# Unraveling the intricacies of sex chromosomes across the Animal Kingdom

Claudiu Gavriloaie

Bioflux SRL, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Corresponding author: C. Gavriloaie, claudiugavriloaie@gmail.com

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**Introduction**. Sex determination is a fundamental aspect of reproductive biology in the Animal Kingdom. While many organisms reproduce sexually, the mechanisms governing sex determination vary widely among species (Mag & Petrescu 2006). Central to this process are sex chromosomes, specialized chromosomes that carry the genetic information determining an individual's sex. Through the study of sex chromosomes, scientists have uncovered fascinating insights into the evolution, diversity, and complexity of sex determination systems across different animal taxa (Petrescu-Mag 2018).

**Evolution of sex chromosomes**. The evolution of sex chromosomes is a dynamic process shaped by various evolutionary forces, including genetic drift, natural selection, and sexual conflict. One of the most well-studied models of sex chromosome evolution is the XY system found in mammals, including humans (Furman et al 2020). In this system, individuals with two X chromosomes develop as females, while those with one X and one Y chromosome develop as males. The Y chromosome, once a homologous pair with the X chromosome, has undergone significant degeneration, resulting in a reduction in gene content and size. This degeneration is thought to be driven by the acquisition of sex-determining genes, such as SRY in mammals, which triggers male development (Miyawaki et al 2020).

Contrastingly, other organisms exhibit diverse sex determination systems. For instance, some species possess ZW sex chromosomes, as observed in birds and some reptiles, where females are the heterogametic sex (ZW) and males are homogametic (ZZ) (Pricop & Pricop 2011). The evolutionary dynamics of ZW systems differ from XY systems, with the Z chromosome often showing signs of degeneration in species with a female heterogametic system.

Additionally, some organisms lack morphologically distinct sex chromosomes altogether. Instead, sex determination may be governed by environmental factors, such as temperature in reptiles like turtles and crocodilians or social cues in some fish species. These examples underscore the remarkable diversity of sex determination mechanisms across the Animal Kingdom and highlight the role of sex chromosomes in shaping reproductive strategies (Petrescu-Mag 2007).

**Sex chromosome dosage compensation**. One intriguing aspect of sex chromosome biology is the phenomenon of dosage compensation, whereby gene expression levels are equalized between individuals of different sexes (Chen et al 2020). In species with XY systems, males possess only one copy of X-linked genes, leading to potential imbalances in gene expression compared to females, who possess two copies. To counteract this imbalance, mechanisms of dosage compensation have evolved to regulate gene expression from the X chromosome.

In mammals, dosage compensation is achieved through X chromosome inactivation (XCI), whereby one of the two X chromosomes in females is randomly silenced during early development (Loda et al 2022). This ensures that males and females have similar levels of X-linked gene expression despite differences in X chromosome dosage. Notably, some genes, known as escapees, evade XCI and remain active from both X chromosomes, contributing to sexual dimorphism in gene expression.

In contrast, birds have evolved a unique form of dosage compensation called Z chromosome dosage compensation (ZDC) (Deviatiiarov et al 2023). In species with a ZW system, gene expression is upregulated from the single Z chromosome in males to match the expression levels from the two Z chromosomes in females. The molecular mechanisms underlying ZDC are distinct from mammalian XCI and involve the differential regulation of gene expression between the sexes.

**Sex chromosomes and speciation**. Sex chromosomes play a crucial role in speciation processes by influencing patterns of reproductive isolation between populations (Dufresnes & Crochet 2022). The evolution of sex-linked genes can lead to genetic incompatibilities between populations, contributing to reproductive barriers that promote speciation. This phenomenon, known as the 'speciation gene cascade,' involves the divergence of sex-linked genes involved in reproductive traits, such as hybrid sterility or inviability (Petrescu-Mag et al 2018).

Sex chromosome rearrangements, such as inversions and translocations, can further reinforce reproductive isolation by suppressing recombination between sex chromosomes. Reduced recombination leads to the accumulation of genetic differences between populations, accelerating the divergence of sex-linked genes and facilitating speciation. Thus, sex chromosomes contribute not only to the determination of sex but also to the evolutionary processes driving biodiversity in the Animal Kingdom.

**Conclusions**. The study of sex chromosomes in the Animal Kingdom offers a captivating window into the diversity, evolution, and complexity of sex determination mechanisms. From the classic XY systems of mammals to the diverse array of sex determination strategies observed in other taxa, sex chromosomes embody the intricate interplay between genetics, evolution, and reproductive biology. By unraveling the mysteries of sex chromosomes, scientists continue to uncover fundamental insights into the origins and maintenance of biological diversity across the Animal Kingdom.

**Conflict of interest**. The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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Author:
Claudiu Gavriloaie, SC Bioflux SRL Cluj-Napoca, 54 Ceahlau Street, 400488 Cluj-Napoca, Romania, e-mail: claudiugavriloaie@gmail.com

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