



Conserved behavioral circuits govern high-speed decision-making in wild fish shoals

Andrew M. Hein^{a,b,1}, Michael A. Gil^{a,b,c}, Colin R. Twomey^d, Iain D. Couzin^{e,f,g}, and Simon A. Levin^{h,i}

^aSouthwest Fisheries Science Center, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Santa Cruz, CA 95060; ^bInstitute of Marine Sciences, University of California, Santa Cruz, CA 95060; ^cDepartment of Environmental Science & Policy, University of California, Davis, CA 95616; ^dDepartment of Biology, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104; ^eDepartment of Biology, University of Konstanz, 78457 Konstanz, Germany; ^fDepartment of Collective Behaviour, Max Planck Institute for Ornithology, 78464 Konstanz, Germany; ^gChair of Biodiversity and Collective Behaviour, University of Konstanz, 78457 Konstanz, Germany; ^hDepartment of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08544; and ⁱPrinceton Environmental Institute, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08544

Edited by Raghavendra Gadagkar, Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, India, and approved October 12, 2018 (received for review May 28, 2018)

To evade their predators, animals must quickly detect potential threats, gauge risk, and mount a response. Putative neural circuits responsible for these tasks have been isolated in laboratory studies. However, it is unclear whether and how these circuits combine to generate the flexible, dynamic sequences of evasion behavior exhibited by wild, freely moving animals. Here, we report that evasion behavior of wild fish on a coral reef is generated through a sequence of well-defined decision rules that convert visual sensory input into behavioral actions. Using an automated system to present visual threat stimuli to fish in situ, we show that individuals initiate escape maneuvers in response to the perceived size and expansion rate of an oncoming threat using a decision rule that matches dynamics of known loom-sensitive neural circuits. After initiating an evasion maneuver, fish adjust their trajectories using a control rule based on visual feedback to steer away from the threat and toward shelter. These decision rules accurately describe evasion behavior of fish from phylogenetically distant families, illustrating the conserved nature of escape decision-making. Our results reveal how the flexible behavioral responses required for survival can emerge from relatively simple, conserved decision-making mechanisms.

predator-prey interactions | neural circuit | neuroethology | decision-making | evasion

Avoiding predators is an essential task for wild animals (1). Because fleeing at the wrong time can be costly (2, 3), theory predicts that animals have evolved mechanisms for initiating escapes when the threat of attack is high, and suppressing them when the threat is low (2, 4). Once an animal decides to flee, the most favorable evasion trajectory depends on the actions of its predator and features of the landscape (3, 5), implying the need for continuous behavioral adjustments in response to sensory feedback (6).

Despite the fact that these tasks can differ considerably from one setting to another, laboratory experiments suggest that a wide range of animal species translate sensory information into evasive actions using strategies that are similar at both the neural and behavioral levels (7). These similarities imply the existence of conserved mechanisms for detecting and responding to predators that govern animal escape decisions in the wild (8). A major challenge in testing this hypothesis, however, has been the difficulty of linking sensory and decision-making mechanisms studied in the laboratory (9–12) to behaviors observed in the field (13). This has proven challenging, in part, due to the difficulty of reconstructing and experimentally manipulating the sensory cues perceived by wild, freely moving animals (14, 15). Consequently, the connection between evasion behaviors of wild animals and the mechanisms that underlie them remains a missing piece in our understanding of animal decision-making (1).

To address this deficit, we studied the predator evasion behavior of wild coral reef fish in Moorea, French Polynesia (Fig. 1A).

These ecologically important species forage in shallow reef flats where they are vulnerable to predators such as reef sharks (16), moray eels (17), and human spearfishers (18). Reef fish forage in loose, mixed-species groups that can vary in size by over an order of magnitude (18). The size of these groups appears to affect evasion decisions of individual fish (18, 19), but the sensory mechanisms that guide these decisions are poorly understood.

Fish could perceive predators and one another using a variety of sensory cues, including pressure changes (20), sounds (21), or olfactory stimuli. Visual cues, in particular, appear to be important in triggering and guiding fish escape behavior (11, 12). Laboratory studies of model fish species, for example, have identified a system of neural circuits in the brain that responds strongly and selectively to looming visual stimuli—expanding images that simulate objects approaching the eye (10, 11, 22). This selectivity for looming objects—also present in amphibians, birds, insects, and humans—has been hypothesized to provide a conserved mechanism for detecting an approaching predator in complex natural scenes (7, 8). Furthermore, some loom-sensitive pathways can integrate the motion of an approaching object with other features in a visual scene (23). These decision-making circuits could, thus, serve to both detect predators (7) and integrate visual information about risk such as the locations of nearby individuals that share common predators (6). However, the degree to which loom-sensitive circuits govern escape decision-making of wild animals is not currently known.

Significance

To survive, animals must quickly detect and respond to predators. However, the rules wild animals use to translate sensory cues into evasion decisions remain largely unknown. We developed an automated system to present visual threat stimuli to mixed-species groups of foraging fish in a coral reef. Using hundreds of stimulus presentations to fish from nine families, we show that escape decisions are governed by a conserved set of decision-making rules that transform sensory input into evasive actions. Our methodology allows us to quantitatively analyze these rules, revealing both how they map onto previously studied neural circuits and how they function under dynamic natural conditions.

Author contributions: A.M.H., M.A.G., C.R.T., I.D.C., and S.A.L. designed research; A.M.H. performed research; A.M.H., M.A.G., and C.R.T. contributed new reagents/analytic tools; A.M.H. and C.R.T. analyzed data; and A.M.H., M.A.G., C.R.T., I.D.C., and S.A.L. wrote the paper.

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

This article is a PNAS Direct Submission.

Published under the PNAS license.

¹To whom correspondence should be addressed. Email: ahein@ucsc.edu.

This article contains supporting information online at www.pnas.org/lookup/suppl/doi:10.1073/pnas.1809140115/-DCSupplemental.

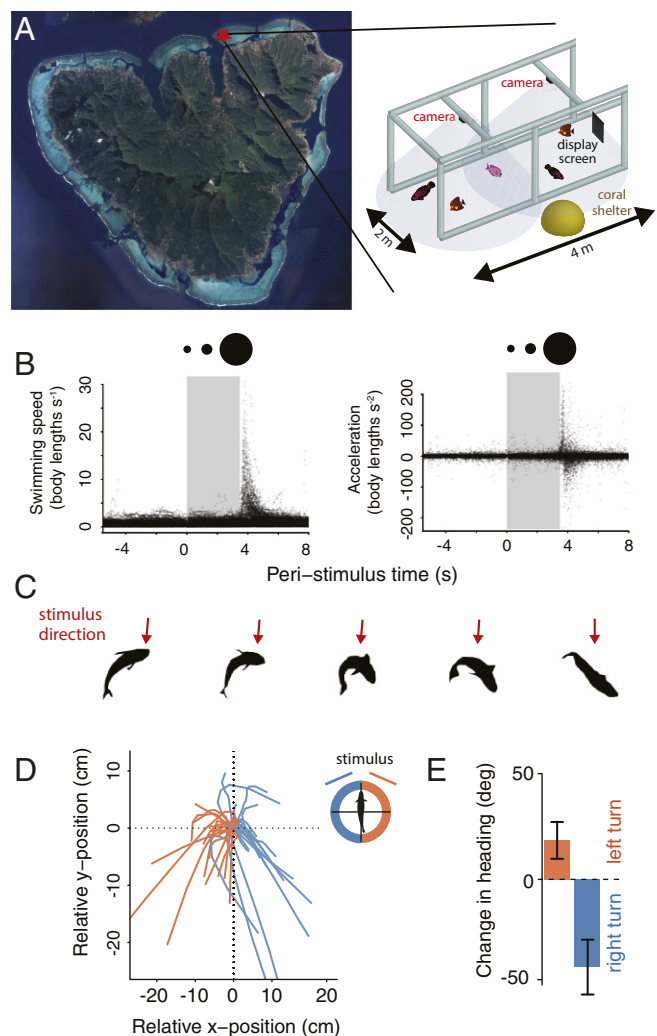


Fig. 1. Looming visual stimuli trigger evasion maneuvers in wild fish. (A) Experimental arena deployed in coral reef. Satellite image courtesy of Google Earth, © 2018 Digital Globe and CNES/Airbus. Data courtesy of LDEO-Columbia, NSF, NOAA, SIO, US Navy, NGA, and GEMCO. (B) Swimming speeds (Left) and accelerations (Right) of fish before, during (gray band), and after presentation of loom stimulus. (C) Sequence of body postures during response of a parrotfish (*C. sordidus*) before accelerating. The arrows indicate the frame measurements in the horizontal dimensions indicated by “2m” and “4m” in A, Right. (D) Escape trajectories of fish that viewed stimulus in the right (orange) and left (blue) visual hemisphere (first 150 ms of trajectories shown). (E) Mean flight angle (± 2 SE) of escape trajectories shown in D (LRT using von Mises distribution: $p = 2.10 \times 10^{-5}$).

To investigate these mechanisms, we engineered a high-throughput system to present looming visual threats to coral reef fish in situ. Our experimental system consisted of a camera frame deployed in a reef flat, within which we positioned a tablet computer to display visual stimuli (Fig. 1A). The frame was placed alongside a colony of mounding coral (*Porites* sp.), which provided a natural structural refuge for fish (18). At predetermined times, a looming stimulus was displayed on the tablet screen, and fish were recorded by downward-facing video cameras. Fish locations and headings were subsequently tracked using custom computer vision software (see *SI Appendix* for full experimental protocol).

Results

The looming stimulus triggered rapid accelerations and swimming speeds far outside the range observed before stimulus presentation (Fig. 1B and *Movie S1*) in 12 phylogenetically

diverse species, including surgeonfish (*Acanthurus nigrofasciatus*, *Ctenochaetus striatus*, *Zebrasoma scopas*), Moorish idols (*Zanclus cornatus*), parrotfish (*Scarus psittacus*, *Chlorurus sordidus*), pufferfish (*Arothron meleagris*), butterflyfish (*Chaetodon vagabundus*, *Forcipiger flavissimus*), wrasses (*Halichoeres hortulanus*), triggerfish (*Rhinecanthus aculeatus*), and goatfish (*Mullidichthys avolineatus*). Because fish swam freely through the arena, the position of the stimulus in their visual fields was not fixed. However, the initial direction of escape trajectories (Fig. 1C) was predictable based on the location of the stimulus in an individual’s visual field before its response (Fig. 1D). Individuals that perceived the stimulus in the right visual hemisphere turned to the left, and vice versa (Fig. 1E). These rapid turns moved the animal’s head out of the perceived path of the looming object (4), and are consistent with the prediction that prey should avoid high-speed attacks by turning (3, 5), a strategy known as the turning gambit. This highly polar turning response (Fig. 1C) also resembles responses to looming objects reported in laboratory studies of Mauthner cell- and reticulospinal circuit-mediated escape responses of zebrafish (10, 22), potentially implicating these circuits in mediating the behavior of wild fish, as we discuss in more detail in *Initiation of Escape Responses* below.

Initiation of Escape Responses. Not all stimulus presentations triggered escape maneuvers. To determine how the probability of response depended on the sensory cues perceived by each fish, we reconstructed the perceived sizes and locations of the looming stimulus and neighboring fish in the visual field of each fish over the course of the trial (Fig. 2A and *Movie S2*). We used these visual features to construct a model of escape decision-making that predicted probability of response, P : $P = 1/(1 + e^{-D})$, where D is a decision function that describes how a fish integrates the sensory cues available to it (see *SI Appendix* for details and full model formulation).

For animals that forage in groups, the risk posed by an attacking predator depends not only on the predator’s speed and initial location but also on the presence and locations of other vulnerable individuals (6). In past work, we found that the propensity of coral reef fish to flee from foraging areas when confronted with threatening stimuli depends on the density of other fish in the area (18). However, we were unable to identify the mechanisms by which fish perceive one another and modify escape decision-making. Motivated by our previous results and the finding that these species respond strongly to visual cues (Fig. 1), we hypothesized that fish decide whether to flee from a looming object by integrating the perceived visual expansion rate of the object (7, 24) with visual information about the presence and locations of nearby individuals [i.e., “neighbors” (6, 12)]. Such a decision rule can be captured by the function $D = \delta + \alpha S' \exp[\sum_i \gamma_i F_i]$, where δ and α are constants, S' is the perceived expansion rate of the looming object (8, 24), F_i represent visual features of the scene (e.g., perceived sizes of neighbors; Fig. 2A), and γ_i are parameters that determine how changes in F_i affect the decision to respond. We compared a large set of models containing different combinations of visual features, F_i , to determine how a fish’s decision to respond depends on the visual cues it perceives (*SI Appendix*). To ensure that we were modeling fish that responded directly to the stimulus rather than to escape responses of other fish, we restricted this analysis to first responders (first fish to respond in a given trial) and nonresponders (full dataset contained 84 total responders, 47 first responders, and 574 nonresponders). First responder (FR) and nonresponder (NR) counts by family were Acanthuridae (FR = 4, NR = 238), Scaridae (FR = 23, NR = 203), Zanclidae (FR = 13, NR = 43), Labridae (FR = 3, NR = 40), Chaetodontidae (FR = 1, NR = 24), Balistidae (FR = 1, NR = 15), Mullidae (FR = 1, NR = 9), Tetrodontidae (FR = 1, NR = 3), and Serranidae (FR = 0, NR = 2). Acanthuridae, Scaridae, and Zanclidae were

constructed a camera frame from polyvinyl carbonate piping and deployed it in a shallow (~2.5 m depth) reef flat, comprising primarily pavement and coral rubble habitat. This habitat is typical of foraging areas throughout the ecosystem (18). The frame was outfitted with two downward-facing cameras (Hero 3 White; GoPro), allowing us to monitor the area from above. Stimuli were displayed using a tablet computer (iPad Air; Apple Inc.) in a waterproof case, which was mounted vertically to a stand constructed from concrete blocks (Movie S1). Data recorded by the two overhead cameras were combined after projecting all tracks into the field coordinate frame using markers placed at known positions on the base of the camera frame. Camera resolution was 720 by 1,280 pixels.

The looming stimulus was motivated by previous laboratory studies of fish startle responses (10, 11, 22, 35). This stimulus was constructed to simulate an object (a predator) approaching the region in front of the tablet screen using a black ellipse (height = $1.5 \times$ width) that expanded on a white background (Movie S1). When viewed from a distance of 25 cm directly in front of the screen, the looming image corresponded to an object of height 15.3 cm and width 10.2 cm approaching from a starting distance of 6.25 m at a constant speed of $1.78 \text{ m}\cdot\text{s}^{-1}$ (duration 3.5 s). These

parameters are related to the displayed image height $h(t)$, by the equation $h(t) = \hat{h}/(1 + d_0 - vt/d_{\text{screen}})$, where \hat{h} is the virtual object true height, v is the virtual approach speed of the object, d_{screen} is the distance between the fish and the screen, and d_0 is the virtual starting distance of the approaching object.

A detailed description of experimental treatments, data processing, and analysis is provided in *S1 Appendix*. All experimental procedures were approved by the Princeton University Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS. We thank B. Martin, S. Munch, and E. Danner for useful comments. This work also benefited from conversations with J. Bak-Coleman. This work was supported by a National Science Foundation (NSF) Postdoctoral Research Fellowship (to M.A.G.) and a McDonnell Foundation Fellowship (to A.M.H.). I.D.C. acknowledges support from NSF Grant IOS-1355061, Office of Naval Research Grants N00014-09-1-1074 and N00014-14-1-0635, Army Research Office Grants W911NG-11-1-0385 and W911NF14-1-0431 (to I.D.C. and S.A.L.), the Struktur-und Innovationsfonds für die Forschung of the State of Baden-Württemberg, and the Max Planck Society. S.A.L. acknowledges Simons Foundation Grant 395890.

- Cooper WE, Blumstein DT (2015) *Escaping from Predators: An Integrative View of Escape Decisions* (Cambridge Univ Press, Cambridge, UK).
- Ydenberg RC, Dill LM (1986) The economics of fleeing from predators. *Adv Study Behav* 16:229–249.
- Wilson AM, et al. (2018) Biomechanics of predator-prey arms race in lion, zebra, cheetah, and impala. *Nature* 554:183–188.
- Domenici P (2010) Context-dependent variability in the components of fish escape response: Integrating locomotor performance and behavior. *J Exp Zool* 315:59–79.
- Howland HC (1974) Optimal strategies for predator avoidance: The relative importance of speed and maneuverability. *J Theor Biol* 47:333–350.
- Scott WL, Leonard NE (2018) Optimal evasive strategies for multiple interacting agents with motion constraints. *Automatica* 94:26–34.
- Fotowat H, Gabbiani F (2011) Collision detection as a model for sensory-motor integration. *Annu Rev Neurosci* 34:1–19.
- Peek MY, Card GM (2016) Comparative approaches to escape. *Curr Opin Neurobiol* 41:167–173.
- Klapoetke NC, et al. (2017) Ultra-selective looming detection from radial motion opponency. *Nature* 551:237–241.
- Dunn TW, et al. (2015) Neural circuits underlying visually evoked escapes in larval zebrafish. *Neuron* 85:1823–1834.
- Temizer I, Donovan JC, Baier H, Semmelhack JL (2015) A visual pathway for looming-evoked escape in larval zebrafish. *Curr Biol* 25:1823–1834.
- Rosenthal SB, Twomey CR, Hartnett AT, Wu HS, Couzin ID (2015) Revealing the hidden networks of interaction in mobile animal groups allows prediction of complex behavioral contagion. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA* 112:4690–4695.
- Stankowich T, Blumstein DT (2005) Fear in animals: A meta-analysis and review of risk assessment. *Proc R Soc B* 272:2627–2634.
- Amador Kane SA, Fulton AJ, Rosenthal LJ (2015) When hawks attack: Animal-borne video studies of goshawk pursuit and prey-evasion strategies. *J Exp Biol* 218:212–222.
- Brighton CH, Thomas ALR, Taylor GK (2017) Terminal attack trajectories of peregrine falcons are described by the proportional navigation guidance law of missiles. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA* 114:13495–13500.
- Gil MA, Zill J, Ponciano JM (2017) Context-dependent landscape of fear: Algal density elicits risky herbivory in a coral reef. *Ecology* 98:534–544.
- White JW, et al. (2010) Synthesizing mechanisms of density dependence in reef fishes: Behavior, habitat configuration, and observational scale. *Ecology* 91:1949–1961.
- Gil MA, Hein AM (2017) Social interactions among grazing reef fish drive material flux in a coral reef ecosystem. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA* 114:4703–4708.
- Januchowski-Hartley FA, Graham NA, Feary DA, Morove T, Cinner JE (2011) Fear of fishers: Human predation explains behavioral changes in coral reef fishes. *PLoS One* 6:e22761.
- Oteiza P, Odstrcil I, Lauder G, Portuges R, Engert F (2017) A novel mechanism for mechanosensory-based rheotaxis in larval zebrafish. *Nature* 547:445–448.
- Eaton RC, Emberley DS (1991) How stimulus direction determines the trajectory of the mauthner-initiated escape response in a teleost fish. *J Exp Biol* 161:469–487.
- Bhattacharyya K, McLean DL, MacIver MA (2017) Visual threat assessment and reticulospinal encoding of calibrated responses in larval zebrafish. *Curr Biol* 27:2751–2762.
- Silva AC, McMillan GA, Santos CP, Gray JR (2015) Background complexity affects response of a looming-sensitive neuron to object motion. *J Neurophysiol* 113:218–231.
- Hatsopoulos N, Gabbiani F, Laurent G (1995) Elementary computation of object approach by a wide-field visual neuron. *Science* 270:1000–1003.
- Marshall NJ, Jennings K, McFarland WN, Loew ER, Losey GS (2013) Visual biology of Hawaiian coral reef fishes. III. Environmental light and an integrated approach to the ecology of reef fish vision. *Copeia* 3:467–480.
- Poggio T, Reichardt W (1973) A theory of the pattern induced flight orientation of the fly *Musca domestica*. *Kybernetik* 12:185–203.
- Lin H, Ros IG, Biewener AA (2014) Through the eyes of a bird: Modeling visually guided obstacle flight. *J R Soc Interface* 11:20140239.
- Gahtan E, Tanger P, Baier H (2005) Visual prey capture in larval zebrafish is controlled by identified reticulospinal neurons downstream of the tectum. *J Neurosci* 25:9294–9303.
- Land MF, Collett TS (1974) Chasing behaviour of houseflies (*Fannia canicularis*). *J Comp Physiol* 89:331–357.
- Green DM, Swets JA (1966) *Signal Detection Theory and Psychophysics* (Wiley, New York).
- Salay LD, Ishiko N, Huberman AD (2018) A midline thalamic circuit determines reactions to visual threat. *Nature* 557:183–189.
- Gurarie E, Ovaskainen O (2012) Towards a general formalization of encounter rates in ecology. *Theor Ecol* 6:189–202.
- Pawar S, Dell AI, Savage VM (2012) Dimensionality of consumer search space drives trophic interaction strengths. *Nature* 486:485–489.
- Courchamp F, Clutton-Brock T, Grenfell B (1999) Inverse density dependence and the allele effect. *Trends Ecol Evol* 14:405–410.
- Preuss T, Osei-Bonsu PE, Weiss SA, Wang C, Faber DS (2006) Neural representation of object approach in a decision-making motor circuit. *J Neurosci* 26:3454–3464.