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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Spring phenology does not affect timing of reproduction in the great tit (Parus major)

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INTRODUCTION

Many seasonal breeders adjust the timing of reproduction in response to year-to-year variations in supplementary environmental cues, amongst which ambient temperature is thought to be most influential. However, it is possible that for species such as the great tit (Parus major L.), phenological cues from sprouting vegetation and the consequent abundance of invertebrate prey, although dependent on temperature, may provide supplementary environmental cues per se. This hypothesis was investigated in breeding pairs of great tits kept in outdoor aviaries. In spring, experimental pairs were provided with access to leafing birch branches and caterpillars as a visual food cue, while control pairs were provided with non-leafing branches. Observations were made on the onset of laying and on concentrations of plasma luteinizing hormone (LH) at regular intervals to monitor changes in reproductive function. The onset of egg laying was not advanced by the presence of leafing branches and caterpillars. LH concentrations increased during the course of the study, but phenological cues did not affect plasma LH levels in females and males. Early spring vegetation, such as the leafing of birch branches, and the appearance of caterpillar prey do not appear to play a significant role in fine-tuning the onset of egg laying in great tits.

Key words: seasonal timing, laying date, Parus major, phenology, supplementary cues, luteinizing hormone.

SUMMARY

Many seasonal breeders adjust the timing of reproduction in response to year-to-year variations in supplementary environmental cues, amongst which ambient temperature is thought to be most influential. However, it is possible that for species such as the great tit (Parus major L.), phenological cues from sprouting vegetation and the consequent abundance of invertebrate prey, although dependent on temperature, may provide supplementary environmental cues per se. This hypothesis was investigated in breeding pairs of great tits kept in outdoor aviaries. In spring, experimental pairs were provided with access to leafing birch branches and caterpillars as a visual food cue, while control pairs were provided with non-leafing branches. Observations were made on the onset of laying and on concentrations of plasma luteinizing hormone (LH) at regular intervals to monitor changes in reproductive function. The onset of egg laying was not advanced by the presence of leafing branches and caterpillars. LH concentrations increased during the course of the study, but phenological cues did not affect plasma LH levels in females and males. Early spring vegetation, such as the leafing of birch branches, and the appearance of caterpillar prey do not appear to play a significant role in fine-tuning the onset of egg laying in great tits.

Key words: seasonal timing, laying date, Parus major, phenology, supplementary cues, luteinizing hormone.

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the addition of live crickets to their diet, while singing was induced even when crickets were only presented visually (Wilkens et al., 2000). In addition, Perfito and colleagues showed in captive lesser sundas zebra finches (Taeniopygia g. guttata) that food availability, in the form of seeds, is a more potent stimulus than increasing day length in regulating testicular development (Perfito et al., 2008). It thus appears that opportunistic breeders use phenological cues alone or in combination with rainfall and/or temperature cues to time the onset of breeding.

Strictly seasonal breeders may also use phenological cues, such as bud burst and the associated appearance of invertebrate prey, to fine-tune the timing of breeding to local conditions, superimposed on an underlying seasonal reproductive pattern (Hahn, 1998; Hahn et al., 2008), particularly if the seasonality of their environment has an unpredictable component (Wingfield et al., 1992). These cues may be dependent on changes in ambient temperature, for example in insectivorous seasonal breeders relying on a food peak in spring to rear their young (Both et al., 2004; Cresswell and McCleery, 2003; Crick et al., 1997; Dhondt and Eyckerman, 1979; Kluvyer, 1952; Perrins, 1965; Perrins and McCleery, 1989; Schmidt, 1984; Sokolov, 2000; van Balen, 1973; Visser et al., 1998; Visser et al., 2003). It is thus difficult to distinguish between direct effects of increasing temperature (Schaper et al., 2011) and phenological phenomena cues for timing the onset of breeding.

Table 1. Review of selected publications reporting effects of spring phenology on the seasonal timing of reproductive development and egg laying in both (A) seasonal opportunists and (B) strictly seasonal breeders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bird species</th>
<th>Food</th>
<th>Cue</th>
<th>Behavioural or physiological measure</th>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>(A) Seasonal opportunists</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pinon jays (Gymnorhinus cyanopeplus)</td>
<td>Granivorous</td>
<td>Green cones of Pinon pines</td>
<td>Breeding commences in summer when cones are present</td>
<td>Obs.</td>
<td>Ligon, 1978</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zebra finches (Taeniopygia g. guttata)</td>
<td>Granivorous</td>
<td>Rainfall</td>
<td>Hatching coincides with ripening of grass seeds after rain</td>
<td>Obs.</td>
<td>Zann et al., 1995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red crossbills (Loxia curvirostra)</td>
<td>Granivorous</td>
<td>Cones of hemlock</td>
<td>Breeding commences when cones are present</td>
<td>Obs.</td>
<td>Hahn, 1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darwin’s ground finches (Geospiza spp.)</td>
<td>Insectivorous</td>
<td>Rainfall</td>
<td>Breeding commences after rainfall</td>
<td>Obs.</td>
<td>Hau et al., 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darwin’s ground finches (Geospiza spp.)</td>
<td>Insectivorous</td>
<td>Rainfall</td>
<td>Rainfall-related noise stimulates singing</td>
<td>Exp.</td>
<td>Grant, 1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spotted antbirds (Hylophylax n. naevoides)</td>
<td>Insectivorous</td>
<td>Addition of live crickets to diet</td>
<td>Faster testis growth when live crickets present</td>
<td>Exp.</td>
<td>Wilkens et al., 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spotted antbirds (Hylophylax n. naevoides)</td>
<td>Insectivorous</td>
<td>Visual cues of live crickets</td>
<td>Increased song rates when crickets visible</td>
<td>Exp.</td>
<td>Wilkens et al., 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zebra finches (Taeniopygia g. guttata)</td>
<td>Granivorous</td>
<td>Food availability, day length</td>
<td>Faster gonadal growth when unrestricted food present</td>
<td>Exp.</td>
<td>Perfito et al., 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>(B) Strictly seasonal breeders</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great tits (Parus major)</td>
<td>Insectivorous</td>
<td>Oak and caterpillar phenology</td>
<td>Breeding coincides with oak and caterpillar phenology</td>
<td>Obs.</td>
<td>Jones, 1972</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great tits (Parus major)</td>
<td>Insectivorous</td>
<td>Oak and caterpillar phenology</td>
<td>Breeding coincides with oak and caterpillar phenology</td>
<td>Obs.</td>
<td>Perrins, 1965</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great tits (Parus major)</td>
<td>Insectivorous</td>
<td>Tree phenology</td>
<td>Breeding coincides with birch leafing</td>
<td>Obs.</td>
<td>Slagsvold, 1976</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pied flycatchers (Ficedula hypoleuca)</td>
<td>Insectivorous</td>
<td>Tree phenology</td>
<td>Breeding correlates only weakly with vegetation phenology</td>
<td>Obs.</td>
<td>Slagsvold, 1976</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great tits (Parus major)</td>
<td>Insectivorous</td>
<td>Caterpillar phenology</td>
<td>Breeding coincides with caterpillar phenology</td>
<td>Obs.</td>
<td>Nager and van Noordwijk, 1995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great tits (Parus major)</td>
<td>Insectivorous</td>
<td>Tree and caterpillar phenology</td>
<td>Breeding coincides with oak and caterpillar phenology</td>
<td>Obs.</td>
<td>van Noordwijk et al., 1995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great tits (Parus major)</td>
<td>Insectivorous</td>
<td>Oak phenology</td>
<td>No correlation between delayed oak bud burst and breeding</td>
<td>Obs.</td>
<td>Visser et al., 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Song sparrows (Melospiza melodia morpha)</td>
<td>Insectivorous</td>
<td>Temperature, emergence of shoots</td>
<td>Testis growth coincides with presence of vegetational cues</td>
<td>Obs.</td>
<td>Perfito et al., 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great tits (Parus major)</td>
<td>Insectivorous</td>
<td>Oak and birch phenology</td>
<td>Breeding coincides with leafing phenology of oak</td>
<td>Obs.</td>
<td>Nilsson and Källander, 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue tits (Cyanistes caeruleus)</td>
<td>Insectivorous</td>
<td>Oak and birch phenology</td>
<td>Breeding coincides with leafing phenology of birch</td>
<td>Obs.</td>
<td>Nilsson and Källander, 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barn swallows (Hirundo rustica)</td>
<td>Insectivorous</td>
<td>Plant phenology</td>
<td>Breeding coincides with leafing of elm and flowering of snowdrop</td>
<td>Obs.</td>
<td>Möller, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue tits (Cyanistes caeruleus)</td>
<td>Insectivorous</td>
<td>Oak bud burst</td>
<td>Breeding coincides with oak bud burst</td>
<td>Obs.</td>
<td>Bourgault et al., 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White-crowned sparrows (Zonotrichia leucophrys)</td>
<td>Granivorous</td>
<td>Sprouted wheat leaves</td>
<td>Ovary, but not testis development advanced by food supplement</td>
<td>Exp.</td>
<td>Ettinger and King, 1981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great tits (Parus major)</td>
<td>Insectivorous</td>
<td>Branches of pedunculate oaks</td>
<td>No correlation between development of branches and breeding</td>
<td>Exp.</td>
<td>Visser et al., 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great tits (Parus major)</td>
<td>Insectivorous</td>
<td>Branches of downy birch</td>
<td>Luteinizing hormone rise accelerated in presence of branches</td>
<td>Exp.</td>
<td>Visser et al., 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue tits (Cyanistes caeruleus)</td>
<td>Insectivorous</td>
<td>Branches of downy or evergreen oak</td>
<td>Breeding advanced in presence of evergreen oak</td>
<td>Exp.</td>
<td>Visser et al., 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Island canaries (Serinus canaria)</td>
<td>Granivorous</td>
<td>Simulated rainfall or vegetation</td>
<td>Rainfall induces rise in testosterone and advances breeding</td>
<td>Exp.</td>
<td>Voigt et al., 2007</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Obs., observational study; Exp., experimental study.
Possible phenological cues used by insectivorous seasonal breeders for reproductive timing have been most extensively studied in great tits (P. major) and blue tits (Cyanistes caeruleus), which appear to respond to the leafing of trees and appearance of caterpillars (Table 1). Egg laying of great tits in Oxford, UK, is associated with oak bud burst and the first appearance of caterpillars (Jones, 1972; Perrins, 1965; van Noordwijk et al., 1995), while in some other European populations it coincides with the timing of birch (Betula pubescens) leafing (Slagsvold, 1976). In Switzerland, laying dates of great tits correlate with the appearance of caterpillars in mixed forests of conifer, beech (Fagus sylvatica), oaks (Quercus spp.) and hornbeam (Carpinus betulus) (Nager and van Noordwijk, 1995). In Swedish coastal and inland habitats, variation in laying dates of great and blue tits correlates with leafing phenology of oak (Q. robur) and birch (B. pendula) (Nilsson and Källander, 2006).

In blue tit populations in Corsica, living in broad-leaved deciduous downy oak (Q. pubescens) or in evergreen Holm oak forests (Q. ilex), egg laying occurs at different times depending on forest type but, regardless of forest type, there is a close correlation between bud burst date and laying date (Blondel et al., 1993; Bourgault et al., 2010). In contrast to these studies, Visser and colleagues observed in great tits, in a ‘natural experiment’ in the Netherlands, that the bud burst of pedunculate oaks (Q. robur) did not correlate with the onset of egg laying when bud burst was delayed in 1992 by an unusual frost in the previous year (Visser et al., 2002).

A close relationship between spring phenology and laying date has also been observed in some non-Parids. In song sparrows (Melospiza melodia morpha), in the Northwest USA, differences in the timing of reproductive development between coastal and montane populations can be best explained by an integration of temperature cues and vegetation cues in the form of fresh shoots (Perfito et al., 2004). In Danish barn swallows (Hirundo rustica), the onset of laying is also closely correlated with the phenology of local vegetation, such as broad-leaved elm (Ulmus glabra) and snowdrop (Galanthus nivalis), which is related to increased temperature (Møller, 2008). In contrast with these studies, in the pied flycatcher, a migratory insectivorous passerine, seasonal vegetation phenology does not provide a strong cue for the timing of breeding (Slagsvold, 1976) (Table 1).

Only experiments under controlled conditions can answer questions about the causal effects of supplementary phenological cues on the timing of seasonal avian reproduction, and observations reported to date are conflicting. The timing of the onset of laying in captive great or blue tits kept in outdoor aviaries has been compared in a multi-site experiment carried out in the Netherlands, Sweden and Corsica (Visser et al., 2002). In the Netherlands, the onset of breeding in pairs of great tits given leafing pedunculate oak branches was not affected by the stage of development of the leaves (Visser et al., 2002). In Sweden, gonadal growth and concentrations of plasma testosterone were the same in male great tits in the presence and absence of leafing branches of birch (B. pubescens), although an increase in plasma luteinizing hormone (LH) was advanced in the presence of leafing branches (Visser et al., 2002). In contrast, in a study of captive blue tits from two populations in Corsica, provided with phenological cues from branches of downy oak (Q. pubescens), the most common tree in the habitat of one population, or of evergreen Holm oak (Q. ilex), the most common tree in the habitat of the other population, the laying dates were advanced in both populations when they were provided with leafing evergreen oak (Visser et al., 2002). In a study on song sparrows from the Northwest USA, differences in the timing of the onset of laying in free-living birds observed at different altitudinal temperatures were not replicated in a laboratory study in which the birds were exposed to the same temperatures but not provided with phenological cues (Perfito et al., 2005). White-crowned sparrows (Zonotrichia leucophrys gambelii) receiving green leaves of wheat sprouts as a food additive for 20 days showed a significant increase in ovarian mass compared with controls, even though body mass and testicular mass were not affected (Ettinger and King, 1981). Finally, in a study on wild island canaries (Serinus canaria) held under short day conditions, the onset of breeding was advanced after exposure to green grass (Poa pratensis), bamboo (Phyllostachys aureosulcata) and white spruce (Picea glauca conica), but not after exposure to simulated rainfall (Voigt et al., 2007).

Spring phenology could influence the onset of laying in several ways. Firstly, if the onset of reproduction is energy limited, the increase in prey abundance and diversity might provide energy and nutrient resources to build up reproductive tissues, thus facilitating an early onset of laying. The effect of food availability on the onset of breeding may be dependent on the appropriate ecological conditions (Bourgault et al., 2009). Pre-breeding food supplementation experiments in single-brooded passerines have produced ambiguous results, either showing no effect or advancing the onset of laying by no more than 1 week (Harrison et al., 2010; Meijer and Drent, 1999) (but see Scheuerlein and Gwinner, 2002).

Secondly, spring phenology could influence the onset of laying through changes in the composition of the bird’s diet, adding chemical compounds that speed up reproductive development. This possibility is suggested by an observation in montane voles (Microtus montanus) in which testicular development and mating are stimulated by 6-methoxybenzoazolinone (6-MBOA), a substance found in growing seedlings eaten by the animals in spring (Berger et al., 1981; Berger et al., 1987). It is possible that birds ingest similar secondary chemical compounds while feeding on buds of deciduous trees in early spring (Betts, 1955), which might affect their reproductive system in a comparable way. However, Bourgault and colleagues investigated the oak bud scale remains in blue tit gizzards and concluded that consumption of large amounts of buds does not occur before egg laying (Bourgault et al., 2006). Lastly, temperature-dependent vegetation and invertebrate phenology might accelerate the onset of laying by providing a visual stimulus that is translated into a reproductive neuroendocrine response, comparable to the effect of photostimulation in early spring (Ball and Ketterson, 2008; Hahn et al., 1997; Moore et al., 2006; Stevenson et al., 2008). It thus seems likely that phenological cues providing a visual stimulus may be used to fine-tune the onset of reproduction in a photoperiodic seasonal breeder, such as the great tit (P. major).

In order to test the hypothesis that vegetation and invertebrate phenology might advance the onset of laying by providing a visual stimulus, it is first necessary to identify a suitable temperature-dependent cue and an appropriate measure of reproductive neuroendocrine response. If birds have evolved to adjust their reproductive timing in response to vegetation cues, these cues should reliably provide information on the future timing of an invertebrate food peak. After dormancy release, deciduous trees of mature forests, e.g. oaks, respond to increased photoperiod in spring, which is modulated by temperature. In contrast, many short-lived, early successional trees, e.g. birches, are primarily temperature sensitive (Körner and Basler, 2010). The leafing of these trees marks the onset of spring in temperate zones (Chmielewski and Rotzer, 2001), and is thus available to insectivorous birds as a cue integrating past temperature patterns and predicting the temperature-dependent hatching of lepidoptera caterpillars.
We experimentally investigated whether great tits make use of phenological cues from birch, as the leafing of birch branches coincides with the beginning of egg laying in great tits in the natural population used in our study (see Fig. 1 for details). The development of vegetation in early spring promotes an increase in invertebrate food sources, especially caterpillars feeding on developing leaves (Buse and Good, 1996; van Dongen et al., 1997). Therefore, caterpillars were also presented as a visual phenological cue. It was predicted that reproductive development and onset of laying of breeding pairs provided with these supplementary cues would advance relative to control pairs. The causal reproductive neuroendocrine response was assessed in both sexes by measuring changes in the concentration of plasma LH, which correlates with increasing gonadal activity and the onset of breeding in blue tits exposed to natural lighting (Caro et al., 2006).

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Experimental birds and housing**

These experiments were carried out under licence CTE 09.08 of the Animal Experimentation Committee of the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences (DEC-KNAW).

Eighty great tits from a long-term study population at the Hoge Veluwe (the Netherlands) were taken into captivity as nestlings in 2008. Broods were selected from early- or late-laying maternal lines (Schaper et al., 2011). All chicks were blood sampled and sexed (Griffiths et al., 1998), and extra-pair offspring were identified (Saladin et al., 2003) prior to brood choice. On day 10 post-hatching, chicks were taken to the Netherlands Institute of Ecology (Hetere) for hand-raising (Drent et al., 2003). After independence they were kept in single-sex groups in open outdoor aviaries (2 × 4 × 2.5 m). The birds were fed ad libitum with a constant daily amount of food, consisting of a mixture of minced beef, proteins and vitamins, complemented by sunflower seeds, fat balls, a mix of dried insects (Carnizoo, Kiezebrink International, Putten, The Netherlands), proteins, vitamin and mineral supplements (Nekton S and Nekton Bio, NEKTON GmbH, Pforzheim, The Netherlands), calcium and water for drinking and bathing. In December 2008, 36 breeding pairs were transferred to climate-controlled aviaries. During the 2009 breeding season the birds were kept under naturally increasing photoperiod and on an average temperature of either 14°C or 8°C, which did not affect the onset of laying (Schaper et al., 2011). The birds were moved back to outdoor aviaries in December 2009, kept in single-sex groups over winter and 16 pairs were reformed again in spring for their second breeding season in 2010. These pairs had bred together in 2009, except in two cases where the females were paired with a new mate as their original mates had died. Two pairs did not lay eggs in 2009, but bred successfully in the experiment (Schaper et al., 2011). All chicks were blood sampled and sexed (Visser et al., 2003) prior to brood choice. On day 10 post-hatching, chicks were taken to the Netherlands Institute of Ecology (Hetere) for hand-raising (Drent et al., 2003). After independence they were kept in single-sex groups in open outdoor aviaries (2 × 4 × 2.5 m). The birds were fed ad libitum with a constant daily amount of food, consisting of a mixture of minced beef, proteins and vitamins, complemented by sunflower seeds, fat balls, a mix of dried insects (Carnizoo, Kiezebrink International, Putten, The Netherlands), proteins, vitamin and mineral supplements (Nekton S and Nekton Bio, NEKTON GmbH, Pforzheim, The Netherlands), calcium and water for drinking and bathing. In December 2008, 36 breeding pairs were transferred to climate-controlled aviaries. During the 2009 breeding season the birds were kept under naturally increasing photoperiod and on an average temperature of either 14°C or 8°C, which did not affect the onset of laying (Schaper et al., 2011). The birds were moved back to outdoor aviaries in December 2009, kept in single-sex groups over winter and 16 pairs were reformed again in spring for their second breeding season in 2010. These pairs had bred together in 2009, except in two cases where the females were paired with a new mate as their original mates had died. Two pairs did not lay eggs in 2009, but bred successfully in the experiment reported here.

The breeding pairs were housed in two rows of outdoor aviaries from January 2010 onwards. One side of the aviary complex opened onto a grass field, while the birds from the other aviary row could see a hedge, mainly consisting of elder (Sambucus nigra) and hawthorn (Crataegus sp.) at about 15 m distance. In 2010, all birds were kept under natural temperature and daylight conditions. Lighting was supplemented by two tubular lights, which were on for 2 h after sunrise to compensate for the shading effect of the aviary roof. The aviaries offered a choice of four nest boxes. Moss as nesting material was provided from mid-February onwards.

**Treatments**

Pairs of birds were randomly and equally assigned to a control and a treatment group in the two rows of aviaries. To simulate an early onset of spring and the availability of prey in the environment, the birds were provided with leafing birch (Betula pendula) branches and caterpillars. Phenological cues were added from 9 March until the end of May. During this period, day length increased from 11 h 18 min to 16 h 21 min. The cues consisted of branches that had been kept at room temperature for 1 week until an advanced bud burst occurred. Five branches about 1.5 m long with just unfolding leaves were provided for each breeding pair and replaced twice weekly. In addition, a covered transparent 20 cm Petri dish was placed on a feeding table in the centre of each aviary, containing about 20 caterpillars of the great cabbage white (Pieris brassicae) at larval instars 2–3 on a cabbage leaf. The larvae were replaced weekly, after they had developed into instars 3–4.

Birds from the control group received undeveloped birch branches with tightly closed buds and, for an equivalent cage enrichment, paper ‘leaves’ were added consisting of 4 × 4 cm red and blue cardboard squares placed over the branches. Control branches were rotated twice a week to simulate branch replacement and torn ‘leaves’ were replaced. As an equivalent to the presentation of caterpillars, small twigs, which could freely roll around, were placed in the Petri dishes. The birds made extensive use of both the birch branches with young leaves and the control branches with paper ‘leaves’ by climbing in them, and pecking and destroying buds and leaves. It is likely that birds from the treatment group regularly consumed buds and leaves. The birds were also attracted to the caterpillars and in a few cases succeeded in opening the Petri dishes to eat them. It was therefore concluded that the caterpillars provided a satisfactory food cue.

**Measurements**

Nest boxes were checked daily for eggs. The day that the first egg was found is referred to as the laying date. Blood samples of 100 μl were taken into captivity as nestlings in 2009. Broods were selected from early- or late-laying maternal lines (Schaper et al., 2011). All chicks were blood sampled and sexed (Griffiths et al., 1998), and extra-pair offspring were identified (Saladin et al., 2003) prior to brood choice. On day 10 post-hatching, chicks were taken to the Netherlands Institute of Ecology (Hetere) for hand-raising (Drent et al., 2003). After independence they were kept in single-sex groups in open outdoor aviaries (2 × 4 × 2.5 m). The birds were fed ad libitum with a constant daily amount of food, consisting of a mixture of minced beef, proteins and vitamins, complemented by sunflower seeds, fat balls, a mix of dried insects (Carnizoo, Kiezebrink International, Putten, The Netherlands), proteins, vitamin and mineral supplements (Nekton S and Nekton Bio, NEKTON GmbH, Pforzheim, The Netherlands), calcium and water for drinking and bathing. In December 2008, 36 breeding pairs were transferred to climate-controlled aviaries. During the 2009 breeding season the birds were kept under naturally increasing photoperiod and on an average temperature of either 14°C or 8°C, which did not affect the onset of laying (Schaper et al., 2011). The birds were moved back to outdoor aviaries in December 2009, kept in single-sex groups over winter and 16 pairs were reformed again in spring for their second breeding season in 2010. These pairs had bred together in 2009, except in two cases where the females were paired with a new mate as their original mates had died. Two pairs did not lay eggs in 2009, but bred successfully in the experiment reported here.

The breeding pairs were housed in two rows of outdoor aviaries from January 2010 onwards. One side of the aviary complex opened onto a grass field, while the birds from the other aviary row could see a hedge, mainly consisting of elder (Sambucus nigra) and hawthorn (Crataegus sp.) at about 15 m distance. In 2010, all birds were kept under natural temperature and daylight conditions. Lighting was supplemented by two tubular lights, which were on for 2 h after sunrise to compensate for the shading effect of the aviary roof. The aviaries offered a choice of four nest boxes. Moss as nesting material was provided from mid-February onwards.

**Treatments**

Pairs of birds were randomly and equally assigned to a control and a treatment group in the two rows of aviaries. To simulate an early onset of spring and the availability of prey in the environment, the birds were provided with leafing birch (Betula pendula) branches and caterpillars. Phenological cues were added from 9 March until the end of May. During this period, day length increased from 11 h 18 min to 16 h 21 min. The cues consisted of branches that had been kept at room temperature for 1 week until an advanced bud burst occurred. Five branches about 1.5 m long with just unfolding leaves were provided for each breeding pair and replaced twice weekly. In addition, a covered transparent 20 cm Petri dish was placed on a feeding table in the centre of each aviary, containing about 20 caterpillars of the great cabbage white (Pieris brassicae) at larval instars 2–3 on a cabbage leaf. The larvae were replaced weekly, after they had developed into instars 3–4.

Birds from the control group received undeveloped birch branches with tightly closed buds and, for an equivalent cage enrichment, paper ‘leaves’ were added consisting of 4 × 4 cm red and blue cardboard squares placed over the branches. Control branches were rotated twice a week to simulate branch replacement and torn ‘leaves’ were replaced. As an equivalent to the presentation of caterpillars, small twigs, which could freely roll around, were placed in the Petri dishes. The birds made extensive use of both the birch branches with young leaves and the control branches with paper ‘leaves’ by climbing in them, and pecking and destroying buds and leaves. It is likely that birds from the treatment group regularly consumed buds and leaves. The birds were also attracted to the caterpillars and in a few cases succeeded in opening the Petri dishes to eat them. It was therefore concluded that the caterpillars provided a satisfactory food cue.

**Measurements**

Nest boxes were checked daily for eggs. The day that the first egg was found is referred to as the laying date. Blood samples of 100 μl...
were taken from the jugular vein every 2 weeks for LH analysis. Additionally, an initial sample was taken a week prior to the provisioning of phenological cues. Plasma was separated from red blood cells and stored at –80°C. Plasma LH concentrations were determined using a chicken LH radioimmunoassay (Sharp et al., 1987) validated for use in blue tits (Caro et al., 2006). The assay reaction volume was 60 μl, comprising 20 μl plasma sample or standard, 20 μl primary antibody (rabbit anti-chicken LH) and 20 μl of 125I-labeled chicken LH. The primary antibody was precipitated to separate free and bound 125I label using 20 μl of donkey anti-rabbit precipitating serum and 20 μl of non-immune rabbit serum. The samples were measured in a single assay, in duplicate. The intra-assay coefficient of variation was 6.4% for a high value plasma pool and 8.1% for a low value plasma pool, and the minimum detectable dose was 0.15 ng ml⁻¹.

Statistics
Laying dates in 2010 were analysed with linear models in R 2.10.0 (R Development Core Team, 2009), including phenology treatment, as well as laying dates of the female’s and male’s mother in the wild (a measure of genetic disposition for early or late laying) and laying date of the pair in the previous year as covariates. LH data were log transformed to achieve normality and analysed in general linear models for females and males separately. First, we tested whether initial LH concentrations differed between treatment groups. Second, we tested whether plasma LH concentrations increased over time. Third, we tested whether the seasonal change in LH following the addition of phenological cues differed between the groups in a mixed model with bird identity as a random factor (procedure lmer, package lme4). Fourth, we tested in a general linear model whether the rise in plasma LH 2 weeks after addition of phenological cues differed between the groups in a mixed model with bird identity as a random factor (procedure lmer, package lme4). Finally, we tested whether LH concentrations at the end of April were related to laying dates.

RESULTS
Initial LH concentrations did not differ between phenology treatment and control groups at the start of the experiment (females: \( t_{1,16}=0.15, P=0.88 \), males: \( t_{1,16}=1.23, P=0.24 \), Fig. 2). In both treatment and control groups, plasma LH increased with time (females: sampling week, \( \chi^2_{23}=27.5, P<0.001 \); males: sampling week, \( \chi^2_{23}=12.8, P<0.001 \)). Two weeks after the start of the experiment, compared with initial values, the difference in LH concentrations was not affected by the addition of phenological cues (females: \( t_{1,16}=1.45, P=0.17 \); males: \( t_{1,16}=1.33, P=0.21 \); Fig. 2). However, while in females there was no interaction between the effects of treatment and sampling date on the increase in plasma LH (treatment \( \times \) sampling week: \( \chi^2_{23}=4.61, P=0.20 \); treatment: \( \chi^2_{1,16}=1.48, P=0.22 \); sampling week: \( \chi^2_{23}=22.3, P<0.001 \); Fig. 2A), in males there was a significant interaction (treatment \( \times \) sampling week: \( \chi^2_{1,16}=11.29, P=0.010 \). In males exposed to phenological cues, LH concentrations were already near their maximum in early spring, just after the addition of phenological cues, while concentrations in control males increased more slowly, with the steepest rise in late April (Fig. 2B). Females with higher LH concentrations at the end of April tended to lay earlier (\( t_{1,14}=-2.06, P=0.062 \), Fig. 3).

One male of a pair given phenological cues died, and one female of a pair also given phenological cues died after laying her first egg. The remaining male was transferred to breed with the remaining female, which started laying 11 days later. Her laying date was included in the analysis. However, one female of the control group was ill and did not lay. Another female of the phenology group started laying extremely late on 11 June, which was considered to be too abnormal to be a consequence of the experimental design and was therefore excluded from subsequent analysis (Grubb’s test for outliers: \( G=2.7, P=0.008 \)).

Laying commenced on 1 May, approximately 8 weeks after the birds were allocated to treatment or control groups. The onset of laying was not advanced by exposure to leafing birch branches and caterpillars (treatment: \( t_{1,14}=-0.40, P=0.71 \), Fig. 3). The genetic background of neither the female (laying date of female’s mother: \( t_{1,14}=-1.38, P=0.20 \)) nor the male (laying date of male’s mother: \( t_{1,14}=1.68, P=0.13 \)) influenced laying date. The onset of laying in 2010 in outdoor aviaries correlated with the onset of laying in 2009 in indoor climatized aviaries under standardized conditions (\( t_{1,2}=3.73, P=0.004 \), Fig. 4), which means that individual females laid consistently early or late in both years independent of supplementary cues.

DISCUSSION
Vegetation phenology and food abundance have often been suggested as proximate supplementary cues in avian timing of reproduction, but there is little evidence for causality, especially in seasonal breeders. In the current experiment, great tits were exposed to phenological cues that are naturally present in their environment at the time of egg laying and are strongly affected by temperature.
Contrary to prediction, exposure to leafing birch branches and caterpillars did not advance the onset of laying in great tits housed in outdoor aviaries exposed to natural light and temperature where birds had access to ad libitum food. This observation is consistent with an earlier study showing no effect of developing oak and birch branches on the timing of reproduction in captive great and blue tits (Visser et al., 2002). The lack of an effect of phenological cues in these earlier studies is therefore not a consequence of inhibitory cues associated with, for example, indoor caging. The failure to demonstrate an effect of phenological cues on the onset of laying is in contrast to many observations in free-living bird populations which imply, or suggest, that the correlation between either bud burst or food phenology and the onset of laying or reproductive activity is causal (see Introduction for references). The interpretation of earlier studies now requires critical re-assessment bearing in mind the following.

First, some experiments measure reproductive development without reporting laying dates in response to environmental cues. These experiments do not take into account the possibility that a given phenological cue may not affect ovarian development but instead the laying decision itself. This decision is made by the female (Caro et al., 2009), which may be responsive to supplementary cues that differ from those recognized by males (Ball and Ketterson, 2008). In less favourable conditions than used in the present study, captive females often do not lay while males tend to show full gonadal maturation, which is why most experimental work has been restricted to males. The observation that females may not show full gonadal development under captive conditions indicates that cues additional to increasing photoperiod are required for the initiation of egg laying, which might be phenological or social cues. Researchers need to critically investigate whether the choice of physiological measures used to deduce changes in reproductive timing in response to a likely cue is appropriate.

Second, leafing date of, for example, the tree species hosting lepidoptera prey, or caterpillar emergence itself, is a standard phenological measure used to predict the timing of avian breeding (Table 1). Selection for synchrony with the food peak facilitates this correlation, but the bud burst of e.g. oak trees often commences late in spring, sometimes after the onset of egg laying, and therefore cannot be considered a predictive cue (Visser et al., 2002). It thus requires careful observation of natural systems to identify cues that are both relevant, in terms of predictability of future events, and timed in advance of changes in the phenological trait under investigation.

Third, the correlation between temperature, tree phenology and insect abundance excludes any inference of the causal relationship between any one of these cues and the timing of reproduction under natural conditions. Even though many studies report on relationships between phenological cues and laying dates (see Introduction), there is little experimental evidence for a causality, which should be a focus of future efforts.

In females, phenological cues did not affect the photoperiod-dependent seasonal increase in LH. In males receiving phenological cues, LH concentrations were coincidently high from the beginning onwards, but did not increase much over time after the addition of cues. In contrast, control males showed a rise to levels similar to males from the treatment group over a period of 2 months. One can only speculate what would have happened if initial LH values in males from the treatment group had been lower, but given the hormonal development in females we would not expect a difference between experimental groups.

Unfortunately, at the moment there is no available assay for avian follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH), the gonadotropin directly inducing follicle maturation, restricting researchers to measurement of LH instead. It is therefore possible that FSH, and not LH, is the mediator for the integration of phenological cues, but as here we found no effect of vegetation cues on the timing of laying itself, we would not expect different results for FSH.

From an ecological point of view, the functional significance of higher LH plasma concentrations in males exposed to predictive environmental cues in early spring is uncertain. As the development of the male reproductive system precedes that of the female, it is less likely that males will show an adaptive response to phenological cues to fine-tune gonadal development. Yet, in an opportunistic breeder, the rufous-winged sparrow (Amphira carpalis), environmental factors associated with summer rains stimulated both gonadotropin-releasing hormone (GnRH) synthesis and LH secretion in males, which was, however, unrelated to gonadal growth earlier in the season.
observations presented here, there is little direct evidence for an
the onset of laying relative to the previous year.

in 2010 than in climate-controlled aviaries in 2009, which delayed
explanation could be that birds experienced colder night conditions
supplementary light was provided in outdoor aviaries. A different
explanation could be attributed to the lower light levels caused by the roofing
environmental information, also in the form of vegetational growth,
brooders normally lay earlier than first-year breeders and additional
photoperiod or temperature (Visser et al., 2011), but is apparently
physiological level or as a proximate cue, remain to be discovered.
Low temperatures may also limit the speed of gonadal maturation
by increasing the daily energy expenditure under natural conditions
when food is scarce (Perrins, 1970; Stevenson and Bryant, 2000).
In captive great tits, however, we did not observe an effect of ambient
temperature on the regulation of gonadal growth (Schaper et al.,
2011).

The high repeatability in the timing of laying between 2009 and
2010 in individual pairs, irrespective of whether they were early or
late layers, supports findings by Visser and colleagues that laying
dates of great tits in climate-controlled aviaries are closely correlated
with laying dates of the same females under natural conditions
(Visser et al., 2009). This consistency again stresses a genetic
component in the mechanisms underlying the timing of reproduction,
which could well be sensitivity to environmental cues, such as
photoperiod or temperature (Visser et al., 2011), but is apparently
not related to phenological cues.

In 2009, the birds in this study bred in climate-controlled aviaries
(Schaper et al., 2011) and in 2010 bred again when exposed to more
natural conditions in open aviaries. Against expectations, egg laying
commenced later in 2010 than in 2009, even though second-year
breeders normally lay earlier than first-year breeders and additional
environmental information, also in the form of vegetational growth,
was available to the birds in outdoor aviaries. Part of this effect
could be attributed to the lower light levels caused by the roofing
in the outdoor aviaries, as the increase in day length is the primary
cue for the timing of reproduction. However, this is unlikely, as
supplementary light was provided in outdoor aviaries. A different
explanation could be that birds experienced colder night conditions
in 2010 than in climate-controlled aviaries in 2009, which delayed
the onset of laying relative to the previous year.

In conclusion, from both previous work and the experimental
observations presented here, there is little direct evidence for an
effect of tree phenology or presence of lepidopteran prey on the
onset of reproduction in great tits. Nonetheless, several studies
reported close correlations between tree phenology and laying dates of
both opportunists and seasonal breeders in the field. Experimental
work on a range of species is needed to further investigate whether
those potential proximate cues assumed to advance or even induce
breeding are really causal for the timing of reproductive
development. This is one of a few studies that have examined direct
effects of phenological cues on both male and female reproductive
development, as well as egg laying under controlled conditions.

More thorough physiological work concentrated on the reproductive
development and behavioural decisions of the female is needed to
investigate to what extent seasonal breeders make use of
phenological cues. It is likely that, at least in great tits, the
relation between spring phenology and onset of laying is
mediated by other proximate factors, such as direct temperature cues
stimulating both vegetation growth and avian breeding.

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