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## ABSENCE OF PARVOVIRUS SHEDDING IN FECES OF THREATENED CARNIVORES FROM MISIONES, ARGENTINA

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*Abstract:* Since its emergence in the 1970s, canine parvovirus (CPV) has spread worldwide and infects a wide variety of mammalian hosts, including domestic and nondomestic carnivores. Today it is one of the most important pathogenic viruses associated with high morbidity and mortality in domestic dogs (*Canis familiaris*). In South America, the range of wild hosts has been scarcely studied and the epidemiology of CPV in wildlife is still unclear. In 2011, feces from five wild carnivores (bush dog [*Speothos venaticus*], jaguar [*Panthera onca*], puma [*Puma concolor*], oncilla [*Leopardus guttulus*], and ocelot [*Leopardus pardalis*]) were collected in Misiones, Argentina, using a detection dog. Of the 289 feces collected, 209 (72.3%) had sufficient sample remaining to be used in this study and the majority of these were genetically confirmed to individual (81.3%) and sex (78.4%) level. In fact, these samples represent a minimum of 115 individuals (10 jaguars, 13 pumas, 33 ocelots, 38 oncillas, and 21 bush dogs). Through polymerase chain reaction, a 583-bp fragment in the VP2 gene of CPV was amplified in these samples. While no samples showed evidence of infection, this does not exclude the occurrence of CPV in wild carnivores in the area, as intermittent viral shedding could condition the diagnosis of CPV in feces of infected wild mammals. Locally, it is recommended that long-term monitoring of parvovirus be continued in wildlife and expanded to domestic carnivores. Internationally, this study provides a useful contribution to the approach to the sylvatic cycle of parvovirus in wild carnivores.

Key words: Leopardus guttulus, Leopardus pardalis, Panthera onca, parvovirus, Puma concolor, Speothos venaticus.

## **BRIEF COMMUNICATION**

Since domestic animals can act as reservoirs for a variety of pathogens that can be transmitted to wild carnivores, they put the conservation of species worldwide at risk.<sup>11</sup> The exponential increase in human populations and their expansion into wild habitats is associated with a concurrent expansion of domestic animals and their pathogens.<sup>2</sup> Several infectious diseases that affect domestic dogs (*Canis familiaris*) can cause mortality in wildlife, including canine distemper virus, canine adenovirus, rabies, and canine parvovirus (family Parvoviridae, genus *Protoparvovirus*).<sup>3</sup> Canine parvovirus (CPV) is endemic in domestic dog populations worldwide. Since its initial description in 1978,<sup>6</sup> CPV has spread globally as a new pandemic disease of domestic dogs and is characterized by acute hemorrhagic enteritis and myocarditis with high morbidity and mortality rates.<sup>30</sup>

Some carnivore parvoviruses, such as the feline panleukopenia virus (FPV), minute virus of canines, mink enteritis virus, and raccoon parvovirus, have been known for many years.<sup>31</sup> Several studies suggest that CPV emerged from a FPV-like virus of domestic cats or from a closely related virus of wildlife species.<sup>4</sup> In the last 40 yr, novel antigenic and genetic variants of CPV have emerged as a result of evolutionary selections in nature.<sup>27,30</sup> Coyotes (*Canis latrans*) and wolves (*Canis lupus*) are susceptible to natural infection with CPV.<sup>29</sup> In fact, in *C. lupus* CPV has been associated with a reduction in early pup survival and limited population growth.<sup>21</sup>

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The new antigenic variants can changed their host range, infecting other species including felines.<sup>23</sup> Analyses of parvovirus DNA sequences recovered from wild carnivores have demonstrated that 95% were derived from CPV-like viruses.4,5 In fact, a recent US study that sampled 852 freeranging wild carnivores showed that through only a few mutations in the capsid protein, parvoviruses may cross species barriers to infect less susceptible hosts.<sup>5</sup> In this study, genetic sequences of CPV were identified in 8 of the 18 studied species, with the highest prevalence found in pumas (67%), gray wolves (43%), coyotes (24%), fishers (Martes pennanti; 20%), raccoons (Procyon lotor; 19%), and bobcats (Lynx rufus; 16%). These high rates of prevalence suggest the possibility of sustained transmission in natural environments.5

While CPV appears to be widespread among North American carnivores,<sup>5</sup> in other areas little is known about its host range and the sylvatic cycles of the virus. The Atlantic Forest and Gran Chaco in South America are highly diverse and contain a wide variety of large species, including endangered and threatened carnivores. In both areas, deforestation rates are exceptionally high and forest fragments are under intense pressure.34 In South America most reports on CPV prevalence in wild carnivores has been based on serologic surveys.1,18,20,25,26 However, serum samples can be difficult to obtain since they require physical capture of the animal and results only reflect pathogen exposure. In contrast, the use of molecular detection of CPV in feces of wild carnivores reflects the shedding of viral particles and indicates the prevalence of infection in the area.

This study aimed to assess CPV occurrence in wild carnivore feces found in and around protected areas in Misiones, Argentina, with a goal to identify areas with high levels of CPV transmission and contribute to management strategies. To examine CPV in Misiones, this study used noninvasive samples (i.e., feces) collected using detection dogs, a technique that allows the number of samples and total area covered to be maximized.<sup>12,13</sup>

Detection dog surveys were conducted from May to August 2011 in and around 12 protected areas in the northern-central zones of Misiones, Argentina, with 30% of the area surveyed partially or completely outside of protected areas and the remainder at varying distances from edge habitat depending on the size of the protected area (Fig. 1).<sup>12,13</sup> The protected areas are mainly composed of Upper Paraná Atlantic Forest but vary in their size (Fig. 1) and degree of protection. They are surrounded by a mixture of native forest, monoculture plantations, subsistence farming, small villages, livestock, and free-ranging domestic animals. Five carnivores were targeted in the surveys: bush dog (*Speothos venaticus*), jaguar (*Panthera onca*), puma (*Puma concolor*), oncilla (*Leopardus guttulus*), and ocelot (*Leopardus pardalis*).<sup>12,13</sup>

Of the 289 feces collected, 209 (72.3%) had sufficient sample remaining to be used in this study and the majority of these were genetically confirmed to individual (81.3%) and sex (78.4%) level (Table 1).<sup>12,13</sup>

While exact sample locations are not reported or displayed per government request as a precaution to protect these threatened and endangered carnivores from targeted poaching, a summary of general location and the genetic results are presented in Table 1. In total 115 unique individuals were identified: 10 jaguars, 13 pumas, 33 ocelots, 38 oncilla, and 21 bush dogs.<sup>12,13</sup>

Once collected, samples were stored at a minimum of  $-20^{\circ}$ C. In the lab, DNA was extracted using phenol-chloroform combined with a standard ethanol precipitation. Polymerase chain reaction (PCR) amplifications of a 583-bp fragment of the VP2 gene were carried out to diagnose CPV presence.9 Each DNA sample was analyzed three times (pure or undiluted, diluted 1:50, and diluted 1:100) totaling 627 PCR amplifications. A primer pair (555 forward : 555 reverse), which anneals to the majority of reported CPV and FPVlike sequences, was used in the PCR amplifications. Each 50-µl reaction was composed of  $1\times$ buffer (KCL 50 mM, Tris-HCl 10 mM, pH 8.3), 1.5 mM MgCl<sub>2</sub>, 10 µM of each deoxynucleotide (dATP, dCTP, dGTP, dTTP), 25 µM of each primer, 1.25 U of GoTaq, and 2 µl of DNA template. The cycling conditions consisted of an initial denaturation at 94°C for 5 min; 40 cycles of denaturation at 94°C for 30 sec, annealing at 50°C for 1 min, and polymerization at 72°C for 1 min; and a final extension at 72°C for 10 min. PCR products were visualized by electrophoresis through an 1% agarose gel stained with ethidium bromide. Reference CPV-d (CPV-2 strain)28 and a local CPV-2C isolate were used as positive controls in all assays.

All 209 samples, from a minimum of 115 individuals, were negative for CPV. These results represent the first assessment of the occurrence of parvovirus in feces of endangered carnivores in Argentina and indicate an absence of CPV in the evaluated environments at the time of the study.

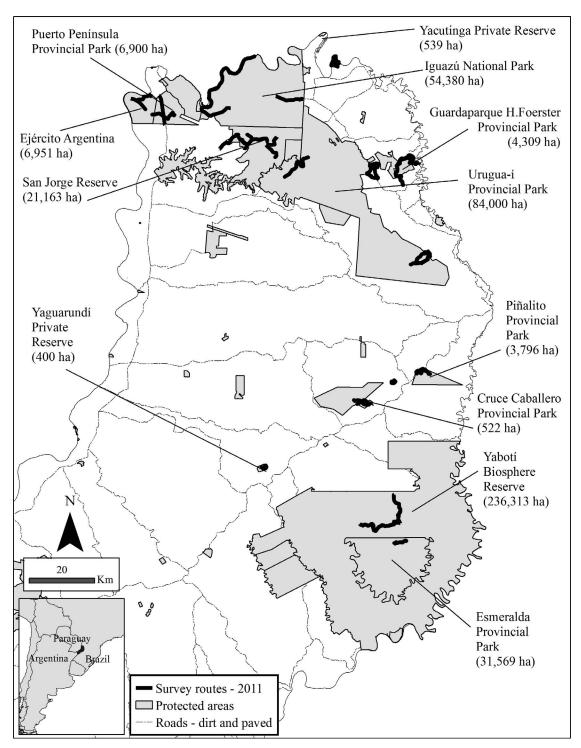


Figure 1. Location of Misiones, Argentina, in South America (inset). Map of Misiones with 2011 survey routes shown relative to protected areas and roads.

Table 1. Summary of 209 feces (species) and 170 genotyped scats (individual) found in protected and unprotected areas in Misiones, Argentina. The number of scats identified to species level and individual level, as well as the number of unique individuals (no. of individuals) is reported. Sexes for the 115 unique individuals

are shown.

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Using conventional and real-time PCRs, studies in North America and Europe have detected the genome of closely related CPV in tissues and feces of several wild carnivores; however, prevalence varied widely.<sup>4,15,16</sup> In Europe the exposure of wild carnivores to parvovirus was demonstrated with a fairly widespread geographic distribution.<sup>15,16</sup> In Bulgaria, only 4% of wolves and red foxes (Vulpes vulpes)16 were determined to be positive and infected by CPV-2a strains. This is in sharp contrast to the 20% observed in a variety of US mammals, with pumas reaching a prevalence of 67%,<sup>5</sup> and the notable incidence of parvovirus found in red foxes (79%) and Egyptian mongooses (Herpestes ichneumon; 58%) in Portugal.<sup>15</sup> In all these studies the virus could not be isolated, suggesting that the findings could correspond to previous infections.

An Italian study identified antigenically and genetically identical strains in domestic dogs and wolves.<sup>7</sup> In the United States, phylogenetic analyses provided evidence of sustained onward transmission and frequent cross-species transmission even bidirectionally between domestic and wild species.<sup>4,5</sup> Although it is not clear which wild species act as natural reservoirs for CPV-related viruses, these studies demonstrate the circulation of CPV in wild habitats. There remains the need to investigate host susceptibility and transmissibility of CPV to new hosts.

CPV has never been studied systematically in South American using molecular tools; however, there have been regional studies focused on the variants affecting domestic dogs and the role of rural dogs as reservoirs for infectious diseases for wild carnivores. A recent study in the center and north of Argentina showed the occurrence of CPV2a, CPV2b, and CPV2c in domestic dogs.<sup>19</sup> Preliminary results of CPV seroprevalence in rural dogs in South America indicates that there is broad variation with only 2% positive in Santiago del Estero, Argentina<sup>25</sup> compared to >95% positive in Isoso, Bolivia.<sup>17</sup> In Brazil, prevalence and risk factors for CPV exposure in rural dogs were described<sup>10</sup> and CPV was isolated in cell culture from 67% of the sampled healthy dogs living around protected areas of Atlantic Forest.<sup>33</sup> In Argentina, recent carnivore surveys highlight the fact that dogs and wildlife have potential opportunities for contact.12-14 This is supported by a serologic survey of CPV using a hemagglutination inhibition assay in protected and disturbed areas in the Chaco province that showed a very high seroprevalence (93.9–94.6%) of CPV antibodies in domestic rural dogs and

similarly high exposure titers to CPV in nearly all wild carnivores and marsupials.<sup>26</sup>

CPV has been confirmed in domestic dogs from Misiones, Argentina, and neighboring areas.<sup>19</sup> While there are no official data on CPV prevalence in domestic dogs from the study area, it is known that the dog population is very abundant. A 2008 survey in Posadas, Misiones, of 1,000 homes, which represents only 1.25% of the total homes (n = 80,000), estimated the abundance of domestic dogs at 100,000.<sup>22</sup>

The negative findings across multiple threatened carnivores in an area of increasing fragmentation does not exclude the occurrence of CPV in wild carnivores of Misiones; instead it is assumed that the number of individuals in the active phase of viral replication or at a point where PCR detection of the viral genome in feces is possible, due to the intermittent shedding, would be very low.<sup>8,24,32</sup> While some samples correspond to the same individual, all samples are considered in the analysis because the narrow window of time for CPV release into the feces allows us to analyze samples of the same animal at different times independently without losing validity.

This study analyzed a large number of samples from elusive or rare species collected with a novel methodology. It cannot be affirmed that the data are representative of the entire region given the zero prevalence of CPV that was detected. However, the results could contribute to an improved interpretation of new results or hypotheses on the subject in different scenarios. It is suggested that techniques such as those used in this study should be preferentially applied in future surveys because they provide a realistic picture of actual presence and transmission of CPV in wild populations. In addition, future surveillance studies in Misiones and similar surveys worldwide should not only continue long-term assessments on wild carnivores but also expand to include monitoring of domestic dogs from surrounding areas.

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