Review of the systematics, biology and ecology of lice from pinnipeds and river otters (Insecta: Phthiraptera: Anoplura: Echinophthiriidae)

MARIA SOLEDAD LEONARDI1 & RICARDO LUIS PALMA2
1Laboratorio de Parasitología, Centro Nacional Patagónico (CONICET), Puerto Madryn, Provincia de Chubut, Argentina
2Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, New Zealand

Abstract

We present a literature review of the sucking louse family Echinophthiriidae, its five genera and twelve species parasitic on pinnipeds (fur seals, sea lions, walruses, true seals) and the North American river otter. We give detailed synonymies and published records for all taxonomic hierarchies, as well as hosts, type localities and repositories of type material; we highlight significant references and include comments on the current taxonomic status of the species. We provide a summary of present knowledge of the biology and ecology for eight species. Also, we give a host-louse list, and a bibliography to the family as complete as possible.

Key words: Phthiraptera, Anoplura, Echinophthiriidae, Echinophthirus, Antarctophthirus, Lepidophthirus, Proechinophthirus, Latagophthirus, sucking lice, Pinnipedia, Otariidae, Odobenidae, Phocidae, Mustelidae, fur seals, sea lions, walruses, true seals, river otter

Introduction

Among the sucking lice (Anoplura), the family Echinophthiriidae is the only family with species adapted to live on pinnipeds—a mammalian group that includes fur seals and sea lions (Otariidae), walruses (Odobenidae), and true seals (Phocidae) (Durden & Musser 1994a, 1994b)—as well as on the North American river otter (Kim & Emerson 1974). Currently, the Echinophthiriidae comprises 5 genera and 12 species (see below).

Echinophthiriids have developed unique morphological adaptations to cope with the amphibious lifestyle of their hosts. All species possess (i) prehensile tibio-tarsal claws in the second and third pairs of legs adapted to grasping onto hairs firmly; (ii) a membranous abdomen that allows gas exchange, particularly underwater; and (iii) abdominal spiracles with a sophisticated closing device that preserves atmospheric air and prevents water entering the body during the host’s immersions (Kim 1975). Morphological and biological traits and host specificity of echinophthiriids suggest that the lice must have coevolved with their hosts during the colonization of the marine environment (Kim 1975, 1985; Kim et al. 1975).


The systematics and ecology of Echinophthiriidae have not been reviewed since the 1970s and need to be re-evaluated through a modern approach. A checklist of all 12 species is provided below, as a first step towards a revision. In addition, literature records, hosts, type localities, type material, comments on current taxonomic status, and references to biological and ecological studies are provided for each species.

The taxonomy and nomenclature of the lice follow Durden & Musser (1994a), and those of the hosts follow Reeves et al. (2002), with the exception of the Galápagos sea lion which we regard as a full species (Zalophus...