Morphological variation of chewing lice (Insecta: Phthiraptera) from different skua taxa

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Received 27 June 1999; accepted for publication 10 December 1999

The lice, Haffnera gymnus and Simulium adamsi were extracted from their hosts, skuas (Aves: Stercorariidae). Lice were extracted from dead birds by combing feathers, while lice from live birds were extracted using a delousing chamber containing chloroform vapour. Lice were measured and the data analysed by canonical discriminant analysis. Lice show variation in morphology that is useful in identifying some of these hosts. This variation is presumably due to micro-environmental pressure provided by each host. Our interpretation is that these chewing lice have evolved to be adapted to each skua taxon; different sizes and morphologies of skua taxa result in different sizes and morphologies of Haffnera gymnus and Simulium adamsi.

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ADDITIONAL KEY WORDS: parasite-host interactions - skua - coevolution - morphological variation - taxonomic indicator - ecosyntropic variation - host specific morphometric analysis.

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INTRODUCTION

Lice (Insecta: Phthiraptera) are ectoparasites of birds and mammals. The three suborders Rhynchopilhurina, Amblycera and Ischnocera, are commonly known as

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chewing lice. These can be found on almost all birds and most mammals. Bird lice are morphologically more diverse than mammal lice, possibly due to a greater habitat range (feather types) provided by their hosts (Barker, 1994).

Lice are obligate ectoparasites, completing all of their life cycle on a single host by feeding on the host’s tissues (such as blood, feathers, fur or skin debris). These insects do not possess wings, and therefore can only be transmitted to another host when hosts come into physical contact with each other, such as during breeding (Barker, 1994). Although there are reported cases that hippoboscid flies can carry lice to a new host through a process known as phoresy (Keirans, 1975), this mechanism is exceptional. Thus, louse distributions are limited to a small number of closely related host species, or often to a single species of host.

Being associated with a single host, lice have developed specific adaptations including modified morphology, behaviour and physiology (Barker, 1994; Hafner & Page, 1995). A louse’s body is dorso-ventrally flattened to facilitate movement between feathers and escape from host grooming behaviour (Rosza, 1999; Keizigiel & Rosza, 1999). Body size also differs according to habitat selection (Waage, 1979). Larger, elongated lice usually exploit the wings of the host while smaller and rounded lice utilize head and neck areas. Due to the differences of feather size in these areas, each louse species has a specific claw size or oral groove width. Every species of louse, therefore, has different adaptations to correspond with its selected habitat on the host. These modifications make it unlikely that lice will survive on other species of bird or mammal.

There are several studies on the effects of host pressure on parasite morphology. Keirans (1973) pointed out that the majority of variation resulting from host pressure occurs within every chewing louse species, caused by the separation of species members into little groups or family strains. Each group is subsequently isolated on its host island or succession of self-reproducing islands and develops variation. Data from simplified phylogenies of gophers and lice, show that evolution of louse body size is highly correlated with host size (Harvey & Keymer, 1991). Further studies also revealed that each species of chewing louse possesses a specific groove, the size of which correlates with the width of the hair of the host (Reed, 1994; Page, Clayton & Paterson, 1996; Reed & Hafner, 1997).

This paper explores the extent of morphological variation of chewing lice parasitizing skuas (Aves: Stercorariidae). Skuas are large seabirds, with nine taxa in two genera. The genus Stercorarius has three smaller species: long-tailed (S. longicrusa), Arctic (S. parasiticus) and pomarine (S. pomarinus) skus. The genus Catharacta has four larger species: great (C. arctica skua), south polar (C. maccormicki), Chilian (C. chilensis) and brown (C. antarctica) skus. This last is often separated into three: the southern subspecies; Falkland (C. a. antarctica), Tristan (C. a. antarctica), and brown skua (C. a. lonnbergii) (Furness, 1987). We sampled lice from each of these nine taxa, to test the hypothesis that the lice of a particular species would differ in morphometrics between skua taxa as a result of coevolution.

Skuas are very aggressive in chasing conspecifics and other skuas from their territory (Furness, 1987). Such behaviour ensures that their ectoparasitic populations are unlikely to be transferred except to offspring or mate. Although most species of skua feed partly by killing other seabirds and so might be expected to acquire chewing lice from their prey, no species of louse has been found to live both on skuas and on their prey seabirds (Furness & Palma, 1992). However, skuas might acquire lice when they (rarely) feed on other skuas. Great skuas will eat Arctic skus, pomarine skus will eat Arctic and long-tailed skus, brown skus will eat south polar skua chicks, so that closer affinities than predicted from their phylogenetic affinities might exist between lice on these species. Morphological variation within skua taxa is small, but the taxa differ considerably in size, shape and ecology. Molecular and cladistic data are available from skuas for phylogenetical comparison (Cohen et al., 1997; Andersson, 1999).

**MATERIAL AND METHODS**

**Collection and measurement of ectoparasites**

Chewing lice were extracted from skuas by standard procedures (Dunn, 1932; Spellerberg, 1971; Fowler & Cohen, 1983; Furness & Palma, 1992). Suka were sampled from North and South Atlantic breeding colonies and from museum collections. In the latter, skuas were sampled to provide representatives of all major breeding areas of the world. In total, 956 lice were removed from 23 long-tailed skus, 83 Arctic skuas, 25 pomarine skus, 53 great skus, 42 south polar skus, 19 Chilian skus, 22 brown skus, 67 Falkland skus and 30 Tristan skus. Lice from live birds were extracted using a delousing chamber containing chlorine vapour. For dried and frozen birds, lice were extracted by thoroughly combing each feather with fine forceps. Species identifications of lice were confirmed by Ricardo L. Palma. Two taxa of louse (Haffnia grandis (Piaget) and Sterrmeissinia) were chosen for this study due to their breadth of distribution across skua taxa. Haffnia grandis (HG) parasitizes the larger (Catharacta) skus while Sterrmeissinia (SS) parasitizes all skus (Palma, 2000). Only well preserved lice (with all of the characters required for measurement) were used in morphometric analysis. Measurements were made using a binocular microscope fitted with an eye-piece micrometer scale. Data were calibrated later with a standard eye-piece calibration. We examine size differences and shape variations. Eleven characters were measured for the study of size differences, while an additional four derived characters (ratios) were selected to investigate shape differences. These characters were based on those used by Evlely & Amano (1977) and were chosen for ease and reproducibility of measurement and overall morphological representation.

**Analysis of morphological differences**

Both species of lice were separated into groups based on sex and the host taxon. The hypothesis being tested was that species of lice show variation in morphology that is attributable to coevolution with their skua host taxon. A canonical discriminant analysis was used on standardized data categorized by skua host taxon. This is a frequently used powerful method for investigating morphometric differences in related taxa (McLellan & Endler, 1998; Miyazaki & Shikano, 1998). In this analysis, the taxa are treated with one classification variable (with each value donating a different group to several quantitative variables). This calculates the distance index between and between groups in a data set. The likelihood ratios produced by this
Table 1: Variation in morphometric data for Haffasia gulei (in mm)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characters</th>
<th>Female (n = 55)</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Male (n = 25)</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Total body length</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>4.05-4.50</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>3.96-4.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Body width, taken at widest point</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.71-0.95</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.70-0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Ratio of body length to body width</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.37</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>4.93-6.19</td>
<td></td>
<td>6.15</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>5.65-6.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Head length</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.31-0.41</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.33-0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Ratio of head length to head width</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>1.05-2.17</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>1.49-2.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Ratio of body length to head length</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>4.39-5.88</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>4.00-5.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Prothorax length</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.26-0.41</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.27-0.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Ratio of prothorax length to prothorax length</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.31-0.59</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.36-0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Distance between head to mouthpart base</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.11-0.17</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.89-1.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Length of femur of third leg</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.62-0.96</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.60-0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Length of tibia of second leg</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.29-0.54</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.25-0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Degree of sclerotization</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.31-0.43</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.27-0.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis of variance using the data reveals that the two species of Haffasia are morphologically distinct. The characters that differentiate the two species include body length, head length, prothorax length, and degree of sclerotization. The female species tends to have longer bodies and heads compared to the male species. Additionally, the female species has a larger prothorax and a higher degree of sclerotization. These differences are significant and can be used for distinguishing the two species in the field.
Table 2: Variation in morphometric data for Symunodes (in mm)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characters</th>
<th>Female ((n=60))</th>
<th>Male ((n=15))</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Range</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body length</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body width, taken at widest point</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head length</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head width, taken at widest point</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head length to head width ratio</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prothorax length</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prothorax width</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance between head tip to mouthpart base</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance between mouthpart bases</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of femur of third leg</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree of sclerotization</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Plot of canonical variables of variation in the size of 15 features of female. Different genders are shown with different symbols.

Figure 2: Plot of canonical variables of differences in the shape of Symunodes. HG = Head region, S = Sclerotic region.
Morphometric analysis shows relatively little variation in morphology of *Sarcomasson*. Only female SS show significant size variation among hosts in one character: Female SS from Chilean skuas possess longer tibia than those from SS inhabiting other hosts (Fig. 5). Both sexes of SS showed no significant variation in their shape among the host taxa.

**DISCUSSION**

Although lice and hosts clearly coevolve, there is considerable debate as to whether bird lice coevolve with their hosts (see Roufa, 1993; Barker, 1994; Page *et al.*, 1996). However, it is known that lice have minimal opportunities to transfer from a given host species to another, mainly due to lack of transmission mechanisms, and therefore they have to modify and adapt to their current host species. This modification will involve alteration of behaviour, physiology and/or morphology (Tompkins & Clayton, 1999). Although alterations in behaviour and physiology are very difficult to study since lice cannot easily be reared, studies of morphological variation are possible.

The number of characters used in this study is considered adequate. Pankhurst (1991) suggested that more reliable results could be deduced when more characters are applied. However, this study shows that from fifteen characters used (including derived characters), only some of them were useful either in recognizing hosts or in distinguishing between them. Analysis of HG successfully separated their hosts (large skuas) by using data associated mainly with head length, tibia length, prothorax length, and sometimes from the measurements of the distance between the head tip to the mouthpart base.

Increasing the number of characters may also produce negative effects on overall results. Results from analysis of variance indicate that male SS possess less information...
characters, but the total effect from the other 11 characters eliminates this information and produces no clear evidence for host identification.

Several previous studies also found that, although many characters are available for analysis, only some of them are informative for displaying differences between sets of morphological data. From 21 morphological and behavioural characters, Alexander (1991) successfully analysed the dance language of Apis (Insecta: Apidae) by using only data on genitalia. In analysis on cloacal anatomy of saltamanders, from 25 characters used in the study, only 12 were useful for phylogenetical analysis (Sever, 1991). In another study, only ten out of 210 morphological characters were capable of presenting good information about phylogenetical relationships among *Drosophila* (DeSalle & Grimaldi, 1992).

Some morphological characters of chewing lice do vary between host taxa (e.g., tibia length) and are therefore very useful in identifying hosts (i.e., large skusas). Various degrees of morphological variation exhibited by HG parasitizing different species of hosts indicate that morphological coevolution has occurred in skua–louse systems. However, the degree of morphological variation is too small to permit easy allocation of these lice to subspecies. These small scale variations can only be detected by detailed morphometric analysis.

Several factors may be responsible for variations in chewing lice morphology. An interaction within and among species living in a similar environment can modify the overall size of an organism. In chewing lice, this interaction may be due to inter and intra-species competition for limited resources provided by their host. Inter and intra-species competition can act as a major factor in morphological modification of chewing lice anatomy. The differences among characters clearly show adaptation of this louse to different hosts. Modifications in femur or tibia length will presumably improve movement of lice on hosts. The ability to move faster is a key factor in enhancing louse efficiency in avoiding the feet and legs of the host during grooming. By increasing the efficiency of avoidance to host grooming, lice may increase their survival rate.

In this study, results from canonical analysis indicate that lice from different host taxa show variation in their morphologies. *Samundosoma* showed rather little morphological variation among skua host taxa, while *Hauseria grandis* showed much host-specific variation. Differences in size or shape of particular louse structures cannot easily be related to known evolutionary relationships between the skua taxa. However, there is a general trend in size of HG between hosts that mirrors the size differences between skua taxa, rather than their phylogeny.

**Acknowledgements**

We thank Richard Swatcliffe (Kemblegrove Museum & Art Gallery, Glasgow), Bob McGowan (Scottish Royal Museum, Edinburgh), Dr Robert Pris Jones and Peter Colston (British Museum Natural History, Tring), and Margaret Reilly (University of Glasgow) for allowing us to examine skua specimens. Many thanks also go to Drs Rod Page, Ken Johnson and Jayne Armstrong for valuable discussions, and to Ricardo Palma (Museum of New Zealand) for identifying the lice. We thank Ricardo Palma, Adrian Paterson and Lajos Rosza for their helpful reviews of the manuscript. This research was sponsored by the Government of Malaysia through a research grant awarded to RR. RWF gratefully acknowledges funding from ROMA.

**References**


