

# The impact of acoustic signalling on offspring performance varies among three biparentally caring species

Taina Conrad <sup>a,\*</sup> , Magdalena M. Mair <sup>b</sup> , Julia Müller <sup>a</sup>, Peter Richter <sup>a</sup>,  
Sophie Schödel <sup>a</sup>, Ann-Kathrin Wezstein <sup>a</sup>, Sandra Steiger <sup>a</sup> 

<sup>a</sup> Department of Evolutionary Animal Ecology, University of Bayreuth, Bayreuth, Germany

<sup>b</sup> Statistical Ecotoxicology, University of Bayreuth, Bayreuth, Germany

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Communication plays a fundamental role in the evolution of any form of cooperative behaviour, such as parental care. However, it can be challenging to understand the specific role of certain signals and how they might have evolved into complex communication systems. To investigate what effect a lack of acoustic communication can have on brood care and offspring performance, we silenced parents of biparentally caring burying beetles with a noninvasive method and studied the effect on clutch and offspring performance. Moreover, by analysing three species with varying degrees of offspring dependency on parental care, we aimed to investigate how differing acoustic communication is related to the level of their dependency and if those two align in some way. We used *Nicrophorus pustulatus*, a nondependent species, *Nicrophorus orbicollis*, a highly dependent species and *Nicrophorus vespilloides*, an intermediately dependent species. We found strong effects of silencing parents on offspring performance in all three species. The lack of stridulations impacted offspring weight across all three species. However, our results point towards a difference between species in which development stage communication had the most substantial impact. Looking at larval weight at dispersal, the effects seem to be in line with the larval dependency in the way we would have expected, with *N. orbicollis* being the most strongly affected, *N. vespilloides* being also affected and *N. pustulatus* not being affected. However, looking more closely, we found various differences at other time points and also that larval survival was strongly affected in *N. pustulatus*. Few studies have looked at the exact function of acoustic signals during brood care with most of them focusing on what type of different signals are emitted rather than what effect they have. Our study is one of the first to start disentangling the interplay of communication and offspring performance.

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Communication is a fundamental part of animal behaviour and a prerequisite to all animal interactions. Communication has been shown to play a vital role in the evolution of any form of cooperative behaviour (Bradbury & Vehrenkamp, 2011). Family life (basic unit of parents and offspring exhibiting parental care; for a detailed definition see Kramer & Meunier, 2018), which is thought to be the first step in the ‘major evolutionary transition’ from solitary to social life and eusociality (Kramer & Meunier, 2018; Szathmáry & Maynard Smith, 1995), includes many cooperative behaviours, such as biparental care or sibling cooperation. Studying family life can therefore be instrumental in understanding the evolution of complex animal societies and the emergence of social life in nature (Kramer & Meunier, 2018). In family life communication is key:

animals must recognize a partner and be able to evaluate their reliability and capabilities. They also need to coordinate their actual interactions with their partner, as well as their offspring, to optimize brood care and, through that, offspring performance (Bradbury & Vehrenkamp, 2011). All of these are accomplished by some form of communication, be it acoustic, vibrational, chemical or visual.

Although communication is a key component in family life it can be difficult to understand the specific role certain signals play. Parental care as a part of family life has been extensively studied in birds (Ar & Yom-Tov, 1978; Cockburn, 2006; Royle et al., 2012; Williams, 2018) but, although birds are known for their complex vocal repertoires (Marler & Slabbekoorn, 2004), very few studies have looked into the role of vocal communication during parental care in either birds or other species (Gorissen & Eens, 2005; Halkin, 1997). Additionally, almost nothing is known of the effect of acoustic communication per se, rather than the effect of signal

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [taina.conrad@uni-bayreuth.de](mailto:taina.conrad@uni-bayreuth.de) (T. Conrad).

variation, as it is usually difficult to completely shut down an entire communication channel.

In insects, on the other hand, numerous studies on communication in family life exist but here most of them focus on chemical communication (Nehring & Steiger, 2018; Stöckl & Steiger, 2017). However, airborne sound, as well as substrate-borne vibrations, are used in many insects and have been found to play an important part in their complex communication systems (Bailey, 2003; Bennet-Clark, 1971; Claridge, 1985; Forrest et al., 2006; Gillham, 1992; Virant-Doberlet et al., 2023).

Burying beetles (genus *Nicrophorus*) bury small vertebrates as a food source for their larvae and then exhibit elaborate biparental care in the rearing of these larvae, which is rare among insects. Consequently burying beetles have emerged as model organisms in evolutionary and behavioural ecology for the study of parental care (Creighton et al., 2015; Engel et al., 2016; Head et al., 2014; Jarrett et al., 2017; Paquet & Smiseth, 2017; Parker et al., 2015; Rozen et al., 2008; Steiger, 2015; Trumbo, 2017; Vogel et al., 2017). Given their rather complex family life, which includes, among other behaviours, feeding of their young, defending the carcass and carcass manipulation, and the interactions between partners as well as with their offspring (Eggert & Müller, 1997; Pukowski, 1933), it is not surprising that sophisticated recognition and communication processes have evolved using chemical as well as acoustic signals, with the former already having been intensively studied (Steiger, 2015).

Starting from mating and throughout their parental care, both parents produce audible sound using their stridulatory organs. All *Nicrophorus* species possess stridulatory organs in which a plectrum (located on the ventral side of the elytra) is moved across the pars stridens (located on the fourth and fifth abdominal segment) to produce airborne sound and substrate vibrations (Darwin, 1871; Fabre, 1899; Hall et al., 2013; Niemitz, 1972; Pukowski, 1933). The innovation of stridulatory files in Nicrophorinae has been suggested to be critically linked to the origin of parental care (Cai et al., 2014), but research on this, and on the specific function of the stridulations during different behaviours, remains rare. Hall et al. (2013) were the first to investigate defensive signals and the morphology of the stridulatory organs of eight North American *Nicrophorus* species in a comparative study and have found significant differences in the airborne signals between species. However, whether these differences are biologically relevant remains unclear. Marking by elytral clipping was shown to significantly reduce brood size in *Nicrophorus americanus*, probably because stridulatory sound was significantly altered (Hall et al., 2015). There is also evidence that larvae can use the sound produced by the parents to find the carcass (Niemitz, 1972; Niemitz & Krampe, 1972). This highlights the importance of these stridulatory signals but there are also contrasting studies like the one by Schrader and Galanek (2022), which found no effect of the stridulations on the success of parental care. So, overall, previous studies have found mixed results, which could have several reasons, one being that they examined different species of *Nicrophorus* which are known to differ in various important ways (Capodeanu-Nägler, 2018; Capodeanu-Nägler et al., 2017; Otronen, 1988; Trumbo, 1992, 1994; Wilson et al., 1984). Some studies also used invasive techniques, such as elytral clipping, which also meant they lacked a true control group (Hall et al., 2015; Jarrett et al., 2017). Finally, all studies looked at only a few reproductive parameters and did not account for between-individual variation in brood size, which, because of the strong dependency of larval mass on brood size, leads to high variation in larval growth among broods (Bartlett, 1988; Eggert & Müller, 1997; Eggert et al., 1998; Scott & Traniello, 1990; Steiger, 2013; Steiger, Richter et al., 2007). Consequently, we still do not really understand the role of stridulatory signals in these species,

nor do we know all the contexts in which these signals are produced.

Although all *Nicrophorus* species exhibit parental care, larval dependency is very varied and ranges from facultative to obligatory parental care, depending on the species (Capodeanu-Nägler et al., 2016; Trumbo, 1992). Capodeanu-Nägler et al. (2016) were able to show that the larvae exhibit a differential dependency on parental feeding posthatching but not on prehatching care. In *Nicrophorus orbicollis*, which is highly dependent for example, larvae do not survive in the absence of parental feeding. Further studies on other *Nicrophorus* species show that there is a continuous spectrum in larval dependency across *Nicrophorus* species (S. Steiger, personal observation). This pattern of differences in offspring dependency in closely related species provides us with an excellent opportunity to investigate patterns of dependency on communication signals. Presumably those species in which offspring rely completely on parental care might have also evolved to be more dependent on acoustic communication to account for the higher need for interactions (Freeberg et al., 2012). Consequently, a disruption of their acoustic communication should have larger consequences than in species that are less dependent on parental care.

Here we provide an in-depth study of the effect of acoustic communication on successful brood care, using three species with varying degrees of dependency: (1) *Nicrophorus pustulatus* from Illinois, U.S.A. as an example of an independent species, (2) *Nicrophorus orbicollis* from Wisconsin, U.S.A. as an example of a highly dependent species and (3) *Nicrophorus vespilloides* from Bavaria, Germany as an intermediately dependent species, mirroring the selection of species in previous research (Capodeanu-Nägler et al., 2017; Prang et al., 2022). We also used a noninvasive technique, including a true control to silence the parents (their ability to stridulate was inhibited). Since we know that *Nicrophorus* stridulates during pre- as well as posthatching care, we included clutch and egg size in our measurements, as well as numerous measurements for offspring performance, such as average larval weight and larval survival at different time points, all the while controlling for variation in brood size by supplying parents with a set number of larvae. With this approach we aimed at gaining insights into the role of communication during brood care. We hypothesized that acoustic communication would be particularly important in species that show increased larval dependency.

## METHODS

### *Rearing and Maintenance of Beetles*

Experimental beetles were descendants of beetles collected from carrion-baited pitfall traps. We caught *N. vespilloides* beetles in a forest near Bayreuth, Germany (49°55'18.192"N, 11°34'19.9488"E), *N. orbicollis* near Big Falls, WI, U.S.A. (44°36'59.0"N, 89°00'58.0"W) and *N. pustulatus* near Lexington, IL, U.S.A. (40°39'57"N, 88°53'49"W). The ranges of the North American *N. pustulatus* and *N. orbicollis* overlap but *N. vespilloides* is not found together with the other two. All beetles were maintained in temperature-controlled chambers at 20 °C on a 16:8 h light:dark cycle. Before the experiments, groups of up to five adults of the same sex and family of each species were kept in small plastic containers (10 × 10 cm and 6 cm high) filled with moist coconut coir. To ensure optimal outbreeding we used the program Kinshipper ([www.kinshipper.com](http://www.kinshipper.com), Bayreuth, Germany) to calculate optimal mating pairs. Kinshipper calculates a value for all possible pairings, which consists of the kinship coefficient of the potential pair itself and the kinship coefficients to all previously added pairs. The heuristic algorithm then successively adds the pairs with the lowest value, thereby minimizing the overall expected relatedness

of all chosen individuals. Before the experiments beetles were fed whole fly larvae (*Lucilia sericata*) ad libitum twice a week. At the time of our experiments, beetles were virgin and between 30 and 40 days of age.

### Mating Pairs and Silencing of Beetles

Mating pairs were chosen according to the program Kinshipper, photographed with a stereo microscope equipped with a camera (Stemi 305, Zeiss, Berlin, Germany) for later size analysis, and then assigned randomly to the silenced (both parents without the ability to stridulate) or control group. Beetles were then anaesthetized using CO<sub>2</sub> and subsequently silenced by gluing a small (approximately 4 mm) piece of parafilm (Bernis Inc., Neenah, WI, U.S.A.) onto the stridulatory organ using super glue (Super Glue Ultra Gel, Pattex, Henkel AG & Co KGaA, Düsseldorf, Germany). The control beetles were treated the same way but the parafilm was placed onto the lower part of the abdomen where it would not interfere with the stridulatory organ. After the attachment of the parafilm, beetles were kept anaesthetized for approximately 10 min to allow the glue to fully dry. Successful silencing was checked visually and audibly during handling throughout the experiment. Additionally, microphone recordings from different studies have proven this method to be reliable as no silenced pairs ever showed stridulations (Conrad, n.d.).

### Experimental Design

To study the effect of a lack of acoustic communication on offspring performance we compared silenced beetles (both parents without the ability to stridulate) with a control group. Reproduction was induced by providing each mating pair with a 20 g ( $\pm 2.5$  g) thawed mouse carcass (Frostfutter.de—B.A.F Group GmbH, Bayern, Germany). For *N. vespilloides*, mice were provided in light and beetles moved to the dark 5 h after the carcass was introduced. In the nocturnal species, *N. pustulatus* and *N. orbicollis*, mice were provided, and beetles immediately moved into the dark.

After the egg-laying period, but before larvae hatched (see Capodeanu-Nägler et al., 2016), parents and the carcass were transferred to new plastic containers filled with coconut coir. The eggs were left to hatch in the old container and checked every 2 h for the presence of newly hatched larvae. Larvae were pooled from each group. We weighed the larvae when they hatched (0 h) and provided each mating pair of beetles with a brood of 10 newly hatched larvae of mixed parentage (within either treatment group of silenced or control beetles) to control for variation among families and individual differences in behaviour (Rauter & Moore, 1999). This set-up enabled us to control brood size and to measure larval growth in more detail than would be possible with natural broods. As females exhibit temporally based kin discrimination in which they kill any larvae arriving on the carcass before their own eggs would have hatched but accept larvae that arrive after their own eggs have begun to hatch (Müller and Eggert 1990), we provided mating pairs with larvae only after their own larvae had begun hatching. We established broods to attain a minimum sample size of 15 for each group within each species in two replicates of the experiment (final sample sizes:  $N = 20$  silenced and  $N = 18$  control for *N. orbicollis*,  $N = 21$  silenced and  $N = 20$  control for *N. pustulatus*,  $N = 15$  silenced and  $N = 19$  control for *N. vespilloides*). As larval begging and parental feeding are most pronounced in the first 48 h (Capodeanu-Nägler, 2018; Smiseth et al., 2003), larvae were weighed again after 48 h and at dispersal. All newly eclosed adults were counted and their pronotum width documented with a stereo microscope equipped with a

camera (Stemi 305, Zeiss, Berlin, Germany). Pronotum size was measured using ImageJ (NIH, Bethesda, MD, U.S.A.).

### Examining Clutch and Egg Size

To test whether the number of eggs or egg size differs between silenced and control beetles, we ran an additional experiment with the same treatment groups as described above. Here we removed the eggs after laying, counted them for each mating pair and then measured the length (i.e. longest axis) and width (i.e. widest distance perpendicular to the length axis) of 10 randomly chosen eggs from each mating pair using ImageJ (NIH, Bethesda) and pictures taken with a camera attached to a stereo microscope (Stemi 305, Zeiss, Berlin, Germany).

### Statistics

For all analysed response variables, we fitted fixed-effects models with treatment (either silenced or control), size of male parent, size of female parent, carcass weight and experiment (either first or second experimental repetition) as fixed effects and an interaction term for male \* female parent size:

$$\text{response} = \text{treatment} + \text{size male parent} * \text{size female parent} \\ + \text{carcass weight} + \text{experiment}$$

Linear models were fitted to continuous response variables (average egg length, average egg width, hatching time, average larval weight right after hatching, average larval weight 48 h after hatching, average weight at dispersal, average adult offspring size). Generalized linear models (GLMs) with Poisson distributed error structure and log link were fitted to egg counts. GLMs with binomial error structure and logit link were fitted to  $k$  out of  $N$  data (number of surviving larvae after 48 h, number of offspring surviving to dispersion, number of offspring surviving to adulthood).

Residuals of linear models were checked visually based on standard residual plots and by plotting residuals against predictors. Residuals of GLMs were checked using DHARMA, version 0.4.6 (Hartig, 2017). Additional dispersion parameters were fitted to GLMs, where necessary. In cases of excess numbers of zeros in  $k$  out of  $N$  responses (*N. pustulatus*, number of surviving offspring at all three time points), analysis was split into two steps: first, a GLM with binomial error structure and logit link was fitted to model the presence/absence of surviving offspring; second, a GLM with Poisson distribution and log link was fitted to offspring numbers including only samples with surviving offspring. The contributions of different predictors to the variance in the data were tested via type II ANOVAs (linear models) and likelihood ratio tests (GLMs) using the Anova() function, car package (Fox & Weisberg, 2019). Effect sizes were calculated using the emmeans package (Lenth, 2023) and are reported as mean differences (control – silenced) for continuous responses, ratios for count data (silenced/control) and odds ratios (odds silenced/odds control) for binary outcomes. For all effect sizes, 95% confidence intervals (CI) are provided. All analyses were done in R version 4.3.1 (R Foundation for Statistical Computing, Vienna, Austria, <https://www.r-project.org/>). All graphs were produced using Sigma Plot 14.0 (Systat Software, Chicago, IL, U.S.A.).

### Ethical Note

All methods used in this study were kept as noninvasive as possible and no animals were permanently harmed during the experiments. The parafilm falls off after a couple of weeks due to

grooming, leaving the animals as before. There are no ethical guidelines applicable for the study of invertebrates in Germany but we followed the ASAB/ABS ethical guidelines.

**RESULTS**

*Clutch Size and Egg Size*

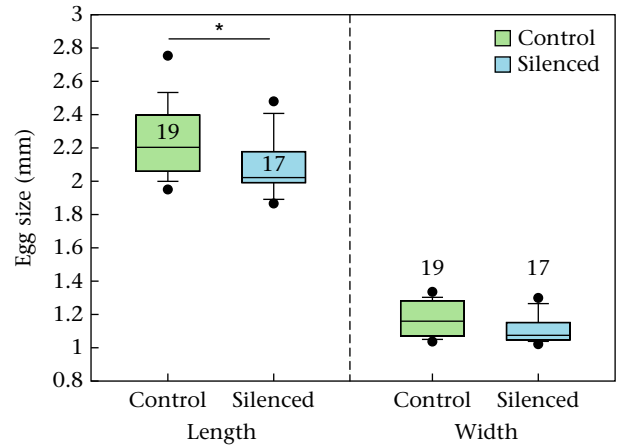
Silenced parents on average had more than 30% fewer eggs than unsilenced control parents in *N. vespilloides* (silenced/control ratio (CI): 0.69 (0.53,0.90);  $\chi^2 = 7.50, P = 0.006$ ; Fig. 1). In contrast, this reduction in egg numbers was not observed in *N. orbicollis* (silenced/control ratio (CI): 1.13 (0.90, 1.43);  $\chi^2_1 = 1.14, P = 0.286$ ) or *N. pustulatus* (silenced/control ratio (CI): 1.1 (0.93, 1.29);  $\chi^2_1 = 1.17, P = 0.279$ ).

Eggs of silenced parents in *N. vespilloides* were on average shorter (control-silenced (CI): 0.09 mm (0.02, 0.16);  $F_1 = 6.22, P = 0.019$ ), but not narrower (control-silenced (CI): 0.03 mm (-0.006, 0.06);  $F_1 = 2.96, P = 0.096$ ; Fig. 2) than those of control parents. There was no effect of treatment on egg length or width in either *N. orbicollis* (length control-silenced (CI): -0.01 mm (-0.09, 0.07);  $F_1 = 0.08, P = 0.781$ ; width control-silenced (CI): -0.02 mm (-0.04, 0.005);  $F_1 = 0.03, P = 0.873$ ) or *N. pustulatus* (length control-silenced (CI): -0.01 mm (-0.06, 0.04);  $F_1 = 0.16, P = 0.691$ ; width control-silenced (CI): 0.0004 mm (-0.02, 0.02);  $F_1 = 0.002, P = 0.964$ ).

*Offspring Performance*

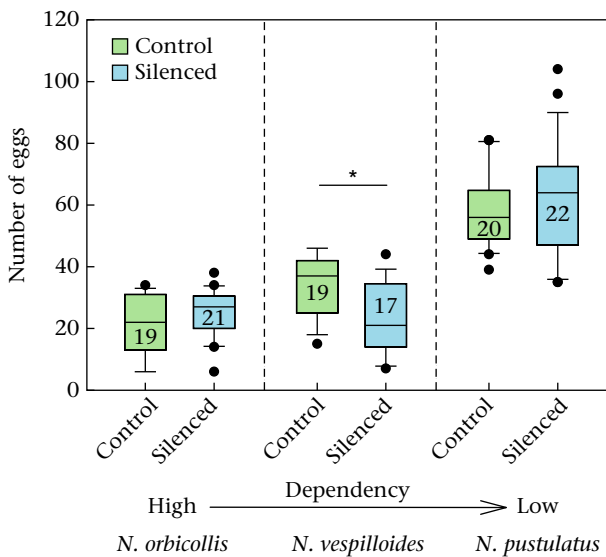
We found no difference in the hatching time of larvae from silenced versus control parents in any of the three species (*N. orbicollis* control-silenced (CI): -0.82 h (-11.2, 9.54),  $F_1 = 0.026$ ; *N. vespilloides* control-silenced (CI): -0.66 h (-7.40, 6.07),  $F_1 = 0.04$ ; *N. pustulatus* control-silenced (CI): 2.57 h (-1.05, 6.19);  $F_1 = 2.09$ ; all  $P > 0.1$ ; Fig. A1).

In *N. orbicollis*, no difference in larval weight right after hatching was observed between silenced and control parents (control-silenced (CI): -0.12 mg (-0.31, 0.08);  $F_1 = 1.47, P = 0.235$ ; Fig. 3).

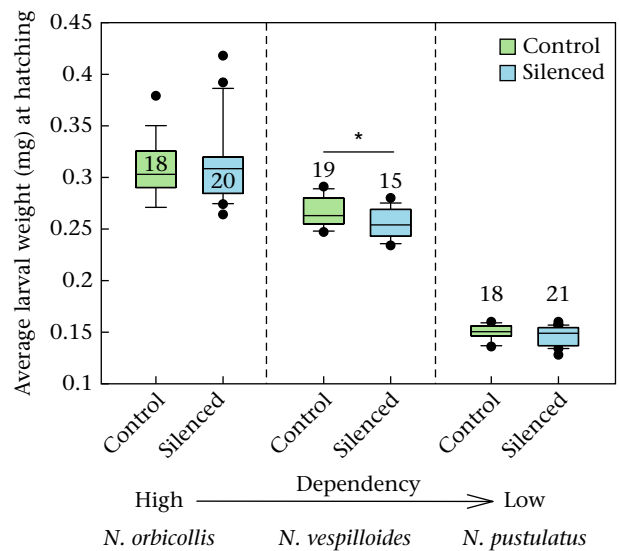


**Figure 2.** Comparison of egg length and egg width between silenced and control parents of *N. vespilloides*. The numbers within the boxes represent the number of mating pairs per group (N). The box plots show the median and 25th and 75th percentiles; the whiskers indicate the values within 1.5 times the interquartile range and the circles are outliers. \* $P < 0.05$  (GLM).

Larval weight of *N. orbicollis* after 48 h and larval weight at dispersal was lower in groups with silenced parents than in those with control parents (larval weight after 48 h, control-silenced (CI): 7.95 mg (1.13, 14.8);  $F_1 = 5.67, P = 0.024$ ; weight at dispersal, control-silenced (CI): 40.20 mg (0.49, 79.90);  $F_1 = 4.29, P = 0.047$ ; Figs 4, 5). This weight difference was also apparent in adult offspring with pronotum width being smaller in offspring of silenced parents than in those with control parents (control-silenced (CI): 0.03 mm (0.006, 0.06);  $F_1 = 6.18, P = 0.019$ ). In *N. vespilloides*, the weight of larvae right after hatching from silenced parents was lower than in control groups, but the difference was very small (control-silenced (CI): 0.12 mg (0.02, 0.21);  $F_1 = 5.80, P = 0.023$ ; Fig. 3). After 48 h and at dispersal, the difference was no longer significant (larval weight after 48 h, control-silenced (CI): 6.88 mg (-0.42, 14.2);  $F_1 = 3.74, P = 0.064$ ; at dispersal, control-silenced (CI): 13.3 mg (-1.26, 27.8);  $F_1 = 3.51$ ,

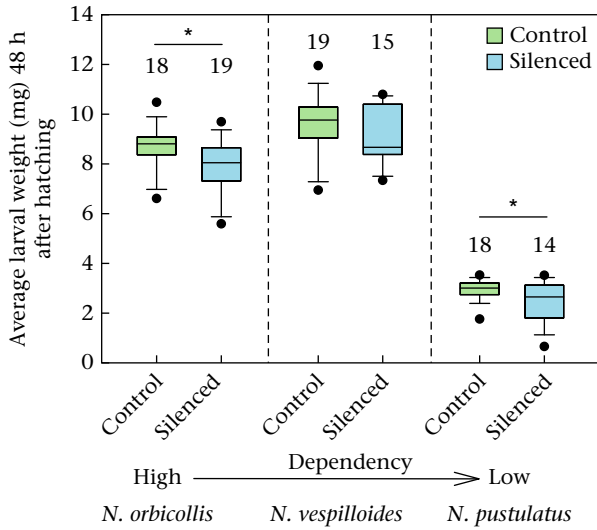


**Figure 1.** Number of eggs laid by silenced or control parents of the three species (*N. orbicollis*, *N. vespilloides* and *N. pustulatus*). The numbers within the boxes represent the number of mating pairs per group (N). The box plots show the median and 25th and 75th percentiles; the whiskers indicate the values within 1.5 times the interquartile range and the circles are outliers. \* $P < 0.05$  (GLM).

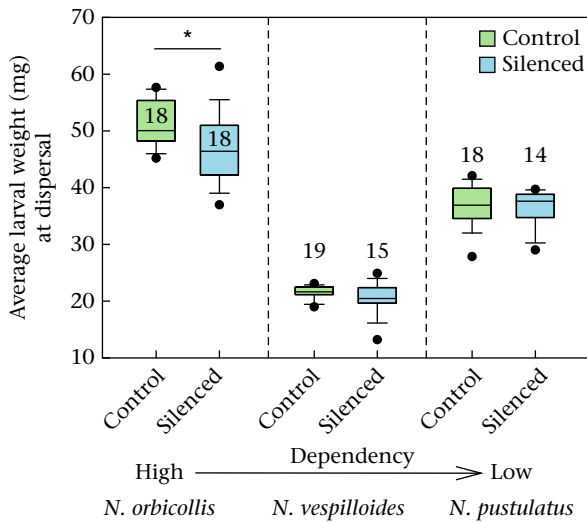


**Figure 3.** Comparison of larval weight at hatching of silenced or control parents of the three species (*N. orbicollis*, *N. vespilloides* and *N. pustulatus*). The numbers within the boxes represent the number of mating pairs per group (N). The box plots show the median and 25th and 75th percentiles; the whiskers indicate the values within 1.5 times the interquartile range and the circles are outliers. \* $P < 0.05$  (GLM).





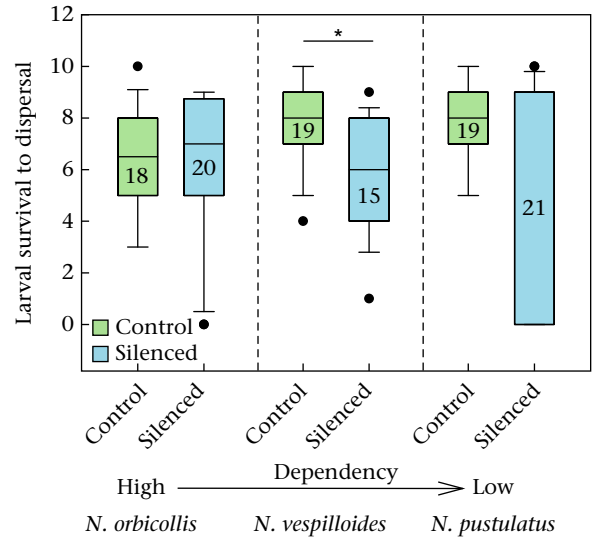
**Figure 4.** Comparison of larval weight 48 h after hatching of silenced or control parents of the three species (*N. orbicollis*, *N. vespilloides* and *N. pustulatus*). The numbers within the boxes represent the number of mating pairs per group (*N*). The box plots show the median and 25th and 75th percentiles; the whiskers indicate the values within 1.5 times the interquartile range and the circles are outliers. \**P* < 0.05 (GLM).



**Figure 5.** Comparison of larval weight at dispersal of silenced or control parents of the three species (*N. orbicollis*, *N. vespilloides* and *N. pustulatus*). The numbers within the boxes represent the number of mating pairs per group (*N*). The box plots show the median and 25th and 75th percentiles; the whiskers indicate the values within 1.5 times the interquartile range and the circles are outliers. \**P* < 0.05 (GLM).

*P* = 0.072; pronotum width of adult offspring, control-silenced (CI): 0.08 mm (−0.03, 0.20); *F*<sub>1</sub> = 2.30, *P* = 0.142; **Figs 4, 5**). In *N. pustulatus*, larval weight after hatching did not differ between treatments (control-silenced (CI): 0.008 mg (−0.05, 0.06); *F*<sub>1</sub> = 0.10, *P* = 0.754; **Fig. 3**). After 48 h, larval weight was lower in silenced than in control group parents (control-silenced (CI): 5.32 mg (0.05, 10.6); *F*<sub>1</sub> = 4.33, *P* = 0.048; **Fig. 4**), but differences disappeared again at dispersal (control-silenced (CI): −5.86 mg (−33.6, 21.9); *F*<sub>1</sub> = 0.19, *P* = 0.667; **Fig. 5**) and in adult offspring (pronotum width, control-silenced (CI): −0.10 mm (−0.27, 0.07); *F*<sub>1</sub> = 1.54, *P* = 0.226).

Offspring survival did not differ between silenced and control parents in *N. orbicollis* (survival after 48 h, silenced/control odds



**Figure 6.** Comparison of larval survival at dispersal of silenced or control parents of the three species (*N. orbicollis*, *N. vespilloides* and *N. pustulatus*). The numbers within the boxes represent the number of mating pairs per group (*N*). The medians, quartiles, and outliers (circles) are shown. Significant differences are marked by stars (GLM, \**P* < 0.05).

ratio (CI): 1.01 (0.72, 1.4);  $\chi^2_1 = 0.001$ , *P* = 0.975; survival to dispersal, silenced/control odds ratio (CI): 0.96 (0.69, 1.36);  $\chi^2_1 = 0.04$ , *P* = 0.835; survival to adulthood, silenced/control odds ratio (CI): 0.87 (0.66, 1.16);  $\chi^2_1 = 0.85$ , *P* = 0.356; **Fig. 6**). In *N. vespilloides*, offspring survival was reduced in offspring of silenced parents as compared to control parents (48 h, silenced/control odds ratio (CI): 0.77 (0.68, 0.89);  $\chi^2_1 = 13.70$ , *P* = 0.0002; dispersal, silenced/control odds ratio (CI): 0.70 (0.57, 0.86);  $\chi^2_1 = 11.53$ , *P* = 0.0007; adulthood, silenced/control odds ratio (CI): 0.58 (0.45, 0.76);  $\chi^2_1 = 15.71$ , *P* = 7.4 e-05). In seven of the 21 silenced *N. pustulatus* parents, none of the offspring larvae survived for 48 h, while this did not happen in any of the 18 control parents (presence – absence of surviving larvae after 48 h/at dispersal/to adulthood, silenced/control odds ratio (CI): 0.08 (0.006, 1.02);  $\chi^2_1 = 5.27$ , *P* = 0.022). Among the parents with surviving offspring, silenced parents had significantly fewer surviving offspring at dispersal (silenced/control odds ratio (CI): 1.15 (1.02, 1.29);  $\chi^2_1 = 5.46$ , *P* = 0.019), but not after 48 h (silenced/control odds ratio (CI): 1.07 (1.00, 1.15);  $\chi^2_1 = 3.83$ , *P* = 0.050) or to adulthood (silenced/control odds ratio (CI): 1.14 (0.998, 1.3);  $\chi^2_1 = 3.70$ , *P* = 0.054).

## DISCUSSION

Our results clearly show that there are effects of silencing parents on offspring performance in multiple *Nicrophorus* species. However, the details of the effects differ from species to species, with *N. vespilloides* being affected during prehatching and both *N. pustulatus* and *N. orbicollis* being affected during posthatching, but at different stages.

One surprising result was that *N. vespilloides* is the only species already affected prehatching with silenced parents laying fewer and smaller eggs, which leads to already smaller larvae at hatching. We did not expect to find an effect during prehatching that so strongly affects the offspring. Various studies show that numerous parameters affect clutch size or egg size, such as the body size of the female (Steiger, 2013), the nutritional state of the female (Steiger, Peschke et al., 2007), carcass size (Müller, 1987) or even the

female's social environment (Paquet & Smiseth, 2017; Richardson et al., 2020). Females are therefore capable of regulating the resources they allocate to their egg laying, depending on their circumstances (Sheldon, 2000). It is possible that a lack of acoustic communication from their partner signals a low-quality male in this species, which leads to the female saving resources in favour of future reproductive opportunities. Additionally, larval survival was also affected with far fewer larvae surviving until dispersal and, consequently, fewer new adults emerging. This can be explained at least in part by the poor-quality eggs from which they emerged. However, we believe this is also due to an important role of the stridulations in feeding behaviour, which might lead to feeding being impaired in the beginning and, consequently, some larvae dying within the first 48 h. Females have been observed to stridulate on top of the carcass, seemingly calling the larvae for feeding (M. Prang, personal communication, 2020; K. Steller, personal communication, 2023). If this proves to be true, feeding is probably affected by a lack of stridulations. After the initial 48 h the remaining larvae have more than enough resources to feed from and less competition, which enables them to make up for their initial disadvantage (Bartlett, 1988; Eggert & Müller, 1997; Scott & Traniello, 1990).

At first glance this result seems surprising, as it appears to contradict the results of Schrader and Galanek (2022), who found no effect of silencing the parents in *N. vespilloides*. However, Schrader and Galanek (2022) used natural brood sizes instead of our standardized ones, which probably led to far more variation that, in turn, would have obscured the differences. Additionally, it is possible that our method of using glue and parafilm is superior to elytral clipping in detecting any effects as it allowed us to have a control group that was treated in the same way, which the authors admit was lacking in their study (Schrader & Galanek, 2022). Finally, they focused on only a few reproductive parameters and, as mentioned, did not account for between-individual variation in brood size, which, because of the strong dependency of larval mass on brood size, leads to high variation in larval growth among broods (Bartlett, 1988; Eggert et al., 1998; Eggert & Müller, 1997; Scott & Traniello, 1990; Steiger, 2013; Steiger, Richter, et al., 2007).

For *N. pustulatus*, we found that larval weight at hatching was the same for larvae from control and silenced parents. After 48 h though, there was a significant difference in the weight of surviving offspring of silenced and control parents. Since the first 48 h are most important for parental feeding (Rauter & Moore, 2002; Smiseth et al., 2007; Smiseth & Moore, 2002) we believe that parental feeding is probably impaired during this time with lower weights in larvae with silenced parents. However, since *N. pustulatus* larvae are a comparatively independent species (Capodeanu-Nägler et al., 2016) they are able to make up for this disadvantage during the remaining time until dispersal, leading to the effect of the treatment vanishing. More important than these weight effects, however, is the large proportion of mating pairs that lost their brood entirely in the silenced treatment (seven of 21 with no surviving offspring). We suggest that, since larvae of this species can survive on their own, the high number of broods without any surviving larvae stem from infanticide by the parents. In *Nicrophorus*, mothers are able to identify their own larvae by timing how long after laying their eggs larvae should arrive, and any larvae arriving too early are killed (Bartlett, 1987). Since fathers do not know exactly when the eggs were laid, it is possible that females use stridulatory signals to communicate whether larvae should or should not be killed. If both parents are silenced, this communication might not be possible, and 'mishaps' could happen in which the father accidentally kills the brood. It is also possible that the female deems the brood or mating partner unsuitable and decides

to invest in future reproductive opportunities instead (Richardson & Smiseth, 2021; Sahm et al., 2022).

*Nicrophorus orbicollis* reacted similarly to *N. pustulatus* with a difference in larval weight at 48 h. However, they did not manage to make up for this difference in the remaining brood care time. They still showed a difference in larval weight at dispersal with larvae of silenced parents being significantly lighter. In consequence, adult offspring from silenced mating pairs were smaller than in control groups. As in the other species, we suggest that the parents' feeding behaviour is disrupted (Mangold et al., n.d.) and because *N. orbicollis* larvae are highly dependent on parental care (Capodeanu-Nägler et al., 2016) they cannot feed themselves sufficiently. Again, this result differs from that of Schrader and Galanek (Schrader & Galanek, 2022), who found no effect of silencing in *N. orbicollis*. Apart from the reasons mentioned earlier for *N. vespilloides*, they also only looked at total brood mass and breeding success at dispersal, which might have been insufficient to detect differences.

Overall, our manipulation revealed that the lack of acoustic communication impacted offspring weight across all three species under study. However, our results point towards a difference between species at which development stage communication plays an important role, with *N. vespilloides* being the only one of the three where the effects already influence pre-hatching care. Looking only at larval weight at dispersal one could argue that the effects on offspring performance seem to be in line with larval dependency in the way we would have expected, with *N. orbicollis* being the most strongly affected and *N. pustulatus* not being affected. However, looking closely at the results, all three species are affected at different times, and we believe more research is needed to fully understand these dynamics. Moreover, the fact that some *N. pustulatus* parents lose their entire brood is, after all, a drastic effect. An important next step would involve examining both the behaviour and the specific signals produced, assessing their complexity and quantity.

Consequently, our study is a very important first step in showing that acoustic communication is indeed vital during brood care in these species, and it will be interesting to discover what exactly is communicated and how brood care is coordinated. Only a few studies, mostly from vertebrates, have looked at the exact function of acoustic signals during brood care with most of them focusing on what type of different signals are emitted rather than what effect they have (Charrier et al., 2001; Kavelaars et al., 2019; Moss et al., 2023; Vergne et al., 2009). From insects we know, for example, that in the thorn bug, *Umberia crassicornis*, females exchange vibrational signals with their offspring when they are under attack from a predator (Hamel & Cocroft, 2019). In the subsocial shield bug *Parastrachia japonensis*, mothers use a 'provisioning call' directed towards their offspring. A new study on poison frogs (*Ranitomeya imitator*) found that evolution of their acoustic signals is likely associated with their cooperative parental behaviour (Moss et al., 2023). Another example comes from zebra finches, *Taeniopygia guttata*, where parents seem to coordinate their tasks through vocalizations (Boucaud et al., 2017). We believe task allocation, as well as parent-offspring communication, is likely to play a key role in *Nicrophorus* and further studies will reveal the interplay of communication, task allocation and larval dependency.

#### Author Contributions

**Taina Conrad:** Writing – original draft, Visualization, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Magdalena M.**

**Mair:** Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis, Data curation.  
**Julia Müller:** Investigation. **Peter Richter:** Investigation. **Sophie Schödel:** Investigation. **Ann-Kathrin Wezstein:** Investigation.  
**Sandra Steiger:** Writing – review & editing, Resources, Conceptualization.

## Data Availability

All data and code are available on github (<https://github.com/magdalenamair/Conrad-et-al-2024.git>) and Zenodo (<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11208659>).

## Declaration of Interest

The authors declare they have no conflicts of interest.

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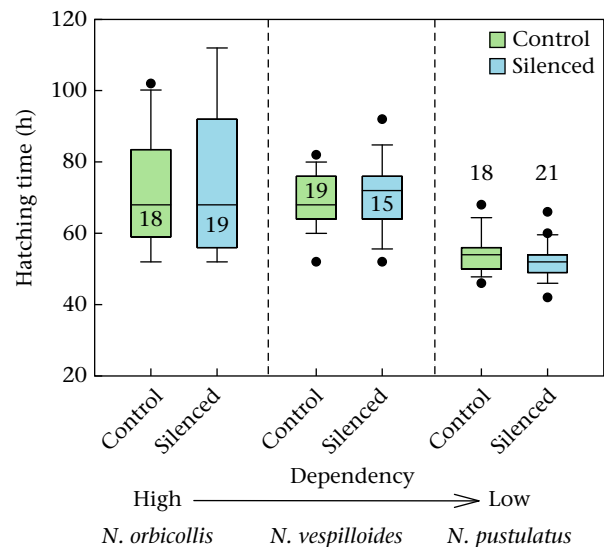
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## Appendix



**Figure A1.** Hatching time (h) of eggs laid by silenced or control parents of the three species (*N. orbicollis*, *N. vespilloides* and *N. pustulatus*). The numbers within the boxes represent the number of mating pairs per group (*N*). The box plots show the median and 25th and 75th percentiles; the whiskers indicate the values within 1.5 times the interquartile range and the circles are outliers.