

# *Herpetological Review*

## **Gape Width: An Alternative to Snout–Vent Length for Characterizing Anuran Size**

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Snout–vent length (SVL) is the most frequently used metric to describe the size of anurans captured in the field (Hammerson 1999; Stebbins 2003). In addition to taxonomy and systematics, SVL has been commonly used in a wide variety of studies including those on age (e.g., Kellner and Green 1995; Schroeder and Baskett 1968), growth (e.g., Quinn and Mengden 1984; Ritke et al. 1991), demography (e.g., Miller 1977; Van Gelder and Rijdsdijk 1987), fecundity (e.g., Quinn and Mengden 1984; Reading 1986; Tejedo 1992), mate selection (e.g., Arak 1988; Marco et al. 1998; Olson et al. 1986; Reading 1991), and locomotion (e.g., Daugherty and Sheldon 1982; Navas et al. 1999). Despite the pervasive use of SVL, little has been published on the precision and accuracy of this metric (Blouin-Demers 2003). Users may have recognized the limitations of SVL, but continued to acquire this metric presumably because of its ease of use and lack of a robust alternative. Measuring mass has become increasingly popular as a metric to describe size (Alvarez and Nicieza 2002; Carey 1978), but its properties have also not been well studied and can be more difficult to obtain in the field. Inadequacies in SVL are a direct result of the inherent malleability in the anurans being studied, as amphibian vertebral columns are somewhat flexible (Fellers et al. 1994). Unlike fish where measurements between researchers on the same individual yield functionally equivalent results (Anderson and Neumann 1996), measurements on frogs appear to be highly variable (K. Rogers, personal observation). Perhaps measurement of more rigid structures that are still clearly defined and easy to isolate would provide more consistent results. This study seeks to quantify variation in SVL measurement as well as that in some alternative metrics expected to be more reproducible between researchers.

**Methods.**—This study examined 100 animals representing three different year classes from nine lots of the Boreal Toad (*Anaxyrus boreas boreas*) brood stock housed at the Colorado Division of Wildlife’s Native Aquatic Species Restoration Facility (NASRF) in Alamosa, Colorado. Husbandry practices at NASRF sought to emulate conditions found in the wild where possible and generally followed Scherf-Norris et al. (2002). Brood stock was reared in captivity from eggs collected in the wild. Animals were maintained on a normal circadian pattern with photoperiod matching ambient conditions. Tanks were maintained at a minimum temperature of 20°C, ranging up to 26°C on hot summer afternoons, with a UVA basking light available in each tank. Boreal Toads were fed 3-week old crickets powdered with nutrient supplements (Scherf-Norris et al. 2002) and hibernated from October 1 through May 1 at 5°C in four environmental chambers subdivided into hibernacula that could house up to five individuals each (Scherf-Norris et al. 2002).

Metrics used in this study were obtained by passing animals



FIG. 1. Gape width measurements were taken with a digital caliper from the corners of each Boreal Toad’s mouth.

down an assembly line of six biologists who each measured the SVL, length of the tibiofibula (TF), width of the gape (GW; Fig. 1), and mass for every toad. Lengths were measured in mm with digital calipers, while mass (g) was obtained with digital balances tared before each measurement. An ANOVA was used to evaluate differences between readers. The coefficient of variation (CV) between readers for each Boreal Toad was also calculated, and a mean CV for all 100 toads for each body metric was determined. Differences between mean CVs were also evaluated with an ANOVA followed by Bonferroni’s multiple comparison test with simultaneous 95% confidence intervals.

**Results.**—There was considerable variation between readers ( $P = 0.029$ ) in the average SVL calculated for all 100 toads measured (Fig. 2). In fact, measurements varied by as much as 30% of the calculated mean SVL for a given toad, with a mean of 12% (95% CI from 11–13%). Significant variation occurred between readers measuring TF as well ( $P = 0.035$ ). Differences between biologists were not evident for GW ( $P = 0.081$ ) or mass ( $P > 0.999$ ).

Coefficients of variation were greatest for SVL and TF and least for mass (Fig. 3). Gape width did provide significantly more precision than SVL and TF, but not mass. As captive Boreal Toads used in this study were of known age, correlation of the various metrics with age was possible. Animal age ranged from 16–40 months. All metrics were positively correlated with age, with highly significant regressions ( $P < 0.001$ ). However, mass was least predictive with an  $r^2 = 0.76$ . SVL and TF were intermediate, while GW showed the highest correlation with age ( $r^2 = 0.85$ ; Fig. 4)

**Discussion.**—Variation in mean SVL measurements was considerable, and potentially a function of how aggressively Boreal Toads were handled during the measurement process. Body parts easily isolated for measurement produced consistent results, while those that required holding the animal in uncomfortable positions induced movement, and therefore more measurement error. It was expected that measurements of body parts less flexible than the anuran vertebral column would be more reproducible between readers. It was surprising therefore that the TF measurement was

no better than SVL for repeatability as the tibiofibula bone is rigid and should have yielded more consistent results. Perhaps subject movement induced by the awkward holding position required to measure TF played a role in the relatively large mean coefficient of variation seen for this metric (Fig. 3). GW was significantly less variable between readers. In fact this assessment is probably conservative, as much of the variation observed was due to contributions from only one of six biologists (Fig. 2). Consistency in GW measurement was facilitated by mouth corners being well defined and easily located by most readers. In addition, Boreal Toads could be held in a comfortable position while acquiring this

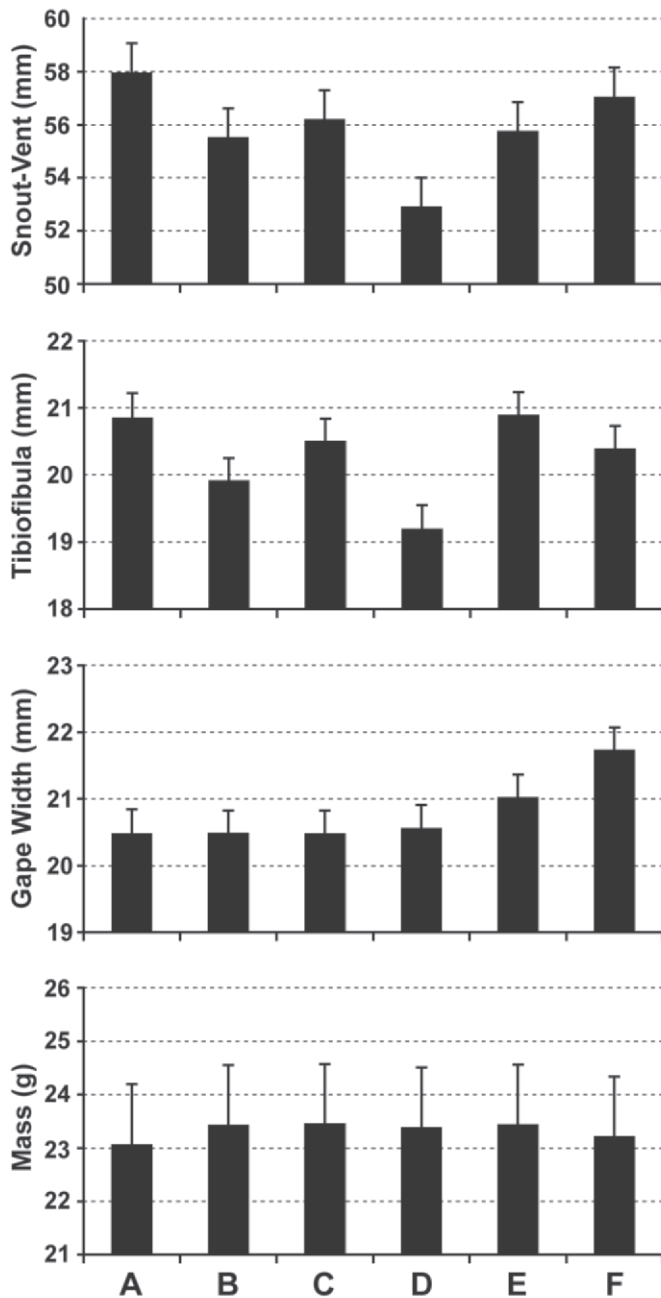


FIG. 2. Average snout–vent length (mm), average tibiofibula length (mm), average gape width (mm), and average body mass (g) for 100 Boreal Toads measured by each of six biologists (A–F) with associated standard errors.

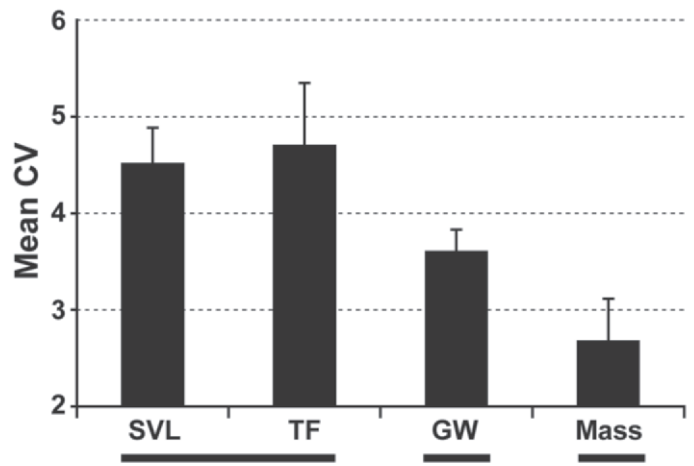


FIG. 3. Mean coefficient of variation (CV) calculated from 100 CVs generated across six biologists for snout–vent length (SVL), tibiofibula length (TF), gape width (GW), and mass with associated 95% confidence intervals. Bars sharing the same bold line below the x-axis are not significantly different ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ).

dimension; reducing writhing that can complicate measurement of SVL and TF. This benefit was also conferred to measurement of mass. It was also not surprising that mass was the most repeatable measure used in this study, as it is the least subject to interpretation as implemented here with top-loading digital scales. Mechanical tube scales commonly used in field surveys might introduce additional measurement variation, but mass will remain a valuable metric for describing Boreal Toad size.

Perhaps the most useful aspect of measuring the width of the gape is that in addition to being very repeatable between measurers, it gave the tightest correlation with age over the size ranges examined here—a function that mass was not able to consistently achieve. While condition or plumpness of an individual can greatly affect the mass of a Boreal Toad, it often

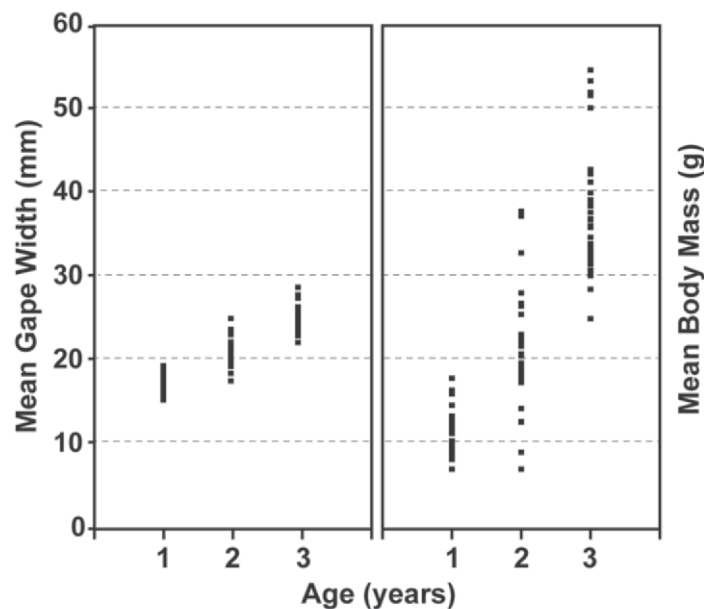


FIG. 4. Mean values for gape width (mm) and mass (g) calculated across biologists as a function of toad age.

has little to do with age. GW on the other hand is intimately tied to the animal's more rigid cranial dimensions. Though others have documented a poor relationship of SVL or mass to age in sexually mature amphibians (Halliday and Verrell 1988; Reading 1991; Wake and Castanet 1995), cranial dimensions in the first several years of a Boreal Toads life appear to more closely reflect age of the individual than mass, at least in the captive Boreal Toads used in this study. Although environmental conditions at NASRF were matched to ambient conditions, the steady diet furnished to these captive Boreal Toads might have provided for more consistent growth than would be realized in the wild. An additional study on known age wild Boreal Toads would be required to confirm the tight link between gape width and age in natural populations.

Indeed, for many analyses where only a rough index of size is required, SVL is probably adequate even with variation between readers. Certainly some of this variation can be mitigated if the same biologist acquires all of the readings. However, if precision is critical to the outcome of the study, or if a metric that is more closely correlated with age is required, then using GW is recommended.

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