SHORT COMMUNICATION

Genetic and taxonomic assessment of the widespread Afrotropical ambrosia beetle *Xyleborus principalis* (Coleoptera, Scolytinae)

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Abstract



The taxonomy of the widespread Afrotropical ambrosia beetle *Xyleborus principalis* Eichhoff, 1878 is reviewed based on morphological and molecular data. The species is both morphologically and genetically variable but without any structure corresponding to geography, or between genes and morphology. Examination of type material and other specimens collected across Africa and Madagascar documented the existence of a single species. New synonymies are proposed for *Xyleborus principalis* (=*X. alluaudi* Schaufuss, 1897, =*X. camerunus* Hagedorn, 1910, =*X. consobrinus* Eggers, 1932, =*X. discrepans* Schedl, 1950, =*X. annectens* Schedl, 1957, =*X. peramploides* Schedl, 1957).

Keywords Xyleborus principalis · Xyleborus alluaudi · Afrotropics · Madagascar · COI · 28S · EF-1 α · PABP1

Introduction

Xyleborus Eichhoff, 1864 is a species rich genus of ambrosia beetles found in humid tropical rain forests around the globe. Species in this genus are frequently collected in dead wood or ethanol baited traps and largely dominate wood decomposing beetle guilds in such places (Beaver and Loyttyniemi 1991; Beeson 1961; Schedl 1956; Schedl 1959; Schedl 1977; Thunes 1998). Some of them have very broad distributions and are known to have extended their current circumtropical ranges independently from human transportation (Gohli et al. 2016). *Xyleborus* species are in principle well adapted to colonize new areas and new introductions to Europe and America are therefore frequently reported (Haack 2001; Haack and Rabaglia 2013; Kirkendall and Faccoli 2010). Global colonization success and subsequent regional expansion is best understood by a peculiar form of reproduction in which siblings

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² Department for Animal Evolution and Biodiversity, Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, 37073 Göttingen, Germany mate and assures insemination before dispersal. Permanent inbreeding over evolutionary time scales also makes new colonists resistant to the negative genetic effects of small founding populations (Jordal et al. 2001; Kirkendall et al. 2014).

As one of the more devastating groups of beetles in the timber industry, rapid and accurate identification is important to differentiate serious pest species from less harmful ones, albeit not a trivial task. Many species are indeed very similar to each other, which is a logical consequence of inbreeding without selection for secondary sexual characters often used in species identification. In Africa and Madagascar, one of the most commonly collected species is *Xyleborus principalis* Eichhoff, 1878, or X. alluaudi Schaufuss, 1897 (Figs. 1-6). These two names have been used about each other by various authors, apparently also by the same author. Less frequently used is the name Xyleborus annectens Schedl, 1957, but is together with a handful of rarely reported taxa - part of the same group. The first two species have been reported repeatedly throughout the Afrotropical region from Gambia to Ethiopia and south to South Africa and Madagascar. If one compares collections identified by prominent taxonomists such as Eggers, Schedl, Nunberg, and Browne, it is clear that species diagnoses are weak. A taxonomic revision of the complex is therefore needed where molecular data from multiple genes enable assessment of variation within and between species.

Table 1 Samples included from Africa and Madagase

Species	Author	Country	Locality	GIS
Xyleborus madagascariensis	Schaufuss, 1891	Madagascar	Ranomafana NP	-21.253, 47.421
Xyleborus sakalava	Schedl, 1953	Madagascar	Ranomafana NP	-21.253, 47.421
Xyleborus ambasiusculus	Eggers, 1920	Cameroon	Limbe, Ekonjo	4.081, 9.172
Xyleborus comparabilis	Schedl, 1957	Cameroon	Mt. Cameroon	4.129, 9.134
Xyleborus conradti	Hagedorn, 1910	Cameroon	Bakingili, N. Limbe	4.068, 9.040
Xyleborus rothkirchi	Eggers, 1920	Cameroon	Limbe, Ekonjo	4.081, 9.172
Xyleborus sp. O		Cameroon	Mt. Cameroon, S. slope	4.143, 9.186
Xyleborus principalis - 01	Eichhoff, 1878	Sierra Leone	Tiwai Island	7.554, -11.353
Xyleborus principalis - 02	Eichhoff, 1878	Cameroon	Limbe, Ekenjo	4.081, 9.172
Xyleborus principalis - 03	Eichhoff, 1878	Cameroon	Bakingili, N. Limbe	4.068, 9.040
Xyleborus principalis - 04	Eichhoff, 1878	Uganda	Kibale forest	0.562, 30.358
Xyleborus principalis - 05	Eichhoff, 1878	Tanzania	Sanje, Udzungwa	-7.725, 36.872
Xyleborus principalis - 06	Eichhoff, 1878	Tanzania	3-rivers, Udzungwa	-7.868, 36.844
Xyleborus principalis - 07	Eichhoff, 1878	Madagascar	Andasibe	-18.861, 48.447
Xyleborus principalis - 08	Eichhoff, 1878	Madagascar	Ranomafana	-21.253, 47.421
Xyleborus principalis - 09	Eichhoff, 1878	Uganda	Kibale forest	0.562, 30.358
<i>Xyleborus principalis</i> - 10	Eichhoff, 1878	Gabon	Ivindo NP	0.512, 12.802
<i>Xyleborus principalis</i> - 11	Eichhoff, 1878	Cameroon	Limbe, Ekenjo	4.081, 9.172
Xyleborus principalis - 12	Eichhoff, 1878	Cameroon	Mt. Cameroon, S. slope	4.143, 9.186
Xyleborus principalis - 13	Eichhoff, 1878	Tanzania	3-rivers, Udzungwa	-7.868, 36.844
<i>Xyleborus principalis</i> - 14	Eichhoff, 1878	Tanzania	Sanje, Udzungwa	-7.725, 36.872
Xyleborus principalis - 15	Eichhoff, 1878	Madagascar	Ranomafana NP	-21.253, 47.421
Xyleborus principalis - 16	Eichhoff, 1878	Madagascar	Ranomafana NP	-21.253, 47.421

 Table 2
 GenBank accession numbers for nucleotide sequences generated for this study

Species	COI	288	PABP1	$EF-1\alpha$
Xyleborus madagascariensis	MN893807	MN894602	MN894625	MN894648
Xyleborus sakalava	MN893808	MN894603	MN894626	MN894649
Xyleborus ambasiusculus	MN893809	MN894604	MN894627	MN894650
Xyleborus comparabilis	MN893810	MN894605	MN894628	MN894651
Xyleborus conradti	MN893811	MN894606	MN894629	MN894652
Xyleborus rothkirchi	MN893812	MN894623	MN894646	MN894668
Xyleborus sp. O	-	MN894624	MN894647	MN894669
<i>Xyleborus principalis</i> - 01	MN893813	MN894607	MN894630	MN894653
Xyleborus principalis - 02	MN893814	MN894608	MN894631	MN894654
Xyleborus principalis - 03	MN893815	MN894609	MN894632	-
Xyleborus principalis - 04	MN893816	MN894610	MN894633	MN894655
Xyleborus principalis - 05	MN893817	MN894611	MN894634	MN894656
Xyleborus principalis - 06	MN893818	MN894612	MN894635	MN894657
Xyleborus principalis - 07	MN893819	MN894613	MN894636	MN894658
Xyleborus principalis - 08	MN893820	MN894614	MN894637	MN894659
Xyleborus principalis - 09	MN893821	MN894615	MN894638	MN894660
Xyleborus principalis - 10	MN893822	MN894616	MN894639	MN894661
Xyleborus principalis - 11	MN893823	MN894617	MN894640	MN894662
Xyleborus principalis - 12	MN893824	MN894618	MN894641	MN894663
<i>Xyleborus principalis</i> - 13	MN893825	MN894619	MN894642	MN894664
Xyleborus principalis - 14	MN893826	MN894620	MN894643	MN894665
Xyleborus principalis - 15	MN893827	MN894621	MN894644	MN894666
Xyleborus principalis - 16	MN893828	MN894622	MN894645	MN894667

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Fig. 1–6 Dorsal, lateral and posterior view of two different *Xyleborus principalis* morphs. 1– 3 narrow morph with less steep declivity and larger spines on interstriae 1 and 3 only, corresponding closely with the *X. principalis* holotype from Madagascar. 4–6 broader morph with steeper declivity and smaller interstrial granules on interstriae 1–3, corresponding to the holotype of *X. annectens* from

Congo



Materials and methods

Type material and other material identified by Schedl, Eggers and Browne were examined in the natural history entomology collections in Vienna (NHMW), Tervuren (MRCB), Paris (MNHN), London (BMNH), Berlin (MNB) and Muncheberg (DEI). Field collections were made by the first author in Uganda (1998), Sierra Leone (2010), Cameroon (2008), Tanzania (2009–2010), and Madagascar (2012, 2015).

We tested species boundaries by comparing nucleotide sequences from multiple genes (Tables 1 and 2). DNA was

extracted with the Qiagen DNEasy kit, and PCR was made with primers targeting the mitochondrial gene cytochrome oxidase I (COI), the large subunit ribosomal RNA (28S), elongation factor $1-\alpha$ (EF- 1α), and poly-A binding protein 1 (PABP1). We used primers and PCR-cycles described in Mugu et al. (2018). Sequences from four gene fragments were analysed by maximum parsimony both separately and in combination. Because very few substitutions separated nuclear genome sequences in the *principalis* group and the closest outgroups, we preferred a simple type of analysis as a means to visualize substitutions separating clades and

 Table 3
 Score of morphological characters on the elytral declivity

Species	Country	striae 2	puncture	interstriae 1 micropunctures	strial setae	spines inter- striae 1 & 3	granules interstria 2	strial punctures	interstrial setae	declivity shape
X. sakalava	Madagascar	straight	round	absent	absent	small	absent	separate	long&pointed	impressed
X. ambasiusculus	Cameroon	straight	round	present	long	small	present	separate	thick	impressed
X. comparabilis	Cameroon	straight	round	absent	absent	small	absent	separate	long&pointed	impressed
X. conradti	Cameroon	straight	round	present	absent	small	absent	contiguous	thick	impressed
X. rothkirchi	Cameroon	straight	round	absent	short	small	present	separate	thick	rounded
X. sp. O	Cameroon	straight	round	absent	absent	small	absent	separate	thick	rounded
X. principalis - 01	Sierra Leone	curved	flat	present	short	small	present	contiguous	thick	rounded
X. principalis - 02	Cameroon	curved	flat	present	short	large	absent	separate	thick	impressed
X. principalis - 03	Cameroon	curved	flat	present	short	small	present	separate	thick	rounded
X. principalis - 04	Uganda	curved	flat	present	short	small	absent	separate	thick	rounded
X. principalis - 05	Tanzania	curved	flat	present	short	small	absent	separate	long&pointed	impressed
X. principalis - 06	Tanzania	curved	flat	present	short	small	present	separate	long&pointed	rounded
X. principalis - 07	Madagascar	curved	flat	present	short	small	absent	contiguous	long&pointed	impressed
X. principalis - 08	Madagascar	curved	flat	present	short	large	absent	separate	long&pointed	impressed
X. principalis - 09	Uganda	curved	flat	present	short	small	present	separate	long&pointed	rounded
X. principalis - 10	Gabon	curved	flat	present	short	small	present	contiguous	thick	rounded
X. principalis - 11	Cameroon	curved	flat	present	short	small	present	separate	thick	rounded
X. principalis - 12	Cameroon	curved	flat	present	short	small	present	separate	thick	rounded
X. principalis - 13	Tanzania	curved	flat	present	short	small	present	separate	long&pointed	rounded
X. principalis - 14	Tanzania	curved	flat	present	short	small	present	contiguous	long&pointed	rounded
X. principalis - 15	Madagascar	curved	flat	present	short	large	absent	separate	long&pointed	impressed
X. principalis - 16	Madagascar	curved	flat	present	short	large	absent	separate	long&pointed	impressed

specimens. Node support was estimated by bootstrapping 200 replicates with 100 heuristic searches each, keeping a maximum of 1000 trees to enable searches on matrices with few variable characters.

Variation in morphology between *X. principalis* populations and outgroups are described in Table 3. Characters were restricted to the declivity of the elytra (Figs. 3, 6) which is the only location on the body that varies within the *X. principalis* complex. Morphology was studied in a Leica M16 stereoscope. Multiple photographs were taken with a Leica camera on a Leica M205 C stereomicroscope and aligned and stacked using Zerene Stacker (Zerenesystems.com).

Results

Phylogenetic analysis of morphological characters resulted in a monophyletic *X. principalis*, with limited support (Fig. 7). This taxon is mainly defined by the curved striae 1 and 2 on declivity, the large-sized strial punctures with a flat bottom, the presence of small and confused punctures on interstriae 1 on declivity, and the short, recumbent strial setae which are no longer than the size of a puncture. Variation within X. principalis was found mainly in five morphological characters (Table 3). There was no geographical pattern in these data, and none of the nodes within X. principalis were strongly supported. Specimens examined varied from having slightly narrower elytra with elevated interstriae on declivity, often with a transverse impression on lower third of declivity, a few large conical granules or spines in interstriae 1 and 3, but with no granules present on interstriae 2 (Figs. 1-3), to the morph which is not impressed on lower third of declivity, has small granules on all interstriae 1-3 on declivity, and is slightly wider and more broadly rounded at elytral apex (Figs. 4–6).

Phylogenetic analyses of nucleotide sequences from four gene fragments resulted in a different tree topology for each gene (Figs. 8–9). The analysis of all molecular data combined resulted in a tree topology identical to the COI topology for





Fig. 7 One of 745 shortest trees found in the parsimony analysis of nine morphological characters (L = 20 steps, RC = 0.36). The strict consensus tree resulted in a monophyletic *X. principalis*, but with complete polytomy within. Numbers above branches indicate bootstrap support

X. principalis, and nearly so for the outgroups, with the same nodes supported by near identical bootstrap support. *Xyleborus principalis* was monophyletic in all analyses, but without any consistent pattern within this species. The only consistent result was the grouping of four Malagasy specimens in the same clade, but these were mixed with different specimens from the African mainland in the four different gene fragment analyses.

Mitochondrial genetic variation was much higher than for the nuclear genes, with a maximum of 14.2% divergence between individuals of *X. principalis* (Table 4). These same specimens differed only by a single substitution at the 28S gene, and four in total for the three genes combined (see Fig. 9).

Examination of type material and other specimens identified as *X. principalis*, *X. alluaudi*, and *X. annectens* by Schedl, Nunberg, Browne and Eggers revealed no consistent differences (Figs. 1-6). Additionally, the holotypes of *X. peramploides*, *X. consobrinus*, and *X. discrepans* were found to be within the same range of variation. Illustrations of *X. alluaudi* by Schedl (1977) and Nunberg (1978) correspond to the first and second morphotype, respectively, while Nunbergs illustration of *X. principalis* fits the first morphotype. The same author illustrates *X. annectens* in very much the same way as for *X. principalis*. All three illustrations by Nunberg has a scale indicating exactly 3.0 mm length for all three taxa.

Discussion

Based on the great similarity in morphological characters in six named Afrotropical species of Xyleborus, we conclude that only one species exists -X. principalis. Genetic data indicate high mitochondrial variation within this species, but there is no correlation between morphology and genetic variation. Neither is there a consistent pattern in the variation across genes, and there is no geographical pattern in the genetic or morphological data. Although more than 10% divergence was observed for COI between several subgroups of X. principalis, such high intraspecific variation in the mitochondrial genome is quite normal for permanently inbreeding species (Andersen et al. 2012; Cognato et al. 2019; Gohli et al. 2016; Kambestad et al. 2017). At the same time there is very limited variation in nuclear genes for this species, most notably no more than two substitutions in the 28S gene. Several species in the Hypothenemus eruditus Westwood, 1836 complex, but also in related Xyleborus species such as X. ferrugineus (Fabricius, 1801), harbour higher genetic variation than in X. principalis. It is therefore likely that X. principalis has maintained large genetic variation over time in the same manner as for other permanently inbreeding species, and is reflected in morphological polymorphism.

Karl Schedl had a rather unfortunate habit of describing new species based on tiny differences from the holotype of a known species (Wood and Bright 1992). Many of these erroneous taxa are now synonymized, particularly in Neotropical and Oriental species which have been studied in more detail. We would therefore not be surprised if many new synonyms are proposed as the revision of the African fauna proceeds.

Taxonomy

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Xyleborus principalis Eichhoff, 1878
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Xyleborus alluaudi Schaufuss, 1897, n. syn.

Xyleborus camerunus Hagedorn, 1910, synonymy of *X. alluaudi* by Schedl 1957.

Fig. 8 Tree topologies resulting from the parsimony analysis of COI (6 trees, L = 752, RC = 0.32). The analysis of all molecular data combined resulted in identical topology except for the sister relationship between *X. ambasiusculus* and *X. conradti* (2 trees, L = 942, RC = 0.38). Numbers on branches indicate bootstrap support: COI above, all molecular data below. Outgroups *X. sakalava* and *X. madagascariensis* were pruned from the trees due to long

connecting branches





Xyleborus consobrinus Eggers, 1932, n. syn. Xyleborus discrepans Schedl, 1950, n. syn. Xyleborus annectens Schedl, 1957, n. syn. Xyleborus peramploides Schedl, 1957. n. syn.

Type material examined: holotypes of *X. camerunus* (MNB), *X. consobrinus* (MRCB), *X. discrepans* (NHMW), *X. annectens* (MRCB), and *X. peramploides* (NHMW), and syntypes of *X. principalis* (NHMW) and *X. alluaudi* (NHMW).

Revised diagnosis

Length 2.9–3.6 mm, $2.4-2.8 \times as$ long as wide, colour reddish brown. **Pronotum** smooth and shiny on posterior half, abruptly declivitous and strongly asperate on anterior half. Elytra with striae in regular rows on disc, on declivity punctures larger and more irregularly

placed, bottom of puncture flat with margins clearly marked, punctures sometimes contiguous, or well separated, striae 1, 2 and sometimes 3 usually curved laterally; interstriae on disc smooth, on declivity with granules, sometimes missing on interstriae 2, sometimes two or more granules on interstriae 1 and 3 larger than the average size of a granule; punctures in interstriae much smaller than in striae, variable in size, on interstriae 1 small and strongly confused. Vestiture consisting of long and thin interstrial setae, intermixed with, or entirely replaced by, thicker setae; strial setae fine, recumbent, barely longer than diameter of a strial puncture. Elytral apex broadly to more narrowly rounded, sometimes with a distinct transverse impression on lower third, sometimes terminal interstriae 1-2 slightly elevated to make apex more pointed. Protibiae with 6 lateral socketed teeth, metatibiae with 8-10 lateral teeth on distal two-thirds.



Fig. 9 Tree topologies resulting from the parsimony analyses of all nuclear genes combined (11 trees, L=217, RC=0.76), 28S (2 trees, L = 93, RC = 0.94), PABP1 (36 trees, L = 38, RC = 0.80) and EF-1 α

(20 trees, L = 85, RC = 0.85). Outgroups were pruned from the trees due to long connecting branches

X. principalis 16 - Madagascar

Tabl	e 4 Genetic p-dista	ances at t	he mitoc	hondrial	Cytochro	me Oxida	ise I loci	ıs (656 bi	tse pairs)												
		1	2	3	4	5	9	7	8	6	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
-	X. ambasiusculus	1																			
7	X. comparabilis	0.167	·																		
Э	X. conradti	0.164	0.174	ı																	
4	X. rothkirchi	0.174	0.149	0.159	ı																
2	X. principalis - 01	0.176	0.162	0.179	0.182																
9	X. principalis - 02	0.171	0.175	0.183	0.184	0.130															
7	X. principalis - 03	0.171	0.175	0.186	0.186	0.131	0.011	,													
×	X. principalis - 04	0.174	0.159	0.162	0.177	0.064	0.125	0.127	,												
6	X. principalis - 05	0.173	0.163	0.182	0.182	0.090	0.125	0.128	0.073	·											
10	X. principalis - 06	0.170	0.163	0.169	0.178	0.128	0.058	0.056	0.120	0.142	,										
11	X. principalis - 07	0.182	0.169	0.169	0.167	0.125	0.106	0.106	0.123	0.135	0.095										
12	X. principalis - 08	0.179	0.166	0.177	0.166	0.114	0.101	0.104	0.113	0.122	0.093	0.017									
13	X. principalis - 09	0.173	0.165	0.183	0.160	0.131	0.108	0.113	0.122	0.128	0.117	0.124	0.119								
14	X. principalis - 10	0.171	0.172	0.186	0.181	0.124	0.012	0.008	0.119	0.125	0.055	0.101	0.096	0.108							
15	X. principalis - 11	0.178	0.167	0.161	0.181	0.077	0.130	0.132	0.029	0.072	0.130	0.124	0.112	0.126	0.124						
16	X. principalis - 12	0.184	0.172	0.195	0.175	0.131	0.122	0.122	0.130	0.119	0.125	0.112	0.107	0.069	0.116	0.132					
17	X. principalis - 13	0.170	0.163	0.169	0.178	0.128	0.058	0.056	0.120	0.142	0.000	0.095	0.093	0.117	0.055	0.130	0.125				
18	X. principalis - 14	0.170	0.163	0.169	0.178	0.128	0.058	0.056	0.120	0.142	0.000	0.095	0.093	0.117	0.055	0.130	0.125	0.000			
19	X. principalis - 15	0.184	0.171	0.178	0.168	0.119	0.105	0.108	0.117	0.124	0.098	0.021	0.005	0.120	0.101	0.113	0.108	0.098	0.098		
20	X. principalis - 16	0.179	0.166	0.177	0.166	0.114	0.101	0.104	0.113	0.122	0.093	0.017	0.000	0.119	0.096	0.112	0.107	0.093	0.093	0.005	

Intraspecific variation for X. principalis is emphasized in bold font

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Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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