



WEST NILE VIRUS ANTIBODIES IN WILD BIRDS OF PREY FROM THE NORTH OF PORTUGAL

Filipa Loureiro^{1,2*}, Luís Cardoso^{2,3}, Ana C. Matos^{4,5}, Manuela Matos⁶, Cristina Pintado^{4,5}, Filipe Silva^{1,2,3} and Ana C. Coelho^{2,3}

¹Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre (GRAS), Veterinary Teaching Hospital (HVUTAD), University of Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro (UTAD), Vila Real, PT; ²Animal and Veterinary Research Centre (CECAV), Associate Laboratory for Animal and Veterinary Sciences (AL4Animals), UTAD, Vila Real, PT; ³Department of Veterinary Sciences, School of Agrarian and Veterinary Sciences (ECAV), UTAD, Vila Real, PT; ⁴Research Centre for Natural Resources, Environment and Society (CERNAS), Polytechnic Institute of Castelo Branco, Castelo Branco, PT; ⁵Quality of Life in the Rural World (Q-RURAL), Polytechnic Institute of Castelo Branco, Castelo Branco, Portugal; ⁶Centre for the Research and Technology of Agro-Environmental and Biological Sciences (CITAB), UTAD, Vila Real, PT

Introduction

West Nile Virus (WNV) is a mosquito-borne arbovirus spread worldwide, with an enzootic cycle among ornithophilic mosquitoes and birds. Rising temperatures, droughts and water shortage, and the increased movement of people and goods around the world, have facilitated and increased the risk of transmission of this virus in European countries. Seroepidemiological surveys of WNV are useful to understand the real spread of the virus in wild populations and prevent contagion to humans.

Materials and methods

Samples from 91 birds, of 25 different species and 10 different orders, were tested for antibodies to WNV using a commercial ELISA serological kit. Most of the birds were from the North of Portugal (Fig.1), and three were of unknown origin.

Results

Thirteen samples (14.3%; 7.8%, 95% CI: 7.8-23.2%) turned out positive for WNV antibodies (Fig.2). We would like to highlight the high prevalence found in owls. i.e. tawny owl, *Strix aluco* (n=6; 40.0%; 95% CI: 16.3-67.8) and barn owl, *Tyto alba* (n=3; 27.3%; 95% CI: 6.0-61.0%).

Discussion and conclusion

The most frequent transmission pathway of WNV infection in birds is through mosquito bite, previously infected by feeding on a viraemic bird or another animal. West Nile Virus has been isolated from other hematophagous ectoparasites, and the occurrence of several arthropods in nocturnal raptors has already been reported. Mosquito feeding preferences may be influenced by distinct factors. In most species of owls, the highest peak of body temperature is reached during the night period, coinciding with the maximum mosquito activity. This group of birds has also a weaker protective behaviour, since they stand quiet in the nests or perches for long periods. This is a seroprevalence study, and the possibility of cross-reactivity with related flaviviruses, such as dengue virus and tick-borne encephalitis virus, cannot be ignored.

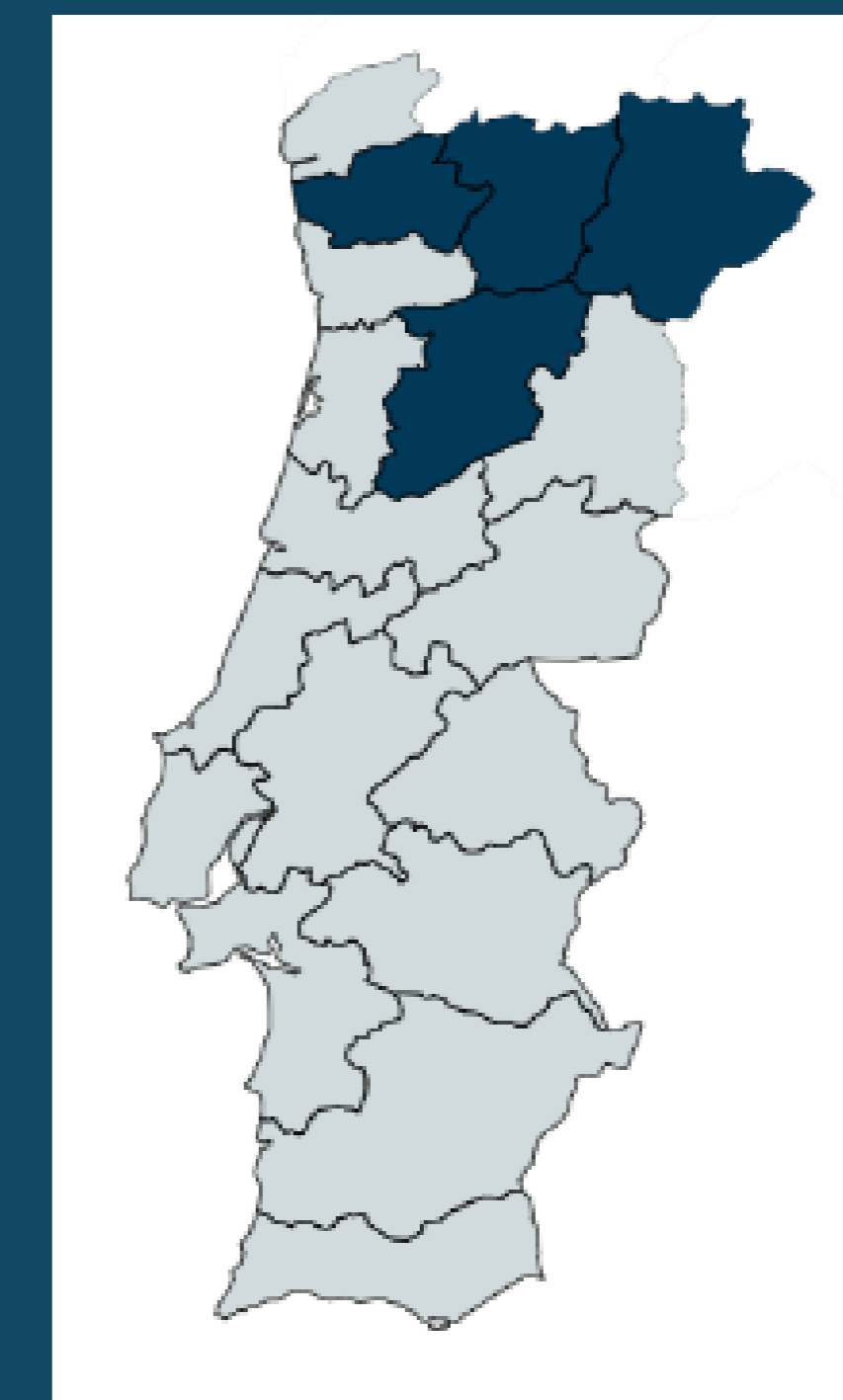


Fig.1 Birds tested came from the districts of Braga, Bragança, Vila Real and Viseu.

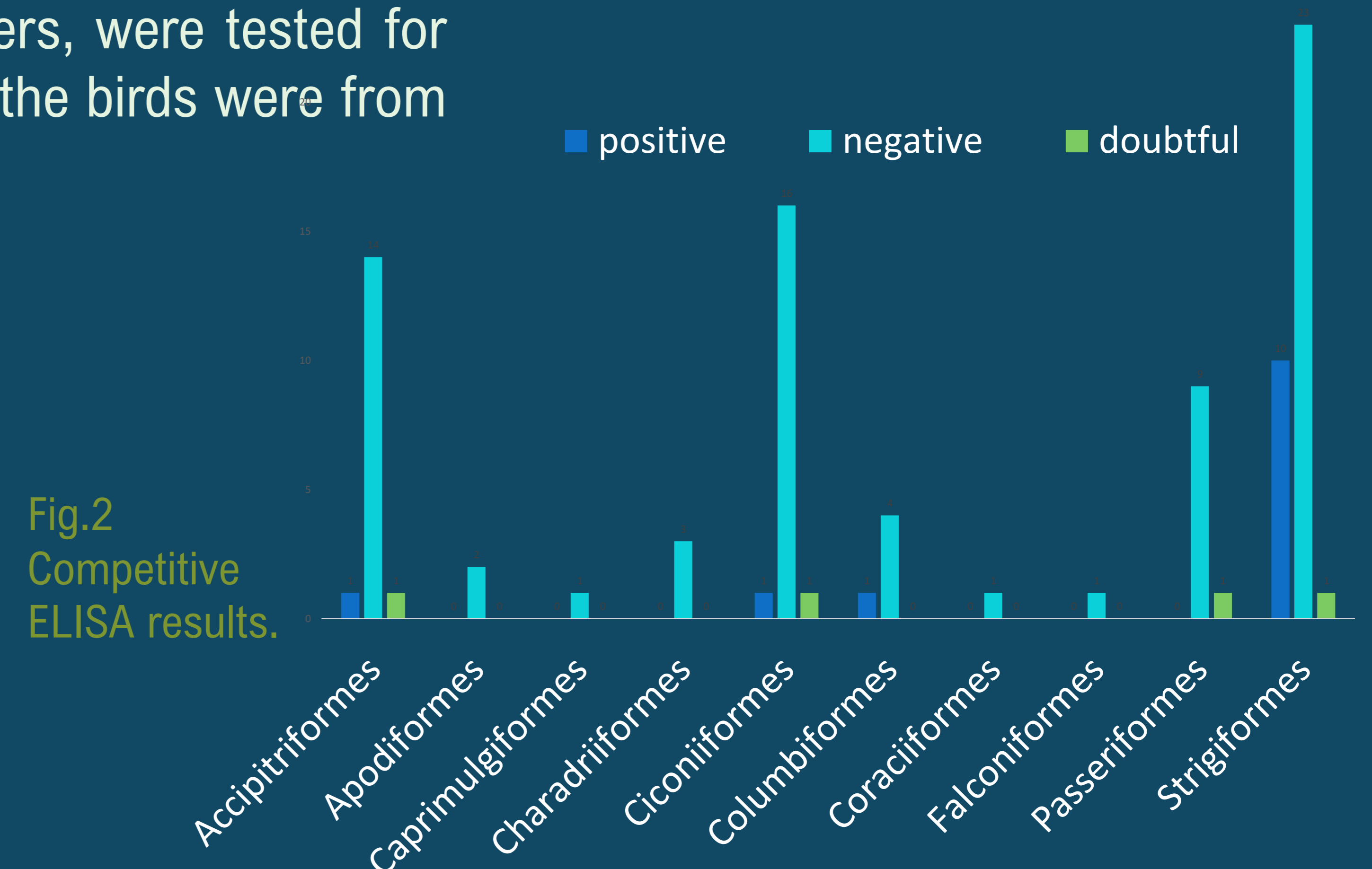


Fig.2 Competitive ELISA results.

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