

Male fish can thank genes for colourful looks

22 March 2019



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Striking traits seen only in males of some species – such as colourful peacock feathers or butterfly wings – are partly explained by gene behaviour, research suggests.

The findings aid understanding of the phenomenon, which can help animals attract mates, but also make them more vulnerable to predators.

Genetics clues

Researchers studied the genetics of the [guppy fish](#), whose [males](#) are brightly coloured compared with the dull brown of females.

Researchers at the Universities of Edinburgh and Exeter used populations of fish bred in the lab to carry out detailed studies of how [genes](#) are passed on during reproduction.

Scientists compared genetic maps over several generations alongside entire genetic codes, to understand how genes were inherited over time.

Combined DNA

In typical sexual reproduction, a set of genes from each parent would combine randomly to create offspring with a mix of features from both.

In male guppy [fish](#), however, packages of genes in cells – known as chromosomes – were found to exchange genes only from their tips.

Many genes, including those that cause bright colours, are passed on from one male [generation](#) to the next almost undisturbed, and rarely mix with genes inherited by females.

Researchers also found that this low rate of genetic mixing between the sexes has enabled the evolution of the male's brightly coloured appearance, by conserving the characteristic over many generations.

Their study, supported by the European Research Council, was published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

"Insight into exchanges between male and female genes have helped explain how these bright colours have evolved and diversified in male guppies," says Dr. Roberta Bergero, School of Biological Sciences.

More information: Roberta Bergero et al. Exaggerated heterochiasmy in a fish with sex-linked male coloration polymorphisms, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2019). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1818486116](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1818486116)

Provided by University of Edinburgh

APA citation: Male fish can thank genes for colourful looks (2019, March 22) retrieved 13 June 2021 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-03-male-fish-genes-colourful.html>

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