

Division of Vertebrate Morphology (DVM): 2002 Fall Newsletter

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Message from the Chair

Kathleen Smith

I look forward to seeing you all in Toronto and to welcoming Frank Fish as the new chair of the Division. Bret summarizes below our schedule for the meetings, and there will be much to interest us all.

Diane Kelly will be stepping down as the chair of the committee for the Dwight Davis award; on behalf of the division I extend my thanks for her service. Jeff Walker has agreed to chair the committee this year. Diane's advice for students whether or not they are competing for this award is posted at the end of this newsletter.

Please be on the lookout for a couple of messages from the Division, which we'll send out as an email to all DVM members. First, we are hoping to organize a "video night" for the night of the social. At this event, we'll invite everyone to bring any cool, funny, amazing or otherwise entertaining research video that you just haven't yet been able to incorporate into your talks. Think of it as a combination of an amazing animals and bloopers—and-outtake kind of show. Second, as summarized below, members of the division organized a highly successful Northeast meeting this past fall. There are possible plans for a mid-West and perhaps mid-Atlantic meeting in the coming year. Stay tuned.

Message from the Program Officer

Bret Tobalske

If last year was a crest with regard to the sheer number of symposia sponsored or co-sponsored by DVM, it seems that we are entering into a trough. In 2001, we sponsored or co-sponsored three symposia, and many DVM members had a challenging time shuttling between symposia and regular sessions. Time budgets will probably be easier to arrange this time around. At the upcoming meeting in Toronto, we are co-sponsoring only one symposium, but it will be an interesting one: "Patterns and Processes in the Evolution of Fishes," organized by Francesco Santini and Gustavo Ybazeta. The SICB-wide symposium, "Selection and Evolution of Performance in Nature," organized by Joel Kingsolver and Ray Huey, will also be of interest to many of us in DVM. The general consensus at the DVM business meeting last year was that approximately one symposium per year represents a good pace, so we are on target for Toronto. However, no proposals have been submitted requesting DVM sponsorship for symposia at the New Orleans meeting in 2004.

Before we panic, I suggest that the lack of upcoming symposia in New Orleans may be a natural pattern. People require time to develop new directions in research before the need arises to review and integrate those directions into a symposium. Certainly DVM is an active division, as we have nearly 160 abstracts submitted for the Toronto meeting with functional morphology as a key topic. A quick glance through abstract titles indicates that feeding and locomotion remain prime areas of interest, but there is also a healthy diversity of topics in other areas of morphology. So, as the meeting approaches this year, I urge everyone in DVM to reflect on the vigor and identity of our division and consider the merits of proposing fresh symposia in 2005. If you have an interest in organizing a symposium, please contact me; I will be happy to talk over your ideas and point you in the right direction with regard to proposal submission.

I look forward to seeing you in Toronto; best wishes for a productive autumn.

Message from the Secretary

Audrone Biknevičius

1. George Lauder and Dan Lieberman submitted the following report of the Northeast Regional DVM meeting held late this summer at Harvard University:

On Saturday September 14th, the Northeast regional meeting of the Division of Vertebrate Morphology was held at Harvard. Organized by Dan Lieberman and George Lauder, nearly 100 people registered and 54 talks were presented in a very successful (and busy) one-day format. In order to fit everyone in, all talks were limited to 5 minutes, but 20 minute breaks were scheduled each hour to allow plenty of time to interact with speakers. Despite some initial skepticism about the value of 5 minute talks, the overwhelming consensus after the meeting was that this format worked exceptionally well. Speakers got right to the point, most even left time for a few short questions, and there was plenty of time for interaction during the numerous breaks, lunch, and dinner. Box lunches were provided which allowed all participants to stay at the meeting and chat during lunch, and dinner was catered in Romer Hall, permitting viewing of the public museum exhibits as everyone relaxed after the papers. We were fortunate also to have participation from visitors outside the immediate Northeast area. Ken Kardong had the record for distance traveled to the meeting (from Washington State), and we are very grateful for his presence. Others coming from a distance included visitors from Duke and the University of Michigan, and their presence added considerably to both the intellectual and social atmosphere of the day.

2. I am pleased to reprint Diane Kelly's sage advice to graduate student on preparing effective presentations:

Tell a story

Whether you're giving a talk or a poster, your results will be more meaningful to your audience if you present them as a part of a story. But given your time (or space) limitations, it has to be a short story. Journal articles can be like novels, with sections that elaborate on side issues. This isn't an option when you have at most 20 minutes to get your point across. You will only have time to present a single overall message, and all your efforts should go toward developing that message. Any diversion away from your main point is more likely to confuse your audience and reduce the overall impact of the talk than to wow them with your breadth. This is not to imply, however, that you should just read off a list of your data and be done with it. Your

audience needs a context in which to appreciate your results, so you will need to spend some time giving them enough background information to understand where your project fits in to vertebrate morphology and what makes it a new contribution. If you have specific predictions about your system, make sure the audience knows what they are before you go on to discuss how your data relates to them.

Make your visuals clear

We are a visual species, and good pictures can do much to drive home a point. Computers have made it much easier for even the most graphically-challenged of us to make beautiful pictures, but they come with their own pitfalls. Bear in mind that just because a program has a lot of special features doesn't mean that you should use them. Keep it simple. Presentations in twelve different colors or with titles that swish in and out of the frame are more likely to give your audience headaches than impress — unless those colors actually convey important scientific information. Any text should be large enough to read from the back of the room, and your graphics should be free of nonessential information. Effective images reinforce the points you are making in your presentation, so your audience can concentrate on the data and your interpretation instead of wondering what that thing in the picture is supposed to be.

Rehearse

Ideally, you want to be able to speak clearly and project your voice (so those pesky people in the back row can hear what you have to say). And the best way to be able to do this is to be comfortable with your material. And that means rehearsing. Practice your talk beforehand. If you can get a group of people to watch you, so much the better.