

1 **Does timing of birth affect juvenile and mare survival in**  
2 **wild plains zebra?**

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## 15 **Abstract**

16 In large herbivores, the timing of births is mainly driven by the seasonal availability of their  
17 food resource. Population dynamics is strongly influenced by juvenile survival and recruitment,  
18 which highly depend on whether individuals are born during a favourable period or not. If births  
19 often occur during the most suitable season in northern cyclical environments for many large  
20 herbivore species, zebra give birth year-round at Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe, a tropical  
21 bushland characterized by the succession of a favourable wet season and a less favourable dry  
22 season. We used capture-recapture models for analysing long term observation data collected  
23 between 2008 and 2019 in this zebra population. We investigated the effect of the season (as a  
24 categorical variable) and the time spent in dry season on three categories of juveniles (younger  
25 foals of less than six months old, older foals between six and twelve months old, and yearlings  
26 between one and two years old) and mares survival, according to their reproductive state. The  
27 season had no effect on any survival. Younger foals annual survival was not affected by the  
28 time spent in dry season, whereas older foals and yearlings annual survival decreased with an  
29 increasing exposure to the dry season. Mares annual survival also decreased with an increasing  
30 time spent in dry season, whatever the reproductive status, but to a large extent when non-  
31 reproducing. The timing of birth, by determining the external conditions experienced by the  
32 offspring and their mothers during critical phases of their life cycle, plays a determinant role in  
33 their survival. As climate change is expected to lead to more frequent droughts, longer and  
34 harsher dry seasons in tropical ecosystems, we hypothesize a detrimental effect on zebra  
35 population dynamics in the future.

36

37 **Keywords:** capture-mark-recapture, environmental seasonality, *Equus quagga*, Hwange  
38 National Park, reproduction, tropical ecosystem.

## 39 Introduction

40 The timing of births, determined by environmental, biotic and internal factors, is a major life  
41 history trait of the organisms, involved in the determination of individual fitness and survival  
42 (Plard *et al.* 2015). Although the demographic role of the phenology of reproduction, *i.e.* the  
43 distribution of a reproductive event such as births across the year in a given population, has  
44 been illustrated theoretically (*e.g.* Calabrese and Fagan 2004 in plants and insects), its empirical  
45 support is less clear (*e.g.* Franks *et al.* 2018 in birds). This is particularly true for large  
46 herbivores (Plard *et al.* 2014), where it has been only marginally explored because of various  
47 limitations (*e.g.* need for detailed long-term individual-based datasets, Clutton-Brock and  
48 Sheldon 2010).

49 The timing of birth and the following months are associated with a critical period for  
50 the newborn and its mother in terms of energetic demand: early growth for the former and  
51 lactation for the latter (Bronson 1989). In large herbivores, juvenile survival is regulated by  
52 various factors such as population size *via* density-dependent effects (Gaillard *et al.* 1998) and  
53 predation (Severud *et al.* 2019), but above all, environmental conditions. Juvenile survival  
54 depend on the environmental seasonality (*sensu* Heldstab *et al.* 2018), *i.e.* the succession of the  
55 seasons defined by an ensemble of environmental and climatic characteristics, with a reduced  
56 survival during the harshest season. For instance, calves survival is lower during the dry season  
57 than during the wet season in Serengeti wildebeest *Connochaetes taurinus* (Mduma *et al.* 1999).  
58 Hence, by determining the environmental conditions experienced by the new individual during  
59 its first months of life, the timing of birth has indirect consequences on newborn survival,  
60 through the modification of its growth rate for instance (*e.g.* Feder *et al.* 2008).

61 Thus, the phenology of birth is generally supposed to be adjusted to maximize offspring  
62 survival. In large herbivores, this mainly goes through the synchronization of parturition with  
63 food resource availability and quality (Post *et al.* 2003). Bighorn sheep *Ovis canadensis* for

64 instance, give birth during a restricted period of time, just before the forage quality peak, to  
65 provide sufficient milk and high-quality vegetation access to their growing lambs (Festa-  
66 Bianchet 1988). Nevertheless, numerous species are characterized by highly variable dates of  
67 birth inside their population, even when living in seasonal environments (*e.g.* Sinclair *et al.*  
68 2000). Why such a variability, and what are the demographic consequences of this variability?  
69 Still few studies have explored the consequences of the timing of birth on early life-stages  
70 survival in tropical ungulates, and most of them did not correct for imperfect detection (Gaillard  
71 *et al.* 2000, Grange *et al.* 2015), leading to less reliable conclusions. Thus, this field of research  
72 remains poorly known and needs further explorations (Lee *et al.* 2017).

73 In addition, the period around parturition is also critical for reproductive females  
74 themselves, as they endure their offspring needs in addition to their own. Lactation costs are  
75 particularly high in mammals (Clutton-Brock *et al.* 1989), and could turn reproductive females  
76 more susceptible to environmental conditions. Therefore, lactating females have to adjust their  
77 foraging behaviour to meet the extra energetic requirements. In zebra *Equus burchellii*, lactating  
78 mares do not increase their feeding time to keep matching the activity budget of the rest of their  
79 harem, but increase their bite frequency when feeding (Neuhaus and Ruckstuhl 2002). They  
80 also lead their harem more frequently than non-lactating mares to initiate movements to  
81 waterholes due to their increased water demand (Fischhoff *et al.* 2007). However, if a higher  
82 mortality rate could have been observed in females undergoing nursing energetic costs than in  
83 those who did not raise an offspring during the same year (Clutton-Brock *et al.* 1983), this does  
84 not appear to be the rule. A large literature, mainly based on northern hemisphere species, found  
85 no or positive correlation between the reproductive state and survival in mammal females,  
86 depending on their age class, social status or overall quality for instance (*e.g.* Weladji *et al.*  
87 2008, Descamps *et al.* 2009, Morano *et al.* 2013). The absence of clear pattern and the low  
88 representation of species from the southern hemisphere spurs further investigations.

89           Here we investigated the effect of the phenology of births on juvenile and mother annual  
90 survival in relation to environmental conditions in wild plains zebra *Equus quagga*. We  
91 explored the impact of the time spent in dry season, defined by the timing of birth and the  
92 duration of the associated dry season, on the survival of two juvenile stages, yearlings and adult  
93 females. We took advantage of a population of individually known animals living in Hwange  
94 National Park (HNP), Zimbabwe and followed since 2004. Even if their environment is  
95 seasonal (*i.e.* characterized by the succession of a wet and a dry season, Chamaillé-Jammes *et*  
96 *al.* 2006), zebras breed year round in this study site. Coupled with a high inter-annual variability  
97 in the starting date of the seasons, this constitutes the adequate framework to study the impact  
98 of variable environmental conditions related to seasonality on juveniles and females survival  
99 during the reproductive period, in a tropical herbivore.

100           As a large-bodied species living in a seasonal environment, the plains zebra is supposed  
101 to belong to the capital end of the capital-income breeder continuum (Jonsson 1997, Ogutu *et*  
102 *al.* 2014). Once the mother is engaged in reproduction, she will provide the energetic effort to  
103 bring her foal to weaning age mainly using previously stored resources. Moreover, newborn  
104 almost exclusively rely on its mother for food provisioning through lactation and nursing  
105 (Jackson *et al.* 2021), and is not exposed to thermo-regulation issues in our tropical study site.  
106 Thus, we hypothesized foals survival should not be sensitive to environmental conditions until  
107 weaning (*i.e.* during the first six months of life) (i). Then, the foal becoming progressively  
108 independent from its mother during the following six months (*i.e.* between six and 12 months  
109 of age, Smuts 1976), it should experience a subsequent decrease in its survival probability (ii).  
110 We expected a similar trend in yearling (*i.e.* between one and two years old) survival (Gaillard  
111 *et al.* 2000) because at this stage, it is fully independent from its mother but not fully grown yet  
112 (iii). To the contrary, the period immediately following parturition should be critical for the  
113 mother, which could experience lower survival than a non-breeding female (iv-1) and a stronger

114 negative response to harsh environmental conditions (v-1). Besides, regarding the variability in  
115 the findings associated with the literature focusing on reproductive females survival and the  
116 possible confounding effect of mares quality, we also considered the alternative hypothesis that  
117 a reproductive female could instead experience higher survival than a non-reproductive one (iv-  
118 2) and show less sensitivity to harsh environmental conditions (v-2).

119

## 120 **Materials and methods**

### 121 *1. Context of the study*

#### 122 *1.1. Study site*

123 Hwange National Park (19°00' S, 26°30' E), Zimbabwe, covers 14,651 km<sup>2</sup> of bushlands,  
124 woodlands and scrublands interspersed with grassland (Arraut *et al.* 2018), at between 900 and  
125 1,100 m a.s.l.. Average annual rainfall is c. 600 mm, with high inter-annual variations  
126 (Chamaillé-Jammes *et al.* 2006). Most, if not all, rainfall events occur during the wet season  
127 from October to April. The start of the wet season is characterised by a high inter-annual  
128 variability, leading to variable duration of the dry season. The study took place in the north-east  
129 of the park where artificial waterholes retain water year round and where areas > 8 km from a  
130 waterhole are rare, even in the dry season (Chamaillé-Jammes *et al.* 2007). There is no hunting  
131 in the park, but the densities of the two main zebra predators, lion *Panthera leo*, and spotted  
132 hyena *Crocuta crocuta* are high (Loveridge *et al.* 2007, Drouet-Hoguet 2007).

133

#### 134 *1.2. Study species*

135 Plains zebras live in harems composed of a stallion, several mares and their foals under two  
136 years old (Klingel 1969). They give birth year-round in most of their range, including  
137 Zimbabwe (Dasmann and Mossman 1962), even if a births peak can be observed around  
138 January to March in this area. Foals are weaned around 11 months of age (Smuts 1976), and

139 are considered as “followers” on the lider-follower gradient (Lent 1974), as they stand and  
140 follow their mother soon after birth (Sinclair *et al.* 2000). Zebras are grazers, feeding virtually  
141 only on grasses. Their food resource is thus mainly driven by rainfall (DuPlessis 2001). In HNP,  
142 the population of zebras is mostly resident (unpublished GPS data).

143

### 144 *1.3. Zebra demographic data*

145 Following the protocol presented in Grange *et al.* (2015), we recorded the presence of  
146 individually identified zebras between 2008 and 2019 using visual identification of their unique  
147 stripe pattern. Censuses were conducted twice a year, around March and August, during field  
148 sessions (hereafter called “sessions”) at the transition between wet and dry seasons ( $n = 24$   
149 sessions, *mean session duration* =  $45 \pm 25$  days, *range* = 13 - 88 days). When first sighted,  
150 individuals were classified according to three age classes: foal (from birth to 12 months old),  
151 yearling (12 to 24 months old) and adults (more than 24 months old). When possible, the precise  
152 age of foals and yearlings was determined using the criteria of Smuts 1975 and Penzhorn 1984,  
153 and photographs of individuals of known age (see details in Grange *et al.* 2015). For those  
154 individuals, we estimated a date of birth and its accuracy.

155

### 156 *1.4. Season delineation*

157 For each year, we identified the transition date between wet and dry season using 500 m  
158 resolution bi-monthly Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) records from the  
159 NASA website (MOD13A1 product, <https://modis.gsfc.nasa.gov>) and daily rainfall records  
160 from the Climate Hazards Center website (Rainfall Estimates from Rain Gauge and Satellite  
161 Observations, <https://www.chc.ucsb.edu>)(Supporting information 1). During the study period  
162 and according to our estimations, the wet season in HNP started between the 1<sup>st</sup> of November

163 and the 19<sup>th</sup> of December, and the dry season started between the 9<sup>th</sup> of May and the 29<sup>th</sup> of  
164 July.

165

## 166 2. Statistical analysis

### 167 2.1. General purpose

168 We ran Capture-Mark-Recapture (CMR) analyses (Lebreton *et al.* 1992) on two distinct  
169 datasets: a first one for individual of known date of birth with an accuracy ranging from 0 to  $\pm$   
170 90 days ( $n = 310$ ) to estimate the annual probability of survival of the two foal age classes (*i.e.*  
171 “younger foals” of less than six months old and “older foals” between six and 12 months old)  
172 and yearling (*i.e.* between one and two years old). We used a second dataset composed of adult  
173 females ( $n = 205$ ) to estimate the annual probability of survival of mares according to their  
174 reproductive state using multi-states models (Lebreton *et al.* 2009). We tested the effect of the  
175 time spent in dry season since births for younger foals and mothers, and the subsequent time  
176 spent in dry season between two successive seasons for older foals, yearlings and non-  
177 reproductive mares (detailed below). We performed CMR analyses using the program MARK  
178 ([www.phidot.org/software/mark](http://www.phidot.org/software/mark)) and R (R statistical software, [www.r-project.org](http://www.r-project.org)), with the R  
179 package *RMark* (Laake 2013). The Goodness Of Fit tests (GOF) were assessed using the R  
180 package *R2ucare* (Gimenez *et al.* 2017).

181 For both datasets, we considered each session as punctual, summarized by its starting  
182 date. As it was variable, we accounted for the time interval between two successive sessions in  
183 the model specification. We calculated the proportion of time elapsed between two successive  
184 sessions pertaining a year as follows:  $\Delta t_{s_2-s_1} = (Start\ date_{s_2} - Start\ date_{s_1}) / 365$ .

185

186

187



188           2.2. Juvenile survival

189   As in previous works of demographic analyses performed on these data (Grange *et al.* 2015,  
190   Vitet *et al.* 2020, Vitet *et al.* 2021), we ran the analyses on individuals observed at least once  
191   in the field ( $n = 290$ ), but also on individuals which were never observed but whose mother was  
192   detected to be pregnant thanks to opportunistic faecal sampling and subsequent hormone (20-  
193   oxopregnanones and oestrogens, Ncube *et al.* 2011) dosage ( $n = 20$ , Supporting information 2).  
194   We recorded those foals as being identified at birth only and never seen again. For both  
195   categories (*i.e.* seen and unseen individuals), we retained individuals whose date of birth was  
196   estimated ( $n = 310$ ). We attributed a session and a season of birth to each individual based on  
197   the date of birth nearest session. So, all the foals born during the same session constituted a  
198   cohort, experiencing similar environmental conditions. We defined three age classes:  
199   “younger foals” of less than six months old, “older foals” between six and 12 months old and  
200   “yearlings” between one and two years old. Individuals remained in the dataset even after  
201   becoming adults (*i.e.*  $> 2$  years old) to get better estimations of yearling survival, but adult  
202   survival was not considered in this analysis. We estimated the time spent in dry season between  
203   two successive sessions. The variable *tids* was defined as the proportion of days of dry season  
204   between the first day of the session  $s$  and the first day of the following session  $s+1$ . We used  
205   the scaled value of *tids* in the models to ease model convergence. We summarized observations  
206   data in a life history dataset, with one observation per known individual per session: 0  
207   corresponding to “no sighting of the individual during the session  $s$ ”, and 1 corresponding to  
208   “at least one sighting of the individual during the session  $s$ ”.

209           The GOF tests of the fully time-dependent model (Gimenez *et al.* 2018) denoted  
210   problems of overdispersion (Test 2.CL:  $\chi^2 = 40.79$ ,  $df = 16$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ; Test 3.Sm:  $\chi^2 = 11.05$ ,  $df$   
211   = 19,  $P = 0.92$ ), trap-dependence ( $\chi^2 = 139.35$ ,  $df = 17$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ) and transience ( $\chi^2 = 70.47$ ,  $df$   
212   = 22,  $P < 0.01$ ). After examination of Test 2.CL, we noticed that overdispersion was mainly

213 caused by three sessions in the dataset. So, we considered it as marginal and ignored  
214 overdispersion in the analyses. We took into account trap-dependence by adding a default trap-  
215 dependence (*td*) effect in each recapture model tested. Transience was likely due to the age  
216 structure as young individuals often have low survival in large herbivores (Gaillard *et al.* 2000).  
217 Thus, we fitted all survival models tested with a default age class effect. We explored the effect  
218 of the season and *tids* on recapture and survival probabilities, for the two age classes of foals  
219 and the yearlings, and on several groupings of those age classes (Supporting information 3).  
220 We also fitted the null models and models including solely a time effect. We conducted a similar  
221 analysis on the two foal age classes using a Generalized Linear Model (GLM) approach,  
222 presented in Supporting information 4.

223

### 224 *2.3. Mare survival*

225 We ran the analyses on all the adult females observed at least once during the sessions ( $n =$   
226 322). The season and *tids* variables were defined in the same way than for juveniles (see above).  
227 We summarized observations data in a life history dataset, with one observation per known  
228 individual per session: 0 corresponding to “no sighting of the mare during the session  $s$ ”, 1  
229 corresponding to “at least one sighting of the mare alone during the session  $s$ ” and 2  
230 corresponding to “at least one sighting of the mare with a dependent foal during the session  $s$ ”.  
231 We considered a dependent foal as an individual that is still suckled, so under 6 months of age.  
232 Even if weaning generally occurs around 11 months of age in zebras, foals can survive without  
233 their mother from 9 months old upwards (Smut 1976). We chose 6 months to exclude such  
234 possibility and match our sessions frequency.

235 As there were too few repetitions to conduct the GOF tests of the multi-states model,  
236 we conducted the GOF tests on the one-state model instead. The tests denoted overdispersion  
237 (Test 2.CL:  $\chi^2 = 49.02$ ,  $df = 19$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ; Test 3.Sm:  $\chi^2 = 72.10$ ,  $df = 20$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ), trap-

238 dependence ( $\chi^2 = 112.13$ ,  $df = 21$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ) and transience ( $\chi^2 = 62.23$ ,  $df = 21$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ). After  
239 examination of Test 2.CL and 3.Sm, we noticed that overdispersion was mainly caused by five  
240 and three sessions in the dataset respectively. So overdispersion could be ignored because  
241 considered as marginal. We took into account trap-dependence by adding a default trap-  
242 dependence effect in each recapture model tested. To take into account transience, we added a  
243 categorical covariable *sight* in all survival models to differentiate between mares captured for  
244 the first time during the survey and mares already captured at least once during the survey,  
245 following the method described by Pradel *et al.* 1997. We evaluated the effect of the  
246 reproductive state (*i.e.* with or without a dependent foal), the season and *tids* on recapture,  
247 survival and transition probabilities. Unfortunately, age was not known for a large number of  
248 females, so we were not able to include it in the models. We also fitted null models and models  
249 including solely a time effect.

250

#### 251 *2.4. Model selection*

252 Because of the huge number of combinations possible between recapture and survival (and  
253 transition for mares) models, we conducted a two-step selection model using the lowest Akaike  
254 Information Criterion adjusted for small sample sizes (AICc) and the number of parameters  
255 (principle of parsimony) (Burnham 2002). We conducted a first model selection step on  
256 recapture and survival (and transition for mares) models independently. When proceeding to  
257 model selection on a given demographic parameter (*i.e.* recapture, survival or transition), we  
258 set the other models to depend exclusively on the covariables related to GOF corrections (*e.g.*  
259 when selecting recapture models in foals, we set survival model as depending on the age class,  
260 see Supporting information 3). We considered all the models within  $\Delta AICc < 2$  from the best  
261 model for the next model selection step. When there was only one competing model emerging  
262 from this model selection step for a given demographic parameter, we also included the second

263 best model in terms of AICc to allow a real model selection for each of the demographic  
264 parameters based on at least two different models (see model selection for data on mares in  
265 Supporting information 3).

266 In the second selection step, we ran all the combinations possible between the best  
267 recapture and survival (and transition for mares) models resulting from the first model selection  
268 step to identify the best complete models. We retained the complete models (recapture and  
269 survival, and transition for mares) within  $\Delta AICc < 2$  from the best model as competing models,  
270 and we retained the models with the lowest number of parameters as the best models. Following  
271 Arnold 2010, we set the confidence intervals at 85%, in accordance with our AICc model  
272 selection procedure.

273

## 274 **Results**

### 275 *Juvenile survival*

276 We found four competing models ( $AICc \in [1718.922; 1720.291]$ ,  $deviance \in [1658.641;$   
277  $1660.011]$ ) to estimate the survival and recapture of juveniles, three of them correspond to the  
278 most parsimonious models ( $k = 29$ , see Table 1 and Supporting information 3). In all three  
279 models, the probability of recapture included an additive effect of trap-dependence and time,  
280 and the probability of survival increased with age and decreased with the proportion of time  
281 spent in dry season. The difference between them lied in the effect of *tids*, which was found to  
282 act in addition with the age class, or exclusively on older foals, or on older foals and yearlings  
283 grouped together in a unique age category. The season was not retained in the competing  
284 models.

285

286 *Table 1: Statistics of the four competing models investigating the relationship between annual survival*  
 287 *and the proportion of time spent in dry season according to the age class in plains zebra juveniles*  
 288 *(Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe, 2008-2019).*

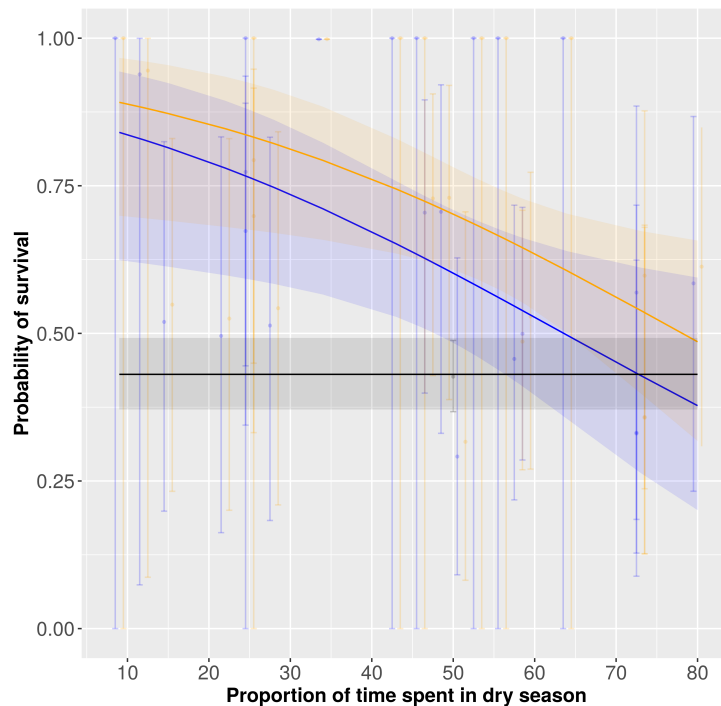
| Model | Explanatory variables   | Nb. of parameters (k) | AICc     | Deviance | ΔAICc |
|-------|---|-----------------------|----------|----------|-------|
| 1     | Survival ~ foal_old + yearl + adult + tids * fo_ye<br>Recapture ~ td + time             | 29                    | 1718.922 | 1658.641 | 0     |
| 2     | Survival ~ foal_old + yearl + adult + tids * fo_ye<br>Recapture ~ td + age_class + time | 32                    | 1719.827 | 1653.049 | 0.906 |
| 3     | Survival ~ foal_old + yearl + adult + tids * foal_old<br>Recapture ~ td + time          | 29                    | 1720.134 | 1659.853 | 1.212 |
| 4     | Survival ~ age_class + tids<br>Recapture ~ td + time                                    | 29                    | 1720.291 | 1660.011 | 1.37  |

289 *tids = proportion of time spent in dry season; foal\_old = older foals; yearl = yearlings; fo\_ye = older*  
 290 *foals and yearlings gathered.*

291

292 The following stated results are from Table 1, model 1: the variable *tids* had a significant  
 293 negative effect on both older foals and yearlings ( $\beta = -0.637 \pm 0.367$  SE, 85% CI [-1.167; -  
 294 0.108]). The probability of survival of older foals ranged from  $0.840 \pm 0.108$  SE, 85% CI  
 295 [0.624; 0.944] when the proportion of time spent in dry season was the shortest (*i.e.* 9 % of the  
 296 time) to  $0.378 \pm 0.144$  SE, 85% CI [0.201; 0.595] when the proportion of time spent in dry  
 297 season was the longest (*i.e.* 80 % of the time, Fig. 1). Similarly, the probability of survival of  
 298 yearlings ranged from  $0.891 \pm 0.085$  SE, 85% CI [0.699; 0.967] to  $0.486 \pm 0.123$  SE, 85% CI  
 299 [0.318; 0.657]. The survival of younger foals was not significantly affected by *tids*, and was of  
 300  $0.431 \pm 0.042$  SE, 85% CI [0.371; 0.492] on average. Besides, the supplementary analyses on  
 301 the two foal age classes using a GLM approach provided similar results (Supporting  
 302 information 4). Therefore, hypotheses (i) stating that younger foals survival should not be  
 303 sensitive to environmental conditions, (ii) and (iii) stating that older foals and yearlings *resp.*  
 304 survival should be lower, were validated by our results. The effect of trap-dependence on the  
 305 probability of recapture was significant ( $\beta = 1.756 \pm 0.182$  SE, 85% CI [1.494; 2.018]). The

306 probability of recapture varied from  $0.123 \pm 0.069$  SE, 85% CI [0.053; 0.259] to  $0.634 \pm 0.151$   
307 SE, 85% CI [0.404; 0.815].



308  
309 *Figure 1: Probability of annual survival of plains zebras juveniles in Hwange Nation Park, Zimbabwe*  
310 *(2008-2019), according to the proportion of time spent in dry season. Black: younger foals (between*  
311 *birth and six months old), blue: older foals (between six and 12 months old), orange: yearlings (between*  
312 *one and two years old). Solid lines represent predicted values from the best model. Shaded areas*  
313 *represent 85% confidence intervals of these predicted values. Dots represent survival predicted by the*  
314 *time model, vertical bars represent 85% confidence intervals. Scaled proportion of time spent in dry*  
315 *season converted back to the proportion of time spent in dry season.*

316

### 317 *Mare survival*

318 We found two competing models ( $AICc \in [3294.197; 3295.161]$ ,  $deviance \in [3226.108;$   
319  $3224.943]$ ) to estimate the survival, transition between reproductive states and recapture of  
320 mares, one of them being the most parsimonious model ( $k = 33$ , see Table 2 and Supporting  
321 information 3). In both models, the probability of recapture included an additive effect of the

322 trap-dependence, reproductive state and time. The probability of survival was higher for  
 323 reproductive than for non-reproductive mares, and the proportion of time spent in dry season  
 324 decreased the probability of survival. The probability of transition between reproductive states  
 325 varied according to the season (see details below). The only difference between the two models  
 326 came from the fact that *tids* acted either in addition or in interaction with the reproductive state  
 327 to predict mares survival.  
 328

*Table 2 : Statistics of the two competing models investigating the relationship between annual survival and the proportion of time spent in dry season according to the reproductive state in plains zebra mares (Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe, 2008-2019).*

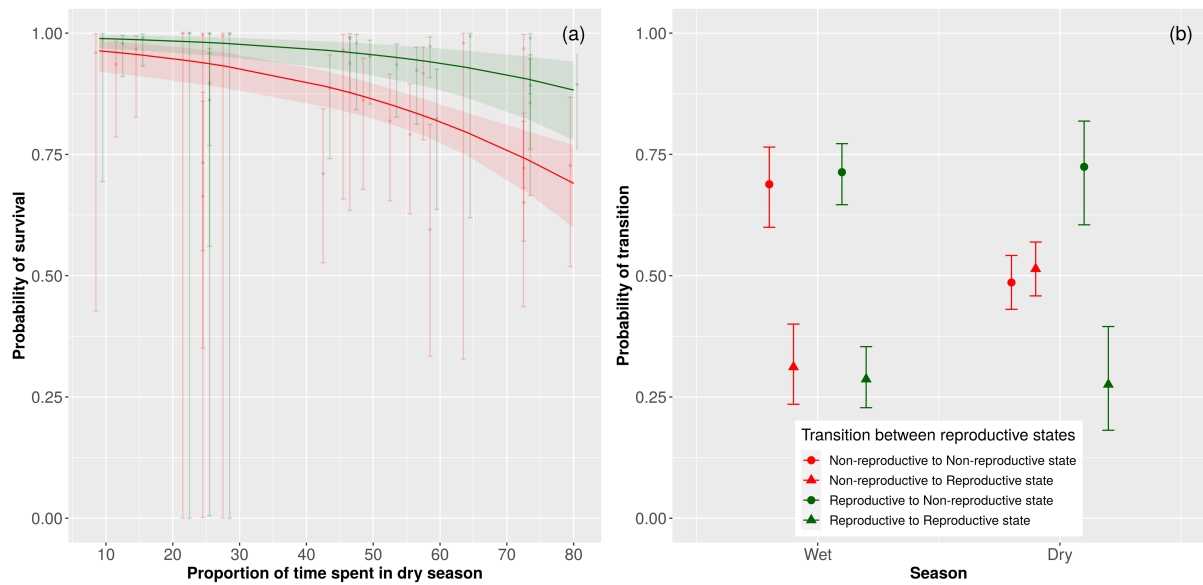
| Model | Explanatory variables  | Nb. of parameters (k) | AICc     | Deviance | $\Delta$ AICc |
|-------|--|-----------------------|----------|----------|---------------|
| 1     | Survival ~ sight + repro_status + tids<br>Recapture ~ td + repro_status + time<br>Transition ~ season * from_repro_status *<br>to repro_status | 33                    | 3294.197 | 3226.108 | 0             |
| 2     | Survival ~ sight + repro_status * tids<br>Recapture ~ td + repro_status + time<br>Transition ~ season * from_repro_status *<br>to repro_status | 34                    | 3295.161 | 3224.943 | 0.964         |

329 *tids* = proportion of time spent in dry season; *sight* = first capture or not for a given female; *repro\_status*  
 330 = reproductive state; *from\_repro\_status* = reproductive state of departure for the transition models;  
 331 *to\_repro\_status* = reproductive state of arrival for the transition models; *td* = trap-dependence.

332  
 333 The best-supported model included a significant effect of *sight* on the survival  
 334 probability ( $\beta = 1.075 \pm 0.272$  SE, 85% CI [0.683; 1.467]). Here we present results for mares  
 335 in their second and following observations only, results relying on a single first observation  
 336 being less informative. The best-supported model also included a significant negative effect of  
 337 *tids* on both reproductive and non-reproductive females ( $\beta = -0.729 \pm 0.221$  SE, 85% CI [-  
 338 1.047; -0.410], Fig. 2a). The probability of survival of non-reproductive females varied from  
 339  $0.963 \pm 0.020$  SE, 85% CI [0.921; 0.984] when the proportion of time spent in dry season was

340 the shortest to  $0.690 \pm 0.060$  SE, 85% CI [0.600; 0.769] when the proportion of time spent in  
341 dry season was the longest. Similarly, the probability of survival of reproductive females varied  
342 from  $0.989 \pm 0.008$  SE, 85% CI [0.969; 0.996] to  $0.883 \pm 0.054$  SE, 85% CI [0.779; 0.941].  
343 Therefore, hypothesis (iv-1) was not validated by our results in favour of hypothesis (iv-2)  
344 stating that mothers could experience higher survival than non-breeding females. Similarly, we  
345 did not validate hypothesis (v-1) in favour of hypothesis (v-2) stating that mothers could  
346 experience a lower negative response to harsh environmental conditions. The probability for a  
347 mare to move from the reproductive to the non-reproductive state was significantly higher (at  
348 least  $0.713 \pm 0.044$  SE, 85% CI [0.646; 0.772]) than the probability to stay in the reproductive  
349 state (at most  $0.287 \pm 0.044$  SE, 85% CI [0.228; 0.354]) whatever the season (Fig. 2b). The  
350 probability to stay in the non-reproductive state was similar to the probability to move from the  
351 non-reproductive to the reproductive state in the dry season ( $0.486 \pm 0.039$  SE, 85% CI [0.431;  
352 0.542] and  $0.514 \pm 0.039$  SE, 85% CI [0.458; 0.569] respectively), but it was significantly  
353 higher in the wet season ( $0.688 \pm 0.058$  SE, 85% CI [0.600; 0.765] against  $0.312 \pm 0.058$  SE,  
354 85% CI [0.235; 0.400] respectively). The effect of trap-dependence on the probability of  
355 recapture was significant ( $\beta = 1.034 \pm 0.174$  SE, 85% CI [0.784; 1.284]). The probability of  
356 recapture was higher for non-reproductive than for reproductive females. It varied from  $0.411$   
357  $\pm 0.072$  SE, 85% CI [0.313; 0.517] to  $0.908 \pm 0.049$  SE, 85% CI [0.808; 0.959] for non-  
358 reproductive females, and from  $0.129 \pm 0.041$  SE, 85% CI [0.080; 0.200] to  $0.676 \pm 0.106$  SE,  
359 85% CI [0.511; 0.807] for reproductive females.





360

361 Figure 2: a) Probability of annual survival of plains zebra mares according to the proportion of time  
362 spent in dry season and their reproductive state (for mares in their second and subsequent observations  
363 only, see text for details). Solid lines represent predicted values from the best model (red: non-  
364 reproductive females, green: reproductive females). Shaded areas represent 85% confidence intervals of  
365 these predicted values. Dots represent females survival predicted by the time model respectively, vertical  
366 bars represent 85% confidence intervals. Scaled proportion of time spent in dry season converted back  
367 to the proportion of time spent in dry season. b) Probability of transition between reproductive and non-  
368 reproductive states for plains zebra mares according to the season. Dots represent predicted values from  
369 the best model. Vertical bars represent 85% confidence intervals of these predicted values. For both  
370 graphs: data from Hwange Nation Park, Zimbabwe (2008-2019).

371

## 372 Discussion

373 The phenology of births, by determining the environmental conditions experienced by newborn  
374 at birth and during the following months, has major effects on their survival. Although the  
375 annual cohort survival of younger foals (between birth and six months old) is stable around  
376 0.431, the one of older foals (between six and twelve months old) and even yearlings (between  
377 one and two years old) significantly decreases with increasing time spent in dry season. The

378 decline observed, from approx. 0.8 to 0.4 for both age classes, is of a factor two between the  
379 shortest and the longest exposure to dry season experienced by juveniles in this study. Mares  
380 annual survival is also altered by an increasing time spent in dry season weather they are in a  
381 reproductive state (*i.e.* with a dependent foal) or not, but in a lower extent. However, this effect  
382 is all the more strong for non-reproductive females.

383         The timing of birth is intrinsically related to the timing of conception because of a slight  
384 flexibility in the duration of gestation (Kiltie 1982). As the reproductive cycle of zebra mares  
385 lasts slightly more than one year (Ncube *et al.* 2011), even if they experience post-partum  
386 oestrus (Klingel 1969), one can expect their parturition date should progressively be shifted  
387 from the optimal period, unless they delay their reproductive cycle to wait for the next  
388 favourable birthing period. But a consequence of this is that their inter-birth interval (mean  
389 inter-birth interval of  $480 \pm 116$  days in the study site, Barnier *et al.* 2012) would be  
390 significantly increased and their lifetime reproductive success decreased (as observed in giraffe  
391 *Giraffa camelopardalis*, Lee *et al.* 2017). In addition, we found only a small negative effect of  
392 the time spent in dry season on reproductive mares annual survival and no effect on annual  
393 survival of younger foals, demonstrating that the timing of birth seems not to be crucial for  
394 them. Moreover, females can engage reproduction only when they reach a certain threshold in  
395 body condition (Grimsdell 1973), which can be delayed in case of adverse environmental  
396 conditions during the year preceding parturition, such as drought years (Ogotu *et al.* 2014). This  
397 is thus a supplementary factor acting as a constraint on the determination of the timing of birth.  
398 Altogether, these observations argue in favour of breeding year-round in our zebra population  
399 in the interest of the mare fitness, as observed in our population.

400         However, older foals and yearlings annual survival suffered from a date of birth  
401 exposing them to a long period of time in dry season while they are gaining independence from  
402 their mother. The date of birth can be the result of a trade-off between the mother and the

403 offspring, with the most adequate period being not necessarily the same for the mother than for  
404 the offspring (Dezeure *et al.* 2021). In our study, one can hypothesize that the optimal timing  
405 of birth for the offspring is situated at the beginning of the dry season: the harsh conditions  
406 during early life are buffered by the mother at this time, and the offspring starts to become  
407 independent while conditions are improving through the following wet season. Moreover, the  
408 foal benefits from higher quality reserves stored by the mother during the previous wet season,  
409 as suggested in African large herbivores (Ogutu *et al.* 2014). To the contrary, the optimal timing  
410 of parturition for the mare could be more variable, in order to minimize the inter-birth interval  
411 as they are only slightly affected by environmental conditions.

412         Although the timing of birth defines the environmental conditions experienced at birth,  
413 it also determines susceptibility to predation, which is a major factor of mortality in zebra foals  
414 (Mills and Shenk 1992) and probably in adults too (Grange *et al.* 2015). On the one hand, the  
415 dry season implies higher water demand (which shall be added to the already increased demand  
416 of lactating mares) while its availability is reduced. As water holes are hot spots of predation  
417 (zebras use movement strategies to minimize risk such as diel migration, Courbin *et al.* 2018),  
418 one can expect a higher predation risk on foals and mares during this season. This could explain  
419 their higher mortality as the time spent in dry season increases. On the other hand, they could  
420 also benefit from an interaction between environmental conditions and predation during the dry  
421 season: the reduced vegetation cover could improve predator detectability and reduce the  
422 exposure of zebras to predation (Lee *et al.* 2017). It is necessary to explore the interactive effect  
423 of environmental conditions and predation as defined by the timing of birth to understand their  
424 concurrent effect on juvenile survival in tropical ecosystems.

425         We did not have information about the quality of the mares of our population, whereas  
426 it is known to influence reproductive success in other large herbivore species, as illustrated by  
427 a lower offspring survival or a lower probability to breed in lower quality females (Hamel *et al.*

428 2009). These observations are nevertheless indirectly supported by our data too, as non-  
429 reproductive females were more sensitive to the time spent in dry season with a survival  
430 decreasing more rapidly than reproductive females. This suggests that they were of lower  
431 quality or at least in poorer body condition than breeding females, and were unable to engage  
432 reproduction or lost their foal at an early stage.

433         Due to data collection happening only every six months, our ability to precisely estimate  
434 the age of the foals was variable, depending on the distance between its date of birth and its  
435 date of first observation (but the same limitations are often encountered in similar studies  
436 conducted *in natura*, Lee *et al.* 2017). Foals born during the field sessions were more likely to  
437 be assigned a precise date of birth. This variability in the precision of the estimation of the dates  
438 of birth (ranging from  $\pm 0$  to 90 days) together with the gathering of foals in discrete periods of  
439 births could have limited the robustness of our analyses. However, the same analysis conducted  
440 on individuals with a date of birth twice as accurate (*i.e.* ranging from  $\pm 0$  to 45 days) provided  
441 very similar results, with an analogous negative effect of the time spent in dry season on older  
442 foals and yearlings survival ( $\beta = -0.571 \pm 0.430$  SE, 85% CI [-1.191; 0.048], results not shown).  
443 In addition, the low detectability of early dead foals limits the ability to spot them in the field.  
444 However, the opportunistic faecal samples coupled with the hormone dosage conferred a major  
445 strength to this study by allowing the detection of a consistent number of probable early dead  
446 foals ( $n = 20$ ) and their inclusion in the foals survival estimations, even if the cause and age of  
447 death remained unknown.

448         In large ungulates, juvenile survival and then recruitment have long term consequences  
449 on the population dynamics (Gaillard *et al.* 2000, Raithel *et al.* 2007). The phenology of births,  
450 by determining the external conditions experience at birth and then the timing of the first critical  
451 phases of the life cycle of the individuals (*e.g.* early growth, age at sexual maturity), plays a  
452 determinant role in the quality of the cohort produced (Holmes *et al.* 2021), affecting in turn

453 the population growth rate. In the southern hemisphere, climate change is expected to lead to  
454 an increasing frequency of droughts and of their unpredictability, but also to longer and harsher  
455 dry seasons in general (Zhao and Dai 2015, Dunning *et al.* 2018). The latter, associated with a  
456 lower survival of older foals and yearlings as the time spent in dry season increases, could affect  
457 the population dynamics of zebras. However, as southern species already live in unpredictable  
458 environments to a certain extent (Owen-Smith and Ogutu 2013), one could expect phenotypic  
459 adjustments in the timing of birth could occur in response to the changing climate, as it is  
460 already observed in drought years in topi or warthog (Ogutu *et al.* 2010). Phenotypic  
461 adjustments are more likely than evolutionary processes, which seems overall less frequently  
462 observed in response to climate change (Hoffmann and Sgrò 2011), in particular in species with  
463 a long generation time.

464

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469 **Authors' contributions:** SCJ, CB and LT conceived the ideas and designed methodology; SCJ  
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471 of the manuscript. All authors contributed critically to the drafts and gave final approval for  
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