1 **Non-invasive evaluation of stress hormone responses in a captive population of sugar gliders**

2 **(*Petaurus breviceps*)**

3 Running head: Stress hormone monitoring in sugar gliders

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15 **Abstract**

16 Faecal hormone monitoring offers a robust tool to non-invasively determine the physiological stress

17 experienced by an individual when faced with natural or human-driven stressors. Although already

18 quantified for a number of species, the method needs to be validated for each new species to ensure

19 reliable quantification of the respective glucocorticoids. Here we investigated whether measurement of

20 faecal glucocorticoid metabolite (fGCM) provides a feasible and non-invasive way to assess the

21 physiological state of sugar gliders (*Petaurus breviceps*), an arboreal marsupial native to Australia, by using

22 both a biological and physiological validation. Our analysis confirmed that the cortisol enzyme

23 immunoassay (EIA) was the most appropriate assay for monitoring fGCM concentrations in sugar gliders.

24 Comparing the fGCM response to the physiological and the biological validation, we found that while the

25 administration of ACTH led to a significant increase in fGCM concentration in all individuals, only six of

26 eight individuals showed a considerable fGCM response following the biological validation. Our study

27 identified the most appropriate immunoassay for monitoring fGCM concentrations as an indicator of

28   physiological stress in sugar gliders, but also supports recent suggestions that, if possible, both biological

29   and physiological stressors should be used when testing the suitability of an EIA for a species.

30

31   **Additional keywords:** ACTH challenge, separation, faecal glucocorticoid metabolites, physiological stress,

32   individual variation

33

34   **Introduction**

35   Monitoring adrenocortical activity in wild animal populations is critical, given the well-documented

36   relationship between stress, health, and reproduction (Tilbrook *et al.* 2000; Romano *et al.* 2010). When

37   an animal is experiencing stress, such as unpredictable environmental changes, a main component of the

38   body's response is the activation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, which results in the

39   increased production and secretion of glucocorticoids (GCs) into the bloodstream (Sapolsky *et al.* 2000).

40   Based on the 'reactive scope model' the increase in GCs (cortisol or corticosterone) can be seen as a

41   mediator of the allostatic load and are a way for the individuum to achieve homeostatis again, often

42   through adjustments in metabolism, energy availability, cardiovascular activity, and behavior (Moberg

43   2000; Romero 2002; Romero *et al.* 2009). Although this response can be beneficial when it comes to

44   circadian or seasonal variations (predictive homeostasis) as well as short-term disturbances (reactive

45   homeostasis), chronically elevated GC secretion, also described as "homeostatic overload", may lead to a

46   suppression of the immune system and reproductive activities, muscle atrophy, and a shortened life span

47   (Sapolsky 2002; Charmandari *et al.* 2005; Cohen *et al.* 2007; Romero et al. 2009).

48   Due to the role GCs play in this response, and the numerous deleterious effects the homeostatic

49   overload, i.e. chronically elevated GCs, can have on an individual, they are often used as a physiological

50   marker for the level of stress experienced and welfare of an individual. Thus, physiological measurements

51   of stress hormones are often used to estimate the consequences of natural or human-induced change in

52   ecological studies of various animals. Non-invasive hormone monitoring has become a reliable technique

53   for assessing physiological stress in a range of wildlife species (Creel *et al.* 2013). Because glucocorticoids

54   (active molecule) circulating in the bloodstream are processed by the liver and excreted via the bile as GC

55   metabolites (Touma and Palme 2005; Sheriff *et al.* 2011), GCs can be monitored non-invasively by

56   collecting excreted faecal material (Hodges *et al.* 2010). Although non-invasive faecal glucocorticoid

57   metabolite (fGCM) monitoring have some shortcomings, such as the inability to monitor short term

58   stressors or the need to determine the time of fGCM excretion relative to the applicable stressor (Touma

59   and Palme 2005; Heistermann 2010), it is often chosen above invasive blood collection techniques for a

60   number of reasons. For example, there is little to no need for animal capture, restraint or anaesthesia to

61   collect faeces, which decreases animal contact and potentially dangerous consequences to animal or

62   collector health (Behringer and Deschner 2017). As a result of the ease of collection, longitudinal sampling

63   can be conducted from captive and free-ranging animals. Another inherent advantage of using faecal

64   material to monitor adrenocortical function is the ability to monitor free (non-protein-bound) GCs that

65   are excreted via faeces. This method is often classified as more relevant than looking into the amount of

66   total GC level in blood samples, as only free GCs are able to reach the target organs and invoke the

67   necessary physiological changes in response to a stressor (Palme *et al.* 2005; Sheriff *et al.* 2011).

68   Before a specific assay can be used to monitor fGCM concentrations in a particular species, it is

69   important that the method have been carefully validated, either physiological or biological, to ensure that

70   the assay can monitor biologically meaningful differences (Palme 2005). Physiological validation refers to

71   the artificial activation, through the injection of synthetic adrenocorticotrophic hormone, of the HPA axis

72   and the ability to monitor the resulting change in fGCM concentrations (ACTH challenge test). Where a

73   physiological validation cannot be performed, e.g. when working with critically endangered or intractable

74   species, biological validations (e.g. handling, constraint, blood collection, transportation and/or agonistic

75   interactions) should be conducted (Bosson *et al.* 2009; Rimbach *et al.* 2013). Although biological

76   validations are often employed as part of the validation process, individual variation in the stress response

77   towards specific stressors may lead to inconsistent and varying results (Koolhaas *et al.* 2010). Thus, to

78   ensure the most appropriate enzyme immunoassay is used to quantify physiological stress in a species,

79   many authors highlight the need to conduct both a physiological and biological validation on the chosen

80   study species (Goymann *et al.* 1999; Sheriff *et al.* 2011).

81   Recent studies have demonstrated a dramatic decline in Australian wildlife as a result of

82   anthropogenic activities, such as introduction of exotic species, the reduction in vegetative cover,

83   fragmentation, a change in fire regimes and causing climate change (Burbidge and McKenzie 1989;

84   McKenzie *et al.* 2007; Hing *et al.* 2014). Despite evidence that chronic stress has significant welfare

85   implications, studies focusing on the possible effects of such stressors on the adrenocortical activity have

86   only been conducted on several Australian marsupials (Hing *et al.* 2014). In this regard, non-invasive

87   hormone monitoring techniques, using hair as hormone matrix, have been successfully applied to

88   determine adrenocortical function in squirrel gliders (*Petaurus norfolcensis*) faced with anthropogenic

89   disturbances (Brearley *et al.* 2012).

90   The sugar glider (*Petaurus breviceps*) is a small arboreal marsupial native to Australia and currently

91   listed as of least concern by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN, 2016). Sugar gliders

92   are a social species known to form groups consisting of several individuals and are frequently found in

93   large huddling groups (Suckling 1984; Nowack and Geiser 2016). They are well adapted to survive short-

94   term changes in their environment (Henry and Suckling 1984; Kortner and Geiser 2000; Parmesan *et al.*

95   2000; Christian and Geiser 2007). However, chronic or extreme changes in temperature, food availability

96   and habitat loss may lead to energetic bottlenecks as well as changes in foraging behaviour and

97   reproduction. Validating a method for monitoring physiological stress in the species may assist in

98   determining sugar glider health and survivability throughout its natural distribution during such periods

99   of change. Here we used both a biological (separation) as well as physiological (ACTH administration)

100   validations to assess the suitability of five enzyme immunoassays (EIAs) that would allow non-invasive

101   monitoring of physiological stress of captive and free-ranging sugar glider populations via the collection

102   of faecal samples.

103

104   **Material and methods**

105   *Ethical note*

106   Approval to conduct this study was granted by the University of New England Animal Ethics Committee

107   and the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service (AEC14-108).

108

109   *Capture and housing*

110   The experiment was performed in February 2014 on eight sugar glider individuals (5 adult females, 2 adult

111   males, 1 sub-adult male) originally retrieved from wooden nest boxes near Dorrigo (30°22'S, 152°34'E)

112   and within Imbota Nature Reserve (30°35'S, 151°45'E) (a group of four animals per location). The

113   individuals were transferred to the University of New England, where they were used to establish a

114   breeding colony, which was used during this study. All individuals were weighed to the nearest 0.1 g,

115   sexed and aged according to Suckling (1984), before being micro-chipped for individual recognition (PIT

116   tags, Destron Technologies, South St Paul, MN, USA). Animals were kept in their capture groups and

117   housed in two outdoor enclosures (3.6 × 1.8 × 2 m), each fitted with branches, two feeding platforms and

118   three wooden nest boxes per group. All individuals of one group usually shared one nest box (Nowack and

119   Geiser 2016). Following a physical evaluation, all animals were deemed healthy at the start of the study.

120   Individuals were removed from their group housing in the late afternoon (start of active period) on the

121   first day of the study and placed into individual enclosures (0.7 x 1 x 2 m) for the study period: individuals

122   were able to have visual and olfactory contact with one or two other members of their family group

123   situated in close-by aviaries. Each individual enclosure was equipped with a wooden nest box and

124   branches; the floor of the enclosure was lined with shade cloth to captured faeces while allowing urine to

125   drain off. Animals were fed daily with a mixture of high protein baby cereal, egg, honey and water, to

126   which a high protein supplement (Wombaroo Food Products, Australia) was added. This food was

127   supplemented with a dish of fresh fruits. Water was provided *ad libitum*.

128

129   *Separation, ACTH challenge and faecal sample collection*

130   In total, faecal samples were collected for eleven nights including separation (day 1), five nights where no

131   animal manipulation occurred, ACTH administration on day 7, and for four nights after the treatment.

132   After both separation and ACTH injection, enclosures were checked for faecal samples at two-hour

133   intervals starting from 2100h until 0600h. The freshest sample was collected and all other faecal samples

134   were removed from the enclosure and discarded. For all other nights, enclosures were checked at the

135   start and end of the active period (2100h in the evening and 0600h in the morning; the same sampling

136   procedure as described above was used). Samples were marked according to the date and time of

137   collection to allow for longitudinal fGCM monitoring. On day 7, all eight individuals were injected

138   intramuscularly with 0.1 ml of synthetic ACTH (1-2 IU/kg of Synacten Depot, Novartis, Auckland, New

139   Zealand) at the start of the active phase between 1925h and 2000h and released back into their individual

140   enclosures. This ACTH dose was chosen as it has been used successfully in a number of studies to invoke

141   a stress response, such as the African lesser bushbaby (*Galago moholi*, Scheun *et al.* 2015), yellow baboons

142   (*Papio cynocephalus*, Wasser *et al.* 2000) and the black-footed ferret (*Mustela nigripes*, Young *et al.* 2001).

143   All faecal samples were stored in 1.5 ml Eppendorf tubes and frozen at -20˚C within 20 min of collection.

144   At the end of the experiment, all individuals were relocated into their original groups.

145

146   *Faecal sample extraction*

147   Faecal samples were lyophilized, pulverized and sieved through a thin mesh to remove any undigested

148   material (Fieß *et al.* 1999). Following this, 0.050 – 0.055 g of faecal powder were extracted by adding 1.5

149   ml 80% ethanol prior to vortexing for 10 min. Suspensions were then centrifuged for 10 min at 1500xg

150   and the supernatants transferred into a new microcentrifuge tube. Centrifugation of the supernatants

151   was repeated at 1500xg for 5 min and the resulting supernatants transferred into new microcentrifuge

152   tube. Subsequently, 1 ml of supernatant was dried in an oven at 50 ˚C overnight; the dried product was

153   sent to the Endocrine Research Laboratory (ERL), University of Pretoria, South Africa, for EIA analysis. At

154   the ERL, dried samples were reconstituted with 1 ml assay buffer and stored at -20 ˚C until EIA analysis.

155

156 *Enzyme immunoassay analysis*

157 To determine an appropriate EIA for measuring alterations in fGCM concentrations in sugar gliders, a

158 subset of faecal extracts from two males (Male1, Male2) and two females (Female1, Female2), injected

159 with synthetic ACTH, were measured for immunoreactive fGCMs using five EIAs, namely: cortisol,

160 corticosterone, 11-oxoetiocholanolone I (measuring 11,17 dioxoandrostanes), 11-oxoaetiocholanalone II

161 (detecting fGCMs with a 5β-3α-ol-11-one structure), and 5α-pregnane-3β,11β,21-triol-20-one (measuring

162 3β,11β-diol-CM). The choice of enzyme immunoassays included assays that were specifically designed to

163 target cortisol or corticosterone, but also widely used group specific assays (Palme 2019). The number of

164 individuals that we used for the evaluation of a suitable EIA has been based on previous studies that have

165 successfully validated assays by using between 2 to 4 individuals (Wielebnowski *et al.* 2002 [N=4]; Fichtel

166 *et al.* 2007 [N=4] ; Laver *et al.* 2012 [N=2]; Young *et al.* 2017 [N=4]; Scheun *et al.* 2018 [N=3]). Details of

167 the five EIAs, including cross-reactivities, are described by Palme and Möstl (1997) for 11-

168 oxoetiocholanolone I and cortisol, Möstl *et al.* (2002) for 11-oxoaetiocholanalone II, and Touma *et al.*

169 (2003) for 5α-pregnane-3β,11β,21-triol-20-one and corticosterone. Assay sensitivity was 0.6 ng/g for

170 cortisol, 11-oxoetiocholanolone I and 11-oxoaetiocholanalone II, 1.8 ng/g for corticosterone, and 2.4 ng/g

171 for 5α-pregnane-3β,11β,21-triol-20-one EIA. Intra-assay coefficients of variation, of high- and low-value

172 quality controls, were 4.17 % and 4.67 % for cortisol, 6.87 % and 8.22 % for corticosterone, 3.05 % and

173 5.71 % for 11-oxoetiocholanolone I, 5.27 % and 5.76 % for 11-oxoaetiocholanalone II and 3.81 % and 4.19

174 % for 5α-pregnane-3β,11β,21-triol-20-one. Inter-assay coefficients of variation, of high- and low-value

175 quality controls, were 8.11 % and 11.68 % for cortisol, 13.46 % and 16.88 % for corticosterone, 1.80 % and

176 6.38 % for 11-oxoetiocholanolone I, 5.74 % and 11.68 % for 11-oxoaetiocholanalone II and 8.22 % and

177 11.36 % for 5α-pregnane-3β,11β,21-triol-20-one.

178

179 *Data analysis*

180 <u>Choice of enzyme immunoassay</u>

181 To determine EIA suitability, individual baseline and peak fGCM concentrations were identified for each

182 of the EIAs tested, using a subset of samples collected two days prior and following ACTH administration.

183 Individual baseline fGCM concentration was determined for the respective data sets, using an iterative

184 process (Brown *et al.* 1994; Scheun *et al.* 2016). Here, the mean and standard deviation (SD) value for

185 each individual was calculated. Subsequently, all data points higher than the mean + 1.5 SD were removed

186 and the mean and SD recalculated. This process was repeated until no value exceeded the mean + 1.5 SD,

187 thus yielding the individual baseline value. To determine the effect of a stressor (ACTH/Separation) on the

188 hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, the absolute fGCM change was determined, defined as percentage

189 fGCM response, by calculating the quotient of baseline and fGCM samples. An average increase of ≥100%

190 was considered a significant rise in fGCM levels (e.g. Jepsen et al. 2019; Young et al. 2017). To identify the

191 most suitable EIA, we then chose the commonly used approach to select the EIA with the highest

192 percentage increase for all individuals (e.g. Young et al. 2017, Ludwig et al, 2013; see Touma and Palme

193 2005 for a list of studies). The cortisol EIA showed the largest peak fGCM response of the five EIAs tested,

194 exceeding the 100% average response (range: 100 % - 2155.30 %, Tab. 1) post-injection for the four study

195 animals (Fig. 1). The lack of a response in one study animal (F2) is not uncommon during a physiological

196 validation via ACTH administration (see Touma and Palme 2005), and does not lower the reliability of the

197 assay. Subsequently, the cortisol EIA was used to assess fGCM concentrations in the samples from the

198 remaining four ACTH administered individuals, as well as in the samples linked to separation from all eight

199 animals. However, we would like to note that, despite the lack of an average increase exceeding 100%,

200 the corticosterone assay produced fGCM responses that were comparable between the four individuals,

201 which is another favourable indicator for assay suitability, and as such, the tested corticosterone EIA may

202 also be suitable to monitor fGCM in sugar gliders. For the assay of choice (cortisol EIA), serial dilutions of

203 extracted samples gave displacements curves, which were parallel to the respective standard curves (the

204 relative variation of the slopes of the trend lines was < 5%). Faecal glucocorticoid metabolite

205 concentrations are given as µg/g dry weight (DW). All EIAs used throughout the study were performed on

206 microtiter plates as described by Ganswindt *et al.* (2012).

207

208 <u>ACTH administration and separation</u>

209 After deciding on an appropriate EIA for monitoring fGCM concentrations in the sugar glider, the entire

210 sample set was analysed using the cortisol EIA. Individual baseline fGCM concentration was calculated

211 from the entire dataset using the iterative process as described above. The production of GCs from the

212 adrenal gland can fluctuate daily (Peter *et al.* 1978; Lincoln *et al.* 1982). In order to determine whether

213 natural daily fluctuations are apparent in sugar gliders, fGCM concentrations from the unmanipulated

214 period preceding the ACTH injection were compared to the calculated baseline value (as above) for each

215 individual. The deviation from the calculated baseline level was expressed as a percentage deviation value

216 and ranged from 14 % - 29% (Tab. 2). Thus, daily variation in fGCM excretion is negligible for sugar gliders.

217

218 **Results**

219 *ACTH challenge*

220　Seven of the eight animals exhibited a pronounced increase in fGCM concentrations, following ACTH

221　administration, when using the cortisol EIA (range: 69 – 1566 %, Tab. 2). Both adult males as well as the

222　sub-adult male showed a considerable increase in fGCM response (206 – 1566 %) 4.5 to 8 hours following

223　ACTH administration (Tab. 2). The fGCM concentrations returned to baseline levels for all three individuals

224　between 6.5 and 25 hours following ACTH administration (Tab. 2). Four of the five females injected with

225　ACTH showed an increase in fGCM response (69-1290 %) 1.5 to 10.5 hours following ACTH administration

226　(2-6 samples post-injection, Tab. 2). The fGCM concentrations of all four females returned to baseline

227　levels between 6.5 and 49 hours following ACTH administration (Tab. 2).

228

229　*Biological validation via separation*

230　While six of the eight individuals showed a considerable increase in fGCM response after separation

231　(range: 62 - 2413 %, Tab. 2 Fig. 2), two females did not show an acute fGCM response above 50% (Tab. 2).

232　Both adult males, the sub-adult male and two adult females showed a peak fGCM response between the

233　first and third collected faecal sample post-separation, with fGCM concentrations returning to baseline

234　levels on the subsequently collected sample for each individual. Additionally, one adult female showed a

235　prolonged, elevated fGCM response following the separation event, with the fGCM response exceeding

236　125% from the first to the fifth collected faecal sample before returning to baseline level.

237　　　　The fGCM response to the separation event was considerably stronger than the response

238　determined following ACTH administration in sugar gliders (Tab. 2: not statistically tested due to small

239　and inhomogeneous sample size).

240

241　**Discussion**

242　Our study shows that fGCM changes induced by both physiological stimulation (ACTH) and behavioural

243　event (separation) can be reliably monitored in faecal samples from sugar gliders using a cortisol EIA. In

244　addition to confirming the ability to non-invasively monitor stress responses in sugar gliders using faecal

245　samples, the measured response to separation further proves the ability of the chosen assay for

246　monitoring biological relevant changes in the stress response.

247　　　　Sugar glider are a highly social species and are commonly found nesting together throughout the

248　year (Suckling, 1984), even though energy savings achieved via torpor expression during winter can be

249　reduced by the presence of normothermic nest mates (Nowack and Geiser 2016). In fact, sugar glider

250　groups are fairly stable and although groups occasionally split up when changing nests, they usually re-

251　join after a few days (Kortner and Geiser 2000). Separation of individuals of a highly social species, such

as sugar gliders, can result in the increased production of GCs of the individuals into the 'reactive homeostasis range' in order to facilitate physiological and behavioural changes which promotes a return to homeostasis. A similar response has also been shown for a number of other social species, such as the domestic guinea pig (*Cavia porcellus*, Hennessy *et al.* 2008), pied babbler (*Turdoides bicolor*, Jepsen *et al.* 2019), African buffalo (*Syncerus caffer,* Ganswindt *et al.* 2012), the common prairie vole (*Microtus ochrogaster*, Ruscio *et al.* 2007), the common squirrel monkey (*Saimiri sciureus*, Hennessy *et al.* 1982) and the black tufted-ear marmoset (*Callithrix kuhlii*, Smith and French 1997).

The time lag between elevated circulating GCs from ACTH administration to the excretion of GCs in sugar glider faeces was around 4-6 hours post-injection. This is similar to other small-bodied mammals, such as the degu (6 hours, *Octodon degus*, Soto-Gamboa *et al.* 2009), mice (8-10 hours, *Mus musculus f. domesticus*, Touma *et al.* 2004), African lesser bushbaby (14 hours, *Galago moholi*, Scheun *et al.* 2015) and eastern chipmunks (8 hours, *Tamias striatus*, Montiglio *et al.* 2012). However, following both biological and physiological stressors, a considerable amount of individual variability for the tested males and females have been observed in terms of peak fGCM response, time to peak response, and return to fGCM baseline levels. The time span from injection of ACTH to the observed peak response varied by up to 8.5 hours between individuals. Furthermore, only three of five female individuals showed an increase in fGCM levels in response to the separation event. Our data also suggest differences between the sexes as males had a considerably higher average fGCM response to both ACTH administration and handling compared to their female counterparts. Although biological stressors (animal handling, separation, constraint, blood collection, transportation and/or agonistic interactions; Goymann *et al.* 1999; Bosson *et al.* 2009; Rimbach *et al.* 2013) have been used successfully in a number of validation studies to increase GC production (Touma and Palme 2005), numerous instances exist where individual variation in the stress response to biological validation has led to inconsistent validation results. The ability of an event to act as a stressor and activate the stress response is based on individual perception; that is, specific biological stressors may not be recognized as such by an individual (Reeder and Kramer 2005). Furthermore, individual and sex-related variations in the stress response can also be caused by the time of year, reproductive status, body condition and the animal's developmental history (Yoshimura *et al.* 2003; Kudielka and Kirschbaum 2005; Cockrem 2013). Individual variation in response to a stressor has been reported in a number of studies. For example, Smith *et al.* (2012) showed that the stress response to capture in yellow-bellied marmots (*Marmota flavivetris*) were individual-specific, with a number of individuals failing to show a significant fGCM increase. Similarly, dwarf hamsters (*Phodopus campbelli*) exposed to a subordinate 'on-back' position showed a large degree of individual variation, ranging from a

284 large to no response (Guimont and Wynne-Edwards 2006), while Narayan *et al.* (2012) showed that
285 greater bilby (*Macrotis lagotis*) held in captivity displayed individual variation in the stress response to
286 anthropogenic activities.

287 Although both physiological and biological validation techniques were largely successful in this
288 study, both can have shortcomings. The injection of ACTH can lead to the overstimulation of the adrenal
289 gland, resulting in a less sensitive EIA being chosen as an ideal assay for fGCM monitoring in a species
290 (Young *et al.* 2017). In contrast to this, the response to a biological stressor is individual specific and may
291 result in the under stimulation of the adrenal gland (Koolhaas *et al.* 2007). As such we agree with previous
292 researchers that, when possible, both a physiological and biological validation should be conducted to
293 ensure the most appropriate EIA is chosen for monitoring fGCM patterns in a particular species.

294 Being able to use fGCM to non-invasively assess the physiological state of sugar gliders will be
295 beneficial to determine the health status of sugar glider populations and may be especially useful to
296 investigate the impact of anthropogenic disturbance and climate change on this species. A study on the
297 closely related squirrel gliders has already shown that reduced availability of nesting sites in highly
298 fragmented habitats leads to elevated cortisol levels, i.e. a homeostatic overload, in squirrel gliders
299 (Brearley et al. 2012); the study utilised hair as a sample matrix for monitoring GC metabolites, which
300 gives a seasonal GC metabolite pattern. In contrast to the seasonal patterns observed in hair, the use of
301 fGCM monitoring, as used in our study, can give a more acute (1 h – 2 days) description of the adrenal
302 activity of a species or population, allowing for an almost real-time assessment of physiological stress
303 experienced in a population. This will provide conservationists and researchers with an accurate, real-
304 time pattern of the physiological stress experienced by populations within altered habitats, leading to the
305 development of more robust conservation programs.

306

307 *Conclusion*

308 Our study confirmed the ability to monitor biologically relevant changes in the adrenal function of sugar
309 glider, using faeces as a matrix. The aim of this study was to determine the suitability of the tested EIAs
310 for monitoring fGCM concentrations in the sugar glider; in this regard, only the cortisol assay showed an
311 overall response exceeding 100 % of the calculated baseline level and seems to be the most suited out of
312 the five EIAs tested. This validated technique can now be employed to determine the physiological stress
313 experienced by free-ranging populations faced with a range of natural and anthropogenic stressors.

314

315 **Acknowledgements**

321

Conflict of interest

322

323   The authors declare no conflict of interest.

324

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562

Tables:

Table 1. Comparison of five enzyme immunoassays. The fGCM result obtained from the ACTH challenge using on two male and two female sugar gliders. Shown here are baseline fGCM concentrations prior to injection, as well as peak fGCM values and the percentage response from baseline values.

ID	Enzyme immunoassay														
	Cortisol			Corticosterone			5α-pregnane-3β,11β,21-triol-20-one			11-oxoaetiocholanolone I			11-oxoaetiocholanalone II		
	Baseline µg/g	Peak µg/g	% response	Baseline µg/g	Peak µg/g	% response	Baseline µg/g	Peak µg/g	% response	Baseline µg/g	Peak µg/g	% response	Baseline µg/g	Peak µg/g	% response
M1	0.14	0.69	398	0.74	1.08	46	8.06	12.77	58	29.51	39.38	33	5.27	9.28	76
M2	0.15	3.07	2055	0.67	1.04	55	4.48	6.09	36	6.94	12.39	79	2.63	2.60	-1
F1	0.18	0.47	157	0.62	0.99	61	5.89	14.71	150	18.14	17.26	-5	2.86	3.90	37
F2	1.50	1.50	0	1.01	1.45	43	12.99	16.02	23	52.71	73.28	36	9.63	17.92	86

Table 2. Time and intensity of peak fGCM response for each of the eight study animals following ACTH administration and separation event.

Individual sample numbers are given (N) as well as total numbers of males and females monitored.

Sex	Deviation from baseline unmanipulated period (%)	Time to peak response post ACTH administration (h)	Peak fGCM response ACTH injection (%)	Peak fGCM response Separation (%)
Sub-adult male	20	6.50 (N=2)	206	168
Adult male1	19	4.5 (N=3)	497	1248
Adult male2	19	8.0 (N=3)	1566	2413
Mean ± SD	19 ± 1 (n=3)	6.3 ± 1.8 (n=3)	756 ± 716 (n=3)	1276 ± 1123 (n=3)
Female1	23	1.5 (N=1)	91	1655
Female2	29	4.0 (N=2)	32	-17
Female3	18	10.5 (N=5)	69	2090
Female4	14	4.0 (N=2)	1290	26
Female5	25	2.0 (N=2)	681	862
Mean ± SD	22 ± 6 (n=5)	4.4 ± 3.6 (n=5)	433 ± 549 (n=5)	923 ± 947 (n=5)

Figure legends

Figure 1. Relative change (%) of fGCMs following ACTH administration observed in two male (A, B) and two female (C, D) sugar gliders using five different enzyme immunoassays.

Figure 2. Relative change (%) of fGCMs following the separation event in all eight study animals using the cortisol enzyme immunoassay.
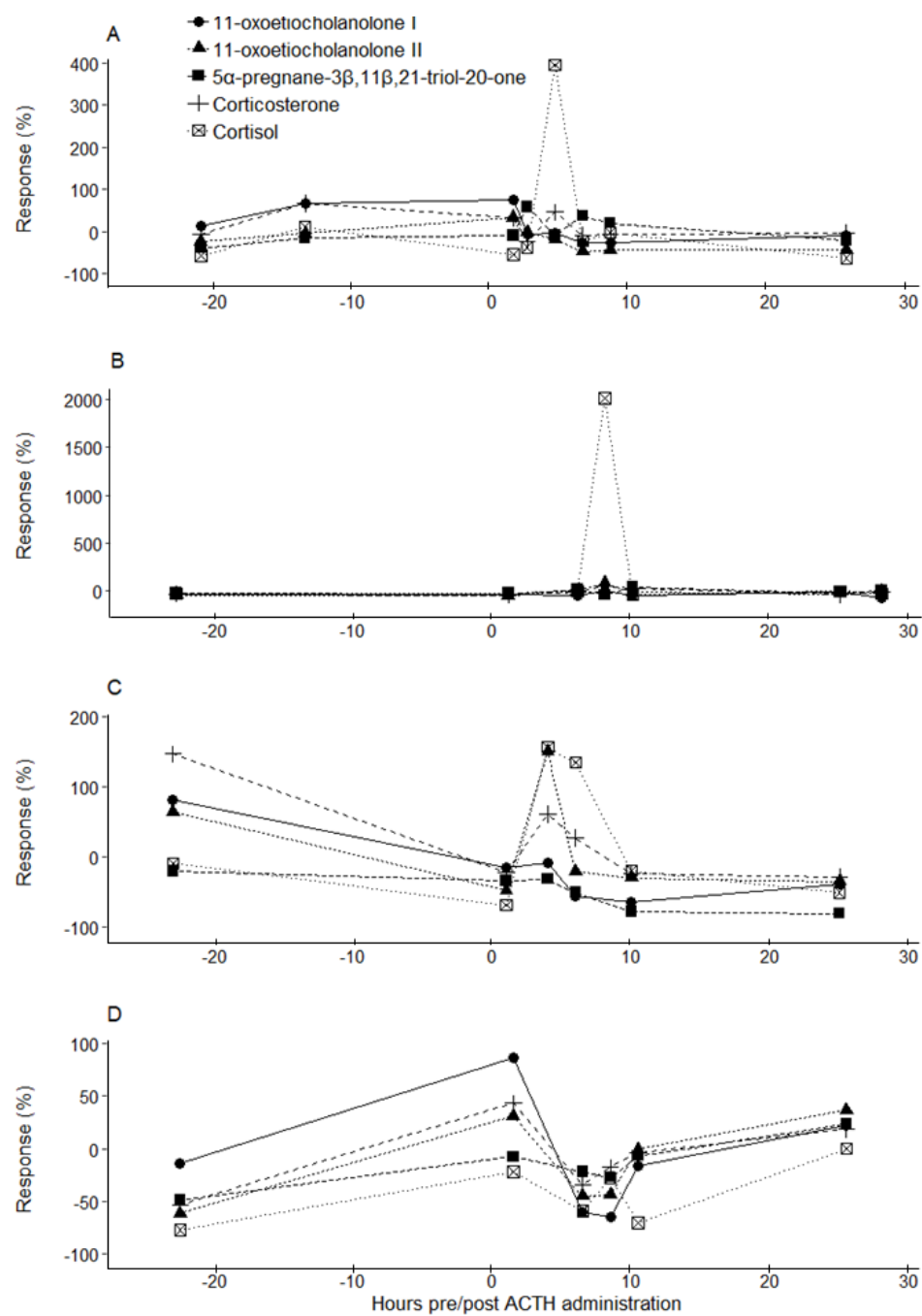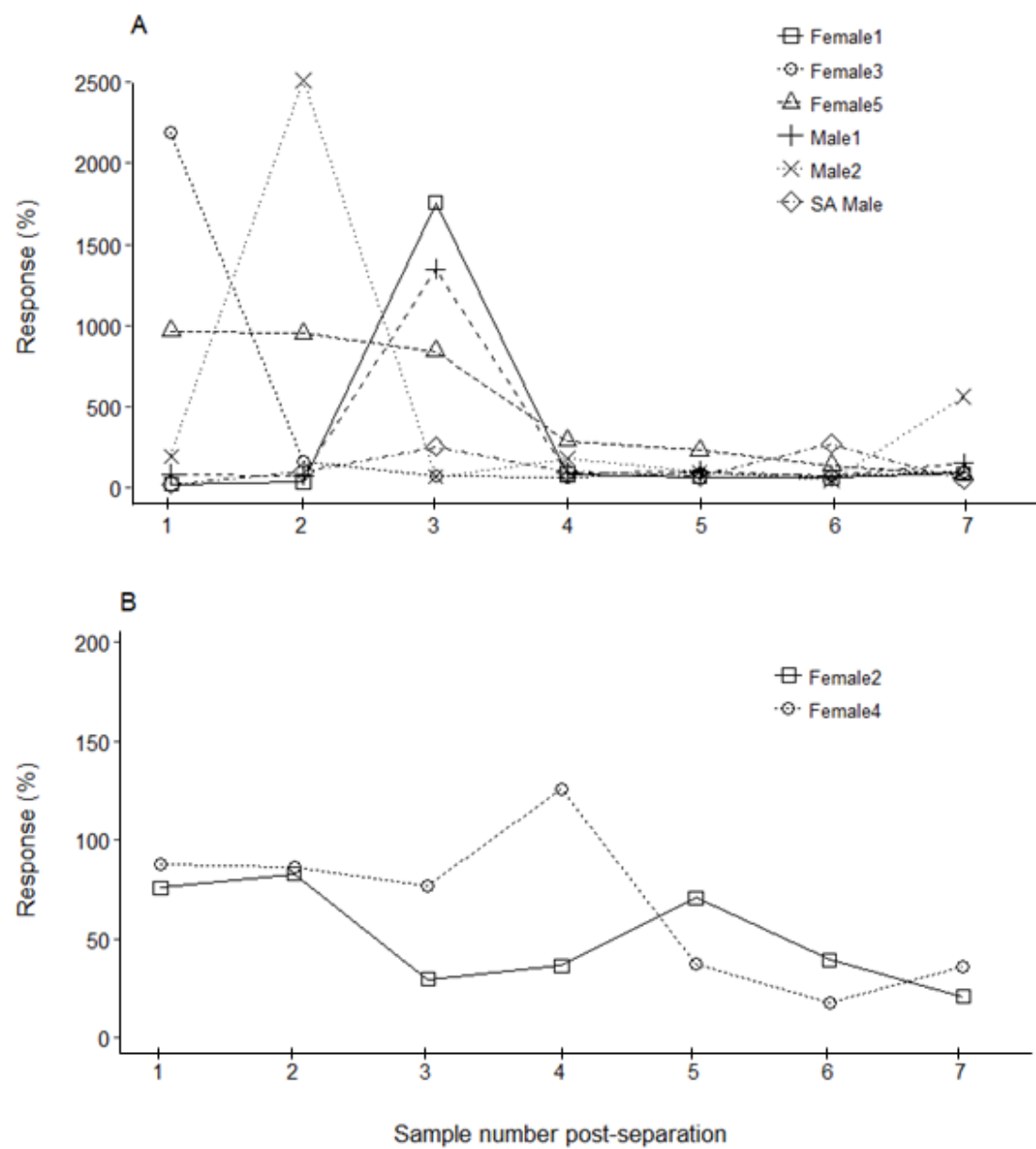
Figure 1

Figure 2