Expanded diversity of novel hemoplasmas in rare and undersampled Neotropical bats

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Running head: Novel Neotropical bat hemoplasmas

Abstract

Hemotropic mycoplasmas are emerging as a model system for studying bacterial pathogens in

bats, but taxonomic coverage of sampled host species remains biased. We leveraged a long-term

field study in Belize to uncover novel hemoplasma diversity in bats by analyzing 80 samples

from 19 species, most of which are infrequently encountered. PCR targeting the partial 16S

rRNA gene found 41% of bats positive for hemoplasmas. Phylogenetic analyses found two novel

host shifts of hemoplasmas, four entirely new hemoplasma genotypes, and the first hemoplasma

detections in four bat species. One of these novel hemoplasmas (from *Neoeptesicus furinalis*)

shared 97.6% identity in the partial 16S rRNA gene to a human hemoplasma (*Candidatus*

Mycoplasma haemohominis). Additional analysis of the partial 23S rRNA gene allowed us to

also designate two novel hemoplasma species, in *Myotis elegans* and *Phyllostomus discolor*, with

the proposed names *Candidatus* Mycoplasma haematomyotis sp. nov. and *Candidatus*

Mycoplasma haematophyllostomi sp. nov., respectively. Our analyses show that additional

hemoplasma diversity in bats can be uncovered by targeting rare or undersampled host species.

Main text

Several decades of research have characterized the diversity of viruses in bats, for which some

species host viruses of notable human health concern [1]. Although bats remain relatively

understudied for other pathogens, the diversity of their bacterial pathogens has been of increasing

interest [2]. Hemotropic mycoplasmas (hemoplasmas) are facultative intracellular bacteria that

are emerging as a model group of bat pathogens [3]. Sampling has uncovered substantial genetic

diversity of bat hemoplasmas [4–6], including high similarity to a human hemoplasma (i.e.,

Candidatus Mycoplasma haemohominis, *C*Mhh) that may indicate zoonotic transmission [7,8].

However, sampling has focused on particular geographies and clades of bats, leaving taxonomic

gaps in understanding how hemoplasma diversity is distributed globally and which bats may

harbor potentially zoonotic hemoplasmas [2,3]. For example, most bat hemoplasma surveys have

focused on species in Central and South America, with limited attention to bats in North

America, Africa, Europe, and Asia [5,9]. Even within well-sampled regions of Central and South

America, there is substantial variation in survey effort, with hemoplasmas of common vampire

bats (*Desmodus rotundus*) being notably well-characterized while those of rarer species (e.g.,

Myotis spp., *Micronycteris* spp., *Noctilio* spp., phyllostomines such as *Mimon cozumelae* and

Trachops cirrhosus) have been minimally sampled [4,10–13]. Here, we leveraged ongoing field

studies in Belize from which we previously identified 24 new hemoplasma genotypes in 23 bat

species to specifically test a range of undersampled bat species for these bacteria [4,10].

During April–May 2019, November 2021, and April–May 2022, we sampled a diverse

bat community in Orange Walk District, Belize [14]. Bats were captured using mist nets and

harp traps along flight paths and at roosts, held in individual bags, and identified to species based

on morphology [15]. Blood volumes under 1% body mass were sampled by lancing the

propatagial vein using sterile needles and collected with heparinized capillary tubes. Blood was

preserved on Whatman FTA cards and held at room temperature until permanent storage at -20C

at the University of Oklahoma. Field methods were approved by the Institutional Animal Care

and Use Committees of the American Museum of Natural History (AMNHIACUC-20190129

and -20210614) and University of Oklahoma (2022-0197). Bat sampling was authorized by the

Belize Forest Department by permits FD/WL/1/19(06), FD/WL/1/19(09), and FD/WL/1/21(12).

We used Qiagen QIAamp DNA Investigator Kits to extract genomic DNA from 80 blood

samples collected from 19 bat species spanning these three years (Table 1). Our prior studies and

those of other groups had mostly minimally sampled 16 of these bat species [4,6,13], whereas

Lophostoma nicaraguae, *Micronycteris microtis*, and *Molossus alvarezi* remained as-of-yet

wholly unsampled. To determine the presence of hemoplasmas, we used PCR targeting the

partial 16S rRNA gene with primers described previously [4,10]. We also attempted to amplify

the partial 23S rRNA gene for 16S rRNA–positive samples to establish a broader library of this

gene for hemoplasmas [16]. Amplicons were purified and directly sequenced at Psomagen. We

then used NCBI BLASTn to identify related 16S rRNA sequences, followed by MUSCLE for

sequence alignment and MrBayes for phylogenetic analysis (10,000,000 generations with a

GTR+G+I model) using the NGPhylogeny.fr platform [17]. We delineated hemoplasma

genotypes based on analysis of the partial 16S rRNA gene (850–860 bp) and clustering on the

hemoplasma phylogeny, using our previously established criteria for novelty [4,10].

We detected hemoplasmas via amplification of the partial 16S rRNA gene in 41% of

samples (95% CI = 31–52%; Table 2 and Figure 1). Of the 12 bat species that tested positive,

five had identical genotypes to those we earlier described in Belize [4]: *Myotis elegans* and the

MYE genotype, *Carollia sowelli* and the CS1 and CS2 genotypes, *Glossophaga mutica*

(formerly *G. soricina*) and the GLS genotype, *Trachops cirrhosus* and the TC1 and TC2

genotypes, and *Pteronotus fulvus* and the PPM1 genotype. All three Belize *Phyllostomus*

discolor had sequences 100% identical to partial sequences from *P. discolor* in Brazil [6] and to

those sequences our team has identified from *P. discolor* in Panama (GenBank Accessions

OR056003–5, OR435279–81); we here classify these hemoplasmas as the PD1 genotype. For

one of the PCR-positive Belize *P. discolor*, we also successfully amplified the partial 23S rRNA

gene (OR055988). Owing to 100% inter-sequence identity of this sequence our recent

hemoplasma 23S rRNA sequences from *P. discolor* in Panama (OR055989–92, OR435277), as

well as 100% identity of the partial 16S rRNA sequences amplified from the same Belize and

Panama individuals (Table 2), we propose the name *Candidatus* Mycoplasma

haematophyllostomi sp. nov. to designate this novel hemoplasma species. We also amplified

partial 23S rRNA genes for all three PCR-positive *Myotis elegans* (OQ456384–86). Given the

high inter-sequence identity of these sequences ($\bar{x}$ = 99.98%) and 100% identity of paired

partial 16S rRNA sequences (Table 2), we propose the name *C*. M. haematomyotis sp. nov. to

designate this hemoplasma species. We also amplified the partial 23S rRNA gene for four more

16S rRNA–positive bats: *Neoeptesicus furinalis* (OQ456392), *Noctilio leporinus* (OR055987),

and *Trachops cirrhosus* (OR398672–73). We were unable to establish other *Candidatus* species,

as these partial 23S rRNA sequences were amplified from only one individual per bat thus far.

104   The remaining six bat species were infected with novel genotypes in that host (i.e., host

shifts or a new host-specific genotype) or represented the first hemoplasma detections for that

species. For the former, we detected two genotypes in *Dermanura phaeotis* that were previously

identified as specific to *Carollia sowelli* (CS1) and *Sturnira parvidens* (SP1, group B); the later

genotype was also previously detected once in *Artibeus lituratus* [4], and we recently identified

the group A variant in *Pteronotus mesoamericanus* [18]. Whereas the former four bat species

belong to the family Phyllostomidae, *Dermanura* and *Carollia* belong to different subfamilies in

that clade, suggesting inter-generic host shifts restricted by broader evolutionary history [4].

Novel hemoplasmas were detected in *Neoeptesicus furinalis*, *Molossus alvarezi*,

Lophostoma nicaraguae, *Gardnerycteris keenani*, and *Noctilio leporinus*, with the latter four

representing the first hemoplasma detections in these species and the latter three representing

entirely novel hemoplasma genotypes. Although we previously characterized two genotypes in

Neoeptesicus furinalis (EF1 and EF2, with the former also identified here) [4], we identified a

third, novel genotype (EF3) in a single *Neoeptesicus furinalis*, with 99.4% identity to EF1. This

new EF3 genotype also was 97.6% identical to *C*Mhh isolates (e.g., MT077859 and GU562823),

exceeding similarity to this human hemoplasma previously observed for the EF1 and EF2

genotypes and representing similar or greater levels of relatedness to *C*Mhh as previously

observed in *Miniopterus* and *Myotis* bats in Europe and Asia as well as *Eidolon*, *Chaerophon*,

and *Rousettus* bats in Africa [5,7,9]. However, given that the average substitution rate for the

16S rRNA gene is estimated to be approximately 1–2% per 50 million years [19], these bat

hemoplasmas and *C*Mhh likely separated from a common ancestor 60–120 million years ago.

For the other bat species with novel hemoplasmas, a single *Molossus alvarezi* tested

positive for the MR1 genotype (99.8% identity), which was previously identified only in the

closely related *M. nigricans* in Belize [4]. We identified the novel NL1 genotype in *Noctilio*

leporinus, one of two members of the family Noctilionidae. This genotype shared only 96.1%

identity to the MYE genotype (i.e., *C*. M. haematomyotis sp. nov.) found in *Myotis elegans*, a

distantly related vespertilionid [4]. We identified the novel LN1 genotype in one *Lophostoma*

nicaraguae, which shared 99.2% identity to the LE genotype previously found in the closely

related *L. evotis* [4] and 99.1% identity to the PD1 genotype (i.e., *C*. M. haematophyllostomi sp.

nov.) in *P. discolor* [6]; all three bat species are members of the Phyllostominae subfamily. We

lastly detected a novel genotype (GK1) in a single other phyllostomine (*Gardnerycteris keenani*),

but GK1 was most related to the GLS genotype (97.6%) found prior in *Glossophaga mutica* [4].

Our analyses demonstrate additional genetic diversity of hemoplasmas in bats uncovered

by targeting less-sampled species, including a novel hemoplasma with moderate phylogenetic

similarity to *C*Mhh. We encourage further analyses of hemoplasmas in other unsampled bat taxa

and geographies to improve our global understanding of these bacterial pathogens [2,3]. Further,

longitudinal studies are needed to understand how these novel hemoplasmas circulate in bats,

transmission risk to other species, and impacts on bats. Novel computational tools could also be

leveraged to predict whether these new bat hemoplasmas may pose human health risks [20].

Data availability

145 Hemoplasma sequence data are available on GenBank for the partial 16S rRNA gene (Table 2)

146 and partial 23S rRNA gene (accessions OR055988, OQ456384–86, OQ456392, OR055987, and

147 OR398672–73). PCR positivity data are summarized in Table 1 and are fully available in the

148 Pathogen Harmonized Surveillance (PHAROS) database: https://pharos.viralemergence.org/.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Figure legends and tables

Figure 1. Consensus Bayesian phylogeny of the partial 16S rRNA hemoplasma sequences from

this study (highlighted in bold; see Table 2 for genotype assignments) and reference sequences

from bats and other mammals. Nodes are colored by posterior probability (nodes with less than

50% support are not shown), and hemoplasma sequences from bats are colored by bat family.

Table 1. Bat samples tested for hemoplasmas in Belize, stratified by year and including 16S

rRNA gene PCR positivity. We include species-level positivity for comparison to prior surveys.

Bat family	Bat species	Year	N	Positive	Prevalence
Phyllostomidae	*Carollia sowelli*	2019	4	2	50%
	Dermanura phaeotis	2019	3	2	66.67%
	Gardnerycteris keenani	2022	35	1	20%
	Glossophaga mutica	2019	11	7	63.64%
	Lophostoma nicaraguae	2019	1	1	100%
	Micronycteris microtis	2019	2	0	0%
		2022	1	0	
	Mimon cozumelae	2019	2	0	0%
	Phyllostomus discolor	2019	1	1	100%
		2022	2	2	
	Trachops cirrhosus	2019	8	6	66.67%
		2022	4	2	
Noctilionidae	*Noctilio leporinus*	2022	3	2	66.67%
Vespertilionidae	*Neoeptesicus furinalis*	2019	5	2	40%
	Lasiurus ega	2019	6	0	0%
	Myotis elegans	2019	3	3	100%
	Myotis pilosatibialis	2022	1	0	0%
	Rhogeessa aeneus	2019	5	0	0%
Molossidae	*Molossus alvarezi*	2019	1	0	33.33%
		2021	2	1	
Mormoopidae	*Mormoops megalophylla*	2019	1	0	0%
		2021	1	0	
	Pteronotus fulvus	2019	1	1	25%

		2022	3	0	
Emballanuridae	*Saccopteryx bilineata*	2019	4	0	0%

177 **Table 2.** Hemoplasma genotypes identified from Belize bats. Genotypes are given with their bat

178 host species, GenBank accessions, and intra-genotype variability from the partial 16S rRNA

179 sequences identified in this study.

Genotype	Bat species	GenBank accessions for 16S rRNA sequences	Mean intra-genotype sequence similarity (%)
GLS[a]	*Glossophaga mutica*	OQ308883–84, OQ308888, OQ308891–92, OQ308898, OQ308901	99.8%
SP1[a,b]	*Dermanura phaeotis*	OQ308922	NA
CS1[a,b]	*Carollia sowelli, Dermanura phaeotis*	OQ308913, OQ308921	100%
CS2[a]	*Carollia sowelli*	OQ308920	NA
EF1[a]	*Eptesicus furinalis*	OQ456391	NA
EF3[c]	*Eptesicus furinalis*	OQ456387	NA
MYE[a]	*Myotis elegans*	OQ456388–90	100%
PPM1[a]	*Pteronotus fulvus*	OQ308894	NA
TC1 [a]	*Trachops cirrhosus*	OR398685	NA
TC2 [a]	*Trachops cirrhosus*	OR398686–92	99.8%
PD1[a]	*Phyllostomus discolor*	OR016503, OR016508–9	100%
LN1[c,d]	*Lophostoma nicaraguae*	OR016504	NA
GK1[c,d]	*Gardnernycteris keenani*	OR016510	NA
NL1[c,d]	*Noctilio leporinus*	OR016506–7	99.5%
MR1[d]	*Molossus alvarezi*	OR016505	NA

181 [a] Previously described genotype

182 [b] Found in a new host species

183   [c] Novel genotype

184   [d] First detection for the bat species

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posterior probability   ◇ 0.5 < PP < 0.7   ◆ 0.7 < PP < 0.9   ◆ PP > 0.9

Emballonuridae   Molossidae

Vespertilionidae   Noctilionidae

Phyllostomidae   Mormoopidae

Miniopteridae   Pteropodidae

MK353891 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Lophostoma evotis*, Belize   LE
MK353892 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Lophostoma evotis*, Belize
OR016504 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Lophostoma nicaraguae*, Belize   LN1
OR016503 *Candidatus* Mycoplasma haematophyllostomi from *Phyllostomus discolor*, Belize
OR016508 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Phyllostomus discolor*, Belize
OR016509 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Phyllostomus discolor*, Belize
OR056003 *Candidatus* Mycoplasma haematophyllostomi from *Phyllostomus discolor*, Panama
OR056004 *Candidatus* Mycoplasma haematophyllostomi from *Phyllostomus discolor*, Panama
OR056005 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Phyllostomus discolor*, Panama
OR435279 *Candidatus* Mycoplasma haematophyllostomi from *Phyllostomus discolor*, Panama
OR435280 *Candidatus* Mycoplasma haematophyllostomi from *Phyllostomus discolor*, Panama
OR435281 *Candidatus* Mycoplasma haematophyllostomi from *Phyllostomus discolor*, Panama
MZ048292 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Phyllostomus discolor*, Brazil
MZ048293 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Phyllostomus discolor*, Brazil   PD1
OR398686 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Trachops cirrhosus*, Belize
OR398689 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Trachops cirrhosus*, Belize
MK353860 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Trachops cirrhosus*, Belize
OR398688 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Trachops cirrhosus*, Belize   TC2
OR398687 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Trachops cirrhosus*, Belize
OR398690 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Trachops cirrhosus*, Belize
OR398691 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Trachops cirrhosus*, Belize
OR398692 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Trachops cirrhosus*, Belize
MH245145 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Trachops cirrhosus*, Belize   TC1
OR398685 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Trachops cirrhosus*, Belize
OQ308890 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Sturnira parvidens*, Belize
OQ308917 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Pteronotus mesoamericanus*, Belize
OQ308900 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Sturnira parvidens*, Belize
OQ308922 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Dermanura phaeotis*, Belize   SP1
MK353820 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Sturnira parvidens*, Belize
OQ308897 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Sturnira parvidens*, Belize
MH245159 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Pteronotus mesoamericanus*, Belize
OQ308894 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Pteronotus fulvus*, Belize   PPM1
OQ308903 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Pteronotus mesoamericanus*, Belize
MK353840 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Myotis elegans*, Belize
OQ456388 *Candidatus* Mycoplasma haematomyotis from *Myotis elegans*, Belize   MYE
OQ456389 *Candidatus* Mycoplasma haematomyotis from *Myotis elegans*, Belize
OQ456390 *Candidatus* Mycoplasma haematomyotis from *Myotis elegans*, Belize
KF713538 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Myotis lucifugus*, USA
MH245131 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Neoeptesicus furinalis*, Belize   EF2
OR016506 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Noctilio leporinus*, Belize
OR016507 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Noctilio leporinus*, Belize   NL1
U82963 *Mycoplasma haemomuris* from rodent
GU562823 *Candidatus* Mycoplasma haemohominis from human
MT077860 *Candidatus* Mycoplasma haemohominis from human
MT077861 *Candidatus* Mycoplasma haemohominis from *Pteropus ornatus*, New Caledonia
MT077864 *Candidatus* Mycoplasma haemohominis from *Pteropus tonganus*, New Caledonia
KM538695 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Miniopterus schreibersii*, Spain
KM538698 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Miniopterus schreibersii*, Spain
OQ456387 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Neoeptesicus furinalis*, Belize   EF3
MH245147 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Neoeptesicus furinalis*, Belize
MK353889 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Saccopteryx bilineata*, Belize   EF1
OQ456391 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Neoeptesicus furinalis*, Belize
MK353831 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Glossophaga mutica*, Belize
OQ308883 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Glossophaga mutica*, Belize
OQ308884 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Glossophaga mutica*, Belize
OQ308891 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Glossophaga mutica*, Belize
OQ308901 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Glossophaga mutica*, Belize   GLS
OQ308892 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Glossophaga mutica*, Belize
OQ308888 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Glossophaga mutica*, Belize
OQ308898 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Glossophaga mutica*, Belize
OR016510 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Gardnerycteris keenani*, Belize   GK1
MK353833 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Carollia sowelli*, Belize
OQ308913 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Carollia sowelli*, Belize   CS1
OQ308921 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Dermanura phaeotis*, Belize
MH245134 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Carollia sowelli*, Belize   CS2
OQ308920 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Carollia sowelli*, Belize
MH245174 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Molossus nigricans*, Belize   MR1
MH245175 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Molossus nigricans*, Belize
OR016505 *Mycoplasma* sp. from *Molossus alvarezi*, Belize
GU905012 *Candidatus* Mycoplasma haemozalophi from pinniped
AY492086 *Mycoplasma suis* from swine
AF338268 *Mycoplasma ovis* from sheep
AY383241 *Candidatus* Mycoplasma haematoparvum from dog
U88564 *Candidatus* Mycoplasma haemominutum from feline
M29061 *Mycoplasma pneumoniae* from human