A Note on Estimation Methodology in Contemporary Small Mammal Capture-Recapture Studies

James D. Nichols and Kenneth H. Pollock

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A NOTE ON ESTIMATION METHODOLOGY IN CONTEMPORARY SMALL MAMMAL CAPTURE-RECAPTURE STUDIES

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Enumeration estimators, which are also known as "minimum number known alive" and "calendar-of-catches" estimators (e.g. see Newson and Chitty 1962, Krebs 1966, Krebs et al. 1969), currently dominate the literature of small mammal capture-recapture studies. Although it is widely recognized that these estimators are negatively biased, they still seem to be preferred by mammalogists to estimators based on probabilistic models such as the Jolly-Seber model (Jolly 1965, Seber 1965). It is our belief that estimators based on the Jolly-Seber and related models are preferable to enumeration estimators and should thus be adopted in small mammal capture-recapture studies.

In this note we first give a brief description of the Jolly-Seber model and then write down the expected values of enumeration survival rate and population size estimators in terms of the parameters of the Jolly-Seber model. We show that these estimators actually estimate complicated functions of the Jolly-Seber model parameters. We then list frequently used reasons for choosing enumeration over Jolly-Seber estimators and argue that Jolly-Seber estimators are still to be preferred.

The Jolly-Seber Model

The most important open population model is the Jolly-Seber model, independently derived by Jolly (1965) and Seber (1965). The best reference for detailed study of this model is Seber (1973:196). This model makes the following assumptions:
(i) Every animal in the population (marked or unmarked) has the same probability \( p_i \) of being caught in the \( i \)th sample \((i = 1, \ldots, K)\), given that it is alive and in the population when the sample is taken.

(ii) Every animal has the same probability \( \phi_i \) of surviving from the \( i \)th to the \((i + 1)\)th sample, given that it is alive and in the population immediately after the \( i \)th release \((i = 1, \ldots, K-1)\).

(iii) Marked animals do not lose their marks and all marks are reported on recovery.

(iv) The actual time spent sampling occupies a short period.

Here an intuitive discussion of parameter estimation will be given. Imagine to begin with that \( M_1 \), the number of marked animals in the population just before the \( i \)th sample, is known for all values \( i = 2, \ldots, K \) (there are no marked animals at the time of the first sample so that \( M_1 = 0 \)).

Obviously an intuitive estimator of \( N_i \), the population size at time \( i \), is the Petersen estimator. If the model assumptions are valid, then

\[
\frac{m_i}{n_i} = \frac{M_1}{N_i},
\]

which gives

\[
\hat{N}_i = \frac{n_i M_1}{m_i},
\]

(1)

where \( m_i \) and \( n_i \) are the marked and total numbers of animals captured in the \( i \)th sample, respectively.

An estimator of the survival rate from sample \( i \) to sample \((i+1)\) is \( M_{i+1} \), which is the total number of marked animals in the population just before the \((i+1)\)th sample, divided by the total number of marked animals in the population immediately after sample \( i \), which is \( M_i - m_i + R_i \).

Note that \( R_i \) is the number of the \( n_i \) animals captured that are released.
\[
\hat{\phi}_i = \frac{M_{i+1}}{(M_i - m_i + R_i)}
\] (2)

An intuitive estimator of the recruitment in time interval \(i\) to \((i+1)\) is

\[
\hat{B}_i = \hat{N}_{i+1} - \hat{N}_i = \hat{N}_i - n_i + R_i.
\] (3)

This is simply the estimated difference between the population size at time \((i+1)\) (which is \(N_{i+1}\)) and the expected number of survivors from time \(i\) to time \((i+1)\) (which is \(\phi_i(N_i - n_i + R_i)\)).

To complete this intuitive outline we need an estimator of the \(M_i\) because they are obviously unknown in an open population. This can be obtained by equating the two ratios

\[
\frac{Z_i}{M_i - m_i} = \frac{r_i}{R_i},
\]

which are the future recovery rates of the two distinct groups of marked animals:

(i) \((M_i - m_i)\) are the marked animals not seen at \(i\)
and (ii) \(R_i\) are the animals seen at \(i\) and then released for possible recapture.

Note that \(Z_i\) and \(r_i\) are the members of \((M_i - m_i)\) and \(R_i\), respectively, which are captured again at least once. The estimator of \(M_i\) is thus given by

\[
\hat{M}_i = m_i + \frac{R_i Z_i}{r_i}
\] (4)

and is defined only for \(i = 2, \ldots, K-1\). It follows that \(\hat{N}_i\) in (1) is defined for \(i = 2, \ldots, K-1\); \(\hat{\phi}_i\) in (2) for \(i = 1, \ldots, K-2\); and \(\hat{B}_i\) in (3) for \(i = 2, \ldots, K-2\).

A summary of these parameter estimators and their approximate large sample variances is given in Seber (1973:205), which should also be consulted for some detailed examples. A very important new development is the work of
Jolly (1979, 1981). He restricts the large number of parameters by assuming a constant survival rate and/or a constant capture rate over the whole study. If these assumptions are realistic, as they often are, then he shows that there can be large gains in precision of estimators. Crosbie (1979) has also considered similar models.

**Enumeration Estimators**

The enumeration estimator for survival rate is simply:

\[ \hat{\phi}_1 = r_1/R_1, \]  

where \( \hat{\phi}_1 \) denotes the enumeration survival rate estimator, and \( r_1 \) and \( R_1 \) are as previously defined. The expected value of this estimator can be written as:

\[ E(\hat{\phi}_1) = 1 - \chi_1 = \phi_1(1 - q_{i+1} \chi_{i+1}) \]  

where \( \chi_1 \) is the probability of never capturing an animal after time \( i \) given that the animal is alive and in the population at the time of release in period \( i \) (note that \( \chi_K = 1 \), where \( K \) is the last sampling period), and \( q_{i+1} = 1 - p_{i+1} \). \( \chi_{i+1} \) can be expressed in terms of \( \phi_{i+1} \), \( q_{i+1} \), and \( \chi_{i+2} \), and subsequent \( \chi_j \) can also be expressed in terms of survival and capture probabilities. The estimator, \( \hat{\phi}_1 \), is thus seen to estimate a complicated function involving every survival and capture probability subsequent to period \( i \).

The enumeration estimator for population size at time \( i \) is given by:

\[ \hat{N}_i = n_i + Z_i. \]  

The expected value of this estimator can be written as:

\[ E(\hat{N}_i) = N_i p_i + M_i q_i (1 - \chi_i). \]  

Because of the \( \chi_1 \) term this expected value is seen to involve all of the \( p_j \) and \( \phi_j \) occurring subsequent to period \( i \). In addition, \( M_i \) is itself a
function of all $p_j$ and $\phi_j$ occurring before time $i$. Therefore, $N_1^E$ also estimates a complicated function involving a large number of parameters.

**Comparison of Methods**

The most frequently-provided reason for preferring enumeration to Jolly-Seber estimators is that capture probabilities, $p_1$, often are not the same for all individuals in the population (or in the stratum of interest) for a given time period, and that this assumption is required by the Jolly-Seber model. Conceptually, we can think of unequal capture probabilities as resulting either from heterogeneity or trap response (e.g. see Pollock 1981a). Heterogeneity refers to the situation in which capture probability is a property of the individual and varies from one animal to another in the population (for small mammal examples, see review of Smith et al. 1975). Heterogeneity results in negatively-biased Jolly-Seber estimates of population size and survival rate, although the survival rate estimates are much less affected (see Cormack 1972, Carothers 1973, Gilbert 1973). Trap response refers to the situation in which an animal's capture probability depends on his previous capture history (e.g. whether or not it has been caught before). Many small mammals are thought to exhibit greater capture probabilities after their initial capture (see review in Tanaka 1980). This type of response results in negatively biased Jolly-Seber estimates of population size, whereas a decrease in capture probability after initial capture can result in a positive bias.

Although heterogeneity of capture probability and trap response do result in biases in Jolly-Seber estimates, we do not believe that this should result in the preference of enumeration estimators. Enumeration estimators are always biased whenever capture probabilities are less than 1. In addition,
the situation (high average capture probability) for which the bias of
enumeration estimators is said to be acceptably small (see Hilborn et al.
1976) is the same situation for which the Jolly-Seber estimators are known
to be robust to heterogeneity of capture probability (Carothers 1973,
Gilbert 1973). We noted that the bias of the Jolly-Seber estimates of
\( \phi _{1} \) and \( N _{1} \) is negative in the case of heterogeneity. The bias of the
estimate of \( N _{1} \) is also negative in the case of a "trap-happy" response to
initial capture. However, in the case of negative bias, we can show that
the absolute value of the bias of the Jolly-Seber estimates is either equal
to or smaller than the absolute value of the bias of the enumeration estimates
(see Appendix). Therefore, the Jolly-Seber estimates perform better than
the enumeration estimates even in the case of heterogeneity and trap-happy
response, the 2 sources of unequal capture probability most likely to
occur in small mammal studies. Finally, we note that trap response has
been explicitly incorporated in the general probabilistic models of Robson
(1969) and Pollock (1975). Despite the claim that trap response occurs commonly
in small mammal capture-recapture studies, we are not aware of any uses of these
general models in such studies.

It has also been claimed that the inability of the Jolly-Seber model to
handle more than one age class severely limits its utility for small mammal
studies. However, a model permitting different capture and survival
probabilities for different age classes has recently been developed (Pollock
1981b, Stokes in prep.).

It is sometimes argued that the actual values of estimates of demographic
parameters are not as important as comparisons of such estimates (e.g. between
populations, time periods, etc.). Therefore, if the enumeration estimators
provided relative estimates that could be used in such comparisons, then an
argument could be made for their use. However, if we wish to use comparisons of different estimates to draw inferences about differences between the underlying parameters, then we must be willing to assume that the biases are equal for the estimates being compared. A simple example will illustrate that this is never likely to be the case. Suppose we have two populations each with perfect survival ($\phi_1 = 1$) and each is sampled 3 times. In the first population the probability of capture in each sample is $p_1 = 0.9$ whereas in the second population the probability of capture is 0.8. Using equation (6) we can calculate the expected values of the survival rate estimates which are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population 1</th>
<th>Population 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$\hat{\phi}_1^E = 0.99$</td>
<td>$\hat{\phi}_1^E = 0.96$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\hat{\phi}_2^E = 0.90$</td>
<td>$\hat{\phi}_2^E = 0.80$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Admittedly this is a very small experiment but it does illustrate the fact that the bias can differ markedly between time periods as well as between populations. The data in Newson and Chitty (1962:734) also illustrate this.

In all cases there is a marked drop in the enumeration survival estimate in the final period. This could be due to a real drop in survival, but it is also consistent with our example. The negative bias of survival estimates is always much larger at the end of the study. Temporal changes in capture probability can also cause problems in comparing enumeration estimates.

We have seen examples in the literature in which enumeration survival estimates are lowest during the period of the year in which capture probabilities are lowest. Although such results are generally interpreted as evidence of low survival rates during the period of interest, they would also be expected to occur simply as a result of low capture probabilities.
Finally the argument that the Jolly-Seber estimates are difficult to compute is not valid. A very powerful, flexible program package called POPAN-2 (Arnason and Baniuk 1978) is now available. The data required for the program is each individual's complete capture history together with any attribute data such as age or sex. There is a strong data manipulation capability so that, for example, it is easy to obtain analyses stratified by age or sex or any other coded attribute data.

Conclusion

In summary, we strongly recommend the use of probabilistic models for the analysis of small mammal capture-recapture data. In addition to the standard model of Jolly (1965) and Seber (1965), the age-specific model of Pollock (1981b) and Stokes (in prep.) should prove useful, as might the trap-response models of Robson (1969) and Pollock (1975) and the modified Jolly-Seber models of Jolly (1979, 1981) which restrict the number of parameters. Because of the heterogeneity and trap response believed to operate in small mammal populations, perhaps a sensible design for capture-recapture studies is that described by Pollock (1981c). In this design population size is estimated using capture-recapture data within a sampling period (using the closed population models of Otis et al. 1978 which allow unequal catchability) and survival rates are estimated from recaptures occurring between sampling periods (using the Jolly-Seber model). We conclude that estimates based on probabilistic models should generally be superior to those based on enumeration techniques, and we hope that small mammal population ecologists will begin to take advantage of these models.
Literature Cited


APPENDIX

Here we show that the Jolly-Seber estimates are always at least as large as enumeration estimates, and this indicates that Jolly-Seber estimates are at least as good as enumeration estimates in situations producing negative bias.

Population Estimation

The enumeration estimator is given by (7)
\[ \hat{N}_1^E = n_1 + Z_1, \]
whereas the Jolly-Seber estimator is given by (1) and can be rewritten as
\[ \hat{N}_1 = n_1 Z_i R_i / r_i m_i + n_1. \]

Since \( R_i / r_i \geq 1 \) and \( n_1 / m_i \geq 1 \), we know that:
\[ n_1 Z_i R_i / r_i m_i \geq Z_1. \]

Therefore, \( \hat{N}_1 \geq \hat{N}_1^E. \)

Survival Estimation

The enumeration estimator is given by (5)
\[ \hat{\phi}_1^E = r_i / R_i, \]
whereas the corresponding Jolly-Seber estimator is given by (2) and can be
rewritten as

\[ \hat{\phi}_i = \begin{bmatrix} Z_{i+1} R_{i+1} \\ r_{i+1} (Z_i + r_i) \end{bmatrix} + \begin{bmatrix} m_{i+1} \\ Z_i + r_i \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} r_i \\ R_i \end{bmatrix} \]

We know that \( R_{i+1}/r_{i+1} \geq 1 \), and \( (Z_{i+1} + m_{i+1})/(Z_i + r_i) = 1 \), because all the marked animals known to be in the population at time \( i + 1 \) \((Z_{i+1} + m_{i+1})\) is equivalent to those animals marked at or before time \( i \) that are subsequently recaptured \((Z_i + r_i)\). Hence, \( \hat{\phi}_i \geq \hat{\phi}_i^E \).

1Manuscript received

2U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, Laurel, Maryland 20708.

3Department of Statistics, Box 5457, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, North Carolina 27650.