

Title: Whole-body endothermy in a mesopelagic fish, the opah, *Lampris guttatus*

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Abstract: Endothermy (the metabolic production and retention of heat to warm body temperature above ambient) enhances physiological function, and whole-body endothermy generally sets mammals and birds apart from other animals. Here we describe, however, a whole-body form of endothermy in a fish, the opah (*Lampris guttatus*), which produces heat through the constant “flapping” of wing-like pectoral fins and minimizes heat loss through a series of counter-current heat exchangers within its gills. Unlike other fishes, opah distribute warmed blood throughout the body, including to the heart, thereby enhancing physiological performance and buffering internal organ function while foraging in the cold, nutrient rich waters below the ocean thermocline.

Once Sentence Summary: The opah (*Lampris guttatus*) enhances physiological function through whole-body endothermy.

Main Text: The ability of an organism to conserve metabolic heat and maintain its body temperature above that of the surrounding environment (endothermy) increases reaction rates, muscle power output, and the capacity for sustained aerobic performance. This process provides distinct benefits, particularly for organisms that inhabit environments of low or variable temperature (1, 2). As such, endothermic organisms demonstrate a higher capacity for niche expansion and often gain a competitive advantage over organisms that thermoconform to their environment (e.g., in predator-prey interactions) (2-5). Due to the high heat capacity of water, the retention of body heat in aquatic habitats is extremely challenging, even for mammals, and thus only a small number of highly active fish species (<0.1% of described fishes) have acquired the ability to retain some internally produced heat (6-9). These fishes are termed “regional endotherms,” as, unlike mammals and birds, they are only able to increase the temperature of specific tissues or organs.

The regionally endothermic tunas (family Scombridae) and lamnid sharks (family Lamnidae) (which warm their internalized red aerobic musculature used in continuous swimming) (6-12) and the billfishes (families Istiophoridae and Xiphiidae, which warm the eye and brain region only) (13, 14) are often termed “high-performance” fishes due to their increased physiological function associated with regional heat retention (8, 15). However, these fishes fall far short of whole-body endothermy, as much of the body (including vital organs such as the heart) remains at ambient temperature, which ultimately puts limits on aerobic performance in cold water (16, 17). This limitation is linked to mechanisms used by these groups to reduce heat loss. While conductive heat loss to the water is minimized by the location of heat-producing tissues near the body midline and insulation from the surrounding tissues, the main challenge to fish endothermy is the convective loss of heat as blood comes in close contact with the water at

the gill lamellae (site of respiratory gas exchange). To reduce convective heat loss, these fishes have retia mirabilia or “wonderful nets” of blood vessels that form counter-current heat exchangers composed of densely-packed arterioles and venules running in opposing directions in which warm venous blood returning from the heat-production site transfers its heat to the cold arterial blood arriving from the gills (18). To date, these retia in fish have only been observed in connection with specific muscle groups or organs, leaving the heart and many other tissues at ambient water temperature.

This study presents morphological, temperature, and behavioral data that demonstrate an independent evolution of a more whole-body form of endothermy present in the opah, *Lampris guttatus*, a poorly studied, large, mesopelagic fish with a circumglobal distribution. We show that unlike other fishes, the opah has putative heat conserving retia located inside the gills, thus isolating the primary site of heat loss from the rest of the body. In situ temperature measurements acquired for freshly sacrificed opah landed during fisheries surveys reveal that the entire body core (pectoral swimming musculature, viscera, and heart) and cranial region (Table 1), are all significantly warmer than the environment. A representative superimposed thermal profile for a 40.0 kg opah reconstructed from over 35 temperature measurements taken 4-5 cm beneath the skin over the entire animal (Figure 1A) shows the general distribution of elevated temperatures. Elevated in situ temperatures were confirmed by in vivo measurements taken from swimming opah released from our fishing vessel with a thermocouple placed in the pectoral musculature and tethered to a surface float for recapture. These fish had an average pectoral muscle temperature elevated 4.8 ± 1.2 °C above ambient (Table 1) when swimming between

depths of 50-300 m at water temperatures of 7.8-10.8 °C (data for a 39.0 kg opah shown in Fig. 1B).

In opah, the bulk of metabolic heat appears to be produced by the dark red aerobic pectoral musculature, which is used during continuous swimming (*I9*) and is insulated from the water by a 0.88 ± 0.21 cm thick layer of fatty connective tissue (mean thickness \pm SD from 16 opah, 22.0-67.5 kg, Fig. S1). Unlike most fishes that use body undulation to achieve forward thrust during swimming, opah primarily use pectoral fin oscillation (Movie S1). The aerobic pectoral musculature in opah comprises 16% of their total mass (37% of the total propulsive musculature) (*I9*), which is among the highest ratio reported for any fish and 25-800% more than that of the regionally endothermic tunas and lamnid sharks that warm their aerobic myotomal swimming musculature (Table S1).

What is exceptional about the opah is its arrangement of counter-current retia mirabilia located inside each thick, fat-insulated gill arch (Fig. 2) which thermally isolate the respiratory exchange surfaces from the rest of the body. Vascular casts of the gills (Fig. 2A, C, E) reveal that unlike other fishes, extensions of the afferent and efferent filament arteries (which feed and collect blood immediately pre and post gas exchange at the gill lamellae) are embedded within each gill arch in a tightly bundled and contorted manner to form an arterio-arterial rete. Specifically, the afferent and efferent arteries of each individual filament are closely coupled (Fig. 2E), and are stacked in an alternating pattern within the arch (Fig. 2C, D) such that the cold oxygenated blood of each efferent vessel (returning from the respiratory exchange surfaces) should be warmed by the conduction of heat from the warm deoxygenated blood in the afferent filament arteries on

either side (which are carrying blood to the gas exchange surfaces). As a result, oxygenated blood leaving the respiratory exchange surfaces should be warmed prior to entering into efferent branchial arteries for distribution to the rest of the body.

Although these arterio-arterial retia should allow warm blood to be circulated throughout the body, the cranial region is warmer than the body core (Table 1, Fig. 1), indicating an additional heat source associated with the brain and extraocular muscles (the muscles that move the eye during swimming). Previous work suggests that heat may be produced by the proximal region of the paired lateral rectus muscles that attach at the base of the skull (immediately ventral to the brain) and conserved by small retia associated with the lateral and superior rectus muscles (20).

Of particular significance is the capacity of opah to increase the temperature of the heart, which receives warm blood from both the coronary arteries and the systemic venous return and is insulated from the opercular cavities by a 0.56 ± 0.07 cm thick fat layer (mean thickness from 15 opah 22.0-67.5 kg). For the regionally endothermic tunas and lamnid sharks (which cannot warm the heart), both aerobic performance and foraging dives into cold water are thought to be largely limited by heart function, with weaker cardiac excitation–contraction (E-C) coupling leading to reduced cardiac outputs at lower temperatures (16, 17, 21, 22), which likely causes most species to return to surface waters to warm in between deep, cold water dives. While some regionally endothermic species such as the salmon shark, *Lamna ditropis*, that spend considerable time in cold waters show enhanced expression of E-C coupling proteins to help mitigate the effect of low temperatures, cardiac function is still greatly reduced at colder temperatures (22). Evidence of a wide thermal tolerance in opah comes from satellite tracking

data showing that opah spend most of their time below the mixed surface layer at depths between 50 and 400 m (23, Fig. 3) without regular visits to surface waters to warm.

With a warm body core, heart, and even warmer cranial region, opah have the capacity for enhanced physiological function in their deep, cold habitat. The elevated body temperature of opah should increase muscle power output and capacity for sustained performance, enhance temporal resolution and neural conductance for the eye and brain, increase the rates of food digestion and assimilation in the digestive tract, and reduce the impact of cold ambient temperatures and temperature changes on cardiac and other organ performance. Supporting its endothermic ability and increased aerobic performance, the opah has a relatively large heart and gill surface area, high hematocrit level, and an unusually large aerobic muscle mass (Table S1), all of which are similar to characteristics of high-performance predators like tunas and in stark contrast to those of other fishes from its order (order Lampridiformes), which tend to be slow-moving ambush predators.

In many respects, the opah has converged with regionally endothermic fishes such as tunas and lamnid sharks for increased aerobic capacity. However, unlike these active, more surface-oriented predators that are thought to be derived from tropical ancestors and to use regional endothermy to expand their thermal tolerance or habitat utilization into deep and colder waters (6, 7), the opah's evolutionary history is likely tied to greater oceanic depths, with all but the most basal lineage of the Lampridiformes inhabiting the mesopelagic zone (200-1000 m depth) (24). Therefore, rather than using regional endothermy to dive below the thermocline during temporary forages, the opah (with its more whole-body form of endothermy) is distinctively

specialized to exploit cold, deeper waters while maintaining elevated levels of physiological performance. The discovery of this form of endothermy, coupled with the recent finding of several distinct opah species inhabiting different regions of the world's oceans (25) (including the sub-polar southern opah, *Lampris immaculatus*), sets the stage for future comparative studies to further explore this key evolutionary innovation.

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Fig. 1. Body temperature in the opah, *Lampris guttatus*. (A) In situ internal temperature profile (measurements taken approximately 4-5 cm below the skin) for a 98.0 cm fork length (40.0 kg) opah with an ambient reference temperature of 10.5 °C. (B) In vivo pectoral muscle temperature for a 96.4 cm (39.0 kg) opah swimming at depth.

Fig. 2. Anatomy and vasculature of the opah gill. (A) Opah with enlarged fixed gill arch (left) and examples of vascular casts of the first gill arch (blue casting material only; center) and fourth arch (blue and red casting material; right). (B) Enlarged view of box in (A) showing blood vessels of the rete mirabile surrounded by adipose tissue within the gill arch. (C) Enlarged view of box in (A) showing the convoluted alternating afferent (blue = deoxygenated) and efferent (red = oxygenated) filament arteries forming the rete mirabile. (D) Magnified image of box in (B) showing a cross-section through the rete with two rows of blood vessels (one associated with each gill hemibranch) containing alternating afferent and efferent filament arteries). (E) Gill filament extracted from box in (A) showing the tight coupling of the afferent filament artery (blue, delivering deoxygenated blood to the gas-exchanging lamellae) with the efferent filament artery (red, returning with oxygenated blood). Abbreviations: A, adipose tissue; ABA, afferent branchial artery; AFA, afferent filament artery; EBA, efferent branchial artery; EFA, efferent filament artery; GA, gill arch; GF, gill filaments.

Fig. 3. Depth distribution of an opah (left) in comparison to that of the regionally endothermic albacore tuna, *Thunnus alalunga* (right), as determined through archival tags. The percentage of time each species spent above 50 m (dotted gray line = the estimated mean depth of the bottom of the warm mixed surface layer) is shown for both daylight and nighttime hours. Data for *T. alalunga* are from Ref. 27.

Table 1. Regional body temperature measurements (means \pm SD) taken from freshly captured and free-swimming opah.

Body region	Mean temp (°C)	Temp elevation above ambient (°C)	Number of fish (n)
In situ measurements (decked fish)			
Pectoral muscle	13.8 \pm 1.5	3.8 \pm 0.8	22
Cranial region	16.1 \pm 3.9	6.0 \pm 3.0	22
Viscera	13.5 \pm 1.6	3.5 \pm 1.0	21
Heart	13.2 \pm 1.7	3.2 \pm 0.7	19
In vivo measurements (free-swimming fish)			
Pectoral muscle	14.4 \pm 0.4	4.8 \pm 1.2	4

Supplementary Materials

Materials and Methods

Figures S1-S2

Tables S1

Movies S1

References (27-38)

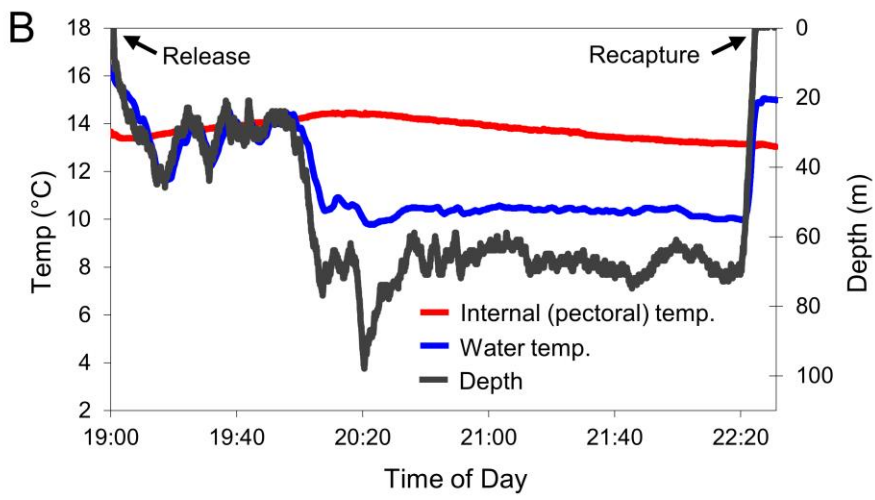
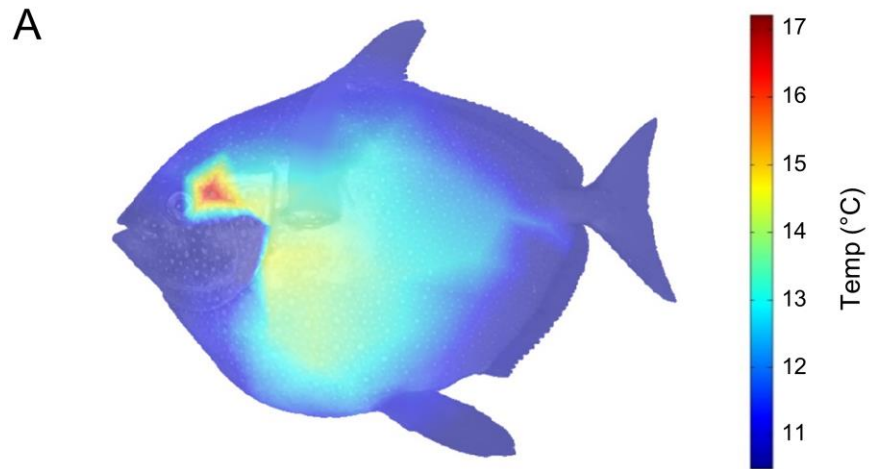


Figure 1

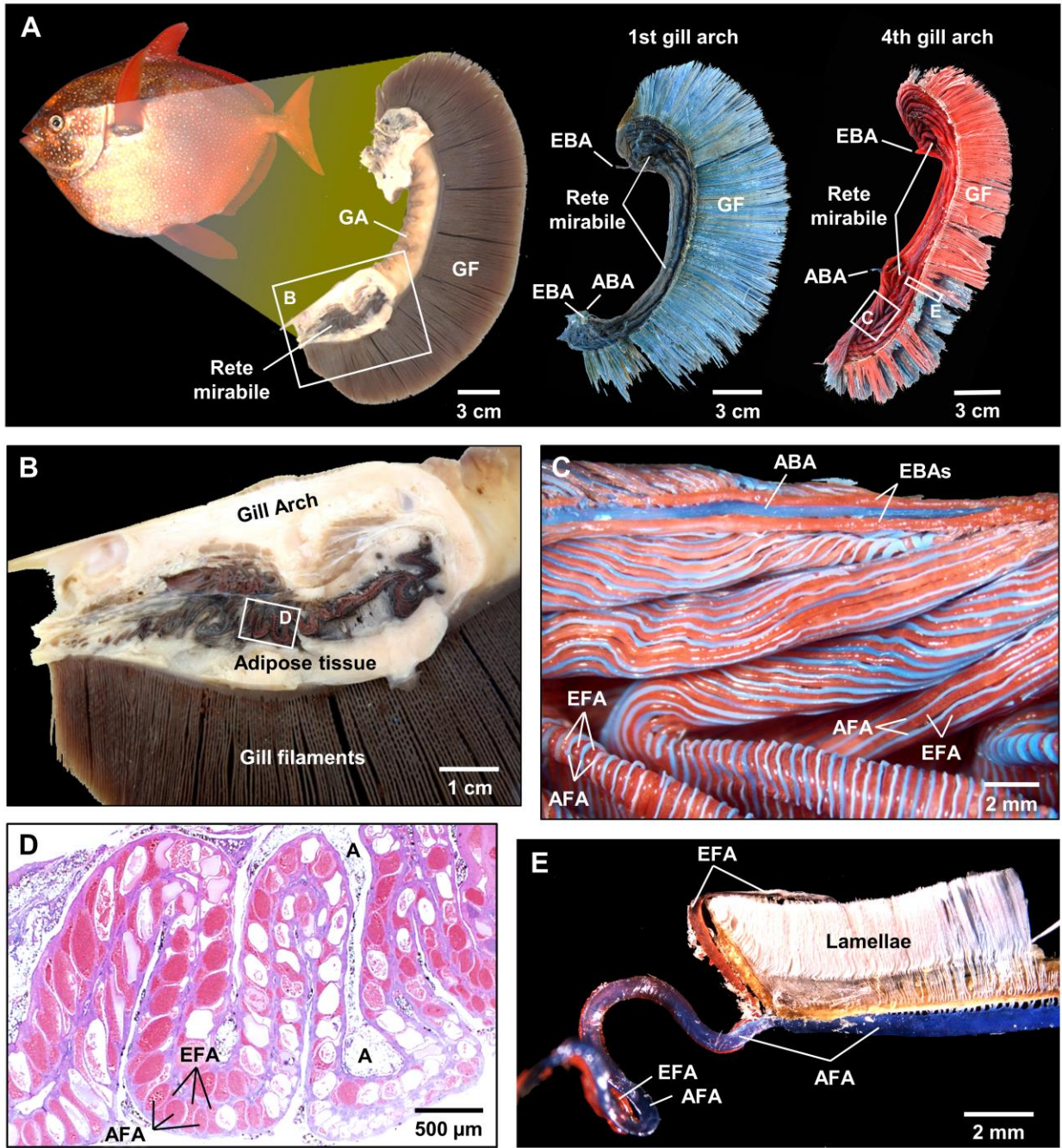


Figure 2

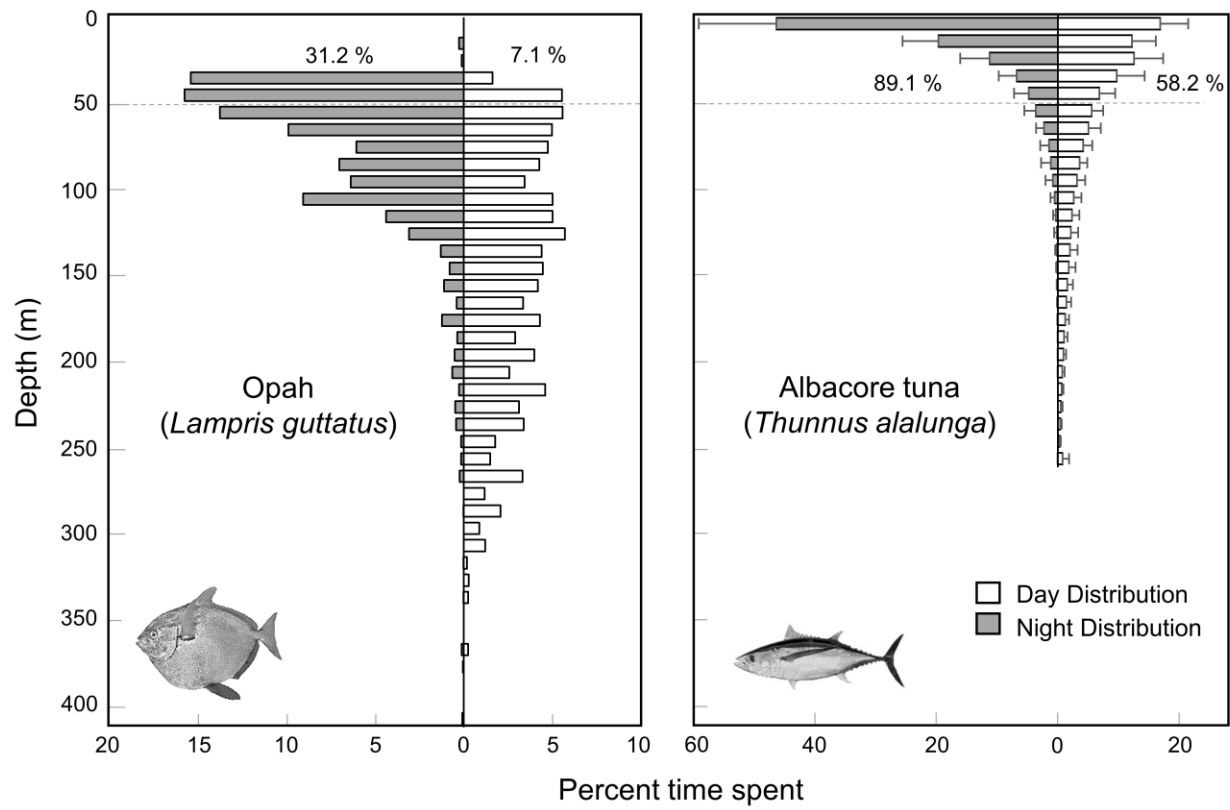


Figure 3