Nota

Cuad. herpetol. 40 (1): 165-168 (*2026*)

Predation of the frog *Physalaemus biligonigerus* (Anura: Leptodactylidae) by a giant water bug (Hemiptera: Belostomatidae) in the Brazilian Pantanal

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Recibida: 15 Mayo 2025
Revisada: 15 Julio 2025
Aceptada: 04 Diciembre 2025
Editor Asociado: D. Barrasso

doi: 10.31017/CdH.2026.(2025-024)

ABSTRACT

Amphibians play a fundamental role in aquatic and terrestrial food chains. They are frequently preyed upon by vertebrates and, less commonly, by invertebrates. Among invertebrate predators, aquatic insects of the family Belostomatidae stand out for their predatory efficiency and wide geographic distribution. Here we report a predation event of an adult male *Physalaemus biligonigerus* by an aquatic insect of the genus *Lethocerus*, observed in a temporary pond during an explosive breeding event in the municipality of Aquidauana, Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil. This kind of records, still poorly documented for anurans in the Pantanal, reinforces the importance of belostomatids as predators influencing the dynamics of anuran populations in temporary aquatic environments.

Key Words: Amphibians; Predator-Prey; Natural History.

Amphibians play a crucial role in both aquatic and terrestrial food webs, acting as predators and prey at multiple trophic levels. Several vertebrate groups, including birds, snakes, mammals, and crocodilians, include amphibians in their diets, particularly adults, which are more visible and accessible (Toledo *et al.*, 2007; González-Maya *et al.*, 2019; Landgref Filho *et al.*, 2019; Hernández-Ruz *et al.*, 2022; Mori *et al.*, 2023). Previous studies have shown that anurans can be preyed upon by a wide variety of invertebrates, including spiders, odonates, and aquatic bugs, which may attack both tadpoles and adults (Toledo, 2005; Nenda *et al.*, 2008; Taffarel *et al.*, 2019; Hernández-Ruz *et al.*, 2022; Howard *et al.*, 2024). Although underreported than predation by vertebrates, attacks by predatory invertebrates can significantly influence amphibian population dynamics, in freshwater environments (especially lentic systems) where these taxa coexist (González-Maya *et al.*, 2019; de Luna *et al.*, 2022).

Among invertebrate predators, aquatic bugs (Belostomatidae) are notable for their efficiency in prey capture and their wide distribution across freshwater habitats (Toledo, 2003; Hernández-Ruz *et al.*, 2022; Mori *et al.*, 2023). These insects use their raptorial forelegs to immobilize prey and a piercing proboscis to inject digestive saliva, enabling a suction-based feeding mechanism (Toledo, 2005;

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Ohba *et al.*, 2008; Maffei *et al.*, 2014). Belostomatids are known to prey upon both tadpoles and adult anurans, with records involving species of the several genera including *Dendropsophus*, *Scinax*, *Leptodactylus*, *Physalaemus*, *Pseudis*, *Atelopus*, and *Boana* (Nenda *et al.*, 2008; González-Maya *et al.*, 2019; Landgref Filho *et al.*, 2019; Taffarel *et al.*, 2019; Hernández-Ruz *et al.*, 2022; Howard *et al.*, 2024; Ceron *et al.*, 2017; Gambale *et al.*, 2014). Records of *Physalaemus* predation by aquatic insects of the family Belostomatidae have been increasing across South America. Nenda et al. (2008) reported *Belostoma* sp. preying upon an adult *P. cuvieri* in Argentina, while Schalk (2010) documented the predation of *P. biligonigerus* by a belostomatid in Bolivia. Subsequently, Taffarel et al. (2019) recorded species of *Lethocerus* preying upon *P. biligonigerus* and *P. cristinae* in Argentina, and Sousa-Félix et al. (2025) reported *Belostoma* sp. preying upon *P. cuvieri* in the Brazilian Cerrado.

Moreover, direct competition for prey between Belostomatids and vertebrates has been documented, with simultaneous predation events involving snakes and birds (Toledo, 2003; de Luna *et al.*, 2022). Despite several studies on the predatory behavior of belostomatids, records involving vertebrate prey remain scarce, especially in natural environments. Reports of attacks on adult anurans are even rarer, highlighting the importance of new records. In this context, we present a predation event involving a belostomatid and an adult individual of *Physalaemus biligonigerus* in the Brazilian Pantanal, contributing novel data on interactions between aquatic insects and anurans.

On January 17, 2025, at approximately 21:44 p.m., we observed an immature giant water bug (*Lethocerus* sp.) preying upon an adult male *Physalaemus biligonigerus* (Fig. 1) in a temporary pond during a breeding explosion event at Fazenda Aguapé, municipality of Aquidauana, Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil (20°06'46.8"S, 55°58'01.7"W, WGS84, 130 m. a.s.l.).

At the moment of observation, the giant water bug had already captured the anuran. We assumed that the anuran was vocalizing at the time of capture, as its vocal sac appeared flaccid and other individuals of the same species were calling nearby. When we observed the scene, the anuran was still alive and struggling to escape; this active behavior lasted for approximately five minutes. Subsequently, both individuals remained motionless for about three minutes. After this period, we collected both specimens. Throughout the collection and transport process, the water bug did not release its prey at any point. We estimate that the insect held the anuran under control for approximately one hour. It is important to emphasize that at no time was any attempt made to forcibly remove the anuran.

The *P. biligonigerus* individual measured 31.7 mm in total length (Snout-vent length), and the water bug measured 44.1 mm in total length. Both specimens were collected under the appropriate authorization (SISBIO: 89284-2) and are deposited in the zoological collection of the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul (ZUFMS), catalogued as ZUFMS-AMP20779 (*P. biligonigerus*) and ZUFMS-HEM00944 (*Lethocerus* sp).

Such records are essential for understanding the ecological role of belostomatids as relevant predators in aquatic ecosystems, particularly in temporary water bodies where explosive breeding events of anurans occur (Toledo, 2003; Ceron *et al.*, 2017; de Luna *et al.*, 2022; Hernández-Ruz *et al.*, 2022). Although invertebrate predation has historically received less attention than predation by vertebrates, it is increasingly recognized as an important ecological factor in structuring amphibian communities (Toledo, 2005; Toledo *et al.*, 2007). Belostomatids, especially those of the genus *Lethocerus*, are efficient predators of both tadpoles and adult frogs, with records involving species such as *Dendropsophus minutus*, *Dendropsophus nanus*, *Scinax fuscovarius*, *Rhinella crucifer*, *Physalaemus cristinae*, *Physalaemus biligonigerus*, *Physalaemus cuvieri*, *Physalaemus nattereri*, *Pseudopaludicola mystacalis* and *Nyctimantis siemersi* (Nenda *et al.*, 2008; Schalk, 2010; Batista *et al.*, 2013; Landgref Filho *et al.*, 2019; Taffarel *et al.*, 2019; Macedo *et al.*, 2021; Mori *et al.*, 2023; Howard *et al.*, 2024; Souza-Felix *et al.*, 2025). These studies demonstrate that belostomatids are recurrent predators of *Physalaemus* species across different Neotropical environments and reinforce their role in trophic interactions involving anurans.

Moreover, less typical interactions, such as egg predation by cockroaches (Toledo, 2005) and cannibalistic behavior or carnivory among tadpoles (Escalante *et al.*, 2022), highlight the complexity of trophic relationships involving anurans. Tadpole predation on eggs or conspecifics has been documented in species such as *Leptodactylus savagei* and *Dendrobates* spp. (Toledo *et al.*, 2007), showing that predation among amphibians themselves may

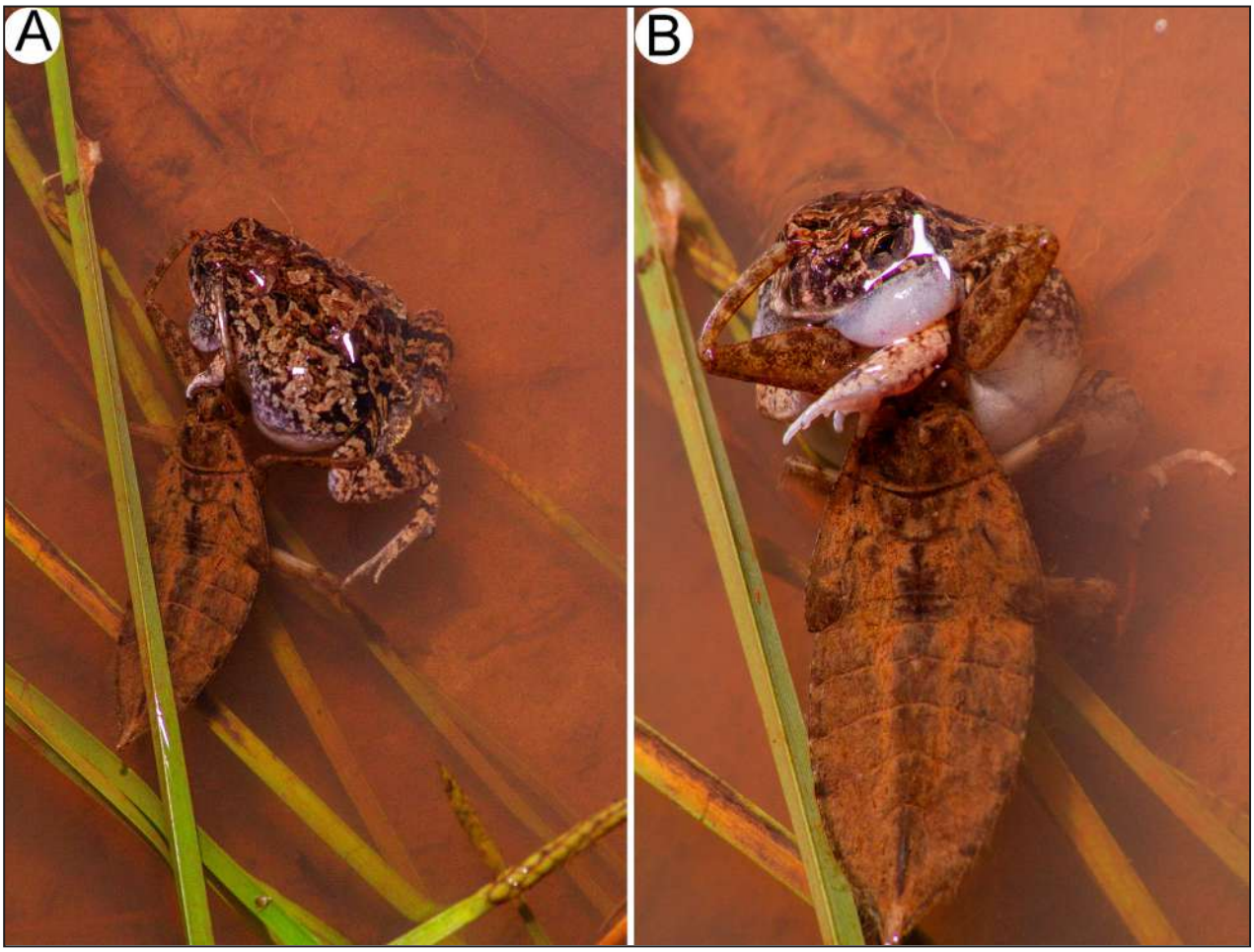

Figure 1. (A and B) Predation by an immature giant water bug (*Lethocerus* sp.) on *Physalaemus biligonigerus* (ZUFMS-AMP20779). Specimens collected at Fazenda Aguapé, Pantanal region, municipality of Aquidauana, Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil.

also be ecologically relevant. Other invertebrates, including spiders (e.g., *Ancylometes*), dragonfly larvae, and scorpions, have been reported preying upon juvenile or adult frogs in various environmental contexts (Toledo, 2005; Maffei *et al*., 2014; Hernández-Ruz *et al*., 2022).

Thus, our record from the Brazilian Pantanal broadens the current understanding of interactions between anurans and invertebrate predators. Although the region harbors a high abundance of amphibians (Strüssmann et al., 2011), reports involving the genus *Physalaemus* remain scarce. This observation represents the first documented evidence of *Lethocerus* preying upon *P. biligonigerus* in the Pantanal, providing data that may help elucidate local trophic interactions. Together with previous observations, this study highlights the importance of natural history records as fundamental tools for advancing our knowledge of amphibian–invertebrate relationships in the Neotropical region.

Acknowledgments

We thank Fazenda Aguapé for all logistical support. Aragão A and Almeida-Júnior JE thank the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (CAPES) for their master's and doctoral fellowships (88887.975346/2024-00; 88887.951712/2024-00), respectively. Carrillo JFC thanks the Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo (FAPESP #2024/01024-5). Santana DJ thanks the Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (CNPq) for the research productivity grant (309420/2020-2).

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