

Early development and the honesty of aposematic signals in a poison frog

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Juvenile of *Dendrobates auratus* at the study site in Santa Fe de Veraguas, Panama. Photo: Eric Flores, 2009.

Abstract.

The causes and consequences of variation in aposematic signals during immature stages are not clearly understood. This thesis explores the effects of early environment on the expression of aposematic signals in the green and black poison frog (*Dendrobates auratus*), and the consequences of variation in such components in the wild. It also explores how aposematic expression relates to levels of chemical defences in immature froglets. Embryos and larvae of poison frogs in the genus *Dendrobates* are known to be darkly pigmented. This thesis reports for the first time polymorphism in egg pigmentation in *D. auratus* and ontogenetic colour change through development reverting to a normally pigmented phenotype; however whether this pigmentation results from constraints or has adaptive consequences remains unclear. Evidence on how immature individuals allocate resources to growth and warning signalling is scarce. Experimental results in this thesis show that food supply during early environment affected body size and signal luminance in post-metamorphic froglets. Therefore the relative importance of these traits in relation to predation risk was further tested, using artificial prey in a field experiment. The results indicated that rates of attack by birds correlated negatively with body size, and on the contrary survival of artificial prey was independent of signal luminance. I therefore tested the hypothesis that in the wild larger, relatively well-nourished juvenile frogs are chemically better defended. I found that in fact larger juveniles are at a selective advantage conferred by their greater foraging efficiency and their superior levels of chemical defences. Overall, these results shows plasticity in aposematic traits in relation to early environmental nutrition in *D. auratus*; and suggests that acquiring large body size and similar integument colour as to adults are key determinants for survival during the early stages of their terrestrial life.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Table of Contents	vi
List of Tables.....	viii
List of Figures	ix
List of Equations	xii
Chapter 1. General Introduction.....	1
1.1. Aposematic signals in relation to early developmental conditions	1
1.2. Phenotypic plasticity and aposematic signals.....	3
1.3. Physiological constraints and expression of aposematic signals	4
1.4. Design of aposematic signals and predators response.....	5
1.5. Honest signalling in aposematic species.....	7
1.6. Study species and field site	10
1.7. Aims and structure of the thesis.....	12
Chapter 2. Unusual whitish eggs in the poison frog <i>Dendrobates auratus</i> Girard, 1855.....	15
2.1. Abstract.....	15
2.2. Introduction	16
2.3. Methods.....	17
2.4. Results.....	19
2.5. Discussion.....	22
Chapter 3. Diet, development and the optimisation of warning signals in post-metamorphic green and black poison frogs	26
3.1. Abstract.....	26
3.2. Introduction	27
3.3. Methods.....	33
3.4. Results.....	49
3.5. Discussion.....	59
3.6. Appendices: Supplementary Methods and Results	68
Chapter 4. Body size but not warning signal luminance influences predation risk in recently metamorphosed poison frogs.....	89
4.1. Abstract.....	89
4.2. Introduction	90

4.3.	Methods.....	95
4.4.	Results.....	104
4.5.	Discussion.....	107
4.6.	Appendices: Supplementary Methods and Results.....	114
Chapter 5.	Relationships amongst aposematic signals, foraging capacity and toxic defences: behavioural observations of juveniles of a poison frog in the wild.....	124
5.1.	Abstract.....	124
5.2.	Introduction.....	125
5.3.	Methods.....	128
5.4.	Results.....	139
5.5.	Discussion.....	144
5.6.	Appendices: Supplementary information.....	152
Chapter 6.	General discussion.....	155
6.1.	Phenotypic plasticity of aposematic traits early in life.....	155
6.2.	Honesty and automimicry of the aposematic signal.....	158
6.3.	Concluding remarks.....	162
References		164