Diet specialisation and foraging efficiency under fluctuating vole abundance: a comparison between generalist and specialist avian predators.

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1 Specialist species, using a narrow range of resources, are predicted to be more efficient when
2 foraging on their preferred food than generalist species consuming a wider range of foods. We
3 tested whether the foraging efficiency of the pallid harrier (*Circus macrourus*), a vole
4 specialist, and of sympatric Montagu's harriers (*C. pygargus*), a closely related generalist,
5 differed in relation to inter-annual variations in vole abundance over 5 years (including two
6 peak- one intermediate and two low vole abundance years). We show that the hunting
7 parameters of pallid harriers strongly varied with vole abundance (higher encounter rates,
8 capture rates and proportion of successful strikes in high than intermediate and low vole
9 abundance years, respectively), whereas Montagu's harriers showed stable capture rates and
10 hunting success (proportion of strikes that were successful), irrespective of vole abundance.
11 Encounter rates and capture rates were higher for pallid than for Montagu's harriers when
12 voles were abundant, but lower when voles were scarce. The hunting success of pallid harriers
13 was also lower than that of Montagu's harriers when voles were scarce, and when they had to
14 target alternative preys, in particular birds. Overall, estimated biomass intake rate was 40%
15 higher for pallid harriers than for Montagu's harriers when voles were abundant, but 50%
16 lower when voles were scarce. Our results indicate that specialists predators, like pallid
17 harriers, which evolve specific adaptations or breeding strategies, do better when their
18 preferred prey is abundant, but may face a cost of specialisation, being not efficient enough
19 when their preferred prey is scarce. These results have broader implications for understanding
20 why specialist predators are, in general, more vulnerable than generalists, and for predicting
21 how specialists can cope with rapid environmental changes affecting the abundance or
22 predictability of their preferred resources.

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26 Keywords: Optimal foraging, capture success, vole cycles, conservation, raptor
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1 The question of why predators specialise on certain prey types, and whether generalist and
2 specialist tactics are equally profitable, is still unresolved (Recher 1990; Woo et al. 2008). In
3 simple terms, a specialist uses a narrow range of resources and a generalist uses a wide range
4 of resources, although there is a continuum from specialization to generalization both within-
5 and between-species (Bernays et al. 2004, Egan and Funk 2006, Partridge and Green 1985,
6 Durell 2000, Woo et al. 2008). Optimal foraging models predict that diet specialization should
7 depend on the variety and abundance of available prey, and on the intrinsic energy qualities of
8 these preys (e.g. handling time, search time per unit abundance, or caloric value, MacArthur
9 and Pianka 1966). Specialisation may depend on: i) the spatial-temporal heterogeneity and
10 predictability in the abundance of resources, ii) cultural experience, and iii) the evolution of
11 more efficient foraging adaptations (Partridge and Green 1985, Whitfield 1990, Sherry 1990,
12 Durell 2000). The latter implies that phenotypic characteristics (anatomical, morphological,
13 behavioural or physiological) should confer greater foraging efficiency to specialists than
14 generalists. For example, individuals that specialize on a single food type may form more
15 effective search images and have greater foraging success linked with a reduced search time
16 (Dukas and Kamil 2001). By exploiting a narrow range of foods, specialists are thus predicted
17 to be more efficient on their preferred food than are generalists consuming a wider range of
18 foods (MacArthur and Pianka 1966). In herbivorous insects, for example, the selection of host
19 plants has been shown to be more accurate, and foraging more efficient, in specialist than in
20 generalist species (e.g. Bernays and Funk 1999, Oppenheim and Goud 2002, Bernays et al.
21 2004, Egan and Funk 2006).

22 In vertebrates, several studies have evaluated the relative efficiency of different
23 trophic strategies (Partridge and Green 1987, Annet and Pierotti 1999, Golet et al. 2000,
24 Bolnick et al. 2003, Svanbäck and Evlov 2003, Tinker et al. 2008, Woo et al. 2008), mostly
25 focusing on intra-specific individual specialization. Specialist individuals were often shown to
26 be more efficient or to have higher fitness than generalist individuals (but see Woo et al.,
27 2008, Whitfield et al. 2009). Other studies compared the foraging efficiency of closely related
28 vertebrate species characterised by different levels of trophic specialization and showed that,
29 between species, specialisation is also usually associated with a higher efficiency (Huckins
30 1997, Jones et al. 2001, Britt and Bennet 2008). However, a study on sunfish pointed out that
31 there could also be a trade-off associated with specialisation, as specialists could be less
32 efficient than generalists on alternative resources, when the preferred food is scarce (Huckins
33 1997 but see Britt and Benet 2008 for contradictory results). This latter issue has, so far,
34 received insufficient empirical attention, particularly in terrestrial top predators, despite strong

1 implications for the conservation and population sustainability of specialist predators. The
2 more specialized on a food resource a forager is, the more it is constrained to live in patches
3 where that resource is abundant or to spend time and energy in searching for it among a
4 mixture of resources (Begon et al. 2005). If specialists are less efficient than generalists when
5 their preferred food is scarce, then specialisation might be costly under certain circumstances.
6 This would help understand why specialists are often more vulnerable and at greater risk of
7 extinction than generalists (Angermeier 1995, Shultz et al. 2005).

8 The Montagu's harrier (*Circus pygargus*) and the pallid harrier (*Circus macrourus*)
9 are two closely related medium-sized ground-nesting raptors that breed in sympatry in
10 northern Kazakhstan (Terraube et al. 2009). There, the abundance of small mammals (mainly
11 voles *Microtus* ssp.) exhibits unstable dynamics with pronounced inter-annual variations in
12 abundance (Bragin 2003, Davies et al. 2004). The Montagu's harrier is considered as a
13 generalist raptor species that hunts for a wide variety of prey types, although it may favour
14 certain prey in particular areas (Arroyo 1997), including voles in some parts of Western
15 Europe (Salamolard et al. 2000). In contrast, the pallid harrier is considered to be a vole
16 specialist, behaving nomadically in response to fluctuations in abundance of this resource
17 (Cramp and Simmons 1980, Ferguson-Lees and Christie 2001).

18 We tested whether the foraging efficiency of the two harrier species differed i) among
19 years in relation to vole abundance, and ii) between species in relation to variations in vole
20 abundance. We predicted greater inter-annual variations in hunting success in the specialist
21 (pallid harrier) than generalist species (Montagu's harrier), with the former showing high,
22 intermediate and low success rates for peak-, intermediate and low vole abundance years,
23 respectively. Furthermore, we predicted that pallid harriers would be better foragers than
24 Montagu's harriers when voles (their preferred prey) are abundant, but worse foragers when
25 voles are scarce.

27 **Methods**

29 **Study area**

31 We conducted fieldwork in the Naurzum National Nature Reserve area in north-central
32 Kazakhstan (Kostanay Oblast, 51°N, 64°E) in June 2000, June 2006, May-July 2007 and
33 2008, and early June to mid-July 2009. The study area, located at the southern limit of

Siberian forests and northern limit of Eurasian steppes, is characterised by a mosaic of dry steppes, riverbeds, bushy areas and woodland patches (see Terraube et al. 2009). The two study species breed there in sympatry. They use slightly different vegetation types for nesting (Terraube et al. 2009, in press), but both use the same habitats (mainly steppes) for foraging (see below). We monitored an area of ca. 700 km² (we estimated survey area by assuming a visibility of 1 km from the network of accessible tracks that we regularly travelled within the overall area, which totalled ca. 350 km in length).

Vole abundance estimates

Small mammals (including voles) exhibit strong inter-annual fluctuations in abundance in Kazakhstan (Bragin 2003, Davies et al. 2004). We estimated vole abundance directly in 2006 (in June) and 2007-2009 (from late May to early July), using an index based on the occurrence of fresh vole droppings. This index is correlated with estimates derived from trapping methods (Tapper 1979, Madders 2003). Twenty-five quadrats (25 x 25 cm) were located every few meters along a transect in 11 (2006) and 25 (2007, 2008 and 2009) plots (each within a 1x1 km observation square located throughout the study site and stratified by habitat type, see below), and sampled for the presence (1) or absence (0) of fresh vole faeces (moist and greenish in colour). Presence/absence scores were then summed across the 25 quadrats in each plot to obtain an index of vole abundance (Madders 2003). We located the plots in the main vegetation types present in the wider study area (steppes, marshlands and agricultural areas). 2006 was a high vole abundance year that preceded a strong population decline in 2007, followed by population increase in 2008 and then a population crash again in 2009 (Table 1).

We did not quantify vole abundance in 2000 (Table 1), but voles were very frequently observed even during daytime (authors, pers. obs.). Pallid harrier breeding densities (which we subsequently found to be highly dependent on rodent abundance, see below and Terraube 2010), as recorded by Bragin (2003) during transect surveys of the study area from 1997 to 2003, reached their highest level in 2000. Similarly, the breeding numbers of other rodent-eating species, such as kestrels (*Falco tinnunculus*) and short-eared owls (*Asio flammeus*), were much higher in 2000 than in previous or subsequent years (Bragin, pers. obs.). All these indirect data indicated that 2000 was a peak vole abundance year, rather than a year of increasing or decreasing vole abundance. We estimated the vole abundance index for 2000 in two ways: i) from the relationships between our vole abundance index and pallid harrier

density, i.e. number of pallid nests found divided by survey effort, for the other four study years (vole index = $11.352 \times [\text{pallid density}] - 0.144$; $R^2 = 0.989$; $n = 4$; see Table 1 for raw data) and ii) from the relationship between the vole abundance index and the % of small mammals in the diet of pallid harriers for the other four study years (vole index = $0.143 \times [\% \text{ small mammals}] - 0.144$; $R^2 = 0.958$; $n = 4$; see below and Table 1 for raw data). These relationships gave estimated vole abundance indices of 8.2 and 7.8 for year 2000, respectively. We used the average value (vole index = 8.0 for 2000) for analyses using vole abundance as a continuous variable. Given that one of our data points was estimated, and in order to check for consistency of results, we also analysed vole abundance as a categorical variable, pooling data from years characterised by same levels of vole abundance: 2000 and 2006 (hereafter “high vole abundance” years); 2007 and 2009 (“low vole abundance” year); and 2008 “intermediate vole abundance” year (see Table 1).

Diet

Pellets were collected each year at nests and perching sites of each species. As the pellets of each species have similar dimensions and appearance, we only included pellets collected in nests or perching sites identified as used by individuals of each species. A total of 276 pellets were analysed for this study (134 for Montagu’s harriers and 142 for pallid harriers). For 2000, 2006 and for pallid harriers in the low vole abundance years (2007-2009), pellets analysed were the totality of those found. For 2008 ($n = 30$ for both species), and for Montagu’s harrier in the low vole abundance years ($n = 60$ in 2007 and 25 in 2009), pellets analysed were a random sample of all pellets collected, to avoid too much discrepancy in sample sizes among years. Pellet contents were classified as “birds”, “small mammals”, “reptiles”, “insects” and “eggs”. We could not identify all pellet contents to the species level, but 95 % of identified small mammals were *Microtus sp.* voles (sub sample size: $n = 37$). We assessed the minimum number of each prey category per pellet (highest number of different jaws, skulls or pairs of incisors in small mammals; upper or lower mandibles, left or right feet in birds; pairs of mandibles for insects). Diet data are presented both as the percentage of identified prey and their estimated biomass. For the latter, we used the estimated average biomass of each prey type (20 g for small mammals, 29 g for birds, 10 g for reptiles, 5 g for insects and 15 g for eggs) according to Arroyo (1997). Sample size was too small to analyse diet at the individual pair or nest site level (between 1 and 4 pellets per nest), so we pooled data across all individuals for a given year and species. Sampling was spread over the whole

breeding population and study area, so a bias due to some pairs or areas being sampled more than others was very unlikely.

We also calculated an index of diet diversity for each species and year class (i.e., high, intermediate or low vole abundance). Diet breadth (B) was calculated according to Levins (1968), as $B = 1 / \sum p_i^2$, where p_i is the proportion of the diet contributed by prey type i . Levin's index tends to weight in favour of abundant prey types, and was preferred over the Shannon Index, which tends to give more weight to rare groups (Krebs 1989).

Finally, we estimated the biomass of an average taken prey in a given year or vole abundance year class for each species by multiplying the frequency of occurrence of the different prey types in diet by the estimated average biomass of each prey type (as detailed above).

Foraging observations

Each year, the study area was surveyed daily, in conditions of good visibility, searching for Montagu's and pallid harriers breeding and monitoring the activity of each individual of the two harrier species exhibiting foraging behaviour during the survey. Thus, foraging observations were spread over one month in 2000 and 2006, over three months in 2007, two months and a half in 2008 and one month and a half in 2009. Each time an adult harrier was detected foraging, we recorded its behaviour using 10× binoculars and a stopwatch. When foraging, harriers typically fly at low (<3 m) elevation above the ground, quartering to search for prey, a flight behaviour distinct from that of other activities (Schipper 1977, Madders 2003). Hunting from perches has never been observed. Behaviours clearly not aimed at capturing or locating prey (e.g. perching, territorial behaviours or prey transport) were ignored. During each foraging observation, we recorded the species observed (pallid or Montagu's harrier), length of foraging bout (in seconds), number of encounters, number of successful prey captures, and the habitat in which the bird was hunting (in no case did we record harriers hunting over more than one habitat during the same observation bout). We ended an observation bout when the hunting harrier's behaviour could no longer be determined accurately (e.g. when it was hidden from view or became too distant). Observation bouts lasted on average (mean ± S.D.) 157 ± 106 seconds (range 15-627; $n = 437$). Prey encounters were defined as unambiguous sudden changes in flight direction or speed directed towards a potential item on the ground. Observers undertook simultaneous watches of the same bird during training sessions at the beginning of each study year, with the

aim of standardising the criteria that were used to define prey encounters. Prey strike attempts were defined as encounters in which the bird landed on the ground. Success rate was evaluated as the proportion of strikes that resulted in a capture. Whether strikes were successful or not was usually obvious from the harrier's subsequent behaviour. Failed strikes were generally followed by an immediate resumption of foraging, whereas captures resulted in harriers plucking prey at the capture site or flying with the prey to the nest. When harriers stayed out of sight on the ground for a very short period, it is difficult to assess whether they captured or not, because harriers can stay on the ground for a few seconds to rest after an unsuccessful strike (authors, pers.obs). In such cases, harriers could have captured and quickly consumed a small prey, such as an insect, but including these could lead to an overestimation of successful strikes. These cases were rare (2.7% of all observations in 2000, and 2.1% of all observations in 2007, 0% in other years), but in order to be conservative, we considered those cases as unsuccessful, which was the most likely outcome based on our direct observations of birds after a successful capture. Over the course of the 5 year-study, we recorded 437 foraging bouts by individuals of the two species. Given that the observations were undertaken on unmarked individuals, there was a potential for sampling the same individuals repeatedly, for example on different days. Nevertheless, we sampled the whole study area (ca. 700 km²) homogeneously, including areas far from the breeding sites and probably used by non-breeding individuals, so we believe our sample is not biased with a disproportionate representation of some individuals. For each species, 90% of the recorded bouts occurred in dry steppes. Other habitats used for foraging were marshlands, fallow agricultural land and bushy areas. The proportion of habitats used for foraging did not differ significantly between species (χ^2 test, $P > 0.9$).

Statistical analysis

We used SAS 9.01 for analyses. We tested for differences in diet composition between species using Chi-square tests on the number of individuals in each prey category. To analyse variation in encounter, strike and capture rates, and in capture success for each species, we used vole abundance either as a class variable (comparing high, intermediate or low vole abundance years) or as a continuous variable (regression on vole abundance index in each year). When testing for differences in study parameters between vole abundance year classes, we included in our Generalized Linear Models two-by-two tests of the LS means differences. When using vole abundance as a continuous variable, we looked for possible non-linear

relationships by trying different transformations of this variable in our models (non-transformed, Log-transformed, or inclusion of a quadratic term). In all cases, the best models (in terms of explained deviance and significance levels) were those that included Log-transformed vole abundance, and we show only the results of these models to simplify the presentation of the results. We tested for among-species differences in foraging variables using GLMs that included Log-vole abundance (continuous), species (pallid vs Montagu's harrier) and the interaction between Log-vole abundance and species as fixed effects. Number of encounters or strikes per observation bout were fitted to models using a Poisson distribution (and a log-link function), with the log-transformed duration of the observation bout included as an offset. Given that there was only one or no capture per observation bout, we fitted capture probability to models using a binomial error distribution (and a logit link function), using also the log-transformed duration of the observation bout as an offset. We fitted success rate (capture / strikes) to models using a binomial distribution and a logit link function. All tests were two-tailed, even though the predictions were directional.

Results

Diet

Pallid harriers preyed mostly on small mammals in years of high vole abundance (72% of total biomass, Fig. 1) and diet breadth (Levin's index) was very low in these years (Table 2). This change in diet breadth was associated with the progressive inclusion of more birds and reptiles (and a marginal higher inclusion of insects and eggs) in the diet. In particular, birds became increasingly important in intermediate (39% of total biomass) and low vole abundance years (59%; Fig.1).

Montagu's harriers preyed upon three main prey types: birds, voles and reptiles (mainly lizards), and diet breadth was similar in all years (Table 2). For this species, the main prey in terms of biomass was birds (particularly in high vole abundance years) and reptiles (particularly in intermediate and low vole abundance years) (Fig. 1).

The relationship between diet breadth (Levin's index) and log- vole abundance thus differed significantly between species (GLM: Log-vole abundance: $F_{1,6} = 24.41$; $P = 0.003$; species: $F_{1,6} = 3.74$; $P = 0.101$; Log-vole abundance $\times$ species interaction: $F_{1,6} = 10.47$; $P = 0.018$). Diet breadth decreased with increasing vole abundance in Pallid harriers (slope: $-0.25 \pm$

0.04, but not in Montagu's harriers (slope -0.05 ± 0.05). Diet breadth of pallid harriers was half that of Montagu's harriers when small mammals were abundant, but was 20% higher than that of Montagu's harriers when voles were scarce (Table 2).

The percentage of small mammals in the diet of Montagu's and pallid harriers was significantly different in high ($\chi^2_1 = 6.15$; $P = 0.013$) and intermediate ($\chi^2_1 = 19.30$; $P < 0.0001$), but not in low vole abundance years ($\chi^2_1 = 0.46$; $P = 0.49$).

The average biomass of taken prey (according to the proportions found in pellets) was higher for pallid than Montagu's harriers in each vole abundance class year (Table 2).

Foraging efficiency and vole abundance

Prey encounter rates significantly differed between vole abundance years in both harrier species (Table 3). The pattern of variation was similar between species, with increasing encounter rates found with increasing vole abundance (Log- linear relationship; Table 3, Fig. 2a). For both species, encounter rate was significantly higher in high than in low vole abundance years (Table 3). For pallid harriers, encounter rates were higher in intermediate than in low vole abundance years, and tended to be higher in high than in intermediate vole abundance years (Fig. 2a, Table 3). For Montagu's harriers, encounter rates were higher in high than in low or intermediate vole abundance years, but were not significantly different between intermediate and low vole abundance years (Fig. 2a; Table 3).

Strike rate significantly differed between vole abundance year classes, and significantly increased with increasing (log-transformed) vole abundance in pallid harriers, but not in Montagu's harriers (Table 3). In pallid harriers, strike rate in high vole abundance years was almost double that in either intermediate or low vole abundance years, and was also higher in intermediate than in low vole abundance years (Fig. 2b; Table 3). For Montagu's harriers, strike rate tended to be higher in high than in low vole abundance years (Table 3; $P = 0.072$).

Capture rate significantly differed between vole abundance year classes in pallid harriers, but not in Montagu's harriers (Table 3). In pallid harriers, capture rate was similar in high and intermediate vole abundance years, but was significantly higher in those years than in low vole abundance years (Fig. 2c, Table 3). Capture rate significantly increased with increasing vole abundance in pallid harriers, but not in Montagu's harriers (Fig. 3a; Table 3).

Success rate (captures per strike) significantly differed between vole abundance years in pallid harriers, but not in Montagu's harriers (Fig. 2d, Table 3). The success rate of pallid

harriers increased with increasing vole abundance (Fig. 3b), being lower in low than in either high or intermediate vole abundance years, but did not differ significantly between intermediate and high vole abundance years (Fig. 2d, Table 3).

Between-species differences in foraging efficiency and vole abundance

When comparing between species along a gradient of vole abundance, the relationship between encounter rate and (Log-transformed) vole abundance differed between the specialist and the generalist species (Table 4; significant Log-vole abundance $\times$ species interaction). Encounter rates were higher for pallid than for Montagu's harrier when voles were abundant, but lower when voles were scarce (Fig. 2a). For strike rate, there was no significant difference between species in relation to variation in vole abundance (Table 4: non significant Log-vole abundance $\times$ species interaction). For capture rate, however, this interaction was significant (Table 4): capture rates were higher for pallid than for Montagu's harriers when voles were abundant, but lower when voles were scarce (Fig. 3a). When comparing high and low vole abundance years only, there was a significant interaction between species and vole abundance year class explaining capture rate ($\chi^2_3 = 5.08$; $P = 0.024$), arising from the opposite differences in capture rate between species in low and high vole abundance years (Fig. 2c).

For success rate (% of strikes that were successful), differences between species in relation to vole abundance did not reach statistical significance (Fig. 3b; Table 4; Log-vole abundance $\times$ species interaction: $P = 0.110$). However, success rate appeared lower for pallid than for Montagu's harriers in years of low vole abundance (Fig. 2d; Fig. 3b). Indeed, when considering between-species differences by vole abundance class years, success rate did not differ between species in high ($\chi^2_{1,37} = 0.29$; $P = 0.588$) and intermediate ($\chi^2_{1,52} = 0.22$; $P = 0.635$) vole abundance years, but was significantly lower for pallid than for Montagu's harriers in low vole abundance years ($\chi^2_{1,75} = 4.13$; $P = 0.042$; LMS difference: -0.966 ± 0.488).

When calculating an estimated biomass intake rate for each species (multiplying the capture rate per hr by the estimated average biomass of a taken prey for each year and species), the relationship between biomass intake rate and Log- vole abundance also differed between species (Table 4; Log-vole abundance $\times$ species interaction: $P = 0.059$; Fig3. c). Biomass intake rate was lower for Pallid than for Montagu's harriers when small mammals were scarce, by higher when voles were abundant (Fig. 3c). Overall, biomass intake rate was

40% higher for pallid than for Montagu's harriers in years of high vole abundance, but was 50% lower in years of low vole abundance (data in Table 2).

Discussion

Our results are consistent with our initial hypotheses: i) that specialist predators have overall higher inter-annual variation in foraging success, and ii) that diet specialization in a vertebrate predator was associated with greater foraging efficiency (higher encounter rates and capture rates, higher biomass intake rate) when the preferred prey was abundant. Most interestingly, our study also shows that the specialist had lower foraging success than the closely related generalist species when its main prey was scarce (lower encounter and capture rates, lower hunting success, and 50% lower biomass intake rate). We discuss below these results and their implications.

Consistent with our predictions, for the specialist pallid harrier foraging success (capture rate and success rate) was highly variable between years, being high when vole abundance was high, when diet data indicated a highly specialized diet (low trophic diversity and 67-77% of small mammals, mainly voles, in the diet). In contrast, foraging success was much lower during low vole abundance years, when diet data indicated a higher trophic diversity and a greater inclusion of alternative prey, in particular passerine birds. In contrast to pallid harriers, capture rate and success in the generalist Montagu's harrier (that had an overall greater diet breadth) did not vary between years of contrasted vole abundance.

Furthermore, the observed between-species differences were in accordance to our predictions: pallid harriers tended to have higher capture rates and capture success than Montagu's when voles were abundant (Fig. 2, 3). Differences between species in encounter rates were even more pronounced (being higher in pallid than Montagu's harrier with increasing vole abundance), suggesting that pallid harriers were overall more efficient at finding and locating prey when voles were abundant (Fig. 2). Interestingly, we found that pallid harriers were worse foragers than Montagu's harriers (lower capture success, resulting in lower capture rates) when they had to feed on alternative prey types (in low vole abundance years). The lower foraging success may arise if pallid harriers invest more time in hunting for voles but are less able to find them, or that they are less efficient in capturing alternative prey. Our results suggest that the second hypothesis is more likely: first, encounter rates were

1 similar between both species in low vole abundance years, which would not be the case if
2 they were searching only for voles; secondly, observed differences in capture success are
3 consistent with the idea that pallid harriers are less efficient than Montagu's harriers when
4 they have to catch prey other than small mammals, and in particular passerine birds. Overall,
5 capture rates of pallid harriers were higher and lower than those of Montagu's harriers in high
6 and low vole abundance years, respectively (Fig. 3a; Table 4; significant Species $\times$ Log-Vole
7 abundance interaction).

8 The pattern observed could be linked with the breeding status of pallid harriers in
9 different years, as lower hunting effort may be expected in non-breeding than breeding
10 individuals, due to their different energetic needs, and there was a higher proportion of the
11 former in low vole abundance years. Nevertheless, the parameter that is more likely to be
12 adjusted in relation to energetic needs is daily time spent hunting, not necessarily the foraging
13 parameters considered on this study. On the other hand, inefficient foragers may not acquire
14 enough energetic condition to become breeders, so it is more plausible to think that breeding
15 status is a consequence of foraging parameters (see also below), and not the other way round.

16 As a result of their different foraging success and prey choice, biomass intake rate
17 (estimated from capture rate and the average biomass of taken prey) differed between species
18 in relation to vole abundance. Biomass intake rate of pallid harriers was 40% higher than that
19 of Montagu's harriers in high vole abundance years, but was half that of the generalist species
20 in low vole abundance years (Table 2; Fig. 3c). Pallid harriers are noticeably heavier than
21 Montagu's harriers (males are 8% heavier and females 30% heavier; authors, unpublished
22 data), so adult pallid harriers need a higher biomass intake rate for self maintenance, in
23 particular females. Also, nestling pallid harriers aged 20-25 days are 25% heavier than
24 nestling Montagu's harriers (authors, unpublished data), so the relative energetic needs for
25 rearing a brood are higher for pallid than for Montagu's harriers. This helps understand i) why
26 fewer pallid harriers breed when voles are scarce, and why most fail to breed successfully
27 (Table 1), and ii) the nomadic behaviour of the vole specialist pallid harrier. It might be more
28 efficient to move to a different area rather than to stay in an area where the preferred prey is
29 scarce, even when alternative prey are abundant. The lower foraging success on these
30 alternative preys and the associated lower biomass intake rate perhaps might not allow adults
31 to attain a body condition sufficient to breed, or to successfully raise a brood. Indeed, we
32 found that breeding density in the low vole abundance year was extremely low: the species
33 was virtually absent from the region as a breeder (see Table 1), although pallid harriers were
34 observed in the area early in the breeding season, but did not stay or breed. Moreover, the few

pallid harrier pairs that bred in the study area in 2007 were all unsuccessful (Table 1). In contrast, Montagu's harriers, which took a variety of prey types and maintained foraging success independently of variations in vole abundance, did not show strong inter-annual variations in any breeding parameters (density or success; Table 1). Interannual variations in the diet composition of Montagu's harriers (Fig. 1) could suggest interannual variations in abundance and availability of alternative prey groups (mainly reptiles and passerine birds), possibly related to variations in the spring weather conditions (Terraube et al. 2010). An interesting result was the absence of significant differences in capture success between intermediate and high vole abundance years in pallid harriers. In this species, foraging success increased with increasing vole abundance, the relationship being Log- linear. Thus, even at intermediate vole densities, like in 2008, pallid harriers were able to maintain high capture rates and foraging success. This suggests that the specialised foraging strategy may be a constraint only in low vole abundance situations.

Differences in foraging efficiency between generalist and specialist species could be explained by neural limitations in relation to diet breadth: specialist species appear to be more sensitive to key stimuli, whereas generalists respond equally to large quantities of sensory neural inputs (Dukas and Real 1991). This implies that generalists need higher attentiveness and learning to be able to narrow their resource choices (Bernays 1998). This phenomenon of limited attention helps to understand why specialists tend to forage more efficiently than generalists, through a search image formation on a given food type (Dukas and Kamil 2001). Specialization may be also associated with morphological or behavioural adaptations to handle certain resources. Harriers, along with *Elanus* kites, are the only diurnal raptors to have evolved a parabolic cowl of feathers surrounding their eyes, suggesting that hearing is enhanced to locate small mammal prey concealed in dense vegetation (Rice 1982, Simmons 2000, Negro et al. 2006). Consistent with this, the trait is more pronounced in the pallid harrier than other harrier species, the facial disc encircling the ears and meeting below the bill (Forsman 1999). In contrast, the facial disc of the Montagu's harrier is confined to an arc just behind the ear opening, suggesting its hearing capacities might be less well developed than that of the rodent specialist species. Such adaptations (physiological and morphological) could explain the higher encounter rates of pallid harrier when voles are increasingly abundant. In contrast, adaptations for vole predation could be detrimental when alternative preys have to be targeted. The later was supported by our results: pallid harriers had lower encounter rates and lower capture rates, and also had a lower capture success than Montagu's harriers in years of low vole abundance.

1 Additionally, it is worthwhile recalling that some populations of Montagu's harriers
2 behave as vole specialists, feeding mainly on voles and presenting strong numerical responses
3 to their abundance, even when alternative prey are present (Salamolard et al. 2000), which
4 suggests that adaptations for capturing certain prey may also be learnt behaviours. For
5 example, Warburton and Thomson (2006) showed that silver perch *Bidyanus bidyanus* can
6 change from a specialist to a generalist phase over very short time intervals. By learning
7 through experience, these fish could adapt to changes in the profitability of different prey
8 types. Mechanisms determining inter-specific (or inter-population) differences in foraging
9 success on different prey types remain however barely understood.

10 The results of this study have broader implications for understanding why specialists
11 are often more vulnerable than generalists (Angermeier 1995, Shultz et al. 2005). Recent
12 studies have shown that specialist bird species could exhibit a behavioural syndrome, i.e. a
13 suite of correlated behaviours reflecting between-individual consistencies in behaviour across
14 situations (Sih et al. 2004). For example, specialist species are usually less innovative and
15 more stressed than generalists (Clavel 2007). This could lead specialist species to be less
16 adaptable and therefore more vulnerable to new environmental conditions (Shultz et al. 2005,
17 Devictor et al. 2008). Specialists may therefore pay a price for their specialisation through
18 lower efficiency when conditions are not optimal. Thus, our results may have implications for
19 the sustainability and conservation of the vulnerable pallid harrier, whose populations have
20 declined in different parts of the breeding range (Birdlife International 2003). Their
21 specialization on voles, low success in capturing alternative prey, and nomadic behaviour
22 could have negative consequences for the species at a large geographical scale, particularly if
23 the frequency, amplitude and predictability of vole outbreaks varies for example through land
24 use or climate change. Climate changes have been shown to affect vole dynamics in the
25 Mongolian steppes (Zhang et al. 2003) and have been predicted to have deep impacts in the
26 Arctic ecosystem (Gilg et al. 2009). On the other hand, agricultural intensification and land
27 use change has also been shown to have effects on vole dynamics in Europe (Huitu et al.
28 2003). Land use in Kazakhstan has changed through recent agricultural intensification (Bragin
29 2003). Similarly, climate change in the area is predicted to be characterized by a decrease in
30 precipitations level and an increase in summer temperatures (Lioubimtseva & Henebry,
31 2009), which may decrease vole numbers (Zhang et al. 2003). Thus, it is possible that current
32 and future changes may have negative impacts on voles in Kazakhstan. As stated above, in
33 pallid harriers, the relationship between foraging and vole abundance appeared to be not
34 linear (even at intermediate vole densities the species is able to maintain high capture rates),

1 and the detrimental effects of low foraging efficiency (in terms of breeding success) were
2 mainly apparent in years of lowest vole abundance. At the population level, these detrimental
3 effects could be compensated for by high values in breeding parameters at other phases of the
4 vole cycle (e.g. higher breeding success than the sympatric Montagu's harrier during high
5 vole abundance years, Terraube et al. 2009; Terraube et al. in press), and by moving to other
6 areas where vole abundance is relatively higher. However, if land use or climate changes
7 increase the frequency and spatial synchronicity of vole population crashes, detrimental
8 effects at the local level may influence population sustainability at a larger scale. To fully
9 evaluate possible costs of specialisation, it would be necessary to compare the lifetime fitness
10 outcomes of generalist and specialist strategies, and their sensitivity to spatio-temporal
11 variations in abundance of the preferred food at a large scale. This is a challenging task for
12 specialist vertebrate predators, especially when they are nomadic (large scale movements,
13 with breeding populations tracking the fluctuations in abundance of their preferred prey), as
14 compared with generalist species, which exhibit more limited breeding dispersal.
15 Disentangling the interactions between food availability, dietary specialization, foraging
16 success and contrasted demographic strategies (and associated variations in survival,
17 reproduction and dispersal) would greatly help in setting conservation priorities for threatened
18 specialist predators in rapidly changing environments.

19
20
21 **Acknowledgements** We are grateful to Robert Stakim, Jeff Watson, Becky Wills, Jesús T.
22 García and Thomas Cornulier for help with data collection. Becky Wills also acted as a
23 translator in 2000, and Ainur Akmetova helped with translations and logistics in 2006. We are
24 also very thankful to Evgeny Bragin and Todd Katzner for assistance in setting up the project
25 and help with the subsequent fieldwork logistics. Phil Whitfield provided helpful comments
26 on a previous version of the manuscript. We are indebted to the current director of the
27 Naurzum Nature Reserve, Muttakov Bagitjan Zhakezhanovich, the deputy director, Zeinelova
28 Maria Alexandrova and all the staff of the Reserve. We dedicate this paper to the memory of
29 late Mike Madders, whose ideas, enthusiasm and initiative (in addition of funding) catalysed
30 the initiation of this project. This paper also contributes to the project Ecocycles (EUI2008-
31 03641, BIODIVERSA. ERA-net project, European Union's 6th Framework Programme for
32 Research).

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Table 1. Vole abundance estimates, foraging observation sample sizes and breeding parameters of pallid harriers (PH) and Montagu's harriers (MH) in each of the study years.

Year		2000	2006	2007	2008	2009
General sampling	Vole index ¹	[8.0] ⁶	8.8 ± 8.1	0 ± 0	4.2 ± 5.1	1.2 ± 2.9
	Survey effort (man-days)	52	57	104	94	79
	N. observations PH ²	49	11	68	58	43
	N. observations MH ³	17	18	59	53	61
	Vole abundance year class	High	High	Low	Interm.	Low
Pallid harriers	% small mammals in diet ⁴	67.24	77.08	21.95	38.35	19.4
	Breeding pairs found	40	46	5	31	10
	% failed nests ⁵	3.44 (29)	13.04 (46)	100 (5)	12.90 (31)	70 (10)
Montagu's harriers	% small mammals in diet ⁴	29.16	20.00	17.39	8.64	8.45
	Breeding pairs found	26	26	26	34	34
	% failed nests ⁵	43.75 (16)	7.69 (26)	38.46 (26)	60 (30)	24.24 (33)

¹ Mean ± s.d. presence/absence score per plot (n = 11 plots in 2006; n = 25 plots in 2007, 2008 and 2009)

² Number of hunting observations of pallid harriers

³ Number of hunting observations of Montagu's harriers

⁴ Percentages based on numbers (prey items)

⁵ Sample size (in brackets) refers to the number of nests monitored

⁶ Estimated value (see methods)

Table 2. Diets and estimated biomass intake rates of pallid and Montagu's harriers in years of contrasted vole abundance (high-, intermediate- and low-vole abundance years).

Vole abundance year classes:	High		Intermediate		Low	
Harrier species ⁵	PH	MH	PH	MH	PH	MH
Sample size:						
Number of prey items	222	64	73	81	106	255
Number of pellets	65	19	30	30	47	85
Diet ¹ :						
Small mammals	69.4	23.4	38.4	8.6	20.8	14.9
Birds	15.8	21.9	27.4	25.9	33.0	16.5
Eggs	0	1.6	1.4	2.5	1.9	0.8
Reptiles	3.0	20.3	21.9	37.0	23.6	45.5
Insects	12.0	32.8	11.0	25.9	19.81	22.35
B index ²	1.91	3.96	3.54	3.57	4.03	3.26
Biomass of average taken prey ³	19.89	16.39	18.56	14.61	17.57	13.57
Biomass intake per hr ⁴	249.7	149.6	141.8	173.1	58.2	116.8

¹ Diet data are given as a percentage of the total number of identified prey items.

² B index= Levin's diet breath index (see methods).

³ Estimated from the % of prey types in diet and the average weight of prey types (see methods)

⁴ Estimated by multiplying the Biomass of average taken prey by the capture rate (number of captures per hr; data shown in Figures 2c and 3a).

⁵ PH = Pallid harrier; MH = Montagu's harrier

Table 3. Results of the GLMs testing for the effect of vole abundance on the foraging parameters of pallid (PH) and Montagu's harriers (MH). Vole abundance was treated either as a class variable (comparing years of High-, Intermediate- or Low-vole abundance) or using estimated vole abundance (log-transformed) as a continuous variable (regressor).

Dependent Variable	Species ⁴	Vole abundance years (class)						Log-Vole abundance (continuous)		
		df	χ^2	P-value	LMS differences: value	means $\pm$ s.e.	P-	df	Chi ²	P
Encounter rate ¹	PH	2,226	54.46	< 0.0001	High vs. Int.	+0.244 $\pm$ 0.133	0.065	1,227	51.21	< 0.0001
					Int. vs. Low	+0.716 $\pm$ 0.145	< 0.0001			
					High vs. Low	+0.960 $\pm$ 0.137	< 0.001			
	MH	2,205	7.98	0.019	High vs. Int.	+0.378 $\pm$ 0.192	0.048	1,206	6.69	< 0.01
					Int. vs. Low	+0.122 $\pm$ 0.161	0.450			
					High vs. Low	+0.500 $\pm$ 0.171	0.004			
Strike rate ¹	PH	2,226	7.00	0.0301	High vs. Int.	-0.012 $\pm$ 0.207	0.953	1,227	5.93	0.015
					Int. vs. Low	+0.452 $\pm$ 0.200	0.029			
					High vs. Low	+0.439 $\pm$ 0.200	0.024			
	MH	2,205	3.25	0.197	High vs. Int.	-0.160 $\pm$ 0.287	0.577	1,206	1.67	0.197
					Int. vs. Low	+0.228 $\pm$ 0.274	0.401			
					High vs. Low	+0.389 $\pm$ 0.216	0.072			
Capture rate ²	PH	2,226	13.85	< 0.001	High vs. Int.	+0.325 $\pm$ 0.445	0.465	1,227	15.08	< 0.0001
					Int. vs. Low	+1.296 $\pm$ 0.493	< 0.01			
					High vs. Low	+1.622 $\pm$ 0.482	< 0.001			
	MH	2,205	1.30	0.523	High vs. Int.	-0.466 $\pm$ 0.597	0.435	1,206	0.64	0.425
					Int. vs. Low	+0.480 $\pm$ 0.433	0.268			
					High vs. Low	+0.014 $\pm$ 0.560	0.978			
Capture success ³	PH	2,85	5.70	0.058	High vs. Int.	+0.333 $\pm$ 0.449	0.459	1,86	6.82	0.009
					Int. vs. Low	+0.788 $\pm$ 0.503	0.117			
					High vs. Low	+1.121 $\pm$ 0.493	0.023			
	MH	2,79	0.13	0.939	High vs. Int.	-0.221 $\pm$ 0.633	0.762	1,80	0.03	0.865
					Inter. vs. Low	+0.048 $\pm$ 0.463	0.776			
					High vs. Low	-0.173 $\pm$ 0.607	0.916			

Table 3- continued: footnotes

¹ The dependent variable (number of encounters or strikes) was fitted to GLMs using a Poisson error distribution and a Log- link function; the duration of the observation (log-transformed) was included as an offset.

² The dependent variable (capture = 0 or 1) was fitted to GLMs using a Binomial error distribution and a Logit link function; the duration of the observation (log-transformed) was included as an offset.

³ The dependent variable (success rate = capture / strikes) was fitted to models using a binomial distribution and a Logit link function

⁴ PH = Pallid harrier; MH = Montagu's harrier

Table 4. Results of GLMs testing for differences between pallid and Montagu's harrier in foraging parameters variation according to vole abundance (as a continuous variable, Log-transformed).

Dependent Variable:	Fixed effects	df	χ^2	P-value
Encounter rate ¹	Log-Vole abundance	1,433	0.01	0.925
	Species		40.85	< 0.001
	Species $\times$ Log-Vole abundance		5.32	0.021
Strike rate ¹	Log-Vole abundance	1,433	1.02	0.312
	Species		6.29	0.012
	Species $\times$ Log-Vole abundance		0.22	0.639
Capture rate ²	Log-Vole abundance	1,433	2.86	0.098
	Species		10.19	< 0.01
	Species $\times$ Log-Vole abundance		4.10	0.043
Capture success ³	Log-Vole abundance	1,166	3.45	0.063
	Species		4.18	0.041
	Species $\times$ Log-Vole abundance		2.55	0.110
Biomass intake per hr ⁴	Log-Vole abundance	1, 6	5.23	0.062
	Species		13.23	0.011
	Species $\times$ Log-Vole abundance		2.55	0.059

¹ The dependent variable (number of encounters or strikes) was fitted to GLMs using a Poisson error distribution and a Log- link function; the duration of the observation (log-transformed) was included as an offset.

² The dependent variable (capture = 0 or 1) was fitted to GLMs using a Binomial error distribution and a Logit link function; the duration of the observation (log-transformed) was included as an offset.

³ The dependent variable (success rate = capture / strikes) was fitted to models using a binomial distribution and a Logit link function

⁴ Biomass intake rate was estimated by multiplying the average biomass of taken prey by the capture rate of each species (1 point per year; data in Figure 3c). The dependent variable was fitted to models using a normal error distribution and identity link function.

Figure legends:

Figure 1. Diet composition (% of biomass) of Montagu's harriers (above), and pallid harriers (below) in high-, intermediate- and low-vole abundance years.

Figure 2. Mean $\pm$ SE (a) encounter rate (encounters per hour of hunting time), (b) strike rate (strikes per hour of hunting time), (c) capture rate (captures per hour of hunting time) and (d) capture success (% of strikes that are successful) of Montagu's and pallid harriers, according to vole abundance year classes (high-, intermediate- and low-vole abundance years). Sample sizes are given above the error bars.

Figure 3. Mean $\pm$ SE (a) capture rate (captures per hour of hunting time), (b) capture success (% of strikes that are successful) and c) estimated biomass intake rate (gr per hour of hunting time) of Montagu's and pallid harriers, according to vole abundance as a continuous variable (1 data point per year).

Fig. 1

Fig. 2

Fig. 3