

1 **Running title:** Molecular identification of the *Trypanosoma (Herpetosoma) lewisi* clade in black rats (*Rattus*
2 *rattus*) from Australia.

3 **Authors:** Siobhon L. Egan^{1*}, Casey L. Taylor², Jill M. Austen¹, Peter B. Banks², Liisa A. Ahlstrom³, Una M.
4 Ryan¹, Peter J. Irwin¹ and Charlotte L. Oskam^{1*}.

5
6 **Affiliations**

7 ¹ Vector and Waterborne Pathogens Research Group, College of Science, Health, Engineering and Education,
8 Murdoch University, Perth, Western Australia, Australia

9 ² School of Life and Environmental Sciences, The University of Sydney, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

10 ³ Bayer Australia Ltd, Animal Health, Pymble, New South Wales, Australia

11 * Corresponding authors

12
13 S.L.E. siobhon.egan@murdoch.edu.au; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4395-4069>

14 C.L.T. casey.taylor@sydney.edu.au; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8708-3405>

15 J.M.A. j.austen@murdoch.edu.au; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1826-1634>

16 P.B.B. peter.banks@sydney.edu.au; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4340-6495>

17 L.A.A. liisa.ahlstrom@bayer.com

18 U.M.R. una.ryan@murdoch.edu.au; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2710-9324>

19 P.J.I. p.irwin@murdoch.edu.au; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0006-8262>

20 C.L.O. c.oskam@murdoch.edu.au; <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8886-2120>

21

22 **Keywords:**

23 *Trypanosoma lewisi*; *Rattus rattus*; Australia; black rats; ship rats

24

25

26 **Abstract**

27 Invasive rodent species are known hosts for a diverse range of infectious microorganisms and have long been
28 associated with the spread of disease globally. The present study describes molecular evidence for the
29 presence of a *Trypanosoma* sp. from black rats (*Rattus rattus*) in northern Sydney, Australia. Sequences of
30 the 18S ribosomal RNA (rRNA) locus were obtained in two out of eleven (18%) blood samples with
31 subsequent phylogenetic analysis confirming the identity within the *Trypanosoma lewisi* clade.

32
33 **Introduction**

34 Black rats (*Rattus rattus*) are distributed throughout the world and considered one of the most significant
35 invasive species. In Australia, black rats became established alongside European settlement during the
36 1770's, although the precise date of their first arrival on the continent is unclear (Banks and Hughes 2012).
37 Black rats can act as amplifying hosts for a diverse range of pathogens that can affect humans, wildlife and
38 domestic animals and a recent review of black rats in Europe identified at least 20 zoonotic infectious agents
39 associated with the species (Strand and Lundkvist 2019). However, despite the global recognition of these
40 rodents as hosts of pathogens, there is a relatively limited understanding of the range of infectious agents
41 present in Australian populations of black rats (Banks and Hughes 2012).

42
43 Trypanosomes are a group of flagellate protozoan parasites, the vast majority of which are transmitted by
44 blood-feeding invertebrates. Worldwide at least 44 trypanosome species are known to infect rodents (Dybing
45 et al. 2016). In Australia, recent research has revealed the presence of several novel trypanosomes infecting
46 native Australian marsupials (Thompson et al. 2014), however investigation into the presence of
47 trypanosomes in Australian rodents, either native or introduced, has been lacking in recent years.

48
49 The results shared in this short communication form part of a broader ongoing investigation into vector-
50 borne microorganisms present in Australia. To the authors' knowledge, this study provides the first molecular
51 identification of *Trypanosoma lewisi*-like organisms from black rats on mainland Australia.

52

53 **Methods**

54 Small mammal trapping was conducted during April and May 2019 at two sites in northern Sydney,
55 Australia; Irrawong Reserve and Warriewood Wetlands, Warriewood (-31.69°, 151.28°) and North Head,
56 Manly (-33.81°, 151.29°). Two transects of 20 trap stations were set up at each site, with each station
57 including one Elliot type B trap (46 x 15.5 x 15 cm) and one medium sized cage trap (72 x 32 x 31 cm) to
58 target small and medium sized mammals. Traps were baited with peanut butter and oat balls and set for 3
59 consecutive nights. The sampling was conducted with approval of the Animal Ethics Committees of
60 Murdoch University (Permit number R3026/18) and the University of Sydney (Permit number 2018/1429).
61 Venous blood was collected into 1mL EDTA tubes for the detection of haemoparasites. Thin blood smears
62 were prepared and stained with modified Wright-Giemsa. Blood films were inspected by light microscopy
63 (Olympus BX51) for the presence of trypanosomes at x 400 magnification and under oil immersion (x 1000).
64 Total genomic DNA was extracted from 200 µl of blood using a MasterPure DNA purification kit
65 (Epicentre® Biotechnologies, Madison, Wisconsin, U.S.A) following the manufacturer's recommendations.
66 Where 200 µl of blood was not available, PBS was used to make samples up to 200 µl. DNA was eluted in
67 30 µl of TE buffer and stored at -20°C.

68

69 Blood samples were screened for the presence of *Trypanosoma* spp. using a nested PCR approach targeting a
70 ~550 bp product of the 18S ribosomal RNA (rRNA) gene with external primers TRY927F/TRY927R and
71 internal primers SSU561F/SSU561R, as previously described (Noyes et al. 1999). Reactions were carried out
72 in 25 µl volumes, 2 µl of gDNA was added to the primary PCR and 1 µl of the primary product was used as a
73 template for the secondary assay. PCR products were electrophoresed on a 1% agarose gel stained with
74 SYBR safe (Invitrogen, USA), and amplicons of the correct size were excised and purified using previously
75 described methods (Yang et al. 2013). Sanger sequencing was carried out using internal primer sets in both
76 directions and sequencing was performed at the Australian Genome Research Facility (Perth, Australia).
77 Samples that returned a positive identification for *Trypanosoma lewisi*-like were further investigated. A near
78 full-length fragment of the 18S rRNA locus was obtained using two nested PCR assays. Reactions were
79 carried out in 25 µl volumes using external primers SLF/S762 and internal primer sets S823/S662 and S825/
80 SLIR as described (McInnes et al. 2009). Gel electrophoresis and Sanger sequencing using internal primers

81 in both directions were carried out as above. No-template and extraction controls were included throughout
82 the laboratory processes. Extractions, pre-PCR and post-PCR procedures were performed in laboratories
83 physically separated from each other in order to minimise the risk of contamination. In addition, no *T. lewisi*
84 species have been previously isolated or amplified in the specific laboratories used.

85

86 Nucleotide sequences from *Trypanosoma* species were retrieved from GenBank (Benson et al. 2017) and
87 aligned with sequences obtained in the present study using MUSCLE (Edgar 2004), gaps were removed
88 using Gblocks (Castresana 2000) with less stringent parameters. The final alignments were imported into
89 MEGA 7 (Kumar et al. 2016), and the most appropriate nucleotide selection model was selected using the
90 dedicated feature based on the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC). Bayesian phylogenetic reconstruction
91 was conducted in MrBayes v3.2.6 (Ronquist et al. 2012) using a MCMC length of 1,100,00, burn in of
92 10,000 and sub-sampling every 200 iterations. Genetic distances were calculated using the Kimura model,
93 positions containing gaps and missing data were eliminated.

94

95 **Results and Discussion**

96 In total, 11 black rat blood samples were collected for analysis from Warriewood Wetlands (n=4), and North
97 Head (n=7). Two rat samples from North Head were positive for *Trypanosoma* species by molecular
98 methods, and of these a blood smear was only available in one case. Unfortunately, no trypomastigote stages
99 were observed by light microscopy despite prolonged searching of the cell layer. Black rat samples that were
100 negative for molecular evidence of trypanosomes were also screened by microscopy, however this also did
101 not return any positive observations. The absence of a morphological identification in this report is
102 disappointing, however it is not unexpected when parasites reside in their natural host. Mackerras (1959)
103 reported that rats (*R. rattus*) experimentally infected with *T. lewisi* go through an acute phase where parasites
104 multiply rapidly, followed by a chronic phase, during which parasite numbers progressively diminish and
105 disappear from circulation.

106

107 Initial screening produced ~550 bp product of the 18S rRNA gene in samples BR042 and BR048, these
108 sequences were 100% identical to each other. A near full length 18S rRNA sequence (1,928 bp) was obtained

109 from both samples also confirming that the sequences were 100% identical and a representative sequence of
110 the 18S rRNA gene from sample BR042 was used for phylogenetic purposes (GenBank accession
111 MN512227).

112

113 Phylogenetic analysis of the shorter (326 bp) 18S rRNA gene alignment was used in order to include a wider
114 variety of reference sequences, in particular for the context of the present study to include the only other *T.*
115 *lewisi*-like sequences from Australia (Averis et al. 2009). Figure 1 shows the phylogeny of the *Trypanosoma*
116 genus (Fig 1a) and the resolution within the *T. lewisi* clade (Fig 1b). As demonstrated by the polytomy
117 present in Fig 1b, this short region of the 18S rRNA gene is insufficient in the differentiation of members
118 within the *T. lewisi* clade. Due to the speed at which the 18S rRNA locus has evolved, short regions of this
119 locus have been reported as being unsuitable for inference of evolutionary relationships between
120 *Trypanosoma* species (Hamilton and Stevens, 2011).

121

122 Reconstruction of phylogenetic relationships over a longer region (1,627 bp) of the 18S rRNA gene exhibited
123 superior resolution within the *T. lewisi* clade (Fig 2). In this phylogeny, sequences obtained from Australian
124 black rats in the present study did not fall within the *T. lewisi* sensu stricto clade; instead they formed a
125 distinct group that branched separately from other reference sequences. Pairwise distance analysis over a
126 1,627 bp alignment of the 18S rRNA gene demonstrated sequences from the black rat were 99.5% similar to
127 *Trypanosoma microti* (AJ009158). The next most similar sequences were *Trypanosoma* sequences from
128 voles in Japan (AB242275, AB242276) and a flea from Czech Republic (KF054111), all of which were
129 99.4% similar. Members of the *T. lewisi* sensu stricto clade, as shown in Fig 2., were all 100% identical to
130 each other over the 1,627 bp alignment. These were the third most similar sequences (99.3%) to the
131 *Trypanosoma* sp. identified in the present study. The phylogeny in the present study supports previous
132 research by Hamilton et al. (2005) showing that the *T. lewisi* clade can be divided into two subclades,
133 consisting of *T. lewisi*, *T. musculi*, *T. rabinowitschae*, *T. blanchardi* and *T. grosi* in subclade one and *T.*
134 *nabiasi*, *T. microti*, *T. otospermophili* in subclade two. Sequences obtained in the present study from
135 Australian black rats fall within subclade two of the *T. lewisi* clade.

136

137 Morphological identification of rodent trypanosomes in Australia, attributed to *T. lewisi*, was first made by T.
138 L. Bancroft in 1888 from black rats in Brisbane (Mackerras 1959), with subsequent records by various
139 scientists who confirmed the presence of this parasite in; Brisbane by Pound (1905), in Perth by Cleland
140 (1906, 1908), and in Sydney by Johnston (1909) (cited by Mackerras 1959). *Trypanosoma lewisi* was first
141 identified in native Australian fauna by Mackerras (1958). Morphological detection of the parasite has been
142 made from the bush rat (*Rattus fuscipes*; Queensland) and the water rat (*Hydromys chrysogaster*;
143 Queensland) (Mackerras 1958, 1959). More recently, molecular reports of *Trypanosoma* species from the *T.*
144 *lewisi* clade have been made from native wildlife in Western Australia, including two bush rats (*Rattus*
145 *fuscipes*), a dibbler (*Parantechinus apicalis*) and an ash-grey mouse (*Pseudomys albocinereus*) (Averis et al.
146 2009). Interestingly, despite sampling from 371 native mammals, 19 different species and 14 sites, detection
147 of *T. lewisi*-like species was confined only to mammals from Fitzgerald River in the south-west of Australia.
148 The identification of *T. lewisi*-like spp. by Averis et al. (2009) was limited by the short size of the 18S rRNA
149 locus analysed (444 bp). As demonstrated in the present study, across a short region of the 18S rRNA locus,
150 trypanosomes within the *T. lewisi* clade can share a high sequence similarity (Fig 1b), however upon more
151 robust analysis of a longer fragment it is evident that sequences within the *T. lewisi* clade form distinct
152 groups. Additional genetic information (e.g. glycosomal glyceraldehyde-3-phosphate dehydrogenase
153 (*gGAPDH*)) also assists in determining the phylogenetic relationships of these closely related species. The
154 rabbit trypanosome (*Trypanosoma nabiasi*), which also falls within the *T. lewisi*-clade, has been identified
155 from Australian rabbits and their associated fleas (*Spilopsyllus cuniculi*) in New South Wales and Victoria
156 (Hamilton et al. 2005).

157

158 Christmas Island is an external Australian Territory located in the Indian Ocean, south of Indonesia and was
159 once home to endemic populations of *Rattus macleari* and *Rattus nativitatis*. The introduction of black rats
160 and their associated trypanosomes to regions previously free of these species has long been considered
161 responsible for the extinction of two native rat species, a hypothesis that dates back to the time of the
162 extinction events in the early 1900's by parasitologist H.E. Durham (Durham 1908). Recent research has
163 confirmed Durham's initial reports and concluded that the rapid decline and extinction of the two endemic

164 rat species was correctly attributed to infections with *T. lewisi* (Wyatt et al. 2008). A review of historical
165 records demonstrated a rapid extinction event following the arrival of black rats on the island in September
166 1900 and an absence of native rat sightings by October 1904 (Green 2014). While there is strong support for
167 the placement of the trypanosome species responsible within the *T. lewisi* clade, the nature of the ancient
168 DNA study by Wyatt et al. (2008) using museum specimens meant that only a short fragment of the 18S
169 rRNA gene was amplified. As such, differentiation within the *T. lewisi* clade is difficult in this case. A recent
170 study by Dybing et al. (2016) investigated the presence of *Trypanosoma* and *Leishmania* spp. from feral cats
171 (*Felis catus*) and black rats (*R. rattus*) on Christmas Island. Through molecular analysis of spleen samples,
172 the study did not detect any *Trypanosoma* or *Leishmania* species. In addition, the same study reported an
173 absence of these parasites from feral cat samples from Dirk Hartog Island and sites from south-west Western
174 Australia.

175

176 North Head is situated on the northern side of Sydney harbour and is dominated by Eastern Suburbs banksia
177 scrub, a declared endangered ecological community (Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation
178 Act 1999). In addition to being home to endangered populations of long-nosed bandicoots (*Perameles*
179 *nasuta*) and little penguins (*Eudyptula minor*), reintroductions of native fauna species, such as bush rats
180 (*Rattus fuscipes*), eastern pygmy possums (*Cercartetus nanus*) and brown antechinus (*Antechinus stuartii*),
181 have also been carried out at North Head by the Australian Wildlife Conservancy. While there is no evidence
182 of spill-over of trypanosomes within the *T. lewisi* clade to native species to-date, ongoing monitoring of
183 populations is encouraged given the historical significance of this parasite with respect to native animal
184 declines (Wyatt et al. 2008; Green 2014).

185

186 In addition to trypanosomes, black rats may act as reservoirs for many other sources of infectious agents
187 (Banks and Hughes 2012). Additional information regarding the presence, distribution and diversity of
188 pathogens harboured by black rats in Australia is critical to understanding pathogen spill-over dynamics
189 (Becker et al. 2019). Future research encompassing both morphological and molecular techniques is on-
190 going by the authors. Collection of ectoparasites, blood, and tissue samples from both native and introduced

191 wildlife will likely continue to shed light on the diversity and distribution of vector-borne microorganisms
192 impacting wildlife, domestic animals and humans.

193

194 **Conflict of interest statement**

195 On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest

196 **Acknowledgements**

197 This study was part-funded by the Australian Research Council (LP160100200), Bayer HealthCare
198 (Germany) and Bayer Australia. S.L.E. is supported by an Australian Government Research Training
199 Program (RTP) Scholarship, C.L.T is supported by a scholarship from the Northern Beaches Council. This
200 project was also part supported by The Holsworth Wildlife Research Endowment & The Ecological Society
201 of Australia (awarded to S.L.E) and the Paddy Pallin Science Grant from The Royal Zoological Society
202 (awarded to C.L.T). We thank Jenna Bytheway, Dr Henry Lydecker and the Australian Wildlife Conservancy
203 ecologists Dr. Viyanna Leo and Mareshell Wauchope for their invaluable assistance in the field.

204 **Ethical statement**

205 The sampling was conducted under Murdoch University Animal Ethics Committee permit number R3026/18
206 and University of Sydney Animal Ethics Committee Permit number 2018/1429.

207

208 **References**

- Averis S, Thompson RC, Lymbery AJ, Wayne AF, Morris KD, Smith A (2009) The diversity, distribution and host-parasite associations of trypanosomes in Western Australian wildlife. *Parasitology* 136:1269–1279. doi: 10.1017/S0031182009990801
- Banks PB, Hughes NK (2012) A review of the evidence for potential impacts of black rats (*Rattus rattus*) on wildlife and humans in Australia. *Wildl Res* 39:78–88. doi: 10.1071/WR11086
- Becker DJ, Washburne AD, Faust CL, Pulliam JRC, Mordecai EA, Lloyd-Smith JO, Plowright RK (2019) Dynamic and integrative approaches to understanding pathogen spillover. *Philos Trans R Soc Lond B Biol Sci* 374:20190014. doi: 10.1098/rstb.2019.0014
- Benson DA, Cavanaugh M, Clark K, Karsch-Mizrachi I, Lipman DJ, Ostell J, Sayers EW (2017) GenBank. *Nucleic Acids Res* 45:D37–D42. doi: 10.1093/nar/gkw1070
- Castresana J (2000) Selection of conserved blocks from multiple alignments for their use in phylogenetic analysis. *Mol Biol Evol* 17:540–552. doi: 10.1093/oxfordjournals.molbev.a026334

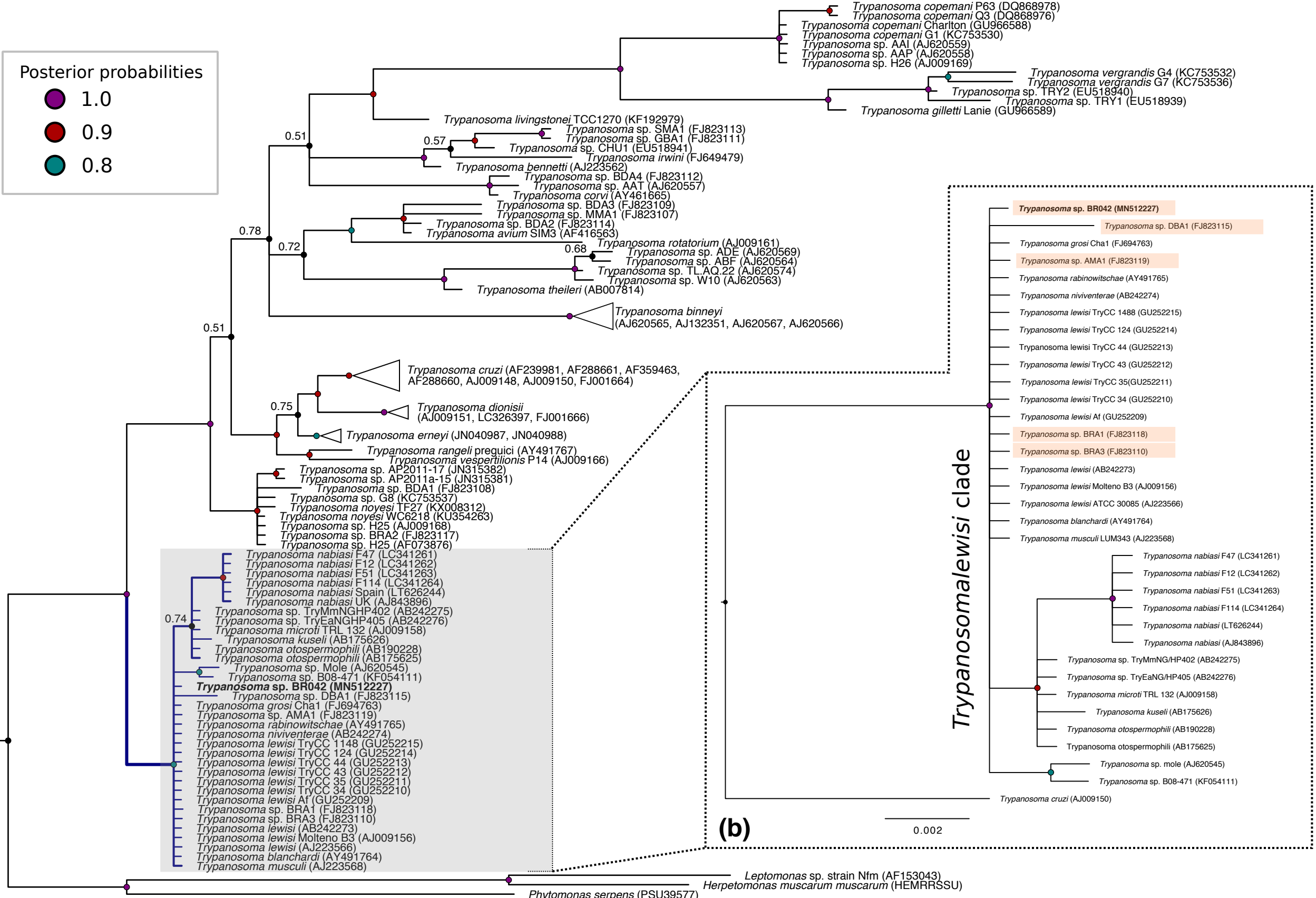
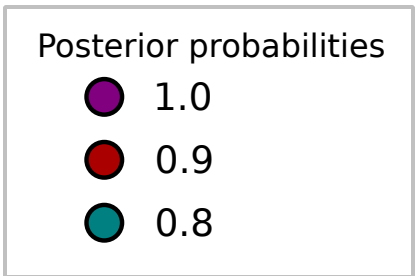
- Durham HE (1908) Notes on Nagana and on some Haematozoa observed during my travels. *Parasitology* 1:227–235. doi: 10.1017/S0031182000003462
- Dybing NA, Jacobson C, Irwin P, et al (2016) Ghosts of Christmas past?: absence of trypanosomes in feral cats and black rats from Christmas Island and Western Australia. *Parasitology Open* 2:e4. doi: 10.1017/pao.2016.1
- Edgar RC (2004) MUSCLE: Multiple sequence alignment with high accuracy and high throughput. *Nucleic Acids Res* 32:1792–1797. doi: 10.1093/nar/gkh340
- Green P (2014) Mammal extinction by introduced infectious disease on Christmas Island (Indian Ocean): the historical context. *Aust Zool* 37:1–14. doi: 10.7882/AZ.2013.011
- Hamilton PB, Stevens JR, Holz P, Boag B, Cooke B, Gibson WC (2004) The inadvertent introduction into Australia of *Trypanosoma nabiasi*, the trypanosome of the European rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*), and its potential for biocontrol. *Mol Ecol* 14, 3167–3175. doi: 10.1111/j.1365-294X.2005.02602.x
- Hamilton PB, Stevens JR (2011) Resolving relationships between Australian trypanosomes using DNA barcoding data. *Trends Parasitol* 27:99. doi: 10.1016/j.pt.2010.11.009
- Kumar S, Stecher G, Tamura K (2016) MEGA7: Molecular Evolutionary Genetics Analysis version 7.0 for digger datasets. *Mol Biol Evol* 33:1870–1874. doi: 10.1093/molbev/msw054
- Mackerras MJ (1959) The haematozoa of Australian mammals. *Aust J Zool* 7:105–135. doi: 10.1071/ZO9590105
- Mackerras MJ (1958) Catalogue of Australian mammals and their recorded internal parasites. I-IV. Part II. Eutheria. *Proc Linn Soc NSW* 83:126–143
- McInnes LM, Gillett A, Ryan UM, Austen J, Campbell RS, Hanger J, Reid SA (2009) *Trypanosoma irwini* n. sp. (Sarcomastigophora: Trypanosomatidae) from the koala (*Phascolarctos cinereus*). *Parasitology* 136:875–85. doi: 10.1017/S0031182009006313
- Noyes HA, Stevens JR, Teixeira M, et al (1999) A nested PCR for the ssrRNA gene detects *Trypanosoma binneyi* in the platypus and *Trypanosoma* sp. in wombats and kangaroos in Australia. *Int J Parasitol* 29:331–339. doi: 10.1016/S0020-7519(98)00167-2
- Ronquist F, Teslenko M, van der Mark P, Ayres DL, Darling A, Höhna S, Larget B, Liu L, Suchard MA, Huelsenbeck JP (2012) MrBayes 3.2: Efficient Bayesian phylogenetic inference and model choice across a large model space. *Syst Biol* 61:539–542. doi: 10.1093/sysbio/sys029
- Strand TM, Lundkvist Å (2019) Rat-borne diseases at the horizon. A systematic review on infectious agents carried by rats in Europe 1995–2016. *Infect Ecol Epidemiol* 9:1553461 doi: 10.1080/20008686.2018.1553461
- Thompson CK, Godfrey S, Thompson RCA (2014) Trypanosomes of Australian mammals: a review. *Int J Parasitol Parasites Wildl* 3:57–66. doi: 10.1016/j.ijppaw.2014.02.002
- Wyatt KB, Campos PF, Gilbert MTP, Kolokotronis S-O, Hynes WH, DeSalle R, Daszak P, MacPhee RDE, Greenwood AD (2008) Historical mammal extinction on Christmas Island (Indian Ocean) correlates with introduced infectious disease. *PLoS One* 3:e3602. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0003602
- Yang R, Murphy C, Song Y, et al (2013) Specific and quantitative detection and identification of *Cryptosporidium hominis* and *C. parvum* in clinical and environmental samples. *Exp Parasitol* 135:142–147. doi: 10.1016/j.exppara.2013.06.014

209 **Figure Captions**

210 **Fig 1.** Bayesian phylogenetic reconstruction of *Trypanosoma* based on a 326 bp fragment of the 18S rRNA
211 locus using the HKY + G substitution model. All positions containing gaps and missing data were
212 eliminated. Phylogeny of the *Trypanosoma* genus (a) and insert tree (b) to show resolution of the *T. lewisi*-
213 clade based on a short 326 bp to include a larger set of reference sequences, sequences obtained from
214 Australia are shaded. All posterior probabilities at branch nodes >0.8 (see colour key on figure) unless
215 indicated, number of substitutions per nucleotide position is represented by the scale bar. Collapsed nodes
216 represented with triangular branches. New sequence from the present study is designated in bold.

217

218 **Fig 2.** Bayesian phylogenetic reconstruction of *Trypanosoma lewisi* clade using 1,627 bp fragment of 18S
219 rRNA locus based on HKY + G substitution model. Node labels represent posterior probabilities, number of
220 substitutions per nucleotide position are represented by the scale bar. *Trypanosoma cruzi* (AJ009150) was
221 used as group out. New sequence from the present study is designated in bold. Isolate hosts: European mole
222 (*Talpa europaea*), squirrel flea (*Ceratophyllus (Monopsyllus) sciurorum*), black rat (*Rattus rattus*),
223 Columbian ground squirrel (*Urocitellus columbianus*), Japanese grass vole (*Microtus montebelli*),
224 Richardson's ground squirrel (*Spermophilus richardsonii*), Siberian flying squirrel (*Pteromys volans*) field
225 vole (*Microtus agrestis*), Japanese/Anderson's red-backed vole (*Myodes andersoni*), striped field mouse
226 (*Apodemus agrarius*), house mouse (*Mus musculus*), European hamster (*Cricetus cricetus*), garden dormouse
227 (*Eliomys quercinus*), Chinese white-bellied rat (*Niviventer confusianus*), greater bandicoot rat (*Bandicota*
228 *indica*), brown rat (*Rattus norvegicus*), brown howler monkey (*Alouatta guariba*), common marmoset
229 (*Callithrix jacchus*), night monkey (*Aotus* sp.). Country abbreviations; Australia (AU), Brazil (BR), Canada
230 (CA), China (CN), Czech Republic (CZ), France (FR), Indonesia (ID), Japan (JP), United Kingdom (UK),
231 United States of America (US), unknown (unk).

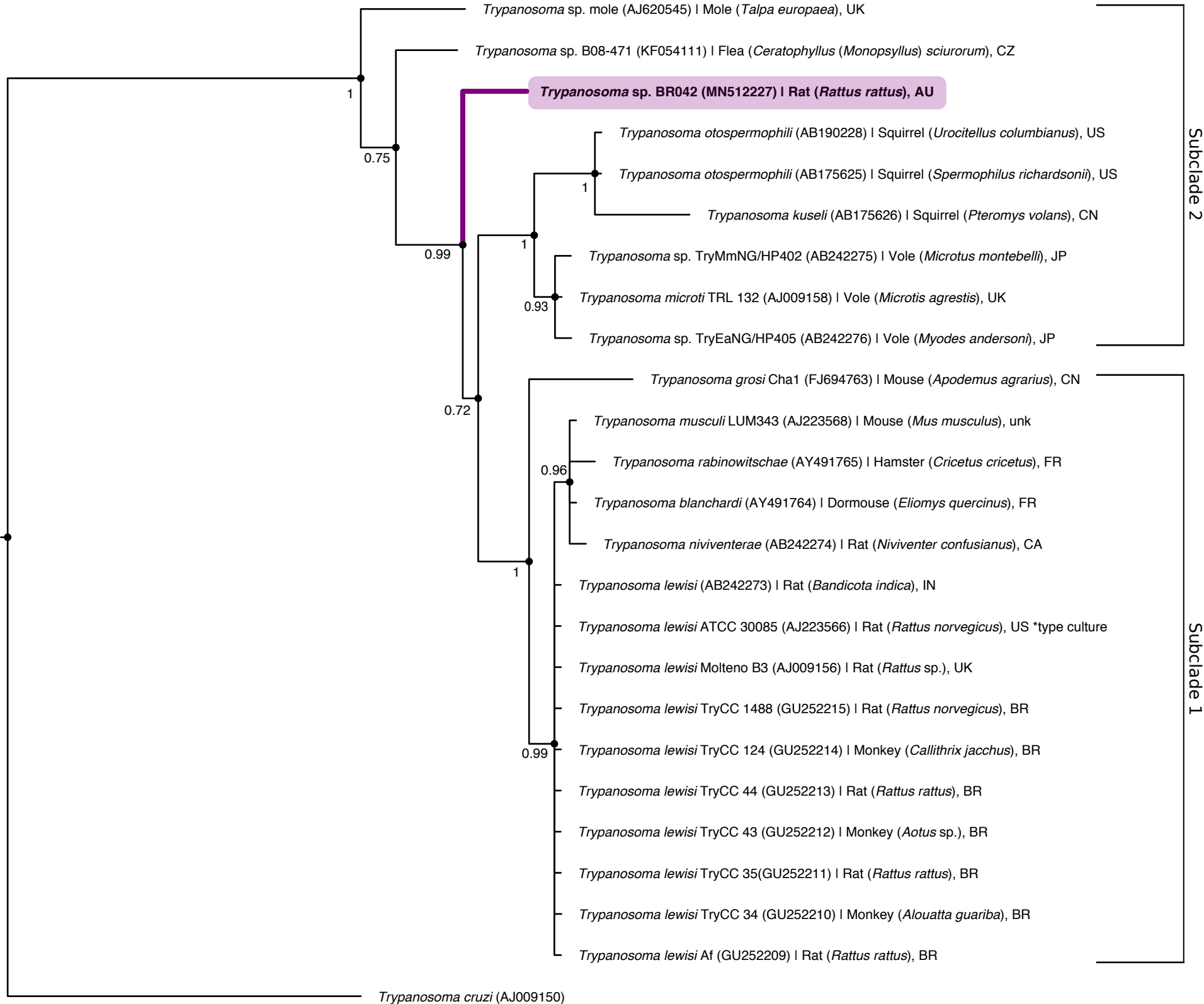


(a)

(b)

0.03

0.002



0.004