Determining Homing Abilities of Nesting Male Threespine Stickleback

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Abstract
Homing, a behavior demonstrated by the threespine stickleback allows an organism to return to its home site when displaced. We predicted that male stickleback fish would home well because they guard their young in nests and have high incentive to return. Here we marked and displaced nesting male stickleback over a variety of distances to see whether homing ability declines with distance displaced. Our results show that stickleback can home, but there was no significant relationship between the distance and return rate. However, some nests were taken over by new males after displacement, meaning that even if the experimental fish returned, they had no nest to access. Removing these “evicted males” from the data reveals a stronger negative trend between distance and return.

Methods
This study was conducted on Vancouver Island, British Columbia in Lower Stella Lake where breeding males had been observed (T. Sasser, personal communication). We dry-suit snorkeled to find males displaying nesting behavior. Once confirmed as nesting, nests were marked, a GPS coordinate for the nest was taken, and the fish was captured via dipnet. GoPro cameras were also set up to observe returns.

To mark stickleback, we anesthetized individuals using a dilute tricaine solution (MS222). We then used Super Glue to adhere one a bead to each pelvic spine. Bead colors included black, pink, red, orange, yellow, light green, dark green, light blue, dark blue, and white for a total of ten colors and 100 color combinations.

We allowed stickleback to recover from anesthesia and, after observing healthy swimming behavior, we released them at a fixed point near the center of the work area. GPS coordinates of the release points and the nests were used to calculate distance between the nesting site and the point of release. Animal use was approved by Loyola University Chicago IACUC (Project 2853).

Due to the low spotting rate of GoPros, diver observation was also used to quantify returns. We moved slowly and carefully and remained at marked nests until other, un-beaded stickleback were present to help ensure that our presence hadn’t scared any beaded stickleback that may have returned.

Introduction:
Homing is the phenomenon of an organism returning to its home range after being displaced. It is present across diverse vertebrate taxa and can vary between populations and even individuals. Homing likely evolved due to its potential to increase individual fitness by allowing organisms to build awareness of refugia and resources.

The threespine stickleback fish is one organism able to home. It has been suggested that stickleback home using landmark recognition. Stickleback also have highly conserved nesting behavior, including reversal of sex roles, as the males oversee guarding the nest.

The aim of this study was to test whether nesting male stickleback return to their nests after displacement, and whether return rate diminishes with increased distance. If stickleback use landmark recognition to home, then an increase in distance would decrease the likelihood of having familiar landmarks the stickleback could use to home. We hypothesized that when displaced, nesting male stickleback would return to their nests and that the likelihood of return would decrease as the distance they were displacement increased.

Results
We caught and marked 42 nesting stickleback males in. Forty-one survived marking and were released. Displacement distance averaged 28.8m (s.d. = 17.0m; range 3m-58m). We re-spotted 20 beaded stickleback after release with 14 spotted by diver alone, 4 observed by both GoPro and diver, and two fish observed by GoPro alone. All the marked and re-spotted stickleback were observed at the nests from which they were taken, indicating that the males can and do return to their nests following displacement. We found that return was negatively but not significantly related to distance displaced (β = -0.02, p = 0.233; Table 1) for the complete data set. When the 7 evicted males were removed from the data set, the strength of the relationship increased (β = -0.04), nearly significantly so (p = 0.057), despite the smaller sample size.

Discussion/Conclusions
In this experiment, we found that nesting males were able to return to their nests following displacement. Frequency of return decreased with distance, though not with statistical significance. Possible reasons for this include small sample size, misidentification of nesting males, or the displacement range being too small. When evicted males were removed from the analysis, the negative correlation was stronger, though still not significant. These results indicate that nesting male stickleback have homing capabilities, an incentive to return, and that the distance displaced likely influences their ability to return.

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Citations