

**Host Seeking and the Genomic Architecture of Parasitism  
Among Entomopathogenic Nematodes**

Thesis by

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To my father Ray, my mother Annette, my stepfather Wallace, and my loving wife Beth,  
for nurturing my passion and enthusiasm for the natural world, and to those who have  
gone before, lighting the way with the knowledge of their discoveries.

“Doing what little one can to increase the general stock of knowledge is as respectable an  
object of life, as one can in any likelihood pursue.”

—Charles Darwin

“To seek, to strive, to find, and not to yield.”

—Lord Alfred Tennyson

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previous graduate applications had been to graduate schools, this application was different, because, although Caltech is among the best universities in the world, I was really only applying to work with Paul. When I came to interview I met with Paul and with several of his colleagues, including Sarkis Mazmanian and Judith Campbell. Of course they all approached the interview formally, as they might with any prospective graduate student. But when I made it clear that my intentions were to work for Paul Sternberg, the interviews became much less formal and they told me what a great person Paul was, how kind and considerate and genuinely interested in his students and postdocs. I thought it odd that none of his colleagues mentioned his scientific accomplishments and prowess but instead talked about what a charitable and genuinely kind person Paul is. I came to understand later that Paul's professional work speaks for itself but that what is remarkable about him is his seemingly endless reservoir of enthusiasm and excitement for research and his unassuming and approachable kindness. His door is always open, his scientific insight is unmatched, and his sincere kindness and concern for others is apparent to all who know him. It has been a pleasure and a privilege to work with such a brilliant and magnanimous man, and I am honored to have him as a mentor and colleague. He has nurtured my intellect, provided seemingly unlimited resources for my research, and helped to focus my enthusiasm and penchant for taking on too many projects.

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## Preface

The diversity of life on planet Earth is astounding, making it easy to become enthralled by the myriad different forms of all the organisms one encounters. However, when asked to define a narrowly focused research project, this wondrous diversity becomes challenging—even when a burgeoning biologist has some idea of the kinds of questions that pique his interest. How does one decide in which organism to study those questions? There are, of course, practical considerations such as the culturability of different organisms in the lab, how long they take to reproduce and develop, the cost of obtaining and growing them, the amount of space and resources they require, governmental regulations requiring specific care and treatment of some organisms (i.e., vertebrates), and many others. But there is also the matter of personal taste, passion, and interest. Some biologists absolutely love the organism they work with, while others see the organism as a tool or means to an end. As an undergraduate, I was counseled to become a ‘question driven’ biologist, meaning that I should not get too attached to any particular organism or technique, but that it should be the biological questions that drive the research, and with the questions well formed, one can then decide which organism and techniques are best suited to address those questions. While I appreciate the value of this counsel, I confess that I am completely enamored by nematodes. I have come to see in them an amazing model system where nearly any aspect of biology can be studied. They are particularly well suited as a model system of behavior, neurobiology, and genomics. Their central nervous system is relatively simple, their genomes are compact, and they are still capable of tremendously interesting behaviors, detailed in the thesis that follows.

## Abstract

Nematodes represent an especially abundant and species-rich phylum, with many free-living and parasitic species. Among the diversity of parasitic species is a guild of specialists known as entomopathogenic nematodes due to their unusual ability to quickly kill their hosts with the aid of pathogenic bacteria. Herein I discuss in detail the hallmarks of entomopathogenic nematodes and how they are different from other insect parasites. Further I explore their host-seeking behaviors, demonstrating their ability to detect insect hosts in complex soil environments and assess their odor preference profiles. I show that CO<sub>2</sub> is a major driver of host seeking and that entomopathogenic nematodes detect CO<sub>2</sub> using the same pair of conserved neurons that the fruit-dwelling *Caenorhabditis elegans* uses to detect and respond to CO<sub>2</sub>. I demonstrate dramatic differences in odor preference profiles and virulence capabilities, even between closely related nematodes. I discuss the role of genomic sequencing generally and more specifically in nematology, including how genomes are sequenced and analyzed and the types of characteristics that are most prominently assessed. This thesis concludes with a discussion of the genomic sequencing of entomopathogenic nematodes in the genus *Steinernema* and the clues these genomes provide regarding the genomic architecture of parasitism.

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# Chapter 1:

## An Introduction to Nematodes and Entomopathogenic Nematodes<sup>\*</sup>

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\* This chapter includes a quick guide first published in *Current Biology* in 2012 that was written by Adler R. Dillman and Paul W. Sternberg.

## Abstract

Nematodes are amazing animals, both ancient and diverse. Among their diversity are many plant and animal parasites, many of which negatively affect humans. However, not all parasitic nematodes are bad and some are currently being used as organic alternatives to chemical pesticides for controlling damaging insect pests. Although there are many insect-parasitic nematodes, the entomopathogenic nematodes are the best studied of these and are remarkably different in their lifestyle and in their particular parasitism. Herein I discuss the difference between entomopathogenic nematodes and other insect parasites and what makes them so interesting and useful.

## Introduction

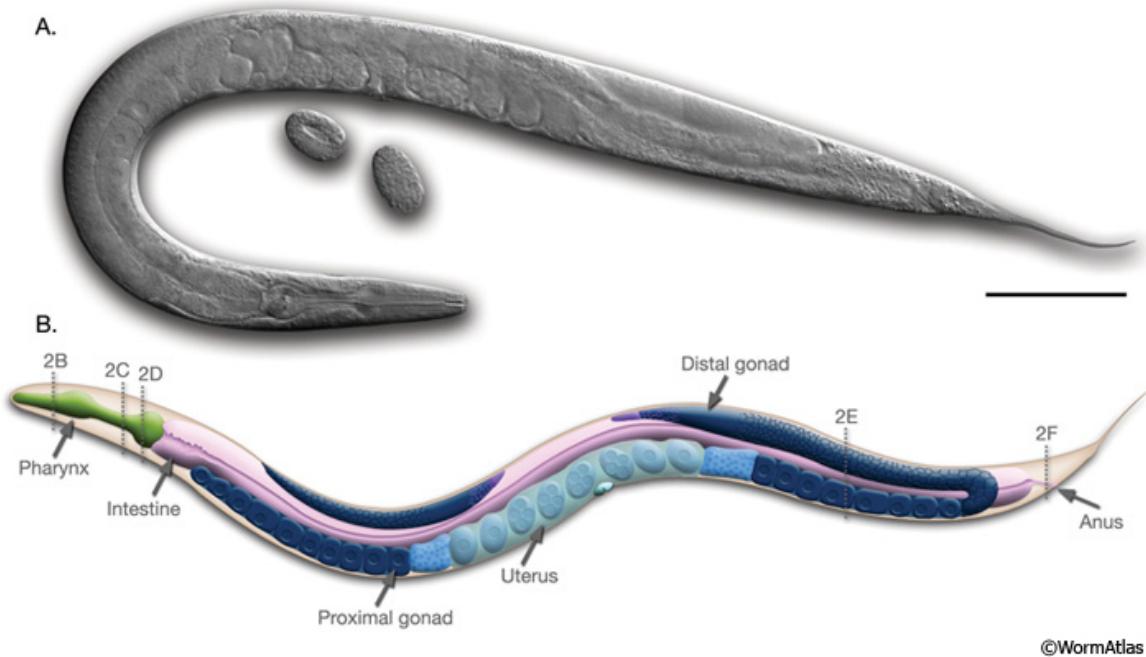
In an effort to discern order amid the astounding diversity of life, humans have classified life into the following taxonomic rankings, in descending order: Domain, kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, and species. Modern taxonomists and systematists use this conceptual hierarchy genealogically, grouping closely related species (singular: species) into genera (singular: genus), closely related genera into families, families into orders, orders into classes, classes into phyla (singular: phylum), phyla into kingdoms, and kingdoms into domains [1]. This classification scheme, or genealogy of life, was originally established by Carolus Linnaeus in the 1700s and has been modified to its current form by a host of scientists, reshaping this scheme according to newer findings, as our understanding of the relationships between organisms has increased. For instance, the ranking of domain was not introduced until 1990, and currently there are only three recognized domains of life: Archaea, Bacteria, and Eukaryota

[2]. At present, there are at 35 recognized phyla in the animal kingdom, though this number may fluctuate with new discoveries and as our understanding of animal relationships increases. Most people are only familiar with a handful of these phyla, such as Chordata, which includes all vertebrates, encompassing virtually anything you would see at a zoo. Other more commonly known phyla include Arthropoda and Mollusca, which are made up of insects, crustaceans, arachnids, and cephalopods (e.g., squid and octopuses) and gastropods (e.g., snails and slugs). Nematoda is a phylum of roundworms that originated during the Precambrian or Cambrian explosion over 500 million years ago [3, 4]. Although fewer than 30,000 species of nematodes have been described, there are thought to be between 1 and 10 million species of nematodes on Earth, making Nematoda the most speciose (alluding to both their beauty and species-richness) phylum on the planet, even more so than Arthropoda [5–8]. This abundance of evolutionary time and their relatively simple body plan has allowed nematodes to adapt and occupy virtually every ecological niche and climate imaginable. Nematodes occupy marine, freshwater, and terrestrial environments from tropical and temperate environments to extremely dry and restrictively cold environments. Nathan A. Cobb, often considered the father of modern nematology, has written: “[Nematodes] occur in arid deserts and at the bottom of lakes and rivers, in the waters of hot springs and in the polar seas where the temperature is constantly below the freezing point of fresh water. They were thawed out alive from Antarctic ice in the far south by members of Shackleton’s expedition. They occur at enormous depths in Alpine lakes and in the ocean” [8]. To borrow another famous quote of his: “If all matter in the universe except the nematodes were swept away, our world would still be dimly recognizable, and if, as disembodied spirits, we could then

investigate it, we should find its mountains, hills, vales, rivers, lakes and oceans represented by a film of nematodes” [9].

Most nematodes are microscopic, varying from 0.5–2 mm in length, with the most heavily studied nematode, *C. elegans*, averaging 1 mm (Figure 1.1). Though rare, there are larger nematodes. The largest, *Placentonema gigantissima*, is a whale parasite that was recorded at over 8 meters in length. Their general body plan is highly conserved among species and relatively simple, essentially consisting of a round tubular body with a mouth on one end and an anus on the other, a digestive tract, and reproductive system [10]. Nematodes also have an excretory-secretory system and a complex nervous system, but no circulatory system. Though this general body plan is conserved, there is extensive morphological diversity of the mouth and cephalic appendages among many species, generally relating to feeding, habitat, and ecology.

While most species of nematodes are “free-living”, there are also many parasites of plants and vertebrates. Most of these parasites are devastating and cause many well-known diseases, including elephantiasis, trichinosis, and river blindness. The World Health Organization estimates that more than two billion people are infected with nematodes (<http://www.who.int/wormcontrol/statistics/>). Though many parasites affect humans directly by causing disease, it is important to emphasize that vertebrate parasitic nematodes also affect humans indirectly by infecting livestock and pets [11]. There are many devastating plant-parasitic nematodes as well, causing an estimated 12.3% annual crop loss worldwide, effectively causing more than 77 billion dollars annually in lost crops [12].



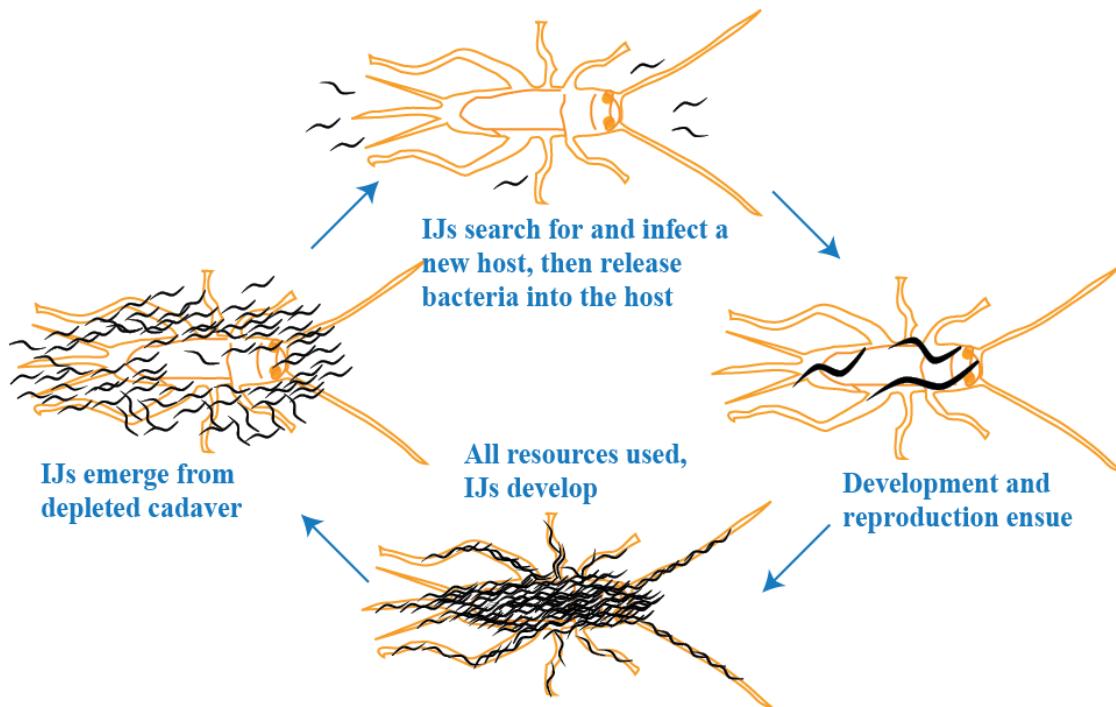
**Figure 1.1 | Anatomy of an adult hermaphrodite *C. elegans*.** **A.** DIC image of an adult hermaphrodite *C. elegans*, left lateral side. Scale bar is 0.1 mm. The two round shapes in the middle are recently laid eggs. **B.** Schematic drawing of anatomical structures. Dotted lines and numbers mark areas of additional detailed anatomical information that can be found at <http://www.wormatlas.org>.

While it is true that most parasitic nematodes affecting humans either directly or indirectly tend to have negative effects, there are some beneficial parasitic nematodes. Many insect-parasitic nematodes have been explored as potential alternatives to chemical pesticides for controlling harmful insect pests. Among these insect parasites, the entomopathogenic nematodes have been the most studied. What follows is taken from a “quick guide” published in *Current Biology* (see footnote in chapter heading), as a brief introduction to entomopathogenic nematodes.

**What are entomopathogenic nematodes?** Nematodes seem to have evolved to occupy nearly every niche imaginable, including a wide diversity of parasitic niches. Among the vast variety of parasitic nematodes, some have evolved an association with insect pathogenic bacteria. Together the bacteria and nematode are a lethal duo. These nematodes are called ‘entomopathogenic nematodes’ or EPNs for short. Essentially the nematodes serve as mobile vectors for their insect-pathogenic bacteria cargo, like little Typhoid Marys. The nematodes seek out and invade potential hosts and release their pathogenic payload into the nutrient-rich hemolymph. Infected insect hosts die quickly, the bacteria proliferate, and the nematodes feed on bacteria and insect tissues, and reproduce. When the host cadaver is depleted of resources, nematodes associated with pathogenic bacteria emerge and search for new hosts to infect (Figure 1.2). The cooperation with bacteria and the speed with which they kill sets EPNs apart from other nematode parasites.

**How do they kill?** The nematode and the pathogenic bacteria they carry contribute to varying degrees, depending on the combination. The known bacterial associates of EPNs, species of *Photorhabdus* and *Xenorhabdus*, are known to produce a toxic cocktail of secondary metabolites that are not only lethal to the insect hosts, but that prevent opportunistic bacteria and fungi from utilizing the nutrient rich cadaver, sequestering the resources for themselves and their nematode partners. The bacteria always contribute to the virulence of the duo, and usually contribute the lion’s share. Some species of nematodes are thought merely to shuttle the bacteria, contributing very little to host death, while others are known to be lethal in their own right, producing a variety of secreted

protein products that degrade and digest host tissues, in addition to short-circuiting the host immune system. Even though some nematodes appear lethal on their own, no non-bacterial associated EPNs are known to exist.



**Figure 1.2 | Life cycle of entomopathogenic nematodes.** The infective juvenile (IJ) stage seeks out a new host to infect, penetrating into the hemolymph and releasing the pathogenic bacteria it carries. The nematodes develop and reproduce in the nutrient-rich insect, going through several rounds of reproduction, depending on the size of the insect host. As resources deplete, a new generation of infective juveniles form and emerge, seeking new hosts to infect with the pathogenic bacteria they carry.

**Are all stages infectious?** The short answer is no. Only a modified third larval stage called the infective juvenile, analogous to the dauer juvenile stage in *Caenorhabditis elegans*, is infectious (Figure 1.3). In fact, infective juveniles are the only free-living stage of known EPNs, while all other developmental stages are only found inside infected

hosts. The infective juvenile is a stress tolerant, non-feeding, bacterial vectoring stage that seeks out insects to infect and kill.



**Figure 1.3 | Entomopathogenic nematodes emerging from insects.** Pictures showing entomopathogenic nematode infective juveniles emerging from *Galleria mellonella* waxworm larvae on the left and *Acheta domestica* crickets on the right

**How did they get their name?** The first entomopathogenic nematode was described by Gotthold Steiner in 1923; since then more than 75 species have been described, with more species being described every year. Most studies focus on EPNs from two genera: *Steinernema* and *Heterorhabditis*. It is through their association with insect pathogenic bacteria that they began to be called entomopathogenic nematodes. First the nematodes' bacterial partners were called entomopathogenic bacteria, because these bacteria have a median lethal dose or LD<sub>50</sub> of ten thousand cells or less. This means that an inoculum of ten thousand bacterial cells or less, into the hemolymph, kills half of a tested population of insects. The term 'entomopathogenic' began to be applied to the nematodes themselves in the late 1980's and reinforces the link between nematology and insect

pathology. It is a useful technical epithet that differentiates them other types of parasitic nematodes, of which there are many.

***Are they harmful to humans?*** While most parasitic nematodes might be seen as harmful, EPNs are beneficial to humans. Their potential as alternatives to chemical pesticides for controlling pesky insects was recognized early on and they have been subjected to extensive laboratory and field-testing. EPNs have been used in biological control since the 1930s and are currently used worldwide. For example, they have been used with high levels of success to control invasive species of mole crickets in Florida and continue to be used in orange groves in both Florida and California to control the citrus root weevil and other damaging crop pests. EPNs are even commercially available for pest control in home gardens and are commonly marketed as ‘beneficial nematodes.’

***Why are EPNs being studied?*** For starters, the symbiotic association with bacteria is highly specific in most cases and provides an excellent model for understanding the development and evolution of symbiosis. EPNs’ potential as biological control agents continues to be evaluated with studies focusing on selection of desirable traits such as virulence, heat and stress tolerance, persistence, etc. Because at least two distantly related genera have evolved this specific type of parasitism (*Heterorhabditis* and *Steinernema*), EPNs are an interesting system for the study of convergent and parallel evolution. Also, since they are odd intermediates between predators and parasitoids, there are many studies regarding their host-seeking behavior. They rely primarily on chemoreception for host seeking and some of them are capable of jumping, which is an extraordinary

behavior in nematodes that is unique to some *Steinernema*. Imagine, a 0.5–1 mm worm with no legs or hard body parts, and yet it is capable of jumping up to 9 times its body length.

**What remains to be explored?** There is much that remains unknown about EPNs, including: their global abundance and diversity, the extent of their host range and whether or not other arthropods or even non-arthropods are also infected, what has led to the specialization of some for certain hosts and not others, what drives niche partitioning within this guild, the molecular underpinnings of their symbiosis and parasitism, how they can survive carrying highly pathogenic bacteria, how they suppress or avoid host immunity, or just how genetically similar disparate species that have converged on this very particular lifestyle are. These and other questions remain underexplored, providing plenty of room for studying these fascinating, useful, and delightful worms.

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