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Large-scale stable isotope characterization of a Late Cretaceous dinosaur-dominated ecosystem

This is the final peer-reviewed author's accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

*Published Version:*

Evans, D., Ryan, M., Goodwin, M., Fanti, F., Huang, L., Wortmann, U., et al. (2020). Large-scale stable isotope characterization of a Late Cretaceous dinosaur-dominated ecosystem. *GEOLOGY*, 48(6), 546-551 [10.1130/G47399.1].

*Availability:*

This version is available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11585/759709> since: 2020-05-21

*Published:*

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1130/G47399.1>

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1 Large-scale stable isotope characterization of a Late Cretaceous  
2 dinosaur-dominated ecosystem

3

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22

23 **ABSTRACT**

24 In the Cretaceous of North America, environmental sensitivity and habitat specialization have  
25 been hypothesized to explain the surprisingly restricted geographic ranges of many large-bodied  
26 dinosaurs. Understanding the drivers behind this are key to predicting broader trends of dinosaur  
27 species and community response to climate change under greenhouse conditions. However,  
28 previous studies of this question have frequently examined only small sub-components of the  
29 paleoecosystem or operated without comparison to similar modern systems from which to  
30 constrain interpretations. Here we perform a high-resolution multi-taxic  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  and  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  study of a  
31 Cretaceous coastal floodplain ecosystem, focusing on species interactions and paleotemperature  
32 estimation, and compare with similar data from extant systems. Bioapatite  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  preserves  
33 predator-prey offsets between tyrannosaurs and ornithischians, and between aquatic reptiles and  
34 fish. Large ornithischians had broadly overlapping stable isotope ranges, contrary to  
35 hypothesized niche partitioning driven by specialization on coastal or inland subhabitat use.  
36 Comparisons to a modern analogue coastal floodplain show similar patterns of ecological guild  
37 structure and aquatic-terrestrial resource interchange. Multi-taxic oxygen isotope temperature  
38 estimations yield results for the Campanian of Alberta consistent with the few other  
39 paleotemperature proxies available, and are validated when applied for extant species from a  
40 modern coastal floodplain, suggesting this approach is a simple and effective avenue for  
41 paleoenvironmental reconstruction. Together, these new data suggest dinosaur niche-partitioning  
42 was more complex than previously hypothesized, and provide a framework for future research on  
43 dinosaur-dominated Mesozoic floodplain communities.

44

45 **INTRODUCTION**

46 The Cretaceous is a key interval of Earth history for understanding paleocommunity structure  
47 and ecological dynamics in greenhouse systems, as it contains a rich and well-studied fossil  
48 record from multiple continents, with those from the Campanian of Alberta, Canada, being  
49 among the richest and most intensively collected (Brown et al., 2013). To thoroughly  
50 characterize paleoecological dynamics at this time, however, we must build upon the inferences  
51 obtained from broad-scale biodiversity meta-analyses (e.g. Butler et al., 2011; Sakamoto et al.,  
52 2016) and examine species and communities at more ecologically sensitive spatial/temporal  
53 scales (Price et al., 2018). Of particular interest is the testing of hypothesized subhabitat  
54 partitioning, which has long been suggested to explain restricted distributions in coeval  
55 Cretaceous dinosaurs (Fricke and Pearson, 2008; Horner et al., 1992; Lehman, 2001; Sampson et  
56 al., 2010). These patterns are surprising given that large terrestrial tetrapods today commonly  
57 have broad ranges and are relatively tolerant of changing environmental conditions (Lehman,  
58 1987). The veracity of such patterns for dinosaur habitat zonation, however, remain debated (e.g.  
59 Lucas et al., 2016), and are only variably recovered in studies of Cretaceous regional vertebrate  
60 community dynamics (Brinkman et al., 1998; Cullen and Evans, 2016). Stable isotope analyses  
61 provide a useful tool for testing these hypotheses, while simultaneously allowing assessment of  
62 paleotemperature conditions in the terrestrial deposits of the Campanian of Alberta/Montana,  
63 which remains relatively uncharacterized despite its densely-sampled and well-studied fossil  
64 record (Barrick et al., 1999; Upchurch and Wolfe, 1987). Detailed assessments of  
65 paleoecological and paleoenvironmental dynamics across both spatial and temporal gradients are  
66 a key piece of data for patterns of biodiversity in greenhouse systems.

67

## 68 **APPROACH**

69 We perform the broadest multi-taxic stable isotope analysis to date of a vertebrate community in  
70 the Mesozoic. We sample a phylogenetically, physiologically, and ecologically broad range of  
71 vertebrate taxa from the Late Cretaceous of Alberta, so as to capture the isotopic range in this  
72 ecosystem at a well-constrained spatial and temporal scale. Our analyses are used: (1) to  
73 reconstruct paleocommunity structure from this ancient coastal floodplain and compare it with  
74 stable isotope data from modern analogues, (2) to test the hypothesis of subhabitat specialization  
75 amongst co-occurring large ornithischians, and (3) to estimate temperature(s) for the sampled  
76 assemblage, with comparisons to the available data from regional samples obtained via other  
77 proxies, and confirmatory tests of oxygen isotope-derived temperatures from modern analogues .

78

## 79 **LOCALITY & GEOLOGICAL SETTING**

80 We sampled a vertebrate microfossil bonebed, the ‘Rainy Day Site’, from the upper Oldman  
81 Formation of Alberta (known as Judith River Fm. in Montana) (Figure 1) (Arbour and Evans,  
82 2017; Cullen and Evans, 2016). Sedimentology in this locality is consistent with an active  
83 channel belt with high aggradation and sediment support, grading into mud-dominated intervals  
84 reflective of the wetter, more organic-rich settings of the uppermost Oldman Formation (Figure  
85 1D). These deposits are constrained spatially, minimally time-averaged, represent local  
86 deposition of wetland or similar materials in fluvial deposits in the broader coastal floodplain  
87 environment, and, as the fossils were preserved together, were likely exposed to the same suite of  
88 diagenetic/taphonomic effects (Rogers and Brady, 2010). This differs from many other isotopic  
89 studies on Mesozoic dinosaur communities, which derive samples from multiple sites and  
90 lithologies; that lack of control on diagenetic and other variation within a sample increases the

91 potential of significant analytical errors. Cretaceous data were compared to modern analogue  
92 coastal floodplain stable isotope analyses of the Atchafalaya River Basin fauna of Louisiana  
93 from Cullen et al. (2019). The Atchafalaya River Basin represents a useful analogue to the upper  
94 Oldman Fm., as both are low-lying, seasonally flooded landscapes with warm temperate to  
95 subtropical climates, contain relatively similar flora, and have numerous taxa that are  
96 physiologically, ecologically, and phylogenetically similar (e.g. metatherian mammals,  
97 crocodylians, lepisosteid fish, etc).

98

## 99 **MATERIAL & METHODS**

100 Stable isotope analyses performed on 83 samples ( $N_{\text{taxa}}=17$ ), measured via laser-ablation gas-  
101 chromatography isotope-ratio-mass-spectrometry at the University of Western Ontario, reported  
102 using standard isotopic practice ( $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  and  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ ), following the methods of Cullen et al (2019,  
103 and references therein). Stable isotope compositions for each specimen and associated data were  
104 recorded (Table DR1 & 2), with tests assessing sampling biases, XRD examining mineral  
105 alteration, and relative grouping of isotopic compositions of sampled taxa (sensu Fricke et al.,  
106 2008 and references therein) finding no bias and a lack of pervasive alteration (Figure DR1). The  
107 carbon isotope composition of diet ( $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{diet}}$ ) was calculated using trophic enrichment factors (or  
108 TEF;  $\Delta = \delta_{\text{bioapatite}} - \delta_{\text{diet}}$ ) obtained for extant relatives and/or physiological analogues of sampled  
109 taxa (Table DR3). Given a lack of specific ecologically-relevant extant relatives, dinosaur  
110  $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{diet}}$  was reconstructed under three TEF scenarios, as birds, as reptiles, and as mammals, to  
111 reveal potential effects of dietary-physiology differences. Stable isotope compositions and TEF-  
112 applied  $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{diet}}$  compositions for Cretaceous and modern taxa are included as species-level  
113 means in Table DR4.

114 Temperature calculations derived from oxygen isotope compositions ( $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ ) were  
115 performed using taxon-bioapatite-isotope geothermometers, and particularly the ectotherm-  
116 endotherm combined mean (EECM) equation of Cullen et al. (2019) (modified from dual taxon  
117 approach of Fricke and Wing, 2004, including species-specific methods of others from  
118 references therein). This modified method calculates the combined mean of bioapatite  
119  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_{\text{phosphate}}$  (in this case, modified by 1‰ from laser-produced total  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ , or  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_{\text{LPTO}}$ , sensu  
120 Larson and Longstaffe, 2007) from each sampled ectotherm taxon, as well as the combined  
121 mean of  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_{\text{water}}$  determined for each sampled endotherm taxon, and uses them in the equation:  
122  $T = 111.4 - (4.3)(\text{combined mean bioapatite } \delta^{18}\text{O}_{\text{ecto phosphate}} - \text{combined mean } \delta^{18}\text{O}_{\text{endo water}})$   
123

## 124 PALEOCOMMUNITY STRUCTURE

125 Stable carbon compositions for Cretaceous taxa show offsets in  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  of ~1-3‰ present between  
126 megacarnivorous tyrannosaurids and their large-bodied ornithischian prey, as well as between  
127 aquatic reptiles and fish (Figure 2), consistent with expectations from predator-prey pairs known  
128 for extant systems (Bocherens, 2000). There is considerable overlap in both  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  and  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$   
129 among sampled bulk-feeding herbivores (hadrosaurids, ceratopsians, ankylosaurs) (Figures 2 and  
130 3, Figure DR1C). While the full extent of plant isotopic heterogeneity in the Late Cretaceous of  
131 this region of North America is not known, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that coastal vs.  
132 inland signals should be detectable (Fricke and Pearson, 2008). This overlap thus challenges the  
133 hypothesis that, at least in this model Campanian ecosystem, these taxa significantly partitioned  
134 isotopic niches (a proxy for ecological niche, see Newsome et al., 2007) via subhabitat  
135 specialization. Our results suggest instead that habitat use and dietary differences (if present) are  
136 either not detectable using bioapatite  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  and  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ , or that they partitioned niches via other

137 means, such as temporal or feeding-height stratification, across a broad range of plant sources  
138 (Byerly et al., 2017; Mallon et al., 2013). The lack of apparent canopy effects in these data  
139 provide some evidence against the latter, but this requires further study (Kohn, 2010, and  
140 references therein). As well, it should be noted that species-level niche-partitioning also may  
141 exist in these systems (Farlow and Planka, 2002; Mallon, 2019), and these results primarily  
142 inform hypotheses of subhabitat niche partitioning among broader groups like hadrosaurids and  
143 ceratopsids. It is also conceivable that these greenhouse environments were ecologically  
144 unsaturated, facilitating a greater degree of shared resource use and weaker niche partitioning  
145 (Pinto-Sanchez et al., 2014).

146         The small theropod *Troodon*, hypothesized as omnivorous or herbivorous (Holtz Jr et al.,  
147 1998; Sankey, 2008), is shown here to be isotopically similar to the faunivorous small theropods  
148 *Saurornitholestes* and *Dromaeosaurus*, as well as indeterminate mammals, suggesting a mixed-  
149 feeding omnivorous or faunivorous diet (Figures 2 and 3). The data for the enigmatic  
150 *Richardoestesia*, known only from a pair of jaws and isolated teeth, are more difficult to  
151 interpret; our results do not strongly support hypothesized piscivory (Sankey, 2008), as  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$   
152 compositions could support feeding on fish and/or terrestrial resources (Figures 2 and 3). The  
153 aquatic reptile *Champsosaurus* and the ray *Myledaphus* have more negative bioapatite  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$   
154 compared to other aquatic taxa, similar to the that observed between otters and other aquatic taxa  
155 in the Atchafalaya (Figure 3). This may suggest a larger dietary proportion from aquatic  
156 invertebrates (e.g. crustaceans, molluscs) when compared to crocodylians and large predatory fish  
157 (Cullen et al., 2019). Relative isospace structure is similar between Cretaceous and modern  
158 systems, regardless of which TEF is used to reconstruct dinosaur  $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{diet}}$ . This suggests that at  
159 the guild-level both modern and Cretaceous coastal floodplains are ecologically similar in terms



160 of relative structure and composition, and that, despite some differences, the Atchafalaya  
161 provides a robust community and paleoenvironmental analogue for the Campanian of Alberta, and  
162 more generally, coastal plain ecosystems from the latest Cretaceous of North America.

163 Overall, where overlap exists our results are in line with stable isotope compositions  
164 recorded from other Late Cretaceous vertebrates (Amiot et al., 2015; Fricke and Pearson, 2008),  
165 though our combination of broader taxon sampling and extant comparisons facilitate a greater  
166 degree of ecological resolution for reconstruction and hypothesis testing. However, we recover  
167 distinct results from those of Ostrom et al (1993), the only other broad multi-taxic stable isotope  
168 study to attempt to reconstruct these ecosystems. Their analyses of high-molecular-weight  
169 organic  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  and  $\delta^{15}\text{N}$  extracted from a mix of fossil bones and teeth sampled from multiple  
170 sites throughout the Dinosaur Park Formation (formerly Judith River Formation) of Alberta  
171 produced somewhat equivocal results, with many compositions at odds with expectations (e.g.  
172 putatively herbivorous ornithomimids with higher  $\delta^{15}\text{N}$  than faunivorous tyrannosaurs,  
173 faunivorous lizards with lower  $\delta^{15}\text{N}$  than herbivorous dinosaurs, etc).  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  compositions for their  
174 samples were  $\sim -27$  to  $-23\text{‰}$ , rather than the  $\sim -10$  to  $-3 \text{‰}$  compositions recorded here and in  
175 other stable isotope studies of Cretaceous dinosaurs (Amiot et al., 2015; Fricke et al., 2008). The  
176 differing sources of the material and distinct analytical methods may account for this disparity,  
177 and it is also possible that their results may be reflective of a sediment bulk organic carbon  
178 signal, as the latter has a nearly identical  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  range in the Late Cretaceous of western North  
179 America (Fricke et al., 2008).

180

## 181 **PALEOTEMPERATURE RECONSTRUCTION**

182 Individual taxon oxygen isotope temperature estimates produce variable results, though the mean  
183 paleotemperature estimate for the Late Campanian of Alberta derived from the multi-taxic  
184 EECM method is 18°C (Figure 4, Table DR5). This is consistent with independent mean annual  
185 paleotemperature proxies from the broader region, including leaf physiognomy (Upchurch and  
186 Wolfe, 1987), clumped isotope analysis of paleosol carbonate nodules (Burgener et al., 2019),  
187 and paired taxon oxygen isotope temperature estimates (Barrick et al., 1999), and produces  
188 distinct results from the single taxon temperature estimate approaches (Figure 4, Amiot et al.,  
189 2004, and references therein; Kohn, 1996)). Applying EECM to extant taxa from the modern  
190 system produced a temperature estimate within ~2 °C of mean annual temperature, providing an  
191 important independent check that the method produces useful results and may moderate some of  
192 the variation introduced by individual taxon physiologies when using the single-taxon or ‘single  
193 ectotherm, single endotherm’ variations of the approach (Figure 4). Our modified EECM method  
194 is therefore a robust and simple tool for estimating paleotemperature in conjunction with multi-  
195 taxic paleoecological stable isotope datasets.

196

## 197 **CONCLUSIONS**

198 Stable isotope analyses of a spatially and temporally constrained Mesozoic vertebrate ecosystem  
199 reveals evidence of predator-prey offsets in  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  compositions and ecological guild distributions  
200 that meet predictions derived from extant analogue ecosystems. The overlapping isotopic ranges  
201 of bioapatite from large ornithischians argues against a long-held hypothesis that these groups  
202 were strongly partitioning their niches based on subhabitat sensitivities. The bioapatite oxygen-  
203 isotope EECM approach for paleotemperature estimation represents a and simple and robust  
204 technique for paleoclimate reconstruction. Our combined fossil + modern combined approach

205 provides a framework for future paleocommunity analyses in these abundantly preserved coastal  
206 plain systems.

207

## 208 **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

209 We thank the staff of the Royal Tyrrell Museum (A. Neuman, D. Brinkman, B. Strillisky, B.  
210 Sanchez), staff of the Royal Ontario Museum (V. Di Cecco, K. Dunnell, Cathy Dutton, Jacquie  
211 Miller), Louisiana State University Museum of Natural Sciences (J. Esselstyn, J. Nations, D.  
212 Dittmann), Museum of Vertebrate Zoology at the University of California Berkeley (C. Spencer,  
213 C. Conroy, C. Cicero), Louisiana Dept of Wildlife & Fisheries, Landry family, C. Capobianco,  
214 L. Yeider, and E. Benner for sampling and analysis permissions and assistance. We thank and  
215 credit D. Dufault, R. Fuchs, T. Heath, L. Hughes, M. Menchetti, M. Michaud, D. Raver, S.  
216 Shelley, V. Simeonovski, S. Smith, M. Spitzer, S. Traver, N. Vitek, E. Willoughsby, C. Yasuda,  
217 Wikimedia user ‘smokeybib’, and PhyloPic for silhouette images. We also thank Jordan Mallon  
218 and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments which strengthened the paper. This  
219 study was supported by Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) of  
220 Canada Discovery Grants to DCE. (RGPIN 355845), UGW., and FJL, a NSERC CGS, OGS, and  
221 a QEII-GSST to TMC, the Canada Research Chairs Program (FJL), the Canada Foundation for  
222 Innovation (FJL), the Ontario Research Fund (F.J.L.), and the Dinosaur Research Institute  
223 (TMC). This is LSIS Contribution #374.

224

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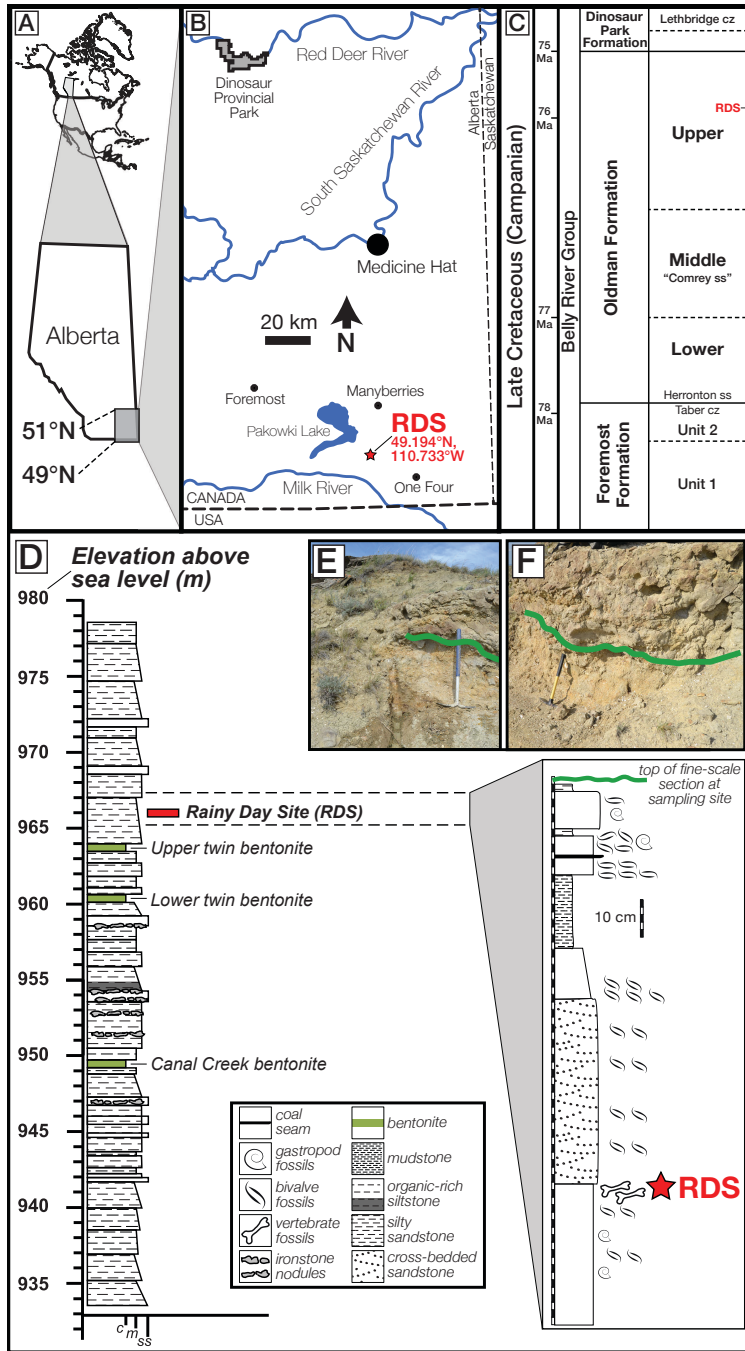
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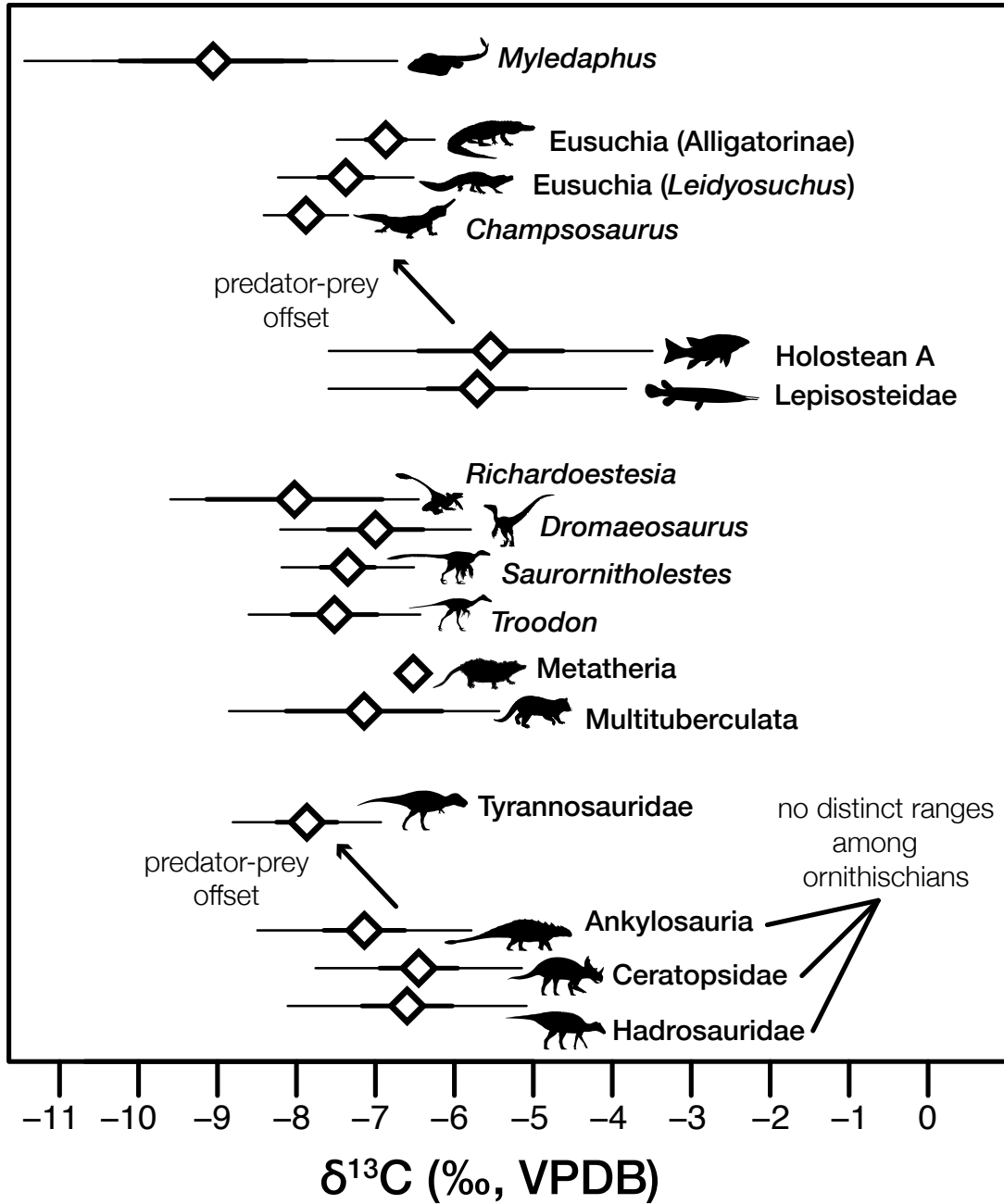
335 **FIGURES & FIGURE CAPTIONS**

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337 Figure 1. Geographic and  
 338 stratigraphic position of  
 339 Cretaceous locality ('Rainy Day  
 340 Site', or RDS). A, position of  
 341 study area in North America; B,  
 342 position of RDS in southern  
 343 Alberta (specific GPS coordinates  
 344 on-file at Royal Tyrrell Museum  
 345 and available upon request); C,  
 346 Campanian stratigraphy of  
 347 southern Alberta with  
 348 stratigraphic position of RDS  
 349 indicated; D, Stratigraphic section  
 350 at RDS locality indicating  
 351 location of RDS in respect to  
 352 other nearby sites and marker  
 353 beds; E, photograph of locality  
 354 showing position of RDS and  
 355 nearby sites and marker beds; F,



356 photograph of broader area stratigraphy. Green line in E & F indicates position relative to  
 357 stratigraphic column in D inset. Abbreviations: c—clay; cz—coal zone; m—mud; ss—sandstone.



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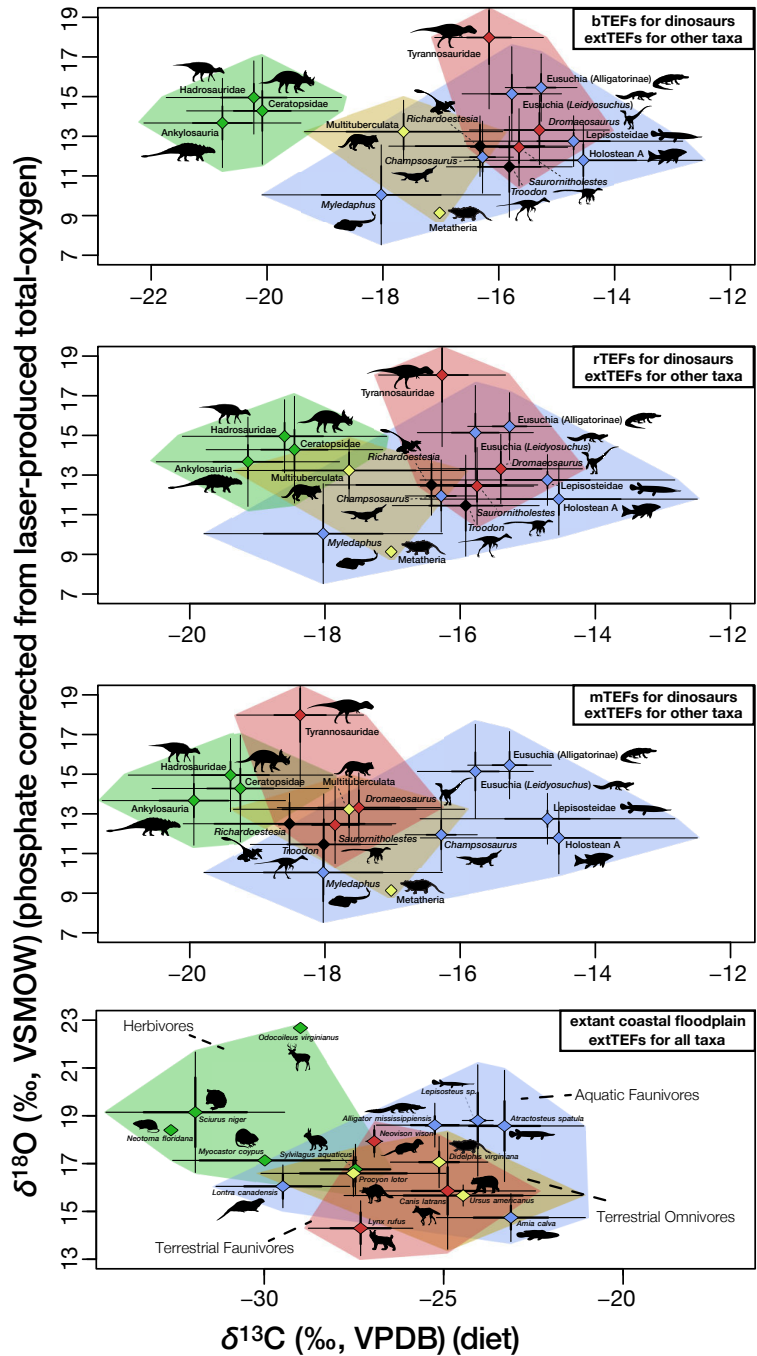
359 Figure 2. Stable carbon isotope compositions of analyzed fossil taxa. Expected predator-prey

360 isotopic offsets exist between tyrannosaurids and large ornithischians, and between aquatic

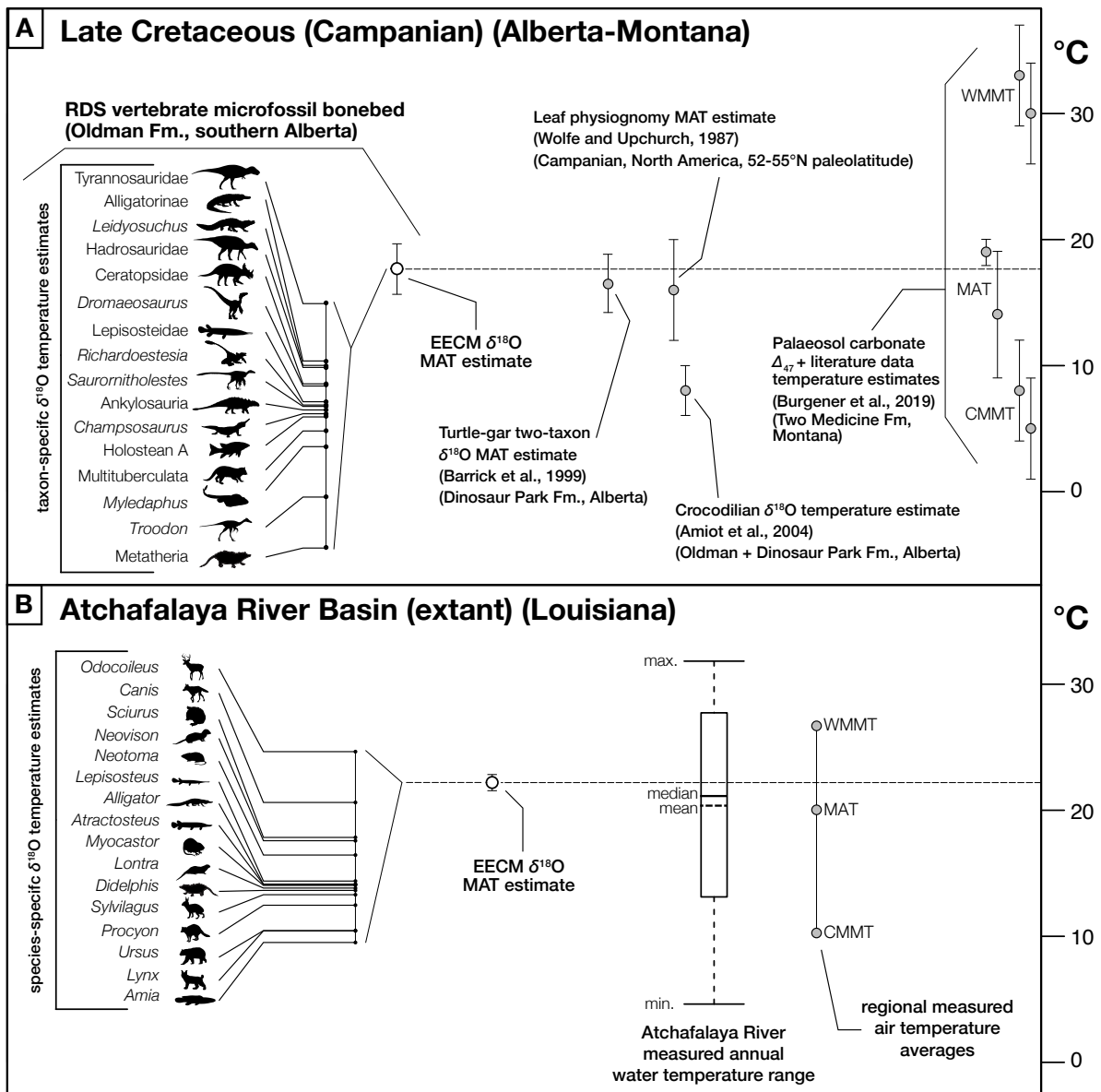
361 reptiles and fish. No distinct separation present in the isotopic ranges of sampled ornithischians.

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363 Figure 3: Stable carbon and oxygen  
 364 isotope distributions of taxa in  
 365 Cretaceous system, with  $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{diet}}$  of  
 366 dinosaurs reconstructed using bird  
 367 (bTEF), reptile (rTEF), and  
 368 mammal (mTEF) carbon-isotope  
 369 trophic enrichment factors (TEF).  
 370 All other taxa in Cretaceous and  
 371 modern Atchafalaya systems  
 372 reconstructed using TEFs from  
 373 extant relatives (extTEFs) (see  
 374 Tables DR3 and DR4 for additional  
 375 information). For broad ecological  
 376 guilds reconstructed for Cretaceous  
 377 and modern Atchafalaya  
 378 comparisons, green = terrestrial  
 379 herbivores, red = terrestrial  
 380 faunivores, yellow = terrestrial  
 381 omnivores, and blue = aquatic taxa.



382 Stable oxygen isotope compositions are 'phosphate-corrected' (i.e. modified to display only  
 383  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_{\text{phosphate}}$ , and remove the small fraction of  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_{\text{carbonate}}$  and  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_{\text{hydroxyl}}$  also measured in laser-  
 384 produced total-oxygen) in order to facilitate comparisons with modern Atchafalaya data from  
 385 Cullen et al. (2019). Full description of method contained in that reference.



386 Figure 4: Oxygen isotope-based temperature estimates. A, individual taxon isotope-temperature  
 387 estimates from Cretaceous paleoecosystem compared to endotherm-ectotherm-combined-mean  
 388 (EECM) estimate from same data, alongside temperature estimates from other proxies (MAT=  
 389 mean annual temperature, WMMT= warm month mean temperature, and CMMT= cold month  
 390 mean temperature). B, individual taxon isotope-temperature estimates from the modern  
 391 Atchafalaya River Basin ecosystem compared to EECM estimate from same data, to measured  
 392 temperatures from Atchafalaya River (taken multiple times per day during one full year), and to  
 393 measured air temperatures for that region. All temperatures and  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_{\text{water}}$  calculated from  
 394  $\delta^{18}\text{O}_{\text{phosphate}}$  compositions. See Table DR5 for detailed information and original data sources.

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**SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION**

<sup>1</sup>GSA Data Repository item 2020155. This contains the data, including Figure DR1 (tests of sampling bias and geochemical alteration), Table DR1 (mean  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ ,  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  and collection data for all specimens), Table DR2 ( $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  and  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  measurements for all samples), Table DR3 (Trophic Enrichment Factors applied for  $\delta^{13}\text{C}_{\text{diet}}$  comparisons between Cretaceous and modern faunal communities), Table DR4 (species mean  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  and  $\delta^{18}\text{O}$  for Cretaceous and modern taxa), Table DR5 (Calculated oxygen isotope-based temperature estimates for Cretaceous and Atchafalaya, other Campanian paleotemperature proxies, and modern Louisiana temperature data), and associated supplementary references mentioned within the included DR figures and tables. Data Repository available online at <http://www.geosociety.org/datarepository/2020/>, or on request from [editing@geosociety.org](mailto:editing@geosociety.org)