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Long-Distance Range Expansion and Rapid Adjustment of Migration in a Newly Established Population of Barn Swallows Breeding in Argentina

Highlights

- A widespread North American bird has begun breeding and spreading across Argentina
- This extends the breeding range 7,000 km into what was formerly the wintering range
- Paths quickly shifted to resemble those of other South American migratory birds
- The entire annual cycle has shifted by about 6 months

Authors

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In Brief

North American Barn Swallows began breeding on the southern edge of their wintering range 35 years ago. Winkler et al. show that these birds have quickly changed their migratory route and schedule and the timing of their annual cycle to take advantage of new nesting substrates (road bridges) in areas with temperate photoperiodic cycles.
Long-Distance Range Expansion and Rapid Adjustment of Migration in a Newly Established Population of Barn Swallows Breeding in Argentina

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SUMMARY

When bird populations spread, long-distance pioneering populations are often backfilled by a more slowly advancing front [1–3]. The Barn Swallow Hirundo rustica, a globally distributed passerine [4, 5], expanded its breeding range an exceptional 7,000 km when it began breeding 35 years ago in its regular wintering range in Argentina [6], subsequently expanding over 500 km from its starting point [7–11]. Trans-hemispheric breeding attempts have occurred previously in related swallows [12–14], but only this colonization has lasted. Comparative studies of birds show a remarkable diversity in patterns of change in migratory habits [15–21], and these Argentine-breeding swallows might retain ancestral patterns, breeding in Argentina but returning to North America for the austral winter. Feather isotopes from these birds are consistent with the alternative possibility that they migrate no farther than northern South America [22]. Because isotopic patterns cannot definitively distinguish these alternatives, we pursued a solar geolocator study [23, 24] to do so. Data from nine tagged birds show conclusively that Barn Swallows breeding in Argentina have rapidly changed their movements to migrate no farther north in the austral winter than northern South America [22]. Because isotopic patterns cannot definitively distinguish these alternatives, we pursued a solar geolocator study [23, 24] to do so. Data from nine tagged birds show conclusively that Barn Swallows breeding in Argentina have rapidly changed their movements to migrate no farther north in the austral winter than northern South America. The estimated mean annual journey was 8,797 km (SD = 3,159 km; range: 4,506–14,628 km; Table S1). Despite spatial heterogeneity in routes and locations, all birds departed the breeding grounds during a 3-week period between February 13 and March 6 and returned to the breeding grounds between September 25 and October 26 (Table S1).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Path reconstructions for the nine nesting Barn Swallows tagged in southern Buenos Aires province from which we retrieved good data were unequivocal: none of the birds went any farther north in the austral winter than coastal Venezuela, and some went no farther than central Brazil (Figure S1). When viewed together (Figure 1A), the broad range of routes and spatial dispersion exhibited by these nine birds is impressive: none went to the same place or followed exactly the same path to get there. Nevertheless, individuals appeared to follow two fairly distinct routes, at least at more southerly latitudes. Six of the birds traversed the tropics along the coast (Figure S1), then either continued north of São Paulo along the coast or across the sparsely forested areas of the Cerrado north of that state to northern South America. The other three birds headed straight north of Buenos Aires province, traversing the tropics along the drainages of the Paraná and Uruguay rivers, and either stayed there or continued across the densely forested Amazon to the Llanos and coasts of northern South America (Figure S1). Though they moved less during the austral winter (Figure S2), most birds continued moving throughout the non-breeding season, and we chose not to designate a given wintering area for any of them. In their movements, though, they all moved north of the breeding grounds by at least 20 degrees of latitude (Figure S2A), and their longitudes spanned most of the breadth of South America (Figure S2B).
The approximately 6-month changes in the timing of northward and southward migration reinforce what is known about the phenology of the remainder of the life cycle, a remarkable mirror-image timing of events compared to that of the recent ancestors in North America [26] (Figure 2).

This study confirms that Barn Swallows in this recently established population in southern South America have dramatically changed their migratory timing and orientation in less than 35 years, overwintering in new destinations in northern South America. These Argentine Barn Swallows are now following a migratory pattern and choice of wintering areas that is very much like that of other migrant birds from the temperate zone of South America [23, 27–29]. Recent work on North American Barn Swallows based on solar geolocators [25] indicates that those in eastern Canada are likely completing an annual round-trip journey of over 20,000 km. In contrast, the Argentine birds are making shorter round-trip journeys averaging only a third that distance and never exceeding 14,600 km. This substantial reduction in distance traveled may represent an important advantage of their new route and includes avoiding the long crossing of the Gulf of Mexico or western Atlantic that at least some North American Barn Swallows endure [25, 30].

**Plasticity of Migration**

We know from the geolocator-bearing birds that this change in migratory behavior was acquired in no more than 35 years, and perhaps simple genetic changes were selected for that took the ancestral migratory route and merely truncated it in northern South America. Work on the genetics of migratory behavior in European passerines [31, 32] has suggested that migratory routes can be decomposed into orientation and duration components. The duration component has been shown to be responsive to selection in captive-reared warblers, and Argentine-bred Barn Swallows could have been subject to similar selection in the wild. However, changes in orientation would not have been amenable to a gradual selection for northerly migration post-fledging in Argentine-reared juveniles: any birds persisting with post-fledging migration in a southerly direction (the direction shown post-fledging in the ancestral North American breeders) would almost certainly perish over the Atlantic Ocean to the south.

A thorough analysis of the breeding life histories of the Argentine-breeding birds is underway (F.A.G., unpublished data), and once sufficient data are collected, they will tell whether the swallows breeding in South America are producing more offspring than they would have if their ancestors had stayed in North America. All that can be said for now is that the bulk of the expanding population appears to be coming from endemic population growth. The Argentine-breeding birds have a molt schedule that appears to be the mirror image of that of their northern counterparts, with molt occurring in the austral non-breeding season (Figure 2). Thus, the vast majority of individuals captured in Argentine breeding colonies are not molting. However, occasional birds are captured undergoing flight-feather molt or retaining vestiges of juvenile plumage that suggest that these are recent immigrants from North American breeding colonies.

**Figure 1. Reconstructed Paths for Barn Swallows Tagged with Geologgers**

(A and B) Paths for Argentina nesting colonies (A) reconstructed from FLightR (see text) and those from nesting colonies in North America (B) redrawn from [25]. Segments in each of the paths are colored to show the calendar months for each, with a common coloring scheme for both. See also Table S1 and Figures S1 and S2.
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immigration from wintering birds of North American origin,
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data) is still too sparse to estimate these relative proportions.

Figure 2. Graphical Summary of the Phenology of Argentine-
Breeding Barn Swallows
Timing of the annual cycle for birds breeding in Argentina (in red) overlain on
the annual cycle for North American Barn Swallows in central North America
[26]. Letters around the circle represent months of the year, starting with
December (D) and January (J) at the top center, and the arcs represent parts of
the annual cycle occupied by each activity, starting with molt innermost, then
breeding and migration with larger radii. The thickness of the arcs represents
the approximate proportion of the northern population engaged in the activity
at the time. Information for Argentine-breeding birds (F.A.G., unpublished
data) is still too sparse to estimate these relative proportions.

colonies (F.A.G., unpublished data). That these molting birds are
new immigrants from North America is made more likely by the
observation that the population genetics of the Argentine popu-
lation does not suggest a strong founder effect with rigid repro-
ductive isolation from the North American gene pool [33]. Thus, it
appears that there may be infrequent but sustained continued
immigration from wintering birds of North American origin,
most likely from eastern North America [25] (Figure 1B), some of
which co-occur with Argentine breeders in the southern sum-
mer. This continued genetic connection to northern-breeding
populations of the same species makes the possibility of rapid
genetic fixation of altered migration duration and orientation
much less likely than if it were a totally isolated population.

Migration is flexibly responsive to an array of environmental
cues (e.g., [34]), making it able to change without the need for un-
derlying genetic change. It thus seems most likely that the rapid
change in migration observed in the Argentine Barn Swallows
is due to phenotypic changes that did not require large changes
in the frequencies of associated genes. There is considerable
evidence for individual variation in the pace and phenology of
migration within populations of this species, and swallows are
generally diurnal migrants, often feeding while en route and re-
sponding to many cues not available to nocturnal migrants [38].
It is likely that Barn Swallows retain sufficient flexibility in their
migratory decision-making that, if feeding conditions in northern
South America were sufficiently good, they could stay there
rather than take the risk of a long migration to North America.
Thus, Argentine-bred Barn Swallows may still retain the potential
of returning to North America in the austral winter, but as individ-
uals they may each elect not to do so. Clearly, the migratory
behavior and movement patterns of northern-reared swallows re-
cruiting to colonies in Argentina would be informative and could
illuminate the routes of causation leading to this rapid change in
migration. We are actively pursuing such research.

Flexibility of Breeding Phenology and Site Choice
Any northern-reared birds breeding in Argentina would also pose
many interesting questions about the biology of the pioneering
individuals. Do immigrant birds begin breeding during the first
season they enter Argentine colonies, or are they initially
confused, associating with a colony at first, but only breeding
there after a full year has passed? Are the immigrants always
young that fledged in the north less than 6 months earlier? Or
do adults that have bred somewhere in the north sometimes re-
cruit as breeders in Argentina?

No matter the age of immigrants, how does shifting the annual
photoperiodic clock by a full 6 months affect other aspects of
their biology? Given the occurrence of late-summer gonadal
recrudescence and “autumnal sexuality” in northern songbirds
[35–37], is a shift of 6 months actually the easiest clock shift to
achieve? And is it possible that photoperiodism explains the
origin of this new population near the southern edge of its
formerly exclusive wintering range? Is it only here, south of the
Tropic of Capricorn, that birds encounter photoperiods like those
in a northern spring, stimulating gonadal activity that leads to
courtship and nest building?

If so, a natural question might be why mud-nesting swallows
have only begun breeding in southern South America relatively
recently. Mean air temperatures, and especially minimum tem-
peratures, in southern Buenos Aires province have increased
over the past 50 years [38], and this may have had an encour-
gaging effect on swallow breeding there. But likely an even bigger
incentive to increased breeding is the proliferation of paved
roads and concrete bridges across the province in the past
100 years. Throughout the world, the commonest substrates
for the construction of nests by mud-nesting swallows are con-
crete bridges and stucco or concrete building walls under eaves.
Concrete bridges in Argentina were first built in the 1890s, but
they did not become the most commonly used bridge construc-
tion until the 1930s [39]. Thus, Barn Swallows would not have
found substrates for attaching their nests before the 20th century,
and the first recorded nests were observed about 50 years after
nesting substrate first started becoming widely available.

Migration Dosing in Long-Distance Migrants
Bildstein [40, 41] has argued that populations of migrating raptors
have repeatedly produced extra-limital breeding populations
when migrating individuals settle and begin breeding in
what had formally been only wintering or migratory passage areas. These extra-limital breeding populations can eventually speciate in what he calls “migration dosing” of the diversification process (see also [42]). Viewed from this evolutionary perspective, the Argentine Barn Swallow colonization may be the first step to speciation. Similar mechanisms could have been behind the origin of several far-northern and far-southern species pairs in skuas (Stercorarius spp.) and terns (Sterna spp.) [43]. Thus, rather than interpret this new swallow population as an oddity of a single clade of passerine birds, this colonization of a far southern site by a population of long-distance migrants from the opposite hemisphere may be the initial phase of an evolutionary process that has occurred in other clades at other times.

**EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURES**

We attached solar geolocation loggers to Argentine breeding Barn Swallows in three successive breeding seasons, and we had recovery rates of tagged birds near 50% in most years. Despite excellent recapture rates, technical problems with the loggers in the first two seasons yielded no useful data for geolocation. In the third geologging attempt, during the 2013–2014 breeding season, 71 tags, 22 from Migrate Technology and 49 prototype tags from Eli Bridge (University of Oklahoma), were attached to swallows (41 female, 27 male, 1 juvenile, 2 unknown age and sex; mean mass = 18.32 g) mist-netted in colonies under three bridges in Buenos Aires Province near El Moro (38°08.5664′ S, 58°48.100′ W) and one near Cristiano Muerto (38°64.5503′ S, 59°69.069′ W) on January 6, 7, and 8, 2014. The tags weighed 0.65 ± 0.1 g, including flexible polymer leg loops for Rappole harnesses (see [26]) used to affix the tags to the backs of the swallows. In the next breeding season, in November 2014, 27 of these individuals (18 females, 9 males) were recaptured. Of these, three no longer wore their loggers, resulting in 24 tags recovered. A lower percentage of recovery of the Cristiano Muerto data may have been due to some birds relocating elsewhere for nesting because of flooding at the previous year’s nest site. All bird handling and tagging were performed under approved IACUC Protocol of Cornell University No. 2001-0051.

Nine of these tags, all Migrate Technology IntiGeo P55B1-7 (0.60 g, 9–13 month battery), contained data, and these were offloaded, preprocessed in BASTag [44], and analyzed with FLightR [45, 46] packages, in the R computing environment.

**ACCESSION NUMBERS**

The data produced by this study are available on Movebank (movebank.org, study name “Argentine Barn Swallows”). The data are published in the Movebank Data Repository and can be accessed through the following link: dx.doi.org/10.5441/001.1.r00m81v.

**SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION**

Supplemental Information includes two figures and one table and can be found with this article online at dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2017.03.006.

**AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**


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