

Multi-scale habitat selection of *Mus minutoides* in the Lowveld of Swaziland

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Abstract

We investigated habitat selection of *Mus minutoides* in northeastern Swaziland. We used powder tracking to determine how *M. minutoides* selected habitat at a fine scale and a broader path scale. At the fine scale, we measured per cent cover of grass and shrubs, the number of forbs and visual obstruction (VO) at five evenly spaced points along a mouse's pathway and at a paired random location. At the path scale, we calculated the relative displacement (RD) of each path as the ratio of the distance from the start to the end point of the path to the total length of the path (values near one indicate less preference). We found that *M. minutoides* were positively associated with increases in visual obstruction, grass cover, and shrub cover at the fine scale, but not at the path scale. Our results indicate that *M. minutoides* selection of vegetative features at the path scale is not as important as their fine-scale selection of vegetative structure. In addition, the shrub encroachment on our study site may be directly beneficial to *M. minutoides* at the fine scale. Our results provide us with an increased understanding of the basic ecology of *M. minutoides* and information on their response to a changing landscape.

Key words: fluorescent tracking, habitat selection, *Mus minutoides*, pygmy mice, shrub encroachment, Swaziland

Résumé

Nous avons étudié le choix de l'habitat par *Mus minutoides* dans le nord-est du Swaziland. Nous avons utilisé le traçage à la poudre pour déterminer comment *M. minuto-*

ides choisissait son habitat à petite échelle et à l'échelle plus grande d'une piste. À fine échelle, nous avons mesuré le pourcentage de couverture d'herbes et d'arbustes, le nombre de dicotylédones et l'obstruction visuelle à cinq points espacés de façon régulière le long d'une piste de souris et à un endroit couplé choisi au hasard. À l'échelle de la piste, nous avons calculé le déplacement relatif de chaque piste comme le rapport de la distance du début jusqu'à la fin de la piste à la longueur totale de la piste (les valeurs proches de 1 indiquent moins de préférence). Nous avons trouvé que les *M. minutoides* étaient positivement liés à des augmentations de l'obstruction visuelle, à la couverture herbeuse et arbustive à fine échelle, mais pas à l'échelle de la piste. Nos résultats indiquent que la sélection de caractéristiques végétales par *M. minutoides* à l'échelle de la piste n'est pas aussi importante que le choix d'une structure végétale à une échelle plus fine. De plus, l'envahissement des arbustes sur notre site de recherche peut être directement avantageux pour *M. minutoides* à l'échelle plus fine. Nos résultats nous permettent de mieux comprendre l'écologie de base de *Mus minutoides* et nous donnent des informations quant à sa réponse à un paysage en voie de modification.

Introduction

Small mammals play an important role in most ecosystems as herbivores, seed predators, and prey species and can be indicators of ecosystem health (Keesing, 2000; Manson, Ostfeld & Canham, 2001; Monadjem & Perrin, 2003; Avenant & Cavallini, 2007). However, we know relatively little about the basic ecology (e.g. habitat selection, diet,

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competitive interactions) of many of sub-Saharan Africa's murid rodents. As quantifying habitat selection is vital to understanding an organism's basic ecology, one obvious place to start is to understand how murid rodents select habitats (Johnson, 1980).

Throughout southern Africa, land-use changes and practices have led to increased shrub encroachment (Roques, O'Connor & Watkinson, 2001). In northeastern Swaziland, Sirami & Monadjem (2012) documented an increase in shrub cover from 30% to 40% from 1998 to 2008. One study on the consequences of shrub encroachment on local rodent abundance showed variable responses (Blaum, Rossmannith & Jeltsch, 2007a). For example, some rodent species (e.g. *Gerbillurus paeba*, *Desmodillus auricularis* and *Tatera leucogaster*) responded negatively while other species (e.g. *Rhabdomys punilio* and *Tatera brantsii*) showed a hump-shaped response, increasing in abundance until a certain threshold of shrub cover and then decreasing (Blaum, Rossmannith & Jeltsch, 2007a). Understanding the relationship between habitat selection of ecologically important small mammals and shrub encroachment is important for land managers hoping to maintain and enhance biodiversity and ecosystem health (Blaum, Rossmannith & Jeltsch, 2007a; Blaum *et al.*, 2007b).

African pygmy mice (*Mus* spp.) are an assemblage of small (4–12 g) murine rodents (subgenus *Nannomys*) distributed throughout sub-Saharan Africa. Pygmy mice have been the subject of much taxonomic confusion (Veyrunes *et al.*, 2005; Kouassi *et al.*, 2008; Mboumba *et al.*, 2011). They are presently recognized as a complex of 17–19 morphologically similar species and may contain a number of species and subspecies not yet described (Marshall, 1981; Macholán, 2001; Musser & Carleton, 2005; Britton-Davidian, Robinson & Veyrunes, 2012). Pygmy mice occupy a wide range of land cover types, including forests, cultivations, recently burned grasslands and rocky habitats, at elevations up to 2,400 m (Veyrunes *et al.*, 2004, 2005; Skinner & Chimimba, 2005; Kouassi *et al.*, 2008; Fichet-Calvet *et al.*, 2010), but are primarily considered a savannah species (Mboumba *et al.*, 2011). We only know of four studies examining pygmy mouse habitat selection, all of which used trapping location to quantify habitat use. Nel & Rautenbach (1975) found that *Mus minutoides* preferred low or high dunes on riverbanks to silt riverbeds or raised plateaus, and Nel (1978) found that *Mus minutoides* used all habitats in which they trapped during their study (e.g. low dunes, plateaus, riverbeds and high dunes). Monadjem (1997a) measured vegetative features within 1-m² plots

around each trap and was unable to correlate pygmy mouse occurrence to vegetative features but noted that they were generally caught in areas with grass cover. In a second study, Monadjem (1999a) was unable to assess the use of burned and unburned areas by pygmy mice due to low trap success following the fire. Although Monadjem (1997a) quantified vegetative features at a fine scale, determining habitat selection relative to traps may lead to inaccurate measures of habitat selection as bait may cause atypical selection of foraging sites. Similarly, a potential reason for the inconclusive results found in Monadjem (1999a) is that small mammals often select foraging areas based on fine-scale vegetative features to decrease the risk of predation (Kotler, 1984; Bowers, 1990) and not at the broader scale measured in their study. Thus, it is important to assess pygmy mice habitat on the scales that are relevant to them, and apart from the study by Monadjem (1997a), we know of no studies examining pygmy mouse habitat selection at fine scales.

Mus minutoides A. Smith, 1834, one species of pygmy mice found in Africa, is rarely caught in large numbers but is common throughout Swaziland and possibly the dominant small mammal species in some nature reserves (Cheeseman & Delany, 1979; Sheppe & Haas, 1981; Monadjem, 1997a, 1999b; Mahlaba & Perrin, 2003). Working in the Lowveld of Swaziland provided us with an excellent opportunity to address our goal of understanding the basic ecology of *M. minutoides* by investigating their habitat selection. Moreover, with shrubs as the dominant vegetative feature on the landscape, we were able to assess the influence of shrub encroachment on *M. minutoides*. Shrubs could affect *M. minutoides* fine scale and nightly movement by providing cover from predators or negatively influence them by decreasing the abundance of seeds for forage through the displacement of forbs and grasses across the landscape. To better understand *M. minutoides* ecology and its use of the savannah, we investigated their movements on two spatial scales. Specifically, our objectives for this study were to (i) determine *M. minutoides* habitat selection on a fine (1 m²) scale; and (ii) determine the influence of shrub cover relative to their nightly movements at a broader path scale. We quantified vegetation within 1-m² plots along the pygmy mouse's path to quantify fine-scale movement as vegetative features at this scale have been shown to be important to small mammals. Similarly, quantifying vegetation at the path scale provided information on habitat selection within areas encompassed by an individual's nightly movement.

Materials and methods

Study area

Our study was conducted in the Mlawula Nature Reserve in northeastern Swaziland. We trapped rodents in sour lowland bushveld vegetation (Low & Rebelo, 1996) characterized by grass cover (*Themda* spp., *Panicum maximum*), a substantial shrub layer dominated by *Dichrostachys cinerea* (Sirami & Monadjem, 2012) and intermittent tree cover dominated by *Acacia nigrescens* and *Sclerocarya birrea*. Large mammal species in the area included blue wildebeest (*Connochaetes taurinus*), impala (*Aepyceros melampus*), kudu (*Tragelaphus strepsiceros*), and warthog (*Phacochoerus africanus*). Some common predators of *Mus minutoides* found in the reserve include serval (*Felis serval*), large-spotted genets (*Genetta tigrina*), and the African barred owl (*Glaucidium capense*). The mean annual rainfall of our study site ranges from 550 to 725 mm (Matondo, Peter & Msibi, 2005).

Sampling design

We trapped rodents during May and June 2011 at two sites separated by 1 km. We established ten trapping transects (ten traps each) spaced 40 m apart on each site. We placed Sherman live-traps (7.6 × 9.5 × 30.5 cm, H. B. Sherman Traps, Inc., Tallahassee, Florida) at 10-m increments along each transect. We baited traps with oats, opened them at sunset, and checked them at sunrise. To assess movements within the habitat, we dusted the first *M. minutoides* captured on each transect with fluorescent powder (A-15-N blaze orange pigment, DayGlo Color Corp.) and then each additional mouse that was trapped at least 30 m away to minimize overlapping pathways. To apply fluorescent powder, we placed each mouse into a bag containing powder and gently shook them (Duplantier *et al.*, 1984; Lemen & Freeman, 1985; Mullican, 1988). We released each individual at their capture location the following evening. Three hours after we released the mice, we followed each travel pathway using a UV light. We flagged each pathway at 1-m increments for its visible length or up to 30 m. The total length of the travelled pathway was measured the following day.

Habitat assessment

To assess *M. minutoides* fine-scale habitat selection, we measured vegetation characteristics at five points every

5 m along the travel pathway (Fig. 1). On paths shorter than 25 m, we quantified vegetative features for our fifth point at the last point along the pathway. We paired used locations with random points by randomly selecting a direction and distance (2–6 m) from each used point on the pathway (Fig. 1). At each used and random point, we placed a 1-m² circular plot and measured the per cent cover of grass (Grass), shrub (Shrub), and the number of forbs (Forbs). We visually classified the per cent cover of grass and shrubs into ten equal classes ranging from 0% to 100% (Higgins *et al.*, 1996). We used a robel pole centred within the circular plots to measure visual obstruction (VO) (a measure of horizontal cover; VO) at a mouse's level in decimetres from a distance of 4 m in each cardinal direction (Robel *et al.*, 1970; Smith, 2008) to determine if the height and density of the vegetation influenced a mouse's ability to traverse the landscape. The robel method has been shown to be an effective measure of available cover in wildlife studies (Robel *et al.*, 1970; Smith, 2008).

To assess habitat selection at a broader scale that encompassed nightly movement, we calculated the relative displacement of each path as the ratio of the straight-line distance from the beginning to the end of the path to the total trail length (Fig. 1; Stapp, 1997). This path scale

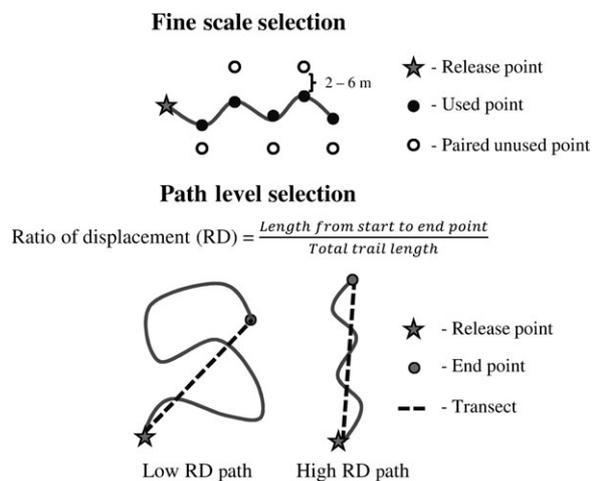


Fig 1 A schematic of the used and paired random locations sampled every 5 m along a mouse's pathway used to assess *Mus minutoides* fine-scale habitat selection (1 m²) and the equation used to calculate the ratio of displacement (RD) for each pathway including examples of pathways with low RD and high RD showing the transects used to measure vegetative features to assess selection at the path scale

analysis was used to provide information on whether *M. minutoides* were using certain vegetation features for activities such as foraging or simply moving through the area (Stapp, 1997). Specifically, this allowed us to quantify how nightly movements were affected by shrub cover and other vegetative features. We assumed that straight trails, with values close to 1, indicated less preference for an area (Stapp, 1997). To assess path scale vegetative features, we ran a transect through the centre of each pathway from the start to end point of the path and used the line-intercept method to assess overstory cover (Overstory) and shrub cover (Shrub Cover) (Fig. 1; Higgins *et al.*, 1996). We also quantified the number of trees (Trees) with trunks touching each transect.

Data analysis

We developed and evaluated *a priori* models to determine fine-scale and path scale selection by *M. minutoides*. We did not include interaction terms in the models due to our limited vegetative measures. For fine-scale selection, we compared used locations to random locations with eleven models, consisting of nine *a priori* models, a global model with all vegetative measures and a null model with only the y-intercept (Table 1). We considered four vegetative measures in these models including VO, Shrub, Grass, and Forbs. We fit models with a logistic regression based on generalized estimating equations (GEE) using PROC GENMOD (SAS Institute Inc., 2011) and the REPEATED statement to account for the paired used/random locations

Table 1 *A priori* models of *Mus minutoides* fine-scale (1 m²) selection relative to grass cover (Grass), visual obstruction (VO), shrub cover (Shrub) and the number of forbs (Forb) based on fluorescent powder tracking conducted in northeastern Swaziland, Africa

Model	QIC	K	DQIC	w_i
Global	267.6	5	0	0.28
Grass + Shrub	268.5	3	0.87	0.18
VO + Shrub	268.6	3	0.97	0.17
VO + Grass	269.7	3	2.06	0.10
Forb	270.0	2	2.34	0.09
VO + Grass + Forb	270.0	4	2.34	0.09
VO	270.9	2	3.24	0.05
Shrub	272.6	2	4.90	0.02
Grass + Forb	274.0	3	6.35	0.01
Grass	274.1	2	6.45	0.01
Null	279.3	1	11.61	0.00

nested by individual (Pan, 2001). We evaluated the models using the quasi-likelihood under the independence model criterion (QIC; Pan, 2001). QIC is roughly equivalent to Akaike's Information Criterion (AIC) for models estimated using the GEE approach (Pan, 2001). We determined our best approximating models based on the relative difference to the smallest QIC in each model set (DQIC) and model weights (w_i ; Probability of a model being the best given the candidate models and data set) (Burnham & Anderson, 2002; Ward, 2008). We considered models with a DQIC ≤ 2 competing models and averaged the regression coefficients (on average, indicates what change in a dependent variable is associated with a unit change in an independent variable; b) and 95% confidence intervals for each model parameter based on w_i (Kass & Raftery, 1995; Burnham & Anderson, 2002; Zar, 2009). We log-transformed and exponentiated the logistic regression analysis to form a logistic prediction model (Guthery & Bingham, 2007). We used the resulting prediction model to determine how the independent variables influenced pygmy mouse fine-scale selection of the measured vegetative features. We held each variable constant at its mean, while allowing one variable to vary and completed this for all four vegetative measures (Guthery & Bingham, 2007).

To evaluate path scale selection, we compared all possible combinations of vegetative features, a global model with all variables and a null model with only the y-intercept (Table 3). We used six variables including mean VO, Grass, and Forbs determined by averaging values from the five points where vegetative characteristics were sampled along each path and Overstory, Shrub Cover and Trees from the line-intercept data. We used our calculated ratio of displacement as the dependent variable and ran a generalized linear regression model in Program R (R Development Core Team, 2005). We evaluated path scale selection models using Bayesian information criteria (BIC) (Posada & Buckley, 2004; Ward, 2008). BIC often selects models that are more simplistic compared with Akaike's information criteria and is better at determining which model best explains the processes underlying a data set (Akaike, 1973; Link & Barker, 2006; Ward, 2008). Thus, it was most appropriate for our data due to the simplicity of our models and observations. We determined our best approximating models based on the relative difference to the smallest BIC in each model set (DBIC) and model weights (Burnham & Anderson, 2002; Ward, 2008). We considered models with a DBIC ≤ 2 competing

models and averaged the regression coefficients (b) and 95% confidence intervals for each model parameter based on w_i (Kass & Raftery, 1995; Burnham & Anderson, 2002; Zar, 2009).

Results

We had 142 captures of *M. minutoides* and two captures of other species per 800 trap nights. We tracked 20 individual *M. minutoides* (10 females, 10 males). The average trail length was 26.2 m (SD = 3.53 m). For fine-scale selection, the DQIC values and w_i indicated that our global model, which included all variables measured, was the best approximating model (Table 1). This model had a w_i of 0.28, indicating a 28% probability that it provided the best explanation of the data. However, two models (Grass + Shrub and VO + Shrub) were competing with our top model (DQIC ≤ 2). The sum of w_i for our three top models indicated a 63% probability that one of these models provided the best explanation of our data.

Three of the model averaged variables evaluated, VO, Grass, and Shrub, had 95% confidence intervals that did not overlap 0 (Table 2). Our fourth variable, Forb, had a 95% confidence interval overlapping 0 suggesting it was not a relevant parameter (Table 2). The prediction model and averaged individual parameters indicated a positive relationship between use and all vegetative features (Fig. 2).

For path scale selection, the best models (Forb only and the null model) were separated by DBIC < 0.01 (Table 3). The model with Forb as the only variable was the better of the two models, but the 95% CI of Forb overlapped 0 ($\beta = 0.0325$, 95% CI = -0.0046 – 0.0697) indicating it was not a relevant parameter. Four additional models (VO + Grass, Grass, Overstory, VO + Forb) competed with our two top models (Table 3), but they were all ranked below the null model and had no variables with 95% CIs that did not intercept 0 (Table 3).

Discussion

At a fine scale, *M. minutoides* were positively associated with visual obstruction, shrub cover, grass cover and the number of forbs, although Forb was not an important parameter in the model. This relationship was not unexpected as cover is necessary for small mammals to evade predators (Ylönen & Brown, 2007). Moreover, as seeds from grasses and forbs are a large component of the diet of

Table 2 Averaged model parameters, regression coefficients (b) and 95% confidence intervals for determining *Mus minutoides* fine-scale (1 m²) selection relative to grass cover (Grass), visual obstruction (VO), shrub cover (Shrub) and the number of forbs (Forb) based on fluorescent powder tracking conducted in northeastern Swaziland, Africa

Vegetative feature	b	95% CI
VO	0.1593	0.0015–0.3171
Shrub	0.1556	0.0393–0.2718
Grass	0.1511	0.0290–0.2731
Forb	0.1168	–0.0290–0.2626

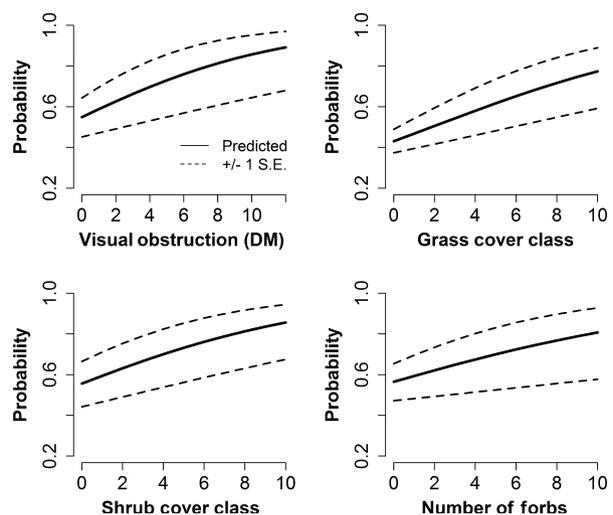


Fig 2 The predicted probability of selection and ± 1 standard error (SE) of the prediction based on the logistic regression predictive model of *Mus minutoides*' fine-scale selection as a function of visual obstruction (VO; top left), grass cover class¹ (Grass; top right), shrub cover class¹ (Shrub; bottom left), and number of forbs (Forb; bottom right) based on fluorescent powder tracking conducted in northeastern Swaziland, Africa. ¹We visually classified grass and shrub cover into ten equal cover classes ranging from 0% to 100%

M. minutoides (Skinner & Chimimba, 2005), increased seed abundance from grasses likely influences their movement and selection of cover through the environment. Our results concurred with Monadjem's (1997a) assertion that grass cover was important for *M. minutoides*. Moreover, our research elucidated that shrub cover and visual obstruction were also important for *M. minutoides* at the fine scale, adding to our basic ecological understanding of this species.

Table 3 Models of *Mus minutoides* path scale selection relative to average visual obstruction (VO), grass cover (Grass) and the number of forbs (Forb) quantified within 1-m² circular plots and the number of trees (Trees), shrub cover (Shrub Cover) and overstory cover (Overstory) quantified along transects based on fluorescent powder tracking conducted in northeastern Swaziland, Africa

Model	BIC	K	DBIC	w _i
Forb	-32.9	3	0.0	0.13
Null	-32.9	2	0.0	0.12
VO + Grass	-32.0	4	0.9	0.08
Grass	-31.6	3	1.3	0.07
Overstory	-31.3	3	1.6	0.06
VO + Forb	-31.1	4	1.8	0.05
VO	-30.9	3	2.0	0.05
VO + Grass + Overstory	-30.7	5	2.2	0.04
Grass + Forb	-30.5	4	2.4	0.04
Forb + Trees	-30.3	4	2.6	0.04
Shrub cover	-30.1	3	2.8	0.03
Trees	-30.1	3	2.8	0.03
Trees + Overstory	-30.0	4	2.9	0.03
Shrub cover + Forb	-29.9	4	3.0	0.03
VO + Overstory	-29.9	4	3.0	0.03
Grass + Overstory	-29.7	4	3.2	0.03
Shrub cover + Grass	-29.2	4	3.7	0.02
VO + Shrub cover + Grass	-29.1	5	3.8	0.02
Shrub cover + Overstory	-28.5	4	4.4	0.01
Grass + Forb + Overstory	-28.3	5	4.6	0.01
VO + Shrub cover + Forb	-28.2	5	4.7	0.01
Grass + Trees + Overstory	-28.0	5	4.9	0.01
VO + Shrub cover	-27.9	4	5.0	0.01
VO + Trees	-27.9	4	5.0	0.01
Shrub cover + Forb + Trees	-27.3	5	5.6	0.01
Shrub cover + Trees	-27.3	4	5.6	0.01
Shrub cover + Grass + Overstory	-27.1	5	5.8	0.01
VO + Shrub cover + Overstory	-26.9	5	6.0	0.01
VO + Grass + Forb + Tree + Overstory	-26.4	7	6.5	0.00
VO + Shrub cover + Grass + Forb + Overstory	-25.8	7	7.1	0.00
VO + Shrub cover + Grass + Trees + Overstory	-25.1	7	7.8	0.00
VO + Shrub cover + Forb + Trees + Overstory	-25.1	7	7.8	0.00
VO + Shrub cover + Trees	-24.9	5	8.0	0.00
VO + Shrub cover + Grass + Forb + Trees	-24.4	7	8.5	0.00
Global	-23.5	8	9.4	0.00

The path scale allowed us to assess if *M. minutoides* altered their nightly movements in response to vegetative features. Interestingly, it did not appear that *M. minutoides* were influenced by vegetative structure. This suggests that the areas encompassed by their nightly movement were not nearly as important as their fine-scale selection of vegetative structure. The influence of vegetative structure at the fine scale may be a function of the diminutive size of *Mus minutoides*. Body size is a useful indicator of the scales at which animals respond to the environment (Hostetler, 2001). With small animals responding at a fine scale it seems fitting that the mice in this study (weighing approximately 4.5 g) responded strongly to vegetative structure at a 1 m² scale.

At the path scale, even though shrub cover ranged from 0 to 78% ($\bar{x} = 46\%$), we did not find that *M. minutoides* changed their movement patterns in response to this variation. This suggests that the shrub encroachment found at our study site and commonly throughout the region (Roques, O'Connor & Watkinson, 2001; Sirami & Monadjem, 2012) does not directly influence the nightly movements of *M. minutoides*. Nonetheless, our high capture rates of *M. minutoides* compared with other species captures revealed that *M. minutoides* was the dominant species in an area with increased shrub cover. One possible explanation for this pattern is that shrub encroachment may reduce the prevalence of other rodents which compete with *M. minutoides*, thus indirectly enhancing the viability of *M. minutoides*. Although *M. minutoides* are omnivorous and grass seeds comprise a part of their diet, they are seed generalists (Oguge, 1995; Monadjem, 1997b). Thus, they may be less impacted by a loss of grass cover from encroachment than species with specialized diets. Furthermore, at the scales that are important to *M. minutoides*, there may still be ample area that has not been altered by excessive encroachment. Alternatively, our study sites may not have had the range of shrub cover necessary to detect the hump-shaped relationships at the path scale that has been found in other species. Similarly, the scale of our study may not have allowed us to measure the landscape level changes in vegetative structure that drive habitat selection by *M. minutoides* and other rodents.

From our study, it is clear that *M. minutoides* need grass and cover at the fine scale. However, continued shrub encroachment often leads to decreases in ground cover, even at fine scales (Blaum, Rossmannith & Jeltsch, 2007a). Thus, at a certain threshold of shrub cover, it will be impossible for *M. minutoides* to find environments of

increased grass cover and visual obstruction that they selected for in our study. Although under current conditions in the Lowveld of Swaziland *M. minutoides* appear to thriving and benefiting directly at a fine scale and were not impacted by the increased shrub cover found in the region at the path scale, this suggests that if ground cover was eventually lost at the expense of shrub cover it would be detrimental to *M. minutoides*. Our study provides the first step in understanding habitat selection of *M. minutoides* in a changing landscape and has added to our understanding of their basic ecology. In the future, we suggest that this study be repeated in a variety of habitats with varying levels of shrub encroachment to better understand the influence of shrub encroachment on *M. minutoides*.

Acknowledgements

We thank All-out Africa and Mlawula Nature reserve for their support of this project. This research was conducted through the African Savannah Research Center as part of the University of Florida's UF in Swaziland Study abroad programme. We also thank three anonymous reviewers for helping us make substantial improvements to our manuscript.

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(Manuscript accepted 26 November 2012)

doi: 10.1111/aje.12062