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**STABLE ISOTOPE ANALYSIS REVEALS BIASES IN THE
PERFORMANCE OF A MORPHOLOGICAL METHOD TO
DISTINGUISH THE MIGRATORY BEHAVIOUR OF EUROPEAN
ROBINS *ERITHACUS RUBECULA***

***EL ANÁLISIS DE ISÓTOPOS ESTABLES REVELA SESGOS EN EL
FUNCIONAMIENTO DE UN MÉTODO MORFOLÓGICO PARA DIFERENCIAR EL
COMPORTAMIENTO MIGRATORIO DE LOS PETIRROJOS ERITHACUS
RUBECULA***

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1 SUMMARY.- Morphological methods to distinguish avian groups of research interest (*e.g.* sex,
2 population or cryptic species distinction) need to be externally validated to ensure a reliable
3 performance across situations. In this study, we used hydrogen stable isotope ratios of
4 feathers (δ^2H_f) to test the validity of morphological classification functions (MCFs)
5 previously designed to assess the migratory behaviour of European Robins *Erithacus*
6 *rubecula* wintering in southern Iberia. Our results showed that a great number of migrants
7 (mostly females and juveniles) were erroneously assigned as sedentary, which could
8 compromise the reliability of previous ecological studies that made use of these MCFs. The
9 development of improved MCFs or the use of alternative differentiation methods (δ^2H_f) could
10 help us to gain a more realistic insight into the habitat distribution and ecological interactions
11 of sympatric migratory and sedentary robins overwintering in southern Iberia.

12
13 RESUMEN.- Los métodos morfológicos para distinguir grupos de aves con interés de
14 investigación (*e.g.* distinción de sexos, poblaciones o especies crípticas) requieren de
15 validación independiente para asegurar su funcionamiento adecuado de forma consistente. En
16 este estudio, usamos la relación de isótopos estables del hidrógeno en las plumas (δ^2H_f) para
17 comprobar la validez de las funciones de clasificación morfológicas (MCFs) diseñadas con
18 anterioridad para identificar el comportamiento migratorio de los petirrojos *Erithacus*
19 *rubecula* invernantes en el sur ibérico. Los resultados revelaron que un gran número de
20 migrantes (sobre todo hembras y jóvenes) fueron clasificados erróneamente como
21 sedentarios, lo que podría comprometer la fiabilidad de los estudios ecológicos previos que
22 han hecho uso de estas MCFs. El desarrollo de MCFs mejoradas o el uso de métodos de
23 diferenciación alternativos (δ^2H_f) podrían ayudarnos a obtener una idea más realista acerca de
24 la distribución entre hábitats e interacciones ecológicas de los petirrojos migratorios y
25 sedentarios que invernan en simpatría en el sur ibérico.

26

27 Discriminant function analyses (DFA) -and other similar statistical approaches- based on
28 avian morphological traits are a readily accessible method to separate morphologically
29 discrete groups of birds (Ellrich *et al.*, 2010; Tellería *et al.*, 2013). They are particularly
30 useful to identify males and females in monochromatic -but still morphologically dimorphic-
31 species (Arizaga *et al.*, 2008; Bertolero *et al.*, 2016). With mixed success, they have also
32 been implemented in the identification of cryptic species (Wilson *et al.*, 2012; Gordo *et al.*,
33 2017), as well as to identify populations within the same species differing in morphological
34 traits (Wennerberg *et al.*, 2002; Maggini *et al.*, 2016). In many cases, morphology is now
35 clearly outweighed by more novel techniques (Webster *et al.* 2002). For example, molecular
36 genetics can provide unambiguous sex and species identifications (Griffiths *et al.*, 1998;
37 Bensch *et al.*, 2002), while methods based on bird morphology are normally subject to
38 variable degree of uncertainty in their assignments. In any case, under budget constraints,
39 logistical limitations (e.g. permits for biological samples collection) and/or when these
40 alternative techniques do not substantially improve the classification potential of
41 morphology, the latter still can be the most cost-effective way to satisfactorily differentiate
42 among avian groups of research interest (De la Hera *et al.*, 2012). In any case, given the
43 potential uncertainty associated with the use of morphology, it is essential to validate the
44 reliability of morphological methods using independent approaches, which can be very useful
45 to reveal previously unnoticed flaws in their performance.

46 The study of the sympatric interactions between local sedentary birds and
47 overwintering conspecific migrants in southern Iberia has greatly benefitted from the use of
48 morphological classification functions (MCFs) that are one of the outcomes of DFA
49 (StatSoft, 2004). It is well known that natural selection favours longer and more pointed
50 wings in migrants compared to sedentary counterparts (Piersma *et al.*, 2005), and this
51 variation is sometimes large enough for developing effective MCFs to distinguish each other.
52 For instance, MCFs built from Iberian breeding populations of known migratory behaviour
53 provided a 90 and an 80 percent of correct assignments of the migratory behaviour for the
54 Eurasian Blackcap (*Sylvia atricapilla*) and European Robin (*Erithacus rubecula*),
55 respectively (Pérez-Tris *et al.*, 1999; Pérez-Tris *et al.*, 2000). However, these MCFs have
56 only been optimized for distinguishing among a few Iberian breeding populations, and these
57 constitute only a small fraction of the wintering population occurring in Southern Iberia.
58 Consequently, whether these MCFs can successfully be applied to distinguish among
59 wintering birds of unknown origin needs to be explicitly corroborated (Ellrich *et al.*, 2010).

60 Most of the migratory blackcaps and robins wintering in Iberia originate from further
61 Northeast in Europe, so they would have a more migratory-like morphology than any Iberian
62 counterpart (Cramp, 1992; Korner-Nievergelt *et al.*, 2014). This should ensure an even better
63 performance of these MCFs for the migratory group when they are applied to seasonally
64 sympatric populations wintering in Southern Iberia. This has been confirmed for blackcaps
65 (De la Hera *et al.*, 2007) and validated using a well-known pattern of stable isotope variation
66 for the Palaearctic region (De la Hera *et al.*, 2012). However, the validity of the MCFs
67 designed for distinguishing between migratory and sedentary robins remains to be tested
68 using an independent control. Unlike blackcaps, robins show a great within-population
69 variation in wing morphology, with male and adult robins having on average longer wings
70 than females and juveniles, respectively (Ellrich *et al.*, 2010; De la Hera *et al.*, 2014). In this
71 respect, there are two main concerns that could affect the performance of MCFs during
72 winter. First, female and juvenile robins are more prone to migrate (Adriaensen & Dhondt,
73 1990) and hence more likely to reach southern Iberia for overwintering, where their short
74 wings might overlap in size with those of local sedentary robins, particularly with males
75 (Ellrich *et al.*, 2010). On the other hand, juveniles were overrepresented in the Iberian robin
76 sample used to develop these MCFs, and the sex ratio of the sample was unknown (Pérez-
77 Tris *et al.*, 2000), which raises the possibility that the error rate would change if testing a
78 wintering population with a different population composition.

79 To clarify the accuracy of the MCFs proposed by Pérez-Tris *et al.* (2000) for
80 distinguishing between sedentary and migratory robins during the wintering period in
81 southern Iberia, we took advantage of the predicted geographic variation in the hydrogen
82 stable isotope signals of robin feathers (δ^2H_f ; Catry *et al.*, 2016). We first characterized
83 isotopically the sedentary robin population of research interest in southern Iberia, as well as
84 one migratory population in northern Iberia. We then made predictions on how the δ^2H_f of
85 wintering robins, classified as migratory or sedentary by the MCFs, should vary in relation to
86 the values of these two breeding populations of known migratory behaviour if the MCFs
87 worked well (see premises 1 and 2 below).

88 We determined the δ^2H_f signature of the sedentary population occurring in the Campo
89 de Gibraltar (Cádiz, South Spain) by sampling one tail feather (one rectrix number 5; Jenni &
90 Winkler, 1994) from robins captured during August 2006 (after moulting period) and May
91 2014 (before moulting period). Robins were trapped in two woodland sites (36°09'48"N,
92 5°34'56"W and 36°09'54"N, 5°34'55"W) located in 'Los Alcornocales' Natural Park. In
93 parallel, we also sampled feathers from robins breeding in Álava (Northern Spain

94 42°54'02"N, 2°32'07"W), where the robin population is considered migratory (De la Hera *et*
95 *al.*, 2014).

96 On the other hand, wintering robins in Gibraltar were trapped between mid-November
97 and mid-February during two different winters (2006-07 and 2013-14). Winter sampling took
98 place in the two abovementioned woodland localities, as well as in two nearby shrubland
99 areas (36°09'03"N, 5°37'54"W and 36°05'11"N, 5°42'09"W) that host robins only during the
100 winter period (Tellería *et al.*, 2001). Each trapped robin was aged as adult or juvenile using
101 plumage characteristics (Jenni & Winkler, 1994). We also recorded the eighth primary (P8)
102 length (being P1 the innermost primary) and the so-called wing formula (Svensson, 1992):
103 the primary distances of the 9 longest primaries (excluding the vestigial outermost primary:
104 P10). 'Primary distance' was defined as the distance from the tip of each primary to the tip of
105 the longest primary with the wing folded, with a value of zero for the primary (or primaries)
106 constituting the wingtip. All morphological measurements were taken by two standardized
107 ringers in 2006-07 (IdH, JP-T) and only by one of these in 2013-14 (IdH). Additionally, we
108 used a syringe to extract a sample of blood from the jugular vein that was used for molecular
109 sexing (Griffiths *et al.*, 1998), and collected one rectrix number 5. Note that feathers of both
110 breeding and wintering sampled birds had grown in the same season: the previous summer
111 (either 2006 or 2013), providing thus comparable feather samples with their corresponding
112 winter.

113 Feather samples were sent to the Colorado Plateau Stable Isotope Laboratory
114 (<http://www.isotope.nau.edu/>), where their hydrogen isotopic ratios were measured by
115 coupled pyrolysis/isotope-ratio mass spectrometry. δ^2H_f values were expressed in units per
116 mil (‰), and normalized according to the VSMOW-SLAP scale using the values obtained for
117 three keratin standards (Keratin-SC Lot SJ, Caribou hoof and Kudo horn). The δ^2H_f values of
118 20 individuals were measured a second time to estimate analytical repeatability (Lessells &
119 Boag, 1987), which was highly significant ($r_i = 0.98$; $F_{19,20} = 130.9$; $P < 0.001$) supporting the
120 reliability of obtained δ^2H_f measurements.

121 We used the same DFA that gave rise to the MCFs detailed in Pérez-Tris *et al.* (2000)
122 to classify as either migratory or sedentary the 149 robins captured during winters 2006-07
123 and 2013-14. From this DFA, we obtained, for each wintering individual, the probability of
124 being migratory ($P_{C_{mig.}}$) or sedentary ($P_{C_{sed.}}$) according to its morphology (StatSoft, 2004).
125 The sum of $P_{C_{mig.}}$ plus $P_{C_{sed.}}$ equals 1, so that the migratory behaviour assigned to each
126 particular robin will be that for which the P_c is higher, which accurately matches with the
127 outcome of MCFs assignments (Pérez-Tris *et al.*, 2000). We then tested the reliability of

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128 these MCFs by comparing the δ^2H_f values of the wintering robins assigned as migratory
129 ($P_{cmig.} > 0.5$) or sedentary ($P_{cmig.} < 0.5$) with the δ^2H_f values of robins captured in Álava
130 (migratory) and Gibraltar (sedentary) during the breeding period. Given the lack of
131 homogeneity of variances between the four groups of birds, we used Welch t-tests with
132 separate variance estimates to make comparisons among them (Fig. 1). We predicted that a
133 good performance of the MCFs will be supported by the fulfilment of two premises: 1)
134 wintering robins assigned as sedentary by the MCFs and breeders captured in Gibraltar would
135 have similar δ^2H_f scores; and 2) the δ^2H_f values of wintering robins assigned as migratory
136 should be at least similar to Álava breeders or smaller (reflecting a more Northern origin;
137 Hobson *et al.*, 2004). This last assumption is based on the observation that most of the
138 migratory robins wintering in Gibraltar should come from farther North-Northeast than Álava
139 (Bueno, 1998; Korner-Nievergelt, *et al.* 2014), since the breeding densities of the species
140 south of Álava are relatively low compared to North and Central European migratory
141 populations, and sedentariness is to be expected in many Iberian populations (Purroy, 2003;
142 Tellería, 2012).

143 δ^2H_f values greatly varied among the four groups of robins compared, (Fig. 1). Thus,
144 robins captured in Gibraltar during the breeding period showed higher δ^2H_f scores than
145 conspecifics captured in Álava ($t_{40} = -8.64$, $P < 0.001$; Fig. 1), with their ranges of values
146 overlapping only very marginally (δ^2H_f range for Gibraltar: [-40.4, -16.3]; δ^2H_f range for
147 Álava: [-82.5, -40.3]). Out of the 149 wintering robins captured in Gibraltar region, 53 were
148 assigned as migratory and 96 as sedentary by the MCFs. Wintering robins assigned as
149 migratory by the MCFs showed the most negative δ^2H_f scores of the four groups for
150 comparison (Fig. 1). These values were significantly lower than those displayed by the
151 wintering robins assigned as sedentary ($t_{147} = -2.76$, $P = 0.006$), Gibraltar breeders ($t_{75} =$
152 10.26 , $P < 0.001$) or Álava breeders ($t_{69} = 2.54$, $P = 0.013$; Fig. 1). However, birds classified
153 as sedentary by the MCFs also differed markedly in their δ^2H_f values from the local birds
154 captured during summer in Gibraltar ($t_{118} = 5.42$, $P < 0.001$), contrary to what would be
155 expected if the MCFs were operating correctly. In contrast, their δ^2H_f values were similar to
156 the ones displayed by the robins breeding in Álava ($t_{112} = 0.15$, $P = 0.877$; Fig. 1).

157 Given the marginal overlap in the δ^2H_f values between robins breeding in Álava and
158 Gibraltar, we decided to use -40‰ as an arbitrary δ^2H_f threshold to separate sedentary from
159 migratory robins in our study site during winter and to analyse in further detail the
160 performance of the MCFs. This -40‰ threshold should tell apart most of the sedentary
161 population in our study site (mean \pm SD for Gibraltar breeders, -27.59 ± 6.62 , $N = 24$), but it

162 is likely to assign erroneously to the sedentary group some North and Central Iberian
163 migrants that would show similar or less negative values than Alava breeders (mean \pm SD for
164 Álava breeders, -53.75 ± 12.75 , $N = 18$). According to the probability density functions of
165 Álava and Gibraltar breeders, we would expect that 14 of the wintering robins with less
166 negative values than -40% were actually migrants. Accordingly, the analyses shown below
167 should be taken with caution..

168 Using abovementioned criteria, we estimated that the rate of correct classifications of
169 the MCFs was 92% for sedentary birds (3 erroneous assignments out of 38 birds with $\delta^2H_f >$ -
170 40% ; see right quadrant in Fig. 2) and a 45% for migrants (61 errors out of 111 birds with
171 $\delta^2H_f < -40\%$; left quadrant in Fig. 2), with significant differences in the error rate between
172 populations (Chi-squared: $\chi^2_1 = 25.6$, $P < 0.001$). Thus, the MCFs worked better than random
173 detecting sedentary birds (Chi-squared: $\chi^2_1 = 26.95$, $P < 0.001$), but did not perform
174 differently from chance for migrants (Chi-squared: $\chi^2_1 = 1.09$, $P = 0.296$). Our data also
175 revealed clear age and sex-related biases in the distribution of the MCFs errors. The three
176 sedentary birds classified erroneously as migrants were all males (two adults and one
177 juvenile; Fig. 2), while the 61 migrants incorrectly assigned to the sedentary group were all
178 females or juveniles (only 7 males within the 40 errors made on juveniles, and none of the 17
179 migratory adult males was misclassified; see Fig. 2). Among the migrants wrongly assigned
180 as sedentary ($n = 61$) errors were not homogeneously distributed between sex and age
181 categories (Chi-squared: $\chi^2_3 = 17.11$, $P < 0.001$).

182 Our results showed that the mean δ^2H_f values of wintering robins assigned as
183 sedentary by the MCFs were lower than those shown by Gibraltar breeders (Fig. 1), which
184 refuted one of the main assumptions that supported the validity of these MCFs. In general,
185 this classification method worked well to identify sedentary robins (92% of correct
186 assignments), but its performance was virtually random on migrants (55% of them were
187 incorrectly classified as sedentary). MCFs are based on the existing differences in wing size
188 and shape between migratory and sedentary robins (Pérez-Tris *et al.*, 2000), but both
189 populations show marked sex and age-related variation in these characteristics that caused a
190 relatively large morphological overlap between populations. This situation was
191 further aggravated by the fact that the migratory population occurring during winter in
192 Campo de Gibraltar region is overrepresented by juveniles (Chi-squared: $\chi^2_1 = 6.19$, $P =$
193 0.013) and females (Chi-squared: $\chi^2_1 = 5.23$, $P = 0.022$) when compared to the sedentary
194 fraction, and these two population groups have more chances of being misclassified as
195 sedentary according to their wing morphology (Fig. 2). Such circumstance, in combination

196 with a potential bias in the representation of the different age and sex categories in the sample
197 of Iberian breeders used to develop the MCFs, might have led to an unrealistic 80% of correct
198 assignments (Pérez-Tris *et al.*, 2000) that is effectively less when applied to the wintering
199 population. New MCFs that incorporated the sex of the individuals in their construction –
200 something initially overlooked in the development of the original MCFs– would significantly
201 increase their ability to distinguish migratory and sedentary robins in their sympatric
202 wintering grounds.

203 Supporting this idea, updated MCFs obtained from a new DFA that considered the sex
204 of the individuals and was developed using the -supposedly- 111 migratory and 38 sedentary
205 robins from our winter sample (Table 1), assigned correctly over 93% of individuals to their
206 respective groups (Wilks' Lambda: 0.39; $F_{11,137} = 19.7$, $P < 0.001$). This result supports the
207 view that morphological characterisation can still be a useful tool for discriminating between
208 migratory and sedentary robins, under the condition that individuals need to be sexed first.
209 However, we discourage a broad use of these newly proposed MCFs before their
210 performance is properly tested using independent samples. Likewise, we acknowledge that
211 our MCFs are based on the study of only two breeding populations, so that a more extensive
212 sampling of Iberian Robins would be necessary to extrapolate the classification method to
213 other wintering areas of Robin sympatric occurrence and to have a better characterization of
214 the isotopic signals of Iberian migrants.

215 Our study is another good example of the potential problems that researchers can find
216 when applying morphology-based differentiation methods on populations different from the
217 ones used to develop the technique (Ellrich *et al.*, 2010). Isotopic signatures revealed that the
218 MCFs available to distinguish migratory and sedentary robins in sympatric wintering grounds
219 of southern Iberia did not work properly, but overestimated the number of local sedentary
220 birds. This suggests that previously described between-habitat patterns of sedentary robins in
221 Gibraltar region might be biased by the misclassification of many migratory females and
222 juveniles as sedentary, providing a misleading picture of how these birds are spatially
223 distributed during winter in southern Iberia (Pérez-Tris *et al.*, 2000). Values of δ^2H_f seem to
224 be a more reliable method than morphology to assess the migratory behaviour of robins
225 (although this is not the case in other species; De la Hera *et al.*, 2012), and could be used to
226 re-assess whether sedentary robins are really outcompeted from woodlands during winter by
227 arriving migratory counterparts (as MCFs initially suggested; Tellería *et al.*, 2001; Tellería &
228 Pérez-Tris, 2004) or, alternatively, they are able to remain in their breeding habitats year-
229 round as it is the case for other species (i.e. Blackcaps; Pérez-Tris & Tellería, 2002). This is

230 an important question in areas where individuals with different migratory behaviour occur in
231 sympatry during winter, since it can help us to assess the vulnerability of some of these
232 wintering populations that are currently facing a drastic decline as a consequence of global
233 warming and other anthropogenic alterations (Herrero & Zavala, 2015; Tellería, 2015).

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235

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336 116.

337 Table 1. Classification functions obtained from a Discriminant Function Analysis that
 338 considered the 149 wintering robins whose migratory behaviour was estimated using δ^2H_f
 339 values. New individuals will be assigned to the group (migratory or sedentary) for which the
 340 corresponding function provides the highest value. For each individual, equations are solved
 341 by adding the value of the constant to the sum of products of each coefficient multiplied by
 342 its morphological trait. Males and females were coded as 1 and 2, respectively.

343 *Tabla 1. Funciones de clasificación obtenidas a partir de un Análisis de Funciones*
 344 *Discriminantes que consideró 149 petirrojos invernantes cuyo comportamiento migratorio*
 345 *fue estimado empleando valores de δ^2H_f . Los nuevos individuos serán asignados al grupo*
 346 *(migratorio o sedentario) para el que su función correspondiente proporciona el valor más*
 347 *alto. Para cada individuo, las ecuaciones se resuelven sumando los valores de la constante a*
 348 *la suma de los productos de cada coeficiente multiplicado por el valor correspondiente del*
 349 *rasgo morfológico. Machos y hembras fueron codificados como 1 y 2, respectivamente.*

350

	Migratory	Sedentary
Constant	-1036.74	-939.15
Sex	89.11	83.86
P8 length	35.30	33.58
Primary distance to P9	-4.14	-3.36
Primary distance to P8	21.88	21.63
Primary distance to P7	3.85	4.05
Primary distance to P6	4.90	7.83
Primary distance to P5	-5.87	-6.02
Primary distance to P4	13.72	11.72
Primary distance to P3	-4.57	-5.02
Primary distance to P2	-4.93	-5.05
Primary distance to P1	2.41	3.21

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354 **Figure legends.**

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356 Figure 1. Variation in δ^2H_f values between robins captured during breeding in Álava and
357 Gibraltar that are known to be migratory and sedentary (left quadrant), respectively; and
358 values for the wintering robins assigned as migratory ($P_{cmig} > 0.5$) or sedentary ($P_{cmig} < 0.5$)
359 by their morphology (right quadrant). Graph shows medians (black dots), percentiles 25-75
360 (boxes) and percentiles 1-99 (whiskers).

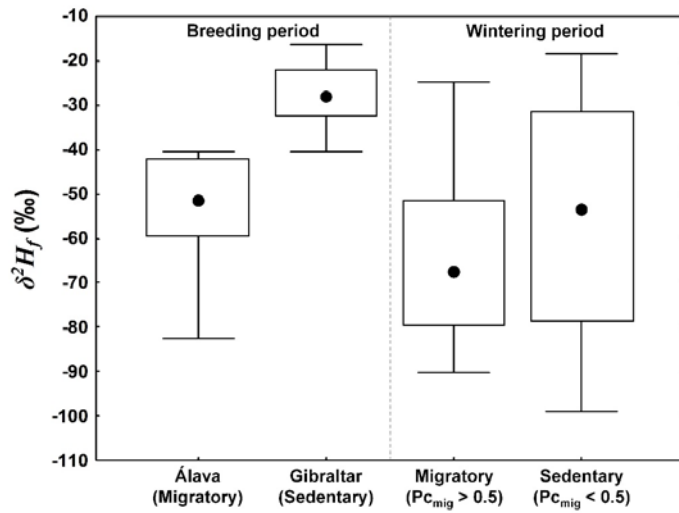
361 *Figura 1. Variación en los valores de δ^2H_f entre petirrojos capturados durante la*
362 *reproducción en Álava y Gibraltar para los que se sabe que son migratorios y sedentarios*
363 *(cuadrante izquierdo), respectivamente; y valores para los petirrojos invernantes asignados*
364 *como migratorios ($P_{cmig} > 0.5$) y sedentarios ($P_{cmig} < 0.5$) a partir de su morfología*
365 *(cuadrante derecho). La gráfica muestra medianas (puntos negros), percentiles 25-75*
366 *(rectángulos) y percentiles 1-99 (segmento de líneas).*

367

368 Figure 2. Variation in the posterior classification probabilities of being migratory ($P_{cmig.}$)
369 between different age and sex categories of wintering robins assigned as migratory or
370 sedentary according to their δ^2H_f values. Individuals above the dashed line ($P_{cmig.} > 0.5$) were
371 assigned as migratory by the MCFs, while individuals below it ($P_{cmig.} < 0.5$) were classified as
372 sedentary.

373 *Figura 2. Variación en las probabilidades posteriores de clasificación de ser migratorio*
374 *($P_{cmig.}$) entre diferentes categorías de edad y sexo de los petirrojos invernantes asignados*
375 *como migratorios o sedentarios de acuerdo a sus valores de δ^2H_f . Los individuos sobre la*
376 *línea discontinua ($P_{cmig.} > 0.5$) fueron asignados como migradores por las MCFs, mientras*
377 *que los individuos bajo esa misma línea ($P_{cmig.} < 0.5$) fueron clasificados como sedentarios.*

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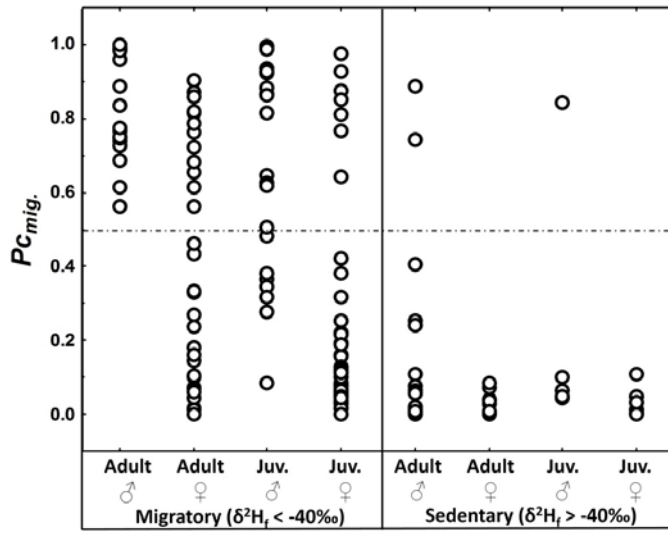


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De la Hera et al. Figure 1. δ^2H_f values and the migratory behaviour of robins.



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De la Hera et al. Figure 2. δ^2H_f values and the migratory behaviour of robins.

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