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DEPARTAMENTO DE MORFOLOGIA E FISIOLOGIA ANIMAL
PROGRAMA DE PÓS-GRADUAÇÃO EM CIÊNCIA ANIMAL

**VARIAÇÃO SAZONAL DA FUNÇÃO MITOCONDRIAL DE
ERITRÓCITOS DE LAGARTOS TEIÚ *Salvator merianae***

João Vitor Paris Xavier

Bacharel em Ciências Biológicas

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ERITRÓCITOS DE LAGARTOS TEIÚ *Salvator merianae***

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João Vitor Paris Xavier, nascido em 24 de maio de 2001, na cidade de Ribeirão Preto – SP, filho de Aparecido Donizeti Xavier e Sônia Maria Paris Xavier. Graduado Bacharel em Ciências Biológicas pela Universidade Estadual Paulista (UNESP), Faculdade de Ciências Agrárias e Veterinárias de Jaboticabal (FCAV-Jaboticabal). Foi bolsista CNPq durante a iniciação científica em pesquisa sobre o uso de acelerômetros como uma ferramenta para ser utilizada como proxy da taxa metabólica de lagartos teiú *Salvator merianae* ao longo de seu ciclo metabólico sazonal, no Laboratório de Fisiologia, Departamento de Morfologia e Fisiologia Animal (UNESP-FCAV), sob orientação da Prof.^a Dr.^a Kênia Cardoso Bícego. Atualmente, realiza mestrado pelo Programa de Pós-graduação em Ciência Animal da Universidade Estadual Paulista “Júlio de Mesquita Filho” (FCAV/UNESP), Câmpus Jaboticabal, com bolsa Capes, atuando no Laboratório de Fisiologia do Departamento de Morfologia e Fisiologia Animal, sob orientação da Prof.^a Dr.^a Kênia Cardoso Bícego.

*“A coisa mais bela que podemos experimentar é o mistério.
É a verdadeira fonte de toda arte e ciência.”*

- Lemony Snicket

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CEUA – COMISSÃO DE ÉTICA NO USO DE ANIMAIS

CERTIFICADO

Certificamos que o projeto de pesquisa intitulado "**Variação sazonal da função mitocondrial de eritrócitos de lagartos Teiú Salvator Merianae**", protocolo nº 4743/2024, sob a responsabilidade da Profa. Dra. KÊNIA CARDOSO BÍCEGO, que envolve a produção, manutenção e/ou utilização de animais pertencentes ao Filo Chordata, subfilo Vertebrata (exceto o homem), para fins de pesquisa científica (ou ensino) - encontra-se de acordo com os preceitos da lei nº 11.794, de 08 de outubro de 2008, no decreto 6.899, de 15 de julho de 2009, e com as normas editadas pelo Conselho Nacional de Controle de Experimentação Animal (CONCEA), e foi aprovado pela COMISSÃO DE ÉTICA NO USO DE ANIMAIS (CEUA), da FACULDADE DE CIÊNCIAS AGRÁRIAS E VETERINÁRIAS, UNESP - CÂMPUS DE JABOTICABAL-SP, em reunião ordinária de 23 de outubro de 2024.

(We certify that the research project entitled "**Seasonal variation of mitochondrial function of erythrocytes of Teiú Lizards Salvator Merianae**", protocol nº. 4743/2024, under the responsibility of Dr. KÊNIA CARDOSO BÍCEGO, which involves the production, maintenance and/or use of animals belonging to the Chordata phylum, vertebrate subfile (except man), for the purposes of scientific research (or teaching) - is in accordance with the precepts of Law no. 11.794, of October 8, 2008, in Decree 6.899, of July 15, 2009, and with the rules issued by the National Council for Animal Experimentation Control (CONCEA), and was approved by the Ethics Commission on Animal Use (CEUA), from the SCHOOL OF AGRICULTURAL AND VETERINARY SCIENCES, UNESP - JABOTICABAL - SP Campus, at October, 23, 2024 an ordinary meeting.)

Vigência do Projeto	01/10/2024 a 31/03/2026
Espécie / Linhagem	Salvator Merianae
Nº de animais	10
Peso / Idade	1,0 – 4,0 kg
Sexo	Machos e Fêmeas
Origem	Captura em campo

Jaboticabal, 23 de outubro de 2024



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VARIAÇÃO SAZONAL DA FUNÇÃO MITOCONDRIAL DE ERITRÓCITOS DE LAGARTOS TEIÚ *Salvator merianae*

RESUMO

Mudanças sazonais no metabolismo são comuns em répteis e exigem ajustes coordenados na bioenergética celular. Nestes vertebrados, os eritrócitos são nucleados, isto é, essas células mantêm mitocôndrias funcionais e, portanto, podem apresentar processos metabólicos aeróbicos próprios, além do transporte de oxigênio. No presente estudo, investigamos a variação sazonal da respiração mitocondrial e da atividade de enzimas metabólicas em eritrócitos do lagarto teiú *Salvator merianae*, uma espécie que apresenta pronunciadas transições metabólicas sazonais e o fenômeno da endotermia facultativa da reprodução. Foram realizadas coletas de sangue nos mesmos indivíduos (7 machos e 3 fêmeas) nos meses de fevereiro (pré-dormência), junho (dormência), setembro (reprodução) e novembro (pós-reprodução), para avaliação da respiração e do desacoplamento mitocondriais dos eritrócitos em oxígrafo de alta resolução. Além disso, também foram medidos nessas mesmas amostras de sangue, as concentrações de hemoglobina e proteínas totais, as atividades da citrato sintase (metabolismo aeróbico) e da lactato desidrogenase (metabolismo anaeróbico) e as concentrações de ATP e ADP. A respiração mitocondrial variou significativamente ao longo do ciclo anual. O fluxo respiratório foi menor durante a dormência de inverno e aumentou durante a estação reprodutiva, indicando maior metabolismo oxidativo quando as demandas energéticas são mais elevadas. Em contraste, a atividade da lactato desidrogenase foi maior durante a dormência, sugerindo maior dependência de vias glicolíticas sob condições de metabolismo suprimido. Apesar dessas variações sazonais no fluxo respiratório, a capacidade mitocondrial máxima permaneceu estável, indicando preservação da função mitocondrial durante a dormência. A respiração associada ao vazamento de prótons (desacoplamento) não aumentou durante a estação reprodutiva, não havendo evidências de que as mitocôndrias dos eritrócitos contribuam diretamente para a termogênese associada à endotermia reprodutiva. Em conjunto, esses resultados

demonstram pela primeira vez que o metabolismo mitocondrial dos eritrócitos acompanha a variação sazonal do metabolismo do organismo, mantendo a capacidade mitocondrial ao longo de diferentes estados fisiológicos.

Palavras-chave: Cadeia transportadora de elétrons, eficiência energética, dormência

SEASONAL VARIATION OF MITOCHONDRIAL FUNCTION IN ERYTHROCYTES OF THE TEGU LIZARD *Salvator merianae*.

ABSTRACT

Seasonal changes in metabolism are common in reptiles and require coordinated adjustments in cellular bioenergetics. In these vertebrates, erythrocytes are nucleated, meaning that these cells retain functional mitochondria and can therefore perform their own aerobic metabolic processes in addition to oxygen transport. In the present study, we investigated the seasonal variation in mitochondrial respiration and metabolic enzyme activity in erythrocytes of the tegu lizard *Salvator merianae*, a species that exhibits pronounced seasonal metabolic transitions and facultative reproductive endothermy. Blood samples were collected from the same individuals (7 males and 3 females) in the months of February (pre-dormancy), June (dormancy), September (reproduction) and November (post-reproduction) to assess erythrocyte mitochondrial respiration and proton leak using high-resolution respirometry. In addition, hemoglobin and total protein concentrations, citrate synthase (aerobic metabolism) and lactate dehydrogenase (anaerobic metabolism) activities, as well as ATP and ADP concentrations, were measured in the same blood samples. Mitochondrial respiration varied significantly throughout the annual cycle. Respiratory flux was lower during winter dormancy and increased during the reproductive season, indicating enhanced oxidative metabolism when energetic demands are higher. In contrast, lactate dehydrogenase activity was higher during dormancy, suggesting a greater reliance on glycolytic pathways under conditions of metabolic suppression. Despite these seasonal variations in respiratory flux, maximal mitochondrial capacity remained stable, indicating preservation of mitochondrial function during dormancy. Proton leak-associated respiration (uncoupling) did not increase during the reproductive season, providing no evidence that erythrocyte mitochondria directly contribute to thermogenesis associated with reproductive endothermy. Together, these results demonstrate for the first time that erythrocyte mitochondrial metabolism tracks

seasonal changes in whole-organism metabolism, while maintaining mitochondrial capacity across different physiological states.

Keywords: Electron transport chain, Energetic efficiency, dormancy

Chapter I – General Considerations

1. Vertebrates Erythrocytes

Blood is a multifunctional connective tissue that plays a central role in maintaining homeostasis in vertebrates (Snyder and Shear, 1999; Claver and Quaglia, 2009). Its primary functions include the transport of respiratory gases, nutrients, metabolic waste products and signalling molecules, as well as participation in immune defence, acid-base balance and thermoregulation (Sawka and Coyle, 1999; Wells, 1999; Jensen, 2004). Through continuous circulation, blood integrates physiological processes across tissues, ensuring that metabolic demands are met under both stable and fluctuating environmental conditions. These functions are tightly coupled to variation in metabolic rate and oxygen demand across vertebrates (Isaacks et al., 1977; Luís Val, 2000; Casagrande et al., 2023).

Among these roles, the transport of oxygen (O_2) and carbon dioxide (CO_2) is one of the most critical functions of blood. Oxygen is required for aerobic metabolism and ATP production, whereas carbon dioxide is a byproduct of cellular respiration that must be efficiently removed to maintain acid–base homeostasis (Jensen, 2004). In vertebrates, this transport is largely mediated by erythrocytes (red blood cells; RBCs), which contain high concentrations of haemoglobin, a protein specialized in reversible oxygen binding (Jensen, 2004; Weber et al., 2010). Haemoglobin's affinity for oxygen is finely regulated by multiple factors, including pH, temperature and intracellular metabolites, allowing blood to adjust oxygen loading at the respiratory surfaces and unloading at the tissues according to metabolic demand (Wood and Johansen, 1973; Nikinmaa, 1992; Jensen, 2004; Weber et al., 2010). Carbon dioxide is largely transported as bicarbonate (HCO_3^-), formed within erythrocytes via carbonic anhydrase. This enzyme catalyses the rapid interconversion between CO_2 and bicarbonate, enabling efficient CO_2 transport and contributing to acid–base regulation (Jensen, 2004).

Erythrocytes are the primary cellular component responsible for gas transport in vertebrate blood. Their structural and functional properties are tightly linked to oxygen transport efficiency and circulatory performance (Snyder and Sheafor, 1999; Wells, 1999; Jensen, 2004). In mammals, erythrocytes are typically anucleate, biconcave cells that lack mitochondria and most organelles (Claver and Quaglia, 2009). In contrast, erythrocytes of non-mammalian vertebrates – including fish, amphibians, reptiles and birds – retain a nucleus and functional organelles, including mitochondria. These nucleated erythrocytes are typically larger and exhibit a more ellipsoidal shape compared with mammalian RBCs (Hartman and Lessler, 1964; Gregory, 2001). They retain the capacity for both glycolytic and oxidative metabolism, and may contribute to systemic physiological processes beyond passive oxygen transport (Stier et al., 2013; Di Giacomo et al., 2015).

The retention of mitochondria in nucleated erythrocytes introduces important functional trade-offs. On one hand, mitochondrial respiration supports intracellular processes such as ion balance and redox homeostasis (Brand and Nicholls, 2011). On the other hand, it implies that erythrocytes consume a fraction of the oxygen they transport, potentially reducing overall transport efficiency (Stier et al., 2013). Additionally, mitochondrial activity can generate reactive oxygen species (ROS), which may affect cellular integrity and haemoglobin function if not properly controlled (Stier et al., 2013; Koch et al., 2021).

Comparative studies indicate that the differences between nucleated and anucleated erythrocytes are linked to the metabolic and thermal strategies of vertebrates (Nikinmaa, 1992; Mauro and Isaacks, 1997; Snyder and Sheafor, 1999; Yap and Zhang, 2021). Mammals benefit from highly specialized erythrocytes optimized for oxygen transport efficiency, whereas ectothermic vertebrates may rely on the functional versatility of nucleated erythrocytes to adjust to changing physiological demands (Snyder and Sheafor, 1999; Stier et al., 2017). Birds, although endothermic, also retain nucleated erythrocytes, highlighting the complexity of the selective pressures shaping erythrocyte evolution.

During erythroblast maturation in mammals, cells typically lose both their nucleus and other organelles, resulting in cells specialized for oxygen transport.

(Moras et al., 2017). Unlike anucleate mammalian erythrocytes, which rely exclusively on anaerobic glycolysis and exhibit high turnover rates, nucleated RBCs tend to have greater cellular longevity, potentially reducing the energetic costs associated with erythropoiesis (Bury et al., 2019; Udriou, 2020). The retention of mitochondria in circulating erythrocytes also provides a minimally invasive opportunity to assess mitochondrial function (defined here as the ability to use O₂ to oxidize substrate to produce ATP and heat) *ex vivo*, specially in wild and free-living animals (Stier et al., 2013; 2017; Nord et al., 2021).

Despite sharing the common function of gas transport, erythrocytes from birds, reptiles, amphibians and fishes exhibit substantial diversity in size, shape and intracellular organization, reflecting both phylogenetic history and physiological constraints. Amphibian erythrocytes are also nucleated and generally exhibit an oval and flattened morphology, and are notable for their large size relative to other vertebrates (Hartman and Lessler, 1964). In some species, cell dimensions may reach up to 70 × 40 µm. Interestingly, a proportion of anucleate erythrocytes, or erythroplastids, has been reported in certain salamanders, indicating that enucleation, although rare, can occur outside mammals under specific conditions (Villolobos et al., 1988).

Reptilian erythrocytes are broadly similar in morphology and function to those of birds, but display greater variability in size and nuclear shape among species (Altland et al., 1962). Notably, reptilian erythrocytes have an exceptionally long lifespan, which can range from several months to over two years (approximately 600–800 days), suggesting reduced turnover rates and distinct strategies of erythropoiesis compared with other vertebrates (Hartman and Lessler, 1964).

In birds, erythrocytes are typically oval and nucleated, with a centrally located nucleus that becomes progressively more condensed as cells age. Haemoglobin is primarily localized within the cytoplasm, although it may also be present within the nucleus. These cells remain metabolically active due to the retention of organelles, despite the high metabolic demands of avian physiology (Isaacks et al., 1977).

Together, these observations highlight the considerable diversity of erythrocyte structure among non-mammalian vertebrates. The retention of the nucleus and

organelles influences both morphology and cellular metabolism, distinguishing these cells from the highly specialized, anucleated erythrocytes of mammals (Hartman and Lessler, 1964; Claver and Quaglia, 2009).

6. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that mitochondrial function in erythrocytes of the tegu lizard *Salvator merianae* varies markedly across the annual cycle, closely tracking seasonal shifts in organismal metabolism. Winter dormancy was characterized by suppression of mitochondrial respiratory flux and increased reliance on glycolytic pathways, while mitochondrial capacity remained largely preserved. In contrast, the reproductive season was associated with elevated oxidative metabolism and higher mitochondrial density in erythrocytes, consistent with elevated energetic demands.

Despite the seasonal increase in mitochondrial respiration, our results do not support a direct contribution of erythrocyte mitochondria to the thermogenic mechanisms underlying reproductive endothermy in tegus. Instead, seasonal variation

in erythrocyte bioenergetics appears to reflect systemic metabolic adjustments and the coordination between oxygen transport and tissue metabolic demand.

Together, these findings identify nucleated erythrocytes as a valuable and minimally invasive model for investigating mitochondrial bioenergetics and seasonal metabolic flexibility, and suggest that key features of mitochondrial regulation during seasonal metabolic transitions may be conserved across vertebrates.

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