How dim is dim? Precision of the celestial compass in moonlight and sunlight

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Prominent in the sky, but not visible to humans, is a pattern of polarized skylight formed around both the Sun and the Moon. Dung beetles are, at present, the only animal group known to use the much dimmer polarization pattern formed around the Moon as a compass cue for maintaining travel direction. However, the Moon is not visible every night and the intensity of the celestial polarization pattern gradually declines as the Moon wanes. Therefore, for nocturnal orientation on all moonlit nights, the absolute sensitivity of the dung beetle’s polarization detector may limit the precision of this behaviour. To test this, we studied the straight-line foraging behaviour of the nocturnal ball-rolling dung beetle Scarabaeus satyrus to establish when the Moon is too dim—and the polarization pattern too weak—to provide a reliable cue for orientation. Our results show that celestial orientation is as accurate during crescent Moon as it is during full Moon. Moreover, this orientation accuracy is equal to that measured for diurnal species that orient under the 100 million times brighter polarization pattern formed around the Sun. This indicates that, in nocturnal species, the sensitivity of the optical polarization compass can be greatly increased without any loss of precision.

Keywords: orientation; polarized light; dung beetle; vision; navigation

1. INTRODUCTION

At night, the Moon overwhelms all other sources of natural light in the sky and is used by many nocturnal navigators as an orientation cue [1–9]. However, instead of relying on the disc of the Moon for its orientation, dung beetles rely primarily on the celestial pattern of polarized light centred upon it [10,11]. After locating a dung pat, the dung beetle quickly forms a ball and rolls it away. To avoid competition, the beetle must move away from the dung pat as swiftly and efficiently as possible, i.e. along a straight-line path [10–13]. On nights with a full Moon, the crepuscular dung beetle Scarabaeus zambesianus prolongs its activity by switching from using the polarization pattern of the setting Sun as an orientation cue, to using the polarization pattern of the rising Moon [11]. When the Moon no longer rises within 30 minutes sunset, S. zambesianus ceases its activity after twilight. However, its more nocturnal relative, Scarabaeus satyrus—which becomes active 1 h after sunset—needs to forage without the benefit of any cues from the Sun. The pattern of polarization present around a full Moon is up to 1 million times dimmer than that which is present around the Sun during the day [14], and on nights with a small crescent Moon, the celestial polarization pattern is almost 100 times dimmer again [15,16]. How does the orientation precision of these crepuscular and nocturnal beetles compare to that of their diurnal relatives? At which phases of the Moon are the celestial polarization patterns still bright enough to support the straight-line orientation without any loss of precision?

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

(a) Animals and field site

Dung beetles (Coleoptera: Scarabaeinae) were collected using dung-baited pit-fall traps. The rolling behaviours of Garetta unicolor, Scarabaeus rugosus, Kheper lamarki, Pachylomerus femoralis (all diurnal), S. zambesianus and S. satyrus (crepuscular and nocturnal, respectively) were studied within the game reserve ‘Stonehenge’, 70 km northwest of Vryburg in the Northwest Province of South Africa. All experiments were performed between February and March 2008 and 2009. During these periods, the Moon phase varied from full to almost new, and rose progressively later in the evening.

(b) Precision of the diurnal and the nocturnal celestial compass

(i) Precision of straight-line orientation

Beetles were observed rolling on a levelled circular arena measuring 3 m in diameter. The arena was enclosed within a 1 m high, featureless circular wall to shade the...
A Perspex ramp (12 cm wide × 20 cm long, 5 cm drop) was placed in the path of a ball-rolling beetle. The ramp surface was covered in a sandpaper to give the beetle traction during up-hill rolling. Beetles rolled up the ramp and fell off the end, losing control of their ball. This usually caused the beetle to climb on top of its ball and rotate around its own axis before resuming rolling. The absolute differences between the original and final angles of rolling were analysed to determine the fidelity to the original rolling direction. A difference of 0° indicated perfect fidelity.

(iii) Correction for rotation
Beetles rolling balls were placed at the edge of a sand-covered wooden disc (42 cm diameter) and allowed to roll towards the disc centre. As the beetle reached the centre of the disc, it was rotated through 90° either clockwise or anticlockwise direction. The absolute angular difference between the original path and the path following rotation was analysed to determine the ability of the beetle to correct for this rotation. A difference of 0° indicated perfect correction.

3. Precision of the nocturnal celestial compass at different phases of the Moon
Over a period of 3.5 weeks in the field—including nights with a full, quarter and crescent Moon—we recorded the tracks of S. satyrus rolling in a level, circular arena (figure 1: arena perimeter seen from above) are reconstructed from video footage recorded under a sky lit by (a) full Moon (average length of the tracks, L = 132.6 ± 1.7 cm; rolling speed, V = 4.5 ± 0.3 cm s⁻¹; n = 25), (b) quarter Moon (L = 135.1 ± 2.1 cm; V = 3.8 ± 0.3 cm s⁻¹; n = 26), (c) crescent Moon (L = 134.5 ± 1.4 cm; V = 3.9 ± 0.2 cm s⁻¹; n = 20) and (d) on a moonless night (L = 185.1 ± 12.2 cm; V = 3.8 ± 0.3 cm s⁻¹; n = 25). The diameter of the arena was 3 m. A 1 m high wall around the arena prevented a direct view of the Moon or terrestrial landmarks. The tracking of the beetle began once it rolled out from the inner, 30 cm diameter circle. The tracks were analysed for speed and length. The orientation performance—as measured by these two parameters—remains consistent for as long as there is a Moon present in the sky (ANOVA, L: p = 0.33, V: p = 0.14). The tracks do, however, become significantly longer (more curved) if the beetles roll on a moonless night (ANOVA, p < 0.001). On these nights, there is no polarization pattern present in the sky to guide the beetles along a given route and their orientation along a straight line becomes significantly impaired. A moonless night is defined as a night when the Moon is lower than 18° below the horizon and the reflected light from this celestial body is no longer visible in the night sky.

Table 1. Details of experimental conditions for measurements of the precision of straight-line orientation of the ball-rolling beetle S. satyrus under different lunar phases.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>lunar phase</th>
<th>date (2008)</th>
<th>days after new Moon (n)</th>
<th>time of day</th>
<th>light intensity (cd m⁻²)</th>
<th>lunar altitude (degrees)</th>
<th>sky condition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>full Moon</td>
<td>19th Feb</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21.40–22.30</td>
<td>4 × 10⁻²</td>
<td>44–46</td>
<td>thin clouds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>quarter Moon</td>
<td>29th Feb</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>00.10–02.00</td>
<td>3 × 10⁻³</td>
<td>23–46</td>
<td>thin clouds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>new Moon</td>
<td>4th Mar</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>03.50–04.40</td>
<td>4 × 10⁻⁴</td>
<td>24–35</td>
<td>clear sky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no Moon</td>
<td>2nd Mar</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>22.10–23.05</td>
<td>7 × 10⁻⁵</td>
<td>−26–−18</td>
<td>clear sky</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The beetles do roll somewhat more slowly at quarter Moon (3.8 ± 0.3 cm s⁻¹), crescent Moon (3.9 ± 0.2 cm s⁻¹) and on moonless nights (3.8 ± 0.4 cm s⁻¹), but not significantly so (ANOVA, p = 0.14). The consistency in rolling speeds at light intensities that differ by 2 log units (full Moon to crescent Moon) implies that the temporal resolution of the dung beetle compass does not limit their ability to analyse the celestial polarization pattern at these light intensities.

4. ANALYSIS OF DIM POLARIZED LIGHT PATTERNS

The problem of orienting by the dim polarization pattern of the crescent Moon—rather than by the bright polarization pattern that spans the sky during the day—is that many fewer photons are available to analyse the polarization direction of light. Signal reliability can be improved with an eye design of high optical sensitivity, but this often comes at the cost of either spatial or temporal resolution [19–21]. A gradual loss of spatial resolution in a compass system should induce a growing navigational error that would finally make it impossible to move along a straight path [22]. However, the consistency of the beetles’ roll-path length at different phases of the Moon clearly shows that the optical compass of *S. satyrus* has overcome the constraints of decreasing light intensity.

One adaptation to increase the sensitivity of the polarized light detector in *S. satyrus* becomes obvious upon comparison of the rhabdoms in the dorsal rim area with those of a crepuscular and a diurnal dung beetle (figure 2). The wider rhabdoms in *S. satyrus* allow the receptors to collect more light, and thus increase their sensitivity [15]. A second strategy that *S. satyrus* may use to improve visual reliability as light intensity decreases is to sum photons over a longer period of time. The accuracy of straight-line orientation could then be maintained at the cost of moving progressively more slowly as light levels fall [23]. Analysis of the tracks in figure 1 reveals that the average rolling speed at full Moon is 4.5 ± 0.3 cm s⁻¹. The beetles do roll somewhat more slowly at quarter Moon (3.8 ± 0.3 cm s⁻¹), crescent Moon (3.9 ± 0.2 cm s⁻¹) and on moonless nights (3.8 ± 0.4 cm s⁻¹), but not significantly so (ANOVA, p = 0.14). The consistency in rolling speeds at light intensities that differ by 2 log units (full Moon to crescent Moon) implies that the temporal resolution of the dung beetle compass does not limit their ability to analyse the celestial polarization pattern at these light intensities.
5. PRECISION OF CELESTIAL ORIENTATION AT NIGHT AND DAY

The near-straight rolling paths of *S. satyrus*—as reconstructed in figure 1—leaves little room for improvement, suggesting that the precision of a compass that reads the polarization pattern from the Moon is as precise as one that reads the much brighter polarization pattern from the Sun. Dung beetles, however, do not normally roll over completely flat, level ground—like that of our experimental arena. Instead, they are constantly forced to deviate from their original course when negotiating obstacles or falling into ruts or hollows, disturbances that require frequent re-orientation to the original rolling direction. These corrections potentially pose a larger challenge to an orientation system than rolling on flat, level ground. In our second set of experiments, such challenges were investigated by exposing diurnal and nocturnal ball-rolling beetles to either an induced fall from a ramp, or a passive 90° rotation on a disc. The smaller the deviation between the original and the new direction of rolling, the better the orientation along a straight path.

After falling from the ramp, the beetles continued to roll in a direction that, on average, differed between 7° and 14° from their original direction of rolling (figure 3). Although there is no significant difference between the performances of the different species (ANOVA, \( p = 0.14 \)), it is worth noting that the crepuscular *S. zambesianus* shows the highest fidelity to its original rolling direction (deviation angle = 7°). *Scarabaeus zambesianus* is also one of the better navigators after a passive rotation of 90° but again the diurnal and the nocturnal beetles do not differ significantly in the precision of their reorientation (ANOVA, \( p = 0.08 \)). The consistent orientation performance of different beetle species under these challenging rolling conditions clearly shows that the nocturnal celestial compass allows the same directional rolling fidelity as its diurnal counterpart. Even though trials with the nocturnal species were limited to the four bright nights following full Moon, the consistency in orientation demonstrated by *S. satyrus* throughout the lunar month (figure 1) strongly suggests that polarized light orientation in dung beetles is as precise in bright sunlight as it is on a dimly lit night with just the crescent Moon.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Here, we report that even the extremely dim celestial polarization pattern formed around a crescent Moon is sufficient to guide a ball-rolling beetle along a straight route. Moreover, the straight-line orientation on these dark nights is performed with the same precision and speed as beetles orienting under the much brighter sky lit by the Sun or full Moon. Even when challenged with major disturbances along their chosen route, such as a 90° rotation or a 5 cm fall, the compass systems of nocturnal and diurnal beetles show no difference in performance. These results strongly indicate that the light-sensitive optical compass sacrifices neither spatial nor temporal resolution when supporting the straight-line orientation in dim light.
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In the laboratory, crickets have been shown to detect the direction of highly polarized light at light intensities that are even lower than that of a clear, moonless night sky [24]. Dung beetles may do the same, but at such light levels the Moon, and its pattern of polarized light, are no longer present to guide beetles and their balls along a straight path. A polarization detection system with greater sensitivity than that demonstrated here would have no biological relevance for straight-line orientation in beetles, unless they can use polarized starlight [25]. It is, however, hard to see how the combined polarized light patterns formed around thousands of stars would provide a navigator with directional guidance. On the other hand, an orientation to stars themselves could possibly explain why some of the beetles are able to orient along straight paths even when the Moon is well below the horizon (figure 1d). It is interesting to note that the Milky Way was clearly visible during the experimental nights without a Moon, and ran like a bright streak across the sky, providing a potential orientation cue. In earlier investigations into the orientation performance of S. zambesianus, the beetles rolled their balls of dung along spiralling tracks after the Moon and its pattern of polarized light had vanished from the sky [11]. However, in these experiments, the Milky Way was positioned much closer to the horizon and was not visible from the arena. It remains to be tested whether dung beetles can use the Milky Way as an orientation cue for straight-line orientation.

With a precision equal to that found in the diurnal celestial compass, the nocturnal celestial compass displays a robustness throughout the lunar month that suggests it might be widely used by animals that need to find their way at night. Nocturnal bees [26], crickets [24,27], spiders [28], tenebrionid beetles [29] and possibly also birds [30–32] are possible candidates that might benefit from the ability to orient using the dim polarization pattern formed around the ever-changing disc of the Moon.

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