Comparison of common lilac (*Syringa vulgaris*) phenology timing between historical data and current Project BudBurst citizen science data: challenges and lessons learned

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Introduction

Plant phenology measures life cycle events (phenophases) in organisms[1].Vegetation is particularly responsive to temperature variation in the spring[2] and changes in phenology timing can have strong effects on the fitness of the plants and the organisms that interact with them[3]. Project BudBurst is a NEON citizen science project that collects data on plant phenology to understand how plants are responding to changing climates and to predict how these and other species will respond in the future[1]. Here, we compared recent Project BudBurst common lilac (*Syringa vulgaris*) observations with a historical data set to test for changes in phenology timing. We compared first leaf and first flower observation dates and tested for comparability between datasets.

Common lilac photographs. Clockwise from top left: Leaves fully opening (credit Paul Alaback), fully flowered (credit Paul Alaback), flowers opening (credit Sarah Newman), leaves opening from buds (credit Kristin Meymaris)

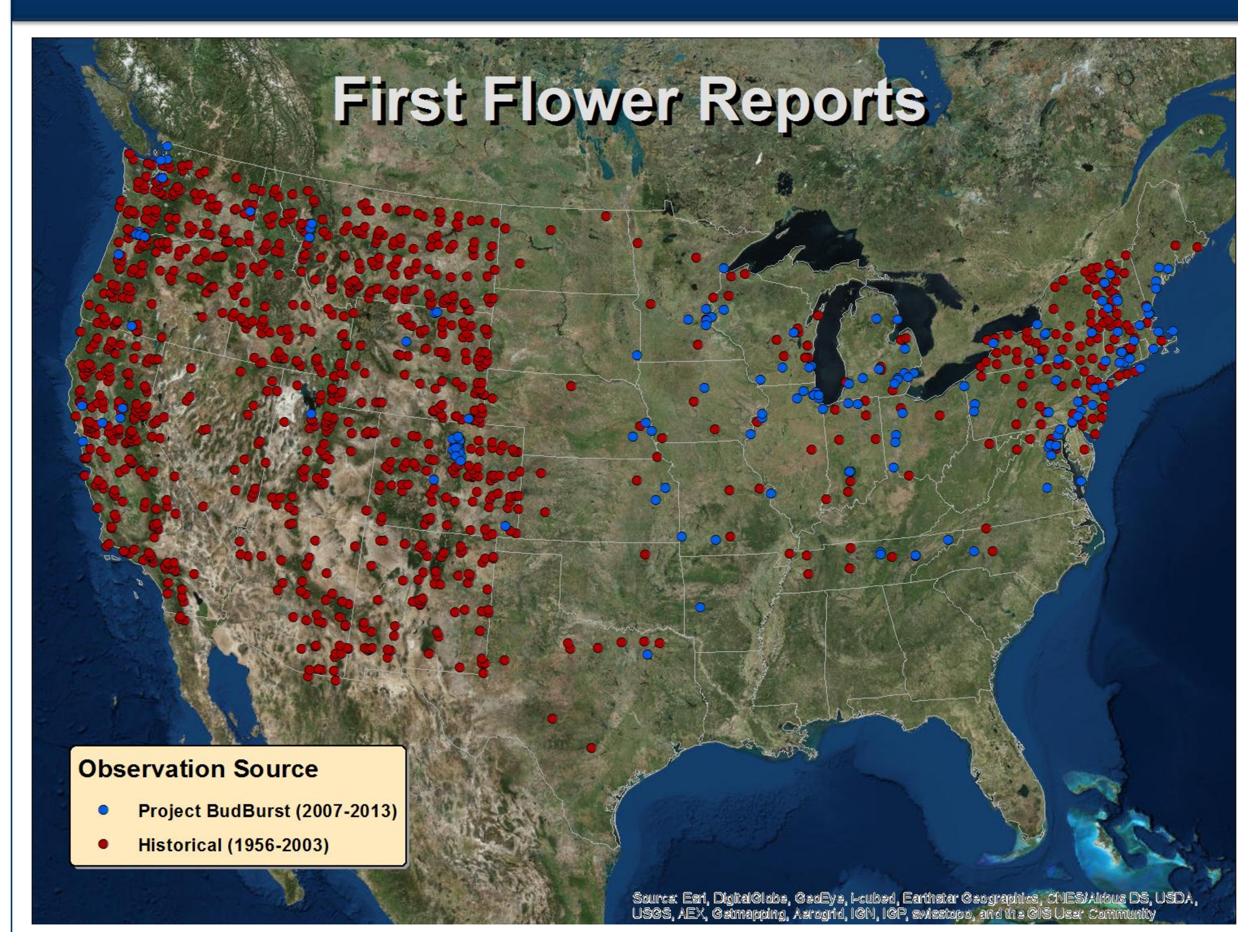
Methods

- We compiled common lilac first flower date, first leaf date, latitude, and longitude of observations from the historical and Project BudBurst data.
- Initial investigations compared first flower and first leaf averages, trends, and distributions across selected states.
- We ran two-sample t-tests for latitude, longitude, and day of year (Julian date) of observation for first leaf and first flower to determine what factors contributed to the timing of first leaf and first flower dates between data sets.

Data Set Descriptions

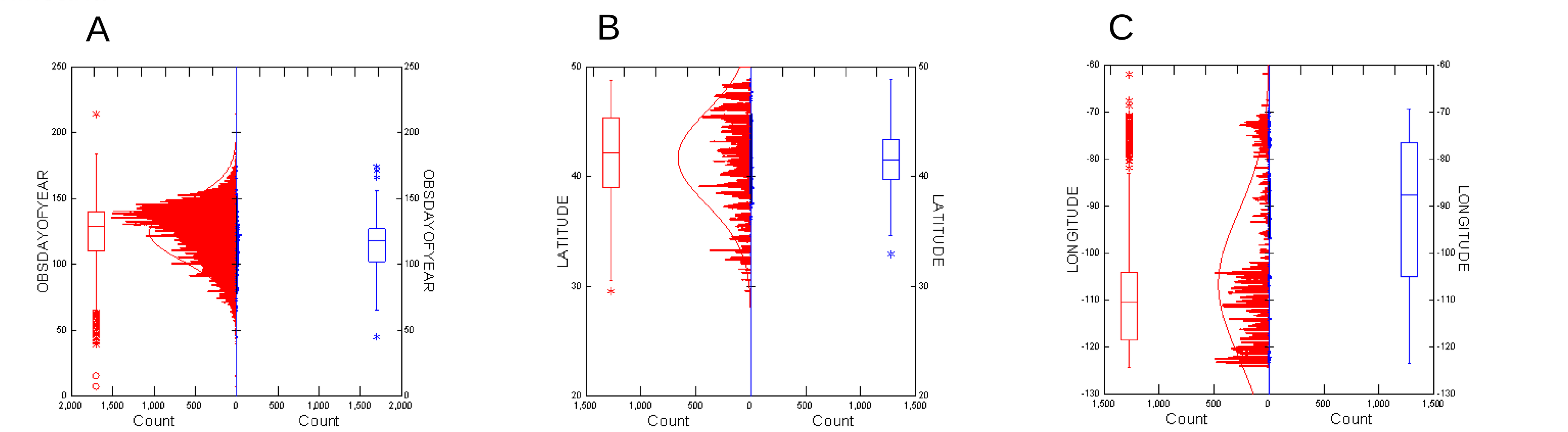
	Historical data (1956-2003)	Project BudBurst (2007-2013)
Source	World Data Center for Paleoclimatology - compiled by Mark D. Schwartz and Joseph M. Caprio[4]	Compiled citizen science observations from Project BudBurst.
Field Sites	1200+	259+
First Flower Observations	14367	216
First Leaf Observations	9262	314

Data Distribution Maps

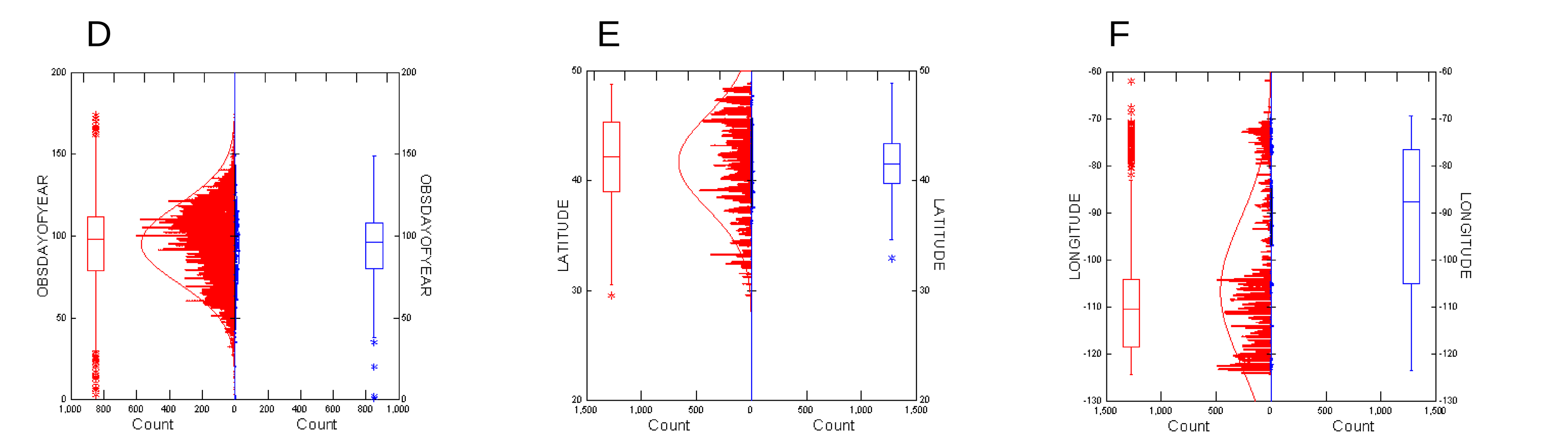


Analysis Between Historical (1956-2003) and Project BudBurst (2007-2013) Data

Mean first flowering day was 9.7 days earlier for Project BudBurst data but is not significant due to the significant difference in longitude between data sets. Mean first leaf was 2.3 days earlier for Project BudBurst data but is not significant.



Two-Sample T-tests for First flower phenophase: A) Observation Day of Year (Julian date) (historical: M = 124.2, SD = 22.3, Project BudBurst (PBB): M = 114.7, SD = 20.2) t = 6.8, p = 0.0001, B) latitude (historical: M =41.7, SD = 4.25, PBB: M = 41.6, SD = 2.87), t = 0.267, p = 0.789 and C) longitude (historical: M = -106.6, SD = 15.3, PBB: M = -90.5, SD = 16.2), t = -14.53, p = 0.0001. The left sides of the figures are the historical data and the right sides are Project BudBurst data.



Two-Sample T-tests for First leaf phenophase: D) Observation Day of Year (Julian date)(historical: M = 95.2, SD = 23.97, Project BudBurst (PBB): M = 92.9, SD = 21.6) t = 1.87, p = 0.063, E) latitude (historical: M = 41.8, SD = 4.02, PBB: M = 41.7, SD = 2.81), t = 0.692, p = 0.489 and F) longitude (historical: M = -101.5, SD = 17.4, PBB: M = -90.5, SD = 15.8), t = -11.97, p = 0.0001. The left sides of the figures are the historical data and the right sides are Project BudBurst data.

Challenges

- Due to significant variation in longitude, the data sets may not be comparable and we cannot determine that there are differences in phenophase timing. A significant effect of longitude on sites suggests that climate may differ across observation sites of data sets.
- Historical growing degree day data was difficult to obtain in a readily accessible format.
- Accounting for all sources of variation due to non-random samples in different locations is difficult. In addition to temperature, precipitation, date since last frost, day length, genetics, shading, and/or augmented watering may affect plant phenology.

Lessons and Recommendations

- Future analyses could consider additional predictive climate factors such as growing degree days, precipitation, and days since last frost.
- Data sets may be more comparable if analyzed by region. If not, sampling needs to be more balanced across regions.
- Encouraging more Project BudBurst observations of lilacs in the western U.S., particularly near historic sites, would allow researchers to make better comparisons in the future.
- Engaging more K-12 teachers in the data collection process could help build a stronger data set.

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