Fecal Carriage of *S. aureus* and the *mecA* Gene in Resident Wild Birds and Its Zoonotic Potential

Heba S. El-Mahallawy¹, Dalia A. Hamza², and Zeinab S. Ahmed²*

¹Department of Animal Hygiene, Zoonoses, and Animal Behaviour and Management - Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Suez Canal University, Ismailia 41522, Egypt.

²Department of Zoonoses, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Cairo University, Giza 12211, Egypt.

*Corresponding Authors: Zeinab S. Ahmed, E-Mail: Zeinab.said@cu.edu.eg, Tel: +201116218942

ABSTRACT

Resistant *Staphylococcus (S.) aureus* in general and MRSA, in particular, have received great attention in both veterinary and human health sectors. The importance of fecal carriage of staphylococci is rarely encountered. This study aimed to investigate the role of wild birds in Giza governorate, Egypt in spreading resistant *S. aureus* from winter 2019 to summer 2021. Cloacal swabs and fecal droppings were collected from different species of wild birds (rock pigeons, laughing doves, cattle egrets, and hooded crows). Isolation and identification of *Staphylococcus* spp. were performed using Columbia agar base with 5% defibrinated sheep blood and mannitol salt agar. Moreover, molecular detection of the *coa, nuc,* and *mecA* genes has been investigated via the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) assay. Out of 166 fecal samples examined, staphylococci had been confirmed in 100 samples (60.2%), with *S. aureus* representing 70% of the obtained staphylococci; however, non-*aureus* staphylococci represented the remaining 30% of the isolates. The *mecA* gene carriage was (57.1%) in *S. aureus*. This study highlighted the zoonotic potential of staphylococci isolated from resident wild birds in Giza, Egypt. Presences of such pathogenic microorganisms with their resistance traits around and in the human habitat add to the microbial community present around human dwellings in the study area. They may play a role in the spreading of various illnesses.

Keywords: *Coa* gene, *mecA* gene, MRSA, PCR, Wild birds.

INTRODUCTION

*Staphylococcus (S.) aureus* is one of the clinically significant pathogens of humans and animals. This bacteria has been linked to various illnesses of various severity and has been found to be life-threatening, with fatality rates higher than those of AIDS, viral hepatitis, and tuberculosis combined (Van Hal et al., 2012). The ability of Livestock-associated *S. aureus* to infect human populations and the community-associated *S. aureus* adds a considerable burden on the healthcare system (Dweba et al., 2019).

Although antimicrobial resistance is usually more frequent in poultry, it has also been detected in bacteria isolated from wild birds (Benskin et al., 2009). Free-living birds that are often encountered in the human environment naturally harbor harmful antibiotic-resistant microorganisms (Literak et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2017). This is especially noticed in crows due to their growing numbers and continuous mobility that aids in the spreading of harmful pathogens (Literak et al., 2010).

Nowadays, antimicrobial resistance has been identified by the world health organization (WHO) as one of the most serious threats to public health and food security (WHO, 2020). Moreover, methicillin-resistant *S. aureus* (MRSA) strains are a significant global health issue (Gajdács and Zsoldiné Urbán, 2019). The *mecA* gene that encodes PBP2a (penicillin-binding protein 2a) is responsible for the majority of MRSA infections, and its detection helps in the identification of methicillin resistance in *S. aureus* (Shrestha et al., 2002). According to CLSI 2020 guidelines, *S. aureus* strains that test positive for the *mecA* should be reported as MRSA (CLSI, 2020).

Furthermore, methicillin-resistant coagulase-negative staphylococci (MRCNS) have long been identified to cause human and animal diseases (Chen et al., 2016). Meanwhile, special attention has been paid
to other coagulase-positive staphylococci and non-
areus staphylococci representing a significant threat. 
Although they are usually found as commensals in 
humans and animals, however exchange of these 
bacteria between animals and humans can sometimes 
cause severe or even lethal infections (González-
Martín et al., 2020).

Despite being recognized as major reservoirs 
or carriers for transmission during the last decade, there 
has been a rising interest in MRSA incidence in 
wildlife. Still, little data are available (Silveira et al., 
2021). Understanding MRSA's general epidemiology at 
the national level is essential for healthcare 
professionals and policymakers to support successful 
preventive and control initiatives. Pigeons, doves, and 
hooded crows are among wild birds extensively 
dispersed in Egypt. Because of their colonial nesting 
behavior around human dwellings, the vast majority of 
their excrement concentrate in these areas, contributing 
to the microbial load that may contain potentially 
harmful pathogens to human health.

Despite extensive research on MRSA in 
humans and animals, there is still a scarcity of data 
about the level of infection, carriage, and the zoonotic 
importance of this bacterium from wildlife. Here we 
report the carriage of the mecA gene in S. aureus 
isolated from droppings and cloacal samples of resident 
wild birds in Giza, Egypt, and highlight its zoonotic 
importance to public health.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Ethical statement:**

Protocols for sample collection and laboratory 
examination for this study were reviewed and approved 
by Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Cairo University's 
Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (No. 
VetCU10102019087).

**Sampling:**

A total of 166 fecal samples were collected 
from resident wild birds (rock pigeons, laughing doves, 
cattle egrets, and hooded crows) from different regions 
in Giza governorate, Egypt, during the period from 
winter 2019 to summer 2021. Traps were used to 
capture the birds and either cloacal swabs or the top 
surface of fresh droppings were obtained before the 
release of the birds from the net. Occasionally, a 
professional hunter was hired to shoot some crows and 
doves when the birds identified the traps at the 
collection sites and avoided them. Samples were 
transported in an ice box as soon as possible and a 
microbiological examination was performed within 24 
h in Zoonoses Department Research Laboratory, 
Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Cairo University.

**Isolation and identification of S. aureus:**

Isolation and identification of S. aureus were 
carried out as described earlier (Quinn et al., 2011). 
Fecal specimens were incubated aerobically into 9 ml 
of brain heart infusion broth (Oxoid, Hampshire, UK) 
at 37°C for 12-24 h. For each sample, two loops from 
the incubated broth were streaked on Columbia agar 
base supplemented with 5% defibrinated sheep blood 
(Oxoid, Hampshire, UK) and mannitol salt agar 
(Oxoid, Hampshire, UK). Both plates were incubated at 
37°C ± 1°C and the characteristic growth on each 
medium was recorded after 24:48 h.

Isolates were presumed to be staphylococci 
based on colony morphology, catalase response, Gram 
staining, and oxidative-fermentative tests. Following 
the identification of the genus *Staphylococcus*, the 
enzyme coagulase was identified in all isolates using 
slide and tube methods (Quinn et al., 2011). 
Coagulase-negative isolates that showed resistance to 
methicillin (based on detection of the mecA gene, see 
below) were submitted to species identification using 
the API-Staph Kit (BioMérieux, France) as described 
before (Petzer et al., 2013). A single pure colony from 
each identified strain was kept on brain heart infusion 
broth for additional testing and PCR analysis.

**Molecular confirmation of S. aureus isolates and detection of the coa and mecA genes:**

All staphylococci isolates were refreshed on 
mannitol salt agar plates at 37°C overnight before 
DNA extraction. A single bacterial colony was picked 
from each plate and placed in 200 μl deionized distilled 
water. The QIAamp Mini DNA Extraction Kit (Qiagen, 
Hilden, Germany) was used to extract genomic DNA 
down to the manufacturer’s instructions. Primer 
sequences of the coa gene specific for coagulase 
production, the nuc gene specific for S. aureus, and the 
mecA gene specific for methicillin resistance in 
staphylococci were used in conventional PCR 
protocols previously described (Table 1).

The reactions were carried out in 25 μl reaction 
mixtures containing 5 μl of DNA as a template, 1 μl 
(20 pmol) of each primer, 12.5 μl of 1× PCR master 
mix (Dream Taq Green PCR Master Mix, Fermentas 
Life Science) and 5.5 μl molecular grade water. 
Expected amplification bands were photographed using 
Gel documentation system (Alpha Innotech) after PCR 
amplification products had been electrophoresed 
through 1.5% agarose gel (Sigma, USA) with ethidium 
bromide (0.5 μg ml-1) (Sigma, USA) in 1x TBE buffer.
Table -1: Distribution of cattle by chiefdoms and towns in Koinadugu District, Sierra Leone:

| Target gene | Sequence | Cycling conditions | Amplified product size | Reference |
|-------------|----------|--------------------|------------------------|-----------|
| nuc         | 5′-GCGATTGATGGTGATACGGTT-3′ 5′-AGCCAAAGCCTTGACGAACATAAGC-3′ | Initial denaturation: 94˚C/5 min. 35 cycles: 94˚C/30 s, 55˚C/30 s, 72˚C/60 s Final extension: 72˚C/10 min. | 270 bp | (Al-Amery et al., 2019) |
| coa         | 5′ATAGAGATGCTGGTGATACGGTT-3′ 5′GCTTCCGATTGTTCGATGC-3′ | Initial denaturation: 94˚C/45 s 30 cycles: 94˚C/20 s, 57˚C/15 s, 70˚C/15 s Final extension: 72˚C/2 min. | 750 bp | (Hookey et al., 1998) |
| mecA        | 5′-GTGAAGATATACCAAGTGATT-3′ 5′-ATGCGCTATAGATTGAAAGGAT-3′ | Initial denaturation: 94˚C/4 min. 35 cycles: 94˚C/60 s, 55˚C/60 s, 72˚C/60 s Final extension: 72˚C/10 min. | 147 bp | (Zhang et al., 2005) |

RESULTS

Out of 166 fecal samples from wild birds, based on phenotypic (culture characteristics, slide and tube coagulase testing), API kit testing and genotypic identification of the coa gene, staphylococci were detected in 100 fecal samples (60.2%). S. aureus predominated among the recovered Staphylococcus spp. (70 isolates, 70%), while other non-aureus staphylococci were detected at a lower level (30 isolates, 30%) (Table 2). S. cohnii was the most frequent (16%) coagulase-negative Staphylococcus spp. (table 2). The occurrence of the mecA gene in S. aureus isolates carried by wild birds was (57.1%, 40/70).

Table 2. Staphylococcus spp. isolates detected based on coagulase testing, API kits, and coa and nuc gene detection:

| Staphylococcus spp. | Staphylococci isolates | Total n=100 (%) |
|---------------------|------------------------|----------------|
| S. aureus (n=70)    | S. aureus              | 70 (70)        |
| CN staphylococci (n=30) |                      |                |
| S. chromogenes      | 4 (4)                  |                |
| S. simulans         | 3 (3)                  |                |
| S. haemolyticus     | 3 (3)                  |                |
| S. epidermidis      | 4 (4)                  |                |
| S. cohnii           | 16 (16)                |                |

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to investigate the fecal carriage of resistant S. aureus by wild birds in Giza, Egypt. Some studies that have been conducted in Egypt have surveyed the presence of several zoonotic pathogens in wild birds (Ahmed et al., 2019; El Taweel et al., 2020; Nabil et al., 2020); however, very few studies have reported the presence of staphylococci from wild birds and its probable zoonotic importance.

Staphylococci have been identified as an appropriate model for "One Health" investigations, as some species and clones have been demonstrated to "jump" through the three ecosystems of interest (human, animals, and the environment) (Abdullahi et al., 2021). In the present study, staphylococci were detected in 60.2% (100/166) of the wild birds’ fecal samples, among which S. aureus (70%, 70/100) were phenotypically and genotypically identified. Fecal carriage of staphylococci is not frequently encountered among birds generally and wild birds in particular. However, in a recent study, staphylococci were detected (45.9%) in cloacal samples from wild birds from street markets in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, with S. aureus representing 11% of the total staphylococci (Matias et al., 2018).

Also, S. aureus has been identified in faeces of corvids, marine and migratory birds in an earlier study (Hubálek, 2004). Moreover, Staphylococcus spp. (S. aureus, S. Sciuri and S. saprophyticus) had recently been detected in droppings of two migratory seabird species along the coastal shores of the Gulf of...
California, with *S. aureus* detected at a rate of 6.8% in Heermann’s Gulls and 5.9% in Elegant Terns (Contreras-Rodríguez et al., 2019). Despite the usual presence of some of these agents as commensals, detecting such pathogenic bacterial species from wild birds around human dwellings highlights their significance in spreading illnesses to inhabitants, especially if these bacteria carry virulence or antimicrobial resistance determinants.

Coagulase-negative staphylococci (CoNS); *S. haemolyticus, S. chromogenes, S. simulans, S. hyicus, S. hominis, S. saccharolyticus, S. carnosus,* and *S. lugdunensis* were isolated from human and domestic mammalian hosts as reported earlier (Becker et al., 2014). Although CoNS may be recovered at a lower level, special attention should be paid to these species due to their opportunistic behaviour. In this regard, *S. haemolyticus* has been linked to septicemia, human endocarditis, and urinary tract infection (Kloos and Bannerman, 1994). Similar to results in the present study, but at a lower level, *S. chromogenes, S. haemolyticus,* and *S. simulans* were isolated from cloacal swabs of wild birds in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (Matias et al., 2018).

The spread of antimicrobial resistance through staphylococci is a significant problem both in veterinary and human medicine, posing a global challenge since some pathogenic species have developed resistance to most antibiotics that limit the therapeutic choices. The appearance of MRSA has become a global public health issue, with these resistant strains identified from wild animal species and birds (Contreras-Rodríguez et al., 2019; Matias et al., 2018; Monecke et al., 2016; Silveira et al., 2021).

Most methicillin resistance in *S. aureus* is controlled by the mecA gene that encodes PBP2a (penicillin-binding protein 2a), which is reported to be the primary cause of the penicillin and methicillin resistance (Pournaras et al., 2015). Due to prolonged COVID-19 lockdown, we can’t revive staphylococci isolates for antimicrobial sensitivity testing which was an unintentional limitation to this study. However, alternatively, the presence of the mecA gene responsible for methicillin resistance in *S. aureus* was assessed.

In the present study, the mecA gene was detected in 57.1% (40/70) *S. aureus* isolates. Similarly, the mecA gene (22%) had been detected in *S. aureus* and some coagulase-negative staphylococci recovered from wild bird cloacal samples in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (Matias et al., 2018). On the other hand, along the shores of Gulf of California, although coagulase-positive staphylococci had been recovered from droppings of migratory seabirds (Heermann’s Gulls and Elegant Terns), none of them carried the mecA resistance gene (Contreras-Rodríguez et al., 2019). This may be related to the nature of the surrounding environment and the microbial load where birds from these studies are distributed.

Overall, the dissemination of such resistant bacteria is merely through anthropogenic sources such as industrial and household wastewater effluents, runoff from agriculture, and garbage, between wild animals and the human environments. Once transmitted to wild animals, some bacteria can then be responsible for disseminating various resistance genes, mobile genetic elements, and epidemic clones to several places (Rousham et al., 2018; Silveira et al., 2021).

**CONCLUSION**

This study highlighted the zoonotic importance of staphylococci isolated from resident wild birds in Giza, Egypt. The presence of such pathogenic microorganisms with their resistance traits around and in the human habitat has public health implications. It may play a role in spreading various illnesses and resistant bacteria. There is an urgent need to develop control systems to restrict bacterial spread throughout different ecosystems, minimize the emergence of more antimicrobial resistance, and maintain the efficacy of presently available antibiotics. Implementation of regular monitoring policies in different environments is necessary to have a clear image of the role of other wild species in transmitting certain zoonotic agents to humans.

**Funding:**

This research didn’t receive any specific grant from any funding agencies in the public, commercial, or nonprofit sectors.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests:**

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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