

# Moving past the challenges and misconceptions in urban adaptation research

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July 29, 2022

## Abstract

Although the field of urban evolutionary ecology is in its infancy, much progress has been made in identifying adaptations that arise as a result of selective pressures within these unique environments. However, as studies within urban environments have rapidly increased, researchers have recognized there are challenges and opportunities in characterizing urban adaptation. Some of these challenges are novel as a consequence of increased direct and indirect human influence, which compounds long-recognized issues with research on adaptive evolution more generally. In this perspective, we discuss several common research challenges to urban adaptation related to: (1) methodological approaches, (2) trait-environment relationships and the natural history of organisms, (3) agents and targets of selection, and (4) habitat heterogeneity. Ignoring these challenges may lead to misconceptions and further impede our ability to draw conclusions regarding evolutionary and ecological processes in urban environments. Our goal is to first shed light on the conceptual challenges of conducting urban adaptation research to help avoid propagation of these misconceptions. We further summarize potential strategies to move forward productively to construct a more comprehensive picture of urban adaptation, and discuss how urban environments also offer unique opportunities and applications for adaptation research.

28 July 2022

## MOVING PAST THE CHALLENGES AND MISCONCEPTIONS IN URBAN ADAPTATION RESEARCH

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**Running Header** — Urban Adaptation Research Challenges

**Author Contributions** — KMW, KJAR, EJC, LSM, and BCV conceived of the idea, and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors participated in the development and editing of the manuscript.

**Acknowledgments** — This article reflects the authors' collaboration within the National Science Foundation (NSF) Research Coordination Network (RCN): Eco-Evolutionary Dynamics in an Urban Planet: Underlying Mechanisms and Ecosystem Feedbacks (DEB 1840663). The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

**Data Availability** — There are no associated data to be archived with this manuscript.

## **MOVING PAST THE CHALLENGES AND MISCONCEPTIONS IN URBAN ADAPTATION RESEARCH**

**ABSTRACT** — Although the field of urban evolutionary ecology is in its infancy, much progress has been made in identifying adaptations that arise as a result of selective pressures within these unique environments. However, as studies within urban environments have rapidly increased, researchers have recognized there are challenges and opportunities in characterizing urban adaptation. Some of these challenges are novel as a consequence of increased direct and indirect human influence, which compounds long-recognized issues with research on adaptive evolution more generally. In this perspective, we discuss several common research challenges to urban adaptation related to: (1) methodological approaches, (2) trait-environment relationships and the natural history of organisms, (3) agents and targets of selection, and (4) habitat heterogeneity. Ignoring these challenges may lead to misconceptions and further impede our ability to draw conclusions regarding evolutionary and ecological processes in urban environments. Our goal is to first shed light on the conceptual challenges of conducting urban adaptation research to help avoid propagation of these misconceptions. We further summarize potential strategies to move forward productively to construct a more comprehensive picture of urban adaptation, and discuss how urban environments also offer unique opportunities and applications for adaptation research.

**Key-words:** urbanization, natural history, natural selection, evolutionary ecology, interdisciplinary approaches, anthropogenic

**6048 words (excluding figures and references), 2 figures**

Although cities are dramatically different in many dimensions from the non-urban environments they replace, including structure, species composition, and climate, they host a diverse suite of organisms that interact with each other and the abiotic and biotic environment (Szulkin et al. 2020a). Cities are typically characterized by built-up surfaces, warmer temperatures than the surrounding non-urban environment, and dense human populations, although there are also green spaces, such as parks and gardens, and landscape features such as rivers and lakes (Venter et al. 2016, Szulkin et al. 2020b). Some species are filtered out of the urban ecosystem whereas others are able to persist (McKinney 2002, McDonnell and Hahs 2015), leading to a range of interacting ecological and evolutionary responses (Alberti 2015, Alberti et al. 2020). In urban ecosystems, the interaction of human society (e.g., cultural, social, economic, political, and technological) with nature generates complex socio-eco-evolutionary dynamics across heterogeneous and novel landscapes (Pincetl 2015, Alberti 2015, McPhearson et al. 2016, Rivkin et al. 2019, Des Roches et al. 2021, Schell et al. 2020). We are only beginning to understand how increased frequency of direct and indirect human influences impact eco-evolutionary dynamics as well as the ability of researchers to study them (Miles et al. 2021).

Accumulating evidence to evaluate adaptation — the evolutionary response to natural selection — is challenging in any environment. Difficulties in identifying adaptive evolution stem from the complexity of the processes facilitating or impeding responses: mutation, gene flow, genetic drift, and natural selection (Kawecki and Ebert 2004). These processes are dependent on life history, habitat use, and movement throughout the landscape, with variable influence and interaction across spatial and temporal scales (Levin 1992, Olson-Manning et al. 2012, Hoban et al. 2016). Challenges to adaptation research in general have been extensively treated elsewhere (e.g., Endler 1986, Kawecki & Ebert 2004, Blanquart et al. 2013). In addition, a number of reviews of urban evolutionary ecology have provided excellent syntheses on eco-evolutionary processes, including adaptation, in urban ecosystems (Donihue and Lambert 2015, McDonnell and Hahs 2015, Alberti 2015, Johnson & Munshi-South 2017, Miles et al. 2019, Rivkin et al. 2019, Szulkin et al. 2020a, Des Roches et al. 2021, Lambert et al. 2021, Diamond and Martin 2021, Diamond et al. 2022). However, what is missing from this discourse is an overall reflection on how conducting adaptation research is challenged by human interactions and influence in urban ecosystems.

The aim of this perspective is to highlight challenges in urban adaptation research, and outline strategies to move forward, including the discussion of opportunities harbored by this fascinating field of research. Our unique perspective brings these ideas together in a framework that provides both conceptual and practical advice with the goal of providing guidance to researchers, especially those in early career positions, regarding the pitfalls that can hinder success in urban adaptation research. In not considering these challenges, urban researchers may unintentionally propagate misconceptions – inaccurate conclusions as a result of faulty information – regarding adaptation. These misconceptions can include the commonality, nature, and strength of adaptive responses, and can influence expectations based on non-urban ecosystems or advocate methods that may not be applicable across diverse habitats and taxa.

We explore four challenges commonly encountered when conducting adaptation research and which can be further compounded by the human element in urban environments: (1) methodological approaches, (2) trait-environment relationships and natural history, (3) agents and targets of natural selection, and (4) habitat heterogeneity. For each challenge, we employ a four-point framework to bring together ideas from the fields of urban ecology and evolutionary biology, adaptation research more generally, and urban adaptation research specifically. We first note how each challenge applies to adaptation research in any ecosystem, then explore how the human element in urban areas can play a specific role in adaptation. We follow this comparative framework with misconceptions that can arise and potential ways to move forward in addressing the challenges of urban adaptation research using examples from the urban evolutionary ecology literature. We conclude with emphasizing the opportunities and applications of conducting research on urban adaptation. We recognize that many of these ideas have been addressed throughout the literature and that

they may not *all* be novel to *every* urban environment. However, our four-point framework brings together both conceptual and practical discussion of these ideas to move the field of urban evolutionary ecology forward productively and inclusively. In this respect, in the coming decades with predicted novel research directions in urban evolutionary ecology incorporating technology, sustainability, climate change, and socio-political considerations (Verrelli et al. 2022), we see our perspective as providing a valuable review to those entering this burgeoning field from many different disciplines.

## Challenge 1: Methodological approaches

*General Application* — Studies of adaptation have historically relied on a mix of observational and experimental methods. Adaptation research often focuses on divergent habitats, although clines across environmental transitions have also been instrumental in studying local adaptation (Endler 1986, Kawecki and Ebert 2004, Hereford 2009). Yet it can be difficult to define the boundaries of habitats and populations in heterogeneous landscapes (see Challenge 4) and environmental variation may present as mosaics rather than gradients. Certain organisms may be more tractable for the quantification of natural selection because of their reproductive cycle, demography, generation time, and geography, which may bias the organisms we choose to study. In particular, approaches requiring movement of organisms between habitats, such as reciprocal transplantation, are not feasible for all organisms, can be prohibitively expensive and time consuming, may require unattainably large numbers of replicates to obtain sufficient statistical power, can facilitate the spread of diseases and parasites, and may be impossible for ethical or legal reasons (Cunningham 1996, Kawecki and Ebert 2004, Blanquart et al. 2013, Johnson et al. 2021). Common approaches for adaptation research, such as mark recapture and long-term monitoring, which have been crucial in disentangling the temporal dynamics of adaptive evolution (e.g., Grant and Grant 2014), may be compromised by external factors such as natural disasters and logistics of carrying out such projects (e.g., funding and researcher continuity). Genomic approaches to identifying local adaptation are becoming increasingly common and may be valuable complements to field research methods, yet genomic approaches come with their own methodological limitations as well (Hoban et al. 2016, Perrier et al. 2020). Lastly, interpersonal interactions between researchers and local community members in any environment can be friendly and educational — offering opportunities for broader impacts of research activities — but can also pose safety risks for researchers (Demery and Pipkin 2021).

*Human Element* — Some methods that may be relatively easy to employ in non-urban settings may be untenable in urban environments (or vice versa). Urban adaptation can be influenced by factors related to greater human activity that are difficult to control using traditional manipulative experiments or may be difficult to predict. Direct and indirect human interactions with wildlife can shape behavioral responses and adaptations (e.g., pedestrian behavior, Bateman and Fleming 2014) and human activities can drastically transform urban environments even on short timescales (see Challenge 3). Rapid or unanticipated anthropogenic modifications in cities limit the establishment and success of studies that involve repeated sampling and long-term monitoring (McPhearson et al. 2016). The mosaic of private and public lands in urban environments intersecting with human and wildlife activity adds additional complexity to the methods that can be employed to conduct urban adaptation research. For example, mark-recapture methods to estimate selection gradients can be challenging because marked individuals can move into inaccessible anthropogenic spaces that dominate urban landscapes, such as restricted-access private property (e.g., backyards or inside homes). Similarly, a random sample of the environment for population genomic analyses could be hampered by private property access in non-random ways across the urban landscape. Some methods may unintentionally facilitate human-wildlife conflict (Treves et al. 2006, Kinsky et al. 2016, Schell et al. 2020), disease transmission between urban wildlife and domesticated animals and humans (Bradley and Altizer 2007, Brearley et al. 2013), and biological invasion (Hufbauer et al. 2012, Borden and Flory 2021). Community members tend to be more concerned and vocal about these potential threats when they occur near their homes (Dickman et al. 2014, Drake et al. 2020). Additionally, urban areas are characterized by a higher density of human presence, which increases interactions between researchers and the public and law enforcement, both positive and negative, and can be problematic when urban sites are repeatedly accessed (Dyson et al. 2019, Des Roches et al. 2021).

*Misconceptions* — A misconception perpetuated by methodological challenges to urban adaptation research is that only specific approaches, such as reciprocal transplants, provide strong support for local adaptation (e.g., Donihue and Lambert 2015, Lambert et al. 2021, Diamond et al. 2022). Although common garden and reciprocal transplant studies are informative for evaluating evidence of local adaptation in some taxa, such as invertebrates or plants (Yakub & Tiffin 2017, Gorton et al. 2018, Chick et al. 2020, Tuzun and Stoks 2020, Yilmaz et al. 2020, Diamond et al. 2022), they are not informative or feasible for all taxa. Advocating broadly for “gold standard” methods might lead to an overrepresentation in urban adaptation research of organisms, microhabitats, or geographic regions most amenable to these approaches. Extrapolating findings based on a restricted set of methods or taxa could lead to incorrect conclusions regarding the generalizability and prevalence of urban adaptive responses.

*Moving Forward* — To address the methodological challenges associated with human presence and activity in urban landscapes, research efforts that employ complementary and innovative methods will provide different pieces of the adaptation puzzle (Figure 1). As in non-urban environments, multifaceted approaches will be most robust for detecting and characterizing local adaptation (Kawecki and Ebert 2004, Barrett and Hoekstra 2011). As a result of increased human interactions in urban areas, collaborations among diverse disciplines can become more commonplace and bring new technology and methodology into urban adaptation research (McPhearson et al. 2016). Interdisciplinary approaches may be particularly valuable in urban ecosystems, where both empirical and applied science involve human activities and have the potential to promote human well-being (McPhearson et al. 2016). Inclusion of local communities in urban and non-urban systems alike can improve the success of methodological approaches via the incorporation of local knowledge (Upstey et al. 2012, Camacho et al. 2021) and will help improve researcher outcomes in terms of safety, access, and study continuity (e.g., continued or repeated access, reduced vandalism). There are several examples where integrated approaches have been used to build a more comprehensive picture of urban adaptation: research on *Anolis* lizards has incorporated behavioral, phenotypic, experimental, and genomic analyses to understand adaptation to thermal and structural habitats (Winchell et al. 2016, Aviles-Rodriguez et al. 2019, Campbell-Staton et al. 2020); work on white clover (*Trifolium repens*) has involved the global community in sampling efforts complemented with experimental, phenotypic, and whole genome sequencing analyses to test for parallelism (Thompson et al. 2016, Santangelo et al. 2020b, 2022); research on Galapagos finches (*Geospiza* spp.) has employed morphometrics and behavioral approaches to understand how access to human foods alter historical patterns of diet-based selection on beak shape (De León et al. 2011, 2018); and a combination of reciprocal transplants, phenotypic variation, and mate choice experiments in Tungara frogs (*Engystomops pustulosus*) has revealed adaptive sexual selection (Halfwerk et al. 2019).

## Challenge 2: Trait-environment relationships and the natural history of organisms

*General Application* — Understanding the natural history of an organism, including how it interacts with the environment, provides the foundation for conducting hypothesis-driven adaptation research (Greene 1986, Tewksbury et al. 2014). Conducting research on trait-environment relationships and natural history is challenging because it requires time-consuming and detailed studies of how organisms utilize environmental spaces, which may differ on spatial and temporal scales and may be difficult to accomplish for cryptic or elusive taxa (Morris 1987). Adaptation research can benefit from museum collections to understand historical and contemporary selective landscapes (Wandeler et al. 2007), although geographic, taxonomic, and temporal bias in specimen collection limit our ability to universally rely on this resource (Vawda 2019). Although there are challenges to obtaining high-quality DNA from museum specimens, new methods applied to ancient DNA (e.g., Castañeda-Rico et al. 2020) are promising and open up new opportunities for exploring temporal trends. In addition, plasticity can modify trait-environment relationships on local scales (Lajoie and Vellend 2015, 2018), and thus, can make it difficult to make generalizations about trait-environment relationships across populations and taxa.

*Human Element* — Urban organisms are relatively understudied, in part because of a historical perspective that urban populations provided little value in understanding “natural” selection due to their proximity to humans, or because their perceived lack of potential for novel research (Sukopp 1998, McPhearson et al. 2016).

Evolutionary ecology has only experienced a recent, but growing, appreciation of urban ecosystems (Rivkin et al. 2019, Szulkin et al. 2020b), relying on decades of natural history research in non-urban systems to develop hypotheses of urban adaptation. Importantly, the human biases in organism focus, specimen collection, and deposition into museum collections have resulted in a paucity of historical resources for many urban organisms, making urban retrospective analyses more difficult, particularly for commensal species (Shultz et al. 2021, but see Major and Parsons 2010, Meineke and Davies 2019). Although many environments and taxa have been historically understudied, urban environments and their associated organisms have been systemically understudied until recently. Consequently, relatively little urban historical data exists across taxonomic and geographic extents compared to other globally distributed habitats (e.g., tropical rainforests) or global non-urban taxa (e.g., stickleback fish). Framing contemporary adaptations in a historical context is important because species may evolve through novel adaptations in the contemporary selective landscape or through filtering, or adaptive modification of existing traits (i.e., exaptations; Gould and Vrba 1982, McDonnell and Hahs 2015, Rivkin et al. 2019, Winchell et al. *in review*). In addition, observational studies can be time intensive in human-dominated spaces, in some cases potentially generating suspicion and conflict with the community, and private property boundaries limit access when conducting research on urban organisms.

*Misconceptions* — A misconception perpetuated by knowledge gaps in the natural history of urban organisms is that non-urban or historic populations are always appropriate baselines in a comparative framework. Although such comparisons are often informative, if we do not know how trait-environment relationships differ within and between urban environments then we may be misled about the nature of adaptation by employing an inappropriate baseline. Inaccurate inference of present interactions between traits and urbanization hinders our ability to make informed predictions about urban adaptation. These gaps in natural history knowledge are particularly consequential for species that are more common in urban areas than in non-urban areas, such as rats and pigeons. For example, urban rats (*Rattus norvegicus* and *R. rattus*) have been placed in historical contexts mainly from archeological collections because museum collections lack specimens of the species that commonly cohabitate with humans (Guiry and Buckley 2018), and so we might not know the true ancestral state to urban adaptive responses. In extreme circumstances where we have no contrast at all with non-urban populations, such as with the common bedbug (*Cimex lectularius*), we might reach incorrect conclusions about how they have adapted specifically to urban environments based solely on their present adapted state (Gould and Lewontin 1979).

*Moving forward* — To address gaps in knowledge regarding the natural history and trait-environment relationships in urban organisms, integrated research that combines observational studies (e.g., natural history and behavioral research) with experimental data of species living in cities is important. One approach to building a foundation of natural history information for urban organisms that has been successful in non-urban environments (Sforzi et al. 2018, Fontaine et al. 2021) is to incorporate community-sourced data collection into research. For example, Puckett et al. (2020) used museum specimens to study changes in brown rat cranial shape over time, and Cosentino and Gibbs (2022) used community-sourced data to demonstrate parallel evolution of clines in melanistic Eastern gray squirrels (*Sciurus carolinensis*). However, community-sourced data is often limited due to socioeconomic biases of regions sampled or due to a limited sampling of overlooked, camouflaged, or microscopic species that are less charismatic (Shirey et al. 2021). Community partnerships in overlooked geographic regions can provide a more comprehensive sampling of the urban landscape (Shirey et al. 2021), while also augmenting museum collections with urban organisms and building stronger relationships with local communities. Moreover, equitable community partnerships provide benefits to both visiting scientists and local communities, facilitate access to research products, reduce potential for conflict, and provide valuable outreach opportunities (Sforzi et al. 2018, Haelewaters et al. 2021, Shirey et al. 2021, Shultz et al. 2021).

### Challenge 3: Agents and targets of selection

*General Application* — Quantifying the agents and targets of natural selection is essential for understanding local adaptation (Kawecki and Ebert 2004) in any environment, yet is inherently difficult (Endler 1986).

Targets of selection may be misidentified or confounded in both phenotypic and genomic approaches due to a poor understanding of the relationships between genotype, phenotype, and environment (Linnen and Hoekstra 2009, Bierne et al. 2011, Hoban et al. 2016). Disentangling selection on single versus multiple correlated traits can be particularly difficult because of genetic, developmental, and functional constraints (Hill and Robertson 1966, Price 1970, Lande and Arnold 1983). The genetic architecture of a phenotype can also complicate genomic tests for local adaptation as polygenic traits may be more difficult to detect in selection scans compared to single locus traits (Hoban et al. 2016). Given the suspected prevalence and importance of polygenic adaptation and that rapid adaptation may involve soft rather than hard selective sweeps, identifying genomic targets of selection may be difficult for many complex phenotypes (Rockman 2011, Messer and Petrov 2013). In addition, large sample sizes and powerful statistical methods may be required to detect what are typically small selection coefficients (Kingsolver et al. 2001), and episodic or age-specific selection may lead to confusion as to when selection has occurred (Grant and Grant 2014). The signatures of past and contemporary selection can be difficult to differentiate (Haller and Hendry 2014) as phenotypes may arise in response to selective pressures in the contemporary environment but also may have arisen under ancestral selective regimes (i.e., exaptations) or as a consequence of non-adaptive processes (e.g., gene flow). Lastly, in any environment humans can directly or indirectly change factors affecting selection and adaptation such as resource availability, resource distribution, population connectivity, and habitat size.

*Human Element* — The urban environment is human-built, thus many of the agents of selection are anthropogenic and not previously encountered by organisms or researchers in non-urban environments (Lugo et al. 2018, Alberti 2015). For example, extensive impervious surfaces (e.g., asphalt) within cities can impact local climate because they absorb and radiate solar energy differently than natural substrates (the “urban heat island” effect, Oke 1973), and high concentrations of anthropogenic pollutants in urban habitats could accelerate mutation rates (Yauk et al. 2000, Somers et al. 2004, Johnson and Munshi-South 2017). Understanding these anthropogenic pressures may require cross-disciplinary collaboration (e.g., engineering, physics, chemistry, governance, urban planning; McPhearson et al. 2016). Moreover, teasing apart the relative importance of local adaptation, exaptation, and non-adaptive (e.g., gene flow) origins of urban phenotypes can be particularly challenging in urban environments. For example, as a consequence of human-associated population connectivity, pigeons (*Columba livia*) in the Northeastern United States form a large continuous genetic metapopulation spanning city centers separated by over 800 km (Carlen and Munshi-South 2020). In fact, due to human-mediated movement, some organisms have a higher probability, frequency, and distance of dispersal in somewhat predictable ways (e.g., intercity translocations; Gotzet et al. 2015, Bennett et al. 2019). For example, urban areas act as hubs to increase connectivity among populations of the Western black widow spider (*Latrodectus hesperus*), including among historically and geographically-distinct populations locally adapted to desert environments (Miles et al. 2018a, 2018b).

*Misconceptions* — A misconception perpetuated by poorly understood agents and targets of selection is that selection in urban environments is strong primarily as a consequence of humans and human activities as agents. Although rates of phenotypic change have been demonstrated to be elevated in response to some anthropogenic agents (Hendry et al. 2008, Alberti 2015), many studies rely on environmental proxies such as impervious surface cover rather than identifying causal relationships. Researchers may conflate environmental proxies with drivers of selection if the selective agents are unclear, multicollinear, or correlated with general environmental features — a problem that plagues adaptation research in any environment (Endler 1986, Mitchell-Olds & Shaw 1987, Kawecki and Ebert 2004). For example, in urban crested anoles (*A. cristatellus*), limb length differences can be connected to shifts in structural environment directly related to locomotion (Winchell et al. 2016, 2018), although this trait shift could also be explained by the proxy variable of impervious surface cover correlated with structural environment. In addition, contemporary movement patterns of urban organisms influenced directly and indirectly by human activities can obscure the selective landscape that shaped phenotypes. For example, populations of the mosquito *Culex pipiens* were presumed to be locally adapted to living in subway stations in London, yet a recent review instead supports exaptive origins of these underground-adapted populations, with adaptive phenotypes previously present in the ancestral

populations outside of Europe (Haba and McBride 2022). As in any environment, if we fail to first characterize patterns of gene flow and genetic drift, we may incorrectly conclude local adaptation to urban environments (e.g., Gould and Lewontin 1979, Hoban et al. 2016).

*Moving Forward* — To address the challenges of understanding novel anthropogenic selective pressures, connecting phenotypes to selective agents and accounting for nonadaptive processes is crucial (Santangelo et al. 2018, Miles et al. 2019). Research that connects adaptive urban phenotypes to selective agents through performance or fitness quantification (e.g., Tuzun and Stoks 2020, Chick et al. 2020) will provide more informative evidence of urban adaptation and reduce the conflation of environmental proxies (e.g., general urban characteristics) with drivers of phenotypic change. Genomic approaches may be particularly valuable to examine adaptive responses while accounting for underlying population structure. For example, Salmón et al. (2021) used genotype-environment association tests to identify adaptation in the great tit (*Parus major*) across multiple cities, interpreting results in light of population structure analyses suggesting widespread gene flow across city centers. When populations are highly connected, it can be unclear if adaptive phenotypes arose repeatedly or swept across urban populations, a subtle distinction in the evolutionary mechanism underlying adaptation. Teasing apart these mechanisms is possible: Oziolor et al. (2019) used a model developed by Lee and Coop (2017) to determine how both *de novo* mutation and adaptive introgression contributed to pollution tolerance in Atlantic killifish (*Fundulus heteroclitus*). Lastly, long-term datasets, including building museum resources (see Challenge 2) and research on ancient DNA will provide important context for understanding urban adaptation by addressing temporal variation and timescales in natural selection. For example, in non-urban ecosystems, selection on beak size in Galapagos finches (*Geospiza* spp.) fluctuates from year to year in variable directions, and by building a multidecadal data set, Grant and Grant (2014) were able to quantify these dynamics.

#### Challenge 4: Habitat heterogeneity

*General Application* — The scale at which adaptation research is conducted must consider the breadth of habitats in an environment (Levin 1992, Castillo and De León 2021), across which the strength and nature of selection may vary. Qualitative habitat categorizations (e.g., montane and lowland) may not capture the habitat features underlying selection and adaptation, particularly at organismally relevant (e.g., microhabitat) spatial scales (Castillo and De León 2021). Quantifying habitat at local spatial scales is important because similar habitat use (e.g., thermal niche) can impede adaptive divergence between populations occupying divergent macrohabitats (e.g., cool montane versus warm lowland; Muñoz and Losos 2020). In addition, quantifying the extent of environmental divergence across habitat contrasts establishes the premise that similar selective forces underlie the covariation between phenotype and fitness, without which the selective landscape may be oversimplified, and proxies (e.g., macrohabitat elements) may erroneously appear to be the main drivers of selection (see Challenge 3). For example, macroclimatic variables (e.g., temperature and precipitation) were weak predictors of niche evolution in plethodontid salamanders in contrast to microhabitat variables (e.g., air temperature, soil temperature, leaf litter depth; Farallo et al. 2020). In addition to spatial variation, all habitats change over time as a consequence of natural processes (e.g., hurricanes, succession) as well as human activity (e.g., land management tied to social and political priorities; Ian Perry and Ommer 2003). Adaptation research that considers temporal variation in the selective landscape may help with minimizing disruption of experiments (see Challenge 1) and identifying appropriate temporal windows of selection (see Challenge 3).

*Human Element* — Modern urbanization represents a significant shift in the complexity, speed, scale, and scope of human modification of the environment (United Nations 2001). Examples of anthropogenic habitat transformation include expansion or contraction of infrastructure, landscaping, and extreme disturbances that radically and rapidly obliterate entire metropolitan areas (such as the recent war conflict in Ukraine). Anthropogenic environmental transformations have long-lasting effects on evolutionary processes in urban environments by altering habitat characteristics and connectivity (Pincetl 2015, Schell et al. 2020, Des Roches et al. 2021). For example, railways in German cities facilitated movement in admixed lineages of wall lizards (*Podarcis muralis*) derived from populations in other European cities (Beninde et al. 2018).



In addition, socio-cultural aspects of urban environments, including the legacy of urban development and discriminatory practices that promote structural racism (e.g., restrictive and discriminatory property sales), generate a heterogeneous landscape and idiosyncratic variation within and between urban centers (Yigitcanlar 2009, Pincetl 2015, United Nations 2018, Schell et al. 2020, Des Roches et al. 2021). For example, wealthy communities often have more green space with abundant domesticated and invasive vegetation compared to poorer communities (Aronson et al. 2014). In addition, modern urbanization in North and South America is more recent than in Asia and Europe (Fox and Goodfellow 2016), leading to less time for urban adaptation to have occurred in American cities. It might be the case that given the relatively recent age of most cities on Earth (a large proportion of which emerged or radically expanded after the Industrial Revolution and are less than 200 years old), adaptation may occur primarily from standing genetic variation rather than *de novo* mutation and result in primarily soft sweeps that are more difficult to detect using classic genomic approaches (Messer and Petrov 2013). However, the importance of standing genetic variation for urban adaptation, and how this relates to variation among cities, remains understudied. Even in urban regions that have existed for centuries, human interests and needs (e.g., roads and energy infrastructure) can lead to drastically different selective landscapes at different points in time. For example, Paris was radically transformed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by demolishing overcrowded medieval neighborhoods and building new parks and squares (Kirkland 2013).

*Misconceptions* — A misconception perpetuated by our nascent understanding of the heterogeneity of cities is that urban environments represent replicated natural experiments with parallel environmental conditions and selective pressures across cities globally (Santangelo et al. 2020a, 2020b, 2022, Szulkin et al. 2020b, Diamond and Martin 2021). Although accumulating evidence suggests urban environments do converge on multiple environmental variables (e.g., Santangelo et al. 2022), the majority of urban adaptation research to date focuses on single geographic regions (Santangelo et al. 2020a). However, we now recognize that replication within a single city, as well as contrasts of urban versus non-urban habitats or across urban to non-urban gradients, may ignore the complex mosaic of anthropogenically impacted landscapes that vary within and among cities (Szulkin et al. 2020b). Although we have many operative definitions of “urban” environments, there is not a universal consensus on what defines a city. For example, variation in biotic (e.g., ecological dynamics), abiotic (e.g., temperature), and social factors (e.g., political structures) across urban environments may be underappreciated because of the North American and Western European focus of much of urban evolutionary ecology research (Johnson and Munshi-South 2017, Schell et al. 2020, Des Roches et al. 2021). Therefore, we may reach incorrect conclusions about the generalizability of urban adaptations globally based on this biased sample of urbanization.

*Moving Forward* — To address the challenges presented by the inherent heterogeneity within and among urban environments, it could benefit researchers to move past a simplified assumption of cities as replicates to incorporate heterogeneity and scale more explicitly. Accomplishing this might involve quantification of urbanization at multiple spatial scales and replication across diverse cities globally (Pincetl 2015, Szulkin et al. 2020b). For example, Merckx et al. (2018) employed spatially hierarchical sampling to capture regional and local variation of temperature and fragmentation in three city centers to understand adaptive patterns of invertebrate body size. When assessing multiple spatial scales is not feasible (e.g., remote-sensing data of appropriate resolution is unavailable or access to field locations is restricted), a biologically-justified scale that reflects local organismal interactions with their environment (e.g., dispersal or home range) can be used as a proxy (Jackson and Fahrig 2015, Szulkin et al. 2020b). Critically, such decisions rely on natural history and trait-environment information that may not yet be available for urban organisms (see Challenge 2), and different methods may be more appropriate (e.g., depending on spatial and temporal variation), requiring flexibility in experimental designs and interdisciplinary collaborations (see Challenge 1). In addition to a more quantitative assessment of urban environments, the global study of cities that vary in the intensity, age, and characteristics of urbanization will help shed light on the process of urban adaptation and aid in our ability to generalize findings. For example, Cosentino and Gibbs (2022) were able to disentangle selective agents contributing to parallel and non-parallel clines in Eastern Gray Squirrel (*S. carolinensis*) melanistic coat color associated with urbanization by comparing 43 North American cities that differed in size, age, and

geographic location. In a global sample, Santangelo et al. (2022) collected data on white clover (*Trifolium repens*) from over 160 cities worldwide to demonstrate that urbanization can lead to parallel adaptation despite considerable environmental variation among cities.

## Closing Remarks

Here, we have addressed some of the challenges researchers face when embarking on adaptation research in urban environments related to four themes: methodological approaches, trait-environment relationships and natural history, agents and targets of natural selection, and habitat heterogeneity (Figure 2). Although these challenges are not unique to urban environments, there are unique aspects that stem from the human element in these ecosystems. Our four-point framework emphasizes how general challenges to adaptation research are relevant to urban adaptation research and considers how each may differ in urban environments. When researchers study urban evolutionary processes without considering these challenges, erroneous conclusions can arise regarding the nature and strength of selection, as well as the generalizability of findings across taxa and cities. Our four-point framework provides a conceptual discussion of these potential misconceptions. Although these pitfalls may slow progress in urban adaptation research, in the last point of our framework we offer practical steps to move past these misconceptions with multiple recent examples of how researchers are moving this burgeoning field forward productively and inclusively. Developing an understanding and appreciation of the human element and how it challenges adaptation research has broad applications to the diverse socio-cultural aspects of urban ecosystems, including the evolution of urban organisms. As federal and other agencies align their funding roadmaps with urban research, we believe outlining these challenges from biological, methodological, theoretical, and socio-cultural perspectives is critical to the success of the field.

Although we have focused on the challenges to conducting urban adaptation research, we also recognize that urban areas are rapidly evolving environments that are globally distributed, and thus are powerful opportunities for contemporary adaptation research (Donihue and Lambert 2015, Szulkin et al. 2020a, Diamond and Martin 2021). This is not to say that urban ecosystems are qualitatively “good”, nor are they more appropriate than non-urban systems for adaptation research. In fact, how humans interact with and influence nature cannot be extricated from wildlife conservation practices (McKinney 2006, Bergey et al. 2020, Egerer et al. 2021). Even so, cities provide the opportunity to study ecological interactions and evolutionary outcomes that may uniquely result from the dynamic interactions that include humans. In addition, adaptation research can utilize aspects of urban ecosystems to carry out research that would otherwise be challenging or not possible in non-urban systems. For example, habitat fragmentation and the frequent and ongoing management actions in cities can be leveraged to test hypotheses about connectivity without needing to actively modify the habitat. Indirect consequences of human activities also offer natural “laboratories” for addressing some of the most pressing issues of the Anthropocene. For example, cities can be viewed as experimental arenas to study adaptation to climate change because of the urban heat island effect (Oke 1973), which in some ways is a spatial analogy of climate change (a temporal trend, Verheyen et al. 2019), and allows for a broader perspective on adaptation to warming than would be possible with laboratory experiments (Lahr et al. 2018). Similarly, cities increase scope for the study of adaptation to anthropogenic materials such as plastic or other solid waste found in the environment, for example when these are used as replacement material in biological structures. This can be best illustrated in nest building, viewed as an extended phenotype, when natural nest-building elements such as fur and feathers are replaced by anthropogenic solid waste pollutants such as plastic or paper (Jagiello et al. 2022).

Finally, the generation and application of ecological and evolutionary information in urban areas may be facilitated because these ecosystems are intimately integrated with human societies. For some types of data such as historical land use and aerial imagery, researchers may find more resources for urban areas than non-urban areas, although there may be geographic biases in the quality and temporal extent of these resources. Urban environments also provide an opportunity to learn about the ecosystems where we live and within which we have a vested interest. Community applications follow naturally from urban research via: regular interactions with the public while conducting fieldwork; museum exhibitions highlighting urban

ecosystems (e.g., Carnegie Museum of Natural History’s 2017 “We are Nature” exhibit); community science initiatives that involve urban communities in research activities (e.g., iNaturalist, BioBlitzes, SquirrelMapper: Cosentino and Gibbs 2022); and inter-disciplinary projects in urban spaces involving policy makers, artists, educators, and researchers (Sexton et al. 2015, Vega et al. 2021, Wallis et al. 2021). By conducting research on how the organisms around us are adapting to human modifications of the environment, we celebrate the diversity of where we live and engage communities to discover and celebrate this diversity. Ultimately, these initiatives expose those who live within cities to the excitement of evolutionary ecology and foster a sense of environmental stewardship.

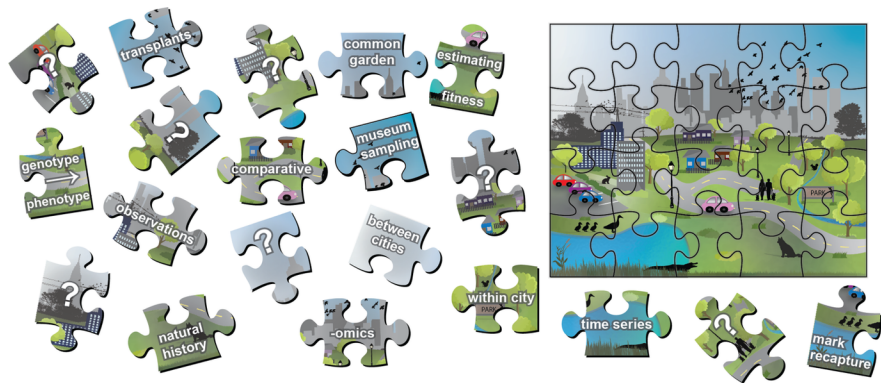


Figure 1. Completing the puzzle. Just as the picture on a puzzle cannot be fully understood from a single piece, no single method can tell us all we need to learn about adaptation in any environment, including urban environments, and each piece can tell us something uniquely important. When pieced together, we obtain a more comprehensive picture of adaptation. Employing complementary approaches that account for both taxonomic and environmental variation provide different pieces of evidence to better understand evolutionary processes and patterns in general and may help move adaptation research in urban ecosystems forward productively.

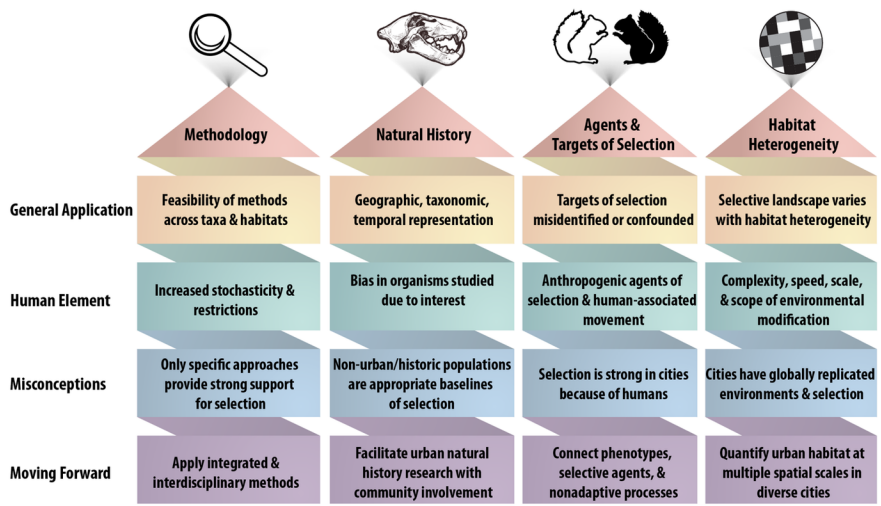


Figure 2. Urban adaptation research may be challenging as a consequence of increased interactions with and influence of humans in urban environments. We discuss challenges and ways to move forward from these main themes: methodology, natural history, agents and targets of selection, and habitat heterogeneity.

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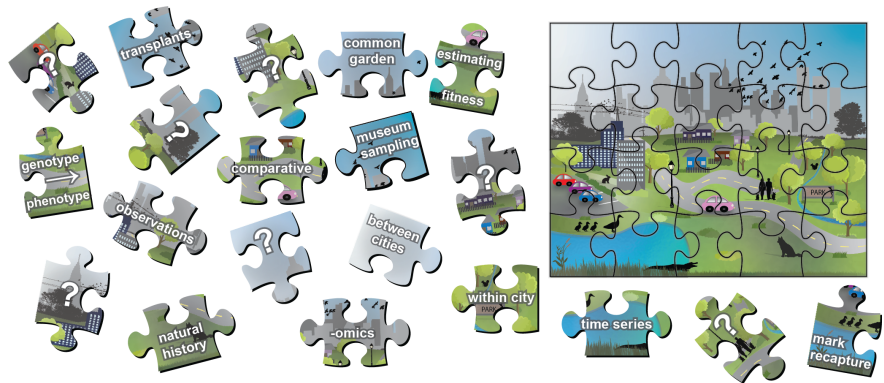






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	 Methodology	 Natural History	 Agents & Targets of Selection	 Habitat Heterogeneity
General Application	Feasibility of methods across taxa & habitats	Geographic, taxonomic, temporal representation	Targets of selection misidentified or confounded	Selective landscape varies with habitat heterogeneity
Human Element	Increased stochasticity & restrictions	Bias in organisms studied due to interest	Anthropogenic agents of selection & human-associated movement	Complexity, speed, scale, & scope of environmental modification
Misconceptions	Only specific approaches provide strong support for selection	Non-urban/historic populations are appropriate baselines of selection	Selection is strong in cities because of humans	Cities have globally replicated environments & selection
Moving Forward	Apply integrated & interdisciplinary methods	Facilitate urban natural history research with community involvement	Connect phenotypes, selective agents, & nonadaptive processes	Quantify urban habitat at multiple spatial scales in diverse cities