First report of *Filaria martis* Gmelin, 1790 in the European mink, *Mustela lutreola* (Linnaeus, 1761)

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Abstract: The riparian European mink (*Mustela lutreola*), currently surviving in only three unconnected sites in Europe, is now listed as a critically endangered species according to the IUCN. Habitat loss and degradation, anthropic mortality, interaction with the feral American mink (*Neovison vison*), and infectious diseases are among the principal causes of its decline. Surveys of helminth parasites of this host that also include focus on subcutaneous potentially pathogenic helminths such as those belonging to the genus *Filaria* are very scarce. We report here the presence of specimens of *Filaria martis* in the subcutaneous connective tissues of three *M. lutreola* individuals from Spain. This is the first finding of a subcutaneous nematode in a representative of the genus *Mustela*. The report also enlarges the known range of the definitive hosts of this nematode. These worms were mainly located in the dorsal region of mink and more rarely in the knees, elbows and hips. Skin sloughing was only observed in one *M. lutreola* with both septicaemia and an associated high burden of *F. martis*. Therefore, more attention should be paid to potentially pathogenic helminths when designing conservation programs dedicated to *M. lutreola*.

Keywords: Filaria martis, Mustela lutreola, Spain, new host record

Introduction

The European mink, *Mustela lutreola* (L., 1761) is a small territorial riparian mustelid, which has suffered a dramatic distribution and population decline over the last century (Maran et al. 1998; Maizeret et al. 2002) being currently listed as critically endangered according to the IUCN (Maran et al. 2011). The European mink populations are currently distributed in three well-defined, unconnected areas (northern Spain and south-western France, Romania, and Belarus and Russia). These populations are still declining due to several factors including anthropic pressure (e.g. habitat loss and degradation, vehicle collisions, accidental trapping, dog predation, hunting), interspecific competition with the alien invasive American mink (*Neovison vison*, formerly *Mustela vison*), and several infectious diseases. In recent years numerous studies on habitat use, spatial behaviour, health and reproductive status, and conservation genetics have been conducted on the western population of *M. lutreola* to understand the causes of its decline and to propose conservation measures (Fournier-Chambrillon et al. 2004, 2010; Michaux et al. 2005;

Zabala et al. 2006; Fournier et al. 2007, 2008; Philippa et al. 2008; Moinet et al. 2010). The highest density of *M. lutreola* in its western population was detected in 2004 in Navarre (Spain), where a health survey was thus initiated by the government, including necropsies on animals found dead in the natural environment (Ceña et al. 2005; Fournier-Chambrillon and Fournier 2013). Earlier parasitological surveys have allowed a thorough characterization of the helminth fauna of *M. lutreola* in Europe (Shimalov et al. 1993; Sidorovich and Anisimova 1993; Torres et al. 2003, 2008) but most of the individuals surveyed were not examined for the presence of subcutaneous potentially pathogenic helminths such as those belonging to the genus *Filaria* Gmelin, 1790. Therefore, the results here presented provide novel information about the presence of these scantly known nematodes parasitizing mustelids in Europe.

Materials and methods

Carcasses of 91 *M. lutreola* specimens were collected between 1999 and 2013 in the Spanish Foral Community of Navarre (Fig. 1). They were kept frozen and then necropsied by trained veterinarians in order to determine the cause of death of each animal. A range of samples was taken at this time for genetic, virological, bacteriologic and histological studies. When it was possible the skin of several specimens was completely removed to enable examination for any subcutaneous lesions, but given the major traumas to which the animals were subjected by road collision (major cause of mortality) only 25 specimens could be completely examined. All the nematodes found in the subcutaneous tissues were removed and transferred to vials containing 70 % ethanol. Some individuals were later processed using conventional techniques for nematodes (cleared in Amman's lactophenol) allowing their specific identification according to previous descriptions of *F. martis* given in Anderson (1960) and Chabaud and Mohammad (1989). Later this identification was molecularly corroborated.

Genomic DNA was isolated from an individual worm stored in ethanol using a QIAamp DNA Mini Kit and a Qiacube (Qiagen Inc, Hilden, Germany), according to manufacturer's instructions with the following minor modifications: one single elution of 50 μ l was performed with an incubation time of 3 min. A partial sequence of the mitochondrial cytochrome oxidase I (COI) gene was amplified using the primers CO1intF (5-TGATTGGTGG TTTTGGTAA-3) and CO1intR (5-ATAAGTACGAGTATCAATATC-3) designed by Casiraghi et al. (2001). PCR

reactions were performed in a 25 μ l final volume under the following conditions: 2.5 μ l of each primer (10 μ M), 10 μ l of multiplex PCR Mastermix (Qiagen Inc., Hilden, Germany), 2 μ l of DNA and 8 μ l of HyPure Molecular Biology Grade Water (VWR, Radnor, USA). The thermal profile used was: an activation step at 94 °C for 5 min, followed by 40 cycles (denaturation at 94 °C for 45 sec, annealing at 52 °C for 45 sec, extension at 72 °C for 90 sec) and a final extension step at 72 °C for 5 min. All PCR reactions were performed with a Unocycler thermocycler (VWR, Radnor, USA). PCR products were visualized on a 1 % agarose gel. Sanger-sequencing was performed and chromatograms were inspected visually to resolve any ambiguities. Forward and Reverse sequences were aligned using Clustal-W inplanted in MEGA 6 (Tamura et al. 2013) and a resulting 663 bp long has been obtained. The sequence has been deposited in GenBank (accession number: KU761590) and compared to previously published GenBank sequences.

Results

The presence of several specimens of *F. martis* in the subcutaneous connective tissue was observed in three (one male and two females) adult European minks that represent a prevalence of 12.0 % (Fig. 1). The morphological and morphometric data of our *Filaria* specimens are consistent with those previously reported for this species in other hosts by Anderson (1960), Chabaud and Mohammad (1989) and Otranto et al. (2007). The molecular analysis (Fig. 2) presented a 99 % homology with the previously published GenBank 642 bp long *F. martis* sequence (AJ544880.1). Only two nematodes in the most infected *M. lutreola* specimen appeared trapped in subcutaneous tissue (Figs. 3 and 4). Nematodes were recovered mainly from the dorsal region of the hosts but also from the knees, elbows and hips. Furthermore, skin sloughing was observed in the most infected European mink, in which a septicaemia (*Enterococcus*, *Staphylococcus* and *Macrococcus*) was detected.

Discussion

Nematodes belonging to the genus *Filaria* Gmelin, 1790 have long caused controversy among parasitologists. The most common subcutaneous filarial findings in mustelid

carnivores were attributed to *Filaria martis s.l.* having been reported repeatedly in Europe, North America and Japan. However, Chabaud and Mohammad (1989) studied specimens from various hosts and reported eleven species within the genus *Filaria*.

The type species F. martis Gmelin, 1790 was described for the first time parasitizing Martes martes (formerly Mustela martes) in Italy and later on, it was also reported in Martes foina in the same country (Otranto et al. 2007). This species seemed to have a cosmopolitan pattern of distribution infecting several mammals, but nowadays it is accepted that F. martis only affects Palaearctic Mustelidae species (Chabaud and Mohammad 1989). Filaria martis has been sporadically reported in M. foina specimens from Switzerland (Zimmerli 1981) and Spain (Sospedra 2000) but no consistent information is available about its prevalence in any host under natural conditions throughout its distribution range except for Italy (Otranto et al. 2007). The latter authors reported a prevalence of 52.3 % in road-killed M. foina, from 1997 to 2006 in the Italian province of Lecce, even though it was never found in M. foina specimens from the nearby Italian province of Basilicata. To our knowledge the present report of a filariid in M. lutreola constitutes the first finding of a subcutaneous nematode in this mustelid and also in any representative species of the genus Mustela Linnaeus, 1758. The relatively low number of specimens examined (n=25) does not allow any definitive conclusion about the true prevalence of F. martis in the current occidental population of the European mink.

Filarioids are all transmitted by haematophagous arthropods. The Filariidae elicit skin lesions and release eggs and/or larvae which attract arthropod vectors, mainly Muscidae. However, no data about the life cycle of *F. martis* are currently known but its transmission process should be similar to that of *F. taxideae*, the only representative of the genus *Filaria* for which reliable life cycle data are available (see Anderson 2000). The eggs of *F. taxideae*, a species that infects American badgers (*Taxidea taxus*) and striped skunks (*Mephitis mephitis*), produce skin lesions after being laid between the epidermis and the cutaneous basement membrane. The eggs and larvae become exposed at the surface of the skin, where they are available to intermediate hosts involved in transmission, that are attracted to open sores on mammals. The potential vectors, perhaps muscid dipterans attracted to lesions as pointed out by O'Toole et al. (1993), are not yet known with certainty. Otranto et al. (2007) found some *M. foina* infected by both *F. martis* and the tick *Haemaphysalis erinacei* but these authors could not draw any conclusions about the life cycle of *F. martis*. In all the surveys carried out on *M. lutreola*

in Spain, so far no ticks and fleas have been detected, most likely because of the time interval between host death and subsequent discovery of the carcass.

Little information is currently available about the pathology that *F. martis* can produce in its hosts, but it is known that these infections usually do not evoke a significant inflammatory response (Anderson 1960). In our study, in the most infected specimen of *M. lutreola*, on which septicaemia was detected, two nematodes were apparently trapped in subcutaneous membranous capsules, and skin sloughing was also observed in this individual.

In a broader context it can be pointed out that nematodes of the genus *Filaria* cause a poorly known subcutaneous filariasis in mustelids and no robust data are available yet about the extent of their occurrence. However, the present report enlarges the known range of the definitive hosts of *F. martis* including now a representative of the genus *Mustela* (*M. lutreola*), which paradoxically is the more endangered and has the lowest population density of all representatives of the genus in Europe.

Concluding remarks

More attention should be paid in the future to the presence of this potentially pathogenic nematode (F. martis) when designing conservation programs dedicated to the critically endangered M. lutreola. To now the relatively low number of M. lutreola specimens examined worldwide does not allow taking any robust conclusion about the true prevalence and potential pathology of F. martis on the current populations of this very endangered carnivore.

Acknowledgments: The present study was partly supported by a Spanish grant from the "Agència de Gestió d'Ajuts Universitaris i de Recerca – AGAUR" (no. 2014 SGR 1241). The necropsies program was funded by the "Departamento de Desarrollo Rural, Medio Ambiente y Administración Local del Gobierno de Navarra" and the carcasses were collected by the "Sección de Hábitats y Sección de Guarderío de Gobierno de Navarra, Equipo de Biodiversidad de Gestión Ambiental de Navarra S.A."

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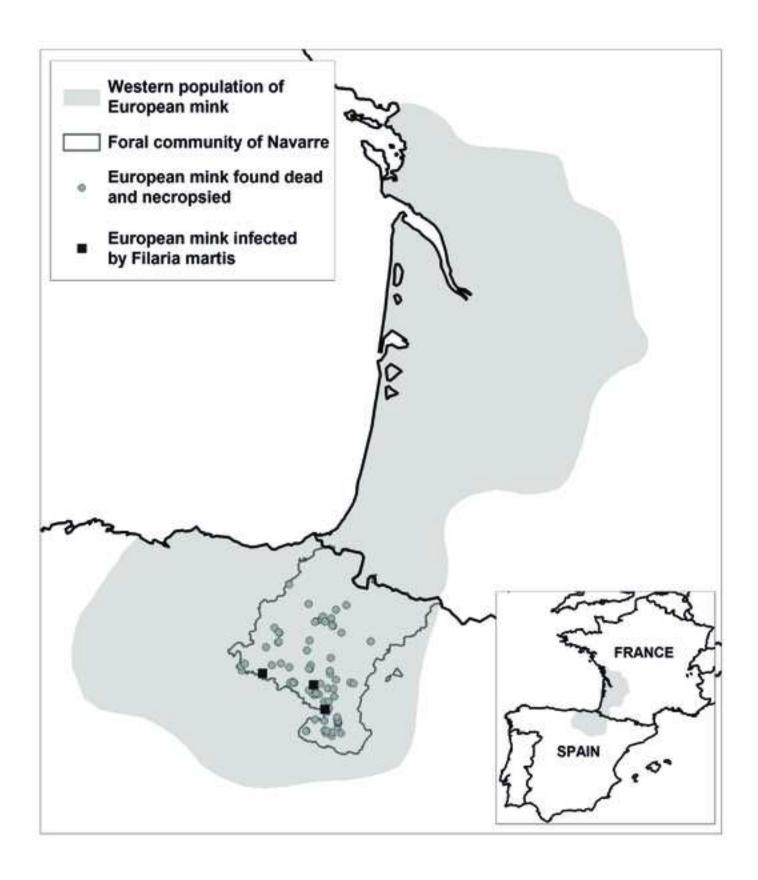
Legends to figures

Fig. 1 Geographic distribution of the 91 European mink (*Mustela lutreola*) that were found dead in Navarre including the three individuals infected by *Filaria martis*.

Fig. 2 Filaria martis partial mitochondrial cytochrome oxidase I (COI) gene.

Fig. 3 Nematode trapped in a dorsolumbar subcutaneous membranous capsule on the most infected European mink.

Fig. 4 Most nematodes occurred free in the subcutaneous tissue (here at the elbow).



Filaria martis mitochondrial partial COI gene for cytochrome oxidase subunit I Sequence ID: emb[AJ544880.1] Length: 643 Number of Matches: 1

Score 1177	bits(6	37)	Expect 0.0	Identities 642/644(99%)	Gaps 2/644(0%)	Strand Plus/Plus
Query	13	GTTACCTO	TATGATTGGG	TCTCCTGAGATAGCTT	TTCCTCGTATTAATGCTTTA	CTTT 72
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Sbjct	61	TTGGTTAAC	TTTAGTGGCT	TTGTTTATGGTATATG	GTTCTTTTTTTTTTTGGTAAT	SGTCC 120
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Sbjct	361	TGGTTCTT	GTTATTTTG	TTATTAGATCGTAATT	TTGGTGGATCTTTTTATGAT	ICTAG 420
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Sbjct	601	A-GAACTTO	AGTGTGGGGT	CATCCATATGTATACT	GCTGGTTTA 643	



