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Development Time, Fecundity, Dispersal, and Survival Form Coordinated Life-History Syndromes Under Environmental Uncertainty in Insects

Ana Rodrigues[1]*, Tiago Martins[1], Bruno Lopes[2]

[1]Department of Life-History Evolution and Environmental Uncertainty, Faculty of Biosciences, University of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal.
[2]Department of Insect Demography and Trait Coordination, Faculty of Life Sciences, University of Porto, Porto, Portugal.

***E-mail** ✉ ana.rodrigues@fc.ulisboa.pt

ABSTRACT

Environmental uncertainty challenges insects because survival and reproduction depend on coordinating multiple life-history processes that are influenced by different ecological cues and physiological constraints. Development time, fecundity, dispersal, and survival are often examined separately, although evidence indicates that they may respond to overlapping environmental information while remaining partially independent. This article develops a conceptual model proposing that these traits form conditional life-history syndromes rather than a universal fixed strategy. The proposed model distinguishes evidence-supported trait responses from higher-level synthesis and emphasizes that coordination depends on environmental predictability, life stage, taxonomic context, and the scale at which traits are measured. Developmental timing may integrate seasonal and thermal information, reproductive allocation may shift according to nutritional and perceived-risk conditions, dispersal may emerge through environmentally regulated developmental pathways, and survival may depend strongly on exposure variability rather than mean conditions alone. The framework highlights partial coordination, trait-specific constraints, and validation requirements as central features of insect life-history research.

Keywords: Insect life history, Developmental plasticity, Fecundity allocation, Dispersal polymorphism, Environmental uncertainty, Diapause

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Introduction

Insects encounter environments that vary across thermal conditions, resource availability, seasonality, habitat structure, and biological interactions. These variations influence when individuals develop, reproduce, move, or survive. Developmental regulation is particularly sensitive to environmental information because insects must coordinate growth, maturation, and seasonal timing with external conditions. However, environmental responses are not uniform across developmental processes. Some traits remain comparatively constrained while others display substantial plasticity, indicating that environmental regulation should be considered trait-specific rather than as a single organism-wide response [1].

Temperature provides one of the clearest examples of this complexity. Heat exposure can influence metabolic regulation, stress physiology, behavior, and ecological performance through multiple interacting mechanisms, but the consequences depend on developmental stage and ecological setting [2]. Thermal sensitivity differs among ontogenetic stages and among fitness-related processes, meaning that development, reproduction, and survival

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may not share identical environmental limits [3]. Furthermore, insects experience microclimates rather than abstract regional averages, creating additional variation between measured environmental conditions and experienced physiological exposure [4].

Climate-related changes can influence insect populations through direct physiological effects and indirect effects mediated by phenology, resource availability, and ecological interactions [5]. Interpreting these responses requires separating phenotypic plasticity from adaptation because environmentally induced changes are not necessarily beneficial, heritable, or evolutionarily favored [6].

A major limitation in current insect life-history interpretation is that development time, fecundity, dispersal, and survival are frequently investigated as separate responses. This separation provides detailed knowledge of individual traits but may obscure how environmental information is integrated across multiple biological processes. Nutritional regulation demonstrates that development and reproduction can share physiological pathways while remaining subject to different constraints [7, 8]. Similarly, dispersal-related traits can be environmentally induced through endocrine and developmental mechanisms, but movement strategies differ substantially among taxa and ecological contexts [9, 10].

The objective of this article is to propose a conditional framework in which development time, fecundity, dispersal, and survival are treated as interacting but non-equivalent life-history axes. The article does not propose that all insects express one universal syndrome. Instead, it argues that environmental uncertainty may organize alternative combinations of trait responses depending on cue reliability, life stage, ecological context, and measurement scale.

Materials and Methods

This article uses a conceptual synthesis approach rather than an empirical dataset. The framework was constructed by selecting four trait domains that represent distinct but potentially interacting components of insect life history: development time, fecundity, dispersal, and survival.

Development time was selected because insect growth and maturation integrate nutritional, thermal, hormonal, and seasonal information. Nutritional pathways influence growth regulation through conserved developmental mechanisms, although their expression differs among tissues and taxa [7]. Fecundity was treated as reproductive output rather than as a direct measurement of fitness because reproductive investment can increase, decrease, or remain unchanged depending on environmental conditions and physiological state [8].

Dispersal was defined as a movement-related life-history domain requiring separation between developmental potential for movement, realized movement, migration, and flight performance. Wing polymorphism studies demonstrate that environmental signals can alter dispersal-related phenotypes through endocrine and developmental mechanisms, but these mechanisms are taxon-specific [9]. Dispersal consequences are also shaped by ecological filtering and environmental context, particularly during range expansion or habitat change [10, 11].

Survival was included as an independent axis because persistence depends on environmental exposure, stress resistance, and demographic conditions that are not reducible to longevity under controlled laboratory conditions. Seasonal information processing through photoperiodic and circadian systems provides one example of how predictable environmental signals may influence insect timing decisions [12].

The proposed syndrome model therefore does not calculate trait scores or estimate universal relationships. Instead, it organizes evidence into conditional relationships and identifies where coordinated responses are supported, where trade-offs are uncertain, and where validation remains necessary.

Results and Discussion

Development time represents an axis through which insects integrate environmental information before reaching later life-history stages. Evidence from thermal performance research indicates that development rates are often nonlinear and strongly influenced by developmental stage and exposure conditions [3]. Therefore, development time cannot be interpreted independently from the environmental scale experienced by the organism.

A direct connection between laboratory thermal responses and field development is possible when models incorporate realistic microclimatic variation and nonlinear responses. In *Pieris napi*, development predictions improved when environmental variation was incorporated rather than relying only on constant-temperature

measurements [13]. This finding supports the use of development time as an environmentally informative trait while also demonstrating that transfer between laboratory and field conditions requires explicit validation.

Seasonal development and diapause provide another example of conditional coordination. In *Aedes albopictus*, several diapause-associated traits showed geographic divergence, whereas other growth-related traits showed limited divergence, indicating that environmental selection may affect components of a life-history strategy unevenly rather than producing complete trait packages [14]. Similarly, seasonal timing of diapause can correspond with growing-season constraints, but such relationships remain dependent on local climate and species-specific biology [15].

Environmental predictability may further influence developmental responses. Studies of thermal plasticity demonstrate that contributions of within-generation and cross-generational responses differ among life stages and populations exposed to different climatic conditions [16]. Thus, development time may function as an information-processing trait, but the direction and magnitude of response depend on the reliability of environmental cues.

Fecundity axis

Fecundity represents allocation toward reproduction and provides a critical counterpoint to development and survival because increased reproductive investment may involve physiological costs. Evidence from insect reproductive studies indicates that environmental threats do not produce a single reproductive response.

Age-related reproductive patterns in *Tenebrio molitor* show that reduced future reproductive opportunity does not necessarily result in increased immediate reproductive investment. Instead, reproductive restraint may occur under some conditions [17]. Similarly, pathogen-related challenges can reduce reproduction rather than produce universal terminal investment responses [18].

However, environmental information associated with mortality risk can generate different outcomes. Exposure of *Drosophila melanogaster* females to dead conspecifics increased reproductive investment, suggesting that perceived environmental signals may influence allocation decisions even when the long-term fitness consequences remain uncertain [19]. These contrasting findings indicate that "uncertainty" cannot be treated as one biological stimulus.

Parental environmental effects further complicate interpretation. Maternal and paternal nutritional conditions can interact to influence offspring traits, demonstrating that environmental information may cross generations without producing uniformly beneficial outcomes [20]. Therefore, fecundity should be interpreted as a flexible allocation axis whose relationship with other traits depends on context rather than as a fixed component of a universal life-history strategy.

Dispersal axis

Dispersal represents one of the most context-dependent life-history domains because movement potential, movement behavior, and migration involve different biological processes. Environmental regulation of dispersal phenotypes has been demonstrated in several insect systems, but the mechanisms and consequences differ among taxa.

In aphids, endocrine regulation involving ecdysone signaling contributes to environmentally induced wing polymorphism. Manipulation of this pathway altered production of winged offspring, demonstrating a mechanistic connection between developmental regulation and dispersal phenotype in that system [21]. In planthoppers, host quality and density influenced wing morph production, showing that multiple environmental cues can interact during dispersal-related developmental decisions [22].

Evolutionary changes in reaction norms may also involve endocrine pathways. In *Jadera haematoloma*, manipulation of insulin signaling altered a host-associated wing polyphenism, demonstrating that developmental signaling can contribute to differences among ecological forms [23]. However, these findings represent specific systems and should not be interpreted as evidence for a universal dispersal mechanism across insects.

Movement categories require additional caution. Comparative butterfly evidence indicates that migration and ordinary dispersal may involve different relationships with reproductive state and morphology [24]. In *Spodoptera frugiperda*, flight performance showed a negative association with deposited eggs, but migrants could still be reproductive, indicating that movement–reproduction relationships may be flexible rather than absolute [25].

The interpretation problem addressed by this section is therefore not whether dispersal trades off with reproduction in all insects. Instead, the key issue is determining when movement represents an alternative allocation state, when it represents a parallel response to environmental cues, and when it can coexist with reproduction.

Table 1 shows the dispersal literature containing multiple biologically distinct movement states that cannot be represented adequately as a single trade-off. The table separates movement-related interpretations according to their evidence basis, mechanistic context, and inference limits.

Table 1. Conditional interpretation of dispersal-related life-history responses across insect systems

Dispersal phenotype		Syndrome inference	
Movement state	**Developmental/ecological origin**	**Life-history meaning**	**Scale-transfer and measurement test**
Developmentally induced movement phenotype	Wing-polymorphic insects. Environmental and endocrine regulation of wing state	Movement potential may be produced before adult movement decisions. Proposed integration.	Morphological potential does not equal realized dispersal. Measure movement after phenotype formation
Environmentally triggered dispersal allocation	Density- or host-responsive systems. Host quality and crowding signals	Multiple cues may alter dispersal-related development. Proposed integration.	Cue combinations differ among taxa. Test cue reliability and timing
Migration-associated movement state	Migratory insects. Flight capacity and reproductive measurements	Migration may involve different allocation patterns from ordinary dispersal. Evidence-supported distinction.	Migration and dispersal are not interchangeable. Separate movement categories
Movement–fecundity association	Adult flying insects. Flight and reproductive measurements	Reproductive costs may occur in some contexts. Evidence-supported boundary.	Correlation does not establish an obligatory trade-off. Examine condition, sex, and timing

As illustrated in **Figure 1**, dispersal-related life-history interpretation requires a separation between the developmental production of dispersal capacity, the ecological and physiological conditions governing movement expression, and the measurements used to infer realized dispersal. This framework emphasizes that morphological or physiological potential should not be treated as equivalent to observed movement and that movement itself does not imply a fixed life-history syndrome without evidence linking phenotype, context, and outcome.

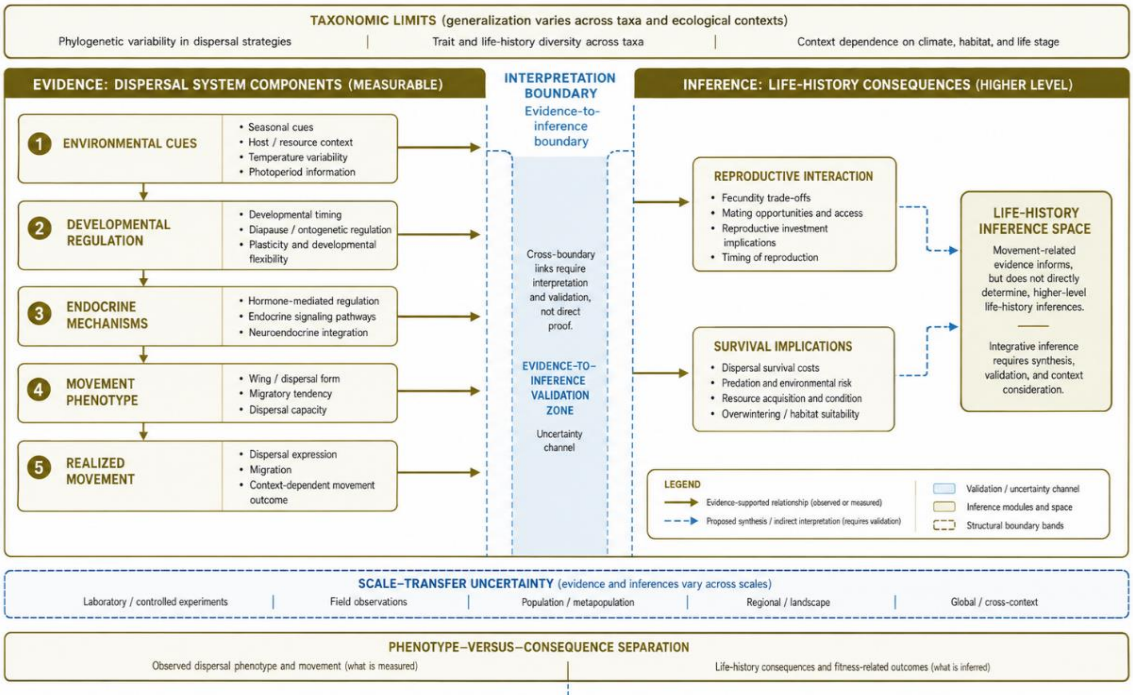


Figure 1. Evidence boundaries separating dispersal phenotype, movement expression, and life-history interpretation in insects

Survival axis

Survival represents the persistence component of the proposed syndrome model and demonstrates why environmental uncertainty cannot be interpreted only through mean conditions. Survival outcomes depend on physiological tolerance, exposure timing, ecological interactions, and demographic context.

Wild insect survival patterns may differ substantially from laboratory longevity measurements. Reviews of insect senescence emphasize that natural mortality, environmental stressors, and ecological interactions complicate direct translation from controlled conditions to field survival [26]. Therefore, survival must remain a context-dependent axis rather than a simple measure of lifespan.

Temperature extremes provide another example of conditional survival responses. Extreme thermal events can influence insect performance, population dynamics, and ecological interactions, but outcomes vary among taxa and exposure scenarios [27]. Mean temperature alone is therefore insufficient to explain survival consequences.

Thermal variability can also produce contrasting outcomes. In *Drosophila suzukii* winter morphs, warm-up events influenced survival differently depending on the surrounding thermal regime, demonstrating that environmental variability has no universal biological direction [28]. This evidence supports treating uncertainty as a structured environmental property involving timing, magnitude, and predictability rather than as a simple increase in stress.

Covariation among traits

The four life-history axes considered in this article are not proposed as isolated traits. However, the evidence does not support treating their relationships as a single universal covariance structure. Instead, the literature indicates that insects may coordinate subsets of traits when environmental information, physiological state, and developmental constraints align.

Developmental timing provides one example of partial coordination. In *Aedes albopictus*, climatic divergence affected several diapause-associated traits, but not all traits associated with growth and development changed in parallel [14]. This pattern suggests that environmental selection may produce modular changes rather than complete reorganization of the entire life history. A proposed interpretation arising from this evidence is that life-history syndromes should be viewed as conditional assemblies of traits rather than fixed packages.

The relationship between dispersal and reproduction illustrates a similar limitation. Wing production, movement phenotype, and reproductive allocation may be connected through developmental and endocrine processes, but the direction of the relationship depends on the insect system. Aphid, planthopper, and soapberry bug studies demonstrate that developmental pathways can regulate alternative phenotypes, yet each system involves different environmental cues and biological contexts [21–23].

Movement and reproduction also cannot be represented as a universal trade-off. Comparative butterfly evidence indicates that migration and ordinary dispersal may involve different reproductive associations [24]. In *S. frugiperda*, flight activity was associated with reduced egg deposition, but migrants could still possess reproductive characteristics, indicating that movement and reproduction can overlap rather than simply exclude each other [25].

Fecundity responses to environmental uncertainty further demonstrate that covariation depends on the type of environmental information received. Pathogen-associated challenge reduced reproduction in one experimental context, whereas perceived mortality cues increased reproductive investment in another [18, 19]. These contrasting outcomes indicate that environmental uncertainty is not a single selective pressure but a collection of distinct informational and physiological states.

The proposed model therefore treats covariation as conditional coupling among traits. Development time, fecundity, dispersal, and survival may become coordinated under specific ecological circumstances, but the strength, direction, and biological meaning of those relationships require validation within particular insect systems.

Alternative life-history syndromes under predictable and unpredictable environments

Environmental predictability provides a useful conceptual dimension for organizing alternative combinations of life-history responses. However, predictability should not be interpreted as a simple division between two universal insect strategies. Instead, it represents the degree to which environmental information reliably forecasts future conditions.

Predictable seasonal environments can provide informative cues. Photoperiodic systems demonstrate that insects may use reliable temporal signals to coordinate diapause and seasonal development [12]. In *A. albopictus*, variation in diapause timing corresponded with seasonal constraints associated with completing development

before unfavorable conditions [15]. These findings support the idea that reliable environmental information can influence developmental scheduling.

However, predictable environments do not necessarily generate complete trait synchronization. Trait divergence during climatic adaptation may occur selectively, affecting some components of a life-history strategy while leaving others comparatively unchanged [14]. Therefore, a proposed predictable-environment syndrome should not be interpreted as a complete optimization of all four traits.

Less predictable environments may favor flexible responses rather than a single alternative state. Experimental evidence indicates that thermal predictability can alter the contribution of within-generation and transgenerational plasticity differently across life stages and populations [16]. Such responses suggest that uncertainty may modify how insects use environmental information rather than simply selecting for greater plasticity.

Survival responses provide further evidence against simple categorization. Thermal fluctuations can improve or reduce survival depending on baseline conditions and physiological context [28]. Consequently, an unpredictable environment cannot automatically be assumed to favor reduced investment, increased dispersal, delayed development, or enhanced survival capacity.

The relationship among environmental predictability, trait coordination, and life-history outcomes requires a representation that preserves both alternative states and uncertainty boundaries. **Figure 2** therefore summarizes the proposed state-space interpretation rather than presenting an empirically validated classification system.

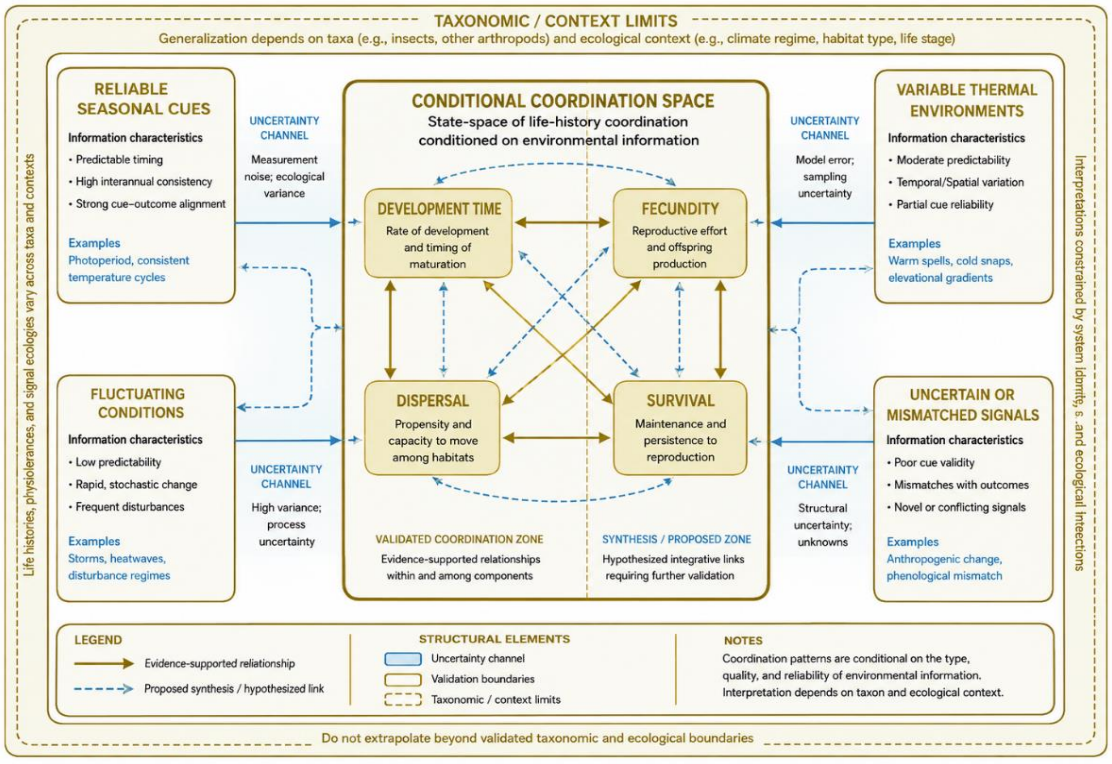


Figure 2. Conditional organization of insect life-history states across environmental information regimes

The central contribution of this article is a proposed reinterpretation of insect life-history coordination. Rather than viewing development time, fecundity, dispersal, and survival as fixed components of a universal strategy, the evidence supports treating them as interacting axes whose relationships depend on environmental information, biological context, and measurement scale.

Several conclusions follow from this synthesis. First, trait coordination is likely to be modular. Evidence from diapause-related evolution demonstrates that some traits can respond together while others remain comparatively unchanged [14]. This pattern argues against assuming that selection or environmental change reorganizes all life-history components simultaneously.

Second, environmental uncertainty requires decomposition into biologically meaningful categories. Thermal variability, seasonal cues, microclimate exposure, and perceived mortality represent different forms of

information and should not be combined into one generalized "stress" variable [4, 12, 28]. The proposed framework therefore emphasizes uncertainty structure rather than uncertainty magnitude alone.

Third, laboratory and field evidence must remain separated. Developmental models can achieve successful field prediction when environmental realism is incorporated [13], but survival and demographic interpretations may require additional field validation because natural mortality factors are not represented by laboratory longevity alone [26].

Fourth, mechanistic evidence remains strongest in specific insect systems. Functional studies of endocrine regulation and developmental signaling demonstrate causal pathways within particular taxa [21, 23], but these findings should not be expanded into a universal molecular explanation for insect life-history coordination.

The proposed syndrome concept also has limitations. The framework does not estimate trait correlations, identify evolutionary optima, or predict future population responses. It organizes existing evidence into a structure that can guide future testing. Validation will require comparative studies that measure multiple traits simultaneously, include realistic environmental variation, and distinguish plastic responses from evolutionary change.

Evolutionary predictions

The proposed model generates several testable predictions while remaining explicitly non-validated.

First, environments containing reliable predictive cues should produce stronger relationships between cue interpretation and developmental timing when those cues accurately correspond with future conditions. Evidence from photoperiodic diapause systems provides support for cue-based seasonal timing, but the broader prediction requires testing across taxa and environments [15].

Second, evolutionary change should not necessarily involve all life-history axes simultaneously. The partial divergence of diapause-related traits in *A. albopictus* suggests that trait combinations may evolve modularly rather than as complete packages [14]. A future comparative approach could test whether development time, fecundity, dispersal, and survival repeatedly respond together or whether different combinations emerge in different environments.

Third, developmental signaling pathways may contribute to environmentally responsive trait combinations. Studies involving insulin signaling and wing polymorphism demonstrate that developmental mechanisms can influence ecological phenotypes, but whether similar pathways contribute broadly across insects remains unresolved [23].

Fourth, validation should prioritize realistic environmental conditions. Thermal performance research demonstrates that environmental scale affects interpretation, while survival studies show that fluctuation effects depend on background conditions [13, 28]. Future work should therefore combine laboratory manipulation with field exposure, demographic measurement, and multi-trait analysis.

Conclusion

Development time, fecundity, dispersal, and survival provide complementary perspectives for understanding how insects respond to uncertain environments. The available evidence does not establish a universal life-history syndrome shared across insects, but it supports a conditional framework in which these traits may become coordinated, remain independent, or shift in opposing directions depending on environmental information and biological context.

The proposed synthesis emphasizes partial coordination, trait-specific constraints, and explicit boundaries between observation and interpretation. Its value lies not in defining a fixed evolutionary strategy, but in providing a structured approach for investigating when and why insect life-history traits become linked under environmental uncertainty.

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