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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vetmic.2020.108927>

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1 **Short communication**

2 **Zoo animals as sentinels for Schmallenberg virus monitoring in Spain.**

3

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23 **Summary**

24 Schmallenberg virus (SBV) is a newly emerged vector-borne pathogen that affects
25 many domestic and wild animal species. A serosurvey was carried out to assess SBV exposure
26 in zoo animals in Spain and to determine the dynamics of seropositivity in longitudinally
27 sampled individuals. Between 2002 and 2019, sera from 278 animals belonging to 73 different
28 species were collected from five zoos (A-E). Thirty-one of these animals were longitudinally
29 sampled at three of these zoo parks during the study period. Seropositivity was detected in 28
30 (10.1%) of 278 animals analyzed by blocking ELISA. Specific anti-SBV antibodies were
31 confirmed in 20 (7.2%; 95%CI: 4.2-10.3) animals of six different species using virus
32 neutralization test (VNT). The multiple logistic regression model showed that “order”
33 (*Artiodactyla*) and “zoo provenance” (zoo B; southern Spain) were risk factors potentially
34 associated with SBV exposure. Two (8.7%) of the 31 longitudinally-sampled individuals
35 showed specific antibodies against SBV at all samplings whereas seroconversion was detected
36 in one mouflon (*Ovis aries musimon*) and one Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) in 2016 and
37 2019, respectively. To the best of the author’s knowledge, this is the first surveillance conducted
38 on SBV in zoos in Spain. The results confirm SBV exposure in zoo animals in this country and
39 indicate circulation of the virus before the first Schmallenberg disease outbreak was reported
40 in Spain. Surveillance in zoological parks could be a complementary approach to monitoring
41 SBV activity. Further studies are warranted to assess the impact of this virus on the health status
42 of susceptible zoo animals.

43

44 **Keywords:** *Schmallenberg, Vector-borne, Emerging, Surveillance, Wildlife, Captive, Animal*
45 *health.*

46

47 **Introduction**

48 Schmallenberg virus (SBV) (genus *Orthobunyavirus*; family *Peribunyaviridae*) is a
49 newly emerged vector-borne pathogen transmitted by biting midges (Diptera:
50 *Ceratopogonidae*, *Culicoides* spp.). After the first Schmallenberg disease outbreak was
51 reported in cattle in Germany in 2011 (Hoffmann et al., 2012), the virus spread rapidly across
52 Europe and into other territories (Collins et al., 2019). In adult domestic ruminants,
53 Schmallenberg disease is either asymptomatic or characterized by mild non-specific clinical
54 signs, including mild fever, diarrhea and a drop in milk production. In pregnant females, SBV
55 infection can lead to early embryonic loss, abortion, stillbirths and congenital malformations in
56 newborn animals (Endalew et al., 2019).

57 Although SBV mainly affects domestic ruminants, with a major impact on animal
58 health, production and international trade, free-ranging and captive wild species have also been
59 shown to be susceptible to SBV infection (Collins et al., 2019; Molenaar et al., 2015). Previous
60 studies have suggested the potential role of wildlife in the maintenance of SBV in Europe,
61 particularly at the livestock-wildlife interface (García-Bocanegra et al., 2017; Jiménez-Ruiz et
62 al., 2020; Rossi et al., 2015). Serosurveys have also been proposed as a useful tool in wildlife
63 for monitoring this virus (Jiménez-Ruiz et al., 2020; Mouchantat et al., 2015). In Spanish
64 Mediterranean ecosystems, SBV circulation has been detected in free-ranging wild ungulate
65 species, with seroprevalence values ranging between 18.2% and 29.8% (García-Bocanegra et
66 al., 2017; Jiménez-Ruiz et al., 2020).

67 The importance of zoos for the surveillance of emerging diseases has been widely
68 documented (Caballero-Gómez et al., 2019; McNamara, 2007; Robinette et al., 2017). The wide
69 variety of animal species, as well as the exhaustive management protocols and veterinary check-
70 ups implemented in zoos, mean that zoo animals are easily accessible and could be considered
71 useful sentinel species for monitoring vector-borne pathogens (Caballero-Gómez et al., 2020;

72 Sánchez-Romano et al., 2019). Antibodies against SBV have been detected in native and exotic
73 wild species kept in captivity in Europe (Laloy et al., 2016; Molenaar et al., 2015; Mouchantat
74 et al., 2015; Sánchez-Romano et al., 2019), although the information on the role of zoo animals
75 in the epidemiology of this virus is still very scarce worldwide. The aims of this study were: (1)
76 to assess SBV exposure in captive zoo animals in Spain, and (2) to determine the dynamics of
77 seropositivity in individuals that were sampled longitudinally during the study period.

78 **Material and Methods**

79 Between 2002 and 2019, a total of 278 zoo animals belonging to 73 different species
80 were sampled at five urban zoos (A-E) in Spain (Fig. 1). Samples were obtained from serum
81 banks or from animals undergoing surgery, medical check-ups or participating in health
82 programs during the study period. Sera were obtained after centrifugation and kept frozen at -
83 20 °C until analysis. Epidemiological data including age, sex, zoo, order and sampling date
84 were collected for each animal, whenever possible. Sample collection was divided into three
85 consecutive periods (2002-2010, 2011-2015 and 2016-2019) based on the first report of SBV
86 circulation in Spain (García-Bocanegra et al., 2017) and the re-emergence of this virus in
87 Europe (Larska, 2018). Additionally, 31 of the 278 sampled animals at three of the zoos
88 analyzed (zoos B, C and E) were surveyed longitudinally. Longitudinally-sampled animals
89 were not translocated during the study period. Reproductive disorders compatible with SBV
90 infection were not observed in any of the five zoos analyzed.

91 SBV seropositivity was determined using a commercial multi-species blocking ELISA
92 (bELISA; INgezim Schmallenberg Compac 2.0[®], INGENASA, Madrid, Spain), carried out in
93 accordance with the manufacturer's instructions. This bELISA detects antibodies against the N
94 protein of SBV. Sensitivity and specificity values provided by the manufacturers were 99.5%
95 and 99.0%, respectively. This bELISA has been used in previous surveys in wild ungulate
96 species and showed very good agreement (Kappa value = 0.95) with the virus neutralization

97 test (García-Bocanegra et al., 2017; Jiménez-Ruiz et al., 2020). The presence of anti-SBV
98 antibodies in bELISA-positive animals was then confirmed by the virus neutralization test
99 (VNT), as previously described (Loeffen et al., 2012). Titers were expressed as the reciprocal
100 of the highest dilution that neutralized 100 tissue culture infective doses (100 TCID_{50%}) of SBV
101 (BH80/11-4 isolate; kindly provided by M. Beer, Friedrich-Loeffler-Institute, Isle of Riems,
102 Germany) in Vero cells. Sera that showed neutralization (absence of cytopathic effect) at
103 dilutions $\geq 1:4$ were considered positive.

104 In the present study, only samples positive to both bELISA and VNT were considered
105 positive for SBV exposure. Seroprevalence to SBV was calculated as the ratio of seropositive
106 animals to the total number of animals examined, using two-sided exact binomial confidence
107 intervals (95%CI). Associations between seroprevalence of SBV and explanatory variables
108 were analyzed using the Pearson's chi-square test or Fisher's exact test as appropriate.
109 Explanatory variables “order” and “zoo provenance” were converted into dichotomous dummy
110 variables. Variables with $p < 0.10$ in the bivariate analysis were included for further analysis.
111 Then, collinearity between pairs of variables was computed by Cramer's V coefficient. Finally,
112 multiple logistic regression analysis to assess risk factors potentially associated with SBV
113 exposure in zoo animals. The fit of the models was assessed using a goodness-of-fit test
114 (Hosmer and Lemeshow, 2000). Values with $p < 0.05$ were considered statistically significant.
115 Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS 25.0 software (Statistical Package for Social
116 Sciences, Inc., Chicago, IL, USA).

117 **Results**

118 Seropositivity to SBV was found in 28 (10.1%) of the 278 zoo animals analyzed by
119 bELISA: twenty of these were positive by VNT, seven tested negative, and one could not be
120 analyzed due to the limited volume of serum available. Hence, the overall individual SBV
121 seroprevalence was 7.2% (20/277; 95%CI: 4.2-10.3) (Table 1; Supplementary Material, Table

122 S1). Anti-SBV antibodies were found in two of the six orders tested (order *Artiodactyla* (13.1%)
123 and order *Proboscidea* (10.0%)), and in six (8.2%) of the 73 species analyzed (Table 1;
124 Supplementary Material, Table S1). Seropositive animals were observed in three (60.0%) of
125 the five sampled zoos (Table 2; Fig. 1) and every year between 2012 and 2019. Seropositivity
126 to SBV were detected in two yearlings (≤ 12 months old) (one aoudad (*Ammotragus lervia*) and
127 one mouflon (*Ovis aries musimon*)) sampled in 2014 and 2016 in zoo B (Table 1). The
128 distribution of seropositive animals according to the explanatory variables is shown in Table 2.
129 The variable “sampling period” was excluded from logistic regression analysis due to
130 collinearity with the variables “order” and “zoo provenance”, while “sex” was collinear with
131 “order”. The final model identified order *Artiodactyla* (19/145, 13.1%; $p = 0.005$, OR =19.3,
132 95%CI: 2.5-150.9) and zoo B (17/79, 21.5%; $p < 0.001$, OR = 17.5, 95%CI: 4.8-63.4) as risk
133 factors potentially associated with SBV exposure in zoo animals in Spain. Of the 31 animals
134 longitudinally sampled, 25 were seronegative in all samplings, while four always showed
135 positive results by bELISA (Table 3). Of these, specific anti-SBV antibodies were confirmed
136 by VNT in two individuals (one aoudad and one bongo (*Tragelaphus euryceros*)). In addition,
137 seroconversions were detected in one Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) between 2018 and
138 2019 and one mouflon between January and December 2016, both housed in zoo B.

139 **Discussion**

140 To the best of the author’s knowledge, this is the first surveillance on SBV carried out
141 in zoo animals in Spain. Our results confirm SBV circulation in zoo parks in this country, which
142 could be of animal health and conservation concern. The overall seroprevalence (7.2%) is lower
143 than those previously found in captive species in Europe, which ranged between 20.2%
144 (419/2077) and 55.6% (30/54) (Laloy et al., 2016; Molenaar et al., 2015; Mouchantat et al.,
145 2015; Sánchez-Romano et al., 2019; Steinrigl et al., 2014). However, comparisons between
146 studies should be made with caution given the differences in study periods, numbers of animals

147 and species analyzed, study design, epidemiological contexts and diagnostic methods
148 employed.

149 The seroprevalence obtained in our study in artiodactyl species sampled after 2011
150 (17.0%; 19/112) when the first SBV outbreak was detected (Hoffmann et al., 2012) is within
151 the range of values (14.6%-27.1% (160/1099-330/1216)) previously obtained in free-ranging
152 wild artiodactyls in Spain (García-Bocanegra et al., 2017; Jiménez-Ruiz et al., 2020). In this
153 regard, multivariate analysis showed that the risk of seropositivity to SBV was 19.3 times higher
154 in zoo animals belonging to the order *Artiodactyla* than in any of the other orders analyzed.
155 This, together with the seropositivity values observed in the aoudad (46.2%), red deer (58.3%)
156 and mouflon (37.5%), which were even higher than those previously found in free-ranging
157 animals of the same species in the study area, indicate the potential role of captive artiodactyls
158 in the maintenance of SBV in Spain (García-Bocanegra et al., 2017; Jiménez-Ruiz et al., 2020).

159 Specific anti-SBV antibodies were also found in the endangered Asian elephant (IUCN,
160 2020), which is consistent with the report by Molenaar et al. (2015) and confirms the
161 susceptibility of this species to SBV infection. Interestingly, most bELISA-positive animals
162 that tested negative by VNT belong to the orders *Perissodactyla* (white rhinoceros
163 (*Ceratotherium simum*)) and *Proboscidea* (African elephant (*Loxodonta africana*)). The same
164 result was obtained in one of the three brown bears (*Ursus arctos*) tested. These findings could
165 be associated with cross-reactivity with other SBV-related viruses of the Simbu serogroup, as
166 previously suggested (Molenaar et al., 2015). Nevertheless, these hypotheses need to be
167 evaluated in future studies. The absence of seropositive animals in the orders *Carnivora* and
168 *Diprotodontia* is in agreement with previous studies and suggests that these species are not
169 reservoirs for SBV (reviewed EFSA, 2014; Garigliany et al., 2013; Molenaar et al., 2015;
170 Mouchantat et al., 2015).

171 Seropositive animals were observed in three of the five sampled zoos. Significantly,
172 higher seroprevalence was detected at zoo B, which is situated in the same area where the first
173 SBV outbreak was reported in Spain (Jiménez-Ruiz et al., 2019). This zoo is also located very
174 close to the city center, which confirms SBV circulation in urban areas, as has been previously
175 documented (Laloy et al., 2016). The differences between zoo parks may be associated with the
176 animal species analyzed, environmental factors and/or the presence and abundance of
177 competent vectors at these zoos. In this regard, the densities of *Culicoides*, particularly
178 *Culicoides imicola*, have been shown to be higher in southwestern Spain (Arenas-Montes et al.,
179 2016; Calvete et al., 2008). Different *Culicoides* species have been confirmed at different zoos
180 in the United Kingdom (England et al., 2020; Vilar et al., 2011), although entomological
181 surveillance in zoo parks in Spain is needed to determine the competent vector species present
182 in these epidemiological scenarios.

183 Specific antibodies against SBV were not detected before 2011 (Hoffmann et al., 2012).
184 In Spain, SBV circulation was first detected in domestic and wild ruminants in the summer and
185 autumn of that year, respectively (Astorga et al., 2014; García-Bocanegra et al., 2017). In our
186 study, the first seropositive zoo animal was an adult aoudad from zoo B sampled in February
187 2012, one month before the first SBV outbreak was reported in livestock in Spain (Jiménez-
188 Ruiz et al., 2019). Two yearling animals (one aoudad and one mouflon) from the same zoo park
189 showed seropositivity in 2014 and 2016, respectively (Table 1). These findings, together with
190 the seroconversions detected in the same zoo in one mouflon in 2016 and one Asian elephant
191 in 2018-2019, indicates endemic circulation of SBV there over the last few years.

192 In conclusion, the seroprevalence detected in the present study is evidence of SBV
193 exposure in zoo animals in Spain over the last decade. The results also confirm that urban zoo
194 parks may be suitable epidemiological scenarios for SBV circulation. Surveillance in zoo
195 species, particularly artiodactyls, could be a complementary approach to monitoring SBV

196 activity. Further studies are warranted to assess the impact of this virus on the health status of
197 susceptible zoo animals.

198 **Acknowledgements**

199 We are grateful to Cordoba Zoo Park, Bioparc Valencia, Bioparc Fuengirola, Zoo-Aquarium
200 Madrid and Río Safari Elche for providing the valuable samples. We gratefully acknowledge
201 the assistance of Dr Joan Pujols with the laboratory analyses. J. Caballero-Gómez is supported
202 by an FPU grant of the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and
203 Universities (FPU17/01319).

204 **Conflict of interest**

205 None of the authors of this study has a financial or personal relationship with other people or
206 organizations that could inappropriately influence or bias the content of the paper.

207 **Ethical approval**

208 The collection of samples was performed by personal of the zoos. All samples were collected
209 from serum banks or from animals subjected to health programs, medical check-ups or surgical
210 interventions during the study period. No ethical approval was necessary.

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311 **Tables**

312 **Table 1.** Results of virus neutralization test (VNT) for the detection of antibodies against
313 Schmallenberg virus in bELISA-positive zoo animals in Spain.

314 **Table 2.** Specific seropositivity to Schmallenberg virus in zoo animals in Spain and results of
315 the bivariate analysis.

316 **Table 3.** Schmallenberg virus exposure in longitudinally-sampled animals. Green and red dots
317 indicate seronegative and seropositive animals respectively, by both bELISA and VNT. Orange
318 dots indicate animals positive by bELISA and negative by VNT. In seropositive animals, VNT
319 antibody titers to SBV are shown in brackets. When two samplings were carried out in the same
320 year, the difference between the two in months is indicated in superscript.

321 **Table S1.** Antibodies against Schmallenberg virus in 73 mammal species sampled in zoos in
322 Spain.

323

324 **Figure captions**

325 **Fig. 1.** Distribution of the zoos (A-E) sampled in Spain. The number of positive (non-green)
326 and negative (green) animals analyzed by bELISA at each zoo park is represented in a pie chart.
327 Non-green colors indicate the presence of specific neutralizing antibodies against SBV by VNT
328 at each zoo (red: presence; yellow: absence; gray: not analyzed). Years when seropositive
329 animals were detected are listed above each species.