Distribution records and comments on fleas in southwestern South Dakota

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DISTRIBUTION RECORDS AND COMMENTS ON FLEAS IN SOUTHWESTERN SOUTH DAKOTA

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ABSTRACT.—From October 2003 through April 2006, we collected 565 fleas incidental to a distribution survey of mammals in southwestern South Dakota. Sixty-one specimens, representing 18 species of mammals, possessed 20 species of fleas. The geographic distributions of these flea species revealed 8 new records for the Black Hills and its adjacent grasslands. Four species—*Megarthroglossus divisus*, *Stenoponia americana*, *Odontopsyllus dentatus*, and *Amaradix euphorbi*—constitute new records for South Dakota, thus increasing the state’s known flea fauna to 42 species. Hunters, trappers, and field biologists should be aware that serosurveillance during the 1990s revealed the presence of sylvatic plague and tularemia in the Black Hills area.

In his book *Fleas of Western North America*, Hubbard (1947) noted that he knew of only 4 publications concerning South Dakota fleas. The earliest of these was Baker’s (1895) description of *Rhadinopsylla (Typhlopsylla) fraterna* from the eastern mole, *Scalopus aquaticus*, in Brookings County. A large study of fleas from North American rabbits and hares by Kohls (1940) listed *Hoplopsyllus affinis* (now *Euhoplopsyllus glacialis affinis*) and *Cediopsylla simplex*, also from Brookings County. The study was based on specimens from the 1920s and 1930s in the insect collection at South Dakota State University. The state’s first extensive field collection of fleas occurred in the early 1940s in conjunction with plague surveillance by the U.S. Public Health Service. This survey was an eastward extension into both Dakotas after human plague was reported in several Rocky Mountain states. In Brown, Potter, and Spink counties, ground squirrels (*Spermophilus franklinii*, *Spermcophilus richardsonii*, and *Spermophilus tridecemlineatus*) were infested with *Oropsylla (Opisocrostis) bruneri* and *Oropsylla (Thrasis) bacehi* (Prince 1943). Females of the latter species were described by Prince (1944). In addition to the above, Hubbard (1947) noted that he had seen or studied specimens of *Ctenocephalides canis*, *Ctenocephalides felis*, and *Pulex irritans* from unspecified localities in South Dakota. With the addition of these 3 species, the known flea fauna of the state was 8 species.

Large multiple-year mammalian collections in Harding County (Andersen and Jones 1971) and the Black Hills (Turner 1974) also provided for opportunistic collecting of fleas. Smaller surveys in the state have focused on pocket gophers (Rissky 1962), deer mice (Ulrich and Vaughn 1963), black-footed ferrets (Boddicker 1968), eastern fox squirrels (Coffman and Balsbaugh 1971, Wilson 1978, Kietzmann 1987a), rabbits (Kietzmann and Hugghins 1984), porcupines (McDaniel and Easton 1986), and prairie dogs (Kietzmann 1987b). The relevance of these collections to the present study are considered in the species accounts.

Collections from the Black Hills and throughout South Dakota by Easton (1981, 1982) provided 6 new state records and a checklist of 35 species for the state’s flea fauna. A correction by Lewis and Galloway (2001) reduced that number to 34 species. Missing from Easton’s...
checklist were *Rhadinopsylla fraterna* and Tipton et al.’s (1979) report of *Callistopsyllus teri- nus*. Since then, *Chaetopsylla setosa* and *Meringis parkeri* have also been reported in the state (McDaniel and Easton 1986, Eads et al. 1987), bringing the known flea fauna of South Dakota to 38 species. The present study was conducted to supplement previous reports on the host and geographic distribution of mammal fleas in the South Dakota portion of the Black Hills and the adjacent grasslands.

**METHODS**

This study was incidental to a study on mammals of Fall River, Custer, Pennington, and Shannon counties (Platt et al. 2009). The first 3 of these counties include portions of the Black Hills, an isolated mountainous formation in southwestern South Dakota. Shannon County, however, is rolling prairie and part of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. Results of the mammal study, along with methods of collection and descriptions of biotic and abiotic characteristics of the area, are presented elsewhere (Platt et al. 2009).

Fleas were collected intermittently from October 2003 through April 2006. The methodology for obtaining small mammals involved setting snap-traps in the late afternoon or early evening. These traps were checked the following morning, and any captures were placed individually in plastic bags for transport to the laboratory. Rodents were brushed over a white enamel pan, but larger mammals, such as leporids, had their pelage carefully inspected for ectoparasites. These were removed and preserved in ethanol for storage and shipment, and all fleas were processed as permanent whole mounts. Specimens were bleached in 10% KOH, dehydrated in ethanol, cleared in xylol, and mounted in Canada balsam on microscope slides. Processing and identifications were done at the University of North Dakota, and voucher specimens (1905–1968) were deposited in their Parasite Collection (UNDPC). Duplicates were deposited in the collections of the Department of Biology, Sul Ross State University, Alpine, Texas. Flea taxonomy follows Lewis (1993), and mammal classification is that of Wilson and Reeder (2005).

**RESULTS**

Sixty-one hosts, representing 18 species of mammals, possessed 565 fleas. Of the 20 flea species collected, 311 specimens (55%) were recovered from 27 leporids, with *Cediopsylla inaequalis inaequalis* and *Euhoplopsyllus glacialis affinis* being the most abundant. All species are presented alphabetically within each of 4 flea families, and the accounts also consider the known range of each species within and outside of South Dakota. A listing of hosts and their fleas is presented as an appendix.

**Pulicidae**

*Cediopsylla inaequalis inaequalis* (Baker).—A total of 161 fleas (53 males, 108 females) were recovered from the 4 species of leporids collected during this study. These leporids included *Sylvilagus audubonii*, *Sylvilagus floridanus*, and *Lepus townsendii* from Fall River County, and *Sylvilagus nuttallii* from Custer County. This flea species is prevalent on rabbits and hares, and their predators, in all 11 western states (Kohls 1940). It has been collected in northwestern South Dakota (Andersen and Jones 1971) but not previously from the Black Hills or adjacent grasslands. A related species, *Cediopsylla simplex*, commonly occurs on leporids from the eastern Dakotas to the Atlantic states.

*Euhoplopsyllus glacialis affinis* (Baker).—We collected 117 specimens (46 males, 71 females) from *Sylvilagus audubonii* and *Sylvilagus floridanus* in Fall River County, a new record for the Black Hills and adjacent grasslands. Although this flea is common on rabbits and hares throughout the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains, previous reports for the state are only from Brookings and McCook counties (Kohls 1940, Kietzmann and Hugghins 1984).

*Pulex sp.*—Four females were collected, with *Lepus townsendii* and *Sylvilagus* sp. from Fall River County each yielding 2 specimens. One additional female was recovered from a *Taxidea taxus* (American badger) in Custer County. Easton (1982) noted the presence of *Pulex irritans* in Brookings, Harding, Fall River, and Shannon counties from coyotes (*Canis lupus*), swift foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*), and a human dwelling. Unfortunately, many records are uncertain since this species and *Pulex simulans* can only be distinguished by their male genitalia (Smit 1958). In the absence of males, our specimens must be listed as *Pulex* sp. Both flea species probably occur in the Black Hills area, as they do on white-tailed jackrabbits (*Lepus townsendii*) in...
southwestern North Dakota (UNDPC 203, 204, 209, 210).

Ctenophthalmidae

_Ctenophthalmus pseudagyrtis pseudagyrtis_ Baker.—Two female specimens collected from a _Microtus pennsylvanicus_ in Shannon County constitute a county record. This flea has previously been reported in South Dakota only from Roberts County, which lies some 500 km to the northeast (Easton 1982). This parasite is common and widely distributed in the eastern half of the United States, but ever less so across the Great Plains. It displays low host specificity for small mammals.

_Epitedia wenmani wenmani_ (Rothschild).—Although recovered in low numbers (1 male, 11 females), this parasite was found on a variety of hosts from 3 counties: _Microtus pennsylvanicus_, Shannon Co.; _Microtus ochrogaster_, _Peromyscus maniculatus_, and _Neotoma cinerea_, Fall River Co.; _Tamiasciurus hudsonicus_, Custer Co. The low infestation (1 or 2 fleas per host) was similar to that reported from Clay County in southeastern South Dakota (Ulrich and Vaughn 1963). Previous collections from the Black Hills were reported by Turner (1974) and Easton (1982), and from an unspecified location in the center of the state by Benton (1955). Two additional female specimens with an unusual combination of characters were collected, one each from _Chaetodipus hispidus_ in Fall River County and _Peromyscus leucopus_ in Shannon County. In the absence of male specimens, the females can only be tentatively identified as _Epitedia_ sp. (T.D. Galloway personal communication).

_Megarthroglossus divisus_ (Baker).—A single male specimen was recovered from a _Microtus ochrogaster_ in Fall River County, which constitutes a state record. This small, delicate nest flea occurs throughout the western United States, ranging eastward into western Nebraska and southeastern Wyoming (Tipton et al. 1979). Various species of woodrats ( _Neotoma_ ) appear to be preferred hosts, but this flea commonly occurs on other rodents.

_Stenoponia americana_ (Baker).—We collected 16 specimens (7 males, 9 females) of this large (3.5–4.5-mm), dark brown flea from _Microtus pennsylvanicus_ in Fall River County. This parasite possesses a large abdominal ctenidium on tergum I, thus contributing to the flea’s overall bristly appearance. Various species of cricetid mice are preferred hosts. This flea is widely distributed throughout eastern North America but is relatively scarce beyond the Great Plains. Our specimens from the Black Hills represent a new record for South Dakota.

Leptopsyllidae

_Odontopsyllus dentatus_ (Baker).—A total of 27 specimens (14 males, 13 females) of this large (3–4-mm), dark flea were collected from _Sylvilagus audubonii_ and _Sylvilagus floridanus_ in Fall River County, and _Sylvilagus nuttallii_ in Custer County. As with _Cediopsylla inaequalis inaequalis_, this rabbit flea is known from all 11 western states. Our collection is a new record for the state and a modest eastward extension of this species’ range beyond Albany County, Wyoming. _Odontopsyllus multispinosus_, the other North American species in the genus, also occurs on leporids but has an eastern distribution and has not been reported from either of the Dakotas.

_Peromyscopsylla hesperomys_ (Baker).—Two males and 7 females were recovered from _Peromyscus maniculatus_ in Fall River County. The flea’s presence on this host in Lawrence and Jackson counties was reported by Easton (1982). Of the 4 subspecies in North America, geography and host preference place _Peromyscopsylla hesperomys hesperomys_ and _Peromyscopsylla hesperomys adelpha_ in the Black Hills. However, intergrades have been reported from Pennington, Custer, and Meade counties (Johnson and Traub 1954); thus, specimens collected in the current study cannot be assigned with confidence to either subspecies.

Ceratophyllidae

_Aetheca wagneri_ (Baker).—Four males and 6 females were collected from 4 species of cricetid mice. These included _Reithrodontomys megalotis_, _Microtus ochrogaster_, _Peromyscus leucopus_, and _Peromyscus maniculatus_, all from Fall River County. This flea exhibits low host specificity throughout its range from the Great Lakes region to the Pacific coast. Previous records from the Black Hills include _Neotoma cinerea_ (Turner 1974) and _Zapus hudsonius_ (Easton 1982), and Johnson (1961) noted the flea’s presence in Custer County without specifying a host. Prior to a revision of the _Ceratophyllidae_ (Smit 1983), these and numerous other reports placed _wagneri_ in the genus _Monopsyllus_.

_Amaradix euphorbi_ (Rothschild).—Two females were removed from a _Peromyscus_
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Prior to the creation of the genus *Anapridix* in 1983, this flea was included in the genus *Malaraeus*. This parasite of cricetid rodents has a distribution from western Canada southward to the Pacific Northwest and the Rocky Mountain states. Extensions of its range include southeastern Wyoming (Wiseman 1955) and west central North Dakota (Larson 1997). The latter appears to be the easternmost record in the United States, with the present report being the first for South Dakota.

**EUMOLPIANUS EUMOLPI (ROTHSCHILD).—**We recovered 2 males from a *Tamias minimus* in Pennington County and 1 female from a *Tamias sciurus hudsonicus* in Custer County. This flea of sciurids ranges from the Great Lakes westward to the Pacific coast. Turner (1974) found least chipmunks in the Black Hills with this parasite, and Easton (1982) similarly collected the flea in Lawrence County. An earlier report from Custer County (Johnson 1961) failed to note a host. Outside of the Black Hills, *E. eumolpi* is also known from Harding County (Andersen and Jones 1971). In their review of *Eumolpius*, Lewis and Jameson (2002) synonymized the 2 subspecies of *eumolpi* (formerly in the genus *Monopsyllus*).

**FOXELLA IGNOTA (BAKER).—**We collected 16 specimens (7 males, 9 females) from a *Geomys bursarius* in Fall River County, a new record for the Black Hills. Members of the genus *Foxella* are parasites of pocket gophers wherever such hosts occur in North America. Riskey (1962) collected *E. ignota* in Clay County, and Easton (1982) listed this flea from Brookings and Harding counties. For nearly a century, *Foxella ignota* and *Foxella ignota albertensis* were viewed as valid subspecies, with the latter having the more westerly distribution. The male claspers display some differences in shape, size, and proportion. However, Lewis and Wilson (2006) reviewed the genus and synonymized these 2 subspecies and 9 others, with *E. ignota* as the only valid taxon. We accept their opinion that the species exists as a cline from east to west.

**MALARAEUS TELCHINUS (ROTHSCHILD).—**Two females were recovered from a *Peromyscus maniculatus* in Fall River County. Turner (1974) reported this parasite in the Black Hills from this host and from *Reithrodontomys megalotis*. Easton (1982) noted *Zapus hudsonius* as a host in Lawrence County. Cricetids are commonly parasitized throughout western North America, but the flea’s presence in the Black Hills appears to be its easternmost distribution. Extensive trapping of small rodents 300 km to the north in southwestern North Dakota has failed to yield *M. telchinus* (Larson et al. 1985).

**ORCHYPEAS AGILIS (ROTHSCHILD).—**Three *Neotoma cinerea* from Fall River County possessed 95 specimens (46 males, 49 females). In the same county, 3 additional specimens were recovered from a *Peromyscus maniculatus*. For many years, *O. agilis* and 7 other related forms were considered to be subspecies of *Orchypeas sexdentatus*, a common and broad-ranging parasite on various species of woodrats. From this “sexdentatus” group, 2 were synonymized and 6 raised to species status by Lewis (2000). Previous collections in the Black Hills from deer mice and woodrats did not specify a subspecies (Turner 1974, Easton 1982).

**ORCHYPEAS CAEDENS (JORDAN).—**Three males and 10 females were removed from 3 *Tamias sciurus hudsonicus*, one each from Custer, Fall River, and Pennington counties. This parasite is commonly found on red squirrels throughout the host’s North American range. In South Dakota, that range is restricted to the Black Hills, from which Easton (1982) noted the flea’s presence in Custer and Lawrence counties. In the absence of red squirrels, *O. caedens* parasitizes other species of sciurids in eastern South Dakota (Coffman and Balsbaugh 1971, Wilson 1978).

**ORCHYPEAS LEUCOPUS (BAKER).—**Eight *Microtus ochrogaster* from Fall River and Shannon counties possessed 51 specimens (19 males, 32 females). Lightly infested *Reithrodontomys montanus* and *Reithrodontomys megalotis* from Fall River County and *Peromyscus leucopus* and *Microtus pennsylvanicus* from Shannon County harbored 14 additional specimens. This parasite is one of the most common and widely distributed fleas on cricetid rodents in North America. However, the only previous report of this flea in South Dakota listed prairie voles and deer mice as hosts in the Black Hills (Turner 1974).

**OROPSYLLA (OPISCROSTIS) HIRSUTA (BAKER).—**One male was collected from a *Cynomys ludovicianus* in Shannon County. This parasite occurs throughout the range of prairie dogs, and was first reported from the Black Hills by King (1955) as occurring in “great numbers.” Additional records from the Black Hills include Custer and Pennington counties.
Boddicker (1968) reported this flea on *Mustela nigripes* in Bennett County and from a prairie dog burrow inhabited by black-footed ferrets in Mellette County. This parasite was formerly in the genus *Opisocroista*, but Smit (1983) lowered the taxon to subgeneric status.

**Oropsylla (Thrassis) Foton** (Jordan). — One male specimen was collected from a *Spermophilus tridecemlineatus* (thirteen-lined ground squirrel) in Fall River County. This parasite occurs east of the Rockies, from the western portion of the Dakotas, southward to Mexico. Various species of ground-dwelling sciruids are commonly infested, including thirteen-lined ground squirrels in Custer County (Turner 1974). Stark (1970) noted this parasite, without giving specific information, from 2 locations in northern and central South Dakota.

**Oropsylla (Thrassis) Stanfordi** Wagner. — One male and one female were recovered from a *Sylvilagus nuttallii* in Custer County. Although mainly a parasite in the Rocky Mountain region, its occurrence in the Black Hills relates to the presence of the preferred host, a disjunct population of *Marmota flaviventris* (yellow-bellied marmot). Ecological associates of yellow-bellied marmots, such as ground squirrels, prairie dogs, and rabbits, may also serve as hosts. Easton (1981) reported this parasite from marmots collected in Lawrence County, and Stark (1970) noted the flea’s presence in Custer County, without specifying a host.

**DISCUSSION**

The diversity of fleas collected reflects the diversity of hosts examined. Although the number of specimens recovered was less than anticipated, this result largely relates to our use of snap-traps for collecting small mammals (Platt et al. 2009). Live-trapped rodents tend to retain most of their fleas, but if the rodents are handled carelessly or killed, rapid abandonment occurs (Stark and Kinney 1962). Also contributing to abandonment is the tendency of fleas to leave a dead host as it loses body heat.

Eight of the 20 species we collected constitute new records for the Black Hills and adjacent grasslands: *Cediopsylla inaequilabiata*, *Europopsyllus glacialis affinis*, *Ctenophthalmus pseudagyrtes pseudagyrtes*, *Foxella ignota*, *Amaradix euphorbi*, *Megarthroglossus divisus*, *Stenoponia americana*, and *Odontopsyllus dentatus*. The last 4 in the list are new South Dakota records, thus bringing the state’s known flea fauna to 42 species.

Only *Epitedia wenmanni wenmanni*, *Peromyscopsylla hesperomys*, *Orchopeas leucopus*, and *Pulex* sp. have transcontinental ranges. The Black Hills area appears to represent the easternmost range for 5 of the 16 species with regional distributions (*Megarthroglossus divisus*, *Odontopsyllus dentatus*, *Amaradix euphorbi*, *Malaraeus tefchius*, and *Oropsylla stanfordi*).

Plague is an occasional but widely distributed zoonotic disease in the western United States, and its possible spread into the Great Plains was the impetus for surveillance work in the early 1940s. Prince (1943) collected plague-positive fleas from *Spermophilus richardsonii* in Divide County, North Dakota. However, in South Dakota’s Potter County, the same host possessed uninfected *Oropsylla bacchi* and *Oropsylla brunneri*, which later were shown to be capable vectors of the disease. Although no human cases of plague are known from South Dakota, there is evidence of the sylvatic form in the Black Hills area. Serosurveillance for plague in wild and domestic mammals has been conducted in most western states by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other agencies. No carnivores collected in Pennington County were seropositive in 1990 (CDC 1992), but a badger, 2 coyotes, and a red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) from Fall River County tested positive for plague in 1994–1995 (CDC 1995). The diets of these animals suggest infected rodents and their fleas as sources of transmission. Of the 20 species of fleas collected in the present study, at least 13 are known to be associated with plague, either through natural infections or laboratory feeding experiments. Although fleas are of minimal, if any, importance as vectors of tularemia, this zoonotic disease is associated with cottontail rabbits and their predators. In the fall of 1990, 48 of 80 sera from carnivores in Pennington County tested positive for tularemia antibodies (CDC 1992). Unknown, but potentially occurring in the Black Hills region, are Bartonelloses, a group of emerging zoonotic diseases of mammals. Although domestic cats and dogs are primary reservoirs for 4 species of *Bartonella* that are infective to humans, it is the unknown distribution and relevance of other species in coyotes, foxes, rabbits, ground squirrels, and wild mice that are of concern (Chomel et al. 2006). Hunters,
trappers, and field biologists should be aware of possible zoonotic diseases when collecting mammals.

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**APPENDIX.** The fleas recovered from mammals collected in 4 southwestern South Dakota counties, 2003–2006. The number of hosts examined is noted in parentheses. Taxonomy follows Wilson and Reeder 2005.

**Mustelidae**

Taxidea taxus (1)

Pulex sp.

**Sciuridae**

Cynomys ludovicianus (1)

Oropsylla hirsuta

Spermophilus tridecemlineatus (1)

Oropsylla fusus

Tamias minimus (1)

Eumolpius eumolpi

Tamiasciurus hudsonicus (3)

Eumolpius eumolpi

Epitedia w. wenmanni

Orchopeas caedens

**Geomyidae**

Geomys bursarius (1)

Foxella ignota

**Heteromyidae**

Chaetodipus hispidus (1)

Epitedia sp.

**Cricetidae**

Microtus ochrogaster (9)

Aetheca vagueri

Epitedia w. wenmani

Megarthroglossus divisus

Orchopeas leucopus

Microtus pennsylvanicus (1)

Ctenophthalmus p. pseudagyrtes

Epitedia w. wenmani

Orchopeas leucopus

Neotoma cinerea (3)

Epitedia w. wenmani

Orchopeas agilis

**Peromyscidae**

Peromyscus leucopus (3)

Aetheca vagueri

Epitedia sp.

Orchopeas leucopus

Stenoponia americana

Peromyscus maniculatus (4)

Aetheca vagueri

Amaradix euphorbi

Epitedia w. wenmani

Malareus tlechinius

Orchopeas agilis

Peromyscopsis hesperomys

Reithrodontomys megalotis (2)

Aetheca vagueri

Orchopeas leucopus

Reithrodontomys montanus (1)

Orchopeas leucopus

**Leporidae**

Lepus townsendii (1)

Cediopsylla i. inaequalis

Pulex sp.

Sylvilagus audubonii (7)

Cediopsylla i. inaequalis

Euhoplopsyllus glacialis affinis

Odontopsyllus dentatus

Sylvilagus floridanus (4)

Cediopsylla i. inaequalis

Euhoplopsyllus glacialis affinis

Odontopsyllus dentatus

Sylvilagus nuttalli (5)

Cediopsylla i. inaequalis

Odontopsyllus dentatus

Orchopeas stanfordi

Sylvilagus sp. (12)

Cediopsylla i. inaequalis

Euhoplopsyllus glacialis affinis

Odontopsyllus dentatus

Pulex sp.