*Wolbachia* infection and parasitoid occurrence among plant-feeding caterpillars of the endangered butterfly *Phengaris teleius* (Lepidoptera: Lycaenidae) in southern Poland

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Parasites are an important component of ecological communities, as they shape host population dynamics and interfere with interspecific competition in ecosystems. Here, we studied *Wolbachia* infection and parasitoid occurrence among caterpillars of the endangered *Phengaris teleius* butterfly in five populations inhabiting southern Poland. The knowledge about potential parasites of *P. teleius* may be of particular importance for understanding forces regulating population processes of this species. Our study showed lack of *Wolbachia* infection and endoparasitoids in the sample of 91 4\textsuperscript{th} instar *P. teleius* caterpillars. However, we found larvae of an unidentified hymenopteran ectoparasitoid on 17 3\textsuperscript{rd} and 4\textsuperscript{th} instar *P. teleius* caterpillars. We compare our results to findings from other populations of *P. teleius*, and its sister species in Europe and Asia, and discuss possible causes of observed patterns of parasite occurrence.

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Received 16 October 2017, accepted 14 May 2018

1. Introduction

*Wolbachia* (Hertig & Wolbach, 1924) (Rickettsiales: Rickettsiaceae) is a bacterial parasite of invertebrate animals that causes several problems, particularly in the conservation management of Lepidoptera (Hamm et al. 2014). *Wolbachia* is an intracellular ω-proteobacterium that has the ability to manipulate the biology of its invertebrate hosts. In Lepidoptera, *Wolbachia* infection may induce feminization of genetic males, kill the male progeny of infected females and cause cytoplasmic incompatibility (i.e. inability of infected males to successfully mate with females lacking the same *Wolbachia* strain; Werren et al. 2008). Typically, *Wolbachia* spreads vertically in populations and is inherited maternally due to its presence in the cytoplasm of female gametes (Werren et al. 2008). The presence of *Wolbachia* may decrease the effective population size of Lepidop-
terata and therefore poses a serious risk for threatened butterfly species (Hamm et al. 2014).

Parasitoid wasps (from the suborder Apocrita) are an example of parasites specialized in utilizing different arthropod species, including butterflies (Hinz 1983, Goulet & Huber 1993, Quicke 1997). Adult parasitoids attack Lepidoptera as eggs, larvae or pupae, laying their eggs inside the insects (endoparasitoids) or on their cuticulae (ectoparasitoids). Parasitoids can be used in pest control (e.g. van Lenteren & Woets 1988, van Lenteren 2000), but may negatively influence endangered populations of their hosts, as even a few dozen parasitoid species may attack the same host species (Godfray & Charles 1994).

In this study, we assessed the occurrence of Wolbachia infection among caterpillars of the scarce large blue butterfly Phengaris teleius (Bergsträsser, 1779), originating from populations located in southern Poland. In the course of sampling, we also recorded the presence of parasitoid larvae on P. teleius caterpillars. Phenagris teleius is a threatened butterfly (van Swaay & Warren 1999, van Swaay et al. 2012) that is considered to be a flagship species for nature conservation in Europe (Thomas 1995, Thomas & Settele 2004).

Identifying the potential parasites of P. teleius may be important for understanding population processes in this species (Dobson & Hudson 1986), with potential significance for conservation management of the butterfly (e.g. McCallum & Dobson 1995, Shaw & Hochberg 2002, Hamm et al. 2014).

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Study species, site and general procedures

The P. teleius butterfly is characterized by a complicated life cycle. Its caterpillar is a monophagous herbivore that feeds exclusively on the great burnet Sanguisorba officinalis L. As a 1st to 3rd instar caterpillar, it feeds inside a single flower bud until leaving the plant (Thomas 1984). 4th instar larvae drop to the ground, remaining there to WAIT for foraging Myrmica Latreille, 1804 ants. If foraging worker ants come across such a caterpillar, they take it to their ant colony in a process called adoption (Thomas 1984). The predatory P. teleius caterpillar then spends 11 or 23 months in the Myrmica nest, feeding on the ant brood (Thomas 1995, Witek et al. 2006). It pupates in late spring/early summer and leaves the colony as an adult butterfly between June and August (Thomas 1995, Witek et al. 2006).

We searched for Wolbachia infection and recorded parasitoid presence among caterpillars originating from five separate P. teleius populations in the western part of the Sandomierz Basin, southern Poland, in the years 2013–2014 (Fig. 1). In both seasons, the study was conducted in Au-
gust when caterpillars, in their 4th larval instar, are most likely to be found on food plants. In each population, we randomly gathered a set of food plants that were later inspected under laboratory conditions to find *P. teleius* caterpillars.

After detecting a caterpillar, we confirmed its species and determined its larval instar, based on the identification table in Śliwińska et al. (2006), using a Nikon microscope SMZ 1500 (magnification 10–20×). In total, we found and investigated 778 *P. teleius* caterpillars at different larval instars, from 361 food plant stems (for details see Table 1). Afterwards, to kill and preserve the caterpillars, they were submerged in a solution of RNA Later (20 mM sodium citrate, 10 mM EDTA, 70% ammonium sulphate, pH 5.2; RNA Later solution also stabilizes DNA) and frozen at −30 °C until further examination.

To determine the presence of *Wolbachia* infection, we examined 4th instar caterpillars (91 caterpillars in total). As *Wolbachia* was not detected in 4th instar caterpillars (see below), we did not find it necessary to include younger larvae in our sample.

### 2.2. Molecular determination of *Wolbachia* infection

To test for *Wolbachia* infection in *P. teleius* caterpillars, we performed PCR of the 16S rDNA fragment using PCR protocols available in Patricelli et al. (2013) and W-Specf and W-Specr primers from Werren and Windsor (2000). Additionally, we used universal arthropod primers for 28S rDNA (as in Nice et al. 2009) to verify the negative results of the 16S rDNA *Wolbachia* PCR. For each sample, one or two PCRs were then performed. First, all samples were screened for *Wolbachia* (16S rDNA PCR) and afterwards, the samples with a negative result were analysed for arthropod 28S rDNA to check for overall PCR quality. In cases where the quality of 28S rDNA PCR was poor, the DNA sample was sequentially diluted, following Nice et al. (2009), and *Wolbachia* PCR was performed again to confirm the negative result. DNA isolation was performed as follows. A whole caterpillar body was macerated in 50 µl of TE buffer, and 1 µl of Proteinase K (Thermo Scientific, 14–22 mg/ml) was added. The mixture was then placed in a thermoblock for 2 h at 56 °C. After protein digestion, 100 µl of 5% CHELEX (chelating material, BioRad) solution was added and the mixture was intensively vortexed for 1 min. After that, the mixture was placed in a thermoblock at 95 °C with an intensive shake (1,400 rpm) for 10 min and then centrifuged at 13,000 rpm for 10 min. The supernatant with purified DNA was taken to the PCR chamber. PCR was performed in a SensoQuest Labcycler. The PCR products were visualized on 1% agarose gels.

![Image](image-url.com)
2.3. Inspection for parasitoids

At the moment of extraction from inflorescences, each caterpillar, from 1st to 4th instars, was inspected for ectoparasitoid larvae feeding on the surface of their bodies. Furthermore, all 4th instar *P. teleius* caterpillars were checked for the presence of endoparasitoid larvae. We examined only 4th instar caterpillars, as visual detection of younger endoparasitoids is unreliable in *P. teleius* (Anton et al. 2007b, Anton, personal inform.). Thus, each 4th instar caterpillar was dissected, after thawing under sterile conditions (on a single-use microscope slide, cut with a single-use sterile scalpel and sterile microscope needle), in order to find the parasitoid larvae inside the body using a Nikon microscope SMZ 1500 (magnification 10–20×). After inspection, the caterpillar was again placed in RNA Later solution for further genetic analyses of *Wolbachia* infection.

3. Results

All 4th instar caterpillars of *P. teleius* were found to be free from *Wolbachia* infection. In addition, no endoparasitoids were found in our sample, either. In contrast, we detected larvae of ectoparasitoid wasps that, however, remained unidentified. We were unable to rear the parasitoids to the adult stage, and any attempts to assign the larvae, even to a family on morphological grounds, would have remained uncertain (Burks 2003). Unfortunately, we also lost the genetic material of the ectoparasitoid larvae, due to difficulties associated with preservation of DNA samples, so that DNA barcoding could not be applied either. Infested caterpillars were paralyzed, i.e. all muscles of a caterpillar were loosened, and it did not move, although it remained alive during the observation (Fig. 2). In total, we found 17 caterpillars (3rd and 4th instars) with ectoparasitoid larvae, in the four studied *P. teleius* populations (for details see Table 1).

4. Discussion

In our study, we found no *Wolbachia* infection among the screened *P. teleius* caterpillars originating from five studied populations, located in the western part of the Sandomierz Basin, in southern Poland. The lack of *Wolbachia* infection was confirmed by the most appropriate and sensitive available molecular methods. Therefore, we are confident in our results. Interestingly, Ritter et al. (2013) analysed *P. teleius* individuals from four populations in Poland – Wółka near Warsaw, Kosyń near Włodawa, Wiesiółka near Zawiercie and Widacz near Krosno. However, all individuals from these populations were also free from *Wolbachia* infection.

Our study was performed on populations located between Wółka and Zawiercie (Ritter et al. 2013), providing information about *Wolbachia* infection in another part of the Polish range of *P. teleius*. In contrast, a recent genetic study conducted on *P. teleius* revealed the occurrence of *Wolbachia* infection (lineage B) in Mongolian, Russian (Altai region), Belarusian and French *P. teleius* populations (Ritter et al. 2013), as well as (lineage A and B) in Hungary and Romania (Bereczki et al. 2015). In total, 13% of screened individuals were infected within the investigated range of *P. teleius* occurrence in Ritter et al. (2013) and 14% of examined individuals were reported to be infected in the Carpathian Basin (Bereczki et al. 2015).

Other butterfly species from the *Phengaris* clade have also shown differential *Wolbachia* infection. So far, *Wolbachia* has been found in *P. nausithous* (Bergsträsser, 1779) populations in Kazakhstan, Russia (Volgograd region), Slovakia and Czechia (*Wolbachia* super-group B; Ritter et al. 2013) as well as in Hungary and Romania (super-group A and B, Bereczki et al. 2015). *Wolbachia* infection has also been documented in *P. alcon* (Denis & Schiffermüller, 1775) from Lithuania, Poland, Austria, Hungary and Romania (*Wolbachia supergroup B, Sieleziew et al. 2012, Bereczki et al. 2015) and in *P. arion* (Linnaeus, 1758) from Poland, Italy, Hungary and Romania (*Wolbachia supergroup A, Patricelli et al. 2013, Bereczki et al. 2015).

Our study showed that populations of *P. teleius* from southern Poland are attacked by an unidentified species of ectoparasitoid wasps. To our knowledge, this is the first observation of ectoparasitoid larvae feeding on caterpillars of *Phengaris* butterflies. At the same time, we failed
Fig. 2. Sketches of a 3rd instar caterpillar of *Phengaris teleius*. – a. A paralyzed caterpillar infested by an ectoparasitoid larva. – b. An uninfested caterpillar.

to find the larvae of any endoparasitic wasps in *P. teleius* caterpillars from the same region of southern Poland. The latter finding is concordant with that of Anton et al. (2007a), who studied two populations of *P. teleius* (similarly, by dissecting *P. teleius* caterpillars feeding on plants; Anton, unpublished data) in the Upper Rhine Valley, southwestern Germany.

In general, various endoparasitic Neotypus (Ichneumonidae) species attack the predatory myrmecophilous species of *Phengaris* (*P. teleius, P. nausithous* and *P. arion*). In particular, in Hungary, larvae of the parasitoid wasp, *N. melanocephalus* Gmelin, 1790 (= *N. pusillus* Gregor, 1940) have been found in a *P. teleius* pupa, originating from *Myrmica* nests (Tartally 2005). This suggests that *N. melanocephalus* is the parasitoid of *P. teleius* in the Carpathian Basin, but its frequency is very low (only one pupa with a parasitoid larva was detected among eight sites of *P. teleius* in the Carpathian Basin, Tartally 2005).

Probably, *N. melanocephalus* is a specialist parasitoid of *P. nausithous*, the sister species of *P. teleius*, and it is recorded from Poland (Stankiewicz et al. 2004) and southwestern Germany (Anton et al. 2007a). Therefore, the observations of *N. melanocephalus* attacking *P. teleius* caterpillars might be based on accidental events. In turn, *N. coreensis* Uchida, 1930 has been shown to attack the predatory *P. arion* (Sielezniew et al. 2010).

In contrast, *Ichneumon* sp. attacks *P. alcon*, a *Phengaris* species with the “cuckoo” lifestyle (Thomas & Elmes 1993, Sielezniew & Stankiewicz 2004, Stankiewicz et al. 2004, Tartally 2005, 2008, Tartally et al. 2013, 2014, Timu et al. 2013). So far, there is one known case of predatory *P. teleius* getting parasitized by *Ichneumon* sp. (Tartally 2008). *Ichneumon* sp. has numerous adaptations to infiltrate *Myrmica* colonies and to find and oviposit into *Phengaris* larvae. Therefore, *Phengaris* cuckoo species are attacked by
parasitoids only within *Myrmica* ant colonies (Thomas & Elmes 1993, Witek et al. 2014).

The presence and diversity of parasites within an ecosystem is a sign of its health (Hudson et al. 2006). So, what is the implication of the scarce number of parasites attacking a given species in local populations? The potential reasons of very low frequency of parasites in the studied *P. teleius* butterfly (including *Wolbachia*) may be in density-dependent effects occurring in host populations across the study region (Cronin 2004, Hancock et al. 2016), but also in biotic and abiotic factors, such as natural enemies of parasites, or microclimatic conditions (Ram et al. 2008, Heard et al. 2015).

The host population turnover and decrease in host densities may have a negative effect on the persistence of parasitoid populations, as well (e.g. Cronin 2004). Populations of *P. teleius* located in our study area have been described as stable and weakly influenced by weather conditions (Nowicki et al. 2005, 2009), as well as resistant to natural catastrophes (i.e. flood and fire, Kajzer-Bonk et al. 2013, Nowicki et al. 2014).

However, during the two years of our study, we witnessed the disappearance of several subpopulations of *P. teleius*, most likely due to succession and a lack of proper habitat management within respective habitat patches (Batáry et al. 2007, Dierks & Fischer 2009, van Swaay et al. 2012). In the context of frequent subpopulation turnovers, like those observed for *P. teleius* in southern Poland, the conditions for the persistence of the populations of parasites may not be met. Otherwise, the lack of *Wolbachia* infection among inspected *P. teleius* caterpillars may be due to other factors than frequent population turnovers.

In fact, *P. arion* and *P. alcon* have infestation levels of 100% (e.g. Particelli et al. 2013, Berczki et al. 2015) even though their population parameters are similar to *P. teleius*. Therefore, the potential mechanisms that cause low levels of *Wolbachia* infection in *P. teleius* remain unknown. To fully understand the factors that determine parasitoid occurrence and *Wolbachia* infection in *P. teleius* populations, a large scale, long-term study is needed, which would take into account habitat changes and the abundance dynamics of butterflies in local populations.

**Acknowledgements.** Specimens of *P. teleius* caterpillars were collected with permission of the General Directorate for Environmental Protection in Poland (DOP-oz. 6401.01.52.2013.JRO). The study was financially supported by the Polish National Science Centre via a post-doctoral fellowship (DEC-2012/04/S/NZB/00215) and partly by statutory funds of the Institute of Nature Conservation of the Polish Academy of Sciences. We thank anonymous reviewers for useful commentaries that helped to improve the manuscript.

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