Title: ***Negative impact of mild arid conditions in natural rodent populations revealed using markers of physiological condition in natura***

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Open research statement

Data will be available from the Dryad repository (TBA)

Keywords

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Abstract

1. Understanding how organisms respond to seasonal variations in their environment can be a window to their potential adaptability, a classical problem in evolutionary ecology. In the context of climate change, inducing increased aridity and disruption of seasonality, it is crucial to study the extent and limits of species responsiveness.

2. Here, the physiological response to food and water shortage during seasonally dry conditions were investigated. We studied populations of two rodent species of the genus *Rhabdomys*, one arid and one mesic, in a semi-arid zone where their range overlap in South Africa. We measured blood concentrations of markers of kidney and liver function, as well as body condition, at the onset and the end of the dry season.

3. We found similar shifts in blood metabolite levels in the semi-arid populations of the two species, indicating malnutrition consistent with the observed degradation of habitat quality between the start and the end of the dry season. Furthermore, regardless of the period, differences between the two species in blood metabolite concentrations (ex: amylase, sodium, alkaline phosphatase) were observed, suggesting contrasting diets and water conservation abilities.

4. Overall, we show that, as seasonal dry conditions worsen, organisms are increasingly affected by reduced food availability, and local adaptation to arid conditions may provide the arid species with an advantage to cope with semi-arid conditions. Our study suggests that even mild arid conditions could have

a negative impact and questions resilience of animals to harsher arid conditions.

Introduction

Organisms are constantly exposed to a wide range of environmental variations, including short-term changes during their lifetime and longer-term changes across generations (Lopez-Maury et al., 2008). In the coming decades, extreme and more frequent droughts are predicted by most projections, resulting from changes in precipitation patterns, increased temperature, and evaporation (Naumann et al., 2018). These changes will induce great challenges to organisms. Under such circumstances, divergent selection can lead to the evolution of local adaptations where, in a given environment, resident phenotypes outperform nonresident ones (Kawecki & Ebert, 2004).

As a result of climate change, organisms can be faced with warmer and drier environmental conditions (Parmesan et al., 2000), likely to impact their capacity to maintain homeostasis (i.e. the state of steady internal conditions allowing optimal body functioning) (Davies, 2016; Fuller et al., 2016). In dry environments, food and water can be scarce, generating strong selection on physiological attributes maximizing energy and water availability for body function. Habitat generalists and specialists' taxa may respond differently to environmental changes. Desert specialists exhibit specific physiological and/or behavioral traits, resulting from genetic adaptations to the environment, allowing them to continuously endure or evade periods of resource restriction (Rocha et al., 2021). In contrast, generalist species may seek to escape the effects of aridity through temporary avoidance (Abraham et al., 2019) or plastic adjustments during unfavorable seasons (Kobbe et al., 2011).

Compared to mesic species, arid species have lower basal metabolic rates and evaporative water loss (Muñoz-Garcia et al., 2022), adopt a more flexible diet (Tshikae et al., 2013), and cope better with prolonged droughts (Boyers et al., 2021).

Local ecological adaptation can be described in several different and complementary ways, such as through its genetic basis, transcriptomic, behavioral, or physiological aspects. Adaptive evolution *sensu stricto* occurs when the genetic constitution of a population changes because of natural selection (Merilä & Hendry, 2013). In contrast, local adaptation *sensu lato*, also considers concepts such as phenotypic plasticity (the ability of a genotype to produce distinct phenotypes when exposed to different environments throughout its ontogeny; Pigliucci, 2005). It is usually assessed using comparative population or species fitness estimates under novel environmental conditions (Webster & Reusch, 2017). The response to local environmental conditions is a major factor in the generation and maintenance of biodiversity, impacting population dynamics, biogeographical ranges, and species interactions (Blanquart et al., 2013; Post et al., 2009). Specifically, physiological limits can drive and be driven by evolution, shape species distributions and niches, and define species response capacities to future climate change, directly impacting risks of extinction (Somero, 2012). For example, latitudinal niches are associated with adaptive variation in thermal limits in marine invertebrates (Somero, 2010).

Studies of different physiological systems, such as the cardiovascular (Seebacher et al., 2005, Berkel & Cacan, 2022) or digestive systems (Naya et al., 2011), in response to different abiotic conditions, can improve our understanding of the causal mechanisms of responses of organisms to climate variation (Seebacher & Franklin,

2012). Biotic factors, such as sex, age, diet, strain, or breeding status also influence individual responses (McClure, 1999). With a focus on influence of air temperature, water availability and energy resources on an organism's physiological state, research in physiological ecology has addressed how variation in physiology evolves and is maintained in relation to environmental conditions (Feder & Block, 1991).

Analysis of blood metabolites has successfully been used to investigate kidney and liver physiology of wild populations (e.g. Al-Eissa et al., 2012). The kidney and the liver both contribute to homeostasis in periods of food and water scarcity; indeed, the kidney plays a crucial role in maintaining osmotic balance and the liver is involved in dietary metabolism. Water loss can also mechanically induce high concentrations of some blood markers and impact organism's capacity to evacuate products of metabolic waste, such as urea, from the blood (Ostrowski et al., 2006). Hence, dry conditions can put a strain on these organs and be detrimental to survival and reproduction.

In the Succulent Karoo of South Africa, where the average daily precipitation during the dry season is 0.26 mm *versus* 0.78 mm during the wet season, the probability of survival of adult *R. pumilio,* another species of the same genus, were related to their physiological response at the start of the dry season (Schoepf et al., 2017a). Schoepf and collaborators found higher serum concentrations of albumin, glucose, potassium, and lower concentrations of globulin, in animals that survived compared to those that did not survive the dry season. At the peak of the dry season, individuals had lower concentrations of glucose and phosphorus and higher concentrations in globulin and urea nitrogen if they survived the dry season. These results strongly suggest that such markers could be good indicators of individual fitness.

The two study species, *R.bechuanae* and *R.dilectus dilectus*, have different environmental niches (du Toit et al. 2012, Meynard et al. 2012). Throughout most of its distribution, *R.d.dilectus* occurs in mesic habitats with vegetation cover and nests in dense grass, while *R.bechuanae* is found in semi-arid and arid habitats, thriving predominantly in sparsely vegetated areas and nesting in bushes (Dufour et al., 2015; Dufour et al., 2019). Moreover, differences in morphology and behavior suggest adaptation to dry conditions in *R.bechuanae* (Ganem et al., 2020; Dufour et al., 2019).

In our study, potential impact of increased aridity was addressed by investigating the physiological consequences of seasonal variation in dry conditions, in two species of the diurnal African striped mouse genus *Rhabdomys*. Here we address both physiological responses to seasonal dry conditions and divergence in populations of the two species in the same bioclimatic region.

Indeed, at the edge of their distributions in central South Africa, the two species inhabit a semi-arid region within which they occur either as parapatric or sympatric populations. This semi-arid zone, the expansion and contraction of which depends on land use and precipitation (Lian et al., 2021), has experienced a recent trend towards desiccation (Jury, 2021). Such drying conditions could generate additional selective pressures to those already experienced by the semi-arid populations of the two species. Short-term climatic patterns can also impact resource availability in this region. Indeed, during La Niña years (like during this study), as part of the El Niño Southern Oscillation phenomenon, there is a general association between regional wetness and sea surface temperatures in the neighbouring Atlantic and Indian Oceans, leading to wetter episodes throughout Southern Africa (Nicholson & Selato, 2000).

While many studies have harnessed physiology, genomics, and transcriptomics to highlight potential adaptive interspecific or interpopulational contrasts, studies under common natural environmental conditions are lacking (Rocha et al., 2021). These approaches provide a mean to disentangle the roles of interpopulational or interspecific variation from extrinsic environmental factors in shaping phenotypic variation, taking advantage of the natural conditions experienced in the field, including their complexity, with little human involvement. This study took place in a natural semi-arid environment and asked how seasonal variation in dry conditions influenced the physiological responses of *R.bechuanae* and *R.d.dilectus*. We compared body condition, blood concentrations of markers of kidney and liver functions and habitat characteristics of parapatric populations of the two species at the start *versus* the end of the dry season. First, we expected that the habitat available for the mice would be drier at the end compared to the onset of the dry season, inducing a reduction of food and water, impairing liver and kidney function, and impacting body condition. Second, assuming local adaptive plasticity, we hypothesized that both species would be able to adjust their physiological responses to seasonal changes in dry conditions. Third, we expected that *R.bechuanae*, having evolved in arid environments, would perform better in semi-arid conditions and be closer to the expected local optimal response to increased dry conditions than *R.d.dilectus* (having evolved in mesic areas), as found for *Mus musculus* (Bittner et al., 2021). Alternatively, if both species evolved specific adaptations to the semi-arid environment, we expected no species differences (**Table 1**).

Materials and Methods

163 ***Ethics statement***

164 Permits to sample and handle animals in the field were obtained from the DESTEA of
165 the Free State, the North West DEDECT and Northern Cape DENC (respectively,
166 n°202110000007994, NW 38956/04/2022, FAUNA 0389/2022). Animal handling was
167 performed under ethical clearance from the Languedoc-Roussillon ethical committee
168 for animal experimentation (n°2022041512256467 v5).

169 ***Choice of sampling periods and sites***

170 We selected six study sites based on their geographical position and their aridity
171 index (AI). The AI calculation was based on Thornthwaite method (Thornthwaite,
172 1948; see **Supplementary Material** for full formula) using rainfall and temperature
173 data collected from 2010-2021 (South African Weather Service).

174

175 We selected parapatric populations of the two species in a semi-arid region of South
176 Africa (0.2 < AI < 0.5). In this region, a hot and wet season occurs from roughly
177 December to February, and a cool dry season from May to September. We sampled
178 six sites at the onset (May 2022) of the dry season: Barberspan Bird Sanctuary,
179 Benfontein Nature Reserve, Bloemhof Dam Nature Reserve, Gariep Dam Nature
180 Reserve, Kalkfontein Dam Nature Reserve and Wolwespruit Nature Reserve
181 (**Figures 1 -3, Table 2**). We then resampled four of these sites at the end of the dry
182 season (September 2022). Two sites (Barberspan and Benfontein) were excluded
183 from the September sampling due to extreme weather conditions.

184 ***Capture and field protocol***

185 We used small mammal PVC traps (LxHxW= 29.6x7.5x7.5 cm), baited with a mixture
186 of oats, peanut butter, salt and sunflower seeds, and added a piece of cotton wool.

They were placed approximately every 15 m along roughly 150 to 300 m transects. Number and length of transects varied with habitat and terrain conditions. Overall, trapping effort was 9688 trap nights (details in **Supplementary Tables 1&2**). Since *Rhabdomys* is mostly diurnal, the traps were checked twice a day (8 AM and 3 PM). On the field, all trapped striped mice were measured (body length and mass), their sex and breeding status (breeding or non-breeding) assessed based on external morphological features (individuals considered as breeders presented either: signs of lactation, a perforated vagina, presence of a vaginal plug, or scrotal testis), and a 0.5 mm piece of tail was collected and kept in 98 % ethanol for species identification. All striped mice were marked with a unique ear-tag before their release at the trapping location unless they were kept for the physiological study (i.e. kept in their trap with cotton wool and food).

Out of 903 trapped small mammals, 694 were *Rhabdomys*. For the physiological study, we selected only adults, avoiding related individuals as much as possible, by selecting mice trapped at least 100 m apart, except for breeding pairs (a male and a female) that could be trapped in the same nest. This distance was based on data obtained for *R. pumilio* indicating minimal relatedness (R=0 between males and R=0.06 between females) at this distance (Solmsen et al. 2012). In each site, trapping lasted 3 to 6 days.

Habitat

Vegetation composition

Earlier studies have shown inter-species differences in vegetation cover and structure requirements (Dufour et al., 2015). Since habitat characteristics can vary locally, we characterized the vegetation structure (i.e. grass *versus* woody

211 vegetation) at a microhabitat scale (around the trap), and at a mouse home-range
212 scale (Dufour et al., 2015). Around traps in which a *Rhabdomys* was trapped, the
213 percentage of the surface composed of dry grass, green grass, dry bushes, green
214 bushes, succulent plants, holes and uncovered surfaces was assessed within 2mx2m
215 (4m²) and the general vegetation within 10x10m (100m²) quadrats centered on the
216 trap position. For each 4m² quadrat we recorded in detail the percentage and type of
217 cover at the ground level within each of four 1x1m subunits (using a metal frame); the
218 results obtained for the four subunits were then averaged. For the 100m² quadrats
219 the assessment was made following a visual inspection at eye-level height; the
220 different cover percentages were estimated by the same observer. All together we
221 characterized 236 quadrats of each type (100m² and 4m²).

222 **Normalised Differential Vegetation Index**

223 NDVI, the satellite imagery-based index informative of ground vegetation greenness,
224 was retrieved from the Copernicus Open Access Data Hub (Copernicus Sentinel-2
225 data, 2023, calculated from 10-m resolution bands). While the two above-mentioned
226 quadrats were aimed at characterizing the structure/cover of the habitat, NDVI was
227 used as an index of habitat quality. To characterize each site and sampling session,
228 we used NDVI data available for the closest day to the beginning of a sampling
229 session, which was expected to represent the conditions experienced by the mice at
230 the time of capture.
231

232 ***Blood extraction and assessment of blood metabolites concentrations***

233 In this study, a total of 273 adult mice were euthanized by means of cervical
234 dislocation on their day of capture, and a blood volume of around 100 µL was

235 collected in lithium-heparinized tubes by cardiac puncture. The breeding status was
236 confirmed for all individuals during dissection. The whole liver, the left kidney, and the
237 skull of every individual were also collected for a complementary study. Because the
238 two species could not be distinguished visually, the spleen was also harvested from
239 each mouse and subsequently analyzed for post-hoc species identification using
240 Cytochrome Oxidase I genotyping (as described in Ganem et al. 2020).

241 Levels of albumin, alkaline phosphatase, alanine aminotransferase, amylase, total
242 bilirubin, blood urea nitrogen, total protein, globulin, glucose, calcium, phosphorus,
243 potassium, and sodium were successfully measured in the whole blood of 257
244 individuals immediately after blood collection (Abaxis VETSCAN V2 technology with
245 the Comprehensive diagnostic profile cartridge), following the manufacturer's
246 instructions. The coefficient of variation (CV%) of measured levels of these markers
247 was determined from data obtained by analyzing a given blood sample twice.
248 Samples from six adult striped mice (5 *R.bechuanae*, 1 *R.d.dilectus*) were used for
249 these calculations. For these six samples, the calculated CV equaled 5.6 ± 1.9 %,
250 which is consistent with the intra-test CV% provided in the manufacturer's instruction
251 manual for other mammal species (**Supplementary Table 3**).

252 ***Data preparation and analysis***

253 All statistical tests were carried out using the R software (version 4.2.1).

254 **Habitat**

255 Vegetation composition

256 Because the distribution of the variables describing the cover and vegetation type did
257 not meet the conditions necessary for further multivariate model based analyses, we
258 performed a Principal Component Analysis (package FactoMineR version 2.9)

259 including the 7 variables measured within the $4m^2$ quadrats and within the $100m^2$
260 quadrats aiming to transform and, as far as possible, reduce the number of variables.
261 In each case, over 80 % of the variance was explained by the first five Principal
262 Components (**Supplementary Tables 4 & 5**). The distribution of the coordinates of
263 all traps on the first 5 PCs complied to the statistical analysis constraints and were
264 used as response variables of a *PERMANOVA* (package *vegan*, version 2.6-4).
265 *PERMANOVA* is a multivariate statistical inference tool using permutational
266 algorithms (Anderson, 2001). This equivalent to *MANOVA* operates in a distribution-
267 free setting and is robust to non-normality of residuals as well as dispersion
268 heterogeneity, even in slightly unbalanced designs (Anderson, 2013). We tested
269 differences between sites nested within sessions (start and end of dry season), with
270 10 000 permutations, to assess whether the sites had similar enough habitat
271 characteristics to be considered as suitable replicates in other analyses.

272 NDVI

273 NDVI was averaged over a 60 m radius circular buffer centered at each trap and then
274 compared across sessions and sites using a GLM Analysis of Variance, with the site
275 nested within session. To meet statistical test prerequisites, the response variable
276 was log-transformed; the analysis was followed by Tukey multiple comparisons of
277 means post-hoc tests.

278 **Age classes**

279 Among trapped *Rhabdomys*, only adults were selected for this study based on their
280 size, general appearance (fur dullness, presence of scars), and/or breeding status.
281 Body length of trapped individuals varied between 5 and 12 cm. The body length of
282 adult individuals involved in the physiological study varied between 7.7 and 12 cm.

283 To distinguish between older and younger adults, mass was plotted against body
284 length (**Supplementary figure 6**) showing a curve defined by an allometric growth
285 equation with a steeper slope at the highest and lowest body length values. Since
286 bone growth can significantly alter the concentration of some physiological markers,
287 and growth rate varies with age/body length, we considered 4 length/age classes
288 among the adults (Class A: [7.7:9 cm[; Class B : [9:10 cm[; Class C : [10:11 cm[;
289 Class D [11 cm:]).

290 **Body condition**

291 We calculated a scaled mass index of body condition using the method described in
292 Peig and Green (2009; see **Supplementary Material** for full formula), to assess the
293 state of each individual's fat reserves (Schulte-Hostedde et al., 2005). To test
294 whether breeding status, age, habitat quality, increased dryness, and/or interspecific
295 differences influence body condition of studied individuals, linear mixed effect models
296 were computed with body condition as a response variable, site as a random factor
297 and session, species, sex, session*species*sex (including all two-way interactions),
298 breeding status (nested within sex), age class and NDVI as explanatory variables.
299 Assumptions of normality and homoscedasticity of residuals were checked using
300 diagnostic plots (*graphics* package v.3.6.2.). A Tukey multiple comparisons of means
301 post-hoc test was applied to determine which inter-level differences were driving the
302 significance of each factorial effect having more than two modalities.

303 **Physiology**

304

305 We first identified twelve outliers that we removed from further analyses. These
306 outliers were animals from which we collected smaller volume of blood samples than

307 recommended for the Vetscan or were heavily hemolyzed and flagged as such in the
308 Vetscan analysis output. In addition, as total protein values were used by the
309 Vetscan analyzer to infer the Globulin (GLOB) fraction of blood protein (with
310 GLOB=TP-ALB), we considered this marker as not informative and removed this
311 variable from our analyses. Finally, for 199 out of 257 samples, blood concentrations
312 of creatinine (CRE) were flagged as being below the instrument's sensitivity
313 threshold; we hence excluded CRE from subsequent analyses, as this imprecision
314 would have hindered analytical performance.

315 Due to covariance in variables such as blood physiological markers, multivariate
316 statistical techniques provide a unique insight into the main patterns and effects
317 driving variation in the data. As with habitat, multivariate normality was violated in our
318 physiological dataset, so permutational multivariate analysis of variance
319 (*PERMANOVA*) was performed. 10 000 permutations were used, with 236 blood
320 samples, 12 physiological parameters as response variables, site as a random factor,
321 and session, species, sex, breeding status (nested within sex), body condition, age
322 class, and NDVI as explanatory variables. A backwards stepwise model selection
323 was performed to retain the most parsimonious model.. We then sought to identify
324 which of the 12 physiological markers drove significantly the between-group
325 differences evidenced with the *PERMANOVA*. Because in the PERMANOVA
326 package a dedicated function was not available, twelve post-hoc univariate linear
327 mixed model (LMM) tests were performed (followed by backwards stepwise model
328 selection), initially using the parameters of the most parsimonious *PERMANOVA*
329 model. Assumptions of normality and homoscedasticity of residuals were checked
330 using diagnostic plots. In the case of total bilirubin, a permutation test had to be

performed instead of the *LMM*. Through a backwards stepwise model selection process. For all tests, the significance level (α) was set at 0.05.

Results

Variation in habitat characteristics between species and sessions

Vegetation composition

We compared the vegetation characteristics surrounding each successful trap with a *PERMANOVA*, using the first 5 Principal Component coordinates (**Supplementary Tables 4 & 5**) of each quadrat as response variable, and site and session as explanatory variables. We detected significant differences in overall habitat characteristics between sessions (4m² and 100m²: $p<0.001$), and sites nested within sessions (4m² and 100m²: $p<0.001$), indicating clear site differences and seasonal effects on habitat structure (**Supplementary Figures 4 & 5**). Although a permutational dispersion test indicated that the latter patterns could be attributable at least in part to differences in dispersion between sessions or sites (see **Supplementary Material : Tables 6&7; Figures 1,2,3&4**), some general trends could be inferred from the data (**Supplementary Tables 7&8**). Indeed, quadrats from *R.d.dilectus* sites (Barberspan, Bloemhof and Wolwespruit) tended to feature higher proportions of grass (mean 4m²: 83.99 ± 1.12 %, mean 100m² : 71.42 ± 1.40 %) than *R.bechuanae* sites (mean 4m²: 54.30 ± 2.57 %, mean 100m²: 53.12 ± 1.84 %). Conversely, *R.bechuanae* sites (Benfontein, Gariep and Kalkfontein) tended to feature higher proportions of bushes (mean 4m²: 31.07 ± 2.37 %, mean 100m²: : 27.35 ± 1.42%) than *R.d.dilectus* sites (mean 4m²: 7.33 ± 1.00 %, mean 100m² : 10.49 ± 1.03 %). Furthermore, differences between sessions could be observed; quadrats surveyed at the end of the dry season tended to feature more dry grass

355 (mean 4m²: 60.82 ± 2.33 %, mean 100m²: 51.99 ± 1.87 %) than at its onset (mean
356 4m² : 50.75 ± 2.04 %, mean 100m²: 40.85 ± 1.39 %).

357 **NDVI**

358 The log-transformed NDVI of sites sampled at the two sessions (2 sites per species)
359 was also analyzed between sites and sessions using *ANOVA*. Site, session and the
360 interaction between these two variables (all $p<0.001$) contributed significantly to
361 explain the NDVI variation (**Table 3**). A post-hoc Tukey multiple comparisons of
362 means test showed that all sites had a significantly lower NDVI in September
363 compared to May (**Figure 4**), indicating a poorer state of the vegetation at the end of
364 the dry season. Furthermore, while these study locations were chosen in a region
365 with similar semi-arid bioclimatic features, Gariep Dam and Kalkfontein (where
366 *R.bechuanae* was targeted) seemed to stand out as having a lower NDVI than all
367 other sites sampled in both May and in September, with Wolwespruit and Bloemhof
368 (where *R.d.dilectus* was targeted) having the highest NDVI (**Figure 4**). Therefore, to
369 take into account the impact of variations in NDVI between the two species trapping
370 locations we included site as a random factor in analyses addressing body and
371 physiological conditions.

372 ***Variation of Body condition***

373 A linear mixed model assessed the influence of session, species, breeding status,
374 age class and NDVI on body condition, including site as a random factor. The most
375 parsimonious model included sex ($p<0.001$), age class ($p<0.001$), breeding status
376 nested within sex ($p<0.01$) and the interaction between breeding status and session
377 ($p<0.05$); session was not significant by itself $p=0.965$, while the effect of NDVI
378 verged on significance ($p=0.067$), and the interaction between session and sex

379 (p=0.683, (**Table 4**). Body condition was lower at the end of the dry season than at its
380 onset for non-breeding females compared to breeding females (post-hoc pairwise t-
381 test p<0.05, **Supplementary Table 10**).

382 ***Variation in physiological responses***

383 A *PERMANOVA* was performed using the distance matrix of 12 physiological
384 markers as response variables and session, species, sex, breeding status, body
385 condition, age class, NDVI and site (random factor) as explanatory variables
386 (**Supplementary table 11**).

387 The most parsimonious model **(Table 5)** indicated an overall difference in
388 physiological parameter concentrations between *R.bechuanae* and *R.d.dilectus*
389 (p=0.002), as well as an influence of body condition (p=0.019), breeding status
390 (nested within sex) (p=0.028), that differed between the two species (interaction
391 effect, p=0.022), and the interaction between sex and species (p=0.020). Session
392 (p=0.065), and sex (p=0.084) verged on overall significance and were also included
393 in the model, indicating that physiological markers overall tend to shift between the
394 start and end of the dry season, and to vary between sexes. Importantly, both
395 species showed the same pattern of variation between sessions (no significant
396 species*session interaction effect, p=0.498, **Supplementary Table 11**).

397 Six physiological markers showed significant differences between the start and the
398 end of the dry season (**Figure 5**). Blood concentrations of markers of nutrition and
399 liver function (albumin, potassium, alanine aminotransferase, alkaline phosphatase,
400 and total bilirubin) were lower at the end compared to the onset of the dry season
401 (**Table 4**). Glucose also showed that trend, but not significantly (p=0.0577). In

contrast, globulin levels varied in the opposite direction (higher at the end compared to the onset of the dry season).

The levels of four markers were significantly lower in *R.bechuanae* than in *R.d.dilectus* : total bilirubin, alkaline phosphatase (ALP), sodium and potassium (**Table 6, Figure 6**). However, amylase showed the opposite pattern between the species.

Regardless of species, the levels of glucose and ALP varied significantly with sex, tending to be lower in females than in males (**Supplementary figure 7**).

Discussion

We asked how seasonal variation of dry conditions influenced the physiological response of semi-arid parapatric populations of two closely related *Rhabdomys* species that evolved under distinct environmental conditions (du Toit et al., 2012). Consistent with our predictions, we found strong evidence for physiological divergence between the species. We also observed a tendency for seasonal variation of the physiological response in both species related to energetic resource depletion at the end of the dry season, supported by the shifts in the levels of 6 blood parameters between the onset and the end of the dry season.

Our study took place in a relatively wet year (La Niña). Vegetation growth and senescence usually follow seasonal rainfall patterns; above-average rainfall widens the temporal window for vegetation growth, improving habitat conditions at the start of the typical dry season (Anyamba et al., 2002). Despite this, and consistent with our predictions, milder dry conditions did alter habitat quality of our study sites (as attested by shifts in NDVI and habitat structure).

426

427 ***Seasonal variation of physiological condition***

428 Despite our study year being relatively wet, mild dry conditions impacted blood
429 marker concentrations in *R.bechuanae* and *R.d.dilectus*. These changes involved 6
430 out of 12 tested physiological markers, and included markers expected to vary in
431 periods of dietary restriction, such as albumin. Contrary to our prediction, we did not
432 find a significant interactive effect between session and species, suggesting that the
433 semi-arid populations of the two species were similarly affected by seasonal dry
434 conditions. However, a follow up study during an El Niño year may be necessary
435 before one can conclude.

436 Water and nutritional stress are expected to impact the body condition of individuals
437 (Fuller et al., 2021). As expected, body condition varied with breeding status, with
438 differences between breeding and non-breeding females heightened at the end of the
439 dry season. Additionally, several physiological markers varied significantly between
440 males and females, indicating their association with physiological processes involved
441 in reproduction. Reproduction in mammals has direct physiological costs, associated
442 with increased energy, protein and calcium demands and indirectly through
443 compensatory effects such as reduction in thermogenesis, immune function and
444 physical activity (Speakman, 2008; Rintoul & Bringham, 2014; Stawski & Rojas,
445 2016; Schoepf et al., 2017b). It follows that sex-specific differences in reproductive
446 investments are associated with contrasts in body weight, fat distribution and energy
447 metabolism (Chen et al., 2012). In support, our results indicate lower levels of blood
448 glucose, and a lower body condition in females compared with males. Moreover,
449 albumin (ALB) and alkaline phosphatase (ALP) were significantly elevated in males

450 compared to females, which could also be attributable to the pleiotropic effects of sex
451 hormones (Havill et al., 2004; Sullivan et al., 2007).

452 The two species responded similarly to increased dryness while maintaining body
453 condition, a proxy of fat reserves. Similarly, *R.pumilio* individuals tended to maintain
454 their body condition stable while reducing their energy expenditure and physical
455 activity during periods of limited food availability (Rimbach, Blanc et al., 2018;
456 Rimbach, Jäger et al., 2018). The semi-arid populations of *R.bechuanae* and
457 *R.d.dilectus* could be displaying a similar behavioral strategy.

458 Blood protein levels are generally good indicators of physiological condition (Tothova
459 et al., 2016). They comprise two distinct and major components: albumin (ALB) and
460 globulins (GLOB). In our study, ALB was significantly lower at the end than at the
461 start of the dry season. ALB is synthesized in the liver and involved in the transport of
462 bilirubin and several hormones. Blood ALB levels are less prevalent in malnourished
463 individuals (Walker et al., 1990), supporting the hypothesis of reduction of quality
464 and/or availability of food at the end of the dry season. The Nubian ibex *Capra*
465 *nubiana*, a desert mammal, also displays low ALB during the dry season (Al-Eissa et
466 al., 2012), which could reflect poor nutritional conditions, kidney dysfunction leading
467 to poor water balance and high osmolality, or liver dysfunction causing low ALB
468 synthesis. We found that GLOB was significantly higher at the end than at the start of
469 the dry season. Higher GLOB levels were also reported for *R.pumilio* individuals that
470 did not survive the dry season (Schoepf et al., 2017). GLOB is a family of molecules
471 including immunity proteins and blood protein carriers (including transferrin). An
472 increase in GLOB levels usually indicates elevation of immunoglobulins and hence
473 could suggest heightened immune activity. Greater antibody production occurs in
474 response to a higher prevalence of respiratory infections during the dry season, e.g.

475 in the Nubian goat (Abdelatif et al., 2009), and/or reduced protein nutritional status in
476 young birds (Lochmiller et al., 1993). An increase in blood GLOB concentrations may
477 also reflect high levels of transferrin (Walker et al., 1990), a major GLOB that may
478 accumulate in the blood in cases of severe iron deficiency (Kasvosve & Delanghe,
479 2002). Hence, elevated blood GLOB levels at the end of the dry season may indicate
480 either or both depletion in iron resource (transferrin) and higher vulnerability to
481 infection (immunoglobulin), both resulting from or being aggravated by reduced
482 access to food. Lower levels of alkaline phosphatase (ALP), a liver enzyme, at the
483 end of the dry season in *Rhabdomys*, is also evidence of malnutrition and deficiency
484 in essential nutrients (proteins, magnesium, zinc) (Yousef et al., 2002; Saraç &
485 Saygili, 2007; Ray et al., 2017). Alanine aminotransferase (ALT), another marker of
486 liver function, also occurred at significantly lower concentrations at the end compared
487 to the start of the dry season, indicating a reduction in liver activity (Walker et al.,
488 1990) or malnutrition (Le Couteur et al., 2010). Indeed, as environmental resources
489 become scarce, essential nutrients, such as pyridoxine (or vitamin B6), that constitute
490 some ALT coenzymes, may be less available, leading to a reduction of ALT blood
491 levels (Vespasiani-Gentilucci et al., 2018).
492
493 Blood glucose, another major physiological marker of nutrition state, was also slightly
494 diminished at the end of the dry season, albeit not significantly. Fasting or low-energy
495 feeding results in lower blood glucose levels (Jensen et al., 2013).
496
497 Acute starvation also typically causes bilirubin (TBIL) to accumulate in the blood, as
498 the enzymatic process for conversion of heme into TBIL is stimulated (Thaler et al.,
499 1972). Yet, TBIL was lower at the end compared to the onset of the dry season,

rejecting the starvation hypothesis. Lower TBIL concentrations at the end of the dry season in *Rhabdomys* could stem from low hemoglobin counts because the body produces fewer red blood cells than usual; low hemoglobin can be induced by several factors, among which dietary factors such as iron deficiencies (Clark, 2008). Iron deficient anemia is also supported by higher GLOB concentrations observed at the end of the dry season. Infection can likewise be a cause of both decreased TBIL levels (Zhao et al., 2019) and higher GLOB concentrations at the end of the dry season. Finally, malnutrition and/or lack of potassium intake are among the main potential causes of the reduction of its levels in the blood (Their, 1986), which could explain why they were the lowest at the end of the dry season, when the available resources were lowest, in our study.

Overall, our results indicate that seasonal variation of some physiological markers could reflect reduced primary productivity throughout the dry season, which is coherent with our observation of habitat degradation (lower NDVI) at the end of the dry season. Blood concentrations of various markers seem to indicate difficulties in maintaining nutritional functions and the necessity of a higher immune output, caused or exacerbated by food restriction. Indeed, individuals undergoing malnutrition during dry conditions are expected to show low blood glucose concentrations, and deficiencies in essential nutrients, leading to pathologies such as anemia (Gordon et al., 1988). Indeed, animals foraging on soils potentially poor in nutrients such as iron, zinc, and magnesium are more prone to malnutrition (Graham, 1991; Gupta et al., 2008). Higher GLOB, lower TBIL and lower ALP blood concentrations in our study might relate to such deficiencies.

524 We did not observe seasonal variation of sodium or blood urea nitrogen, blood
525 markers of kidney function or osmoregulation. Indeed, reduced environmental
526 moisture at the end of the dry season could have caused an overall increase in blood
527 osmolality, increasing blood concentrations of most biomarkers. Still, most markers
528 exhibited a significant reduction in blood concentrations. This suggests that,
529 compared to food availability, seasonal patterns in water availability may impose a
530 milder physiological cost to the striped mice throughout the dry season in this semi-
531 arid environment during a La Niña (wet) episode.

532 ***Interspecific differences***

533 *R.bechuanae* is thought to have evolved in drier environments than *R.d.dilectus*.
534 Moreover, in the semi-arid region where they co-occur, we showed that *R.bechuanae*
535 populations occupy slightly drier habitats than *R.d.dilectus*. While body condition did
536 not differ significantly between species, some interspecific contrasts support our
537 hypothesis that *R.bechuanae* may have developed a better physiological capacity to
538 cope with dry conditions than *R.d.dilectus*.

539 Among the markers exhibiting a significant difference between *R.bechuanae* and
540 *R.d.dilectus*, all but amylase showed higher blood concentrations in *R.d.dilectus*.
541 Amylase is positively correlated with digestive activity and reflects differences in
542 feeding status or diet composition between the species (Hidalgo et al., 1999). Given
543 the role of alpha-amylase in digestion, lower blood amylase levels in *R.d.dilectus*
544 than *R.bechuanae* may indicate lower digestive activity due to reduced access to
545 food, or lower starch content in the diet. Pajic et al. (2019) found a correlation
546 between dietary starch content and the number of amylase gene copies in several
547 mammalian genomes, even in different habitats and with different diets. Since

548 amylase activity and amylase gene expression are directly correlated with amylase
549 gene copy number (Arendt et al., 2014), further studies could elucidate the potential
550 genetic basis of the different levels of amylase in our two study species.

551 Sodium (NA) and potassium (K) concentrations, which depend on both dietary and
552 water intake, were higher in *R.d.dilectus* than in *R.bechuanae*. These differences,
553 coupled with higher ALP and TBIL concentrations in *R.d.dilectus* compared to
554 *R.bechuanae*, could suggest a better nutrition state for *R.d.dilectus* than
555 *R.bechuanae*. However, higher levels of amylase in *R.bechuanae* cast doubt on this
556 interpretation. Instead, lower levels of blood NA, K, ALP, and TBIL, would be more
557 parsimoniously attributed to lower overall osmolality, perhaps due to better water
558 balance, in *R.bechuanae*. A better overall ability of *R.bechuanae* to conserve body
559 moisture could rely on physiological mechanisms such as more efficient excretion or
560 osmoregulation, or through feeding on a diet optimizing water intake. We hypothesize
561 that during the evolutionary history of *R.bechuanae*, selection pressures may have
562 favored specific strategies allowing an overall more efficient water regulation
563 compared to *R.d.dilectus*. These results, combined with the reduction in the levels of
564 K, ALP and TBIL at the end of the dry season suggest both species are exposed to
565 both water and nutrition stress.

566 We found relatively little evidence that the two species suffer differentially from lack of
567 food in their semi-arid environment during a dry season impacted by La Niña
568 phenomenon. Overall, energy levels, as indicated by blood glucose, and body
569 condition, did not vary between the species. Instead, it seems that the overall
570 differences between the two species can be accounted for by lower blood osmolality
571 in *R.bechuanae*, and on average higher blood osmolality in *R.d.dilectus,* as
572 evidenced by differences in NA and K concentrations, possibly due to overall poorer

water regulation. High average blood amylase levels in *R.bechuanae*, compared to *R.d.dilectus* during the dry season, might indicate an interspecific difference in diet composition or food intake, rather than protein-energy malnutrition. Little is known about *R.bechuanae* and *R.d.dilectus* diets; the genus was characterised as a generalist feeding on seeds and other plant material, and insects (Curtis & Perrin, 1979). Some studies showed variation in diet composition within *Rhabdomys* genus associated with variation in local resources (Taylor & Green, 1976). The two species could have adjusted their diet to the respective local availabilities of different food resources within their home ranges. For example, during the dry season and in the semi-arid zone, arthropod biomass and diversity is affected by seasonal patterns in rainfall. Dalerum et al. (2017) found lower arthropod trapping success and diversity during the dry season, in shrub habitats compared to any other biomes, in Benfontein Game Reserve, one of our study sites. Thus, compared to seeds, the reliability of arthropods as a food source during dry conditions could be lower in shrublands, inhabited by *R.bechuanae* across its range and by both species in parapatry, than in grasslands inhabited by *R.d.dilectus* in allopatry. Variation in seed composition could also explain this interspecific difference in amylase concentrations. Indeed, granivores prefer seeds that have higher protein content and lower secondary metabolites but may be forced to take a wider range of seeds in dry areas than in mesic ones (Wilmer et al., 2009). If the hypothesis of a relatively ancient adaptation of *R.bechuanae* to dry habitats is true, it could be expected that it would also have adjusted its diet to the specific conditions encountered in dry habitats. Within this ecosystem, *R.bechuanae* could forage more efficiently compared with *R.d.dilectus*, which evolved in a more mesic environment; its diet could also be richer in starch (such as containing more seeds/grains than leaves or fibre). Higher starch intake

could help maintaining water balance, starch being the best substrate for metabolic water production in a dry environment (Adolph, 1964). This is consistent with the other interspecific differences revealed in this study, as diet can also significantly affect osmoregulation (Sabat et al., 2009).

Perspectives and conclusions

Due to climate change, populations of many species experience changes in their habitats affecting their fitness and inducing shifts in their geographical distribution (Parmesan et al., 2006; Fuller et al., 2010). In some species, range shifts are expected to swell edge populations, as marginal habitats grow more favourable. For instance, edge populations of *Wilsonia citrina* hooded warblers have repeatedly expanded their ranges due to climate change (Melles et al., 2011). In other species, the quality of marginal habitats occupied by populations at the range edge may decline because of reduced food availability or nutrient richness, making these populations particularly vulnerable to climate change and inducing range contraction. For example, the koala *Phascolarctos cinereus* experiences declines in population sizes and habitat contraction due to droughts (Seabrook et al., 2011). As such, depending on their phenotypic plasticity, edge populations may hold the key to the survival of a species in a changing environment (Wu & Seebacher, 2022, Usui et al., 2023). *R.d.dilectus* edge populations may experience the same situation, as the example above, in the semi-arid zone, an hypothesis that could be tested addressing these populations dynamics, compared to *R.bechuanae* semi-arid populations.

In this study, we found that two closely related species with different ecological characteristics displayed similar seasonal negative shifts in blood concentrations of

markers of nutrition and liver function in spite of a relatively mild seasonal drying of their habitats. We hence expect the physiological impact of harsher dry conditions, to affect the individuals' fitness even more dramatically. The fact that the habitat of *R.bechuanae* studied populations was the driest at both time points, combined with our findings concerning their overall better water balance and nutrition than *R.d.dilectus*, point towards *R.bechuanae* coping better in the semi-arid environment during the dry season. Though adaptation *per se* cannot be inferred, this comparative study considering populations of the two species in the same biogeographic zone adds to the growing evidence that these cryptic species of striped mice have diverged phenotypically. Overall, these findings show the ecological relevance of physiological approaches in investigating the effect of climatic variation on organisms and question resilience of core populations of arid species and edge populations of mesic species in the face of predicted enhanced aridification.

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Author contributions

G.G. conceived the idea and designed methodology with input from H.K; G.G., H.K., P.C., collected the data; H.K. analyzed the data with input from G.G.; H.K. wrote the first draft of the manuscript with input from G.G.; N.P. and N.A. contributed critically to the manuscript, secured funding for the project with G.G. and helped with field logistics. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest statement

The authors declare they have no conflict of interest.

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973 **Tables**

974 ***Table 1: Summary of main ecological characteristics of R.bechuanae and***

975 ***R.d.dilectus and of our predictions on their physiological response during the***

976 ***dry season***

ECOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS	*R.BECHUANAE*	*R.D.DILECTUS*
ENVIRONMENTAL NICHE	Arid to semi-arid (Ganem et al., 2020)	Mesic to semi-arid (Ganem et al., 2020)
PREFERRED HABITAT	Bushy patches (Dufour et al., 2015)	Continuous cover / grassland (Dufour et al., 2015)
SOCIAL STRUCTURE	Group-living (Dufour et al., 2018)	Solitary / opportunistic group-living (Dufour et al., 2018)
SPECIES-SPECIFIC RESPONSE TO SEASONAL VARIATIONS OF DRY CONDITIONS: PREDICTIONS		
BODY CONDITION	↘↘ or ↘*	↘↘
NUTRITIONAL METABOLISM	↘↘ or ↘*	↘↘
LIVER ACTIVITY	↘↘ or ↘*	↘↘
WATER BALANCE	↘↘ or ↘*	↘↘
SENSITIVITY TO INFECTION	↗↗ or ↗*	↗↗
SPECIES DIFFERENCES: PREDICTIONS		
BODY CONDITION	+	-
LIVER ACTIVITY	+	-
WATER BALANCE	+	-
SENSITIVITY TO INFECTION	-	+

977

978 *Adaptation to harsher arid conditions could have enabled *R.bechuanae* to withstand growing aridity

979 without suffering as many adverse effects as *R.d.dilectus* in the semi-arid zone. Alternatively, semi-

980 arid populations of both species could both have developed local adaptation.

981

982 ***Table 2: Geographical position and Aridity Index of sampled sites for each***
983 ***species***

SPECIES	SAMPLED SITES	GEOGRAPHICAL COORDINATES	ARIDITY INDEX*
R.bechuanae	Gariep Dam Nature Reserve	E25.55537; S30.57589	0.42 ± 0.07
	Kalkfontein Dam Nature Reserve	E25.28031; S29.52058	0.54 ± 0.07
	Benfontein Nature Reserve**	E24.81824; S28.82747	0.39 ± 0.07
R.d.dilectus	Bloemhof Dam Nature Reserve	E25.65144; S27.66063	0.35 ± 0.06
	Barberspan Bird Sanctuary**	E25.58354; S26.56538	0.39 ± 0.05
	Wolwespruit Nature Reserve	E26.26326; S27.41418	0.53 ± 0.10

984 *Average Aridity index (see **Supplementary material** for formula) ± Standard Error of
985 the Mean, based on climate data collected from 2010 to 2021 (South African Weather
986 Service)

987 ** Sampled only in May 2022 (dry season onset).

988

Table 3: Results of the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) test addressing variation in NDVI

Variable	Df	R^2	F	P
Session	1	0.445	442.757	**$< 2.2*10^{-16}$**
Site	3	0.348	115.385	**$< 2.2*10^{-16}$**
Session*Site	3	0.021	7.113	**$1.512*10^{-4}$**
Residual	229	0.185		

993 ***Table 4: Results of the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) test addressing variation***
994 ***in body condition***

Variable	Df	R^2	F	P
Session	1	$1.271*10^{-5}$	0.0019	0.965
Sex	1	0.085	25.163	**$1.072*10^{-6}$**
NDVI	1	$8.007*10^{-4}$	0.239	0.626
Age class	3	0.091	8.990	**$1.201*10^{-5}$**
Breeding status	2	0.041	6.067	**0.003**
Session*Sex	1	$5.592*10^{-4}$	0.167	0.683
Session*Breeding status	2	0.0299	4.444	**0.012**
Residual	229	0.753		

995

996

997 ***Table 5: Summary of the results of the best fitting Permutational multivariate***

998 ***analysis of variance (PERMANOVA) model, addressing variation in***

999 ***physiological response (site= random factor)***

1000

Variable	Df	R^2	Pseudo-F	P
Session	1	0.011	2.882	0.067
Species	1	0.042	11.070	**0.003**
Sex	1	0.010	2.748	0.087
Breeding status	2	0.033	4.320	**0.011**
Species * Sex	1	0.016	4.232	**0.029**
Species * Breeding status	2	0.026	3.413	**0.037**
Residual	227	0.862		

1001

1002

1003 ***Table 6: Summary of the results of univariate mixed models analyses of***

1004 ***variance addressing variation in responses of each of the 12 studied***

1005 ***physiological variables (best fitting models).***

1006

Physiological marker	Variable(s) kept in Best Model and their significance	adjusted R^2	F	df Model	df Residual	P (model)
Albumin	**Session*******, Sex***	0.098	13.72	2	233	$2.338*10^{-6}$
Alkaline phosphatase	**Session*******, Species*****, Sex*******,** Breeding status^{+}	0.260	17.43	5	229	< $1.281*10^{-14}$
Alanine aminotransferase	**Session***, Species, Sex, Breeding status, Species*Sex, Species*Breeding Status	0.060	2.884	8	227	0.004
Amylase	**Species*****, Sex, Breeding status, Species*Sex, Species*Breeding Status	0.185	8.603	7	228	$3.34*10^{-9}$
Calcium	Species	0.009	3.095	1	234	0.080
Globulin	**Session*****	0.291	97.44	1	234	< $2.2*10^{-16}$
Glucose	Session^{+}, **Sex****	0.079	11.14	2	233	$2.397 *10^{-5}$
Potassium	**Session*****, Species***	0.068	9.569	2	233	$1.014*10^{-4}$
Sodium	**Species*******,** Sex	0.092	12.87	2	233	$4.983*10^{-6}$
Blood Urea Nitrogen	*Null Random effect model*	0.072	/	/	/	/
Phosphorus	Species, Sex, **Breeding status*** + random	0.248	/	/	/	(χ^2 test vs. null model) $3.471*10^{-7}$

1007

1008 *Note: The full models, before backwards elimination, included session, species, body condition, sex,*

1009 *breeding status, sex*species and breeding status*species as variables, with breeding status nested*

1010 *within sex and site as a partially-crossed random factor nested within species.*

1011 ***Bold:*** *significant effects ($p < 0.05$) following Bonferroni correction with:*

1012 ****: $p < 0.001$;* ***: $0.001 < p < 0.01$;* **: $0.01 < p < 0.05$;* $^{+}$ *: $0.05<p<0.1$*

Figure captions

Figure 1: Map of known occurrences of 6 main clades of Rhabdomys (translucent dots) and locations sampled in this study (full colour dots) in southern Africa. *Based on published data and unpublished data (origin details are available in doi: 0d1b3414-7e2a-11ea-a38d-00163e26bfb0). Base map: World Topographic Map Esri Standard, Aridity Index layer was computed from a 0.5° global grid, using data from the Version 3 of the Global Aridity Index and Potential Evapotranspiration Database (Zomer et al.,2022).*

Figure 2: Graphical summary of organization and composition of data used for analysis in this study. *Figures between brackets indicate number of modalities or types of categories included in the factor.*

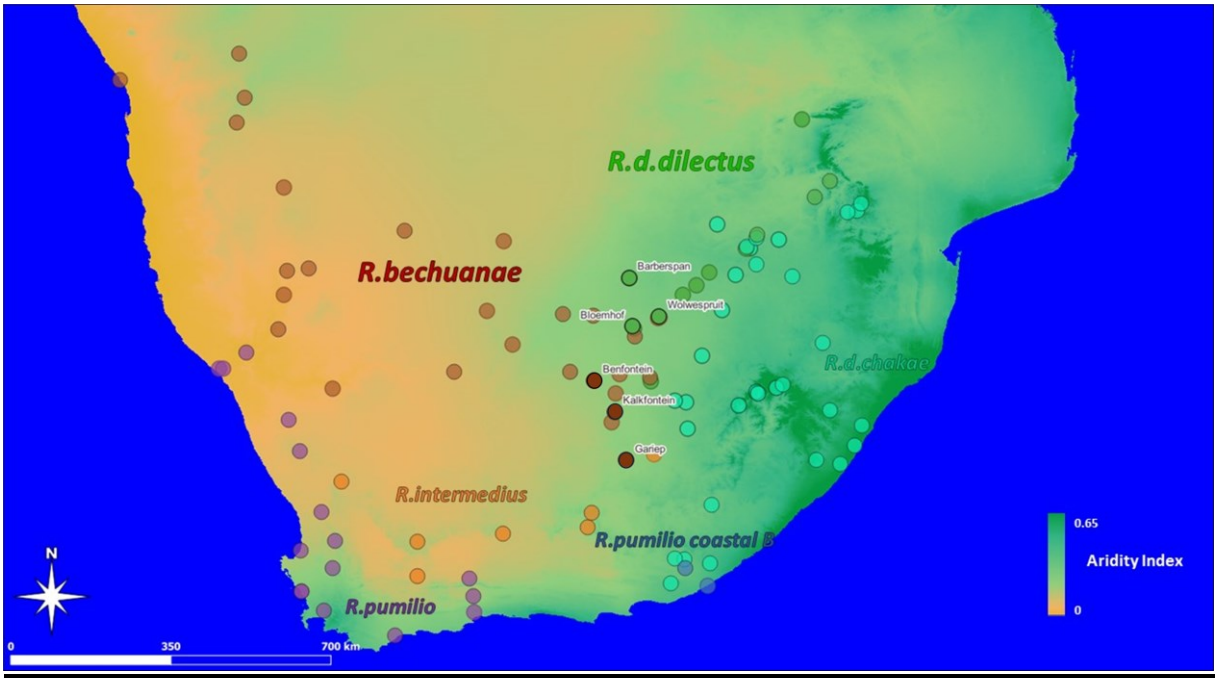
Figure 3: Total monthly precipitation for all sampled sites as recorded in 2022.

Figure 4: Average Normalized Differential Vegetation Index calculated within a buffer circle of 60m radius around each successful trap per site and session. *NDVI was retrieved from the Copernicus Open Access Data Hub (Copernicus Sentinel-2 data [2023]). For each site and session, we retained NDVI data available for the closest day to the beginning of a sampling session, expected to represent the conditions experienced by the mice at the time of capture.*

Figure 5: Significant shifts in blood physiological marker concentrations between the onset and the end of the dry season (mean ± SE)

Figure 6: Significant interspecific differences involving four blood physiological marker concentrations (mean ± SE)

1036 **Figures**



1037

Figure 1: Map of known occurrences of 6 main clades of Rhabdomys (translucent dots) and locations sampled in this study (full colour dots) in southern Africa

1038 *Based on published data and unpublished data (origin details are available in doi:*
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1040 *Standard, Aridity Index layer was computed from a 0.5° global grid, using data from*
1041 *the Version 3 of the Global Aridity Index and Potential Evapotranspiration Database*
1042 *(Zomer et al.,2022).*

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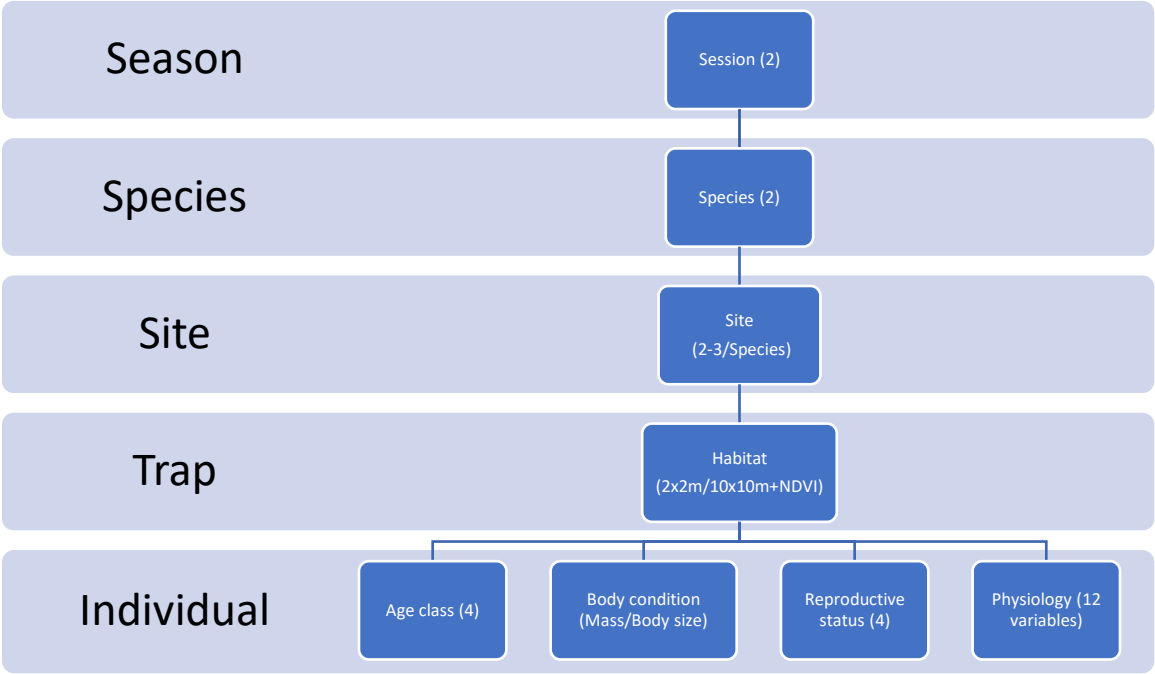
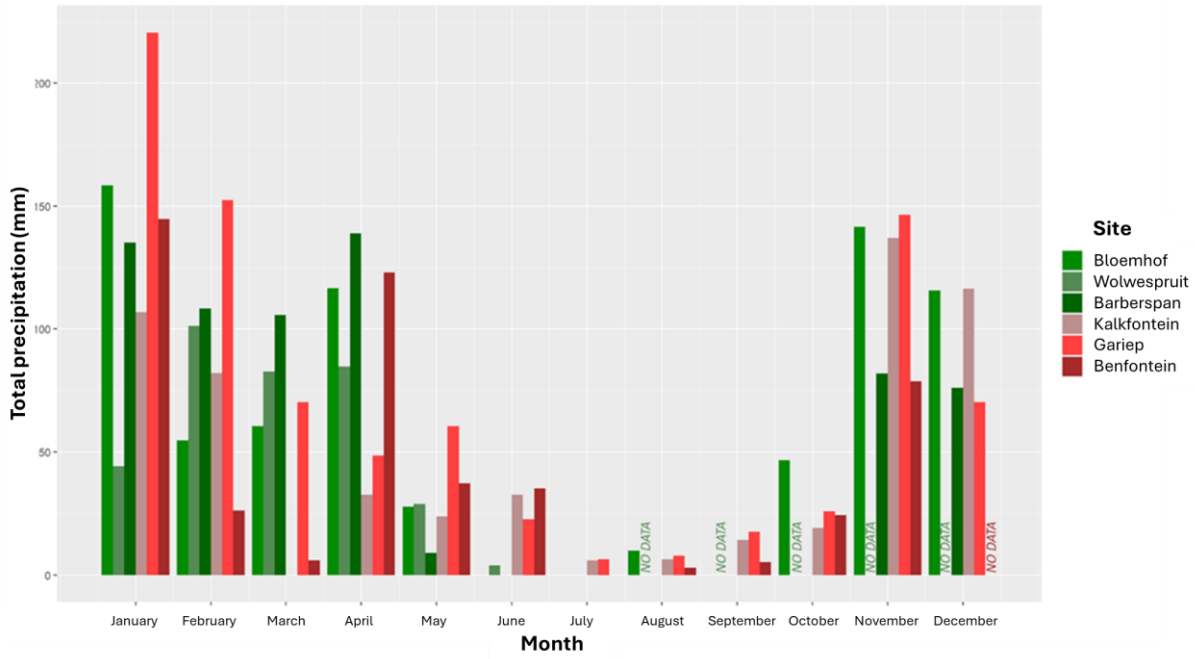


Figure 2: Graphical summary of organization and composition of data used for analysis in this study. Figures between brackets indicate number of modalities or types of categories included in the factor.



<u>Figure 3: Total monthly precipitation for all sampled sites as recorded in 2022.</u>

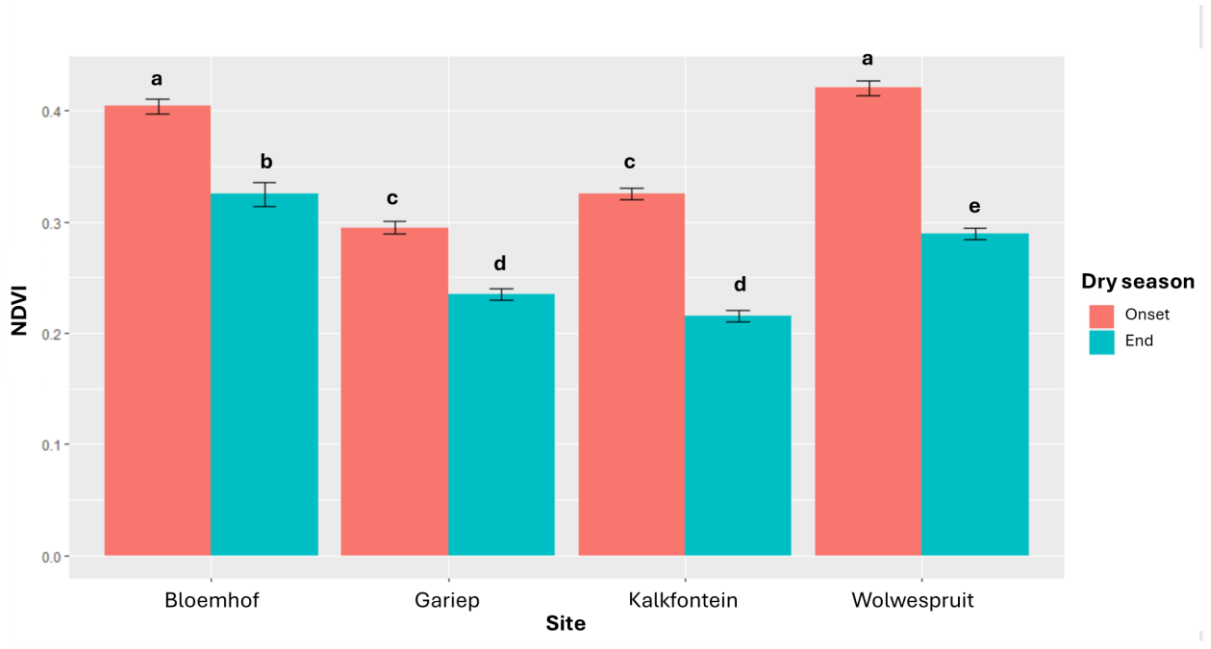


Figure 4: Average Normalized Differential Vegetation Index calculated within a buffer circle of 60m radius around each successful trap per site and session.

Different letters above the bars indicate statistically significant difference at P<0.05. NDVI was retrieved from the Copernicus Open Access Data Hub (Copernicus Sentinel-2 data [2023]). For each site and session, we retained NDVI data available for the closest day to the beginning of a sampling session, expected to represent the conditions experienced by the mice at the time of capture.

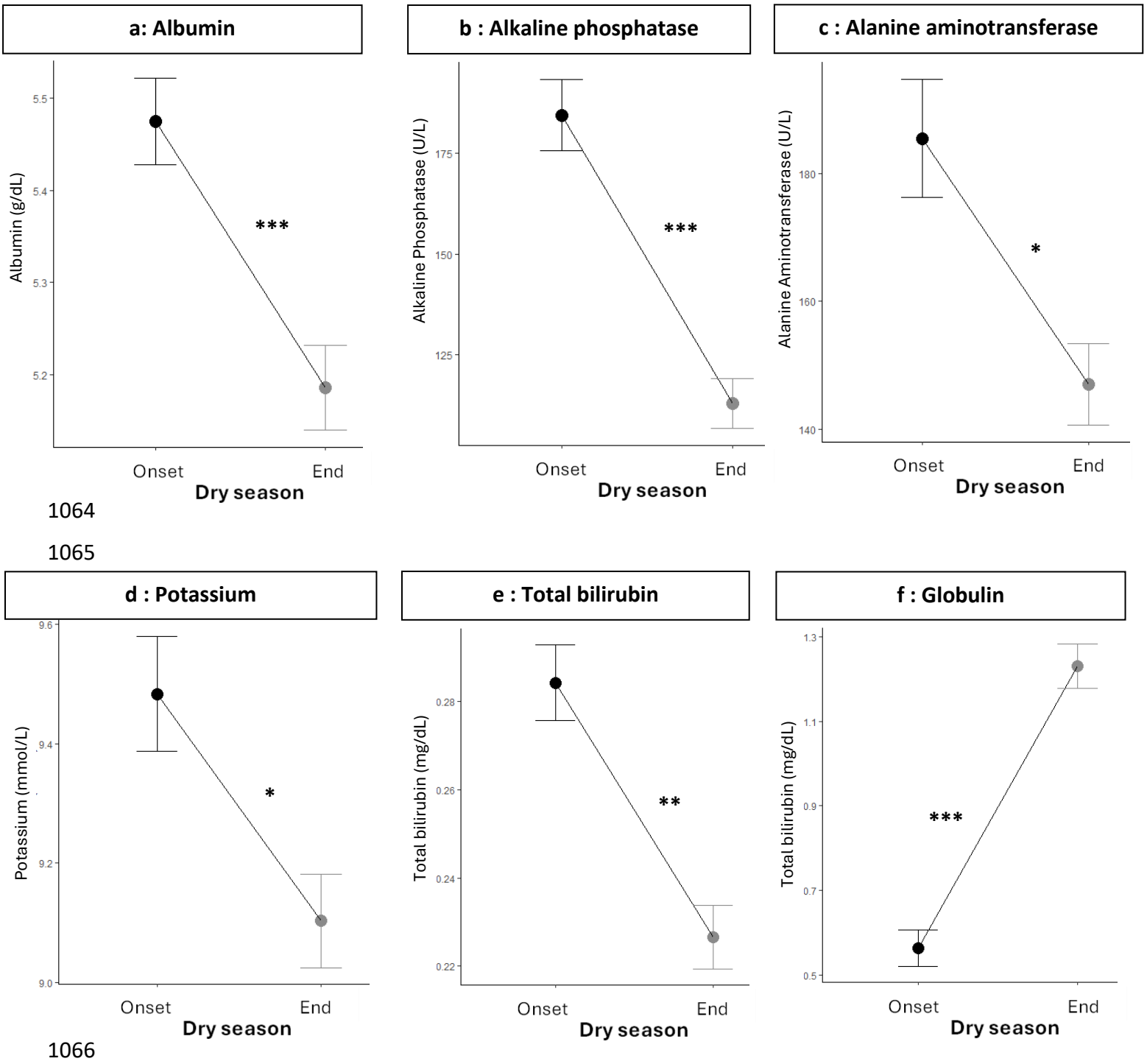
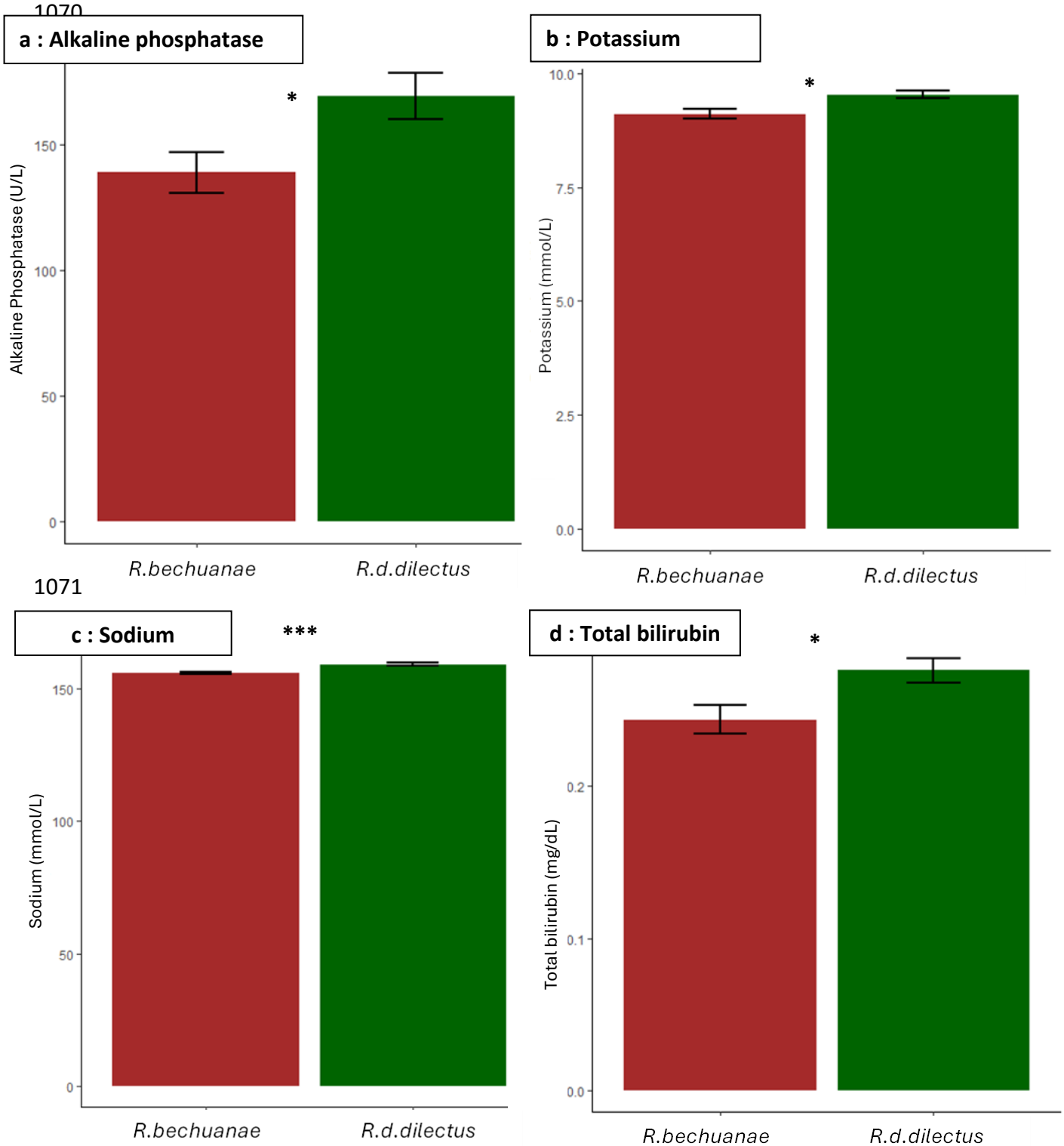


Figure 5: Significant shifts in blood physiological marker concentrations between the onset and the end of the dry season (mean ± SE)

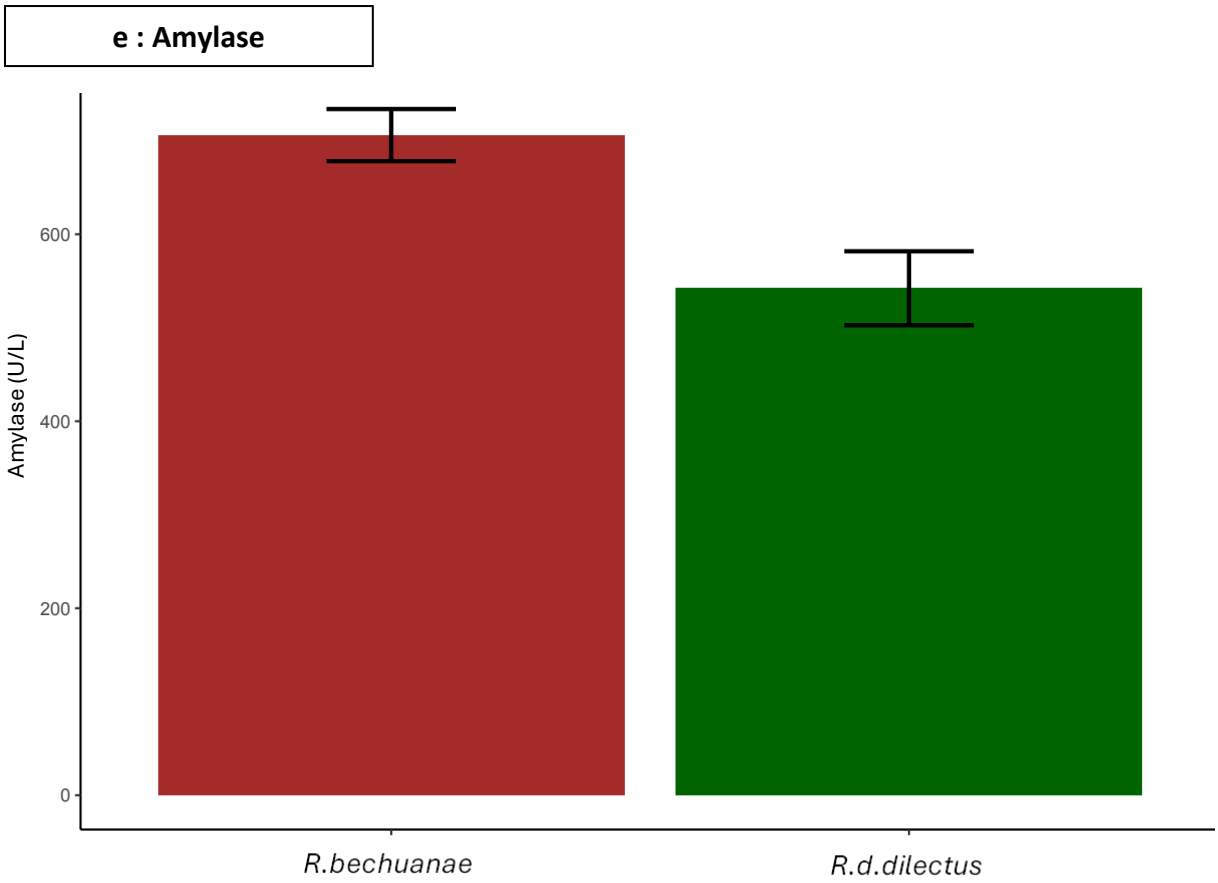
1070



1071

1072 ***Figure 6: Significant interspecific differences involving five blood physiological***

1073 ***marker concentrations (mean ± SE)***


e : Amylase
Amylase (U/L)
600
400
200
0
R.bechuanae
R.d.dilectus