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Placental Diversity and Evolution in Wildlife

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Abstract

The placenta is a pivotal evolutionary innovation enabling prolonged intrauterine development and shaping reproductive strategies across vertebrate wildlife. In mammals, placentas exhibit striking diversity in gross morphology, interhaemal barrier structure, trophoblast invasion, decidualization, and microscopic exchange architecture. These structural differences align closely with life-history strategy, ecological context, and phylogenetic history. Phylogenomic analyses suggest that placental traits have undergone repeated transitions during mammalian diversification, challenging earlier linear models of increasing invasiveness. Molecular studies indicate that placental evolution is driven primarily by regulatory innovation and repeated co-option of endogenous retroviral genes involved in trophoblast fusion. Beyond mammals, placenta-like systems have evolved independently in reptiles, demonstrating strong convergent pressures favoring maternal–embryonic nutrient exchange. Integrating morphology, genomics, and ecology reveals that placental diversity reflects adaptive optimization under evolutionary constraint rather than progressive complexity. Understanding this diversity provides insight into reproductive resilience and evolutionary flexibility across wildlife taxa.

Keywords: Ecology; Evolution; Placenta; Phylogenomics; Viviparity.

INTRODUCTION

The placenta represents one of the most consequential evolutionary innovations in vertebrate history, enabling sustained maternal–fetal exchange and facilitating extended gestation. Functionally defined as a transient organ mediating nutrient, gas, and waste transfer between mother and embryo, the placenta has evolved repeatedly in vertebrates and displays remarkable structural and molecular diversity (Roberts, 2016; Stewart, 2000). In eutherian mammals, placentation underlies reproductive success and developmental strategy. However, its origin and diversification remain central questions in evolutionary biology. Competing models of placental mammal radiation including “Explosive” and “Long-Fuse” hypotheses debate whether major lineages diversified rapidly after the Cretaceous–Paleogene boundary or began diverging earlier in the Late Cretaceous (Springer et al., 2019; Foley et al., 2023). Regardless of timing, structural diversification of the placenta accompanied mammalian ecological expansion.

Comparative analyses show that placental architecture varies extensively across mammalian orders, reflecting divergent adaptive solutions shaped by ecology and life-history strategy (Carter, 2018; Wildman et al., 2013). Modern syntheses emphasize that placental form is not merely anatomical variation but a functional interface regulated by developmental genetics, immune negotiation, and maternal–fetal resource allocation (Baker, 2024; Roberts, 2016). Wildlife species, occupying diverse ecological niches, provide critical models for understanding how this organ evolves under contrasting environmental pressures.

STRUCTURAL DIVERSITY OF THE PLACENTA IN MAMMALS

Placental diversity in mammals can be described along four largely independent axes: gross morphology, interhaemal barrier type, decidualization, and microscopic exchange architecture (Carter, 2018; see Table 1 & Fig.1).

Gross Morphology

Gross morphology refers to the spatial distribution of chorionic attachment. Diffuse placentas distribute villi broadly across the uterine surface and occur in wild ungulates such as plains zebra (*Equus quagga*) and white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*). Cotyledonary placentas localize exchange into discrete placentomes, typical of ruminant wildlife including African buffalo (*Syncerus caffer*) and moose (*Alces alces*). Zonary placentas form a circumferential band of attachment and occur in carnivores such as African lion (*Panthera leo*), gray wolf (*Canis lupus*), and harbor seal (*Phoca vitulina*). Discoid placentas concentrate exchange into one or two disc-shaped regions, characteristic of primates, rodents, and many bats. These categories describe shape rather than invasiveness.

Table 1. Multidimensional Structural Diversity of Mammalian Placentas in Wildlife

Structural Axis	Type	Definition	Representative Wildlife Examples	Functional / Evolutionary Significance
Gross Morphology	Diffuse	Chorionic villi distributed broadly across uterine surface	<i>Equus quagga</i> (plains zebra), <i>Odocoileus virginianus</i> (white-tailed deer)	Broad attachment surface; often associated with long gestation and precocial neonates
	Cotyledonary	Exchange localized in	<i>Syncerus caffer</i> (African	Compartmentalized nutrient

		discrete placentomes	buffalo), <i>Alces alces</i> (moose)	exchange; strong maternal–fetal structural segregation
	Zonary	Circumferential band of placental attachment	<i>Panthera leo</i> (African lion), <i>Canis lupus</i> (gray wolf), <i>Phoca vitulina</i> (harbor seal)	Regionalized exchange; typically, moderate trophoblast invasion
	Discoid	One or two disc-shaped exchange regions	<i>Pan troglodytes</i> (chimpanzee), bats (<i>Myotis</i> spp.), rodents	High localized exchange efficiency; frequently associated with haemochorial barrier
Interhaemal Barrier	Epitheliochorial	All maternal tissue layers retained	<i>Giraffa camelopardalis</i> (giraffe), large ungulates	Low invasiveness; limited maternal tissue remodeling
	Syndesmochoria (historical term)	Maternal epithelium reduced; connective tissue retained	Ruminant wildlife	Often reinterpreted as modified epitheliochorial (Carter, 2018)
	Endotheliochorial	Maternal endothelium retained; epithelium lost	<i>Lycaon pictus</i> (African wild dog), other carnivores	Intermediate invasiveness; balance between exchange efficiency and maternal protection

	Haemochorial	Direct trophoblast contact with maternal blood	Primates, rodents, many bats	High nutrient transfer efficiency; requires advanced immune tolerance
Decidualization	Deciduate	Maternal tissue shed at parturition	Primates, carnivores	Reflects deeper trophoblast invasion and uterine remodeling
	Non-deciduate	Minimal maternal tissue loss at birth	Most ungulates	Preserves uterine integrity across reproductive cycles
Micro-architecture	Villous	Branching chorionic villi projecting into maternal blood spaces	Primates	Surface area amplification via arborization
	Labyrinthine	Interwoven trophoblast–capillary network	Rodents	Thin diffusion barrier; maximized exchange efficiency

Interhaemal Barrier Type

Barrier classification depends on the number of maternal tissue layers separating fetal trophoblast from maternal blood. Epitheliochorial placentas retain maternal epithelium, connective tissue, and endothelium, and are typical of large herbivores such as giraffe (*Giraffa camelopardalis*). Syndesmochorial placentation, historically described in ruminants, is now generally interpreted as a modified epitheliochorial condition (Carter, 2018). Endotheliochorial placentas, seen in carnivores including African wild dog (*Lycaon pictus*), retain maternal endothelium but lose epithelium. Haemochorial placentas permit direct trophoblast contact

with maternal blood and are characteristic of primates and rodents. Phylogenetic analyses suggest that haemochorial placentation was likely ancestral in early eutherians, with multiple independent transitions toward less invasive states (Wildman *et al.*, 2013; Springer *et al.*, 2019).

Multidimensional Evolutionary Landscape of Placental Diversity

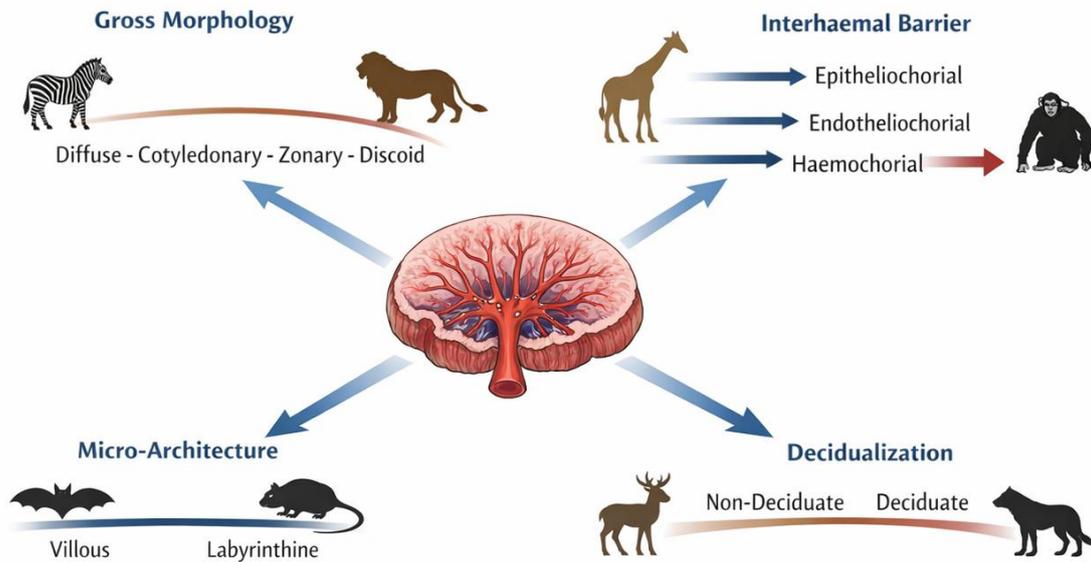


Fig. 1. Multidimensional evolutionary landscape of placental diversity in wildlife.

Schematic representation of four independent structural axes of mammalian placentation: gross morphology (diffuse, cotyledonary, zonary, discoid), interhaemal barrier type (epitheliochorial, endotheliochorial, haemochorial), decidualization (non-deciduate, deciduate), and micro-architecture (villous, labyrinthine). Representative wildlife taxa are illustrated to emphasize that placental traits evolve independently and reversibly under ecological and phylogenetic constraints rather than along a linear progression of increasing invasiveness.

Decidualization

Deciduate placentas involve significant maternal tissue loss at parturition and are typical of invasive systems such as primates and carnivores. Non-deciduate placentas, common in ungulates, involve minimal maternal tissue shedding and reduced uterine remodeling.

Microscopic Exchange Architecture

At the microstructural level, villous placentas exhibit branching chorionic villi, as in primates. Labyrinthine placentas, characteristic of rodents, form intricate interwoven trophoblast–capillary networks that reduce diffusion distance and enhance exchange

efficiency. Micro-architecture often predicts exchange performance more accurately than gross classification alone. Placental evolution therefore reflects lineage-specific optimization rather than linear progression toward increasing invasiveness.

PLACENTAL EVOLUTION AND PHYLOGENETIC DIVERSIFICATION

The origin and diversification of placental mammals represent a central debate in vertebrate macroevolution. Fossil evidence places definitive placental radiation near the Cretaceous–Paleogene boundary, whereas genomic divergence estimates suggest earlier lineage separation (Springer *et al.*, 2019; Foley *et al.*, 2023). Structural transitions among barrier types have occurred repeatedly across lineages (Carter, 2018). Associations between placental type and offspring developmental strategy further indicate adaptive evolution. Species producing altricial young frequently exhibit haemochorial placentation with high nutrient transfer capacity, whereas precocial species often possess epitheliochorial systems (Wildman *et al.*, 2013). These patterns indicate reversibility and ecological responsiveness rather than directional escalation in complexity. Placental diversity evolved in concert with broader mammalian adaptive radiation.

Molecular and Developmental Innovations

Placental evolution is driven largely by regulatory modification of conserved developmental pathways rather than wholesale gene invention (Baker, 2024; Foley *et al.*, 2023). The trophoblast, a defining feature of eutherian placentation, differentiates into specialized subtypes that determine invasion depth and exchange efficiency (Carter, 2018). A striking molecular innovation is the independent co-option of endogenous retroviral envelope genes (syncytins) in multiple mammalian lineages. These genes mediate trophoblast fusion and illustrate convergent recruitment of viral elements for placental development (Baker, 2024). Differences between villous and labyrinthine architectures correspond to lineage-specific regulation of angiogenic signaling and trophoblast proliferation. Invasive haemochorial systems require sophisticated immune modulation to prevent maternal rejection, consistent with maternal–fetal conflict models (Roberts, 2016). Placental diversity thus emerges from regulatory rewiring within a conserved developmental framework.

Placentation Beyond Mammals

Placenta-like systems have evolved repeatedly outside mammals, particularly in squamate reptiles. Viviparity has arisen independently numerous times in these lineages, often through gradual transitions from yolk dependence (lecithotrophy) to maternal nutrient supplementation (matrotrophy) (Stewart, 2000; Blackburn, 2015). Although reptilian and mammalian placentas differ developmentally, they converge functionally in increasing surface

area, vascular remodeling, and maternal–embryonic exchange efficiency. These repeated origins demonstrate that prolonged embryonic retention is a predictable evolutionary outcome under certain ecological conditions.

Ecological and Life-History Drivers

Placental diversity reflects adaptive alignment with ecological and life-history strategy. Large-bodied herbivores producing precocial young typically exhibit less invasive placentation, preserving uterine integrity across repeated reproductive cycles. Small mammals with rapid reproductive turnover often display invasive haemochorial systems supporting accelerated fetal growth. Environmental stability, metabolic constraints, and predation pressure shape these reproductive strategies. Phylogenetic analyses demonstrate that placental traits are reversible and have transitioned multiple times across mammalian history (Springer *et al.*, 2019). Placental architecture therefore encodes ecological strategy within developmental constraint.

EMERGING DIRECTIONS

Advances in 3D imaging, comparative transcriptomics, and phylogenomics are refining understanding of placental evolution. Quantitative assessment of vascular geometry and gene regulatory networks will enable more precise links between structure and function (Foley *et al.*, 2023; Baker, 2024). In the context of climate change and habitat disruption, understanding placental plasticity may inform conservation physiology by identifying species-specific reproductive vulnerabilities.

CONCLUSION

Placental diversity in wildlife represents a multidimensional evolutionary landscape shaped by morphology, regulatory innovation, ecological context, and phylogenetic history. Structural categories such as discoid or epitheliochorial capture only part of this complexity. Beneath them lie gene regulatory networks, immune negotiations, and life-history trade-offs that repeatedly reshape the maternal–fetal interface. Across vertebrates, placentation has evolved not along a single progressive trajectory but through iterative adaptive experimentation within biological constraint.

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