Genomics of freshwater adaptation in three-spine stickleback from eastern

Canada

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Abstract

The threespine stickleback is an important species in the study of parallel evolution. However, the evidence for parallel evolution, and the genetic and phenotypic levels, has largely come from the west coast of North America and parts of southern Europe. Here, we use RAD-sequencing of pooled samples to study stickleback marine-freshwater differentiation in Atlantic Canada and test for evidence of parallel evolution. Our results show considerable heterogeneity in differentiation among populations, with some freshwater populations showing high degree of allele frequency divergence relative to marine ones. The strongest candidates were two SNPs near dopamine receptors (*Drd24a* and *Drd2l*). Gene ontology (GO) analysis of candidate genes shows dopamine neurotransmitter receptor activity as one of the most enriched gene functions, along with nervous system development. Our study suggests a more complex evolutionary history of stickleback populations in the Atlantic than previously thought, suggesting multiple colonization events or ongoing gene flow. The genomic regions showing repeated differentiation suggest adaptation to freshwater through changes in behaviour.

Introduction

Knowledge of the genetic basis of adaptation is central to understanding the mechanisms driving the diversification of species. Threespine stickleback fish (*Gasterosteus aculeatus*) are native to the oceans of the northern hemisphere and has been an important species in studies of ecology and evolution for almost a century (Bertin 1925; Heuts 1947a, b; Moodie and Reimchen 1976). Over the last 12000 years, with the melting of glaciers after the last glacial maximum, marine populations of threespine stickleback have colonized freshwater lakes and rivers across the northern hemisphere. Many freshwater populations evolved similar low-plated morph phenotypes, particularly in western North America (Baumgartner and Bell 1984; Colosimo et al. 2005; Hohenlohe et al. 2010). It is thought that alleles that confer higher fitness in freshwater are found at low frequencies in marine populations, with bidirectional gene flow maintaining the genetic variation needed to seed new freshwater

habitats ('transporter hypothesis', Schluter and Conte 2009). Today, the threespine stickleback is considered an exemplar of parallel evolution.

However, even early in the development of stickleback as a model species, it was noted that the remarkable parallel evolution among freshwater populations might be a local phenomenon and limited to western North America (i.e., eastern Pacific) and southern Europe (Hagen and Moodie 1982). Taking armour phenotype as an example, in regions of North America, Northern Europe, the Baltic Sea, and eastern Asia the completely plated morphs which is common in marine environments dominates in local lakes (Münzing 1963; Penczak 1965; Hagen and Moodie 1982; Mäkinen et al. 2008; Raeymaerker et al. 2014; Ferchaud and Hansen 2016; Yamasaki et al. 2019). This lack of differentiation between marine and freshwater populations was also noted at the genetic level using allozymes (Rafiński et al. 1989). More recently, a genomic study (Fang et al. 2020a) that looked at stickleback across their distribution showed that high marine-freshwater (M-FW) differentiation is largely confined to the eastern Pacific, with Atlantic populations showing low levels of genomic differentiation. In contrast to populations in British Columbia, many freshwater populations in Eastern Canada are dominated by full-plated ecotype (Hagen and Moodie 1982; Haines et al. 2022), with certain populations showing distinct phenotypes (Scott et al. 2023). However, genomic studies in this region are few (e.g., Fang et al. 2020).

One explanation for why parallel evolution and M-FW differentiation appears to be lower outside of the eastern Pacific is stochastic loss of freshwater-adapted alleles. Threespine stickleback evolved in the Pacific Ocean where they have persisted since for approximately 26 million years ago (Matschiner et al. 2011; Betancur R et al. 2015). Only much more recently, in the late Pleistocene (36.9–346.5 thousand years ago), did threespine stickleback colonize the western Pacific and Atlantic basin (Orti et al. 1994; Fang et al. 2018; Fang et al 2020). Atlantic populations also show less genetic diversity than those in the Pacific (Fang et al. 2020), a consequence of range expansion. However, most Atlantic populations analyzed thus far are located along the coast of northern Europe.

We study marine and freshwater threespine stickleback from eastern Canada, in

the provinces of Nova Scotia and Newfoundland where the full-plated phenotypes can

be found at high frequencies in freshwater habitats (Hagen and Moodie 1982). We use

genome-wide SNPs to characterize M-FW differentiation and look for evidence of

parallel natural selection. We seek to gain insight into the evolutionary history and the

genetic basis of freshwater adaptation of stickleback populations from eastern North

America.

Methods

Field sampling and DNA extraction

We used minnow traps and beach seines to collect 30 adult stickleback (> 30 mm in

length) from nine populations in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, Canada (Figure 1). In

Nova Scotia, we sampled three freshwater sites, including two lakes (Pomquet Lake

Lake Ainslie) and a stream (Black River), and two marine populations (Antigonish

Landing and Porper Pond). In Newfoundland, we sampled two freshwater (Pinchgut

Lake and Blue Pond) and two marine populations (Cooks Brook and Humber Arm). We

followed a phenol-chloroform procedure for DNA extraction.

DNA sequencing of pooled samples

For DNA quantification, we used a Picogreen® ds DNA assay (Thermo Fisher Scientific,

Waltham, USA) and an Infinite® 200 Nanoquant (Tecan Group Ltd. Männedorf,

Switzerland). We then normalized the concentration of dsDNA and pooled according to

sampling location. Thus, we created nine pools consisting of 30 individuals each. RAD-

seq libraries were prepared and sent for sequencing the McGill University and Genome

Quebec Innovation Center, Montreal, Canada. Sequencing was carried out on one lane

of Illumina HiSeq2500 which produced 125bp paired-end reads.

Bioinformatics

We used the *trim-fastq.pl* script of *Popoolation* (Kofler et al. 2011a) to process raw

reads, filtering based on read quality (--quality-threshold 20) and length (--min-length

50). We then mapped the processed reads to the stickleback reference genome

(BROADS S1) with the program *Bowtie2* (Langmead and Salzberg 2012), using the --

end-to-end mapping option. We then used *SAMtools* (Li et al. 2009) to convert the

output SAM files to BAM format and subsequently removed reads with mapping quality

below 20 (samtools view -q 20). We generated an mpileup file (samtools mpilep -B) and

converted the mpileup file to the synchronized (sync) format using *Popoolation2* (Kofler

et al. 2011b), which was used for downstream analyses.

Estimates allele frequency differentiation

We estimated population differentiation using F_{ST}, as formulated by Hartl and Clark

(1997), using the *fst-sliding.pl* script of *Popoolation2*. We applied the following

parameters: --min-count 2, --min-coverage 5, --max-coverage 500, --min-covered-

fraction 0, --window-size 1, --step-size 1, --pool-size 30:30:30:30:30:30:30:30:30, --

suppress-noninformative. We only analyzed genomic regions assembled at the

chromosome level (i.e., scaffolds excluded). We categorized F_{ST} outliers as SNPS in the

top 5% of the F_{ST} distribution of a given M-FW comparison. We then looked for overlap

of F_{ST} outliers among M-FW population pairs. We quantified F_{ST} outlier overlap among

M-FW population pairs using a custom bash script. Loci showing relatively large

changes in allele frequency (top 5%) in two or more M-FW comparisons within

provinces and across Nova Scotia and Newfoundland were taken as three subsets. We

then considered 'F_{ST} parallel outliers' SNPs that overlapped among the three sets.

Identification of candidate genes and analysis of molecular function

Genes potentially under parallel selection are expected to contain outlier loci, or more

likely, be near them as we used a reduced representation approach. We applied a

custom bash script to map outliers to or near protein-coding genes in the reference

genome. We limited our search to a set of 14,252 protein-coding gene annotations with

attributes "ID=gene" and "biotype=protein_coding". To gain insights into the traits under

selection, we analyzed candidate genes for enrichment of molecular functions using the

software *ShinyGO* 0.77 (Ge et al. 2020). This program, which is implemented as a

graphical web application, uses a large annotation database derived from Ensembl and

STRING-db to link lists of genes to functional categories, like gene ontology (GO). We

analyzed whether candidate genes were enriched for GO terms (biological process,

cellular component, and molecular function), using the FDR threshold of 10% and

keeping the 20 most significant hits. Because our data is based on a reduced

representation of the genome, there are likely cases where a causal mutation is not

sampled but rather a SNP in linkage disequilibrium to it. We thus analyzed significant

enrichment of GO terms for genes with outlier loci or within 5kb of one. We compared

our list of candidate genes to the set of 14,252 genes from which our candidate genes

were sampled and used the 'best matching species' option.

Results

Data sets and Genomic differentiation among populations

After processing raw RAD-seq data, we identified 18,582 SNPs across all 36 population

comparisons. We find that median genome-wide F_{ST} varies widely, ranging from 0.0118

to 0.0824 (Table S1; Figure 2). Considerable genomic heterogeneity is found among M-

FW comparisons (Figure 3) and between populations from the similar environments

(Figure 4). Notably, both the highest and lowest levels of genomic differentiation are

between freshwater populations. The least differentiated populations are Pomquet Lake

(Nova Scotia) and Pinchgut Lake (Newfoundland), while the most differentiated

correspond to Lake Ainslie (Nova Scotia) and Blue Pond (Newfoundland; Figure S1,

Table S1).

159   After excluding M-M and FW-FW comparisons, we obtained 25,236 informative

SNPs, variable across all 20 M-FW population comparisons. We used this SNP set to

look for genomic regions potentially involved in parallel adaptation to freshwater and

found 2,100 SNPs as F_{ST} outliers in two or more M-FW comparisons within Nova Scotia

(19 SNPs across all six comparisons; Figure S2a). In the four M-FW comparisons within

Newfoundland there are 1,306 SNPs in two or more comparisons (Figure S2b). When

comparing interprovincial differentiation among 10 M-FW population comparisons, our

results show 3,422 SNPs are F_{ST} outliers in at least two comparisons; three SNPs in

nine of the 10 comparisons (Figure S2c). In the top 5% of the F_{ST} distribution we find an

overlap of 279 SNPs (referred to as 'F_{ST} outliers' hereon) among the three sets M-FW

comparisons (NS, NL, and NS-NF), meaning these SNPs are F_{ST} outliers in at least 6/20

M-FW comparisons, representing 1.1 % of SNP data set. We found 133 different genes

contain or are within 5 kb of any of the 279 F_{ST} outliers (Table S2), with 68 genes

containing at least one outlier (Table S3). Notably, two SNPs (chromosome VI position

16449327 and chromosome XX position 14009648) fall in the top 5% of the F_{ST}

distribution in 19/20 M-FW comparisons: 6/6 M-FW comparisons in Nova Scotia, 4/4

comparisons in Newfoundland, and 9/10 interprovincial M-FW comparisons (not an

outlier in the Porper Pond and Pomquet Lake comparison). The latter of these two

SNPs is 920 bp downstream from a gene coding for a dopamine receptor, *drd2l*

(chromosome XX 14002115-14008728).

Gene Ontology

Among genes within 5 kb of an F_{ST} outlier, we found enrichment (FDR = 5%) of

biological processes associated with adenylate cyclase-inhibiting dopamine receptor

signaling and nervous system development (FDR = 0. 0.043) (Table S4). Molecular

functions enriched include neurotrophin binding and dopamine neurotransmitter

receptor activity (FDR = 0.019) (Table S5).

Clustering of marine and freshwater populations

Clustering of populations on a phylogram shows a paraphyletic relationship among

marine and freshwater populations. A WPGMA tree clusters freshwater populations

together, with Lake Ainslie and Black River as one sister clade, Pomquet Lake and

Pinchgut Lake as another, and Blue Pond as an out-group (Figure 5). Low bootstrap

values (< 50) correspond to branching off marine populations.

Discussion

In this study, we investigated marine and freshwater populations of stickleback along

Canada's east coast to gain insights into their evolutionary history and the potential

genetic basis of their adaptation to freshwater. Contrary to the expectation of low

genome-wide differentiation between marine and freshwater populations in the West

Atlantic (Fang et al. 2020a), we found that differentiation among M-FW populations

varied widely on the east coast of North America. This suggests a more complex

evolutionary history likely involving multiple colonization events or different refugia, and

ongoing gene flow. Evidence of parallel evolution was found as repeated differences in

allele frequency at SNP loci across multiple M-FW populations. Notably, we found

consistent differentiation of one SNP near a dopamine receptor previously found

differentially expressed in freshwater (Di Poi et al. 2016). Likely lacking the alleles for

reduced armour found in western North America, our results suggest selection to

behaviour or endocrine function played a role in eastern populations persisting in fresh

water

Heterogeneous marine-freshwater differentiation in Eastern Canada

Current evidence on the evolutionary history of threespine stickleback indicates this

species colonized the Atlantic during the late Pleistocene, as recently as 36.9 thousand

years ago (Fang et al. 2018; Fang et al. 2020). During range expansion into the Atlantic,

repeated bottlenecks appear to have led to the stochastic loss of some alleles

associated with freshwater adaptation, like the *Eda* allele for the low-plated morph

(Fang et al. 2020). Loci with alleles conferring higher fitness in freshwater are expected

to become rapidly differentiated after freshwater colonization. Therefore, the low M-FW

differentiation observed in the Atlantic is thought to be caused by a lack of these alleles

in the standing variation present in Atlantic populations relative to Pacific populations

(Fang et al. 2020).

Here, we show that although genome-wide M-FW differentiation is indeed low in

some population comparisons in eastern North America, other comparisons show a

level of differentiation like that observed in the Pacific side (Figure 3). We found the

highest differentiation between different freshwater populations. For example, in

Newfoundland, stickleback from two lakes isolated from the ocean and only 5 km apart

from each other, Pinchgut Lake and Blue Pond, differ considerably in their degree of

differentiation relative to marine populations (Figure 4). Blue Pond is a relatively small

lake with no input or output streams and is only fed by rainwater, thus immigration from

neighbouring sites is unlikely. Barriers to gene-flow likely played a role in differentiating

Blue Pond, as genetic drift drives populations apart in the absence of gene flow. An

alternative explanation is that there were multiple waves of colonization in Eastern

Canada, as occurred in the Japanese Archipelago (Kakioka et al. 2020). The clustering

of freshwater populations is consistent with three colonization events, one by the

lineage in Blue Pond, one by the lineages in Lake Ainslie and Black River, followed by a

more recent expansion to Pomquet and Pinchgut lakes. However, our results are also

consistent with freshwater populations that evolved in isolation in different glacial refugia

during the last ice age (Mäkinen and Merilä 2008).

Evidence of selection on dopamine receptors

Adaptation to similar ecological conditions through re-use of standing genetic variation

in a source population is thought to be the dominant mechanism leading to parallel

evolution (Schlötterer 2023). The low-plated allele of the *Eda* gene, which is found at

low frequencies in marine populations, is known to confer higher fitness in freshwater

(Marchinko and Schluter 2007; Barrett et al. 2008; Rouzic et al. 2011). Loss of this allele

throughout much of the Atlantic gene pool helps explain why parallel evolution of the

low-plated phenotype is not observed in lakes of eastern Canada. However, *Eda* is not

the only gene known to be selected in freshwater, as osmoregulatory genes have also

been implicated in freshwater adaptation at a global scale, including Na/K ATPase

pump and $Na^{+/}K^{+/}2Cl^-$ cotransporter (Deagle et al. 2013; Divino et al. 2016; McCairns

and Bernatchez 2010).

We did not find evidence of molecular evolution near the *Eda* locus, which is

consistent with historical observations of stickleback phenotypes in lakes from this

region of North America and stochastic loss of allele during range expansion (Hagen

and Moddie 1982; Fang et al. 2020). Nonetheless, the west Atlantic stickleback

populations sampled here show evidence of parallel evolution, with 1.1% of SNPs

showing some evidence of repeated differentiation in M-FW comparisons in Nova

Scotia, Newfoundland, and between the two provinces. Notably, we found repeated M-

FW differentiation of SNPs near dopamine receptors, *Drd4a* and *Drd2l*, and enrichment

of gene functions related dopamine receptor activity and nervous system development.

These results suggest that stickleback might have adapted to freshwater through

parallel changes in behaviour, like aggression.

Individual variation in endocrinology tends to be underutilized in evolutionary

biology despite its potential to bridge physiology with ecology and genetics (Williams

2008). In zebrafish (*Danio rerio*), the expression profile of dopamine receptors *Drd2c*

and *Drd3* have been found to correlate with individual differences in aggression,

particularly between dominant and subordinate males (Filby et al. 2010). In stickleback,

exposure to a simulated predator lowers the expression of *Drd4a* (Abbey-Lee et al.

2018). At the population level, marine and freshwater populations show extensive

differences in the behavioural parameters of sociability, aggressiveness, and levels of

activity (Di-Poi et al. 2014). A study comparing physiological regulatory networks in

freshwater and marine populations of stickleback indicates that evolution of receptors,

like *Drd2*, and not ligands (e.g., monoamine levels or metabolites) are associated with

population divergence.

The dopaminergic system is also known to inhibit prolactin which, in fish, plays

an important function in osmoregulation (Liu et al. 2006; Yamamoto and Vernier 2011;

Mancera and McCormick 2019). Prolactin increases retention of ions like Na^+ and Cl^-

and decreases water uptake, giving it the name the 'freshwater-adapting hormone' (Liu

et al. 2006). Prolactin mRNA levels correlate with local ion concentrations in natural

populations of the black-chinned tilapia (*Sarotherodon melanotheron*) adapted to

different salinities (Tine et al. 2007). In the spotted scat (*Scatophagus argus*), a

euryhaline fish, the renal dopaminergic system responds via *Drd1* to hypo-osmotic

shock by inhibiting Na^+/K^+-ATPase (Su et al. 2016). In stickleback, prolactin is linked to

freshwater migration and tolerance (Lam and Hoar 1967; Ishikawa et al. 2016; Pavlova

et al. 2020; Taugbøl et al. 2022). Thus, the parallel differentiation of regions near

dopamine receptors in M-FW comparisons may reflect adaptation mediated by

phenotypic changes to behaviour, osmoregulation, or both.

Conclusion

Using genome-wide SNPs, our study showed heterogeneous genomic differentiation

between marine and freshwater populations of threespine stickleback in eastern

Canada. We found evidence of parallel evolution near dopamine receptors, potentially

meaning that behaviour was under selection upon colonization of freshwater lakes.

Alternatively, individuals with alleles associated with specific behaviour profiles may

have been predisposed for undergoing range expansion into freshwater. Genetic

changes near genes for dopamine regulation may also be connected to osmoregulatory

adaptation. Overall, our results suggest that parallel evolution in eastern Canada, and

perhaps across much of the Atlantic, may be reflected not as morphological changes

but as adaptation of hormone-mediated phenotypes.

305   **Bridging text**

306   Chapter 3 presented an investigation of freshwater adaptation and the evolutionary

307   history of post-glacial populations of stickleback from Eastern Canada. In Chapter 4, we

308   focus on the lower limits of contemporary evolution. We use estuary stickleback as a

309   system for glimpsing the first steps of adaptive evolution.

Figure 1. Collection sites in Eastern Canada.

Figure 2. Heatplot depicting average (median) pair-wise F_{ST} with histogram of F_{ST} values. Freshwater sites are labelled blue.

Antigonish Landing - Pomquet Lake

Antigonish Landing - Lake Ainslie

Antigonish Landing - Black River

Porper Pond - Pomquet Lake

Porper Pond - Lake Ainslie

Porper Pond - Black River

Humber Arm - Pinchgut Lake

Humber Arm - Blue Pond

Cooks Brook - Pinchgut Lake

Cooks Brook - Blue Pond

Antigonish Landing - Pinchgut Lake

Antigonish Landing - Blue Pond

Porper Pond - Pinchgut Lake

Porper Pond - Blue Pond

Humber Arm - Pomquet Lake

Humber Arm - Lake Ainslie

Figure 3. Manhattan plot of FST values showing heterogeneity in 20 marine-freshwater (M-FW) comparisons.

Antigonish Landing - Porper Pond

Pomquet Lake - Lake Ainslie

Pomquet Lake - Black River

Lake Ainslie - Black River

Humber Arm - Cooks Brook

Pinchgut Lake - Blue Pond

Antigonish Landing - Humber Arm

Antigonish Landing - Cooks Brook

Porper Pond - Humber Arm

Porper Pond - Cooks Brook

Pomquet Lake - Pinchgut Lake

Pomquet Lake - Blue Pond

Figure 4. Manhattan plots of populations from similar environments (M-M and FW-FW comparisons).

Figure 5. Phylogenetic tree of marine (M) and freshwater (FW) populations.