
Why Male Ground Squirrels Disperse: A multilevel analysis explains why only males leave home

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Why Male Ground Squirrels Disperse

Kay E. Holekamp
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When they are about two months old, male Belding's ground squirrels (*Spermophilus beldingi*) leave the burrow where they were born, never to return. Their sisters behave quite differently, remaining near home throughout their lives. Why do juvenile males, and only males, disperse? This deceptively simple question, which has intrigued us for more than a decade (1, 2), has led us to investigate evolutionary, ecological, ontogenetic, and mechanistic explanations. Only recently have answers begun to emerge.

Dispersal, defined as a complete and permanent emigration from an individual's home range, occurs sometime in the life cycle of nearly all organisms. There are two major types: breeding dispersal, the movement of adults between reproductive episodes, and natal dispersal, the emigration of young from their birthplace (3, 4). Natal dispersal occurs in virtually all birds and mammals prior to first reproduction. In most mammals, young males emigrate while their sisters remain near home (the females are said to be philopatric); in birds, the reverse occurs (4–6). Although naturalists have long been aware of these patterns, attempts to understand their causal bases have been hindered by both practical and theoretical problems. The former stem from difficulties of monitoring dispersal by free-living animals, and of quantifying the advantages and disadvantages of emigration (6). The latter stem from failure to distinguish the two types of dispersal, and from confusion among immediate and long-term explanations for each type.

We begin with a discussion of the latter point and

develop the idea that natal dispersal, like other behaviors and phenotypic attributes, can be understood from multiple, complementary perspectives. Separating these levels of analysis helps organize hypotheses about cause and effect in biology (7). In the case of natal dispersal, this approach can minimize misunderstandings in terminology and allow for clearer focus on the issues of interest.

Questions of the general form "Why does animal A exhibit trait X?" have always caused confusion among biologists. And even today, the literature is full of examples. The nature-nurture controversy, which arose over the question of whether behaviors are innate or acquired through experience, is a classic case (8). After two decades of spirited but inconclusive argument in the nature-nurture debate, it became apparent to

Mayr (9) and Tinbergen (10) that a lack of consensus was caused by the failure to realize that such questions could be analyzed from multiple perspectives.

In 1961, Mayr proposed that causal explanations in biology be grouped into proximate and ultimate categories. Proximate factors operate in the day-to-day lives of individuals, whereas ultimate factors encompass births and deaths of many generations or even entire taxa. Pursuing this theme in 1963, Tinbergen further subdivided each of Mayr's categories. He noted that complete proximate explanations of any behavior involve elucidating both its ontogeny in individuals and its underlying physiological mechanisms. Ultimate explanations require understanding both the evolutionary origins of the behavior and the behavior's effects on reproduction. The former involves inferring the phylogenetic history of the behavior, and the latter requires comparing the fitness consequences of present-day behavioral variants.

There are two key implications of the Mayr-Tinbergen framework. First, competition among alternative hypotheses occurs within and not between the four analytical levels. Second, at least four "correct" answers to any question about causality are possible, because explanations at one level of analysis complement rather than supersede those at another. Deciding which explanations are most interesting or satisfying is largely a matter of training and taste; debating the issue is usually fruitless (7).

With the Mayr-Tinbergen framework in mind, let us turn to the question of natal dispersal in ground squir-

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Figure 1. A female Belding's ground squirrel (*Spermophilus beldingi*) sits with two of her pups in the central Sierra Nevada of California. The pups are about four weeks old, and have recently emerged above ground. At about six or seven weeks of age, male ground squirrels begin to disperse; young females always remain

near home. The causes of male dispersal in ground squirrels and many other mammals are complex, but can be explained by using a multilevel analytical approach in which four categories of causal factors are considered separately. (Photo by Cynthia Kagarise Sherman.)

rels. Following analyses of why natal dispersal occurs from each of the four analytical perspectives, we attempt an integration and a synthesis. Our studies reaffirm the usefulness of levels of analysis in determining biological causality.

From 1974 through 1985 we studied three populations of *S. beldingi* near Yosemite National Park in the Sierra Nevada of California (Figs. 1 and 2). In each population, the animals were above ground for only four or five months during the spring and summer; during the rest of the year they hibernated (1, 2). Females bore a single litter of five to seven young per season, and reared them without assistance from males. Most females began to breed as one-year-olds, but males did not mate until they were at least two. Females lived about twice as long as males, both on average (four versus two years) and at the maximum (thirteen versus seven years) (11).

During each field season ground squirrels were trapped alive, weighed, and examined every two to three weeks. About 5,300 different ground squirrels were handled. The animals were marked individually and observed unobtrusively through binoculars for nearly 6,000 hours. Natal dispersal behavior was measured by a combination of direct observations, livetrapping, radio telemetry, and identification of animals killed on nearby roads (12). The day on which each emigrant was last seen

within its mother's home range was defined as its date of dispersal. Only those juveniles that were actually seen after leaving their birthplace were classified as dispersers.

Observations of marked pups revealed that natal dispersal was a gradual process, visually resembling the fissioning of an amoeba (see Fig. 3). Young first emerged from their natal burrow and ceased nursing when they were about four weeks old. Two or three weeks later some youngsters began making daily excursions away from, and evening returns to, the natal burrow. Eventually these young stopped returning, restricting their activities entirely to the new home range; by definition, dispersal had occurred.

As shown in Figure 4, natal dispersal is clearly a sexually dimorphic behavior. In our studies, every one of over 300 surviving males dispersed by the end of its second summer; a large majority (92%) dispersed before their first hibernation, by the age of about 16 weeks. In contrast, only 5% of over 250 females recaptured as two-year-olds had dispersed from their mother's home range. The universality of natal dispersal by males suggested no plasticity in its occurrence; however, there was variation among individuals in the age at which dispersal occurred.

During the summer following their birth, males that



Figure 2. *S. beldingi* in the central Sierra Nevada are found above ground only four or five months of the year, during the spring and summer; they hibernate during the rest of the year. The group above is emerging from an underground burrow. Female adults bear litters of five to seven young each year and rear them in underground burrows without assistance from males. (Photo by George D. Lepp)

had dispersed as juveniles often moved again, always farther from their birthplace (Fig. 4). Yearling males were last found before hibernation an average of 170 m from their natal burrow, whereas yearling females moved on average only 25 m from home in the same time period. As two-year-olds, males mated at locations that were on average ten times farther from their natal burrows than the mating locations of females (13).

By the time they were two years old, male *S. beldingi* had attained adult body size. In the early spring they collected on low ridges beneath which females typically hibernated. As snow melted and females emerged, the males established small mating territories. Only the most physically dominant males—especially the old, heavy ones—retained territories throughout the three-week mating period. Although dominant males usually copulated with multiple females, the majority of males rarely mated. After mating, the most polygynous males again dispersed. They typically settled far from the places where they had mated; indeed, their new home ranges usually did not include their mating territories. Less successful males tended not to move, and they attempted to mate the following season in the same area where they were previously unsuccessful.

Females were all quite sedentary. After mating on a ridge top close to her hibernation burrow, each female dug a new nest burrow or refurbished an old one—sometimes her own natal burrow. There she reared her pups. As a result of philopatry, females spent their lives surrounded by and interacting with female relatives. Close kin cooperated to maintain and defend nesting territories and to warn each other when predators approached (13, 14). Natal philopatry has facilitated similar nepotism, or favoring of kin, among females in many other species of ground-dwelling sciurid rodents (15).

Physiological mechanisms

We began our analysis of natal dispersal in *S. beldingi* by considering physiological mechanisms. Of the two broad categories of such mechanisms, neuronal and hormonal, we were most interested in the latter. Gonadal steroids can influence the development of a specific behavior in two general ways: through organizational effects, which are the result of hormone action, in utero or immediately postpartum, on tissues destined to control the behavior, and through activational effects, which result from the direct actions of hormones on target tissues at the time the behavior is expressed (16). We suspected that gonadal steroids might mediate natal dispersal, and so we tested for organizational versus activational effects of androgens.

Under the activational hypothesis, levels of circulating androgens should be elevated in juvenile males at the time of natal dispersal. Conversely, in the absence of androgens, males should not disperse. To test this, we studied male pups born and reared in the laboratory. Blood samples were drawn every few weeks for four months (17). We also conducted a field experiment: soon after weaning but prior to natal dispersal, a number of juvenile males and females were gonadectomized; sham operations were performed on a smaller sample of each sex. After surgery, these juveniles were released into their natal burrow and subsequent dispersal behavior was monitored.

Castration was found to have little effect on natal dispersal. Although castrated males and those subjected to sham operations dispersed a few days later than untreated males, probably because of the trauma of surgery, castration did not significantly reduce the fraction that dispersed. Likewise, removal of ovaries did not increase the likelihood of dispersal by juvenile females. Finally, radioimmunoassays revealed only traces of testosterone in the blood of lab-reared juvenile males throughout their first four months, and no increase in circulating androgens was detected at the age when natal dispersal typically occurs (7–10 weeks).

Sex and body mass together were the most consistent predictors of dispersal status

Under the organizational hypothesis, exposing perinatal or neonatal females to androgens should masculinize subsequent behavior, including natal dispersal. We tested this idea by capturing pregnant females and housing them at a field camp until they gave birth. Soon after parturition, female pups were injected with a small amount of testosterone propionate dissolved in oil; a control group was given oil only. After treatment, the pups and their mothers were taken back to the field, where the mothers found suitable empty burrows and successfully reared their young.

Twelve of the female pups treated with androgens were located when they were at least 60 days old, and

75% of them had dispersed (17). The distances they had traveled and their dispersal paths closely resembled those of juvenile males. By comparison, only 8% of untreated juvenile females in the same study area had dispersed by day 60, whereas 60% of juvenile males from the transplanted litters and 74% of males from unmanipulated litters born in the same area had dispersed by day 60.

It is possible that transplantation and not treatment with androgens caused the juvenile females in our experiment to disperse; unfortunately, we were unable to test this because none of the transplanted females treated with only oil were recovered. However, transplantation did not seem to affect the behavior of the juvenile males in the experiment. Also, other behavioral evidence linked natal dispersal in the females with androgen treatment. For example, treated juvenile females did not differ significantly from untreated juvenile males of the same age, but did differ from control females with respect to several indices of locomotor and social behavior. Androgen treatment masculinized much of the behavior of juvenile females, apparently including the propensity to disperse.

These results, which suggest an organizational role for steroids in sexual differentiation of *S. beldingi*, are consistent with those from studies of many other vertebrates (18). In mammals, females are homogametic (XX) and males are heterogametic (XY), whereas in birds the situation is reversed. In each taxon, natal dispersal occurs primarily in the heterogametic sex. In both birds and mammals, sex-typical adult behavior in the homogametic sex can often be reversed by perinatal exposure to the gonadal steroid normally secreted at a particular developmental stage by the heterogametic sex. These considerations suggest that natal dispersal in mammals and birds has a common underlying mechanism, namely the organizational effects of gonadal steroids on the heterogametic sex.

Ontogenetic processes

Natal dispersal might be triggered during development by changes in either the animal's internal or external environment. We tested two hypotheses about external factors. First, natal dispersal might be caused by aggression directed at juveniles by members of their own species. Under this hypothesis, prior to or at the time of dispersal, the frequency or severity of agonistic behavior between adults and juvenile males should increase. However, observations revealed that adults neither attacked nor chased juvenile males more frequently or vigorously than juvenile females (19), and there was no increase in aggression toward juvenile males at the time of dispersal. Moreover, there were no differences between juvenile males and females in the number and severity of wounds inflicted by other ground squirrels. Thus the data offered no support for the social aggression hypothesis.

A second hypothesis is that natal dispersal occurred because juvenile males attempted to avoid their littermates (current and future competitors) or their mother (20). For a large number of litters, we found no significant relationship between litter size or sex ratio and

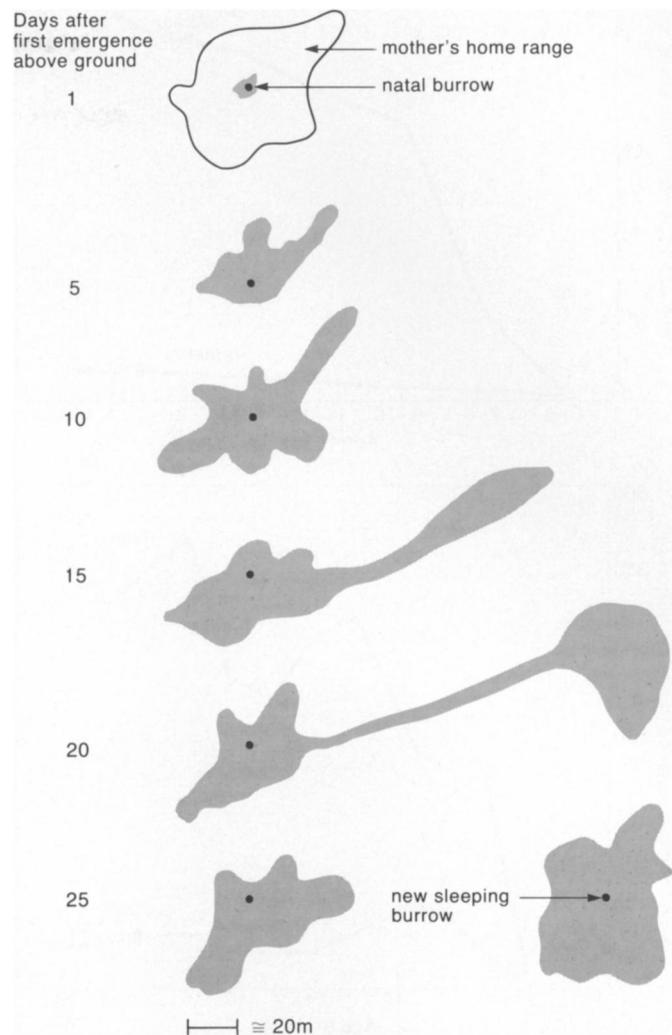


Figure 3. The process by which *S. beldingi* males disperse visually resembles the fissioning of an amoeba. When a male first emerges from the natal burrow, at an age of about four weeks, his daily range of movement is restricted to the immediate vicinity of the burrow. He soon enlarges that range into an amorphous shape, the boundaries of which are established by topographic features or the presence of other animals. By about the 15th day above ground, his range has surpassed the scope of his mother's home range. At this time he may spend long periods far from the natal burrow, yet he will return home at nightfall. Near the 25th day, when he is roughly seven weeks old, he will cease returning at dusk, thereby accomplishing dispersal. (After ref. 35.)

dispersal behavior (2, 19). Males who dispersed during their natal summer were not from especially large or small litters, or predominantly male or female litters. Also, the timing of juvenile male dispersal depended neither on the mother's age nor on whether the mother was present or deceased. Thus the ontogeny of natal dispersal was apparently not linked to either of the exogenous (external) influences usually invoked to account for it.

In view of these results, we suspected that natal dispersal was triggered by endogenous (internal) factors. In particular, we hypothesized that males might stay home until they attained sufficient size or energy reserves to permit survival during the rigors of emigration. This ontogenetic-switch hypothesis predicts that juvenile

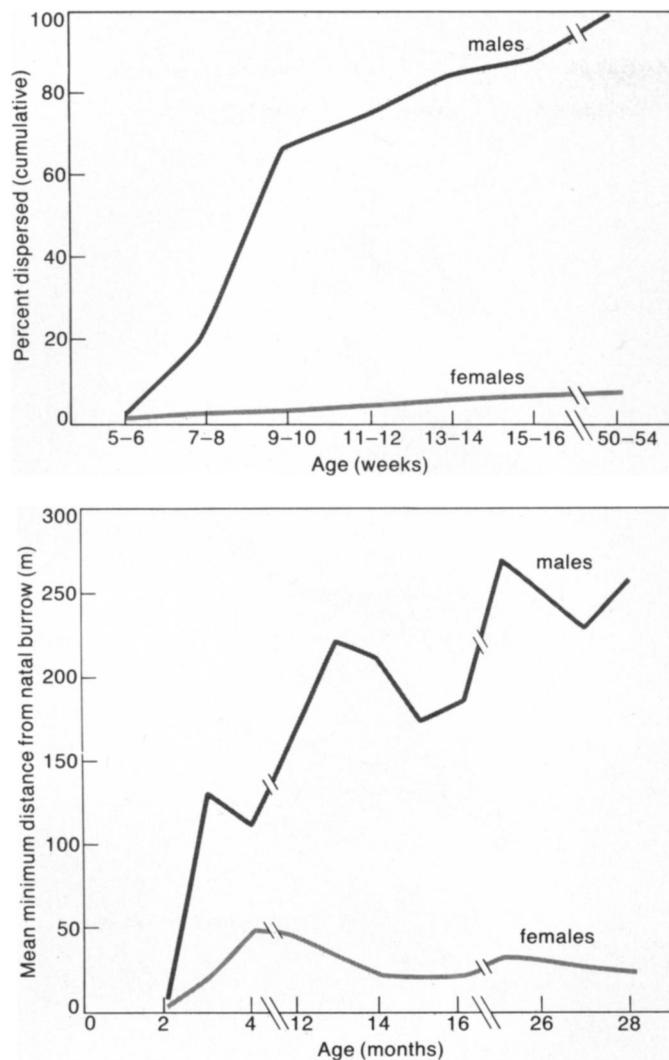


Figure 4. Although a small fraction of female *S. beldingi* disperse, the behavior is very evidently male-biased. The majority of male pups disperse by the 10th week; by about the 54th week, all males have dispersed (above). Although many other mammals exhibit male-biased natal dispersal, *S. beldingi* is unusual in that all males eventually disperse. Males also move considerably farther from their natal burrows than do females, and they continue to move away from home throughout their first three years (below). (After refs. 2 and 12.)

males will disperse when they attain a threshold body mass and that dispersers should be heavier, or exhibit different patterns of weight gain, than predispersal males of equivalent ages.

Our data were consistent with the ontogenetic-switch hypothesis. Emigration dates were correlated with the time at which males reached a minimum body weight of about 125 g, as shown in Figure 5. Emigrant juveniles were significantly heavier than male pups that had not yet dispersed. Most males attained the threshold weight during their natal summer, and dispersed then. Only the smallest males, who did not put on sufficient weight in the first summer, overwintered in their natal area. All these males dispersed the following season once they had become heavy enough.

Sex and body mass together were the most consistent predictors of dispersal status. Occasionally, how-

ever, predispersal and immigrant juvenile males with body weights exceeding the threshold were captured in the same area. This observation suggested that something closely associated with body weight, such as fat stores, may be the actual dispersal trigger.

Behavioral changes also accompanied natal dispersal. The frequencies of movement and distances moved per unit time by juvenile males were found to be greater than those of females, and these behaviors peaked at the time of dispersal. Relative to juvenile females, juvenile males also spent significantly more time climbing and digging and exploring nonfamilial burrows and novel objects—for example, a folding footstool; they also reemerged from a burrow into which they had been frightened much sooner than did females. These observations of spontaneous ontogenetic changes in the behavior of young males reinforced the hypothesis that endogenous factors triggered natal dispersal.

Effects on fitness

Natal dispersal might enable juvenile males to avoid fitness costs associated with life in the natal area and might allow them to obtain benefits elsewhere (6). Possible disadvantages of remaining at home include shortages of food or burrows (21), ectoparasite infestations or diseases, competition with older males for mates (5, 22), and nuclear family incest (4, 23, 24). We examined each of these hypotheses as functional explanations for natal dispersal in *S. beldingi*.

If natal dispersal occurs because of food shortages, then juveniles whose natal burrow is surrounded by abundant food should be more philopatric than those from food-poor areas; immigration to food-rich areas should exceed emigration from them; dispersing individuals should be in poorer condition (perhaps weigh less) than males of the same age residing at home; and, based on the strong sexual dimorphism in natal dispersal, food requirements of young males and females should differ.

Detailed observations revealed that juvenile males and females ate similar amounts of the same plants and at similar rates. Juvenile males spent only slightly more time foraging than did juvenile females. The diets and foraging behaviors of males that had not yet dispersed and males that had immigrated to that same area were indistinguishable. As discussed previously, dispersing males were significantly heavier than predispersal males, a result contrary to that predicted in the scenario of emigration because of lack of food. Finally, juvenile male immigration equaled emigration every year. This is important because preferred foods were unevenly distributed within and among populations (1, 2). Evidence consistently suggested no link between immediate food shortages and natal dispersal.

A second reason for natal dispersal might be to locate a nest burrow. Ground squirrels depend on burrows for safety from predators, as places to spend the night, and as nests in which to hibernate (25). Given the sexual dimorphism in natal dispersal, this hypothesis predicts differences between males and females in the type or location of habitable burrows and implies that dispersers should emigrate from areas of high population density or low burrow quality to areas where unoccupied holes of high quality are available. To test this

idea we monitored population density each week and counted burrow entrances in the territories of lactating females. We found that neither the probability of juvenile male dispersal nor its timing was significantly related to population density or burrow availability near home, and that dispersers did not settle in areas of higher burrow density.

The only unusual aspect is that every male eventually leaves home

Another cause of natal dispersal might be ectoparasite infestation. If parasites build up in the natal nest and if juvenile males are more affected by them than are juvenile females, then males in particular might emigrate to avoid them. We examined this hypothesis indirectly, by counting the number of fleas and ticks on every captured juvenile. We found low levels of ectoparasitism throughout the animals' natal summer, and no consistent differences between infestations in males and females prior to or at the time of dispersal.

Do juvenile males disperse to avoid future competition with older males for sexual access to females? Because males always emigrated, it was not possible to determine if dispersers experienced less severe mate competition than hypothetical nondispersers. However, the mate competition hypothesis was examined indirectly by comparing, at sites where males were born and on ridge tops where those males mated two or more years later, three parameters: the density of breeding adult males, the mean number of fights adults engaged in for each successful copulation, and the mean daily ratio of breeding males to receptive females. We found no significant differences in any of these parameters, suggesting that dispersing males did not find better access to females than they would have if they had remained at home.

Do juvenile males disperse to avoid future nuclear family incest? A test of this hypothesis requires comparing the reproductive consequences of various degrees of inbreeding (26, 27). However, of more than 500 copulations observed, none occurred between close kin; therefore we could not directly test this hypothesis. Nonetheless, the nonrandom movements of males away from the natal area clearly resulted in complete avoidance of kin as mates (Fig. 4). Furthermore, during post-breeding dispersal, the highly polygynous males moved farthest. Under this hypothesis, the polygynous males who had sired many female pups in an area would have the most to gain by emigrating. Under the mate-competition hypothesis, successful males would be expected to stay put, while unsuccessful males might gain by dispersing. The observed pattern is thus most consistent with avoiding inbreeding.

Belding's ground squirrels are not unusual in the rarity of close inbreeding. Consanguineous mating is minimized in most mammals and birds (23, 24, 28, 29), often via the mechanism of sex-specific natal dispersal. But why are males the dispersive sex in mammals generally and ground squirrels particularly? The answer probably relates to a sexual asymmetry in the significance

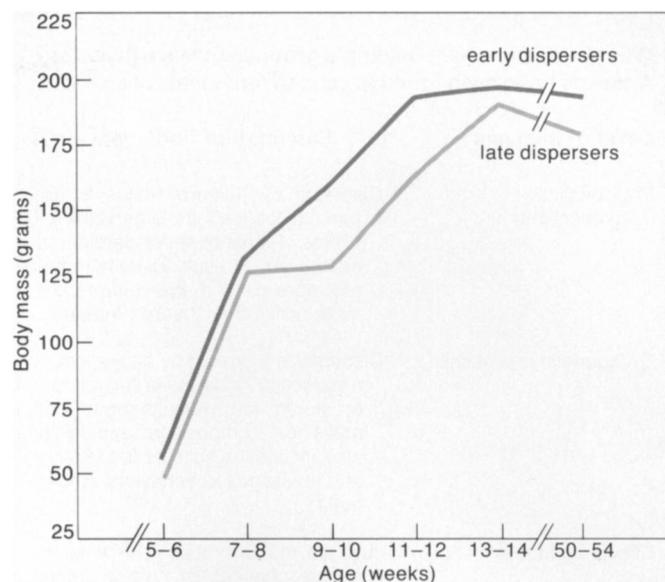


Figure 5. Weight gain among juvenile *S. beldingi* has been positively correlated with the onset of dispersal. Early dispersers (most males) left home at 7–10 weeks of age; late dispersers, in contrast, remained at home until they were 11–14 weeks old. Dispersal seems to occur when a threshold body mass of 125–150 g is attained. (After ref. 19.)

of the location and quality of burrows for procreation (6, 30). The depth and dryness of nest burrows, their proximity to food, and their degree of protection from both inter- and intraspecific predators are vital to pup survival (31). The significance of the burrow, in turn, favors females who seek out and defend high-quality nest sites and who remain in them from year to year (25). The quality of a nursery burrow is of negligible significance to nonparental males. To avoid predators and inclement weather, and to forage, males can move frequently without jeopardizing the survival of their young. Thus the sexual bias in natal dispersal might occur because inbreeding is harmful to both sexes and males incur lower procreative costs by leaving home.

Sexual selection could reinforce a sex-bias in natal dispersal generated by incest avoidance. If consanguineous mating is indeed harmful, then the philopatric females should prefer to mate with unrelated (unfamiliar) males. A reproductive advantage should therefore accrue to males that seek and locate unfamiliar females (32).

Evolutionary origins

The fourth component of our investigation of natal dispersal was an attempt to infer evolutionary origins. A first hypothesis was that the male bias in natal dispersal arose in an evolutionary ancestor of *S. beldingi* as a developmental error (for example, in the timing of hormone secretion) or as a by-product of natural selection on males for the high levels of activity associated with finding mates and defending mating territories. Alternatively, perhaps natal dispersal was favored directly by selection, for example, as a mechanism to avoid inbreeding, throughout the evolutionary history of *S. beldingi*.

One way to evaluate these alternatives is to consider

**Why do juvenile male Belding's ground squirrels disperse?
Answers have been found at each of four levels of analysis.**

Level of analysis	Summary of findings
Physiological mechanisms	Dispersal by juvenile males is apparently caused by organizational effects of male gonadal steroid hormones. As a result, juvenile males are more curious, less fearful, and more active than juvenile females.
Ontogenetic processes	Dispersal is triggered by attainment of a particular body mass (or amount of stored fat). Attainment of this mass or composition apparently also initiates a suite of locomotory and investigative behaviors among males.
Effects on fitness	Juvenile males probably disperse to reduce chances of nuclear family incest.
Evolutionary origins	Strong male biases in natal dispersal characterize all ground squirrel species, other ground-dwelling sciurid rodents, and mammals in general. The consistency and ubiquity of the behavior suggest that it has been selected for directly across mammalian lineages.

the taxonomic distribution of male-biased natal dispersal. If selection has consistently and directly favored dispersal by juvenile males, then phylogenetic relatives of *S. beldingi* should share this trait to a greater degree than if it were a hormonally mediated side effect or developmental error. This is because any hormonal link between adult male sexual activities and dispersal by juveniles two years previously could presumably be broken by mutation in some species through evolutionary time. This, in turn, would lead to a spotty taxonomic distribution of the behavior if it were neutral for fitness.

Members of the squirrel family first appeared in the fossil record 35 to 40 million years ago; thus they are one of the most ancient of extant rodent families (33). Belding's ground squirrel is one of 32 species in the genus *Spermophilus*; this genus is more closely related to marmots and prairie dogs than to tree squirrels (34). Strongly male-biased natal dispersal occurs in all 12 *Spermophilus* species that have been studied in this regard (5, 15, 35). Male-biased natal dispersal patterns are also the rule in marmots (35) and prairie dogs (36). The dispersal behavior of *S. beldingi* is therefore probably a conservative rather than a derived trait; in other words, it is likely quite ancient.

As far as we know, the only unusual aspect of natal dispersal in *S. beldingi* is that every male eventually leaves home, whereas in a few other species a tiny fraction of males are philopatric. Male-biased natal dispersal is widespread among mammals (4–6, 30, 32, 37), suggesting that this behavior may predate the appearance of the squirrel family. The ubiquity of natal dispersal seems more consistent with the hypothesis that it has been favored directly by natural selection in various

lineages than that it originated as a mistake or a correlated response to selection for some other male attribute and is maintained by phylogenetic inertia rather than adaptive value.

Synthesis

Our data reveal that there are at least four types of answers to the question of why juvenile male Belding's ground squirrels disperse (see the box). These answers complement rather than supersede each other. Clearly, however, the causal variables we have identified within each analytical level do not operate in isolation, and it seems appropriate to consider how they may interrelate.

During embryogenesis, sex chromosomes cause the formation of testes in male *S. beldingi*. The gonads secrete a pulse of androgens before birth, which, we hypothesize, sets up an ontogenetic switch, presumably by modifying the morphology or behavior of neurons or nuclei in the brain. When juvenile males have accumulated sufficient weight or fat stores, the switch turns on. The young males then boldly explore their environment, making increasingly longer forays away from home. The timing of dispersal by each individual may be influenced by any environmental factor that accelerates or delays arrival at the dispersal threshold (for example, food abundance or scarcity). The main cost of natal dispersal is probably mortality during emigration; the main benefits are likely related to reduced inbreeding and optimal outbreeding. Male biases in natal dispersal occur consistently across modern mammalian taxa (37), suggesting an evolutionary history of natural selection favoring such behavior directly, and a taxon-wide consistency of function.

By employing the levels-of-analysis framework for developing and testing hypotheses, we have come to appreciate the complexity of what at first appeared to be a simple behavior. We suspect that our explanations for the proximate and ultimate causes of natal dispersal in *S. beldingi* will be applicable to other species. Perhaps equally important, our study illustrates that there can be multiple correct answers to questions of causality in behavioral biology (38). The usefulness of the levels-of-analysis approach is thereby reemphasized.

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