Evaluating the effects of capture and handling time on plasma corticosterone and heterophil/lymphocyte ratios in the Tufted Titmouse (*Baeolophus bicolor*)

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INTRODUCTION

Stress in Birds

Stress is a part of daily life for all organisms as they face biological challenges. All free-living organisms face a variety of internal and external sources of stress, which may affect physiological function and reduce fitness. Acute stress results from a specific novel event that elevates the stress response, such as a predation event or capture and handling by researchers. Chronic stress results from prolonged exposure to biologically challenging conditions, such as exposure to extreme temperatures, periods of limited food availability, and anthropogenic pressures such as pollution and habitat disturbance. To cope with such stressors, birds and other animals have a protective stress response that allows them to withstand immediate threats to their homeostatic balance. When this response is elevated chronically, however, it can become biologically costly and have negative impacts on birds' fitness by weakening the immune system and compromising growth and reproduction.

Detecting the stress experienced by birds is useful to researchers in areas such as conservation and bird management because stress levels can indicate the general physiological condition of birds and point to possible environmental perturbations. The avian stress response consists of several different measurable components including the hormonal response, the intracellular response, and the immune response. Measures of these different components of the stress response can be used as physiological indicators of stress, especially chronic stress. Researchers utilize biomarkers such as the glucocorticoid corticosterone (CORT), heat shock proteins (HSPs), and heterophil/lymphocyte ratios (H/L) as tools to assess chronic or long-term stress in wild populations because they respond to physiological distress and are measurable in blood samples.

In avian ecology, researchers are interested in physiological stress indicators such as CORT, H/L, and HSPs because they may be predictably regulated according to environmental conditions and various biological challenges (Gross and Siegel 1983; Sapolsky et al. 2000; Vleck et al. 2000; Moreno et al. 2002; Martinez-Padilla et al. 2004; Tomas et al. 2004; Davis 2005; Herring and Gawlik 2007; Busch and Hayward 2009; Cockrem et al. 2009; Krams et al. 2010; Herring et al. 2011). Such indicators can provide researchers with consistent methods of detecting stress experienced by birds in their natural habitats, thus they may be important contributors to conservation biology and basic behavioral ecology research.

Physiological Stress Indicators

The concentration of glucocorticoids obtained from plasma or feces is a commonly used measure of chronic stress in birds. Glucocorticoids are part of the vertebrate hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal stress response in which hormones such as CORT are released into the circulatory system in response to environmental stressors (Davis et al. 2000; Sapolsky et al. 2000; Herring and Gawlik 2007; Busch and Hayward 2009; Cockrem et al. 2009; Herring et al. 2011). Under normal conditions, plasma CORT is present at low levels to regulate energy reserves. An increased concentration of CORT serves to combat the negative effects of stress by breaking down and mobilizing stored energy reserves through the redistribution of stored glucose

and the catabolism of protein (Sapolsky et al. 2000; Busch and Hayward 2009; Herring et al. 2011).

Though specific CORT levels can vary in a species-specific manner, CORT has been a useful measure of stress in avian ecology research (Sapolsky et al. 2000; Cockrem et al. 2009; Herring et al. 2011). Davis et al. (2000) demonstrated that stress due to long-term caging and reduced food supply can lead to increased CORT levels. Herring et al. (2011) used plasma and fecal CORT to demonstrate that White Ibis nestlings can be physiologically affected by food availability. Cockrem et al. (2009) used research on individual variation and repeatability of CORT responses in Adélie penguins in combination with previous research involving Great Tits and chickens to propose a system using coefficients of variation in CORT responses and power analyses, suggesting the use of such a system in future research on CORT responses in birds may provide more consistent and acceptable statistical results for analysis.

Another indicator of chronic stress in birds is the ratio of heterophils to lymphocytes, which has been used in research since Davison et al. (1983) and Gross and Siegel (1983) applied this ratio as a measure of stress in domestic fowl (Moreno 2002). Since then, H/L has been commonly used in assessing the conditions of chickens reared under different conditions, and it has gradually become more commonly used as a stress indicator in other avian studies (Davis et al. 2008). Heterophils and lymphocytes are two types of leukocytes that can be observed in blood samples. Leukocytes, also known as white blood cells, are immune system cells that primarily function to protect against foreign pathogens. Of the leukocytes found in avian blood, heterophils and lymphocytes are the most abundant (Campbell 1995; Davis et al. 2008; Moreno et al. 2002). Heterophils enter tissues during the non-specific inflammatory response, whereas lymphocytes are part of the specific immune response (Moreno et al. 2002; Krams et al. 2010). The difference in the cellular responses of heterophils and lymphocytes to stressful conditions allows for the use of H/L as a quantifiable indicator of stress, such that higher H/L may be indicative of increased stress (Zulkifli et al. 2000; Davis et al. 2008; Cirule et al. 2012).

Certain stressors can cause an increase in heterophil counts and a reduction in lymphocyte counts, resulting in an increase of the H/L. Gross and Siegel (1983) found that in chickens, H/L increased in response to increasing levels of CORT in the chicken feed and to various stressors such as social stress, blood sampling, and the administration of inoculations. Zulkifli et al. (2000) evaluated the effect of pre-slaughter handling on H/L in broiler chickens and surprisingly found no significant difference in H/L response between roughly and gently handled chickens. However, the chickens were treated with ascorbic acid to experimentally modify fear-related behavior, which may have affected the H/L results. Due to the results of the study, Zulkifli et al. (2000) suggested that supplemental ascorbic acid may alleviate fearfulness and enhance the welfare of broiler chickens, in which case the observed H/L response may have been inhibited by such effects. Ewenson et al. (2001) compared H/L between wild, captured, and aviary-bred zebra finches, concluding that the avian immune system may respond to stressors independently of body condition. Moreno et al. (2002) showed a positive correlation between H/L and nutritional stress resulting in reduced growth in nestling Pied Flycatchers. According to their conclusions, H/L was likely related to the mean effects of malnutrition within the nestling broods. Al-Murrani et al. (2006) used the magnitude and direction of the change in H/L in response to infection as an indicator of resistance to stress, finding that selection for stress resistance based on measurement of H/L is positively correlated with some reproduction and fitness traits in chickens. Krams et al. (2010) found a positive correlation between forest

management and physiological stress in Siberian Tits, further demonstrating H/L as a reliable stress indicator.

Effects of Capture and Handling

Glucocorticoids, such as CORT, are presently the most frequently applied method of assessing individual stress in birds (Sapolsky et al. 2000; Tomas et al. 2004; Herring and Gawlik 2007). However, this method is often unreliable, as release of CORT can be induced by acute distress associated with capture and handling during field research. Being caught and handled is an acutely distressful experience for birds that can rapidly mobilize CORT, which makes the accuracy of CORT measurements questionable (Sapolsky et al. 2000; Romero and Reed 2005; Fridinger et al. 2007; Herring and Gawlik 2007; Busch and Hayward 2009; Cockrem et al. 2009). Fridinger et al. (2007) showed that Black-legged Kittiwake nestlings exhibit increased levels of CORT in response to handling stress and to the removal of nest mates by researchers. When handling time before sampling lasts for more than two or three minutes, CORT levels may no longer accurately reflect birds' physiological status before their capture (Romero and Reed 2005; Cockrem et al. 2009). Also, CORT, especially fecal corticosterone, can degrade over time in frozen samples (Herring et al. 2007).

The avian immune response to stress takes significantly longer to begin by hours to days than the rapid CORT response, and changes in leukocyte numbers last longer than changes in CORT levels (Davis et al. 2008). The slower stress response and longer endurance of increased H/L indicate it may be a more reliable measure than the more commonly used CORT, especially in obtaining baseline measurements. Vleck et al. (2000) compared the responses of CORT and H/L in Adélie penguins to different stressors, including handling time and repeated sampling. Vleck et al. (2000) found no increase in H/L or CORT in penguins repeatedly handled and sampled with an average interval of 13.4 days between samples. They observed no significant increase in H/L or CORT in samples taken with handling times less than 5 minutes, but CORT did increase in samples taken more than 5 minutes after capture. Davis (2005) examined the effects of handling time and repeated sampling on H/L in House finches and found that H/L did not increase significantly in response to handling times of up to one hour.

More recently, Cirule et al. (2012) compared the use of circulating glucocorticoid levels to H/L as physiological stress indicators in a study of wintering male Great Tits, concluding that H/L is a useful alternative method for measuring stress in birds. Though in that same study, Cirule et al. (2012) found that acute distress due to capture and handling caused an increase in heterophil counts between 30 and 60 minutes and a decline in lymphocyte counts between 60 and 120 minutes after capture. Therefore, H/L may change more rapidly than originally thought due to acute distress, which may limit the reliability of results in a way similar to CORT. This concern justifies further study of H/L in response to acute distress in comparison to other well-studied methods of measuring physiological stress, such as CORT.

Evaluating Reliability and Accuracy

The reliability of these stress assessment tools is paramount to the success of avian research concerning bird management and conservation. CORT and H/L may not be equally consistent stress assessment tools for avian research since their values can be affected in different ways and over different time periods by the acute distress experienced by birds upon their capture and handling (Sapolsky et al. 2000; Romero and Reed 2005; Fridinger et al. 2007; Herring and Gawlik 2007; Busch and Hayward 2009; Cockrem et al. 2009; Cirule et al. 2012). The significantly slower H/L response time and longer endurance of the H/L response demonstrate that H/L may be a much more reliable measurement of long-term stress in birds.

However, the relative utility of H/L as a stress assessment tool has been little studied outside of research concerning domestic fowl. Much research has been done to refine the use of glucocorticoids and H/L as stress assessment tools, but limited research has been done to compare the sensitivities of both CORT and H/L to handling stress. With the exception of researchers studying chickens, few studies have compared CORT and H/L in blood samples taken from the same subjects at the same time, and very few have compared the biomarkers in such samples taken from free-ranging birds. More research is needed to evaluate the causal relationships between stress due to capture and handling and these biomarkers of the avian stress response.

This study compared the sensitivity of CORT and H/L to acute distress induced by the capture and handling of Tufted Titmice to evaluate their use as reliable tools in avian research. Previous research has demonstrated the sensitivity of CORT to handling stress (Romero and Reed 2005; Fridinger et al. 2007; Herring and Gawlik 2007; Busch and Hayward 2009; Cockrem et al. 2009), but the relationship between H/L and handling stress has not been as well studied. To further evaluate H/L as a reliable indicator of chronic moderate physiological distress, the relationships between CORT and H/L to the time elapsed from capture to blood sampling and the relationships between the two bioindicators were analyzed. It was predicted that a positive correlation would be found between CORT and handling times longer than 2 minutes after capture of subjects. It was predicted that no correlation would be found between H/L and handling time in samples taken more than 2 minutes after capture. It was also predicted that no correlation would be found between values of CORT and H/L within subjects.

MATERIALS AND METHODS
Research Subjects
This study was conducted using the Tufted Titmouse (Baeolophus bicolor), a permanent-resident passerine bird that is commonly found throughout eastern North America, including Virginia (Pravosudova et al. 2001). Winter is a critical time for the survival of permanent-resident birds, such as the Tufted Titmouse, primarily due to food scarcity and temperature extremes (Pravosudova et al. 2001). Since the Tufted Titmouse supplements its diet by caching food such as seeds during cold winter weather, it commonly frequents bird feeders.

Previous stress research utilizing CORT and H/L as physiological stress indicators has been performed using species of passerine birds that are close relatives of the Tufted Titmouse, such as the Great Tit and the Siberian Tit (Davis 2005; Krams et al. 2010; Cirule et al. 2012). The use of related species in stress research can better serve as a basis of comparison for data collected to evaluate stress indicators.

Capture and Handling
Mist nets were set around established feeders to capture Tufted Titmouse subjects at sites in Spotsylvania and Stafford counties in Virginia within 30 miles of the University of Mary Washington campus. All subjects were captured during the field portion of this study, which was conducted from December 2012 through February 2013. Ambient conditions were recorded as the average overnight air temperature (˚C) during the night before capture and air temperature (˚C) at the time of capture for each subject.

Upon capture with the mist net, subjects were carried in small canvas bags a short distance to the blood sampling site. As a consequence of the complications of capturing and handling birds in a mist net, blood samples were drawn at varying times after capture. Handling time was defined as the elapsed time in seconds from when a subject flew into the mist net to the start of blood sampling. Handling time was intentionally varied between 120 and 942 seconds to

mimic the range of handling times typical to this type of field research. Subjects were individually marked with metal leg bands engraved with unique identification numbers.

Physical Measurements and Blood Sampling

Right wing chord length was measured to the nearest .5 mm and mass to the nearest .5 g for each subject before its release. A body condition index (BCI) was calculated for each subject as a value obtained from the equation $\frac{mass}{wing\ length^3} \cdot 10^6$, a modification of the condition index used by Owen and Cook (1977). This BCI can be used in evaluating whether birds are over- or underweight in relation to their body structural size.

A 26-gauge needle was used to puncture the left brachial vein of each subject. A capillary tube was used to collect the blood and transfer it to an individually labeled 5 mL centrifuge tube. The blood samples were kept cool with a freezer pack in a small styrofoam cooler in transition from the sampling site to the laboratory. Immediately upon return to the laboratory (1-4 hours after capture and sampling), the blood samples were centrifuged at 500 G for 10 minutes to separate the plasma supernatant from the hematocrit. The separated plasma and hematocrit samples were kept frozen in individually labeled 5 mL centrifuge tubes in a subzero (-80 ˚C) freezer.

Corticosterone Levels

After the conclusion of field work, the frozen plasma samples were brought back to room temperature and analyzed using a Corticosterone Enzyme Immunoassay (EIA) kit from Enzo Life Sciences International, Inc. Volumes of plasma obtained for several of the samples were insufficient for the EIA protocol. Therefore, plasma samples were diluted 1:30 by mixing 3.3 μL of the plasma sample into 96.7 μL of assay buffer. The total number of samples assayed was 28. According to the EIA protocol, samples were assayed in duplicate in a 96-well microwell plate and read at 405 nm optical density. The resulting concentrations calculated according to this procedure were recalculated to adjust for the initial dilution of the plasma samples and recorded for each sample in ng per mL serum.

Heterophil to Lymphocyte Ratios

At the time of blood sampling, a small drop of blood collected from each bird was used to create a blood smear on an individually marked microscope slide using the two-slide wedge method (Houwen 2000). The blood smears were air dried before being transported from the sampling site to the laboratory. Immediately upon return to the laboratory (1-4 hours after capture and sampling), blood smears were fixed in methanol for 30 seconds then stained using the Wright-Giemsa stain procedure.

The stained blood smears were examined under a compound microscope with 1,000x magnification using oil immersion. Areas of each slide with a monolayer of erythrocytes, also known as red blood cells, were examined in search of leukocytes. For each individual slide, only fields of view with similar erythrocyte densities as those containing countable leukocytes were examined. If a field of view did not contain any leukocytes, it was skipped as the slide was systematically searched from field to field. For each leukocyte-containing field of view, counts were recorded for numbers of heterophils, lymphocytes, total leukocytes and total erythrocytes. Counting was arrested when at least 100 leukocytes were found on a slide. Identification of leukocytes was based on information and images found in the *Atlas of Clinical Avian Hematology* (Clark et al. 2009).

In order to account for the variability of cell counts owing to uneven distribution of cells in the blood smears, each slide was evaluated in duplicate by separate researchers and the resulting counts were averaged. H/L was calculated as the number of heterophils divided by the

number of lymphocytes. The number of leukocytes per 10,000 erythrocytes was calculated and recorded, and an H/L index was calculated for each slide as the H/L multiplied by the number of leukocytes per 10,000 erythrocytes.

Statistical Analysis

After obtaining the CORT concentration and H/L for each sample, IBM SPSS Statistics software was used to evaluate the relationships between the variables CORT, H/L, H/L Index, body mass (Mass), BCI, and handling time (Time). Linear regression and analysis of variance (ANOVA), a multiple comparison test of significance, were used to describe the following relationships between variables in determining correlations: CORT versus Time, H/L versus Time, H/L index versus Time, H/L versus Mass, H/L Index versus Mass, H/L versus BCI, and H/L Index versus BCI. All tests performed using the SPSS software were considered significant when $P < 0.05$.

Since the relationship between CORT and H/L may depend on the time elapsed between initial capture and sampling, the analysis was also performed using the residuals of CORT versus Time (CORT Resids) to account for the variation in CORT values owing to capture and handling. Linear regression and ANOVA were performed on H/L versus CORT Resids and H/L Index versus CORT Resids. The SPSS software was also used to calculate Spearman's rho, a nonparametric correlation coefficient, to compare within-subject values of H/L and CORT residuals versus Time.

RESULTS

After all stained blood smears were examined, some slides remained with smears that were too thick to obtain reliable counts and were therefore excluded. After the analysis of plasma samples for CORT concentration, some results were excluded due to relative error >10% between the duplicate runs of the samples in the assay. After excluding such results, leukocyte data was obtained for 24 slides, and CORT values remained for 14 samples with coinciding leukocyte data and physical measurements (Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of descriptive statistics of data obtained from field measurements, corticosterone assay, and stained-slide cell counts.

Variable	N	Mean	S.D.	Range
CORT (ng/mL)	14	17.538	13.772	1.13 to 44.41
CORT Resids	14	0.000	0.961	-1.879 to 1.594
Heterophils	24	5.667	3.299	2.0 to 16.0
Lymphocytes	24	37.438	12.255	15.5 to 62.0
H/L	24	0.157	0.082	0.047 to 0.362
H/L Index	24	95.869	79.878	9.367 to 320.4
Mass (g)	22	21.273	1.193	19.0 to 24.5
BCI	22	40.695	2.668	35.8 to 46.4
Time (s)	24	454.000	250.390	120 to 942

The average handling time before blood sampling was 454 seconds (N = 24, Mean = 454 ± 250.39, Range 120 to 942), or just under 8 minutes (Table 1). CORT was positively and significantly correlated with handling time (R^2 = .702, N = 14, P < .001). No other relationship examined resulted in a significant correlation (Table 2).

H/L was not significantly correlated with CORT after variation in CORT owing to handling time was removed (Spearman's rho = .241, N = 14, P = .407).

Table 2. Summary of results from statistical analysis. For each relationship listed, SPSS software was used to perform linear regression and ANOVA.

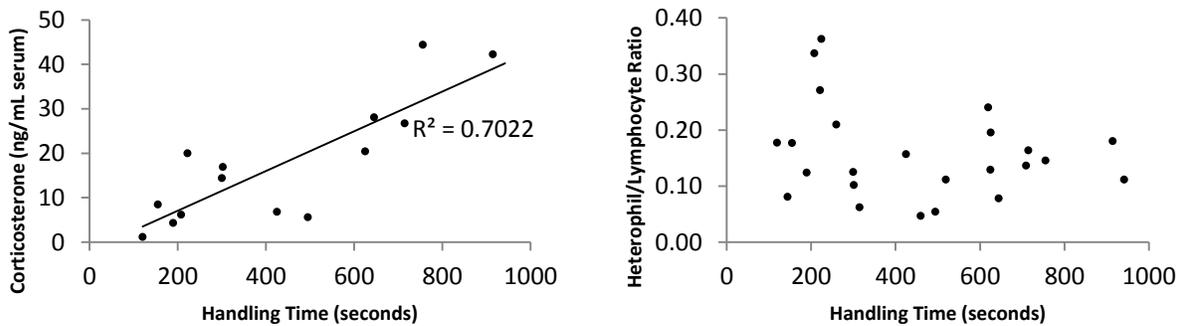| Variables	df	F	R^2	P
CORT (ng/mL) vs. Time (s)	13	28.295	.702	< .001
H/L vs. Time (s)	23	1.220	.053	.281
H/L Index vs. Time (s)	23	1.782	.075	.196
H/L vs. CORT Resids	13	1.518	.112	.241
H/L Index vs. CORT Resids	13	1.182	.090	.298
H/L vs. Mass (g)	21	0.033	.002	.859
H/L Index vs. Mass (g)	21	0.142	.007	.710
H/L vs. BCI	21	0.612	.030	.443
H/L Index vs. BCI	21	0.708	.034	.410

Figure 1. Scatter plots showing corticosterone (CORT) concentration (ng/mL serum) versus handling time (seconds), and heterophil/lymphocyte ratios (H/L) versus handling time (seconds). Linear regression was performed on both data sets using SPSS software. The R-square value for the correlation between CORT and handling time is displayed below the trendline on the plot.

DISCUSSION

After performing linear regression and ANOVA to examine the relationships between the variables, no significant correlations were found between the CORT data, leukocyte data, and data from physical measurements taken in the field. CORT was positively and significantly correlated with handling time, as expected based on the results of previous research (Romero and Reed 2005; Fridinger et al. 2007; Herring and Gawlik 2007; Busch and Hayward 2009; Cockrem et al. 2009). Also as expected, no correlation was found between H/L and handling time, or between H/L Index and handling time. These results support the hypothesis that H/L is less sensitive than CORT to handling time in samples taken more than 2 minutes after capture, supporting H/L as a better measure of chronic stress for some research applications.

The CORT results in this study were similar to the results of studies on free-ranging Adélie penguins by Vleck et al. (2000) and Cockrem et al. (2009), to the results of Davis et al. (2000) on Single Comb White Leghorn hens, and to the results of Herring et al. (2011) on White Ibis nestlings. CORT results were not consistent with values obtained in the research of Gross and Siegel (1983) on broiler chickens or of Fridinger et al. (2007) on Black-legged Kittiwake nestlings. Herring and Gawlik (2007) reported fecal CORT in ng/g, thus the plasma CORT values in ng/mL reported in this study could not be directly compared.

The results for heterophil counts, lymphocyte counts, and H/L in this study were similar to those for Siberian Tits in managed habitats (Krams et al. 2010) and for wintering male Great Tits (Cirule et al. 2012). Though the lymphocyte counts and H/L values reported in this study were not similar to those of House Finches (Davis 2005), the heterophils counts were within the range reported by Davis (2005). The ranges of leukocyte counts and H/L in this study were consistently lower than the those reported in several studies, including the results of Gross and Siegel (1983) and Zulkifli et a. (2000) on broiler chickens, Davis et al. (2000) on Single Comb White Leghorn hens, Vleck et al. (2000) on Adélie penguins, Moreno et al. (2002) on Pied Flycatcher nestlings, Martinez-Padilla et al. (2004) on Eurasian Kestrel nestlings, and Al-Murrani et al. (2006) concerning chickens. Upon review of the leukocyte data in this study compared to the results of previous research on H/L, the disparities of results between these studies could be attributed to the differences between the leukocyte profiles of the different species studied. The values found in the results of this study seem to agree more closely with studies concerning species that are more closely related to the Tufted Titmouse, such as the Great Tit and the Siberian Tit (Davis 2005; Krams et al. 2010; Cirule et al. 2012).

The H/L ratio is a direct measure of a physiological change, whereas the concentration of CORT in the blood may be affected by different factors before physiological changes occur in response to environmental stressors (Gross and Siegel 1983). Numbers of different leukocytes present in the blood change more slowly in response to stress than does CORT concentration, and the changes are longer lasting than CORT (Vleck et al. 2000). H/L was not expected to change in response to stress due to capture and handling within the time range in this study, which the data supports. Owing to such differences between these two bioindicators and the resistance of H/L to acute distress from capture and handling that is supported by this study, the consistency and relative dependability of these two stress measures must be considered in field studies which require the handling of subjects to attain blood samples. The rapid effect of capture and handling on CORT requires that blood samples be collected immediately after capture in order to obtain baseline measurements indicative of environmental stress as opposed to handling stress. The resistance of H/L to the effect of capture and handling demonstrates that this measure

is not affected by routine handling and thus allows for the attainment of baseline measurements indicative of environmental stress instead of stress due to capture and handling. H/L is therefore a more reliable and tool for use in field studies measuring chronic stress.

Spearman's rho was calculated to examine the within-subject relationship between CORT and H/L after removing the variation in CORT owing to the effect of handling time, and again no significant correlation was found between the CORT and leukocyte data. This finding agrees with the results of Gross and Siegel (1983) in which no correlation was found between H/L and CORT in response to various stressors. The only situation in which Gross and Siegel (1983) found a correlation between H/L and CORT was in well-socialized groups of chickens in low-stress environments with stable social hierarchies before any experimental stressors were applied.

The absence of a correlation between H/L and CORT in this study does contradict the results of more recent research that has supported a possible relationship between H/L and CORT. According to Sapolsky et al. (2000) in a comprehensive review of current research on physiological stress indicators, immune activation in response to stressors contributes to the subsequent release of glucocorticoids such as CORT by synthesizing molecules similar to adrenocorticotropic hormone and cytokines that stimulate the adrenocortical axis. Prolonged increases in levels of glucocorticoids can have an immunosuppressive effect resulting in reductions of circulating leukocytes, which would alter the H/L measured in samples. But Sapolsky et al. (2000) also suggest that decreases in leukocyte counts in such situations may not be due to the depletion of leukocytes but the diversion of leukocytes to local areas of need in response to specific stressors. If this were true, glucocorticoids such as CORT would not have the described immunosuppressive effect. Therefore, the overall leukocyte proportions in a subject's system should not be significantly affected by variations in CORT levels, a scenario which would be supported by the findings of this study. Leukocyte counts, however, may vary in such a case depending where in the system leukocytes are being diverted as well as where and how samples are taken.

The findings of this study support H/L as a more reliable stress measurement tool for use in field research as well as a more convenient tool. The significantly slower H/L response to stress, especially the acute distress due to capture and handling, allows researchers more time to obtain blood samples in the field with accurate baseline measurements. In addition to decreasing the pressure to minimize handling times, the use of H/L as a stress measurement tool offers other benefits that the use of CORT may not. First, the amount of blood necessary to prepare a blood smear is much smaller than that required for CORT assays. A blood smear requires a single drop of blood whereas typical assays to measure CORT concentrations require several microliters. The average Tufted Titmouse body mass in this study was just over 21 g and the smallest bird sampled was 19 g. When extracting blood samples from birds of such small masses, it would be ideal to use the least invasive method of blood sampling. Second, the relative costs of obtaining H/L and CORT measurements for research are significantly different. CORT assay kits are expensive and analysis of samples requires the use of sensitive and expensive equipment and specialized software. The method for measuring H/L requires only stain, microscope slides, a microscope, and immersion oil. H/L offers a less expensive and more convenient method for measuring stress that may affect the subjects sampled less.

There are challenges to the use of H/L, though, as previous researchers such as Davis et al. (2008) have pointed out. First, H/L measured from a single blood smear is only indicative of the relative proportions of leukocytes that were circulating in the blood at the moment and the

specific bodily location of sampling. It is therefore possible that H/L may not represent the numbers of heterophils or lymphocytes present in other areas of the body from which samples were not taken, which may change if certain stressors affect localized regions within a subject's body. Without taking multiple samples and creating multiple blood smears, there is no way to know if such a difference is present or the magnitude of that difference. Second, H/L is not a direct measure of chronic stress levels, but a relative measure that requires comparison either to other samples or to a reference of some kind. Since references do not exist for many species describing what would be a typical H/L in low-stress or high-stress conditions, this poses an issue for researchers attempting to interpret the stress data represented by this measure. Finally, as a measure based on the immune response to stress, H/L may be influenced by other factors that induce an inflammatory or an antibody response, such as injury or disease. While these factors could be causes of chronic stress, they do pose a problem to researchers with specific applications in mind exclusive of those kinds of stressors. These challenges do not omit H/L as a useful physiological indicator of chronic stress, but they do warrant consideration in choosing the appropriate stress assessment tool for use in specific research applications.

This study was conducted to determine the effect of acute distress due to capture and handling on levels of plasma CORT and on H/L and to determine a possible correlation between these two physiological stress indicators. As described above, the results of this study support H/L as a reliable stress indicator that is less sensitive to the effects of handling time than the more commonly used CORT. This study was intended to help researchers identify which indicators may be more effective for particular research applications. In light of these results, this research encourages more frequent use of H/L as a measure of chronic moderate stress in avian field research.

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