and speciation. *Trends Ecol. Evol. 22*, 71–79.

Mckinnon, J.S. and Pierotti, M.E. (2010) Colour polymorphism and correlated characters: Genetic mechanisms and evolution. *Mol. Ecol.* 19, 5101–5125.

McLean, C.A. and Stuart‐Fox, D. (2014) Geographic variation in animal colour polymorphisms and its role in speciation. *Biol. Rev.*

Roulin, A. (2004) The evolution, maintenance and adaptive function of genetic colour polymorphism in birds. *Biol. Rev.* 79, 815–848.

Wellenreuther, M. Svensson, E.I., and Hansson, B.(2014) Sexual selection and genetic colour polymorphisms in animals. *Mol. Ecol.* *23*, 5398-5414.

Colour polymorphism in nature. (a, b) Both morphs of the spiny spider *Gasteracantha fornicata*, whose conspicuous colour patterns visually lure prey (Photos: Thomas White). (c, d) Colour and pattern variation in the highly polymorphic land snail *Cepaea nemoralis* (Photos: Ettore Balocchi). (e, f) Two of approximately 20 morphs of the aposematic poison frog *Dendrobates pumilio* (photos: Justin Lawrence).

# 