



## LJMU Research Online

Nichols, HJ, Cant, MA, Hoffman, JI and Sanderson, JL

**Evidence for frequent incest in a cooperatively breeding mammal.**

<https://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/id/eprint/1348/>

### Article

**Citation** (please note it is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from this work)

**Nichols, HJ, Cant, MA, Hoffman, JI and Sanderson, JL (2014) Evidence for frequent incest in a cooperatively breeding mammal. *Biology Letters*, 10 (12). ISSN 1744-9561**

LJMU has developed **LJMU Research Online** for users to access the research output of the University more effectively. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LJMU Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain.

The version presented here may differ from the published version or from the version of the record. Please see the repository URL above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information please contact [researchonline@ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:researchonline@ljmu.ac.uk)

# BIOLOGY LETTERS

## Evidence for frequent incest in a cooperatively breeding mammal

Journal:	<i>Biology Letters</i>
Manuscript ID:	RSBL-2014-0898.R1
Article Type:	Research
Date Submitted by the Author:	n/a
Complete List of Authors:	Nichols, Hazel; Liverpool John Moores University, Natural Science and Psychology Cant, Michael; Centre for Ecology and Conservation, School of Biosciences Hoffman, Joseph; Bielefeld University, Department of Animal Behaviour Sanderson, Jennifer; University of Exeter, Centre for Ecology and Conservation
Subject:	Behaviour < BIOLOGY, Evolution < BIOLOGY
Categories:	Animal Behaviour
Keywords:	Inbreeding, Incest, Cooperative breeding, life-history evolution, reproductive competition, dispersal

SCHOLARONE™  
Manuscripts

# 1 Evidence for frequent incest in a cooperatively breeding mammal

2 H.J. Nichols<sup>1\*</sup>, M.A. Cant<sup>2</sup>, J.I. Hoffman<sup>3</sup> & J. Sanderson<sup>2</sup>

3 1. Faculty of Science, Liverpool John Moores University, UK. Email: h.j.nichols@ljmu.ac.uk

4 2. College of Life and Environmental Sciences, University of Exeter, UK

5 3. Department of Animal Behaviour, Bielefeld University, 33501 Bielefeld, Germany

6 \*corresponding author

7 **Short title:** Inbreeding in a cooperative breeder

8

## 9 Summary

10 As breeding between relatives often results in inbreeding depression, inbreeding avoidance is  
11 widespread in the animal kingdom. However, inbreeding avoidance may entail fitness costs. For  
12 example, dispersal away from relatives may reduce survival. How these conflicting selection  
13 pressures are resolved is challenging to investigate, but theoretical models predict that inbreeding  
14 should occur frequently in some systems. Despite this, few studies have found evidence of regular  
15 incest in mammals, even in social species where relatives are spatiotemporally clustered and  
16 opportunities for inbreeding frequently arise. We used genetic parentage assignments together with  
17 relatedness data to quantify inbreeding rates in a wild population of banded mongooses, a  
18 cooperatively breeding carnivore. We show that females regularly conceive to close relatives,  
19 including fathers and brothers. We suggest that the costs of inbreeding avoidance may sometimes  
20 outweigh the benefits, even in cooperatively breeding species where strong within-group incest  
21 avoidance is considered to be the norm.

22

## 23 Introduction

24 Breeding between close relatives has long been recognised to entail a fitness cost, known as  
25 inbreeding depression, which is thought to result mainly from the unmasking of harmful recessive  
26 alleles [1]. Consequently, it is not surprising that inbreeding avoidance mechanisms such as dispersal,  
27 reproductive restraint and mating with unfamiliar individuals are widespread in the animal kingdom  
28 [1]. However, inbreeding avoidance can also entail fitness costs. For example, dispersal is commonly  
29 associated with increased mortality [2]. By implication, even inbreeding between first-order relatives  
30 should be tolerated under some circumstances [3, 4].

31 Although inbreeding and inbreeding avoidance have fitness consequences in virtually all  
32 vertebrates, these effects may be particularly important in cooperative breeders, where natal  
33 philopatry can lead to the presence of sexually mature relatives in social groups [5]. Moreover,  
34 theoretical work predicts that inbreeding could have a substantial positive effect on inclusive fitness  
35 in these species by increasing the reproductive success of relatives [6] and/or increasing the benefits  
36 of cooperation [5, 7].

37 Despite these theoretical predictions, evidence that incest forms a regular part of the mating  
38 system of mammalian cooperative breeders is scarce and the vast majority of these species appear  
39 to have obvious within-group inbreeding avoidance mechanisms [5]. Furthermore, in the handful of  
40 species where frequent incest is thought to occur, such as naked mole rats, genetic data are either  
41 lacking or insufficient to quantify inbreeding [2, 4, 5].

42 Here, we use an unusually large genetic dataset in combination with detailed behavioural  
43 observations to investigate inbreeding in the banded mongoose (*Mungos mungo*), a cooperatively  
44 breeding carnivore that lives in mixed-sex groups (median group size = 18 adults). Groups consist of  
45 a 'core' of dominant individuals (1–5 females and 3–7 males) that reproduce 3–4 times per year,  
46 alongside younger subordinates that breed occasionally. Although some dispersal occurs, many

47 individuals of both sexes remain in the natal group for their entire lives [8]. Both sexes also  
48 frequently breed in their natal group, despite the presence of first order relatives, and there is no  
49 evidence of reproductive restraint [9]. Immigration of individuals into established groups is  
50 practically absent [8] so opportunities to mate with unrelated immigrants rarely arise. Furthermore,  
51 pups are reared in large communal litters, making familiarity an ineffective cue to relatedness [8]. In  
52 the absence of any obvious mechanism of within-group inbreeding avoidance, a previous study  
53 suggested that inbreeding could be a regular part of the banded mongoose mating system [9].

54         New banded mongoose groups form when a cohort of female relatives from one natal group  
55 joins a cohort of male relatives from a different natal group, resulting in opposite sex group-  
56 members initially being unrelated [8]. However, due to high levels of philopatry and a lack of  
57 immigration, relatedness between opposite-sex breeders builds up over time [10], suggesting that  
58 inbreeding could be more prevalent in older groups. Inbreeding might also be more likely to occur  
59 when groups are small and choice over mating partners is restricted. Nevertheless, it is also possible  
60 that females avoid inbreeding by mating with extra-group males. Although observations of extra-  
61 group copulations are rare, neighbouring territories often overlap substantially and groups  
62 encounter each other regularly, so opportunities may arise [10].

63         We use 20 microsatellite markers to assign parentage and to generate a partial pedigree for  
64 an intensively studied population of banded mongooses. We quantify the frequency with which  
65 females breed within their natal group and test the hypothesis that females mate with close  
66 relatives. We also test the predictions that inbreeding is prevalent in older and smaller social groups,  
67 and that females can avoid inbreeding through dispersal or mating with extra-group males.

68

## 69 **Methods**

70 *Behavioural data*

71 We studied a population of 14 banded mongoose groups living in Queen Elizabeth National  
72 Park, Uganda (0°12'S; 29°53'E) between November 1995 and September 2011. All animals were  
73 marked individually and habituated to close observation (< 5 m). Groups were observed every 1-4  
74 days, allowing individuals to be tracked from birth to death and all dispersal and breeding events to  
75 be recorded [8]. Average adult survival in our Ugandan population (females 0.61, males 0.66) is  
76 similar to that found in the Serengeti (females 0.69, males 0.65) so it is unlikely that any observed  
77 inbreeding is due to unusually high survival in our study population [11].

#### 78 *Parentage analysis*

79 A total of 1534 tail tip samples were collected using sterile scissors while animals were  
80 anaesthetised. Further details of sample collection and genotyping using 20 microsatellite loci are  
81 described elsewhere [10]. Pairwise relatedness was calculated following Lynch and Ritland [12] and  
82 parentage was assigned using Cervus [13]. As female group-members usually give birth  
83 synchronously, all visibly pregnant females present in the group when a litter was born were  
84 considered potential mothers. Due to the relatively small numbers of candidate mothers (mean = 4.3  
85 per pup), maternities were assigned first. Paternity was then assigned to all pups assigned maternity  
86 at ≥95% confidence. Potential fathers included all males in the population over 1 year old at litter  
87 conception (approximately 60 days before birth, mean = 72.5 candidate fathers per pup). A total of  
88 629 pups were assigned paternity at ≥95% confidence (≥90% confidence after taking into account  
89 the probability of misassigning maternity). For 516 of these pups from 12 groups, the mother's  
90 group of birth was known, allowing us to investigate whether dispersal influenced female  
91 reproductive behaviour. See supplementary material for further details on sample sizes. Coefficients  
92 of inbreeding were calculated using Pedantic [14] and inbreeding was quantified following [15].

#### 93 *Statistical analysis*

94 Statistical analyses were conducted in R.3.0.1 using the lme4 package [16]. General linear  
95 mixed models (GLMMs) were constructed to test whether inbreeding is more frequent (1) among  
96 natal females than dispersed females; (2) among females that mate with resident rather than extra-  
97 group males; and (3) in older and smaller social groups.

98

## 99 Results

100 Of a total of 516 pups, 328 (63.6%) were born to females that conceived within their natal  
101 group to resident males (figure 1). A further 93 pups (18.0%) were born to females who remained in  
102 their natal group but conceived to an extra-group male, and 95 pups (18.4%) were born to females  
103 that dispersed out of their natal group (figure 1). A significantly larger proportion of pups were  
104 fathered by extra-group males when females stayed within their natal group (93 of 421 pups) in  
105 comparison to females that dispersed (8 of 95 pups; binomial proportions test:  $\chi^2=8.35$ ,  $df=1$ ,  
106  $p=0.0039$ ), suggesting that natal females may sometimes mate extra-group to avoid inbreeding.

107 Relatedness coefficients calculated from microsatellite data [12] revealed that females  
108 breeding within their natal group conceived to closer relatives than females that either bred with  
109 extra-group males or dispersed (GLMM:  $\chi^2_{(3)}=35.74$ ,  $p=8.47 \times 10^{-08}$ , figure 2, table S1). A substantial  
110 proportion of females that bred within their natal groups conceived to close relatives; 26.71%  
111 conceived to a male related by  $\geq 0.25$  and 7.53% conceived to a male related by  $\geq 0.5$ . The equivalent  
112 proportions for females that did not breed within their natal group were substantially lower at 4.46%  
113 and 0.89% respectively.

114 After excluding extra-group paternities, the mean relatedness of parent-pairs increased  
115 significantly with group age (GLMM:  $\chi^2_{(1)}=6.23$ ,  $p = 0.013$ , Table S2) indicating that inbreeding is more  
116 likely to occur in older social groups. There was no evidence for inbreeding being more prevalent in  
117 smaller groups (GLMM:  $\chi^2_{(1)}=0.25$ ,  $p = 0.62$ , Table S2).

118 Pedigree assignment identified 30 individuals from four social groups with non-zero  
119 inbreeding coefficients ( $f$ ). These comprised 11 cases of close inbreeding ( $f = 0.25$ ), seven cases of  
120 moderate inbreeding ( $f = 0.125$ ) and 12 cases of weak inbreeding ( $0 < f < 0.125$ , Table S3).

121

## 122 Discussion

123 We provide evidence that inbreeding is a regular part of the breeding system of banded  
124 mongooses in our study population. The majority of pups were born to females reproducing within  
125 their natal groups and, of these, a substantial proportion were conceived to relatives. A high level of  
126 inbreeding was also supported by the pedigree data, which revealed close inbreeding ( $f=0.25$ ) in 8.5%  
127 of cases and moderate inbreeding ( $0.25 < f \leq 0.125$ ) in 16.7% of cases.

128 Similar rates of moderate inbreeding have been documented in other cooperative mammals,  
129 including black tailed prairie dogs (26%, [17]) and meerkats (15%, [18]). However, close inbreeding is  
130 far less common and appears to be actively avoided in almost all species [5]. The unusually high rate  
131 of close inbreeding in the banded mongoose could be a consequence of group structure, as we  
132 found that inbreeding was more common in older social groups. This is probably due to natal  
133 philopatry leading to an increasing encounter rate between opposite-sex relatives over time since  
134 groups formed [10].

135 While all group members could potentially inbreed in older social groups, some categories of  
136 inbreeding appear more common than others. For example, we recorded 8 instances of incest  
137 between fathers and daughters (of a possible 160 observations, Table S3) but none between  
138 mothers and sons (of a possible 170 observations), a highly significant difference (Binomial  
139 proportions test,  $\chi^2 = 6.73$ ,  $p = 0.0095$ ). This may be because female banded mongooses begin  
140 breeding at 1 year but males rarely reproduce until they are 3 or 4 years old [8]. Young females may



141 therefore have a high risk of encountering their fathers, while breeding males are unlikely to  
142 encounter their mothers, who have since died.

143 In other mammals where females are likely to encounter their father, females either  
144 disperse from their natal group prior to breeding, or mate extra-group [2]. Although both of these  
145 strategies are effective at avoiding inbreeding in the banded mongoose, the majority of females  
146 mated within their natal group. Why, therefore, don't all females outbreed? Theory predicts that  
147 regular inbreeding may occur under circumstances where the costs of inbreeding are outweighed by  
148 the costs of inbreeding avoidance [6]. It is possible that banded mongooses may have particularly  
149 high costs of dispersal, since members of newly-founded groups suffer an annual adult mortality rate  
150 (0.33) almost three times that of resident groups (0.12) [8]. Similarly, violent encounters between  
151 neighbouring groups mean that extra-group mating risks injury [8]. Hence, there might be a net  
152 benefit, at least to some females, of breeding within the natal group. Alternatively, inbreeding may  
153 be tolerated if the costs of inbreeding depression are relatively low. For example, (allo)parental  
154 investment towards inbred offspring could potentially buffer any fitness costs of inbreeding [3].  
155 These possibilities will be the subject of future study.

156 How animals balance the costs of inbreeding and inbreeding avoidance is important to  
157 understand as this can be a fundamental determinant of patterns of dispersal, reproductive skew  
158 and cooperative interactions [5]. In the majority of cooperatively breeding vertebrates, the balance  
159 seems tipped towards inbreeding avoidance, at least at the within-group level. Identifying species  
160 where inbreeding is a normal part of the mating system will allow us to investigate how this balance  
161 can be reversed, and to understand inbreeding in the context of cooperation and conflict within  
162 social groups.

163

164 **Acknowledgements**

165 We are grateful to UWA and UNCST for permission to carry out our research, and the Wardens of  
166 QENP for logistical support. We thank F. Mwanguhya, S. Kyabulima, K. Mwesige, R. Businge, and E.  
167 Vitikainen for assistance in the field. The research was funded by NERC grant NE/J010278/1 awarded  
168 to MAC and a Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft standard grant (HO 5122/5-1) awarded to JIH, HJN  
169 and MAC.

170

## 171 References

- 172 1. Pusey, A., Wolf, M. 1996 Inbreeding avoidance in animals. *Trends in Ecology and Evolution*  
173 **11**,201-206.
- 174 2. Clutton-Brock, T.H., Lukas, D. 2012 The evolution of social philopatry and dispersal in female  
175 mammals. *Molecular Ecology* **21**,472-492.
- 176 3. Thunken, T., Bakker, T.C.M., Baldauf, S.A., Kullmann, H. 2007 Active inbreeding in a cichlid  
177 fish and its adaptive significance. *Current Biology* **17**,225-229.
- 178 4. Szulkin, M., Stopher, K.V., Pemberton, J.M., Reid, J.M. 2013 Inbreeding avoidance, tolerance,  
179 or preference in animals? *Trends in Ecology and Evolution* **28**,205-211.
- 180 5. Koenig, W., Haydock, J. 2004 *Incest and incest avoidance*. In: Ecology and Evolution of  
181 Cooperative Breeding in Birds. eds Koenig, W., Dickinson J. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 182 6. Kokko, H., Ots, I. 2006 When not to avoid inbreeding. *Evolution* **60**,467-475.
- 183 7. Hamilton, W.D. 1964 The genetical theory of social behaviour I, II. *Journal of Theoretical*  
184 *Biology* **7**,1-52.
- 185 8. Cant, M.A., Vitikainen, E., Nichols, H.J. 2013 Demography and social evolution of banded  
186 mongooses. *Advances in the Study of Behavior* **45**,407-445.
- 187 9. Gilchrist, J.S., Otali, E., Mwanguhya, F. 2004 Why breed communally? Factors affecting  
188 fecundity in a communal breeding mammal: the banded mongoose (*Mungos mungo*). *Behavioral*  
189 *Ecology and Sociobiology* **57**,119-131.

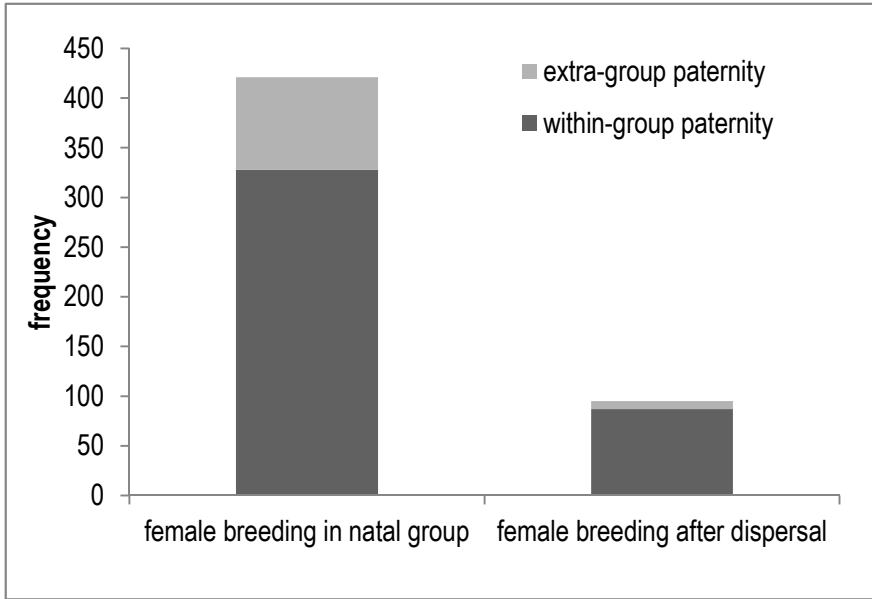
- 190 10. Nichols, H.J., Jordan, N.R., Jamie, G.A., Cant, M.A., Hoffman, J.I. 2012 Fine-scale  
191 spatiotemporal patterns of genetic variation reflect budding dispersal coupled with strong natal  
192 philopatry in a cooperatively breeding mammal. *Molecular Ecology* **21**,5348-5362.
- 193 11. Waaser, P.M., Elliott, L.E., Creel, N.M., Creel, S.R. 1995 *Habitat variation and mongoose*  
194 *demography*. In: In Serengeti II: Dynamics, Management, and Conservation of an Ecosystem. eds  
195 Sinclair, A.R.E., Arcese P. University of Chicago Press. p. 421-428.
- 196 12. Lynch, M., Ritland, K. 1999 Estimation of pairwise relatedness with molecular markers.  
197 *Genetics* **152**,1753-1766.
- 198 13. Marshall, T.C., Slate, J.B.K.E., Kruuk, L.E.B., Pemberton, J.M. 1998 Statistical confidence for  
199 likelihood-based paternity inference in natural populations. *Molecular Ecology* **7**,639-655.
- 200 14. Morrissey, M.B., Wilson, A.J. 2010 PEDANTICS: an r package for pedigree-based genetic  
201 simulation and pedigree manipulation, characterization and viewing. *Molecular Ecology Resources*  
202 **10**,711-719.
- 203 15. Marshall, T.C., Coltman, D.W., Pemberton, J.M., Slate, J., Spalton, J.A., Guinness, F.E., Smith,  
204 J.A., Pilkinton, J.G., Clutton-Brock, T.H. 2002 Estimating the prevalence of inbreeding from  
205 incomplete pedigrees. *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London Series B, Biological Sciences*  
206 **269**,1533-1539.
- 207 16. Bates, D., Maechler, M.B., B., Walker, S., 2013 lme4: Linear mixed-effects models using Eigen  
208 and S4. R package version 1.0-5.: <http://CRAN.R-project.org/package=lme4>;
- 209 17. Hoogland, J.L. 1992 Levels of inbreeding among prairie dogs. *The American Naturalist*  
210 **139**,591 - 602.
- 211 18. Nielsen, J.F., English, S., Goodall-Copestake, W.P., Wang, J., Walling, C.A., Bateman, A.,  
212 Flower, T.P., Sutcliffe, R.L., Samson, J., Thavarajh, N.K., et al. 2012 Inbreeding and inbreeding  
213 depression of early life traits in a cooperative mammal. *Molecular Ecology* **21**,2788-2804.
- 214

215

216 Figure 1. The frequency of within-group and extra-group paternity among the offspring of females  
217 breeding (i) in their natal group, and (ii) after dispersal to a new group.

218

219 Figure 2. Mean ( $\pm$  95% confidence intervals) relatedness values of banded mongoose breeding pairs  
220 depending on whether females bred in their natal group or after dispersal, and with a resident or  
221 extra-group male. The 216 breeding pairs included here produced 516 pups.



For Review Only

