

# Decision Trees for Estrus Prediction in Bovine Cattle

## *Árboles de decisión para la predicción del estro en el ganado bovino*

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**ABSTRACT:** Artificial Intelligence enables the transformation of bovine reproduction by providing tools for early estrus detection, including decision trees. In Cuba, Artificial Intelligence is being introduced as part of the digital transformation process. In this research, the objective was to determine the most appropriate machine learning algorithm for predicting estrus in cattle belonging to the “El Guayabal” University Farm. Three machine learning tools were identified for the selection analysis: Random Forest, XGBoost, and CART, taking into account the particularities of each algorithm. The analysis revealed that CART is the most suitable option for the research scenario, standing out for its low resource consumption, flexibility, and accuracy in processing small to moderate-sized data sets. **Keywords:** Machine Learning, Artificial Intelligence, Regression, CART, Estrus.

**RESUMEN:** La Inteligencia Artificial permite la transformación de la reproducción bovina ya que brinda herramientas para la detección temprana del estro incluyendo los árboles de decisión. En Cuba, se está introduciendo la Inteligencia Artificial como parte del proceso de transformación digital. En esta investigación, se planteó como objetivo: determinar el algoritmo de aprendizaje automático más adecuado para la predicción del estro en el ganado bovino perteneciente a la Granja Universitaria “El Guayabal”. Para el análisis de selección se identificaron tres herramientas de aprendizaje automático: Random Forest, XGBoost y CART donde se tuvo en cuenta las particularidades de cada algoritmo. El análisis reveló que CART es la opción más adecuada para el escenario de investigación, destacando por su bajo consumo de recursos, flexibilidad y precisión en el procesamiento de conjuntos de datos de tamaño pequeño a moderado. **Palabras clave:** aprendizaje automático, inteligencia artificial, regresión, CART, estro.

## INTRODUCTION

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has transformed various sectors, including livestock farming (Parrado-Alvarez et al., 2019). This field depends largely on reproductive efficiency and the sustainability of its production and reproductive systems. Over the last two decades, the development of advanced algorithms, precision sensors, and data analysis platforms has made it possible to address historical challenges in livestock reproductive management by integrating AI-based solutions (Hinestroza, 2018; Souza y de Oliveira, 2022). Among the most relevant processes are early estrus detection, genetic improvement, and pregnancy monitoring, among others.

Cuba is promoting a process of digital transformation, which includes the incorporation of AI in the country's priority sectors (Caballero et al., 2024). One example of

this is livestock farming, where special attention is being paid to reproduction with the aim of increasing livestock activity. The “El Guayabal” University Farm, belonging to the Agrarian University of Havana (UNAH), is a key space for the development of various research projects, some of which incorporate AI technologies as part of the digital transformation process. One of the farm's most important activities is artificial insemination in bovines, which is why estrus detection plays an important role in reproductive efficiency (Bekara y Bareille, 2019). Currently, estrus identification on the farm is a challenge due to staff shortages. For this reason, alternatives are being sought to facilitate the work of specialists.

Therefore, the objective of this research is to: determine the most appropriate machine learning algorithm for estrus prediction in bovine cattle belonging to the “El Guayabal” University Farm.

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## DEVELOPMENT OF THE TOPIC

### Artificial insemination in bovines and estrus detection

Artificial insemination emerged with the aim of improving animal reproduction, controlling diseases, and preserving genetic diversity (Hafez y Hafez, 2000; Foote, 2002; Thibier, 2005). Since its inception, it has evolved into a key tool for increasing milk and meat production in bovine cattle, responding to the growing global demand for food (Hoyos et al., 2023). Currently, there is a need to introduce new technologies that optimize this process and make it more efficient.

The reproductive development of female bovines goes through important stages such as heifer, calf, and cow, where essential changes occur to reach sexual maturity. The first estrus usually appears in the heifer stage, although it can vary between 9 and 15 months of age (Montes de Oca, 2016). The estrous cycle, which lasts an average of 21 days, is divided into two phases: luteal and follicular, each with two specific stages. Ovulation occurs during estrus, considered the beginning of the cycle, and lasts approximately 12 to 18 hours, which makes it difficult to detect due to its brevity (Carvajal et al., 2020).

During estrus, cows exhibit characteristic behaviors such as receptivity to mounting, restlessness, decreased milk production, genital licking, reduced food intake, and physical changes such as vulvar edema or mucus secretion (Hernández y Ortega, 2009; Strappini et al., 2015; Ávila, 2024). However, factors such as the inexperience of the observer, the environment, or stress can make identification difficult. Correct estrus detection brings significant benefits: higher birth rates, increased milk production, and reduced costs for artificial insemination (Strappini et al., 2015).

### Methods and errors in estrus detection

Methods for detecting estrus in bovines are classified as visual, non-visual, electronic, and chemical (Ortiz y Avila, 2020). Visual methods include direct observation, mounting detection tags, rump-attached ampoules, marker crayons, and the use of bulls as detectors. Non-visual methods include physiological changes such as temperature and hormonal activity, while electronic methods use pedometers, microchips, and surveillance cameras, often supplemented with software that records and reports activities. Chemical methods include androgenization and hormone implants. Observation remains the most viable method due to its low cost and effectiveness, provided that the watcher is trained and conducts frequent inspections (Hernández y Ortega, 2009).

Despite the implementation of these technological advances, there are still failures in estrus detection. Among the main factors that cause errors are anestrus, caused by poor nutrition, stress, reproductive diseases, genetics, or ovarian cysts; the inexperience of the observer; silent estrus, in which some females do not show visible symptoms; and the absence of monitoring of the estrous

cycle and the post-insemination process, according to the criteria provided by Hernández y Ortega (2009) and Jiménez (2010). To reduce these problems, advanced technologies capable of identifying animal behavior have been incorporated, and the application of AI in bovine reproduction is being explored (Strappini et al., 2015), although its implementation still faces challenges.

### Challenges, applications, and impact of Artificial Intelligence in bovine reproduction

Bovine reproduction continues to be a developing field for the incorporation of new technologies, which is why AI faces challenges in this sector, including resistance to change on the part of livestock farmers (Álvarez, 2024), high implementation costs (Patel y Prajapati, 2018), the need for staff training, and the requirements for large volumes of data along with advanced storage and processing equipment. Despite these limitations, AI offers significant benefits when applied to processes such as genetic improvement, disease prediction and prevention, monitoring and pattern analysis for estrus detection, integration with electronic devices for real-time tracking, and optimization of artificial insemination (Chávez et al., 2024), contributing to greater accuracy, efficiency in livestock reproduction, and decision-making.

AI applied to bovine reproduction offers multiple benefits to the livestock sector. It allows for more accurate identification of the optimal time for insemination, optimizes the selection of high-quality embryos, and enables constant monitoring of bovine cattle health to detect problems early (González et al., 2018; Perdigón y González, 2021). In addition, process automation reduces human error and improves operational efficiency, while predictive analytics and assisted genetic selection increase herd productivity and sustainability. Together, these applications strengthen strategic decision-making, enhance animal welfare, and contribute to more profitable and efficient cattle production management (Horrach et al., 2020).

Currently, bovine reproduction is focused on milk production, making it essential to promote AI techniques in this area in order to increase production levels (Perdigón y González, 2021). Its incorporation into digital transformation and cattle reproduction seeks to respond to the needs for progress and development, proposing strategies that allow the advantages of these technologies to be exploited to improve production and efficiency in livestock farming (Bekara y Bareille, 2019).

Among the AI techniques applicable to bovine reproduction, the following stand out: machine learning, which allows data to be processed and analyzed using different types of algorithms (Hinestroza, 2018); Bayesian networks, useful for decision-making under uncertainty (Rodríguez y Dolado, 2007); vector support machines, which optimize data classification (Resendiz, 2006); and decision trees, used in classification and regression tasks (Martí et al., 2022).

According to Souza y de Oliveira (2022), these techniques can be applied to accurate estrus detection, animal health monitoring, genetic selection of embryos, optimization of artificial insemination, analysis of large volumes of genetic data, and improvement of reproductive efficiency.

Decision trees represent a simple solution and offer robust results. Their advantages include ease of interpretation of results, rapid translation into principles applicable to production, the ability to classify both categorical and numerical data, and the absence of prior assumptions about the shape of the data or the behavior of the model (Taha y Mohsin, 2021). Furthermore, they do not require many resources, making them a quick and efficient option for moderately sized data sets (Bouza y Santiago, 2012).

### Decision tree for regression

Decision trees for regression are non-parametric tools that allow information to be predicted by dividing data into smaller segments based on specific characteristics. They are composed of decision nodes and leaf nodes that represent categories or values, facilitating classification and regression (Ghiasi *et al.*, 2020; Taha y Mohsin, 2021). These tools are notable for their accuracy in data analysis and process optimization (Barrientos *et al.*, 2009; Martí *et al.*, 2022). They can also be combined with other models to improve their accuracy (Kotsiantis, 2013) and are constructed by grouping homogeneous data that allow modeling relationships between dependent and independent variables (Kocarik y Deveci, 2020). However, they have disadvantages such as a tendency to overfit when the tree is too deep and increased computational complexity as the training sample size increases (Taha y Mohsin, 2021).

In addition to decision trees, there are other regression models such as support vector regression, artificial neural networks, and logistic regression. Each has different resource requirements and levels of accuracy (Perdigón y González, 2021; Shafiee *et al.*, 2021; Olascoaga-Del Angel *et al.*, 2022). In terms of specific decision tree algorithms, CART, Random Forest, and XGBoost stand out. CART is valued for its simplicity and ability to handle moderate amounts of data with high accuracy, while Random Forest and XGBoost are less efficient with moderate-sized datasets, although they offer greater robustness in more complex scenarios (Ejea, 2017). Taking into account the analysis carried out, the CART method is selected because, due to its characteristics, it is well suited to the scenario described above.

### CART method

The CART machine learning method belongs to the supervised learning group and is used for both data classification and regression. It is characterized by its flexibility, as it can learn from training sets and reuse parameters in different sections of the model, allowing it to identify complex interdependencies between variables (Ghiasi *et al.*, 2020). Its construction is based on division

criteria that seek to minimize prediction error and generate homogeneous nodes, thus facilitating data analysis.

Among its main advantages are the ease of interpreting results, the ability to handle categorical variables without the need for coding, and the possibility of identifying nonlinear relationships and modeling complex patterns (Pérez, 2024). In addition, CART does not require large volumes of data for training, making it an efficient and low-cost tool in terms of technological resources. To develop a CART-based model, three fundamental processes must be carried out: training, evaluation, and model adjustment.

The process of training a decision tree model begins with the collection and preparation of well-structured data, which is then divided into two subsets: training and testing (García, 2023). The training set, which should contain most of the records, is used to teach the model to identify relationships between variables, apply division criteria, and detect patterns that enable it to generate accurate predictions. The test set, although smaller, must be representative of the total data, as its function is to evaluate the model's ability to generalize and verify the reliability of its results. The division can be done randomly or intentionally, but it must always ensure a balance between the different classes of the model (Trujillano *et al.*, 2008). A common practice is to assign approximately 80% of the data to training and 20% to the test set, which ensures that the model has enough records to learn without losing its validation capacity. This process is essential to avoid bias, reduce errors, and ensure that the model can be successfully applied in new scenarios, becoming a reliable tool for prediction and data analysis.

During the model evaluation process, it is essential to monitor errors in its performance and learning capability. A high training error indicates learning difficulties, which may be due to insufficient or noisy data and reflects high bias. In contrast, a low error suggests that the model has correctly captured the relationships between the data, although it is necessary to analyze the test set to detect possible cases of overfitting (Benitez *et al.*, 2018). This phenomenon occurs when the model learns not only the patterns but also the noise in the training data, generating high variance and poor performance on new data. To avoid this, techniques such as cross-validation and regularization are used, which help to build more robust models that are capable of generalizing adequately (Hernández, 2022).

Evaluating the performance of a regression model requires a thorough analysis of both the training and test sets, comparing performance metrics to measure its generalization ability (Pérez, 2024). Methods such as cross-validation allow the data to be divided into multiple folds and more accurate and reliable results to be obtained. In addition, acceptance criteria based on error thresholds can be established to determine model accuracy and differentiate between correct and incorrect predictions (Vivaracho-Pascual *et al.*, 2016). This evaluation stage facilitates hyperparameter tuning, which helps improve the quality of predictions and optimize model performance.

Decision trees can be affected by problems such as overfitting, especially when there are unbalanced classes in the data (Ghiasi et al., 2020). To avoid this, the model can be adjusted using strategies such as hyperparameter tuning, pruning, and cross-validation. The most common hyperparameters include tree depth, classification criteria, and the minimum number of samples in a node, all of which can be modified during model development to improve its performance and generalization ability (Hernández, 2022).

Pérez (2024) considers the pruning process to be a key technique for reducing tree complexity and preventing the model from capturing unnecessary noise. Among its variants are pruning by cost complexity, which seeks to balance simplicity and accuracy (Ejea, 2017); pruning by height, which limits the maximum depth of the tree (McTavish et al., 2022); pruning by minimum number of leaf samples, which ensures more reliable predictions and pruning by minimum number of samples to split a node, which avoids splits based on insufficient data (Tong et al., 2022). All these techniques contribute to creating more robust, interpretable, and efficient models.

Cross-validation is an essential method for evaluating the performance of decision trees. It consists of dividing the data into multiple subsets or folds, training and testing the model on each of them. This allows for a more accurate and reliable estimate of its generalization ability, ensuring that the final model is robust and performs well in different application scenarios (Ochoa, 2019).

## CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the CART, Random Forest, and XGBoost techniques identified CART as the most suitable alternative for predicting estrus considering the conditions of the "El Guayabal" University Farm. This algorithm offers interpretability, ease of implementation, and low computational requirements. On the other hand, Random Forest is presented as an alternative option with better performance, although it is more complex. However, XGBoost, despite its high accuracy, requires resources and technical knowledge that exceed the institution's current capabilities.

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