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Comparisons of Host Specificity in Feather Louse Genera
(Insecta: Phthiraptera: Philopteridae) Parasitizing Gulls
(Aves: Laridae: Larus)

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Data from gene sequences and morphological structures were collected for the gull feather lice, Saemundssonia lari, Quadraceps punctatus, and Q. ornatus, parasitizing Larus crassirostris and L. schistisagus. Saemundssonia lari was collected from both gull species, and no detectable morphological and genetic differences were found between lice collected from the two different hosts. In contrast, Q. punctatus was only collected from L. crassirostris, whereas Q. ornatus was only collected from L. schistisagus. The two Quadraceps species were genetically highly divergent, and body-size differences corresponding to the gull’s body size (Harrison’s rule) were also detected between them. Both Quadraceps species were collected from the interbarb of the remex or rectrix, and a match in body size between the louse and the interbarb space may be important in escape from host preening defenses. In contrast, Saemundssonia is a head louse, inhabiting the finer feathers of the head and neck, which the bird cannot preen. A close match to host body size may be less important for lice in the head microhabitat. The differences in the pattern of host-specificity between Saemundssonia and Quadraceps on the two focal host species of this study were probably due to their different microhabitat preferences. More broadly, comparisons of the gene sequences of S. lari and Q. punctatus to those from other gull hosts showed that genetically almost undifferentiated populations of both species were distributed on wide range of gull species. Frequent interspecific hybridization of gulls is one possible factor that may allow these lice to maintain gene flow across multiple host species.

Key words: Saemundssonia, Quadraceps, Harrison’s rule, host switch, parasitic lice

INTRODUCTION

Parasitic lice (Psococidae: Phthiraptera) are obligate parasites of mammals and birds and spend their entire lifecycle on their hosts. Their external structures (e.g., flattened body, short legs, absence of wings) are highly specialized to an ectoparasitic lifestyle, and their mobility is extremely limited (Johnson and Clayton, 2003). Usually, lice transmit to a new host individual only via direct contact between the hosts, such as during copulation (Hillgarth, 1996) or parental care (Clayton and Tompkins, 1994). Due to these constraints, parasitic lice frequently show strong host specificity, and many species of lice are restricted to single genus or species of host (e.g., Marshall, 1981). This strong host specificity makes the lice an ideal model system for studying the host-parasite coevolution and co-speciation (Johnson and Clayton, 2003).

This high host specificity notwithstanding, some lice show low host specificity and parasitize a wide range of host species (Price et al., 2003). It is widely thought that a wide range of host species is made possible by some factors other than direct contact between hosts. For example, it is well known that the hippoboscid flies frequently transmit lice between different host bird species (phoresis; Keirans, 1975). In such cases, genetic structure of a louse species is known to reflect biogeography rather than the host distribution, probably restricted by the distributional range of hippoboscid flies (Johnson et al., 2002; Weckstein, 2004). However, even if lice successfully transmit to a different host species via phoresis or other means, morphological mismatch between host and louse may prohibit colonization of the new host species by the lice. For example, the wing lice of birds escape from host preening defenses by inserting themselves between the barbs of the wing feathers. One study found that the body width of the wing lice from pigeons and doves is strongly correlated with host body size, which dictates the width of the feather interbarb space (Johnson et al., 2005). A mismatch between louse body width and the host’s interbarb space prevents the louse from escaping host preening, and makes it difficult to colonize host species that differ in body size from the native host.

Even in species of lice with a wide host range, molecular
analyses sometimes reveal significant genetic divergence between lice on different host species. For example, species of both body and wing lice that parasitize different species of doves show considerable population structure between different host species (Johnson et al., 2002). A similar pattern has also been identified in the louse genus *Lunaceps* that parasitizes shore birds (Gustafsson and Olsson, 2012). Deep genetic divergence within a louse species on a single host species, but in different geographic locations, has also been identified (Mizukoshi et al., 2012). These examples clearly show that it is sometimes inappropriate to evaluate the host-range of a louse species based on morphological information alone, which has been utilized for species-level taxonomy of lice.

*Saemundssonia lari* is one louse species with a very wide host range, recorded from 36 species across six genera of Laridae (gulls and their relatives) (Price et al., 2003). This species is of the head louse ecomorph (Johnson et al., 2012), possessing a triangular head and rounded body (Fig. 1A), and living in the head and neck regions of the bird using its mandibles to grip feather barbs. Gulls are also parasitized by a closely related genus, *Quadraceps* (Cruickshank et al., 2001; Smith et al., 2004; Price et al., 2003). This genus is broadly recognized as a generalist (Johnson et al., 2012). However, species of the genus parasitizing gulls have an elongated head and body (Fig. 1B, C), and they insert into the interbarb spaces of the flight feathers on the wing in a similar way to wing lice that use this behavior to escape preening (Clayton et al., 2003). Therefore, the species treated here exhibit the same escape behavior as the wing louse ecomorph found on other groups of birds. In general, species of *Quadraceps* show a much higher degree of host specificity than those of *Saemundssonia*. Four species, subdivided into many subspecies, of *Quadraceps* have been recorded from the gull genus *Larus* (Price et al., 2003).

In this study, we compare the morphological and genetic structures of *Saemundssonia* and *Quadraceps* collected from two species of gulls breeding in Japan: black-tailed gull (*Larus crassirostris*) and slaty-backed gull (*Larus schistisagus*). The former is smaller (ca. 47 cm) than the latter (ca. 64 cm) in body length, and both gulls are parasitized by *Saemundssonia lari*. However for *Quadraceps*, the black-tailed gull is host only to *Quadraceps punctatus* (also known to parasitize 26 other *Larus* species) whereas the slaty-backed gull is host only to *Q. ornatus* (also known to parasitize six other *Larus* species). In this study we address (1) are there any hidden morphological or genetic differences in *S. lari* parasitizing different host species and, if not, (2) what causes the difference in host specificity between the two closely related louse genera using different microhabitats of the same two host species.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

All samples were collected at Teuri Island, an island located west to northern Hokkaido. This island is isolated around 28 km from the mainland Hokkaido, and its circumference is about 3 km.

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**Fig. 1.** Habitus (left) and male genitalia (right) of (A) *Saemundssonia lari*, (B) *Quadraceps punctatus*, (C) *Quadraceps ornatus*. In the habitus figures, dorsal (left) and ventral (right) structures are shown. Arrows in (A) indicate measurements used for morphological analyses. Abbreviations: PCHW = precornal head width; THW = temporal head width; AW = abdominal width (5th segment); HL = head length; TL–HL = total length minus head length; PL = paramere length.
Both black-tailed and slaty-backed gulls breed on this small island. Both head (*Saemundssonia*) and wing lice (*Quadraceps*) were collected from living and dead birds under permits from the Agency for Cultural Affairs and from Ministry of the Environment. Louse specimens were searched for by eye and picked up using a forceps. Lice were killed and preserved in 99.5% ethanol. For *Saemundssonia*...
Molecular analyses

From Saemundssonia lari collected in Teuri Island, three haplotypes were detected, and the maximum uncorrected p-distance between them is only 0.6% (Fig. 2). All haplotypes clustered into a single clade, and, except for haplotype 2 unique to the slaty-backed gull (n = 4), all other haplotypes were present in lice from both gull species. Four sequences of S. lari collected from other gull species and downloaded from GenBank also clustered closely with the S. lari sequences obtained from Teuri Island. In particular, the sequences obtained from S. lari parasitizing herring gull (L. argentatus: Europe) and kelp gull (L. dominicanus: South Hemisphere) showed completely identical sequences with the haplotype 1 of S. lari from Teuri Island (Fig. 2).

Even S. lari obtained from geographically distant gull species, gray-headed gull (L. cirrocephalus: Africa and South America) and lesser black-backed gull (L. fuscus: Europe), showed at a maximum only 0.9% sequence divergence from those of Teuri Island.

The two species of Quadraceps were host specific, at least within Teuri Island (Fig. 2). They are genetically highly divergent at about 22% uncorrected sequence divergence. Each species composed a clade with either a single haplotype (Q. punctatus) or two haplotypes with extremely low genetic divergence (0.3%: Q. ornatus). Intraspecific sequence difference within Q. punctatus was low (0–1.00%), even when including the sequences from the species on other gull hosts (i.e. Q. punctatus from L. cirrocephalus from Africa and South America, L. dominicanus from the South Hemisphere, and L. californicus from western North America).

Morphological analyses

Significant differences in body size between males and females were detected for all species, and, in all cases, females were about 20% larger than males (Tables 2, 3).

Saemundssonia collected from different species showed no significant difference in most measurements, including groove width (a functionally relevant character used in the process of attaching to feather barbs) and paramere length (a male genitalic character) (Table 1). However, significant differences were detected in abdominal width and total body length minus head length of females (Table 1). The two Quadraceps species from the two gull species were significantly different in many features, including genital structure (Fig. 1B, C), such that their independent species status can be confirmed based on morphology alone. Significant differences existed between the two species status can be confirmed based on morphology alone.

Table 1. Measurements of Saemundssonia lari collected from two gull species.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>from L. crassirostris</th>
<th>from L. schistisagus</th>
<th>P (t-test)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n = 16 each</td>
<td>n = 10 (male),</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(male, female)</td>
<td>14 (female)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCHW-male</td>
<td>0.3581 ± 0.0091</td>
<td>0.3580 ± 0.0244</td>
<td>0.9852</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCHW-female</td>
<td>0.3963 ± 0.0152</td>
<td>0.3900 ± 0.0180</td>
<td>0.9187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THW-male</td>
<td>0.5831 ± 0.0135</td>
<td>0.5830 ± 0.0157</td>
<td>0.9830</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THW-female</td>
<td>0.5060 ± 0.0112</td>
<td>0.6749 ± 0.0239</td>
<td>0.6818</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MW-male</td>
<td>0.4619 ± 0.0138</td>
<td>0.4450 ± 0.0344</td>
<td>0.9092</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MW-female</td>
<td>0.5125 ± 0.0148</td>
<td>0.5000 ± 0.0332</td>
<td>0.1851</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AW-male</td>
<td>0.8150 ± 0.0239</td>
<td>0.7830 ± 0.0881</td>
<td>0.1782</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AW-female</td>
<td>0.9667 ± 0.0305</td>
<td>0.9150 ± 0.0720</td>
<td>0.0171**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HL-male</td>
<td>0.5506 ± 0.0152</td>
<td>0.5450 ± 0.0165</td>
<td>0.8340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HL-female</td>
<td>0.5875 ± 0.0161</td>
<td>0.5867 ± 0.0164</td>
<td>0.8934</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TL-HL-male</td>
<td>1.2111 ± 0.0385</td>
<td>1.1790 ± 0.0814</td>
<td>0.1921</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TL-HL-female</td>
<td>1.4813 ± 0.0427</td>
<td>1.3817 ± 0.1284</td>
<td>0.0073**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GW-male</td>
<td>0.1272 ± 0.0066</td>
<td>0.1240 ± 0.0057</td>
<td>0.2182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GW-female</td>
<td>0.1331 ± 0.0070</td>
<td>0.1329 ± 0.0099</td>
<td>0.9321</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PL-male</td>
<td>0.2900 ± 0.0035</td>
<td>0.2910 ± 0.0044</td>
<td>0.8606</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviations: PCHW = precornal head width; THW = temporal head width; MW = metathoracic width; AW = abdominal width (5th segment); HL = head length; TL-HL = total length minus head length; PL = paramere length. Asterisks indicate significance at 5% (*) or 1% (**).
from two gull species.

Table 2. Measurements of two Quadraceps species collected from two gull species.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Q. punctatus from L. crassirostris</th>
<th>Q. ornatus from L. schistisagus</th>
<th>P (t-test)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n = 8 (male), 7 (female)</td>
<td>n = 7 (male), 9 (female)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCHW-male</td>
<td>0.3513 ± 0.0083</td>
<td>0.3843 ± 0.0162</td>
<td>0.0002***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCHW-female</td>
<td>0.3743 ± 0.0053</td>
<td>0.4033 ± 0.0180</td>
<td>0.0011**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THW-male</td>
<td>0.4688 ± 0.0064</td>
<td>0.5223 ± 0.0170</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THW-female</td>
<td>0.5014 ± 0.0134</td>
<td>0.5655 ± 0.0151</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MW-male</td>
<td>0.4375 ± 0.0238</td>
<td>0.4657 ± 0.0181</td>
<td>0.0240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MW-female</td>
<td>0.4571 ± 0.0281</td>
<td>0.4987 ± 0.0348</td>
<td>0.0256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AW-male</td>
<td>0.6338 ± 0.0307</td>
<td>0.6600 ± 0.0557</td>
<td>0.2700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AW-female</td>
<td>0.7214 ± 0.0273</td>
<td>0.7267 ± 0.0543</td>
<td>0.8198</td>
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<tr>
<td>HL-male</td>
<td>0.5550 ± 0.0141</td>
<td>0.5400 ± 0.0141</td>
<td>0.0612</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HL-female</td>
<td>0.5829 ± 0.0170</td>
<td>0.5756 ± 0.0150</td>
<td>0.3793</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TL-HL-male</td>
<td>1.5150 ± 0.0507</td>
<td>1.4243 ± 0.0959</td>
<td>0.0381*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TL-HL-female</td>
<td>1.8529 ± 0.0531</td>
<td>1.7522 ± 0.0736</td>
<td>0.0088**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GW-male</td>
<td>0.0899 ± 0.0053</td>
<td>0.0850 ± 0.0029</td>
<td>0.0462</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GW-female</td>
<td>0.0821 ± 0.0057</td>
<td>0.0883 ± 0.0056</td>
<td>0.0465*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviations: PCHW = precornal head width; THW = temporal head width; MW = metathoracic width; AW = abdominal width (5th segment); HL = head length; TL-HL = total length minus head length. Asterisks indicate significance at 5% (*), 1% (**) or 0.1% (**).难怪 Quadraceps species in the precornal head width, temporal head width, metathoracic width, and total body length minus head length, whereas no significant differences were detected in head length, and abdominal width (Table 2). Measurements showing significant differences were always detected in the larger host (L. schistisagus), except that total body length minus head length showed the opposite trend (Table 2).

**DISCUSSION**

Genetic analysis indicates that *Saemundssonia lari* collected from two host gulls breeding on Teuri Island represent a single species with low genetic divergence. Although significant differences were identified in the abdominal width and length of female *S. lari* collected from two host gulls, the abdomen has wide membranous regions (Fig. 1A) and thus its shape can be altered easily by extrinsic factors, such as egg maturation or artifacts during slide preparations. As far as the heavily sclerotized structures are concerned, no significant morphological difference was identified between the lice from different host species. Therefore, morphological evidence also suggests that populations of these lice on the two different host species are conspecific. In contrast, the *Quadraceps* on the two gulls breeding on Teuri Island are clearly different species based on both morphological and molecular evidence. These results indicate that the closely related louse genera parasitizing two gull species breeding on the same island differ dramatically in their patterns in host specificity.

All *Quadraceps* examined in the present study were collected from the interbarb spaces of the remex or rectrix (i.e. flight feathers), whereas *S. lari* were collected from the downy part of the head and neck regions. Therefore, although Johnson et al. (2012) classified the genus *Quadraceps* as generalist (lice with no specific microhabitat preference on the host’s body), at least the two *Quadraceps* species examined here can be regarded as wing lice. That is, they exhibit the same escape behavior that other wing lice use to avoid preening (Clayton et al., 2003). *Saemundssonia* can be confidently classified as the head louse, as also suggested by Johnson et al. (2012). These microhabitat differences are likely to be the largest factor influencing the difference in patterns of host specificity of the two louse genera parasitizing these two gull species on Teuri Island. Wing lice escape from host’s preening by inserting their body between the interbarb space of the flight feathers. Any mismatch between the width of the louse and the feather interbarb space thus increases the risk of being preened off the host (Clayton et al., 2003; Bush and Clayton, 2006). In the case of the *Quadraceps* species examined here, lice on different host gulls show significantly different body widths, and the louse on the larger host exhibited a larger body size (Table 2), showing good correspondence between host and parasite body size. Although the abdominal length shows the opposite trend (larger in the louse on the smaller host), different from the body length, body length is less likely to cause a mismatch between louse body size and feather interbarb space, as lice insert with their central body axis parallel to the feather barbs. A correlation between host and parasite body size, generally known as Harrison’s rule (Harrison, 1915; Johnson et al., 2005), probably prevents parasites from shifting to a new host with a greatly different body size. In contrast, Harrison’s rule has not been detected in body lice, which burrow in feather down (Johnson et al., 2005). This also agrees with the present observation, because *S. lari* inhabit the downy parts of the bird’s head and neck feathers, and no morphological difference was detected between *S. lari* collected from two gull species. However, it should also be noted that Timmermann (1951) recognized head size variation of *S. lari* roughly following Harrison’s rule when host size is smaller than *L. canus* (wing length ca. 36 cm), although the comparisons were not subjected to statistical tests.

The other question is what mechanisms can homogenize populations of *S. lari* parasitizing different gull species. Generally, lice transmit to a new host individual only via direct contact of host animals, such as breeding and mating, whereas interspecific direct contact between different host species is limited. Phoresis mediated by the hippoboscid flies is a well-known factor that frequently causes host-switching of bird lice. However, no species of hippoboscid fly has been recorded from the Japanese gulls (Maa, 1969; Keirans, 1975) and thus phoresis is an unlikely mechanism. Teuri Island is utilized as a breeding site for many seabirds (including rhinoceros auklet, Japanese cormorant and so on), and their density on the island is also very high. Slaty-backed gulls sometimes prey on chicks of black-tailed gulls (Watanuki, 1988). This probably provides frequent direct contact between different host species and a possible dispersal opportunity for lice. This may include not only dispersal from smaller to larger gulls, but also larger to smaller because the adults of smaller gulls will attack predatory gulls. Host-size differences probably do not prevent establishment of the head louse genus *Saemundssonia* (Johnson et al., 2005), but a mismatch between the louse body size.
and the feather interbarb probably prevent establishment of the wing louse genus Quadraceps on a novel host (Bush and Clayton, 2006). This local factor may also extend different breeding sites.

Several other factors may also enable lice to disperse between different species of gulls when host individuals contact each other during the breeding season. These include encounters during fishing frenzies, territorial fights, and theft of nesting material. Hybridization between gull species may also be lead to dispersal of lice between species, and such hybrids are known between many different species of gulls. For example, the white-headed gull species-group consists of 18 species, including slaty-backed gull, and different species hybridize quite frequently (Liebers et al., 2004; Olsen and Larsson, 2004; Pons et al., 2005). Although the distributional range of slaty-backed gull is restricted to Japan and neighboring regions, some gulls in the species-group show very wide distributional ranges (Olsen and Larsson, 2004). For example, hybridizing pairs of slaty-backed gull and glaucous-winged gull (L. glaucescens) have been observed in Rishiri and Rebun Islands, located only ca. 75 km north of Teuri Is. (Kosugi, 2003; Kazama et al., 2011). The distribution of the glaucous-winged gull includes both Asia and North America, where it overlaps with a different suite of gull species. It is likely that such widely distributed gulls spread their lice widely and facilitate mixing of louse populations even between geographically distant host species.

Although these dispersal opportunities occur locally, worldwide, S. lari only shows at most 0.9% sequence difference, even between individuals collected from phylogenetically distant host species (Pons et al., 2005) whose geographic ranges are also very separated (e.g., Japan and Africa, South America). Quadraceps punctatus also shows low genetic divergences within the species, even though louse samples were collected from widely separated hosts. Widespread gull species in combination with gull migration may facilitate a more global homogenization of louse populations. During winter, many species of gulls roost together in large flocks. These communal winter roosts include species of gulls that do not normally overlap during the breeding season. Ongoing gene flow of Saemundssonia among many widely distributed hosts is probably possible. However, a mismatch between parasite and host body sized likely prevents Quadraceps from establishing across such a wide range of host species. Interestingly, the host species of Q. punctatus examined here are mostly smaller gulls but also include a larger one (L. dominicanus: about the same size as slaty-backed gull). Transmission of small lice to larger host may not prevent louse survival over shorter timescales (Bush and Clayton, 2006). It is also possible that the population of Q. punctatus on L. argentatus is transient but, according to Timmermann (1971), Q. punctatus is quite frequently found on L. argentatus, as well as Q. ornatus. Because a single host individual rarely host two species of lice, Timmermann (1971) argued that different populations of a host species host different species of Quadraceps, and distributional ranges of Quadraceps species are rather restricted by climates than host species. Further morphological and genetic analyses of Quadraceps collected from much wider range of gull species are needed to uncover the factors which allow/ prevent dispersal and establishment of gull wing lice.

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