Environmental drivers behind the genetic differentiation in mountain chickadees (*Poecile*

*gambeli)*

Running title: Population genetics of mountain chickadees

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**Abstract**

Anthropogenic climate change has a large impact on wildlife populations and the scale of the impacts have been increasing. In this study, we utilised ddRAD sequence data to investigate genetic divergence and identify the environmental drivers of genetic differentiation between 12 populations of mountain chickadees, family Paridae, sampled across North America. To delineate populations and identify potential zones of hybridisation, we conducted a discriminant analysis of principal components (DAPC), admixture analysis, and calculated pairwise Fst values. The DAPC revealed four clusters: southern California, eastern Rocky Mountains, northwestern Rocky Mountains and Oregon/northern California. We then used BayeScEnv to highlight significant outlier SNPs associated with the five environmental variables. We identified over 150 genes linked to outlier SNPs associated with more than 15 pathways, including stress response and circadian rhythm. We also found a strong signal of isolation by distance. Local temperature was highly correlated with genetic distance. Maxent simulations showed a northward range shift over the next 50 years and a decrease in suitable habitat, highlighting the need for immediate conservation action.

**Keywords:** climate change; ddRAD; gene-environment interaction; *Poecile gambeli*; population genetics; species distribution models

**Introduction**

Anthropogenic climate change is increasingly affecting ecosystems worldwide. The steady

increase in temperature means and variability can affect the functioning of organisms and

alter ecosystems that have existed on this planet for millennia. While most ecosystems are

sensitive to changes in the environment, mountain ecosystems are particularly vulnerable to

environmental changes (Beniston, 2003). Owing to increasing temperatures and reduced snow

cover, organisms in mountainous regions may shift their elevational range to higher altitudes,

potentially leading to population fragmentation and extinction (Calkins et al., 2012; McDonald &

Brown, 1992; Parmesan, 2006; Wilson et al., 2007). Climate change also significantly affects

phenology, such as the timing of flowering or breeding (Walther et al., 2002). The extent and

effects of these changes are a current area of study, and the pace at which changes occur

requires commensurate efforts in the form of conservation research to prevent the breakdown

of ecosystems and extinction of organisms (Christmann & Menor, 2021; Payne et al., 2020).

The North American landscape is full of physical barriers that affect species dispersal, and

therefore causing genetic divergence (Antonelli, 2017; Boutilier et al., 2014; Machado et al.,

2018). In addition, the wide range of environmental conditions across the continent makes it

an ideal area to study the effect of the environment on genetic differentiation. In particular,

species with low migration rates could experience significant divergence (Keyghobadi et al.,

1999). Therefore, it is crucial to study the population genetics of these species to investigate

their resilience to climate change (Hanski et al., 2006). Despite being able to traverse long

distances, birds are unable to pass through certain barriers, makes them a good model for

studying the effects of physical barriers on divergence (Greenwood & Harvey, 1982).

The mountain chickadee, *Poecile gambeli*, is found across western North America and

primarily occupies coniferous forests. As many as seven subspecies have been described and

are divided into two mtDNA groups, eastern and western, with limited contemporary gene

flow observed between them (Hindley et al., 2018; Spellman et al., 2007). A recent study

using microsatellite data identified Washington as a potential contact zone between two

clades (Hindley et al., 2018). Ubiquitous across the west, the mountain chickadee has limited

migratory capabilities, and high philopatry makes it an ideal candidate for studying the effects

of geography and climate on genetic differentiation.

In this study, we examined the population structure of mountain chickadees from populations

across the range using double digest restriction-site associated DNA, ddRAD, data. In

addition, we aimed to answer the following questions: (1) What are the environmental drivers

of genetic differentiation? Previous studies using mtDNA have shown that isolation by

distance influences differentiation (Hindley et al., 2018); however, more information is

needed on the effects of other variables such as temperature and precipitation. (2) Which

genes or pathways are undergoing selection across populations? Given the pace of climate

change, it is essential to investigate the pathways undergoing selection to identify gene-

environment interactions. (3) How much will the changing climate affect the habitat of

mountain chickadees over the next 50 years? Although we expect a northward shift in habitat

or a shift in elevational range, understanding how a common species is affected by climate

change can provide valuable insights to inform conservation decisions on other co-distributed

species.

**Methods**

*Sampling and DNA extraction*

A total of 94 mountain chickadee samples were collected from 12 locations (Figure 1, Table

1). Birds were caught using mist nets and either blood or feather samples were collected.

Following Aljanabi et al. (1997), we used ~40 ul of blood to extract DNA from samples.

Library preparation for ddRAD sequencing was done at the University of Laval using the

enzymes *Pst*l, *Nsi*l, and *Msp*l and sequencing was done at Genome Quebec on an Illumina

NovaSeq 6000 S4 PE100.

*Bioinformatic pipeline*

Sabre was used to demultiplex the ddRAD data. Adapters were removed and fastq files were

trimmed to 80 bp using Cutadapt (Martin, 2011). The fastq files with the trimmed sequences

were aligned to a black-capped chickadee reference genome provided by Scott Taylor

(University of Colorado, Boulder) with BWA-MEM using default settings (Branch et al., 2022;

Li & Durbin, 2009; Wagner et al., 2020). The resulting bam files were used to identify SNPs with

gstacks. The gstacks output was used to create a vcf file and calculate summary statistics with

populations using the default parameters while limiting the SNPs to one per locus (Catchen et

al., 2013). SNPs were subsequently filtered using Vcftools to keep bi-allelic SNPs with a

minor allele frequency ≥ 0.05 (Danecek et al., 2011). SNPs with > 50% missing data and

individuals with > 30% missing data were excluded. The filtered vcf files contained 28,600

sites and 61 individuals from 11 populations; no individuals from NM remained after

filtering.

*Population analyses*

To analyse the population structure, we conducted a DAPC (discriminant analysis of principal

components) in R using the packages 'adegenet','ape', 'vcfR', and 'ade4' (Dray & Dufour,

2007; Jombart, 2008; Knaus & Grünwald, 2016; Paradis & Schliep, 2018). DAPC accounts for both

within- and between-group differences when clustering individuals. After clustering, we

plotted the linear discriminants in 2d and 3d plots using the packages 'ggplot2' and 'plotly'

(Sievert, 2020; Wilkinson, 2011).

To identify the number of ancestral populations, we used ADMIXTURE with default settings

iteratively for K=1-7 (Alexander et al., 2009). Linkage disequilibrium pruning and vcf-to-bed

conversion were performed using PLINK (Purcell et al., 2007).

Pairwise Fst values between populations were calculated with Arlequin using the default

settings (Excoffier & Lischer, 2010). Vcf-to-arp conversion was done using PGDSpider2 (Lischer

& Excoffier, 2011).

*Outlier loci and environmental variation*

To identify the candidate loci under selection, we used BayeScan (Foll & Gaggiotti, 2008).

BayeScan is a Bayesian algorithm based on the multinomial-Dirchlet model, which identifies

loci under selection using differences in allele frequencies between populations. We set the

pr_odds value at 350, with a total of 1,00,000 iterations. The pr_odds value defines the

likelihood of the neutral model compared with the selection model.

To identify divergence associated with environmental variation, we used BayeScEnv for five

environmental variables: temperature, precipitation, altitude, temperature seasonality and

precipitation seasonality (Villemereuil & Gaggiotti, 2015). BayeScEnv, which is based on the F-

model, detects local adaptation linked to a given environmental variable using Bayesian

methods. In this study, we set the pr_jump value at 0.05 with a total of 50,000 runs. The

pr_jump value is similar to the pr_odds value used in BayeScan. Using the 'sp' and 'raster'

packages, we extracted 30s resolution from https://www.worldclim.org/ for the following

environmental variables: Annual Mean Temperature (BIO1), Temperature Seasonality

(stdev×100)(BIO4), Annual Precipitation (BIO11), Precipitation Seasonality (Coefficient of

Variation) (BIO11), and Elevation from the SRTM data (Bivand et al., 2013; Fick & Hijmans,

2017; Hijmans, 2020). The environmental data were standardised before the BayeScEnv

analysis.

To test for isolation by distance and the effect of the above environmental variables on

genetic differentiation, we conducted Mantel and partial Mantel tests using GenAlEx and the

R package 'vegan' (Dixon, 2003; Mantel, 1967; Peakall & Smouse, 2012). Mantel tests are

commonly used in population genetics to test for correlation between two matrices, while

partial Mantel tests use a third matrix to account for another variable (Diniz-Filho et al.,

2013).

*Genes of interest*

We used the gff file for black-capped chickadees provided by Scott Taylor to identify genes

under selection and investigate gene–environment interactions. We ran a custom R script to

identify genes present within 100 kb of the outlier loci from the BayeScan/BayeScEnv

analyses. Subsequently, to identify the pathways and functions associated with these genes,

we ran a gene ontology with ShinyGO using a human and zebra finch gene set. The genes

were also analysed individually (Ge et al., 2019).

*Species distribution models*

To understand the distribution of the species in the past and future, we created species

distribution models for the current distribution, the last glacial maxima, and four

Representative Concentration Pathways (RCP) in 2050 and 2070. RCPs describe different

climatic futures depending on the emission of greenhouse gases with the four main RCPs

being RCP2.6, RCP4.5, RCP6, and RCP8.6 (van Vuuren et al., 2011).

We used the Maxent algorithm in the 'Wallace' package (Kass et al., 2018). This algorithm

uses occurrence data in conjunction with environmental layers to provide a potential

distribution for a species. Presence data were obtained from iNaturalist observations over a 13

year period from 2010-2022 (GBIF.org, 2022) which we spatially thinned using a 10 km

threshold. These points were then partitioned into six clusters using the random k-fold method

(Aiello-Lammens et al., 2015). Using these 5330 points, we created a SDM with 14

environmental variables.

We tested 12 models: linear (L), quadratic (Q), hinge (H), and linear-quadratic-hinge (LQH),

with a regularization multiplier between 1-3 using a step value of 1. Model selection was done

using AICc and AUC values (Kass et al., 2021; Phillips, 2017). The trained models were

projected onto the LGM and RCP scenarios using environmental layers obtained from

http://www.paleoclim.org and CCSM4, respectively using a 10% minimum training presence

threshold (Brown et al., 2018; Hill, 2015; Karger et al., 2017; Pisias & Moore, 1981).

## Results

*Population structure*

We looked at over 28,500 loci in 61 individuals from 11 populations after filtering. Prior to

filtering, there were over 1,000,000 SNPs for 94 individuals from 12 populations. The DAPC,

consistent with Hindley et al. (2018), revealed four distinct clusters: southern CA; northern

CA/southern OR; eastern Rockies (MT, UT, SAB); and northwestern Rockies (WA, BCR,

FTSJ, PG, NWBC) (Figure 2a). The first three linear discriminants (LD) explained 98.5% of

the variance, while the fourth explained approximately 1.5%. Pairwise LD plots (Figure 2b)

accounted for the effect of altitude on genetic differentiation.

As ADMIXTURE does not predict the K value, we ran the analysis for K=1-7 (Figure 3a-b).

Figure 3(b) shows the CV errors for each K value, where K=1-3 are strongly supported (CV

error 0.668-0.696). K=4-6 coincide with the DAPC despite having a slightly higher CV error

(0.758-1.026). For K=4, the SCA population splits from the SOR/NCA population to form a

separate cluster consistent with the DAPC analysis. At K=5 WA separates from the other

northwestern Rocky populations and BCR individuals and three FTSJ individuals show

admixture with WA.

The pairwise Fst values, consistent with the DAPC, showed four broad clusters, with the SCA

population having the highest Fst values between every pair (Figure 4). The p-values were

significant for most cases, except those that included NWBC, PG, or SAB populations.

Within the northwestern Rockies group, WA was significantly different from all of the other

populations except PG. Pairwise Fst values ranged from 0.02 to 0.37, the highest significant

value is seen between BCR-SCA while the smallest are between the BCR-FTSJ and UT-MT

populations.

*Outlier loci and gene-environment analysis*

To identify areas of genomic divergence and their association with environmental factors, we

used BayeScan and BayeScEnv, two commonly used genome scan programs (Foll & Gaggiotti,

2008; Villemereuil & Gaggiotti, 2015). Outlier loci associated with temperature (Temp), altitude

(Alt), precipitation seasonality (PS), temperature seasonality (TS), and precipitation (Prec)

were identified using BayeScEnv, whereas BayeScan was used to identify all possible

outliers, regardless of their association with environmental variables.

We identified 2251 outlier loci at a false discovery rate (FDR) of 0.0001 using BayeScan,

despite using a conservative model with a pr_odds value of 350 (Figure 5a). Several SNPs

had a false discovery rate of 0, which was converted to $10e^{-10}$ for visualisation. Similarly, the

BayeScEnv analysis, with an FDR of 0.0001, showed 1564 outlier SNPs associated with

temperature, 2060 with temperature seasonality, 805 with precipitation, 1090 with

precipitation seasonality, and 1606 with altitude (Figure 5b-f). Several SNPs had a false

discovery rate of 0, which was converted to $10e^{-6}$ for visualisation. We used different values

for visualisation between the BayeScan and BayeScEnv analysis due to several SNPs having

FDRs of $10e^{-6}$ in the former.

To test whether the large number of outlier loci was due to the isolated SCA population, we

ran the same tests for pairs of the identified DAPC clusters and with all populations except for

SCA. We found a significant decrease in the number of outlier loci identified in the pairwise

cluster tests. The decrease differed amongst clusters, but the number of outlier loci ranged

from 4-800. In the case of precipitation, the outliers ranged from 30-500 compared to 805.

However, there was no change when we repeated the analysis with every population

excluding the SCA population.

We performed Mantel and partial Mantel tests to investigate the possibility of isolation by

distance and the effect of the aforementioned environmental variables on divergence.

Geographic distance ($R_{xy}$= 0.54) was most highly correlated with genetic distance, followed

by temperature ($R_{xy}$= 0.40) (Figure 6a-b). All the results were statistically significant (p <

0.0003). The partial Mantel tests highlighted a similar pattern; however, when the z-axis was

either temperature, temperature seasonality, or geographic distance; the results for

precipitation seasonality did not meet the cut-off criterion of p = 0.05. In addition, the results

of temperature seasonality when the z-axis was geographic distance did not meet the cut-off

criteria.

*Genes of interest*

We identified 181 genes within 100 kb of temperature-associated SNPs and 189 genes from

the BayeScan outlier SNPs. Genes of interest were analysed only for these two cases because

of the overlap in SNPs across environmental variables. ShinyGO identified 15 significant

pathways (Supplementary, gene_SuppInfo.xlsx) for the BayeScan genes, which included

thermogenesis (p = $4.58e^{-5}$).

Subsequently, we grouped the genes based on their biological functions using ShinyGO (Ge

et al., 2019). The BayeScan analysis revealed 37 genes associated with response to stress, 22

genes related to immune system processes, and three genes associated with circadian rhythm.

CSNK1D, a clock gene, was one of the genes associated with circadian rhythm, which has

been shown to play a role in migration (Steinmeyer et al., 2009). In addition, several genes

affecting immune response, response to external stimuli, and growth were found to be

associated with outlier SNPs. We also identified genes associated with the reproductive

system in all the analyses. The JAM3 gene is known to play a role in spermatogenesis and the

RNF212 gene has been shown to influence meiotic recombination. A similar grouping of

genes was observed using the BayeScEnv temperature-associated SNPs, with the number of

genes associated with each function differing.

We obtained similar results when using the zebra finch genome, although the number of

unmapped genes was higher than that in the human genome (BayeScan – 137 vs 87

unmapped, BayeScEnv – 108 vs 64 unmapped).

*Species distribution models*

We created species distribution models to understand the effects of climate change on

mountain chickadee habitat (Figure 7). We ran 12 models with a regularisation multiplier

between 1-3 with a step value of one. While all models had an AUC value of 0.93 or above,

the hinge model with regularisation multiplier 1 was chosen as the best model based on AICc

and AUC values.

The SDMs show a significant decrease in suitable habitat over the next five decades across all

RCP scenarios except RCP2.6, which is an ideal projection of future climate. In addition, a

northward shift in habitat is also observed. The SDM for the last glacial maximum is

consistent with previous studies, with populations present near the coast and extending into

Mexico (Manthey et al., 2012) (Figure 7d). The SDMs for other RCPs, response curves, and

model statistics are available in the supplementary material.

**Discussion**

In this study, apart from delineating population structure, we aimed to answer the following

questions: (1) What are the environmental drivers of genetic differentiation? (2) Which genes

or pathways are undergoing selection across populations? (3) How much will climate change

affect the habitat of mountain chickadees over the next 50 years?

DAPC revealed four primary clusters, which coincided with our ADMIXTURE and pairwise

Fst values. The eastern Rocky Mountain cluster (UT, MT, SAB) is separated from the

northwestern Rocky Mountain populations by the Rocky Mountains. These populations could

have diverged because of the presence of physical barriers or differences in habitat on either

side of the mountains. This is evident from the high, but not significant, pairwise Fst values

between the BCR and SAB populations, which are geographically close (300 km), but

separated by the Rockies. In addition, the SCA population is of particular interest because it is

genetically isolated from all other populations. As indicated by the Mantel tests and previous

studies, this could be due to its distance from other populations or due to

geographic/environmental features within its habitat (Spellman et al., 2007; Hindley et al.,

2018).

Our outlier SNP analysis revealed several loci under selection associated with environmental

conditions. Despite the use of conservative models, we identified several outlier loci

highlighting the genetic diversity of the species. However, because the large number of loci

could have been due to the isolated SCA population, we conducted the same analyses by (1)

excluding the SCA population and (2) between the DAPC clusters. There were no significant

differences in the first case, whereas we observed a decrease in the second case. This decrease

can be attributed to the low genetic distances between populations within the same cluster.

Additionally, the overlap of SNPs across analyses and the existence of several SNPs with an

FDR of zero highlights the genetic diversity present in the species. Divergence across

populations is expected because of the reduced gene flow among them due to the non-

migratory nature of the species (Templeton, 2006; Eckert et al., 2008; McCallum et al., 2020).

Consistent with mtDNA and microsatellite studies, genetic diversity is highly influenced by

geographic distance (Hindley et al., 2018). The strong correlation between geographic and

genetic distance ($R_{xy} = 0.55$) indicates isolation by distance. However, we cannot discount the

role of habitat differences, given that local temperature ($R_{xy} = 0.4$), temperature seasonality

($R_{xy} = 0.23$), and altitude ($R_{xy} = 0.2$) are also significantly correlated with genetic distance.

The rapid increase in global temperatures could affect the genetic isolation in the coming

years. Additionally, an increase in temperature forces species to shift their elevational range.

Precipitation and precipitation seasonality are predicted to increase with rising temperatures,

resulting in more extreme climate scenarios (Boer, 2009; Pendergrass et al., 2017). As a

result, despite their weak correlation with divergence, these factors could play a major role in

the future of these species.

We identified genes associated with SNPs undergoing selection. Over 30 genes linked to

stress response were found to be near with SNPs associated with temperature. We also found

over 19 genes linked to response to external stimuli, and ShinyGO analysis revealed that the

thermogenesis pathway had a significant number of genes involved. Previous studies have

shown that increasing temperatures are linked to the activation of the stress response in birds

in the form of thermoregulatory strategies such as panting and increased glucocorticoid levels

(Bohler et al., 2021; Mentesana & Hau, 2022; Siegel, 1980). This is of particular concern because

of rising global temperatures, which could lead to negative consequences for the species.  In

addition, the selection of a clock gene, CSNK1D, could imply a change in phenology in

response to rising temperatures (Milligan et al., 2009).

We observed a northward shift in suitable habitat over the next five decades with the SDM.

This pattern was observed for all RCP scenarios, except for RCP2.6. However, RCP2.6 is an

ideal scenario where all expected climate change goals are fulfilled, and temperatures increase

by 1°C above pre-industrial levels by the year 2050 and remain the same in 2070 (van Vuuren

et al., 2011). While shifting to cooler habitats is a normal thermoregulatory response, the

massive decrease in suitable habitats for such a common species is worrying (Siegel, 1980).

Additionally, because the model does not account for other factors, such as human-induced

habitat loss, competition, and invasion; the amount of suitable habitat could be much less than

predicted. This could lead to a further population decline in this species.

**Conclusions**

Mountain chickadee genetic distance is highly correlated with geographical distance and

temperature. Genes affecting several essential functions associated with outlier SNPs were

identified, highlighting the genetic diversity and selection pressure faced by the species. The

identification of genes related to circadian rhythm may underlie changes in phenology. In

addition, the large decrease in suitable habitat over the next five decades for a common

species highlights the need for immediate action to protect this species and other species from

extinction.

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**Data accessibility and benefit sharing**

*Data accessibility*

Multiplexed ddRAD sequence data will be uploaded to a data repository prior to publication.

*Benefit sharing*

A research collaboration was developed between researchers from India and Canada with

funding from Mitacs. Our research also addresses a priority concern, climate change, and

provides benefits by the sharing of our data and results on public databases.

**Author contributions**

The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: Study conception and design:

Srikanthan and Burg. Data collection: Burg. Data analyses: Srikanthan. Wrote the paper:

Srikanthan and Burg. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the

manuscript.

**Tables**

Table 1 List of sampling sites and sample sizes for mountain chickadees used in this study.
See Fig 1 for location.

| Location | Abbreviation | Sample size |
|---|---|---|
| Revelstoke, BC | BCR | 4 |
| Fort St James, BC | FTSJ | 8 |
| Northwest British Columbia | NWBC | 2 |
| Prince George, BC | PG | 2 |
| Washington | WA | 8 |
| Montana | MT | 7 |
| Utah | UT | 10 |
| Southern Alberta | SAB | 2 |
| Southern Oregon | SOR | 10 |
| Northern California | NCA | 5 |
| Southern California | SCA | 3 |

564  **Figure Legends:**

565  Figure 1 Mountain chickadee sampling sites in western North America along with the range
566  map from the IUCN Red List (pink)

567  Figure 2 (a) 3d DAPC plot showing four distinct clusters(b) LD1 vs LD2 (c) LD1 vs LD3 (d)
568  LD1 vs LD4
569
570  Figure 3 (a) Admixture plot for K=2-7 (b) Cross validation errors for K=1-7
571
Figure 4 Pairwise Fst values for 11 populations. Asterisks indicate non-significant
observations (p-values >0.05).

Figure 5 BayeScan and BayScEnv plots with correlation q-values for genetic divergence
where q-value = -log(FDR). (a) BayeScan plot (N=2251, FDR=0.001). (b) BayScEnv
Temperature plot (N=1564, FDR=$10^{-4}$). (c) BayScEnv Temperature Seasonality plot
(N=2060, FDR=$10^{-4}$). (d) BayScEnv Precipitation plot (N=805, FDR=$10^{-4}$). (e) BayScEnv
Precipitation Seasonality plot (N=1090, FDR=$10e^{-4}$). (f) BayScEnv altitude plot (N=1606,
FDR=$10e^{-4}$).
580
581  Figure 6 (a) Mantel test $R_{xy}$ and p-values. Geographic distance-Dist, Precipitation-Prec,
582  Precipitation seasonality-PS, Temp -Temperature, Temperature Seasonality-TS, Altitude-Alt
583  (b) Geographic vs genetic distance plot.
584
585  Figure 7 Species distribution models of mountain chickadees using the $10^{th}$ percentile training
586  presence threshold. Legend: green-presence, brown-absence (a) Current distribution. (b) 2050
587  distribution under RCP 8.5 (c) 2070 distribution under RCP 8.5. (d) Distribution during the
588  last glacial maxima 21 kya.

**Figures:**

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

| Number of ancestral populations (K) | CV error |
| --- | --- |
| 1 | 0.668 |
| 2 | 0.672 |
| 3 | 0.696 |
| 4 | 0.758 |
| 5 | 0.830 |
| 6 | 0.941 |
| 7 | 1.026 |

Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6

| Mantel Test | | |
|---|---|---|
| X-axis | Rxy | P_Value |
| Dist | 0.547 | 0.0001 |
| Prec | 0.197 | 0.0002 |
| PS | 0.184 | 0.0003 |
| Temp | 0.402 | 0.0001 |
| TS | 0.233 | 0.0001 |
| Alt | 0.206 | 0.0001 |

Figure 7