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**Functional significance of highly variable colouration in
the shore skink (*Oligosoma smithi*)**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements
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in

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ABSTRACT

Variation in animal colouration is attributed to several biological functions, a key one being camouflage. Background-matching is a camouflage strategy where prey conceal themselves from predators by resembling their immediate backgrounds. Achieving optimal background-matching can be challenging, particularly in 1) visual backgrounds that form a mosaic caused by spatial variations in habitat characteristics, and 2) varying predator abundance or behaviour. Additionally, crypsis can be affected by alternative and potentially antagonistic functions, such as intraspecific signalling and thermoregulation. This thesis aimed to investigate the selective processes that affect prey colouration for background-matching in a heterogeneous environment. Specifically, I focused on the influence of habitat gradients, predator behaviour, and the potential conflict between camouflage requirements and thermoregulation or intraspecific signalling. Firstly, I conducted a detailed survey on the colour and colour patterns of a wild shore skink population (*Oligosoma smithi*) within a continuous heterogeneous habitat at Tāwharanui Regional Park. This population's body colouration showed a significant association with a vegetation gradient, consistent with selection for background-matching. However, field experiments also revealed that predation risk for the more common colour pattern variants was double that of the rarer variant's regardless of background type, consistent with predictions for apostatic selection (negative frequency-dependent selection). Secondly, I demonstrated that population colouration can respond to a change of habitat. One year after a translocation of shore skinks to an island habitat with a disjunct two-patch background, the population's colours matched the simple substrate type (bare rocky stones) more than the complex substrate (high vegetation cover on sand). Skinks were darker, less intense in colour, and had lower colour pattern diversity compared to the founder and source populations at Tāwharanui. This study highlighted the potential significance of considering camouflage requirements of a species in human-induced translocations. Thirdly, in an analysis of seasonal effects to camouflage, I found no evidence that background-matching in the Tāwharanui population was compromised by differences in body colours between breeding and non-breeding seasons. This is likely because colours associated with intraspecific signalling (i.e. that exhibited age-dependence and sexual dichromatism) were located in the ventral body regions of skinks that would typically be hidden from predators. Finally, across 17 populations, shore skink colouration showed patterns of spatial variation consistent with thermal melanism (thermoregulation) and island syndrome. Despite the strong correlation of maximum

monthly temperature on colours and latitude on colour patterns, I suggest that the significantly darker island populations were caused by a combination of local adaptation (i.e. crypsis) and non-selective forces (e.g., genetic drift). Overall, my thesis provides new insight on how different selection processes maintain dramatic colouration within a species, and marks the first quantitative research on colouration in New Zealand reptiles.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION.....	15
1.1	CAMOUFLAGE: CONCEALMENT FROM PREDATORS.....	15
1.2	CONFLICTING SIGNALS: CAMOUFLAGE, THERMOREGULATION AND INTRASPECIFIC SIGNALLING.....	18
1.3	GEOGRAPHICAL VARIATION IN COLOUR AMONG POPULATIONS.....	20
1.4	<i>OLIGOSOMA SMITHI</i> AS A MODEL SPECIES.....	21
1.5	AIMS AND OBJECTIVES.....	23
1.6	THESIS STRUCTURE AND OUTLINE.....	23
1.6.1	<i>Terminology</i>	25
1.7	REFERENCES.....	25
2	HABITAT SUITABILITY FOR CONSERVATION TRANSLOCATION: THE IMPORTANCE OF CONSIDERING CAMOUFLAGE IN CRYPTIC SPECIES.....	35
2.1	ABSTRACT.....	35
2.2	INTRODUCTION.....	36
2.3	METHODS.....	38
2.3.1	<i>Study species and study site</i>	38
2.3.2	<i>Population surveys</i>	39
2.3.3	<i>Quantifying colour pattern complexity</i>	40
2.3.4	<i>Quantifying vegetation cover</i>	41
2.3.5	<i>Quantifying colour from photograph</i>	41
2.3.6	<i>Statistical analyses</i>	42
2.4	RESULTS.....	43
2.4.1	<i>Colour pattern variation and habitat use</i>	43
2.4.2	<i>Background-matching of shore skinks</i>	45
2.5	DISCUSSION.....	46
2.5.1	<i>Change in colour pattern diversity</i>	46
2.5.2	<i>Habitat occupancy of shore skinks</i>	47
2.5.3	<i>Background-matching of shore skinks</i>	48
2.5.4	<i>Diversity in translocated populations</i>	49
2.6	AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS.....	50
2.7	REFERENCES.....	50
3	SPATIAL AND TEMPORAL VARIATION IN COLOURATION FOR BACKGROUND-MATCHING ACROSS A CONTINUOUS HETEROGENEOUS ENVIRONMENT.....	59
3.1	ABSTRACT.....	59

3.2	INTRODUCTION.....	60
3.3	METHODS	62
3.3.1	<i>Study population</i>	62
3.3.2	<i>Population surveys</i>	62
3.3.3	<i>Quantifying colour patterns and habitat from photographs</i>	62
3.3.4	<i>Quantifying colour from photographs</i>	63
3.3.5	<i>Calculating colour contrasts (background-matching)</i>	64
3.3.6	<i>Statistical analyses</i>	64
3.4	RESULTS.....	66
3.4.1	<i>Colour contrasts among body regions</i>	66
3.4.2	<i>Body colouration and background-matching across the vegetation gradient</i>	66
3.4.3	<i>Association of colour to age, sex and quality</i>	68
3.4.4	<i>Seasonal variation of body colouration and background-matching</i>	69
3.5	DISCUSSION.....	69
3.5.1	<i>Background-matching across a continuous heterogeneous habitat</i>	70
3.5.2	<i>Body colours for intraspecific signalling</i>	72
3.5.3	<i>Variation of colour patterns across seasons</i>	72
3.6	AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS.....	73
3.7	REFERENCES	73
4	BACKGROUND-MATCHING AND APOSTATIC SELECTION MAINTAIN PREY COLOUR PATTERN VARIATION IN A HETEROGENEOUS ENVIRONMENT	81
4.1	ABSTRACT	81
4.2	INTRODUCTION.....	82
4.3	METHODS	83
4.3.1	<i>Study site</i>	83
4.3.2	<i>Population survey</i>	84
4.3.3	<i>Predation experiment</i>	84
4.3.4	<i>Predicted attack scenarios</i>	86
4.3.5	<i>Statistical analysis</i>	87
4.4	RESULTS.....	88
4.4.1	<i>Pattern type frequencies in the population</i>	88
4.4.2	<i>Predation experiment</i>	88
4.5	DISCUSSION.....	90
4.6	AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS.....	92
4.7	REFERENCES	92
5	GEOGRAPHIC VARIATION IN COLOUR AND PATTERNS IS ASSOCIATED WITH CLIMATE AND MICROHABITAT IN A LIZARD.....	98

5.1	ABSTRACT	98
5.2	INTRODUCTION	98
5.3	METHODS.....	101
5.3.1	<i>Study sites and population surveys</i>	101
5.3.2	<i>Skink colour and pattern from photographs</i>	102
5.3.3	<i>Environmental data</i>	103
5.3.4	<i>Phylogenetic tree</i>	104
5.3.5	<i>Statistical analyses</i>	104
5.4	RESULTS	106
5.5	DISCUSSION	109
5.6	AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS	111
5.7	REFERENCES.....	111
6	DISCUSSION	119
6.1	POPULATION COLOURATION IN A CONTINUOUS HETEROGENEOUS ENVIRONMENT	119
6.1.1	<i>Habitat structure, colour and complexity</i>	119
6.1.2	<i>Predator behaviour</i>	120
6.2	POPULATION COLOURATION IN A DISJUNCT HETEROGENEOUS HABITAT	120
6.3	CONFLICTING SIGNALS: CRYPSIS VERSUS INTRASPECIFIC SIGNALLING	122
6.4	CONFLICTING SIGNALS: CRYPSIS VERSUS THERMOREGULATION	123
6.5	FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS	124
6.5.1	<i>The ability of prey to adapt to the environment</i>	124
6.5.2	<i>Predator selection</i>	125
6.6	CONCLUSIONS.....	126
6.7	REFERENCES.....	127
7	APPENDICES	136
7.1	APPENDIX 1	136
7.2	APPENDIX 2	137
7.3	APPENDIX 3	137
7.4	APPENDIX 4	138
7.5	APPENDIX 5	138
7.6	APPENDIX 6	140
7.7	APPENDIX 7	141
7.8	APPENDIX 8	141
7.9	APPENDIX 9	143
7.10	APPENDIX 10	145

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Geographic distribution of the shore skink, <i>Oligosoma smithi</i>	21
Figure 2. Example of shore skink colouration.....	21
Figure 3. Shore skink phylogeny consisting of two clades, and the third clade is small-scaled skink, <i>O. microlepis</i>	22
Figure 4. Four body pattern types of shore skinks at Tāwharanui Regional Park.....	40
Figure 5. Proportion of four colour patterns in three shore skink populations.	43
Figure 6. Dorsal colour patterns of shore skinks occupying different percentages of vegetation cover at three populations: (a) Tāwharanui, (b) subset of founders, and (c) translocated population at Tiritiri Matangi Island.	44
Figure 7. Mean colours of shore skinks and habitat background of source population, compared to the founder population, and translocated population..	45
Figure 8. Four colour pattern types assigned to the shore skinks, and examples of ventral body colours	63
Figure 9. Median colour contrast between body and habitat background for dorsal, ventral, and ventral tail regions of shore skinks.....	66
Figure 10. a) Frequency of colour patterns of shore skinks across vegetation cover; and b) mean body and habitat background colour across vegetation cover; and c) between age classes of shore skinks.....	68
Figure 11. a) Frequency of colour patterns in adult shore skinks across seasons; and b) mean body and habitat background colour across seasons, c) between sexes, and d) between colour pattern types..	69
Figure 12. (a) New Zealand coastal sand dune; (b) shore skink variants at Tāwharanui; and (c) 3D-printed skink models in sand and vegetation backgrounds.....	85
Figure 13. Predicted avian attack frequencies on skink models under four scenarios...86	
Figure 14. (a) Proportion of shore skink colour patterns across four years, and (b) across vegetation cover.....	88
Figure 15. Observed attack frequencies of (a) four clay model types, and (b) combined models of shore skinks.	89
Figure 16. The proportion of colour pattern types for each surveyed population, at latitudes 35° to 38° in New Zealand.....	101
Figure 17. An example of variation in colour for the four colour patterns in 17 shore skink populations.....	103

Figure 18. a) Predicted body brightness across latitude, location, maximum temperature, habitat colour and microhabitat cover if shore skink colour was strongly selected for thermoregulation; b) predicted body brightness if shore skink colour was under selection for camouflage; and c) the trends observed in body brightness (raw data and data predicted from PGLS model) for each independent variable..... 106

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. The standard mean differences in colour between three shore skink populations: source and subset of founder populations from Tāwharanui Regional Park, and translocated populations at Tiritiri Matangi Island	46
Table 2. Best fit PGLS models (lowest AICc) and their associated subset competing models that had AICc weight summed to at least 0.95 for shore skink colour and colour patterns.....	108