

# 1 Do bar-headed geese train for high altitude flights?

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3 Running title: Do geese train for high-altitude flight?

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42 **ABSTRACT**

43 Exercise at high altitude is extremely challenging, largely due to hypobaric hypoxia (low oxygen levels  
44 brought about by low air pressure). In humans, the maximal rate of oxygen consumption decreases with  
45 increasing altitude, supporting progressively poorer performance. Bar-headed geese (*Anser indicus*) are  
46 renowned high altitude migrants and, although they appear to minimise altitude during migration where  
47 possible, they must fly over the Tibetan Plateau (mean altitude 4,800 metres) for much of their annual  
48 migration. This requires considerable cardiovascular effort, but no study has assessed the extent to which  
49 bar-headed geese may train prior to migration for long distances, or for high altitudes. Using implanted  
50 loggers that recorded heart rate, acceleration, pressure and temperature: we found no evidence of training  
51 for migration in bar-headed geese. Geese showed no significant change in summed activity per day or  
52 maximal activity per day. There was also no significant change in maximum heart rate per day or minimum  
53 resting heart rate, which may be evidence of an increase in cardiac stroke volume if all other variables were  
54 to remain the same. We discuss the strategies used by bar-headed geese in the context of training  
55 undertaken by human mountaineers when preparing for high altitude, noting the differences between their  
56 respective cardiovascular physiology.

57

58 Key words: Bar-headed geese; Biologging; Heart rate; High-altitude; Migration; Training.

## 59 INTRODUCTION

60 Migratory birds undertake some of the most challenging feats of exercise of any vertebrate animals on the  
61 planet. For example, arctic terns (*Sterna paradisaea*) have been recorded making annual migration round  
62 trips of more than 80,000 km (Egevang et al. 2010), bar-tailed godwits (*Limosa lapponica*) have been  
63 recorded making non-stop flights of 11,000 km in a little more than a week (Gill et al. 2009), and great snipe  
64 (*Gallinago media*) can maintain flight speeds of 80 km h<sup>-1</sup> for several days (Klaassen et al. 2011). Flight is  
65 one of the cheapest forms of locomotion per unit of distance, but flapping flight is extremely costly per unit of  
66 time, requiring ten-times or more the resting basal metabolic rate (Butler 2016, Bishop 1999). Some large  
67 birds (such as raptors) have therefore evolved behaviours such as soaring, gliding and thermalling to reduce  
68 flight costs, requiring them to flap very little to remain aloft (Sherub et al. 2016, Duriez et al. 2014; Nourani  
69 and Yamaguchi 2017). Avian flight muscle is consequently highly adapted, and has two- to five-times greater  
70 mitochondrial density than most mammalian skeletal muscle, leading to a much higher mass specific ATP  
71 turnover rate (Kuzmiak-Glancy and Willis 2014). Avian flight muscle also generates the highest mass specific  
72 power outputs (up to 433 W kg<sup>-1</sup>) of any cyclically contracting vertebrate muscle (Askew and Marsh 2002).

73  
74 Some species of birds not only migrate long distances but also travel to high altitudes en-route to their  
75 breeding or wintering grounds (Prins & Namgail 2017). As altitude increases, barometric pressure  
76 decreases, leading to reduced partial pressure of oxygen and consequently to hypoxic conditions. For  
77 example, at the mean altitude of the Tibetan Plateau (mean altitude ~4,800 metres), there is approximately  
78 50% of the oxygen at sea level (Cerretelli 1976). The challenge of supplying sufficient oxygen for aerobic  
79 metabolism in flight is therefore magnified. Bar-headed geese (*Anser indicus*) migrate across the Tibetan  
80 Plateau, and while flying northwards in spring make the fastest recorded sustained rates of climb over the  
81 Himalayas, flying from approximately sea-level to 4,500 metres altitude in under eight hours, with no  
82 opportunity to acclimatise (Hawkes et al. 2011). By contrast, human athletes show reduced metabolic rates  
83 and increased lactate production at altitude (Smith et al. 2015, Chapman et al. 2015), with  $\dot{V}O_{2\text{MAX}}$  declining  
84 by about 6 to 8% per 1,000 metres of altitude (Wehrlin et al. 2016). One might therefore imagine, if  
85 considering the context of human climbers, that bar-headed geese would undergo considerable preparation  
86 for their annual migration not only in training for distance but also for altitude exposure (but see Tucker et al.  
87 1968).

88

89 (i) Training in humans

90 In humans, athletic training usually involves either endurance exercise (e.g. long distance running or  
91 cycling), exercise for varying durations close to  $\dot{V}O_{2\text{ MAX}}$  (the maximal sustainable rate of oxygen  
92 consumption) or short, intense 'explosive strength training' sessions. Such training exercise produces a  
93 variety of physiological responses that enhance capacity for efficient work output and use of oxygen  
94 (Hellsten and Nyberg 2011; Hoffman 2014; Jones and Carter 2000a, b, Joyner and Coyle 2008). For  
95 example, training can increase the volume and thickness of the left ventricle of the heart, leading to an  
96 increase in stroke volume (the amount of blood ejected per heart beat) (Weiner et al. 2015). Training can  
97 increase blood haemoglobin content, red cell count, and plasma volume (Mairbäurl 2013) and can decrease  
98 lactate production during exercise and increase the rate of lactate removal when it is produced (Jones and  
99 Carter 2000a).

100

101 Training can also alter the relative proportions of muscle fibre types, increase the storage of intra-muscular  
102 lipids, and increase their relative use during exercise (Dubé et al. 2016) as well as increase muscle capillarity  
103 and myoglobin concentration (Jones and Carter 2000a). Finally, it can increase the size, number, and  
104 function of mitochondria (Bishop et al. 2014). Human training for high altitude usually involves repeated  
105 exposure to hypobaria (either simulated or at moderate altitudes), which produces a range of physiological  
106 adaptations for enhancing oxygen supply to the tissues (e.g. erythropoiesis, increase in ventilation and heart  
107 rate, Bärtzsch and Saltin 2008; increase in mitochondrial volume density, Jacobs et al. 2016). Most  
108 mountaineering expeditions to very high altitude acclimatise over a series of staged ascents over several  
109 weeks, recovering at a base camp in between. Training and acclimatisation therefore has a significant  
110 impact on the physiological capacity for exercise and high altitude tolerance in humans.

111

#### 112 *(ii) Training in non-human animals*

113 Undoubtedly, selection pressures on wild animals to be optimally physically fit in their respective  
114 environments are very different from those acting on modern, largely sedentary humans (Caldwell 2016).  
115 Wild animals must constantly be able to forage efficiently and evade predation, and for many species the  
116 ability to move between seasonally changing habitats is key to survival (Chapman et al. 2014). For the  
117 purposes of the present study, therefore, the context of human training is unrealistic, but there is no alternate  
118 framework for how to improve physical fitness without exercise training. It would appear that there is no  
119 existing evidence to suggest that any wild animals undertake voluntary activity to 'keep fit' (Halsey 2016;  
120 Portugal et al. 2011), but there are observations of wild mice (and even a wild frog) running freely on  
121 exercise wheels when they are available to them (Meijer and Robbers 2014). Captive mice and rats,

122 subjected to training, have shown similar improvements in exercise capacity to those detailed above for  
123 humans (Goutianos et al. 2015; Kemi et al. 2004, Waters et al. 2004). Butler & Turner (1988) trained captive  
124 tufted ducks (*Aythya fuligula*) to swim on a water flume in captivity and showed that training enhanced  
125 muscle capillarity and reduced heart rate for a given rate of oxygen consumption, which suggests an  
126 accompanying increase in cardiac stroke volume. Training, therefore, clearly produces an effect in non-  
127 human animals. There is also evidence that wild animals can respond to high altitude exposure. For  
128 example, lowland resident deer mice (*Peromyscus maniculatus*), exposed to hypoxia equivalent to 4,300  
129 metres for six to ten weeks increased their tidal volume (Ivy and Scott 2015), increased mitochondrial  
130 respiratory capacity and decreased the production of ROS (reactive oxygen species; Mahalingam et al.  
131 2017). Given that migratory animals probably need to increase their physical fitness, from sprint-burst type  
132 fitness sufficient for chasing prey and evading predators, to endurance type fitness required to support long-  
133 distance migration, it may seem surprising, at least from an anthropomorphic point of view, that there is not  
134 more evidence for training in wild animals.

135

### 136 (iii) *Training for migration in birds*

137 The phenomenon of '*zugunruhe*' (migratory restlessness) has been well described in captive birds (Gwinner  
138 1968). At times of the year when birds in captivity would otherwise be migrating, they can exhibit agitated  
139 movements in specific directions that correspond to their natural migratory pathways, providing an  
140 opportunity for study (for a review and new directions, see (Muheim et al. 2014)). However, in the wild  
141 songbirds apparently switch into migratory mode without previous locomotory preparations (Zúñiga et al.  
142 2016). At the same time as this restlessness, avian muscle also undergoes significant biochemical changes,  
143 for example, increase in fatty acid binding proteins (FABP; improving transport and delivery of fatty acids to  
144 flight muscles) and citrate synthase activity (which is indicative of muscle oxidative capacity) (Guglielmo et  
145 al. 2002; Saunders and Klemm 1994). Several studies have provided evidence to suggest that such changes  
146 are likely endogenous and not brought about by training (Bauchinger and Biebach 2006; Bishop et al. 1998;  
147 Dietz et al. 1999; McFarlan et al. 2009; Portugal et al. 2009; Price et al. 2011; Vézina et al. 2007). It has also  
148 been suggested, however, that flight muscle hypertrophy in wild birds may be brought about as a  
149 consequence of pre-migratory mass gain which would increase wing loading and therefore the relative  
150 workload in flight (so called 'power training', (Marsh and Storer 1981)). There is evidence for flight muscle  
151 hypertrophy from a number of studies on captive birds ( Marsh 1984; Marsh and Storer 1981; Lindstrom et  
152 al. 2000; Butler and Turner 1988).

153

154 For wild birds, the picture is less clear. In eared grebes (*Podiceps nigricollis*), an increase in body mass does  
155 not appear to be correlated with flight muscle hypertrophy, and “conspicuous flapping exercise” has been  
156 noted during recovery from wing moult, which might represent training (Gaunt et al. 1990). Bishop et al.  
157 (1998) demonstrated that citrate synthase activity in the pectoral muscles of barnacle geese (*Branta*  
158 *leucopsis*) was higher in wild than captive barnacle geese, and Pelters et al. (1999) demonstrated that FABP  
159 was higher in wild than captive gosling and adult barnacle geese, suggesting that some element of activity in  
160 the wild might be important in muscle hypertrophy, aerobic capacity and fuelling. The advent of biologging  
161 technology (Kays et al. 2015) has enabled researchers to record movement and aspects of animal biology  
162 and that can be used to address the question of training for migration in birds. Using implanted heart rate  
163 loggers, Portugal et al. (2011) showed that wild barnacle geese at their summer breeding area in  
164 Spitsbergen did not appear to increase the daily amount of time (22 minutes) spent flying in the weeks  
165 leading up to migration and therefore were likely not training for migration. Their work remains the only study  
166 to date on wild migratory birds.

167

168 In the present study, we set out to investigate whether there was any evidence of training for migration in a  
169 population of bar-headed geese deployed from nesting grounds (elevation 2,050 m) in Mongolia. Bar-headed  
170 geese make one of the most demanding migrations on earth, crossing the Himalayan mountains and the  
171 Tibetan Plateau (mean elevation 4,800 metres) as they make their migration between India, China and  
172 Mongolia (Bishop et al. 2015; Hawkes et al. 2012; Hawkes et al. 2011). We used implanted loggers to look  
173 for patterns of changes in heart rate that might suggest increases in physiological fitness and, for the first  
174 time, acceleration loggers to look for patterns in activity per day leading up to migration.

175

176 **METHODS**

177 Bar-headed geese (n=4, 2.4 kg mean body mass, range 2.1 to 2.6 kg) were captured on a breeding lake in  
178 western Mongolia (Terkhiin Tsagaan lake, 48.148 °N, 99.577 °E) where they annually moult their primary  
179 flight feathers and are unable to fly for two to three weeks of the summer. Geese were captured in July 2011  
180 during moult using 'drive trapping', herding the geese with inflatable kayaks on their breeding lakes into  
181 shoreline corral nets. In order to investigate whether the geese trained prior to their autumn (southward)  
182 migration, we implanted the geese with loggers to record heart rate, acceleration, temperature and pressure  
183 (Figure 1; (Spivey and Bishop 2014)). Geese were always captured, implanted, and released on the same  
184 day, and the loggers were surgically implanted into the abdominal cavity of the geese by a veterinary  
185 surgeon, under isoflurane anaesthesia and using sterile instruments. Each logger was sterilised using  
186 ethylene oxide in the UK prior to the fieldwork. All work was carried out with ethical permission from Bangor  
187 University and following ethical regulations set out by the UK Home Office Animal in Scientific Procedures  
188 Act (ASPA 1986). Birds implanted with loggers were released with green neck collars bearing alpha-numeric  
189 identifying codes (P35, P37, P41 and P43; Figure 1b). The following year, geese were re-sighted during  
190 surveys of the same breeding lakes and recaptured in order to remove the loggers and download the data.

191  
192 The logger recorded internal body temperature and pressure every 30 seconds, acceleration at 180 Hz in 18  
193 second bursts every two minutes and ECG via titanium end cap electrodes in the same 18-second burst  
194 every two minutes (Spivey & Bishop 2014). The logger was 7 cm long and 2 cm diameter, weighing a total of  
195 32 g. Acceleration data were used to calculate VeDBA (vectoral dynamic body acceleration (Qasem et al.  
196 2012)) which describes dynamic movement by the geese in three dimensions (heave, surge, and sway).  
197 Heart rate was derived from the raw ECG data using a custom beat detection script in R. Because data were  
198 collected at intervals (to maximise logger battery life), data were summarised into two-minute averaged bins  
199 for analysis. The onset of migration, defined here as the first southerly movement away from the breeding  
200 grounds, was derived using plots of daily mean VeDBA and altitude (Figure S1).

201  
202 In order to investigate whether geese trained for migration, we looked for significant changes in five key  
203 variables leading up to the onset of migration for each bird. (i) Whether the total amount of exercise  
204 undertaken increased leading up to migration. We used summed VeDBA per day to estimate total exercise  
205 because it encompassed all dynamic movement by the bird while the logger was recording. (ii) Whether the  
206 magnitude of the maximal activity undertaken each day increased prior to migration. We hypothesised that  
207 maximal activity could encompass strenuous take-off manoeuvres, climbing flights, or other demanding

208 activities. We used the maximum VeDBA recorded in any two-minute block per day to estimate this. (iii)  
209 Whether intense, probable 'ground based wing flapping events' increased in frequency prior to migration. We  
210 inspected one-hour sections of data per goose to develop a thresholding approach: First we considered any  
211 section where VeDBA was four G or more for over six minutes as 'flight', and therefore excluded it from the  
212 analysis. For the remaining data, we extracted all instances where VeDBA exceeded 6 G, assigned it as  
213 probable ground based wing flapping, or a putative take-off event and counted the number of these 'spikes'  
214 happening per day. There are no other activities undertaken by these birds that should lead to such a high  
215 dynamic acceleration value. (iv) Whether maximal heart rates increased leading up to migration. We  
216 hypothesised that maximal heart rate could encompass strenuous take off manoeuvres, climbing flights or  
217 other demanding activities that might encompass training. We used the maximum heart rate recorded in any  
218 two-minute block per day to estimate maximal heart rate. (v) Finally, in order to investigate whether there  
219 was any evidence of the geese becoming physiologically fitter (not implying any evolutionary sense), we  
220 looked to see if the overnight resting heart rate decreased, which may be evidence of an increase in cardiac  
221 stroke volume if all other variables were to remain the same. We used minimum heart rate recorded in any  
222 two-minute block per day to estimate this parameter, which always occurred overnight.

223  
224 Because heart rate and acceleration data from the loggers are serially auto-correlated (i.e. within each  
225 animal's dataset, subsequent data points are not independent), data were analysed using generalised least  
226 squares models (Zuur et al. 2009) using the *gls* function in the R package 'nlme' (Pinheiro et al. 2011). We  
227 applied a first order auto-regression (AR1) autocorrelation structure, which allows the user to account for  
228 serial autocorrelation within each bird's dataset, and compared models with (*gls*) and without (*lm*) auto-  
229 correlation structure using corrected Akaike values (AICc) using the R package 'MuMIn' (Barton 2014). For  
230 each statistic, we report the model that had the lower AIC value, indicating better fit. The model took the form  
231 *gls*(parameter ~ days leading up to migration) where the parameters of interest were sum VeDBA, max  
232 VeDBA, maximum, minimum daily heart rate and sum of daily spikes in VeDBA.

233

## 234 RESULTS

235 The four loggers recorded data for a median of 171 days in total (including the full migration and some time  
236 wintering, range 158 to 222 days; example in Figure 2). The four geese departed for migration 35, 42, 46  
237 and 51 days after logger deployment in late August and early September (Figure S1).

238

239 (i) *Does the total amount of exercise increase prior to migration?*

240 There was no evidence that there was an increase in the total amount of exercise carried out each day  
241 leading up to migration for any of the four geese (sum VeDBA did not change significantly; P37 *g/s*  $t = 0.91$ ,  
242  $AIC = 451.6$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ; P41 *g/s*  $t = 0.08$ ,  $AIC = 612.9$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ; P43 *g/s*  $t = 1.95$ ,  $AIC = 437.3$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ; P35 *g/s*  $t =$   
243  $2.00$ ,  $AIC = 463.5$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ; Figure 3), suggesting they did not undertake more physical activity as they got  
244 closer to migratory departure. Three of the four geese exhibited a spike in activity, approximately 33 days  
245 prior to migration (Figure 3A-C). The geese were not being directly observed during this time, so it is not  
246 clear what the stressor might have been, although we suggest predator presence might be a likely  
247 explanation.

248

249 (ii) *Does the magnitude of the maximal activity undertaken each day increase prior to migration?*

250 The maximal amount of activity (as indicated by maximum VeDBA), which might have indicated particularly  
251 strenuous exercise bouts, did not change leading up to migratory departure for three of the geese (P35 *lm*  $R^2$   
252  $= 0.02$ ,  $F_{1,43} = 1.94$ ,  $AIC = 181.7$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ; P37 *lm*  $R^2 = -0.03$ ,  $F_{1,33} = 0.04$ ,  $AIC = 121.5$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ; P43 *lm*  $R^2 =$   
253  $0.00$ ,  $F_{1,33} = 0.9$ ,  $AIC = 123.2$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ; Figure 4A, C, D) but did increase significantly for the fourth (P41 *lm*  $R^2$   
254  $= 0.22$ ,  $F_{1,48} = 14.46$ ,  $AIC = 193.2$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; Figure 4B). There was no correlation between maximum VeDBA  
255 and body temperature (Pearson's correlation P35,  $r = 55.5$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ; P37,  $r = 38.7$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ; P41,  $r = 69.6$ ,  
256  $p > 0.05$ ; P43,  $r = 52.9$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ), which suggested that when maximal activity occurred, it was not necessarily  
257 sustained long enough to produce a hyperthermic response.

258

259 (iii) *Do probable 'ground based wing flapping events' increase in frequency prior to migration?*

260 The frequency of probable 'ground based wing flapping events' (number of spikes in VeDBA per day) did not  
261 increase prior to migration for two geese (P37 *lm*  $R^2 = 0.07$ ,  $F_{1,33} = 3.49$ ,  $AIC = 192.6$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ; P41 *lm*  $R^2 =$   
262  $0.01$ ,  $F_{1,48} = 1.67$ ,  $AIC = 238.7$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ; Figure 5A, B) but actually decreased prior to migration for the other  
263 two geese (P35 *lm*  $R^2 = 0.22$ ,  $F_{1,33} = 10.80$ ,  $AIC = 175.8$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; P43 *lm*  $R^2 = 0.17$ ,  $F_{1,33} = 10.00$ ,  $AIC =$   
264  $300.2$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; Figure 5C, D).

265

266 (iv) *Does the magnitude of the maximal heart rate each day increase prior to migration?*

267 For two of the geese, there was no change in maximum heart rate leading up to migration (P41 *g/s*  $t = -0.88$ ,  
268  $AIC = 466.7$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ; P43 *g/s*  $t = 0.80$ ,  $AIC = 439.5$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ; Figure 6B, C) but two geese had a small but  
269 significant decrease in daily maximum heart rate leading up to migration (P35 *g/s*  $t = 2.26$ ,  $AIC = 402.2$ ,  
270  $p < 0.01$ ; P37 *g/s*  $t = 2.45$ ,  $AIC = 283.8$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ; Figure 6A, D), contrary to the prediction of an increase in  
271 maximum heart rate.

272

273 (v) *Is there any evidence of physiological improvements prior to migration?*

274 There was no significant change in minimum heart rate for any of the geese over the period leading up to  
275 migration (P35 *g/s*  $t = -0.93$ ,  $AIC = 330.3$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ; P37 *g/s*  $t = -0.44$ ,  $AIC = 221.8$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ; P41 *g/s*  $t = -1.91$ ,  
276  $AIC = 380.4$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ; P43 *g/s*  $t = -1.32$ ,  $AIC = 217.7$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ; Figure 5), which might have been indicative of  
277 cardiac hypertrophy. There was also no significant change in the range of body temperatures experienced by  
278 the four geese (P37 *lm*  $R^2 = 0.04$ ,  $F_{1,33} = 2.42$ ,  $AIC = 21.5$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ; P41 *lm*  $R^2 = 0.03$ ,  $F_{1,48} = 2.48$ ,  $AIC =$   
279  $33.8$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ; P43 *lm*  $R^2 = 0.00$ ,  $F_{1,33} = 1.06$ ,  $AIC = 9.3$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ; P35 *lm*  $R^2 = 0.06$ ,  $F_{1,43} = 3.94$ ,  $AIC = 40.0$ ,  
280  $p < 0.05$ ; Figure S2), which might have otherwise reflected the difference between intense periods of exercise  
281 and sleep at low metabolic rates.

282

## 283 **DISCUSSION**

284 Here, we provide evidence that bar-headed geese do not obviously engage in training for migration. Our  
285 study is the first to use accelerometry data to study this in wild birds, and suggests that overall (for three out  
286 of four birds) there was no increase in the sum or the maximal amount of activity each day leading up to  
287 migration. Interestingly, while there is notable variation in the maximal activity undertaken by each bird  
288 (doubling or halving from one day to another), the sum of activity is remarkably consistent both within and  
289 between individuals at around 600 to 700 G per day. The accelerometry data was also used to identify  
290 ground based flapping events, which might have represented 'power training'. These do not appear to  
291 increase leading up to migration, and indeed actually decreased for two birds. Likewise, the results showed  
292 that maximum daily heart rate decreased for two of the four birds leading up to migration. Perhaps, therefore,  
293 study birds might have been conserving energy to lay down greater fat deposits for migration, rather than  
294 training, but the cause of this, or prevalence, is not clear and requires further investigation. There may be  
295 several reasons for the present observations, which we discuss in turn:

296

### 297 *(i) Limited data coverage*

298 To prolong battery life, the archival loggers were duty-cycled to record for just 18 seconds of every two  
299 minutes throughout the day. Although this represents some of the highest resolution, long-term physiological  
300 data ever collected for a migratory bird, data were not collected for 85% of the time. It was not possible to  
301 collect complete recordings (covering 100% of the time) to compare with the duty-cycled data. It is possible  
302 that episodes of training did not occur during the 15% window when we did collect data. However, it would  
303 seem highly unlikely that all training occurred in bouts of less than 102 seconds, all of which we missed for  
304 the entire period of several weeks leading up to migration. So while we recognise this shortcoming, we do  
305 not believe it is the best explanation for the apparent lack of training. Perhaps also longer recording prior to  
306 migration might reveal greater insight into preparation for migration. Increases in maximum VeDBA were  
307 observed for the one goose that remained for the longest period prior to departure (see below), and highlight  
308 that longer recordings in the future might shed light on whether this was an artefact.

309

### 310 *(ii) Training at surprisingly small scales*

311 Alternatively, training for migration may occur at a far smaller scale than previously appreciated. Many birds  
312 including waterfowl exhibit ground-based wing-flapping behaviour, typically as a preening or social activity.  
313 These bouts of flapping usually only last a few seconds but may be metabolically extremely intense (Norberg  
314 1996) and thus, it might be that these bouts act as short, intense explosive strength-training sessions.

315 Muscle building in humans is known to respond strongly to such short but high intensity training sessions  
316 (Mitchell et al. 2013), so these events could contribute meaningfully to training in birds. In the present study  
317 we attempted to identify these from accelerometry data and find that they do not increase prior to migration,  
318 suggesting that either these explosive training bouts do not contribute to migratory preparation in bar-headed  
319 geese, or that such preparation is continuous from the time of moult.

320

321 *(iii) Endogenous development of flight musculature*

322 It also remains highly possible that increases in flight muscle mass and performance necessary for migratory  
323 flight are endogenous, i.e. not brought about as a result of exercise. This has been suggested previously for  
324 migratory birds (Bauchinger and Biebach 2006; Bishop et al. 1998; Dietz et al. 1999; Guglielmo et al. 2002;  
325 McFarlan et al. 2009; Portugal et al. 2009; Price et al. 2011; Vézina et al. 2007), although other studies  
326 suggest that regular flight can be augmented with 'power training' (increasing load to the working muscles)  
327 and may produce muscle hypertrophy (Lindstrom et al. 2000; Marsh 1984; Marsh and Storer 1981). It  
328 remains to be empirically demonstrated if bar-headed geese can endogenously build flight muscle without  
329 power training because we did not measure flight muscle mass in the present study, but barnacle geese in  
330 captivity (i.e. deprived of the ability to fly around freely, and therefore exercise their flight muscles) increase  
331 flight muscle mass by a third as they regrow their flight feathers after moult (Portugal et al. 2009). In addition,  
332 there is no evidence that wild birds 'de-train' (i.e. exhibit a partial or complete anatomical, physiological or  
333 performance loss as a consequence of reduction of activity) during long periods without flight, e.g. over the  
334 breeding or wintering seasons, although this can be seen in captive birds, such as pigeons (*Columba livia*,  
335 Chaplin et al. 1997)). Certainly most wild birds probably experience large fluctuations in flight muscle mass  
336 over the course of a year (Jehl 1997) – consuming flight muscle during migratory journeys, rebuilding it on  
337 arrival to breeding and wintering grounds, and must regulate this via some process. It is also unclear to what  
338 extent power training might be beneficial for endurance exercise.

339

340 The mechanism for such endogenous change appears likely to be hormonally based, brought about by  
341 changing photo-period, leading to up-regulation of specific genetic pathways for muscle development or fuel  
342 mobilisation. For example, McFarlan et al. (2009) showed that white-throated sparrows (*Zonotrichia*  
343 *albicollis*) increase gene expression for heart-type FABP and plasma-membrane FABP up to 1,000% relative  
344 to pre-migratory resting levels which would facilitate transport of essential fatty acids by up to 110% into the  
345 flight muscle to fuel migration. In barnacle geese, FABP in the pectoralis muscle can be twice as high in pre-  
346 migratory wild goslings as that of captive goslings and 50% higher in wild than captive adults (Pelters et al.

347 1999). In another study, Price et al. (2011) demonstrated that mRNA expression of Insulin-like growth factor  
348 1 (IGF1) was increased in captive white-throated sparrows in migratory condition relative to sparrows in  
349 wintering condition. At the same time, it also is clear that training produces muscle hypertrophy and  
350 increases in specific gene expression – Price et al. (2011) trained starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) in a wind  
351 tunnel and demonstrated muscle hypertrophy as well as up-regulation of IGF1 and myostatin immediately  
352 following an acute bout of flight. It remains to be demonstrated what proportion of flight muscle hypertrophy  
353 may be exercise-induced versus endogenously generated across bird species, but it seems likely that there  
354 may be variation in the relative contributions across species and migratory pathways.

355

### 356 *Expedition style*

357 Waterfowl also generally do not migrate for very long periods at a time, with episodes of flight up to a day  
358 long interspersed with stopovers (Arzel et al. 2006). Bar-headed geese migrate up to 5,140 km in as much  
359 as 92 days in the spring (Hawkes et al. 2012) which would require them to fly as little as one hour each day  
360 (although in reality they make flights of up to 23 hours, interspersed with stopovers of several weeks). Thus,  
361 during migration, bar-headed geese have ample time to rest and recover between flights, possibly for days.  
362 They may therefore effectively train as they migrate, becoming steadily fitter as they travel and this remains  
363 to be investigated. Clearly, the differences in strategies used between human and avian high altitude  
364 specialists come about because wild birds do not have access to the facilities, resources and equipment that  
365 expedition style human mountaineers do, but also likely come about as a consequence of their differing  
366 physiology and evolutionary pressures. Birds, of course, might also make use of assisting wind conditions to  
367 reduce flight costs, as has been shown previously (Sherub et al. 2016).

368

### 369 *The superior avian cardiorespiratory system*

370 The avian respiratory system has evolved to allow birds to take up greater amounts of oxygen per unit of  
371 body mass than other vertebrates owing in large part to the huge metabolic demands for oxygen during flight  
372 (Cieri et al. 2014; Maina 2000; Ward et al. 2002), although see (McGuire and Guglielmo 2009; Speakman  
373 and Thomas 2005) for discussion of flight metabolic rate of bats. It might not be surprising if the *metabolic*  
374 costs of flight could be easily met by a migrating bird without much need for training, assuming the flight  
375 muscles have sufficient fuel stores. In bar-headed geese, oxygen uptake is thought to be considerably  
376 enhanced compared to that of all other birds studied to date, with adaptations for enhanced oxygen uptake  
377 throughout the oxygen transport cascade (Butler 2010; Meir and Milsom 2013; Scott 2011; Scott and Milsom  
378 2006; 2007; Scott et al. 2011). For example Hawkes et al. (2014) tested the performance of bar-headed

379 geese in severe hypoxia (7% oxygen) and showed that their capacity for endurance exercise is enhanced  
380 compared with that of barnacle geese, which are otherwise very similar morphologically, but migrate at low  
381 altitudes (Butler et al. 1998; Eichhorn et al. 2009; Prop et al. 2003). It is also worth noting that the majority of  
382 work demonstrating the range of adaptations by bar-headed geese to enhance oxygen delivery at multiple  
383 steps of the oxygen transport cascade (Butler 2010; Scott 2011; Scott et al. 2015) have been carried out on  
384 captive bar-headed geese that had been pinioned and, therefore had never flown, i.e. wild birds might be  
385 expected to do better (but see Lague et al. 2016). Bar-headed geese have also been shown to use  
386 behavioural adaptations to reduce flight costs, such as staying close to the underlying terrain (Bishop et al.,  
387 2015), or flying at night in colder conditions where air density (and therefore oxygen availability) should be  
388 higher (Hawkes et al. 2011, 2012).

389

#### 390 *Future directions*

391 Given physiological and behavioural adaptations to reduce the challenge of flight at high altitudes, perhaps  
392 the major challenge for migratory bar-headed geese is not in supplying adequate oxygen to the flight  
393 muscles or in endogenously gaining flight muscle mass, but in maintaining an adequate supply of fuel to the  
394 flight muscles and in preventing dehydration and muscle damage (Butler 2016; Jenni-Eiermann 2017). First,  
395 fuel supply and water balance can probably be maintained by migrating bar-headed geese by regular 'stop-  
396 overs' to rest and refuel (Hawkes et al. 2012). However, muscle damage might be expected during migratory  
397 flights in bar-headed geese, particularly during steep climbing flights from Indian wintering grounds onto the  
398 Tibetan Plateau in just seven to eight hours (Hawkes et al. 2011). Both hypoxia and exercise are known to  
399 generate high levels of free radical species, which are thought to cause damage in proteins, lipids and  
400 muscle myocytes (Zhang et al. 2015, Powers and Jackson 2008). Thus it might be expected that bar-headed  
401 geese, or many other high altitude migrants, would have a significant free radical production during  
402 migration, yet we lack any understanding of rates of ROS production or their ability for dealing with it, for  
403 example through anti-oxidant loading (Powers and Jackson 2008). This is therefore a research priority  
404 remaining to be investigated.

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631

632

633 **SUPPLEMENTAL FIGURE LEGENDS**

634 Figure S1. Plot showing the onset of migration for four geese (A, B, C, D), where periods of migratory flight  
635 can be easily distinguished from the pre-migratory period with marked changes in altitude accompanied by  
636 peaks in activity, marked with a vertical red line for each goose.

637

638 Figure S2. Plots showing (A, C, E, G, left panels) daily minimum body temperature and (B, D, F, H, right  
639 panels) daily range of body temperatures for four bar-headed geese (each in a separate row) over the period  
640 between device deployment and migratory departure, shown as days prior to departure, where 0 is the day  
641 of departure.

642

643 Figure S3. Plots showing (a) altitude, (b) heart rate, (c) VeDBA and (d) body temperature for three weeks  
644 leading up to migration (which occurs immediately after the last data point in the plot) for one bar-headed  
645 goose (P35). Data are averaged into two-minute bins. Diurnal patterns in heart rate, VeDBA and body  
646 temperature can be seen as regular increases during the day and decreases overnight. Grey vertical boxes  
647 show night-time for all figure parts.

648

649 Figure S4. Plots showing (a) altitude, (b) heart rate, (c) VeDBA and (d) body temperature for three weeks  
650 leading up to migration (which occurs immediately after the last data point in the plot) for one bar-headed  
651 goose (P41). Data are averaged into two-minute bins. Diurnal patterns in heart rate, VeDBA and body  
652 temperature can be seen as regular increases during the day and decreases overnight. Grey vertical boxes  
653 show night-time for all figure parts.

654

655 Figure S5. Plots showing (a) altitude, (b) heart rate, (c) VeDBA and (d) body temperature for three weeks  
656 leading up to migration (which occurs immediately after the last data point in the plot) for one bar-headed  
657 goose (P43). Data are averaged into two-minute bins. Diurnal patterns in heart rate, VeDBA and body  
658 temperature can be seen as regular increases during the day and decreases overnight. Grey vertical boxes  
659 show night-time for all figure parts.