

# Thermoregulatory changes anticipate hibernation onset by 45 days: data from free-living arctic ground squirrels

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**Abstract** Hibernation is a strategy of reducing energy expenditure, body temperature ( $T_b$ ) and activity used by endotherms to escape unpredictable or seasonally reduced food availability. Despite extensive research on thermoregulatory adjustments during hibernation, less is known about transitions in thermoregulatory state, particularly under natural conditions. Laboratory studies on hibernating ground squirrels have demonstrated that thermoregulatory adjustments may occur over short intervals when animals undergo several brief, preliminary torpor bouts prior to entering multiday torpor. These short torpor bouts have been suggested to reflect a resetting of hypothalamic regions that control  $T_b$  or to precondition animals before they undergo deep, multiday torpor. Here, we examined continuous records of  $T_b$  in 240 arctic ground squirrels (*Urocitellus parryii*) prior to hibernation in the wild and in

captivity. In free-living squirrels,  $T_b$  began to decline 45 days prior to hibernation, and average  $T_b$  had decreased 4.28 °C at the onset of torpor. Further, we found that 75 % of free-living squirrels and 35 % of captive squirrels entered bouts of multiday torpor with a single  $T_b$  decline and without previously showing short preliminary bouts. This study provides evidence that adjustments in the thermoregulatory component of hibernation begin far earlier than previously demonstrated. The gradual reduction in  $T_b$  is likely a component of the suite of metabolic and behavioral adjustments, controlled by an endogenous, circannual rhythm, that vary seasonally in hibernating ground squirrels.

**Keywords** Test drops · Torpor · Body temperature

## Introduction

Hibernation is a physiological and behavioral strategy expressed by many mammals to survive unfavorable and unpredictable environmental conditions by decreasing energy intake and expenditure (Lyman et al. 1982). Hibernation in mammals typically lasts from late summer or autumn until late winter or spring. Torpor during hibernation is characterized by a regulated, substantial reduction in metabolic rate, core body temperature ( $T_b$ ) and activity for days to several weeks at a time. Torpid metabolic rate is reduced to 2–30 % of basal levels and  $T_b$  falls from euthermic levels of ~32–42 °C to as low as –2.9 °C (Barnes 1989; Geiser and Ruf 1995). Across the hibernation season, bouts of torpor are interspersed with brief (<24 h) and spontaneous arousal episodes, during which animals rewarm to euthermic  $T_b$  and have metabolic rate > basal metabolic rate (Geiser 2004).

Hibernating mammals attain the low  $T_b$  associated with torpor by suppressing metabolism through a combination

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of temperature-dependent and -independent mechanisms (Geiser 1988; Heldmaier and Ruf 1992; Buck and Barnes 2000; Tøien et al. 2011) in association with adjustments in their hypothalamic  $T_b$  set-point (Heller et al. 1977). However, even at low  $T_b$ , hibernating mammals maintain the ability to increase metabolism by means of thermoregulatory heat production to maintain constant  $T_b$  when ambient temperature is decreased below  $T_b$  set-point (Buck and Barnes 2000). Thus, low  $T_b$  during torpor is distinct from pathological hypothermia.

Before entering hibernation, animals undergo a suite of major physiological changes. Rates of food consumption in many fat-storing species (such as ground squirrels) increase months before first torpor as animals increase body mass by adding both fat and lean components (Pengelley and Fisher 1963; Buck and Barnes 1999). Compared to the active season, hibernating animals have differential gene and protein expression (Carey et al. 2003; Yan et al. 2008), reduced cell division and proliferation (Carey et al. 2003), altered hormone secretion (Barnes et al. 1988; Kronfeld-Schor et al. 2000), a switch from carbohydrate-based to fat-based fuels (Carey et al. 2003; Dark 2005), and remodeling of certain organs (Arnold et al. 2011). However, despite extensive research on physiological adaptations expressed during hibernation, less work has been done to examine transitional states in thermoregulation. It has been hypothesized that short-term (3–4 days) thermoregulatory adjustments may occur during a series of ‘test drops’ prior to the first multiday torpor bout. Test drops are described as a step-wise series of short (<24 h) bouts of torpor with consecutively lower minimum  $T_b$  and complete arousal between torpor bouts. This is suggested to be due to a progressive resetting within hypothalamic regions that control  $T_b$  set-point and thermoregulation (Strumwasser 1958, 1960; Hammel 1967; Heller and Colliver 1974; Luecke and South 1972; Pivorun 1976; Lyman et al. 1982). Recently, it has been shown that 13-lined ground squirrels expressed irregular use of daily torpor prior to multiday torpor (Russell et al. 2010), and that Syrian hamsters exhibit a small decrease in subcutaneous temperature 5–16 days before their first torpor (Arai et al. 2005). However, these studies were conducted under laboratory conditions, and thermoregulatory patterns prior to hibernation in free-living animals are not well understood. Here we investigate patterns of  $T_b$  in arctic ground squirrels (*Urocitellus parryii*) prior to hibernation to assess changes associated with preparation for hibernation in both free-living and captive animals.

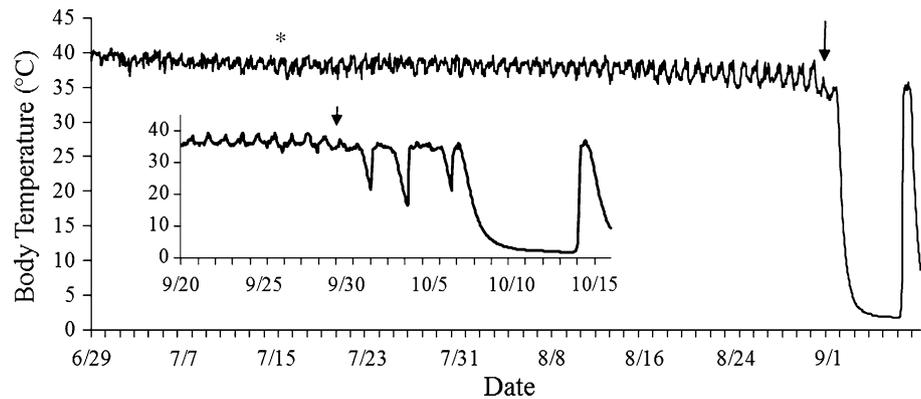
## Materials and methods

Arctic ground squirrels were captured using Tomahawk live-traps (Tomahawk Trap Co.) baited with carrot near the University of Alaska Fairbanks’ Toolik Field Station (68°

38’N, 149° 38’W) on the North Slope of Alaska. Animals brought into captivity were transported to Fairbanks and housed in laboratory cages within environmental chambers held at 18 °C and an 18 h light: 6 h dark photoperiod or in individual 1 × 1 × 2 m soil filled outdoor enclosures at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (Barnes and Ritter 1993). Free-living animals were released to the site of capture <24 h after surgery. Between 1996 and 2010, prior to the first day  $T_b$  decreased <30 °C, we obtained data from 203  $T_b$ -loggers (TidBit Stowaway model TBICU32-05+44, Onset Computer Corporation programmed to record core  $T_b \pm 0.2$  °C at 20 min intervals) implanted abdominally in 141 different free-living ground squirrels (some squirrels were implanted multiple years; being implanted once or multiple times did not affect  $T_b$  changes or test drop probability). During this time we also obtained data from 75  $T_b$ -loggers implanted in laboratory held ground squirrels, and in 2009 and 2010, we obtained data from 24  $T_b$ -loggers implanted in ground squirrels from the outdoor enclosures. Details of surgical procedures are provided in Long et al. (2007). Loggers were implanted in free-living animals throughout the active season with most implants occurring in spring or summer; in captive animals, implant surgeries occurred only in autumn just prior to hibernation. Of the 141 implanted free-living squirrels, we obtained  $T_b$  records up to 60 days prior to entrance of hibernation in a subset of 43 individuals. In captive animals, long-term  $T_b$  records were not obtained since loggers were implanted near the beginning of hibernation.

In the field, squirrels entered hibernation between August and October. Ambient temperatures during the study ranged from August:  $T_{ave} = 4.1$  to 10.7 °C,  $T_{max} = 12.4$  to 25.6 °C,  $T_{min} = -9.5$  to -2.1 °C; September:  $T_{ave} = -4.7$  to 4.7 °C,  $T_{max} = 8.8$  to 17.0 °C,  $T_{min} = -26.5$  to -4.1 °C; October:  $T_{ave} = -16.2$  to -5.4 °C,  $T_{max} = -1.6$  to 14.3 °C,  $T_{min} = -35.5$  to -21.1 °C (Environmental Data Center, Toolik Field Station, toolik.alaska.edu/edc). In the laboratory, squirrels were transferred to environmental chambers at 2 °C and a 6-h light: 18-h dark photoperiod in late August and September. In the outdoor enclosures, animals were exposed to ambient photoperiod and temperature and entered hibernation between August and October. Ambient temperatures in 2009 and 2010 were August:  $T_{ave} = 12.0$  and 15.1 °C,  $T_{max} = 29.3$  and 32.2 °C,  $T_{min} = -0.4$  and 4.2 °C; September:  $T_{ave} = 8.7$  and 8.4 °C,  $T_{max} = 22.9$  and 21.1 °C,  $T_{min} = -4.4$  and -9.2 °C; October:  $T_{ave} = -0.4$  and -1.0 °C,  $T_{max} = 14.8$  and 14.9 °C,  $T_{min} = -10.7$  and -12.4 °C (The Alaska Climate Research Center, Geophysical Institute at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, climate.gi.alaska.edu). All procedures were approved by the University of Alaska Fairbanks Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee, and conducted under permits from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

**Fig. 1** Core body temperature ( $T_b$ ) of a free-living arctic ground squirrel 62 days before heterothermy (first  $T_b$  decline  $<30$  °C). Arrows denote the day prior to first heterothermy, asterisk denotes the first significant decline in  $T_b$  45 days prior to heterothermy. In-set shows truncated  $T_b$  record for a free-living animal that exhibited preliminary torpor prior to multiday torpor



We defined stages of the heterothermic season as in Buck et al. (2008). Specifically, the heterothermic season began the first day an animal's  $T_b$  declined  $<30$  °C, the duration of torpor was defined as the interval when  $T_b$  was  $<30$  °C, and we distinguished multiday torpor from preliminary torpor (test drop) by the duration of the bout (Fig. 1). If  $T_b$  was  $<30$  °C for  $<24$  h we considered it a preliminary torpor bout and if  $T_b$  remained  $<30$  °C for  $>24$  h we considered it a multiday torpor bout (Pivovarov 1976; Geiser 2004). A  $t$  test for dependent samples was used to compare the change in  $T_b$  of free-living squirrels every 5 days from day 60 to day 0 to determine when the first decline occurred and to compare the difference between active season  $T_b$  (day 60) with  $T_b$  the day before animals  $T_b$  first declined  $<30$  °C. To maintain the family-wise error rate, we applied a Bonferroni correction and thus used a  $P$  value of 0.004. Average daily  $T_b$  was calculated each 5th day, i.e., average of day 60, 55, 50, etc; daily minimum and maximum was the lowest and highest  $T_b$  reached each 5th day. We did not have long-term pre-hibernation records of  $T_b$  for captive squirrels. We used a  $z$  test with a Yates correction to compare the proportion of free-living, laboratory or enclosure-held squirrels that underwent preliminary torpor and Kruskal–Wallis rank sum tests with Dunn's method pairwise comparisons to compare the duration and number of all preliminary bouts occurring before the onset of multiday torpor in squirrels that had at least one preliminary bout. A  $t$  test for dependent samples was used to compare the duration and minimum temperature reached of the last preliminary torpor bout to the second last. We found no difference among years, or between ages or sexes for any of the comparisons ( $P > 0.05$ ). All statistics are presented as mean  $\pm$  SD unless otherwise specified.

## Results

All free-living arctic ground squirrels significantly decreased  $T_b$  in advance of the first day when  $T_b$  decreased  $<30$  °C (Fig. 2). Average daily  $T_b$  declined by  $4.3 \pm 1.1$  °C from day 60 pre-heterothermy (ph) until 1 day ph ( $t_{42} = 24.55$ ,

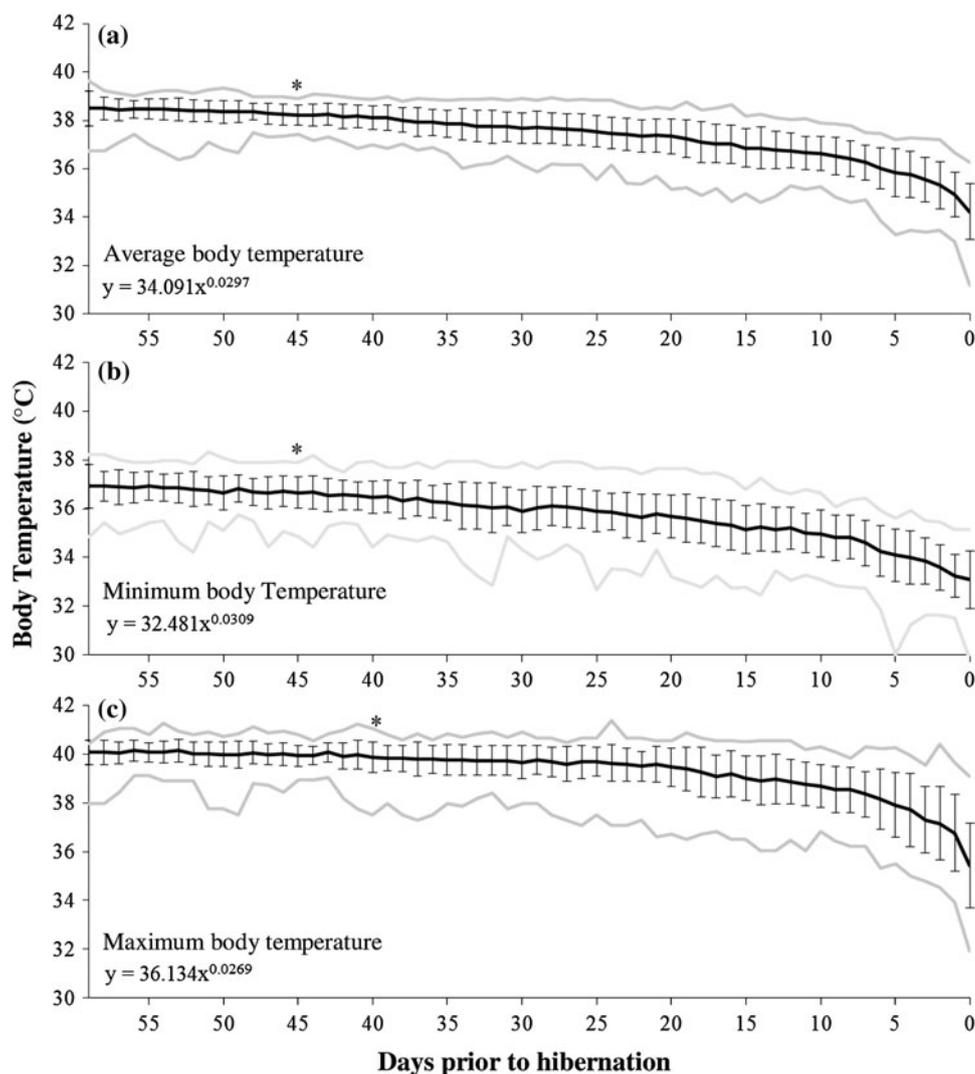
$P < 0.0001$ ); the first significant decline from average summer values occurred on day 45 ph ( $t_{42} = -25.73$ ,  $P < 0.0001$ ). Daily minimum  $T_b$  declined  $3.8 \pm 1.3$  °C from day 60 ph until 1 day ph ( $t_{42} = 19.17$ ,  $P < 0.0001$ ); the first significant decline in minimum summer values occurred on day 45 ph ( $t_{42} = -3.55$ ,  $P = 0.001$ ). Daily maximum  $T_b$  declined  $4.7 \pm 1.8$  °C from day 60 ph until 1 day ph ( $t_{42} = 17.17$ ,  $P < 0.0001$ ); the first significant decline in maximum summer values occurred on day 40 ph ( $t_{42} = 3.48$ ,  $P = 0.001$ ).

We also found that preliminary torpor bouts are not required before multiday torpor (Fig. 1). Only 25.6 % of free-living ground squirrels underwent preliminary torpor prior to expressing multiday torpor, compared to 66.7 % of squirrels in the outdoor enclosures ( $z = 3.92$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ) and 64.5 % of squirrels in the laboratory ( $z = 5.78$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ; Fig. 3a). There was no difference in the proportion of animals exhibiting preliminary torpor between outdoor enclosure and laboratory conditions ( $z = -0.004$ ,  $P = 0.996$ ). Of animals that exhibited preliminary torpor bouts, we found a significant difference in the number of preliminary bouts ( $H = 12.20$ ,  $P = 0.002$ ; Fig. 3b) and average duration of each preliminary bout ( $H = 36.99$ ,  $P < 0.0001$ ; Fig. 3c) among the three groups. Free-living squirrels averaged 1.84 fewer preliminary bouts than squirrels held in the outdoor enclosure ( $P = 0.0003$ ) and 1.82 fewer than squirrels held in the laboratory ( $P = 0.051$ ). Conversely, preliminary torpor bouts lasted on average 6.27 h longer in the field than in the laboratory ( $P < 0.0001$ ) and 5.16 h longer in the outdoor enclosures than in the laboratory ( $P = 0.001$ ); there was no difference between field squirrels and those in the outdoor enclosures ( $P = 1.00$ ). In free-living squirrels, there was no difference in the duration of ( $t_{15} = 1.09$ ,  $P = 0.30$ ) or minimum  $T_b$  between ( $t_{15} = -1.99$ ,  $P = 0.067$ ) the last and second last preliminary bout (Fig. 4).

## Discussion

We found that average daily  $T_b$  of free-living arctic ground squirrels began to decline 45 days prior to their first expression of preliminary or multiday torpor (Fig. 2).

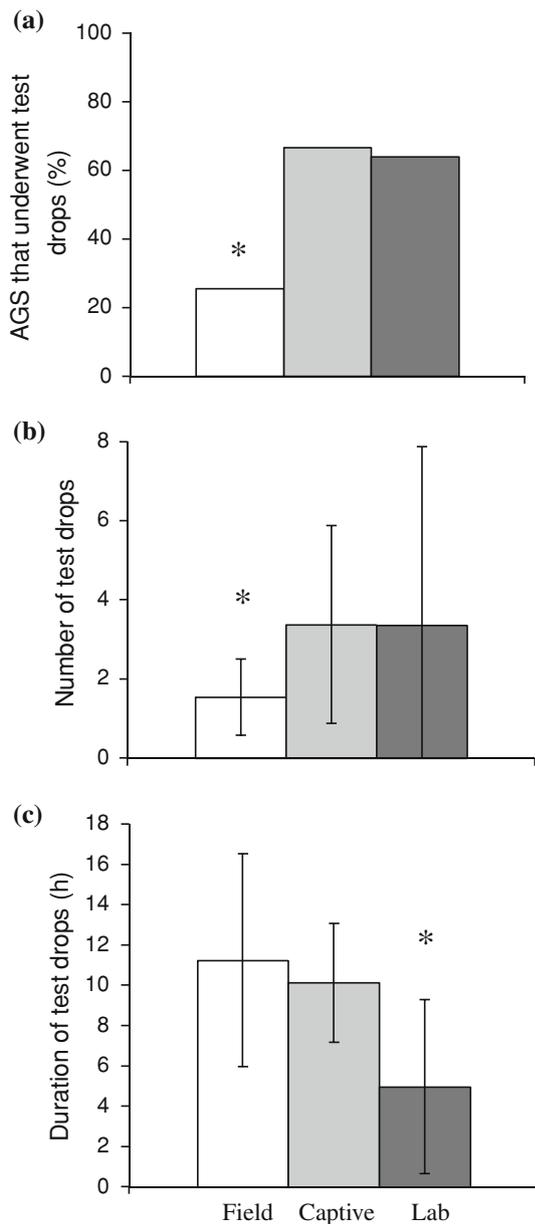
**Fig. 2** The daily average (a), daily minimum (b), and daily maximum (c) body temperature of free-living arctic ground squirrels ( $n = 43$ ) during the 60 days preceding entrance into hibernation. *Solid black line* represents mean  $\pm$  SD; the *light gray lines* represent the range. The *equation* represents the best-fit function of the decline in  $T_b$ . Asterisk denotes first significant decrease in body temperature from day 60 ( $P < 0.004$ )



Levels of  $T_b$  are relatively dynamic over this time as average, maximum, and minimum daily  $T_b$  values all steadily declined prior to the onset of torpor. Other studies also provide evidence that small mammalian hibernators undergo thermoregulatory changes weeks, and not days, prior to hibernation. In a population of free-living marmots, Arnold et al. (2011) found that  $T_b$  began to decline 14 days prior to hibernation. Arai et al. (2005) found that captive Syrian hamsters significantly decreased  $T_b$  5–16 days prior to hibernation, and animals that did not decrease  $T_b$  did not enter hibernation. Similarly, Christian and Geiser (2007) found that free-living sugar gliders that entered torpor lowered resting  $T_b$  in the preceding 3 days, while those that did not enter torpor did not lower  $T_b$ . In laboratory held 13-lined ground squirrels, Russell et al. (2010) describe a transition period between the active and hibernation seasons when torpor use was extensive, even while animals were held at room temperature and long photoperiod. However, the duration and minimum  $T_b$  reached was

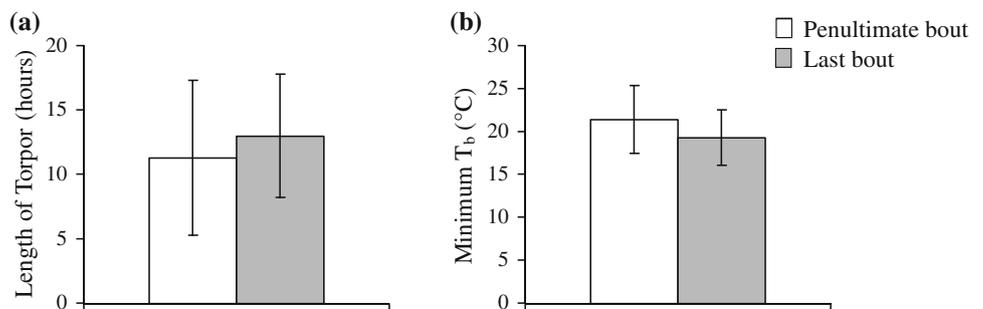
highly variable and animals alternated between bouts of torpor  $>24$  h and bouts  $<24$  h. Over time, animals tended toward maximizing time spent torpid, suggesting that animals were readjusting thermoregulatory mechanisms to enhance expression of torpor as they progressed through a fall transition period. We suggest that our findings provide evidence that thermoregulatory preparations for multiday torpor in arctic ground squirrels begin several weeks before hibernation. This view is consonant with the role proposed for endogenous, circannual rhythms in the mechanisms of ongoing, year-round adjustments in appetite, energy intake and expenditure, and body mass (Pengelley and Fisher 1963; Körtner and Geiser 2000).

Previously, we described behavioral and physiological changes occurring in free-living arctic ground squirrels throughout their active season that are linked to changes in  $T_b$ . Williams et al. (2011) showed that average female  $T_b$  decreases 0.5–1.0 °C during gestation and abruptly increases 1–2 °C on the day of parturition in both captive



**Fig. 3** The proportion (a), number (b), and duration (c) of preliminary torpor bouts (test drops) in free-living ( $n = 52$ ), captive (held in outdoor enclosures;  $n = 16$ ) and laboratory-caged ( $n = 48$ ) arctic ground squirrels. Mean  $\pm$  SD, asterisks denote significant difference ( $P < 0.005$ )

**Fig. 4** The duration (a) and minimum body temperature ( $T_b$ ) (b) of the penultimate and last preliminary torpor bout preceding multiday torpor in free-living arctic ground squirrels. Mean  $\pm$  SD,  $n = 15$



and free-living squirrels. Males end heterothermy and achieve high  $T_b$  for several weeks prior to emergence from hibernation as a requirement for testis growth and spermatogenesis (Barnes 1996), and only upon emergence from hibernation does their  $T_b$  begin to fluctuate in daily rhythms (Sheriff et al. 2011; Williams et al. 2011). Other studies have also indicated that physiological changes occur throughout the active season, which likely play a role in preparation for hibernation. In a recent review, Florant and Healy (2011) discuss how hormonal, enzymatic and neuronal mechanisms that control changes in feeding behavior throughout the active season may play a role in preparation for hibernation. Delehanty and Boonstra (2011) and Sheriff et al. (2012) found that free-cortisol levels in arctic ground squirrels significantly decrease following breeding. Given the catabolic nature of cortisol and its ability to stimulate hepatic gluconeogenesis, animals may decrease cortisol as they increase fat stores and lean body mass prior to hibernation. Thus, in hibernating animals thermoregulatory and physiological changes in preparation for hibernation appear to be occurring over the broader course of the active season.

Historically, thermoregulatory and  $T_b$  adjustments that anticipate hibernation were thought to occur during a short time interval through a series of test drops. Strumwasser (1958) measured the brain temperature of captive California ground squirrels and found that before displaying extended torpor, squirrels entered into and aroused from torpor on a daily basis several times with each succeeding bout being longer in duration and terminating at a lower temperature. He argued that each subsequent minimum temperature reached was a critical point, and that temperature regulating mechanisms were being informed of the state of an animal's physiological preparations for multiday torpor. Our results show that in arctic ground squirrels shallow, preliminary bouts of torpor are not required for multiday torpor to occur. Only 25 % of field squirrels exhibited preliminary torpor compared to 66 % of captive squirrels held outdoors and 65 % of those held in the laboratory (Fig. 3). Furthermore, we found no difference in duration or in minimum  $T_b$  reached between the last and second to last preliminary torpor bout (Fig. 4). In a study of

captive and free-living Anatolian ground squirrels, Gür et al. (2009) found that only 62 % of squirrels exhibit preliminary torpor bouts prior to multiday torpor, although they did not distinguish between captive and free-living animals. In our study,  $T_b$  patterns of squirrels were not different regardless of whether animals entered hibernation early (August) or late (October) or in different years, suggesting absolute differences in ambient temperature are not drivers of  $T_b$  pattern differences among free-living and captive squirrels. However, the increased propensity of captive animals to exhibit short preliminary bouts of torpor early in hibernation may be due to sensitivity to disturbances that occurs in captive conditions, or the lack of normal cues or inability to use available seasonal environmental cues, such as the rate of changes in day length, light intensity, and ambient temperature that are likely used by free-living animals to synchronize and coordinate endogenous circannual physiological changes in anticipation of hibernation.

Other studies of  $T_b$  patterns show that animals can begin multiday torpor in a single, simple temperature decline (Geiser and Kenagy 1988; Michener 1992; Geiser 2004). The short preliminary torpor bouts displayed early in the hibernation season do not resemble daily torpor physiologically and metabolically, and it has been demonstrated that preliminary bouts involve metabolic rates that are more similar to those of multiday torpor (Song et al. 1997; Geiser and Brigham 2000). Thus, we suggest that rather than being preparatory, brief preliminary torpor bouts of <24 h prior to multiday torpor are a continuum of torpor patterns associated with hibernation.

In conclusion, we found that average  $T_b$  of free-living squirrels begins to decline up to 45 days before the first day of torpor, indicating that changes in thermoregulation begin earlier than previously recognized. We also found that free-living animals can enter multiday torpor in a single, simple  $T_b$  decline without exhibiting preliminary bouts of torpor <24 h. We suggest that short shallow, preliminary bouts of torpor that occur prior to multiday torpor may physiologically and metabolically resemble multiday torpor and are simply part of a continuum of torpor patterns associated with hibernation. Thus, future studies investigating the complex physiological changes that occur prior to hibernation need to commence much earlier in the active season.

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