

Dr. Randal S. Olson

CONTACT INFORMATION

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RESEARCH SPECIALTIES

Artificial Intelligence Evolutionary computation, neuroevolution, and machine learning.
Data Science Large-scale data analysis, statistics, and data visualization.
Biology Artificial life, neuroscience, and the evolution of animal behavior.

EDUCATION

Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI
Dual-major PhD in Computer Science and Ecology, Evolutionary Biology, & Behavior (2015)
Doctoral Advisor: Prof. Christoph Adami
Thesis Title: “Elucidating the evolutionary origins of collective animal behavior”

University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL
Computer Science B.S. with Honors in Major (2010)
Undergraduate Advisor: Prof. Kenneth Stanley
Honors Thesis Title: “A step toward evolving biped walking behavior through indirect encoding”

TECHNICAL SKILLS

Software I have been an open source software developer for 10+ years and work comfortably with a broad spectrum of languages, including bash, C, C++, C#, Java, Python, SQL, HTML, CSS, JavaScript, ASP.NET, and PHP. I regularly hold workshops to teach researchers basic software skills for scientific computing, including software engineering practices, version control, continuous integration, unit testing, shell scripting, and data management.

Environments I work in a variety of development environments, including Microsoft Visual Studio (Windows), XCode (Mac), emacs/vim in the terminal (Mac/Linux), and the Jupyter Notebook (web browser).

High-performance computing I have considerable experience with high-performance computing for artificial life, computational biology, and machine learning research at the Michigan State University and University of Pennsylvania’s HPC, as well as cloud computing services such as Amazon EC2 and Google Cloud Computing.

Statistics My research benefits from the application of numerous statistical analyses, primarily with frequentist methods for hypothesis testing, including non-parametric tests and multiple comparisons. I regularly hold workshops to teach students the basic statistical skills they require for their research.

Data visualization I am an expert at analyzing and visualizing data at both the large and small scale, with tools including Python (matplotlib, Seaborn, and Bokeh), JavaScript (D3.js), Excel, Tableau, and Gephi. I created a commercial data visualization course for O’Reilly, and regularly hold workshops to teach data visualization skills to scientists and analysts.

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Senior Data Scientist, August 2016 – Present
Computational Genetics Laboratory
University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA

Postdoctoral Research Fellow, June 2015 – July 2016
Computational Genetics Laboratory
University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA

Graduate Research Assistant, Aug. 2011 – May 2015
Adami Laboratory & Digital Evolution Laboratory
Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI

Undergraduate Research Assistant, May 2009 – May 2010
Evolutionary Complexity Laboratory
University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL

PROFESSIONAL
EXPERIENCE

Robins Air Force Base, June 2010 – Aug. 2011
Civilian Computer Scientist, Electronic Warfare systems

United Space Alliance, Jan. 2008 – Aug. 2008
Computer Science Co-op, Space Simulator Department

Accounting Systems Technology, Inc., Jan. 2007 – Jan. 2008
Software Developer / Technical Asst., Healthcare Billing Software

TEACHING
EXPERIENCE

Michigan State University 2013 – 2014

Class co-instructor: CSE 801 Intro Computational Science for Evolutionary Biologists

Guest instructor: CSE 891 Computational Techniques for Large-Scale Data Analysis

Software Carpentry Jan. 2013 – Present

Workshop instructor: University of Chicago, University of Notre Dame, Michigan State University, US Army Corps ERDC, MIT, Stony Brook University, Plant Biology 2014 Conference, & University of Pennsylvania

BEACON Center for the Study of Evolution in Action Aug. 2012 – Jan. 2013

Workshop instructor: data management, analysis, and visualization in IPython Notebook

University of Central Florida Jan. 2009 – May 2009

Undergraduate teaching assistant: Systems Software course

RESEARCH
GRANT
PARTICIPATION

NSF BEACON “Transfer of Information Through Hierarchical Social Systems.”

PI: H. Hofmann, Co-PIs: C. Adami, A. Jordan, and **R. Olson**.

Funded: 2014–2015, \$109,576.

NSF BEACON “Leveraging Human Computation Markets to Evolve Complex Behaviors.”

PI: J. Lehman, Co-PIs: R. Miikkulainen, C. Adami, and **R. Olson**.

Funded: 2013–2014, \$33,812.

Results of my research were included as preliminary studies in the following proposals:

NSF BEACON “Evolution of cognition, communication, and social coordination – Year 2.”

PI: F. Dyer, Co-PIs: F. Bartlett, P. Stone, D. Knoester, A. Hintze, R. Pennock, L. Grabowski, and C. Adami.

Funded: 2013–2014, \$131,278.

HONORS
AND
AWARDS

Best Paper Award July 2016

Award for best paper in the GECCO 2016 Evolutionary Machine Learning track

Best Paper Award March 2016

Award for best paper in EvoBIO 2016

Best Paper Award March 2016

Award for best paper in EvoGAMES 2016

MSU Graduate School Dissertation Completion Fellowship Jan. 2015

\$4,900 to partially cover tuition while completing PhD dissertation

BEACON Mini-sabbatical Fellowship May 2014

\$1,000 to take a week-long sabbatical at the University of Texas at Austin

Fulbright Research Fellowship Finalist Mar. 2014

Recommended for 9-month research fellowship in The Netherlands

Travel Grants 2012 – 2014

\$8,000+ in travel grants from NSF BEACON, the MSU CSE & EEBB programs, and others

Best Paper Award July 2013

Award for best paper in the GECCO 2013 Artificial Life track

IHPC Workshop Fellowship May 2013

Full fellowship to attend workshop on high-performance computing at University of Iowa

Honors in Major May 2010

Recognition for completing undergraduate research thesis

Department of Defense SMART Scholarship Aug. 2009 – May 2010

National scholarship: \$25,000 annual stipend and full tuition costs

FAEDS Dr. Robert W. Sims Memorial Scholarship Aug. 2009 – Dec. 2009

State scholarship: \$3,000 one-time award for outstanding Computer Science student

Florida Bright Futures Scholarship Aug. 2005 – May 2010

State scholarship: 75% of all tuition costs for entire undergraduate degree

PEER REVIEWED
PUBLICATIONS

- R.S. Olson**, J.H. Moore, and C. Adami (2016). Evolution of active categorical image classification via saccadic eye movement. *Proceedings of Parallel Problem Solving from Nature 2016*, to appear.
- R.S. Olson** and J.H. Moore (2016). Identifying and Harnessing the Building Blocks of Machine Learning Pipelines for Sensible Initialization of a Data Science Automation Tool. *Genetic Programming Theory and Practice 2016*, to appear.
- R.S. Olson**, N. Bartley, R.J. Urbanowicz, and J.H. Moore (2016). Evaluation of a Tree-based Pipeline Optimization Tool for Automating Data Science. *Proceedings of the Genetic and Evolutionary Computation Conference 2016 (GECCO 2016)*, pp. 485–492.
Best paper award in the Evolutionary Machine Learning track.
- R.S. Olson**, A. Hintze, F.C. Dyer, J.H. Moore, and C. Adami (2016). Exploring the coevolution of predator and prey morphology and behavior. *Proceedings of the 15th International Conference on the Synthesis and Simulation of Living Systems (ALIFE 2016)*, pp. 250–257.
Acceptance Rate: 44%.
- A. Tehrani-Saleh, **R.S. Olson**, and C. Adami (2016). Flies as Ship Captains? Digital Evolution Unravels Selective Pressures to Avoid Collision in *Drosophila*. *Proceedings of the 15th International Conference on the Synthesis and Simulation of Living Systems (ALIFE 2016)*, pp. 554–561. Acceptance Rate: 44%.
- R.S. Olson**, R.J. Urbanowicz, P.C. Andrews, N.A. Lavender, L.C. Kidd, and J.H. Moore (2016). Automating biomedical data science through tree-based pipeline optimization. *Applications of Evolutionary Computation*, pp. 123–137.
Best paper award in the EvoBio track. Oral Acceptance Rate: 50.4%.
- A. Hintze, **R.S. Olson**, and J. Lehman (2016). Orthogonally Evolved AI to Improve Difficulty Adjustment in Video Games. *Applications of Evolutionary Computation*, pp. 525–540.
Best paper award in the EvoGames track. Oral Acceptance Rate: 50.4%.
- R.S. Olson**, D.B. Knoester, and C. Adami (2016). Evolution of swarming behavior is shaped by how predators attack. *Artificial Life 22*: 299–318.
- R.S. Olson**, P.B. Haley, F.C. Dyer, and C. Adami (2015). Exploring the evolution of a trade-off between vigilance and foraging in group-living organisms. *Journal of the Royal Society Open Science 2*.
- R.S. Olson** and Z.P. Neal (2015). Navigating the massive world of reddit: Using backbone networks to map user interests in social media. *PeerJ Computer Science 1*: e4.
- A. Hintze, **R.S. Olson**, C. Adami, and R. Hertwig (2015). Risk sensitivity as an evolutionary adaptation. *Scientific Reports 5*.
- P.B. Haley, **R.S. Olson**, F.C. Dyer, and C. Adami (2015). Evolving an optimal group size in groups of prey under predation. *Proceedings of the 13th European Conference on the Synthesis and Simulation of Living Systems (ECAL 2015)*, p. 620.
Oral Acceptance Rate: 66.4%.
- P.B. Haley, **R.S. Olson**, F.C. Dyer, and C. Adami (2014). Exploring conditions that select for the evolution of cooperative group foraging. *Proceedings of the 14th International Conference on the Synthesis and Simulation of Living Systems (ALIFE 2014)*, pp. 310–311.
Oral Acceptance Rate: 49.8%.
- R.S. Olson**, A. Hintze, F.C. Dyer, D.B. Knoester, and C. Adami (2013). Predator confusion is sufficient to evolve swarming behavior. *Journal of the Royal Society Interface 10*: 20130305.
- R.S. Olson**, M. Mirmomeni, T. Brom, E. Bruger, A. Hintze, D.B. Knoester, and C. Adami (2013). Evolved digital ecosystems: Dynamic steady state, not optimal fixed point. *Proceedings of the 12th European Conference on Artificial Life (ECAL 2013)*, pp. 126–133.
Acceptance Rate: 48.3%.

R.S. Olson, D.B. Knoester, and C. Adami (2013). Critical interplay between density-dependent predation and the evolution of the selfish herd. *Proceedings of the 15th Annual Conference on Genetic and Evolutionary Computation (GECCO 2013)*, pp. 247–254.

Best paper award in the Artificial Life track. Acceptance Rate: 35.8%.

R.S. Olson, C. Adami, F.C. Dyer, and A. Hintze (2012). A Bottom-Up Approach to the Evolution of Swarming. *Proceedings of the 13th International Conference on the Synthesis and Simulation of Living Systems (ALIFE 2012)*, pp. 567–568.

Acceptance Rate: 50%.

R.S. Olson (2010). A step toward evolving biped walking behavior through indirect encoding. Undergraduate Honors Thesis, University of Central Florida.

SCIENCE
JOURNALISM

R.S. Olson (2015). “Rethinking the population pyramid.” *Significance Magazine*.

R.S. Olson (2015). “How Machines Learn (And You Win).” *Harvard Business Review*.

R.S. Olson (2015). “How I found the optimal *Where’s Waldo?* strategy.” *Wired*.

R.S. Olson (2014). “A tech-focused guide to increasing your influence on Twitter.” *FastCo.Labs*.

R.S. Olson (2014). “A data scientist explains what makes a viral Reddit post.” *Business Insider*.

R.S. Olson (2014). “Infographics lie. Here’s how to spot the B.S.” *FastCo.Design*.

SELECTED
PRESS
COVERAGE

Discovery News, 2015. “How to Really Drive Across the U.S. Hitting Major Landmarks.”

The Atlantic, 2014. “The Myth of Working Your Way Through College.”

Huffington Post, 2014. “Google Reveals What People Really Think About Europe And Asia.”

Wired Design, 2014. “Fascinating Graphs Show How Reddit Got Huge by Going Mainstream.”

Fast Company Design, 2013. “This Brilliant Visualization Could Build A Better Reddit.”

Science Daily, 2013. “Discovering One Reason Why Swarming Evolved Offers Tantalizing Clues On How Intelligence Developed.”

Science News, 2013. “Video: When Predators Attack.”

PRESENTATIONS

“Evaluation of a Tree-based Pipeline Optimization Tool for Automating Data Science.”
GECCO 2016, July 2016. Denver, CO. **Best paper award for this talk.**

“Exploring the coevolution of predator and prey morphology and behavior.”
ALIFE 2016, July 2016. Cancun, Mexico.

“TPOT: A Tree-based Pipeline Optimization Tool for Automating Data Science.”
Automated Machine Learning workshop at ICML 2016, June 2016. New York, NY.

“Automating biomedical data science through tree-based pipeline optimization.”
Society of Actuaries Spring Health Meeting, June 2016. Philadelphia, PA.

“Do’s and don’ts of data visualization.”
Society of Actuaries Spring Health Meeting, June 2016. Philadelphia, PA.

“Identifying and Harnessing the Building Blocks of Machine Learning Pipelines for Sensible Initialization of a Data Science Automation Tool.”
Genetic Programming Theory and Practice Workshop, May 2016. Ann Arbor, MI.

Invited keynote talk: “Getting to the point in data visualization.”
Qlik Qconnections 2016, May 2016. Orlando, FL.

“Automating biomedical data science through tree-based pipeline optimization.”
EvoBIO 2016, March 2016. Porto, Portugal. **Best paper award for this talk.**

Invited talk: “Automating data science through tree-based pipeline optimization.”
DataPhilly Monthly Meeting, Feb. 2016. Philadelphia, PA.

Invited talk: “Automating biomedical data science through tree-based pipeline optimization.”
EDGE Workshop, Feb. 2016. Key West, FL.

Invited talk: “The myth of working your way through college.”
Michigan Interscholastic Press Association (MIPA) Annual Journalism Contest, Apr. 2014. Lansing, MI.

“Evolution of swarming is shaped by how predators attack.”
MSU Graduate Academic Conference, Mar. 2014. East Lansing, MI.

- “Exploring the coevolution of predator and prey behavior and morphology in a digital model.”
BEACON Seminar, Dec. 2013. East Lansing, MI.
- “Studying the Evolution of Swarm Behavior in Action.”
Workshop on Collective Behaviours at ECAL 2013, Sept. 2013. Taormina, Italy.
- “Evolve & Conquer: Teaching evolution using an interactive 3D video game.”
BEACON Congress, Aug. 2013. East Lansing, MI.
- “Using digital models of evolution to study how animal behavior evolves: a case study with the predator confusion effect.”
Behaviour 2013, Aug. 2013. Newcastle, United Kingdom.
- “Critical interplay between density-dependent predation and the evolution of the selfish herd.”
GECCO 2013, July 2013. Amsterdam, The Netherlands. **Best paper award for this talk.**
- “Critical interplay between density-dependent predation and the evolution of the selfish herd.”
BEACON Seminar, July 2013. East Lansing, MI.
- “Evolve & Conquer: Using video games to teach evolution.”
BEACON Seminar, Nov. 2012. East Lansing, MI.
- “Predator confusion is sufficient to evolve swarming.”
BEACON Seminar, Oct. 2012. East Lansing, MI.
- “Predator confusion is sufficient to evolve swarming.”
SwarmFest, July 2012. Charlotte, NC.
- “aBeeDa: A bottom-up approach to the evolution of swarming.”
BEACON Congress, July 2012. East Lansing, MI.

SERVICE
AND
OUTREACH

- DataPhilly Data Science Meetup Group** Mar. 2016 – Present
Event co-organizer
- University of Pennsylvania** Jan. 2016 – Present
Undergraduate & graduate student research mentor
- Referee / Reviewer** Jan. 2013 – Present
AutoML workshop at ICML 2016, Journal of the Royal Society Interface, Frontiers in Robotics and AI, Ecological Modelling, ALIFE/ECAL 2014-2016, ANTS 2014 & 2016, BioMed Research International, & NSF BEACON Center
- Software Carpentry** Jan. 2013 – Present
Workshop organizer & instructor
- Michigan State University** Jan. 2012 – May 2015
Undergraduate research mentor
- University of Central Florida Burnett Honors College** Oct. 2011 – May 2013
Honors undergraduate e-mail mentor
- NSF BEACON Blog** Aug. 2012 – May 2015
Write about evolution & outreach as a guest blogger at www.beacon-center.org
- MSU Undergraduate Research and Arts Forum** Apr. 4, 2014
Poster presentation judge
- BEACON Congress** Aug. 13, 2013
Workshop organizer: Using video games to teach evolution
- Mid-SURE Symposium** July 24, 2013
Poster presentation judge
- BEACON Evolved Art Competition** Mar. 2013 – June 2013
Challenged public to evolve art pieces on Picbreeder.org. URL: <http://bit.ly/19zOrpw>
- Darwin Discovery Day at Michigan State University Museum** Feb. 12, 2012 & 2013
BEACON representative
- NSF BEACON** July 27, 2012
Presenter and tour guide for international students
- MSU CS&E Summer Undergraduate Research Forum** July 24, 2012
Presentation moderator and judge
- Capital Area Humane Society** Jan. 2012 – Jan. 2013
Canine behavior trainer / behavior staff assistant