Separation of monophyletic groups into distinct genera should consider phenotypic discontinuities: the case of Lasiurini (Chiroptera: Vespertilionidae)

ROBERTO LEONAN M. NOVAES1,2,3, GUILHERME S. T. GARBINO1, VINÍCIUS C. CLÁUDIO2 & RICARDO MORATELLI1

1Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Instituto de Biologia, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Biodiversidade e Biologia Evolutiva, CEP 21941-902, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil
2Fundação Oswaldo Cruz, Fiocruz Mata Atlântica, CEP 22713-375, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil
3Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Instituto de Ciências Biológicas, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Zoologia, CEP 31270-901, Belo Horizonte, MG, Brazil
4Universidade Federal de São Carlos, Centro de Ciências Biológicas e da Saúde, CEP 13565-905, São Carlos, SP, Brazil
5Corresponding author. E-mail: robertoleonan@gmail.com

“Given consistency with its proper basis, classification should be as stable as possible, changed only when changing knowledge tends to make it definitely less useful or reveals inconsistency”

George Gaylord Simpson (1961)

Baird et al. (2015) split Lasiurus into three distinct genera (Aeorestes, Dasypterus and Lasiurus) based on tree topology and divergence times for the tribe Lasiurini. This arrangement has not been widely adopted by the scientific community and was criticized by Ziegler et al. (2016). More recently, Baird et al. (2017) reinforced the taxonomic arrangement of Lasiurini comprised by three genera. Baird et al. (2015, 2017) provided the most comprehensive phylogenetic analyses of Lasiurus and offer important insights on the phylogeny and alpha-taxonomy of the group. However, we disagree with the taxonomic arrangement proposed at the genus level and explain our point below.

Baird et al. (2015, 2017) recovered Lasiurini as a monophyletic group with three internal clades (see Baird et al. 2015:1262, fig. 5), which are equivalent to the three traditionally-recognized and informally-named species groups: red, hoary, and yellow bats. The split between yellow bats and the ancestor of red and hoary bats was estimated to have occurred ca. 12.2–26.5 Ma, followed by the subsequent split of red and hoary bats between 9.1 and 20.8 Ma (Baird et al. 2015). Their rationale for separating these clades into three distinct genera is based on genetic distances (obtained from the nucleotide substitution using the Kimura 2-parameter model); cranial features described by Tate (1942); and the argument that internal groups are already informally named as red bats, yellow bats, and hoary bats, and that these names should be reflected in the scientific nomenclature of the group (Baird et al. 2015). Here, we discuss point-to-point Baird et al.’s (2015, 2017) rationale to show the lack of support to recognize three different genera within Lasiurini. Firstly, genetic distance and divergence time are not evidence for recognizing different genera (see Garbino 2015), inasmuch as these categories are not comparable among taxa—for example, primate genus Tarsius is at least 45 Ma old, while Homo and Pan diverged from each other about 6 Ma. About the morphological distinction, Baird et al. (2015, 2017) do not report the skull characters that they judge useful to distinguish the three genera. Moreover, it is noteworthy that Tate (1942) did recognize two genera (not three) within Lasiurini based uniquely the occurrence of the upper second premolars (p2). Therefore, the skull differences cited by Baird et al. (2015) cannot be reassessed, and there are no clear phenotypic discontinuities supporting Tate’s (1942) hypothesis, which has been subsequently refuted (see Hoofer & Van Den Bussche 2003; Roehrs et al. 2010). Finally, the congruence between vernacular names and natural unities (i.e. clades) cannot be used as an argument to take taxonomic decisions.

Baird et al. (2017) reject the criticism of Ziegler et al. (2016) arguing that the subgenus category is frequently ignored, and that separation of Lasiurus into three genera would improve the taxonomy of the group, indicating the divergence among the main internal clades of Lasiurini. Considering only the genus-level taxonomy of Lasiurini, we disagree that the split of this well-defined genus will bring any clarification to the taxonomy because the genus has not been retrieved as paraphyletic and thus there is no need to split it into different genera based on a falsified premise of
monophyly. Besides, the arrangement recognizing *Aeorestes*, *Dasypterus* and *Lasiurus* as subgenera of *Lasiurus* would represent better the topology found by Baird et al. (2015), as this arrangement conveys the information that there are three monophyletic groups within *Lasiurus*.

We agree that clades may be separated into different genera if well-marked phenotypic discontinuities are detected among them. However, the decision will always be arbitrary, but if supported by a suite of consistent characters, preferably from multiple datasets, it is more likely that the proposed arrangement will be accepted by the scientific community. In this case, Baird et al.’s (2015, 2017) arrangement into three distinct genera of Lasiurini is not the most appropriate decision, because it attributes unnecessary weight to clades whose phenotypic distinction is merely superficial. Thus, there arrangement does not add any information for the current understanding of the evolutionary history of the group. In addition, it also introduces nomenclatural instability, impairing scientific communication and online indexing (e.g., an exact search in Google Scholar for "Lasiurus cinereus" yields over 5,000 results). The assignment of other names to *Lasiurus* may give the impression of a degree of phylogenetic differentiation that does represent the established knowledge. Based on the lack of support for Baird et al.’s (2015, 2017) hypothesis, and following the principle of stability of the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature (1999), we strongly suggest that all Lasiurini species be kept under the genus *Lasiurus*. To better reflect the topology found by the authors, maintain stability, and avoid the use of informal names, we recommend following Ziegler et al. (2016) who consider *Aeorestes* and *Dasypterus* as subgenera of *Lasiurus*.

Rather than defining genera and discussing the taxonomy of *Lasiurus*, our proposal is to reinforce the idea that if a nomenclatural change does not alter the conception and understanding of a taxon, the most parsimonious decision is to maintain the accepted arrangement.

References cited