Prevalence of new and known species of haemoparasites in feral pigeons in northwest Italy

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Abstract

Background: Haemoparasites in feral pigeons have been studied in several countries but no data are available from Italy. The aim of this work was to evaluate the prevalence and diversity of *Haemoproteus* spp./*Plasmodium* spp. and *Leucocytozoon* spp. in feral pigeons from northwest Italy, as well as the association between infection and host age or sex.

Methods: Feral pigeons were collected during a regional culling programme from the Piedmont region (northwest Italy) and subjected to necropsy. Infections were detected from DNA extracted from the spleen following a nested PCR protocol. The association between sex or age and infection status was evaluated using the chi-squared test for independence or Fisher’s exact test.

Results: Out of 51 animals, 15 were positive for *Haemoproteus/Plasmodium* spp. and eight for *Leucocytozoon* spp., with a significant difference between haemoparasites prevalence. There was no significant association between age or sex and infection status. The coinfection with different haemoparasites was very significant (*p* < 0.01), showing a greater relative risk to be infected by a second haemoparasite in birds already infected, in particular in male and in adult pigeons. DNA sequencing of *Leucocytozoon* spp. showed six different lineages in pigeons, and one of *Haemoproteus* and *Plasmodium*, respectively.

Conclusions: Blood parasites are continuously circulating around the world, and the results presented in the paper suggest that cross infection of feral pigeons with haemoparasites typical of other migratory or nonmigratory bird species is possible. Moreover, the geographical location of Italy along the main migratory routes is a crucial factor to be considered for migratory birds, because they can be affected by blood parasites detected in feral pigeons, and vice versa.

Keywords: Feral pigeons, *Columba livia*, Haemoparasites, *Haemoproteus* spp., *Leucocytozoon* spp, *Plasmodium* spp

Background

Blood parasites have been subject of extensive research since the beginning of the 20th century [1]. The presence of haemoparasites in birds is very common, and it is estimated that 68% of all bird species are susceptible to haemosporidians [2,3]. Feral pigeons (*Columba livia*) are widely distributed in the world. Their number is increasing, especially in urban areas [4]. Haemoparasites in this species have been studied in several countries [5,6], but to the authors’ best knowledge no data on their presence in Italy are available. Therefore, the prevalence of *Haemoproteus* spp./*Plasmodium* spp. or *Leucocytozoon* spp. from pigeons culled by game wardens in the northwest of Italy has been determined. The possible associations between infection rate and different age or gender were also investigated. Moreover, considering that Italy is geographically situated on the main bird migratory routes, infection of feral pigeons with haemoparasites typical of other bird species could not be excluded, and vice versa.

Methods

During the years 2010–2011, following the adoption of a regional animal containment programme (according to...
Gene haplotypes, defined by a sequence differ-

e other Leucocytozoon/Haemoproteus/Plasmodium spp. showed the

e et al. (LC3-LC6 and LC2-LC4) were present at

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significant (p < 0.01) was detected. There were no significant

differences on infection status according to either bird age or sex.

The co-infection with both haemoparasites was very significant (p < 0.01), and a greater relative risk (RR, 7.2) to be infected by a second haemoparasite was recorded in already infected birds.

Regarding sex and age distribution of multiple infestation in pigeons associations were significant only in males (p < 0.05; RR 11.0) and in adult birds (p < 0.05; RR 10.0).

DNA sequencing of the eight PCR positive samples for Leucocytozoon spp. allowed identifying six different lineages: five of them were the same identified in Hooded crows investigated by the authors in the same area (LC2; LC3, LC4; LC5; LC6: Scaglione et al., unpubl. data, [GenBank: KJ128987; KJ128989; KJ128990; KJ128991; KJ128988]), the other was a new lineage in feral pigeons (L.-AEMO02). In two animals, two different lineages of Leucocytozoon (LC3-LC6 and LC2-LC4) were present at the same time. DNA sequencing of the 15 PCR positive samples for Haemoproteus/Plasmodium spp. showed the presence of the already described haplotypes P-SGS1 and H-HAECOL1. One Leucocytozoon sample and five Haemoproteus/Plasmodium samples that scored positive on the PCR analyses could not be sequenced, despite repeated amplification.

Discussion

Haemoparasites in birds have been object of many investigations [1,14]. Usually blood samples are taken from free-living birds during bird ringing, in order to evaluate morphology of haemoparasite in blood cells and grading parasitaemia with light microscopy, and to identify different lineages by PCR. Blood samples and blood smears were not collected in this project because animals were captured in accordance with current national regulations through Larsen cage traps and immediately euthanized. After a standard necropsy, the spleen of each animal was tested by PCR for haemoparasites. Spleen, being a well perfused and easily removable organ, with an important role in destruction of parasitized cells [15], can be used as a substitute of blood, useful to identify an erythrocytic or megalomeront stage. In fact, during these stages of development, the spleen should test positive by PCR. Furthermore, megalomeronts can be detected anywhere in the bird organism, but most of all in the spleen [1].

Several studies on birds haemoparasites [16-18] demonstrate that young animals are more prone to be infected by haemoparasites, even if the majority of authors indicated that adults have a greater prevalence of infection by various groups of haemosporidians [19]. Other authors showed that there were no differences in the prevalence of bird infections in different age groups [20], as reported in the present investigation.
Numerous endogenous and exogenous factors may have a cumulative influence on the infection status of both sexes of the pigeons by these parasites, such as the host’s hormones and humoral compounds, age and nutritional conditions, behaviour and habits, as well as the season of the year and ecological and physical features of the regions [6]. Usually, females are more parasitized because the reduction of the locomotion activity during the nesting period is a factor increasing the probability of their infection with haemosporidians [1].

In the present study, a significant association between sex and infection status was not detected. However, as the animals were captured from October to March, probably nesting related differences could not have been observed due to a reduced laying of eggs in this period. Moreover, in this species both male and female can hatch eggs.

Statistical differences in PCR detection of Haemoproteus/Plasmodium spp. and Leucocytozoon spp. infection may be due to variation in vector diversity and population size, and avian community composition [1,21,22].

The finding of avian haematozoa in pigeons implies the presence of ornithophilic vectors in Piedmont region and the susceptibility of this species to infection. Many bird hosts could be simultaneously infected by several species or strains of parasites [23-25]. According to the literature, Haemoproteus spp. is the most frequently observed blood parasite in birds, followed by Leucocytozoon spp. and Plasmodium spp. [26-28]. In Columbidae [5,6,28,29], prevalence for each of them is strictly correlated to the geographical area. Sequences analysed in this study revealed respectively positivities of 56.3%, 43.8%, and 6.3%, for the three species. The coinfection with Haemoproteus spp., Plasmodium spp. and Leucocytozoon spp. in tested samples showed that the presence of a haemoparasite predisposes to other haemoparasitic infections, in particular in males and in adult birds.

Coinfections with two or more different malaria parasites are common in wild birds [30] and it is possible to find several haemoporaic lineages both in a population and in the individuals [9]. Beadell et al. [31] found mixed infections in 29/428 (6.8%) individuals in their study on the prevalence of two avian blood parasite genera (Plasmodium and Haemoproteus) in the Australo-Papuan region. In a recent study in New Zealand, double infections with Plasmodium relictum and Plasmodium rouxi were found in blackbirds [32]. There are discrepancies in the literature about the effect of coinfections with different strains of Plasmodium, although these are generally considered more virulent than infections with just a single strain [33-35]. Heavy parasitaemia (over 35% and up to 90% during peaks) was found in three species of experimentally infected passerines, but the authors did not note any significant effect in body mass [35]. In contrast, Marzal et al. [34] found a negative additive cost in body condition in individuals from a natural population of House Martins (Delichon urbicum) experimentally infected by two different Plasmodium strains [36].

The L-AEMO2 Leucocytozoon spp. lineage [GenBank: KJ152637] has been observed in Aegypius monachus in Spain (Pérez-Rodriguez et al., unpubl. data, [GenBank: HF543622]). The other lineages of Leucocytozoon spp. identified in feral pigeons have never been observed before in non-passerine birds. The L-CORNIX02 and L-CORNIX06 lineages have been previously observed in Corvus corone and Corvus macrorhynchos in Japan (Yoshimura et al. unpubl. data [GenBank: AB741499, AB741505]) and in Corvus corone cornix in Italy in the same area. The LC3, LC4 and LC5 lineages have been previously identified only in Corvus corone cornix in Piedmont. Similar sequences with a homology of 99% (473/479 bp) have been registered in Pycnonotus jocosus in Switzerland (van Rooyen and Christie, unpubl. data [GenBank: JX867112]).

The H-HAECOL1 Haemoproteus/Plasmodium spp. lineage has been previously recorded in Columbidae [25,37] being repeatedly detected in pigeons and many other species of wild and domestic birds worldwide [38-42]. Reported infection rates were highly variable (range 18.8%-76.5%) but all the animals positive for Haemoproteus presented the H-HAECOL1 lineage 13, in contrast to Al-Barwari and Saeed [6], hypothesized that female pigeons are more prone than males to infection by H-HAECOL1. On the other hand, Senlik et al. [42] were unable to detect a significant difference in the infection rate of this parasite in terms of host sex, as already demonstrated in the present study.

Concurrent with the infection by H-HAECOL1, Dranzoa et al. [40] provided a figure of 29.4% for infection of the rock pigeons by Plasmodium parasites. In this study only one male pigeon was infected with P. relictum P-SGS1 lineage, not associated to other tested haemoparasites. The identified Plasmodium parasite has been observed worldwide, mainly in passerine birds [43-45].

**Conclusion**

Blood parasites are related in many characters and considered by many authors to have either benign or mild effects [39,18]. They are continuously circulating around the world and any variation in their prevalence, intensity and health impact, whether sex-, seasonal- or spatial-related, might depend on the susceptibility of the host species involved, their ages, habitats, as well as congruence, transmission, density and feeding habits of their vectors.

In the present paper the authors report novel host species for Leucocytozoon of corvids found in pigeons, and a
novel Leucocytozoon species. Leucocytozoon parasites are not routinely found in pigeons. Moreover, the results hereby presented suggest that cross infection of feral pigeons with haemoparasites typical of other migratory or nonmigratory bird species is possible and should be further investigated and monitored. In fact, the geographical location of Italy along the main migratory routes is a crucial factor to be considered for migratory birds, because they can be affected by blood parasites transmitted by feral pigeons, and vice versa.

Acknowledgements
The authors gratefully acknowledge the Centro di Referenza di Patologia Comparata “Bruno Maria Zaini”, Italy; Prof. Javier Perez-Tris of the Department of Zoology and Physical Anthropology, Complutense University of Madrid, Spain and Spanish Ministry of Education for financial support (FPU studentship to APR).

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Received: 4 December 2014 Accepted: 20 February 2015

Published online: 03 March 2015

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Abbreviations
LC2: Leucocytozoon-CORNIX02; LC3: Leucocytozoon-CORNIX03; LC4: Leucocytozoon-CORNIX04; LC5: Leucocytozoon-CORNIX05; LC6: Leucocytozoon-CORNIX06; LENA02: Leucocytozoon AEM02; H-HARECD1: Haemoproteus columbae 1; P-SGS1: Plasmodium relictum lineage SGS1.

Competing interests
The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors’ contributions
FES carried out the necropsies, sampling, collection of data, molecular studies and helped to draft the manuscript; PP performed the statistical analysis and helped to draft the manuscript; FTC carried out the biomolecular studies, ADPR participated in the sequence alignment, EF participated in the design of the study and EB participated in the design and coordination of the study and helped to draft the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Acknowledgements
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