

CRISPR/Cas9-based heritable targeted mutagenesis in *Thermobia domestica*: a genetic tool in an apterygote development model of wing evolution

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Abstract

Despite previous developmental studies on basally branching wingless insects and crustaceans, the evolutionary origin of insect wings remains controversial. Knowledge regarding genetic regulation of tissues hypothesized to have given rise to wings would help to elucidate how ancestral development changed to allow the evolution of true wings. However, genetic tools available for basally branching wingless species are limited. The firebrat *Thermobia domestica* is an apterygote species, phylogenetically related to winged insects. *T. domestica* presents a suitable morphology to investigate the origin of wings, as it forms the tergal paranotum, from which wings are hypothesized to have originated. Here we report the first successful CRISPR/Cas9-based germline genome editing in *T. domestica*. We provide a technological platform to understand the development of tissues hypothesized to have given rise to wings in an insect with a pre-wing evolution body plan.

Keywords: CRISPR/Cas9; genome editing; apterygote insect; *Thermobia domestica*; ABC transporter

1. Introduction

A neontological approach is essential for understanding the evolution of insect wings because the transitional fossil record from wingless to winged insects is sparse. Developmental comparisons between modern species regarding the pre- and post-evolution status could elucidate the key developmental changes for trait evolution. For example, developmental comparisons between the digital skeletons of fins and limbs have previously clarified the relationship between bones in the pre- and post-evolution status: tetrapods' digits originated through transition of distal cellular fates in ancestral fins (Nakamura *et al.*, 2016).

The case of insect wings is more challenging since the anatomical origin remains unclear. Two anatomically distinct portions, the tergum and pleuron, have long been proposed as possible origins of insect wings, and several developmental studies evaluating the expression of wing gene orthologs in wingless arthropods have provided new insights into these classical hypotheses (reviewed in Clark-Hachtel and Tomoyasu, 2016). However, the question remains unanswered, as results from those studies support both the tergal and pleural origin hypotheses. Averof and Cohen (1997) showed that *Apterous* and *Pdm*, which are two functional proteins involved in the development of wings in *Drosophila melanogaster*, are expressed in the limb branch (epipod) in crustaceans (Averof and Cohen, 1997). As the

common ancestry between wings and crustacean limb branches had been suggested (Kukalová-Peck, 1983), the study provided the first genetic evidence supporting the pleural origin hypothesis. On the other hand, Niwa *et al.* (2010) examined the expression pattern of the wing gene orthologs *wingless*, *apterous*, and *vestigial* in the jumping bristletail *Pedetontus unimaculatus* and showed that those genes are expressed in both the developing tergal margin and pleural branches. This dual wing gene expression led them to propose that both the tergal and pleural tissues contribute to wing evolution, hence formulating the dual origin hypothesis (Niwa *et al.*, 2010). To further clarify how each structure contributed to the first wing development, it is important to delve further into the genetic regulation operating in these structures that possibly originate wings. This approach may shed light on the development of wingless ancestors and the subsequent developmental changes that led to evolution of the first wing. However, we currently lack an apterygote insect model that allows for detailed genetic analysis.

The firebrat *Thermobia domestica* belongs to the order Zygentoma, which comprises an only apterygote group within ectognatha, in which the first wing evolved (Misof *et al.*, 2014). Because of the phylogenetic proximity with pterygote insects, the order Zygentoma retains key traits that were present in the wingless ancestor. Although *T. domestica* forms no wings,

1 it forms a flat sheet structure, known as the paranotum, at the dorsolateral margin of thoracic
2 segments (**Fig. 1**). The paranotum is considered a tissue hypothesized to have given rise to
3 wings because of its location at the tergal lateral margin where pterygote insects form wings
4 (Snodgrass, 1935).

5 The present study aimed to establish the CRISPR/Cas9 (Clustered regularly interspaced
6 short palindromic repeats/CRISPR-associated protein 9) system in *T. domestica*, as the first
7 genome editing tool in an apterygote insect. In CRISPR/Cas9-based genome editing, Cas
8 nuclease introduces double-strand DNA breaks according to the guide RNA nucleotide
9 sequence, and brings about subsequent endogenous DNA repair processes, such as non-
10 homologous end joining and homologous recombination, resulting in targeted gene disruption
11 (insertion/deletion) or targeted gene integration at the cleaved site (Doudna and Charpentier,
12 2014; Hsu *et al.*, 2014). The establishment of CRISPR/Cas9 germline genome editing in *T.*
13 *domestica* could potentially expand the available approaches, such as gene functional
14 analysis and transcriptional modulation (Doudna and Charpentier, 2014; Hsu *et al.*, 2014),
15 hence accelerating the understanding of apterygote insect development.

16 For the proof-of-principle experiment of this study, we targeted *white*, an evolutionarily
17 conserved gene, encoding the ATP-binding cassette (ABC) membrane transporter. In *D.*

melanogaster; three paralogous half-type ABC transporters, namely White, Brown, and Scarlet, function to transport pigment precursors into the eye pigment cells (Ewart and Howells, 1998). The White/Brown heterodimer transports a precursor of the red pigment pteridine, whereas the White/Scarlet heterodimer transports a precursor of the brown pigment ommochrome (Ewart and Howells, 1998). Dysfunction of *white* orthologs results in a clear loss of eye-color in non-dipteran insect orders, such as Lepidoptera and Coleoptera (Abraham *et al.*, 2000; Grubbs *et al.*, 2015). In addition, a white ortholog has been found in a crustacean, which is a closely related group of hexapoda, suggesting that the requirement of White as a core subunit in ABC transporters is evolutionarily conserved from some crustacean lineages to hexapoda (Sturm *et al.*, 2009). In this study, we successfully introduced heritable mutations in *white* locus of *T. domestica* by using CRISPR/Cas9 system, which results in white-eyed firebrats. The establishment of CRISPR/Cas9-mediated genome engineering in the apterygote insect open new research opportunities on the evolution of insects, such as on the insect wing origin.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Insect rearing

Firebrats were placed in plastic containers and stored inside a dark incubator at $37 \pm 1^\circ\text{C}$ with no photoperiodic conditioning. A water bottle without a lid was fitted in the container to maintain approximately 55%–70% humidity. The insects were fed a mixture of the artificial fish foods Tetra Goldfish and Tetra Goldfish Gold Growth (Spectrum Brands, WI, U.S.A.).

2.2 Identification of translated nucleotide sequences of the ABC transporter gene homologs

in *T. domestica*

BLAST search against our unpublished de novo transcriptome of *T. domestica* was performed to find ABC transporter gene homologs. We constructed *T. domestica* cDNA library from total RNA extracted from few terminal abdominal segments of both sexes, and sequenced on HiSeq2000 (Illumina, CA, U.S.A.). Short reads were assembled with Trinity software (Grabherr *et al.*, 2011).

2.3. Molecular phylogenetic analysis

The translated nucleotide sequences of the ABC transporter gene homologs from *T.*

1 *domestica* were aligned with the following public amino acid sequences using the MUSCLE
2 software with the default configuration on EMBL-EBI server (version 3.8.31; Edgar, 2004):
3 White from *Drosophila melanogaster* (AAF45826.1), *Aedes aegypti* (XP_011492980),
4 *Anopheles gambiae* (XP_310530), *Tribolium castaneum* (AAL56571.1), *Bombyx mori*
5 (NP_001037034.1), *Athalia rosae* (BAD54748.1), and *Pediculus humanus corporis*
6 (XP_002425032.1); Scarlet from *D. melanogaster* (AAF49455.1), *Anopheles gambiae*
7 (XP_321812.4), *T. castaneum* (AJD07060.1), *B. mori* (BAK08373.1), *Apis mellifera*
8 (XP_001122240.1), and *Pediculus humanus corporis* (XP_002423908.1); Brown from *D.*
9 *melanogaster* (AAF47020.3), *A. gambiae* (XP_308215.4), *T. castaneum* (AJD07061.1), and
10 *A. mellifera* (XP_395665.5); and ABC transporter expressed in the trachea (Atet) from *D.*
11 *melanogaster* (AAF45826.1) and *T. castaneum* (AAL56571.1). Atet was included to the
12 analysis as a representative non-eye-color ABC transporter since it is grouped into ABCG
13 subfamily with three eye-color ABC transporters, but expresses in non-eye tissues such as
14 trachea (Kuwana et al., 1996; Dermauw and Van Leeuwen, 2014). Poorly aligned regions
15 were trimmed with Gblocks (version 0.91b; Castresana, 2000), and 327 residues of amino
16 acid from each protein was used for the molecular phylogenetic analysis (sequences used for
17 phylogenetic analysis are provided in Appendix A).

A maximum likelihood-based phylogenetic tree was generated using the Garli software (version 2.01; Zwickl, 2006) with 1000 bootstrap replicates. Prottest (version 3.4.2) was used for selecting the LG model of amino acid evolution.

The iTOL was used to draw the phylogenetic tree (version 4.0.3; Letunic and Bork, 2016).

Nucleotide sequences of *Td22089*, *Td23978*, *Td30354*, and *Td32270* were deposited to DDBJ/ENA/NCBI with accession numbers LC368081, LC368082, LC368083, and LC368084, respectively.

2.4. Embryo staging

T. domestica embryos were collected from tissue paper at four hours after placed in a container, and incubated until reaching to each time point. Embryos were collected and incubated at $37 \pm 1^{\circ}\text{C}$. We made a hole on a collected embryo in 4% paraformaldehyde, and fixed overnight at 4°C . After fixation in paraformaldehyde, chorion and vitelline membrane were manually removed with forceps, and then embryos were post-fixed in Carnoy's solution overnight at 4°C . We washed fixed embryos in 0.75% NaCl three times, and stained with SYTOX Green (S7020; Thermo Fischer Scientific, MA, USA) for at least one hour at room temperature.

2.5. Single guide RNA (sgRNA) synthesis

The gene-specific sgRNAs were transcribed *in vitro* from synthesized DNA templates and column-purified using a GeneArt Precision gRNA synthesis kit (Thermo Fischer Scientific, MA, USA) according to the manufacturer's instructions. The DNA oligomers for each sgRNA (sgRNA#1: TAATACGACTCACTATAGTAAGTGTGTTGTGGGAC and TTCTAGCTCTAAAACATCGGTCCCACAACACTTA; sgRNA#2 TAATACGACTCACTATAGGGATTCCTGGAAGGC and TTCTAGCTCTAAAACCTTCAGCCTTCCAGGAATCC) were annealed and used as templates for sgRNA synthesis. Synthesized sgRNA was stored at -80°C until use.

2.6. sgRNA/Cas9 protein microinjection

Eggs laid within eight hours at $37 \pm 1^{\circ}\text{C}$ were collected from layered tissue paper, and aligned on grooves in a 2% agarose gel, which held the eggs during microinjection. We used a plastic mold to make grooves on an agarose gel. The mold design is according to Porazinski *et al.* (2010). A solution containing $1 \mu\text{g}/\mu\text{L}$ *Streptococcus pyogenes* Cas9 nuclease with three nuclear localization signals (Integrated DNA Technologies, IA, USA) and $100 \text{ ng}/\mu\text{L}$ sgRNA

was injected into the eggs with Femtotips II (Eppendorf, Hamburg, Germany) using the Femtojet microinjector (Eppendorf). An sgRNA targeting a site was injected at a time. Injected eggs were incubated on a 2% agarose gel in an incubator at $37 \pm 1^\circ\text{C}$.

2.7. Genotyping

Embryos and hatched nymphs were genotyped using genomic DNA extracted from whole egg, and cerci and a caudal filament, respectively. The tissue was digested with 0.25 mg/mL proteinase K solution in Tris-EDTA buffer for more than three hours at 55°C . The supernatant was stored at -20°C and used as a PCR template. A heteroduplex mobility assay was performed by running the PCR-amplified DNA fragments in MCE-202 MultiNA system (Shimadzu corporation, Kyoto, Japan; Chen *et al.*, 2012; Ansai *et al.*, 2014). In this method, heteroduplexes are detected as bands with low mobility by running PCR products directly on MultiNA system without denaturing and reannealing (Ansai *et al.*, 2014). Some PCR products that showed heteroduplex bands were sub-cloned into pCR4-TOPO (Thermo Fischer Scientific) and sequenced.

For high-resolution melt analysis performed on the G1 generation, the PCR product was mixed with SYTO9 dye (Thermo Fischer Scientific), incubated for two minutes at 95°C and

1 five minutes at 25°C, and analyzed in a LightScanner system (Idaho Technologies Inc., UT,
2 U.S.A; Dahlem *et al.*, 2012). The PCR products that showed a differential melting pattern
3 were re-amplified from genomic DNA, and sequenced after treatment with ExoSAP-IT™
4 PCR Product Cleanup Reagent (Thermo Fischer Scientific).
5 PCR was performed using the primer pair#1: 5'-GCTGTTGAACGCTCTGACTTT-3' and 5'-
6 TGCTGTACGTAAGCGGACAA-3', and pair#2 5'-CAACATACTTTGATCGGGATTC-3'
7 and 5'-TCTGATGCAAAAGACAATCG-3' for checking effects of sgRNA#1 and sgRNA#2,
8 respectively.

9

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Identifying a *white* ortholog in *T. domestica*

To identify a *white* ortholog in *T. domestica*, we used the basic local alignment search tool in our unpublished *T. domestica* transcriptome (total number of transcripts are 237,304 with 1,625 of contig N50) for finding sequences highly similar to the eye-color ABC transporters *white*, *brown*, and *scarlet* of other species. We found four amino acid sequences of candidate ABC transporter orthologs—Td22089, Td23978, Td30354, and Td32270—which were then aligned with public ABC transporter sequences (as listed in the Materials and Methods) from other insect species to perform a phylogenetic analysis. We first performed phylogenetic analysis with all four ABC transporter genes identified from *T. domestica* transcriptome, and obtained low bootstrap values of 349 and 127 for Brown and Scarlet subfamily clusters, respectively (Supplementary figure in Appendix A). Since Td22089 has a shorter amino acid sequence due to the lack of C-terminal region, we omitted Td22089 and reanalyzed the phylogeny. It results in the clear separation between Brown and Scarlet clusters (**Fig. 2A**). Td32270 and Td23978 were grouped with the White and Scarlet subfamilies, respectively (**Fig. 2A**), whereas Td30354 was not grouped with any of the eye-color ABC transporters. The cluster of White subfamily was supported by a high bootstrap value (971) after 1,000

replicates (**Fig. 2A**). We then used the *Td32270* sequence as a *T. domestica white* ortholog (*Td-w*) for the subsequent analysis. An InterProScan search against Td-W revealed that it contains an ATP-binding domain and six transmembrane helices like other ABC transporters (**Fig. 2B**; Dermauw and Van Leeuwen, 2014). To increase the chance of disrupting protein function by introducing insertions or deletions (indels), we designed sgRNAs targeting sites within the ATP-binding domain (**Fig. 2B**).

3.2. Establishment of CRISPR/Cas9-mediated gene knockout in *T. domestica*

More injected materials would be successfully delivered into nucleus before cell membrane barrier are formed (i.e. before the cellular blastoderm stage) as shown in other insects. To determine the timing of injection to *T. domestica* eggs, we briefly examined developmental stage of embryos until 24 hours after egg laying (hAEL) (**Fig. 3**). At 20–24 hAEL most of nuclei arrive at cell surface where cellularization takes place, whereas nuclei divide deep interior of the egg at 4–8 hAEL (**Fig. 3**). Superficial nuclei start appearing at 8–12 hAEL (**Fig. 3**). We thus injected mixture of sgRNA and Cas9 into eggs collected within eight hours, which appear to be prior to cellularization.

To test whether the injection of sgRNA and Cas9 protein caused indels, we used a microchip

1 electrophoresis system to perform a heteroduplex mobility assay on the PCR products that
2 include the targeted region. We observed multiple heteroduplex bands suggestive of indels in
3 injected embryos (**Fig. 4A**). Such heteroduplex bands were detected for samples treated with
4 either of two sgRNAs (#1 and #2), suggesting two independent sgRNAs work similarly. We
5 then analyzed the *Td-w* nucleotide sequences of the targeted site of the sgRNA#1-injected
6 eggs, and found various indels (**Fig. 4B**). We performed another injection of sgRNA#1 and
7 observed its effect on the phenotype; 32.4% of the injected embryos hatched (**Table 1**).
8 Consistent with the genotypes, 32.6% of the hatched nymphs presented a loss of black
9 coloration in some ommatidia (Arrowhead in **Fig. 5A, B, Table 1**). *T. domestica* nymphs
10 have a pale red color in some body regions, including the lateral to posterior margin of the
11 thoracic segments (Arrows in **Fig. 5A**). In addition to the eye coloration defect, 80.4% of the
12 hatched nymphs presented a lack of body pigmentation in at least a portion of those body
13 regions (Arrow in **Fig. 5B, Table 1**). Taken together, these results indicate that the loss of
14 coloration in the eye and body was caused by indels at the *Td-w* locus, because of
15 CRISPR/Cas9 in at least some somatic cells.

16 To investigate whether CRISPR/Cas9 induced indels also in germ cells, we individually
17 crossed each of the 24 injected adults showing body color defects with a wildtype individual,

and successfully obtained offspring from 23 of the 24 pairs (95.8%) (**Table 2**). To screen for possible knockouts within the G1 generation, we performed a high-resolution melt assay for at least two individual nymphs from each line. Thirteen pairs presented different melting patterns from the wildtype (data not shown). We then checked the G1 genotypes of those 13 pairs and found indels in 69.2% of the checked pairs (**Table 2**). We further obtained the next generation (G2) from the *Td-w* knockout allele heterozygotes, and found homozygotes which present complete loss of compound eye coloration (**Fig. 5C–E'**). The homozygotes presented a loss of coloration of the dorsal head capsule (Asterisks in **Fig. 5E and E'**) and of the segment margins of the thorax (Arrows in **Fig. 5F, F'**) and abdomen (Arrows in **Fig. 5G, G'**). Loss of coloration on other body parts such as antennae, maxillary palps, legs, abdominal styli, caudal filament, and cerci are displayed in adults of *Td-w* knockouts (Fig. 6). These observation confirmed that *Td-w* plays a role in the pigmentation of both the eye and body. The ABC transporter has been implicated in the evolutionarily conserved function of the eye color because the crustacean species *Daphnia pulex* encodes *white* and *scarlet* (Sturn *et al.*, 2009). However, this functional evidence has been restricted to holometabolous insects. Although it is beyond the scope of this study, the *white* ortholog function observed in *T. domestica* supports the proposition that the role of ABC transporters in the eye and body

color is evolutionarily conserved among insects.

The rate of CRISPR/Cas9-mediated gene knockout in somatic cells (80.4%) observed in *T. domestica* is comparable with the somatic transformation efficiency previously observed in other species. For example, the early reports of CRISPR/Cas9-mediated knockout efficiency in *D. melanogaster*, *T. castaneum*, and *B. mori* were approximately 88%, 80%, and 95.6%, respectively (Bassett *et al.* 2013; Wang *et al.*, 2013; Gilles *et al.* 2015). Similarly, the germline transmission efficiency in *T. domestica* (39.1%) is comparable with that reported for other species, such as *D. melanogaster*, (~58%), *T. castaneum* (~100%), and *B. mori* (35.6%; Bassett *et al.* 2013; Wang *et al.*, 2013; Gilles *et al.* 2015).

In conclusion, our results demonstrate that the CRISPR/Cas9 system provides efficient heritable genome editing in the apterygote insect *T. domestica*. In addition to the RNAi-mediated gene knockdown (Ohde *et al.*, 2009), germline genome editing using CRISPR/Cas9 in *T. domestica* provides a platform technology that opens up a new avenue toward understanding ancestral development in wingless insects and evolution of the wing development program.

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1 **Figure Captions**

2 **Fig. 1 The paranotum in *T. domestica***

3 **A**, Lateral view of the female adult *T. domestica*. **B**, A transverse section of the *T. domestica*
4 thorax stained with hematoxylin and eosin Y. The arrow indicates the paranotum.

1 **Fig. 2 Identification of a *white* ortholog in *T. domestica***

2 **A**, Phylogenetic tree of eye-color ABC transporters. Bootstrap values after 1000 replicates
3 are shown for each node. **B**, Schematic diagram of the Td32270 domain architecture. The
4 arrow indicates the site where sgRNA is designed.

5 Ae, *Aedes aegypti*; Ag, *Anopheles gambiae*; Am, *Apis mellifera*; Ar, *Athalia rosae*; Atet, ABC
6 transporter expressed in trachea; Bm, *Bombyx mori*; Dm, *Drosophila melanogaster*; Ph,
7 *Pediculus humanus corporis*; Tc, *Tribolium castaneum*; Td, *Thermobia domestica*.

8

1 **Fig. 3 Eggs in eight hours after laying are in early cleavage stage**

2 *T. domestica* embryos stained with SYTOX Green. Labels indicate hours after egg laying. A

3 number in parenthesis is the number of samples. A representative image of an embryo for

4 each time window is displayed. Scale bar is 0.5 mm.

5

Fig. 4 Microinjection of sgRNA and Cas9 protein induces indels in *T. domestica*

A, Heteroduplex shift assay for *Td-w* sgRNA/Cas9 protein injected embryos (G0). Asterisks indicate samples showing multiple heteroduplex bands. The lane 'C' represents no injection control. **B**, Nucleotide sequences around the *Td-w* CRISPR/Cas9 target site in *Td-w* sgRNA#1/Cas9 protein injected embryos (G0). The target sequence of our *Td-w* sgRNA#1 is underlined. Protospacer adjacent motif is represented as a blue box. The red dash and character indicate detected mutations. The number of deleted (–) or inserted (+) nucleotide(s) and the number of sample(s) that showed each nucleotide sequence (N = 19) are indicated at the right side of the sequences.

1 **Fig. 5 CRISPR/Cas9-based germline genome editing in *T. domestica***

2 **A, B**, Nymph phenotypes in injected generation (G0). Lateral view of the first instar nymphs

3 after no injection (A) and *Td-w* sgRNA#1/Cas9 protein injection (B). **C–G'**, G2 nymph

4 phenotype. Dorsal view of the first instar nymphs of the wild type (C) and *Td-w* knockout

5 allele homozygote (D). The regions in white boxes in C and D are magnified in E–G and E'–

6 G', respectively. The red arrowhead indicates a compound eye. The arrow indicates

7 coloration at the tergal edge. T1, prothorax; A1, first abdominal segment. Scale bar

8 corresponds to 0.25 mm in A–D, and 0.1 mm in E–G'.

9

1 **Fig. 6 *Td-w* mutant homozygotes display loss of coloration in body parts of adults**

2 **A**, Dorsal view of adult heads of the wildtype (top) and *Td-w* mutant homozygote (bottom).

3 Arrowheads indicate eyes. Arrows indicate segments on maxillary palps that are colored in

4 the wildtype. Asterisks indicate antennae. **B, C**, Legs on prothorax, mesothorax and

5 metathorax (left to right) in the wildtype (**B**) and *Td-w* mutant homozygote (**C**). Arrows

6 indicate colored regions in the wildtype. **D, E**, Ventral view of caudal regions in the wildtype

7 (**D**) and *Td-w* mutant homozygote (**E**). Arrows indicate abdominal styli. Asterisks indicate

8 cerci. Scale bars are 1 mm.

1 **Table 1 Summary of G0 phenotype after *Td-w* sgRNA/Cas9 protein injection**

No. of injected egg	No. (%) of hatched egg	No. (%) of nymph with each phenotype		
		Wildtype	Loss of body pigmentation	White ommatidium
145	46 (32.4)	10 (15.6)	37 (80.4)	15 (32.6)

2

1 **Table 2 Summary of fertility and G1 genotype in *Td-w* knockouts**

Sex of <i>Td-w</i> sgRNA/Cas9 protein injected G0	No. crossed to wildtype	No. (%) of fertile pair	No. of pairs in which offspring genotype was checked	No. (%) of line with Indels
Male (M)	6	6 (100)	4	3 (50.0)
Female (F)	18	17 (94.4)	9	6 (35.3)
Total (M+F)	24	23 (95.8)	13	9 (39.1)

2

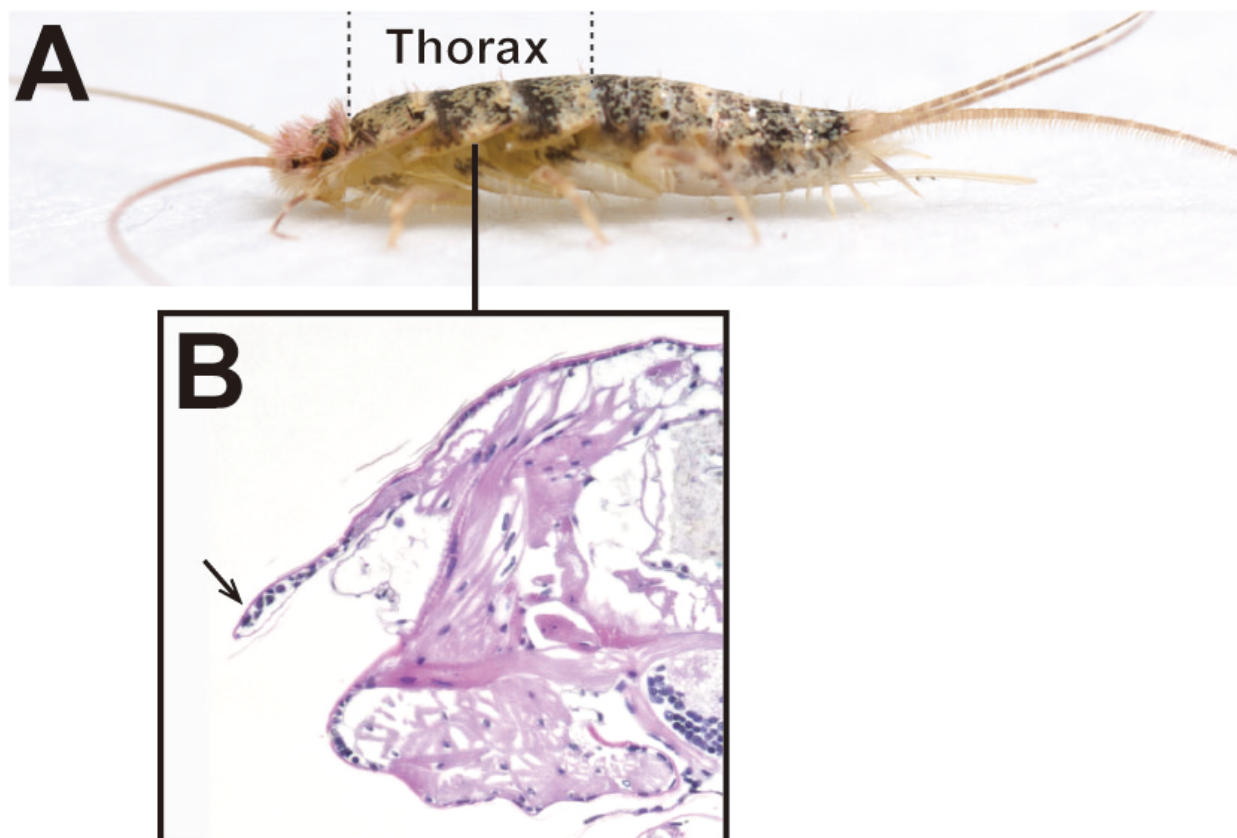


Fig. 1 (color)

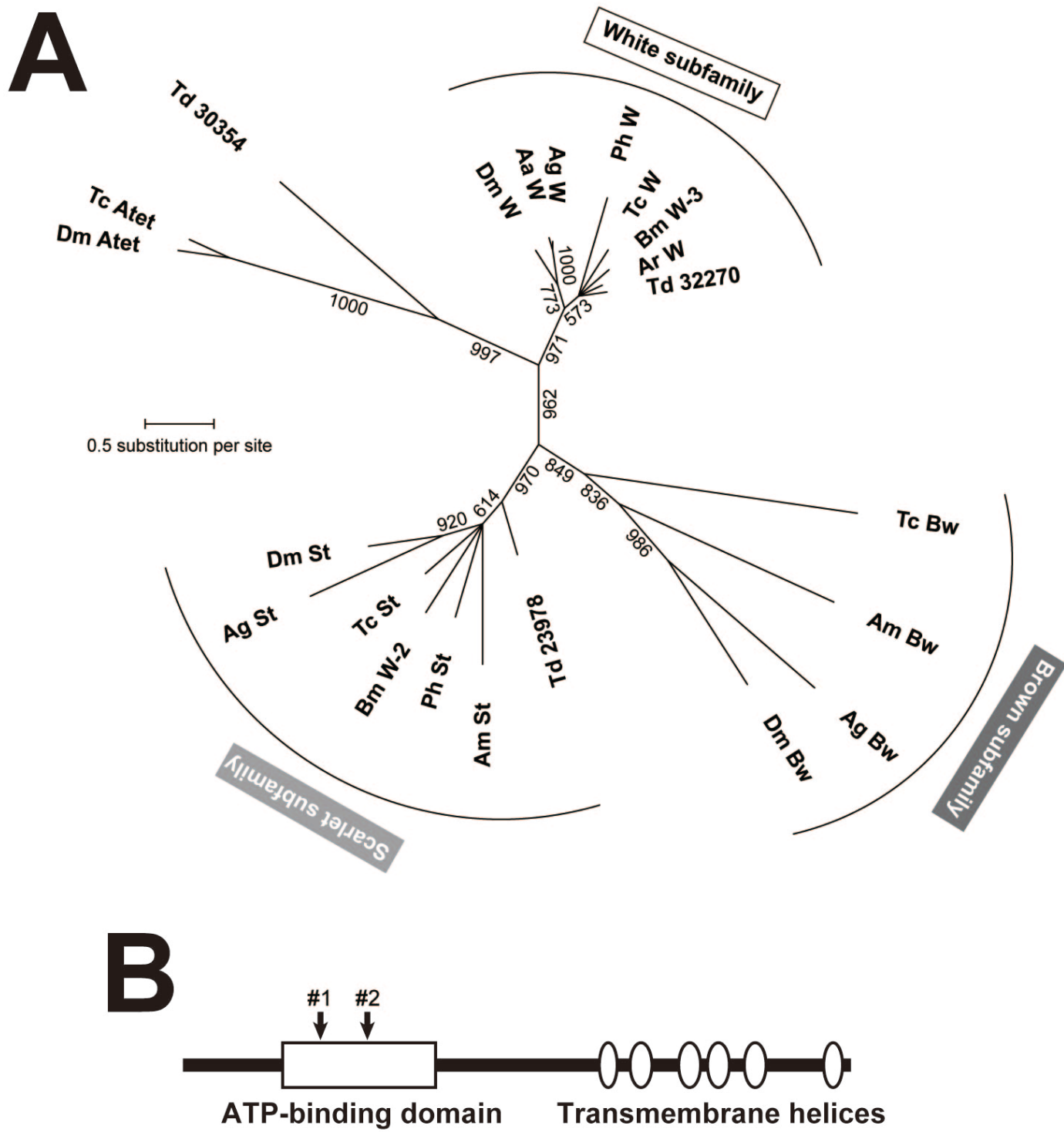


Fig. 2

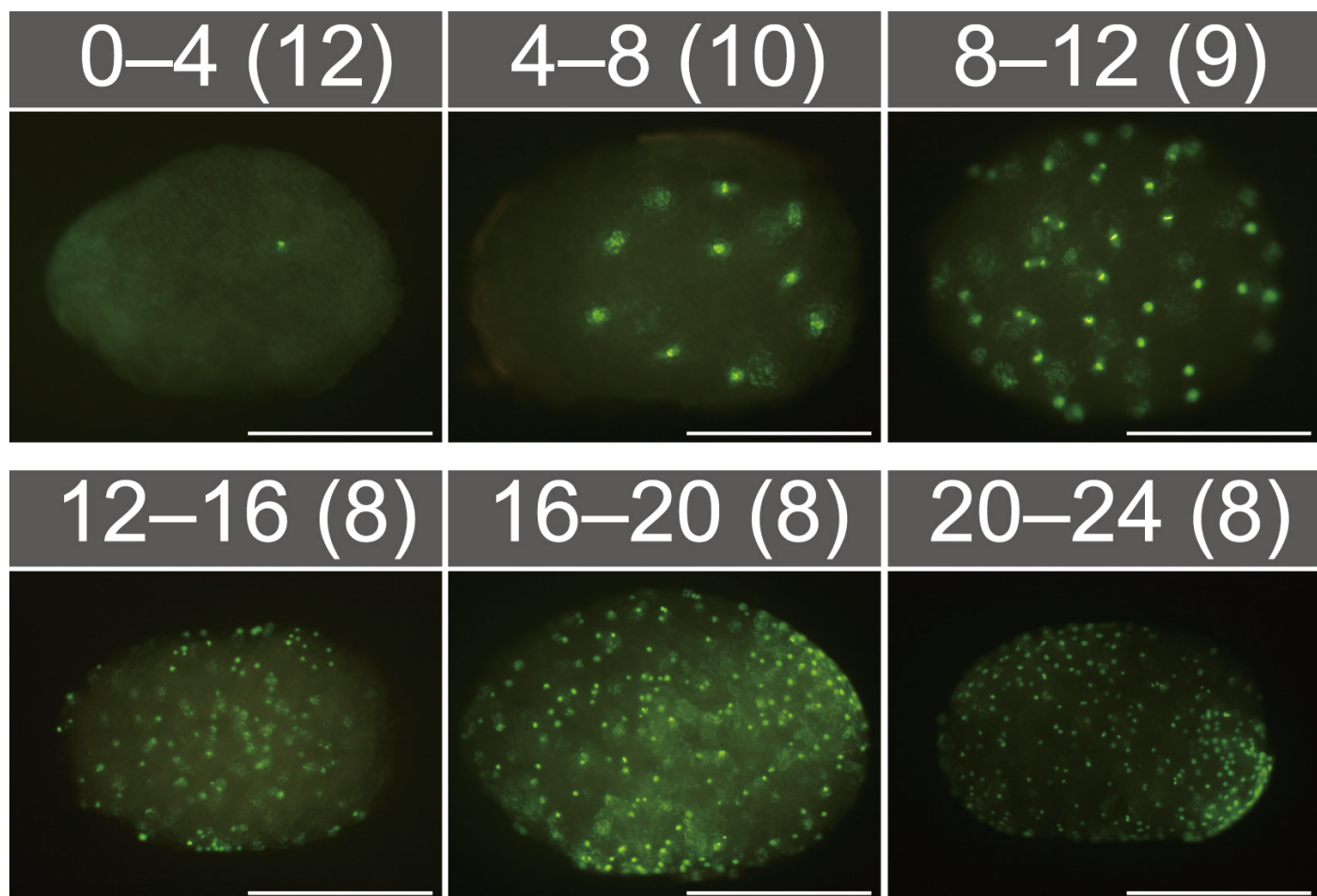


Fig. 3 (color)

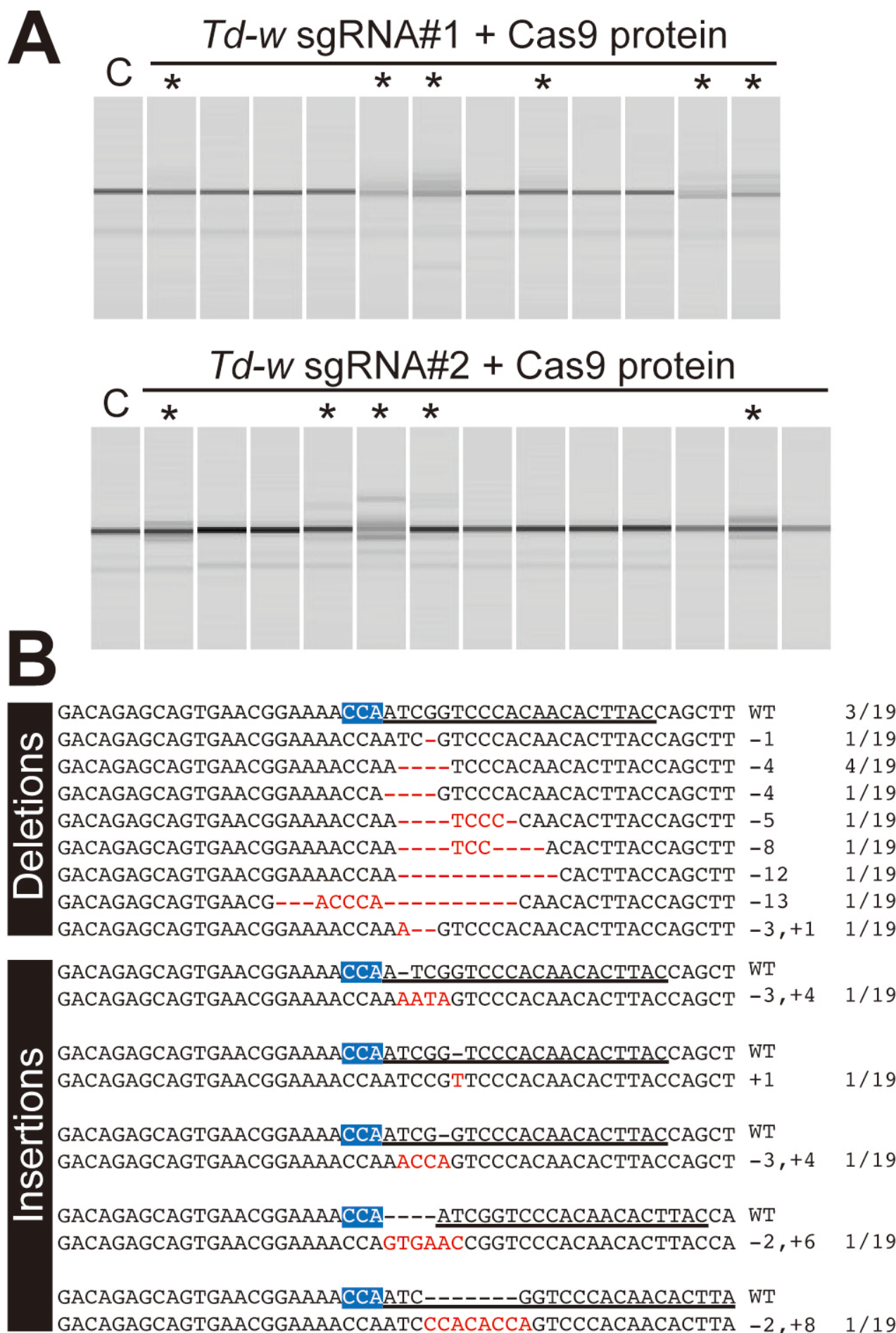


Fig. 4 (color)

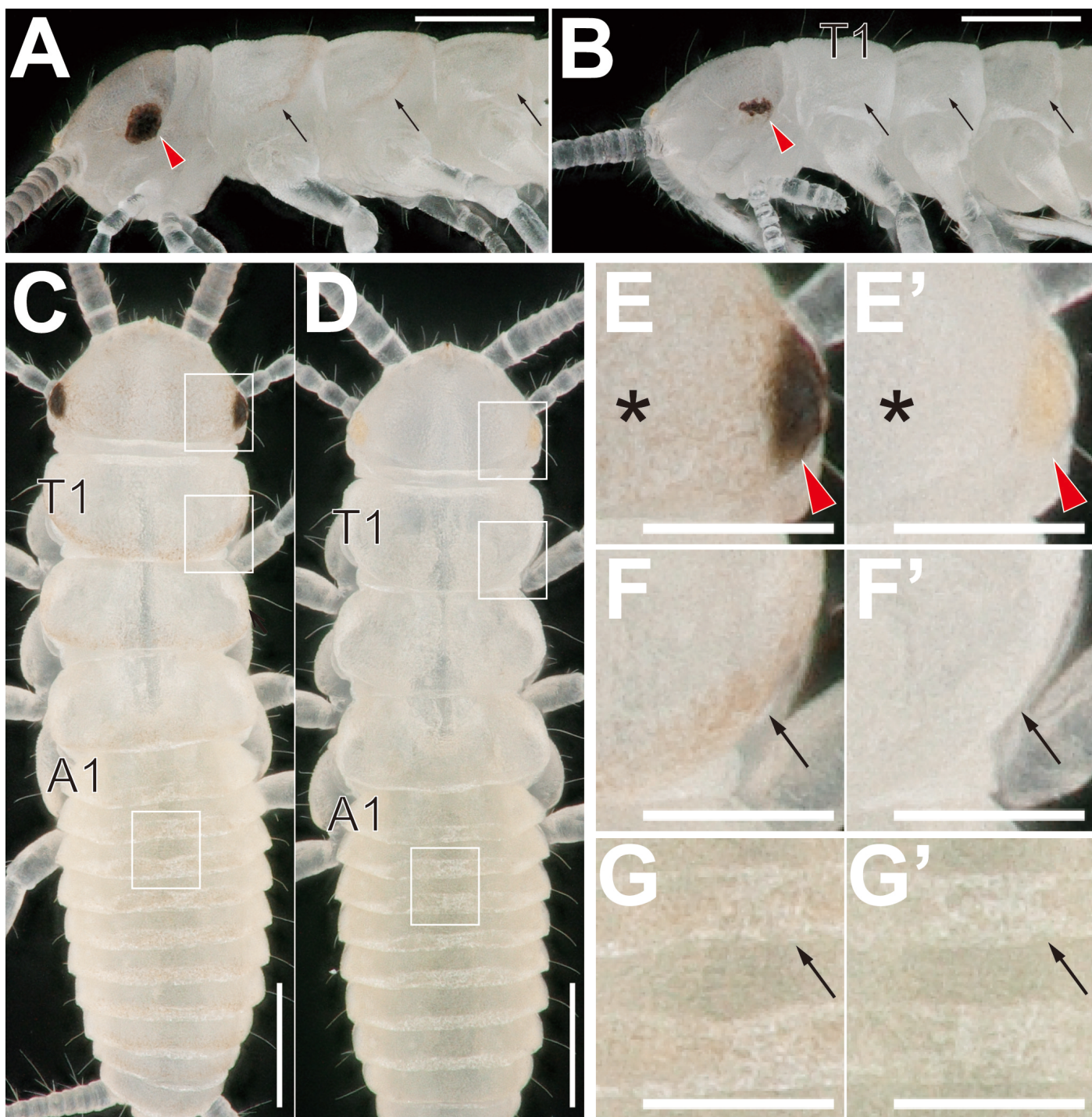
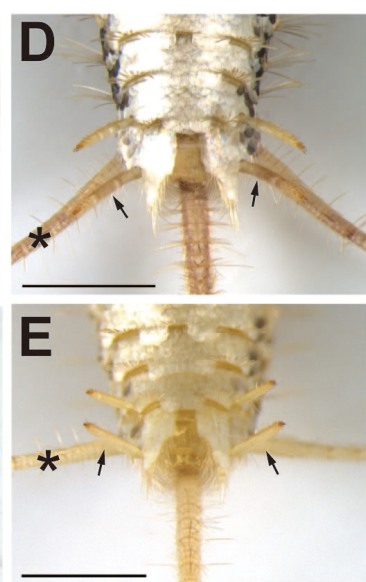
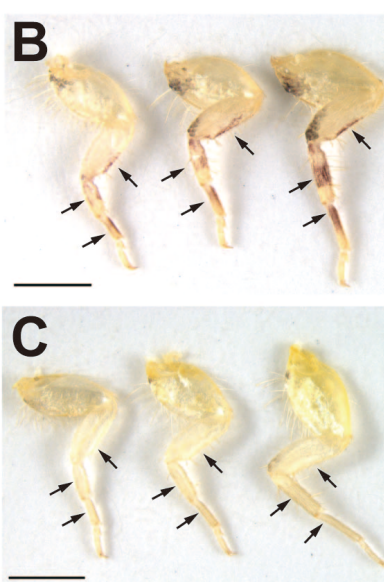
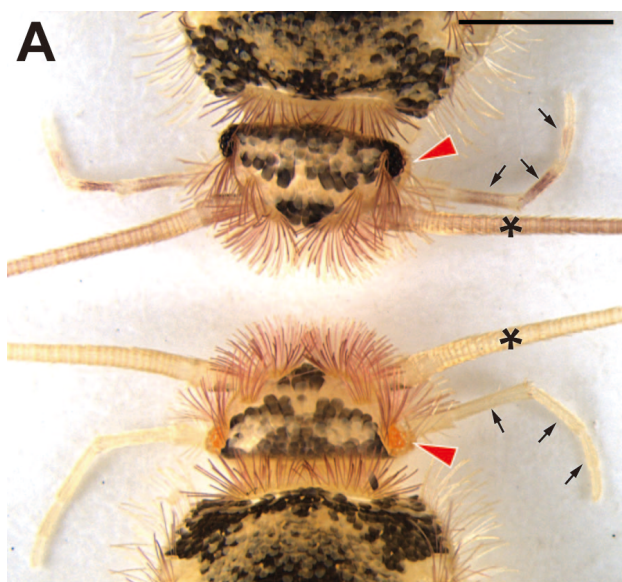


Fig. 5 (color)



1 **Supplementary figure**

- 2 Phylogenetic tree of eye-color ABC transporters with Td22089. Bootstrap values after 1000
- 3 replicates are shown for each node. Low bootstrap values for Brown and Scarlet subfamilies are
- 4 shown in red characters.

2

3

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