Resolving the complexity of vitellogenins and their receptors in the tetraploid Atlantic salmon (*Salmo salar*) - Ancient origin of the phosvitinless VtgC in chondrichthyean fishes

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Abbreviations: Vtg; vitellogenin, VtgR; vitellogenin receptor, LLTP; large lipid transfer protein, LvH; heavy lipoprotein, LvL; light lipoprotein, VLDLR; very low density lipoprotein receptor; LDLR; low density lipoprotein receptor, LR8; eight ligand binding repeats, Lrp13; LDLR-related protein 13, ERE; estrogen responsive element, GSI, gonado-somatic index.

Grant sponsor: The Research Council of Norway, grant number: 221648/030.

Running title: Salmon vitellogenins and receptors

Abstract

Egg yolk proteins are mainly derived from vitellogenin (Vtg) serving as essential nutrients during early development in oviparous organisms. Vertebrate Vtgs are predominantly synthesized in the liver of the maturing females and are internalized by binding to specific oocyte receptors (VtgR). Here we clarify the evolutionary history of the vertebrate Vtgs, including the teleost VtgC lacking phosvitin, and investigate the repertoire of Vtgs and VtgRs in the tetraploid Atlantic salmon. Conserved synteny of the *vtg* genes in elephant fish (*Callorhinchus milii*) strongly indicates that the *vtg* gene cluster was present in the ancestor of tetrapods and ray-finned fish. The shortened phosvitin in the VtgC ortholog of this chondrichthyean fish may represent the result of early truncation events that eventually allowed the total disappearance of phosvitin in teleost VtgC. In contrast, the tandem duplicated VtgCs identified in spotted gar (*Lepisosteus oculatus*) both contain the phosvitin domain. The Atlantic salmon genome harbors four *vtg* genes encoding the complete VtgAsa1, phosvitinless VtgC and truncated VtgAsb proteins, while *vtgAsa2* is a pseudogene. The three *vtg* genes were mainly expressed in the liver of the maturing females, and the *vtgAsa1* transcript predominated prior to spawning. The ovarian expression of *vtgr1* and *vtgr2* was dominated by the splice variant lacking the *O*-linked sugar domain. The strongly increased *vtgAsa1* expression during vitellogenesis contrasted with the peak levels of *vtgr1* and *vtgr2* in the previtellogenic oocytes that gradually decreased. Recycling of the oocyte VtgRs is probably not sufficient to maintain the receptor number during vitellogenesis.

Key words: Vitellogenesis, *Salmo salar*, phosvitin, VtgC, elephant fish

Introduction

In oviparous species the maternal supply of vitellogenins (Vtg) are the main source of egg yolk nutrients during early development. Vertebrate Vtgs are preferentially synthesized in the liver and are transported *via* the blood to the growing oocytes to be selectively internalized by receptor-mediated endocytosis (Opresko and Wiley, 1987; Dierks-ventling, 1978; Mouchel et al., 1996; Prat et al., 1998; Dominguez et al., 2012). The Vtg phosholipoproteins are members of the Large Lipid Transfer Protein (LLTP) superfamily, and the three Vtg forms synthesized by jawed vertebrates (Gnathostomes) are processed into the heavy and light lipovitellins (LvH, LvL) and phosvitin in the developing oocyte (Hiramatsu et al., 2002; Amano et al., 2007a; Finn and Kristoffersen, 2007; Finn, 2007; Reading et al., 2009; Yilmaz et al., 2016). The Vtgs of spiny-rayed fish (Acanthomorphs) are made up of the VtgAa and VtgAb forms and the shorter VtgC variant, which lacks the phosvitin domain and the C-terminal β' and CT domains (Hiramatsu et al., 2002; Sawaguchi et al., 2005, 2006; Amano et al. 2007b). Although yolk proteins are mainly used as nutrients for the developing embryo, some marine teleosts cleave VtgAa before spawning to generate a pool of free amino acids used to aid in oocyte hydration of buoyant pelagic eggs (Greeley et al., 1986; Fyhn et al., 1999; Finn et al., 2002). The function of the serine-rich phosvitin is unclear, but this highly phosphorylated domain might be involved in carrying calcium and phosphate required for embryonic bone formation (Wahli, 1988; Hiramatsu et al., 2006). Phylogenetic analyses of vertebrate Vtgs suggested that the phosvitinless VtgC is a neo-functional product of the second whole-genome duplication (Finn and Kristoffersen, 2007; Prowse and Byrne, 2012). The presence of phosvitin in the Vtgs of invertebrates such as the mosquito, agnathan fishes, and the Indonesian coelacanth (*Latimeria menadoensis*) (Sharrock et al., 1992; Chen et al., 1997; Canapa et al. 2012; Nishimiya et al., 2014) indicates that the domain was lost after the divergence of ray-finned fishes (Actinopterygians) and lobe-finned fishes (Sarcopterygians).

The vertebrate *vtg* genes are co-localized in a conserved syntenic region in both teleost fish and oviparous tetrapods suggesting that the *vtg* cluster was already present in the last common ancestor about 450 million years ago (Babin, 2008; Finn et al., 2009; Braasch and Salzburger, 2009). The teleost-specific, or third, whole-genome duplication event was followed by the loss of multiple paralogs that possibly included one of the duplicated *vtg* clusters, while lineage-specific tandem duplications have increased the repertoire of Vtgs (Wang et al., 2000; Babin, 2008; Finn et al., 2009). Similarly, paralog loss and tandem gene duplications in the tetraploid salmonid genome resulted in substantial variation in the number of the salmonid *vtgAsa* and *vtgAsb* genes (Trichet et al., 2000; Buisine et al., 2002). The genus *Oncorhynchus* exhibits a tandem array of highly similar *vtgAsa* genes, while *vtgAsb* has probably been lost in rainbow trout. In contrast, a truncated VtgAsb has been reported in various salmonids, while *vtgAsa* was suggested to be a pseudogene in Atlantic salmon (Trichet et al., 2000; Buisine et al., 2002). However, expression of a *vtgAsa* form was induced in estrogen-stimulated males of Atlantic salmon (Yadetie et al., 1999). The salmonid eggs are among the largest shed by any broadcast spawning teleost, and the multiplicity of salmonid Vtgs was suggested to compensate for the large amounts of yolk (Finn and Kristoffersen, 2007). Substantial amounts of Vtg are synthesized in the liver of the maturing females, which possess plasma Vtg levels above 35 mg/ml during vitellogenesis, and accumulated Vtg comprised about 17 % of the ovary in a landlocked strain of Atlantic salmon (So et al., 1985; King and Pankhurst, 2003).

Whereas a single oocyte receptor seems to mediate uptake of Vtgs in tetrapods, multiple Vtg receptor (VtgRs) have been reported in teleosts (Stifano et al. 1990a,b; Hiramatsu et al., 2015). Six discrete ovarian proteins binding Vtgs were detected by ligand labelling in cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus clarkii*), while white perch (*Morone americana*) and rainbow trout (*O. mykiss*) were found to exhibit four VtgRs (Tyler and Lubberink, 1996; Reading et al., 2011, 2014;

Mushirobira et al., 2015). The very low density lipoprotein receptor (VLDLR) is characterized by eight ligand binding repeats (LR8) and is coded by a single *vldlr*, or *vtgr*, gene in oviparous vertebrates, except for the two distinct *vtgr* genes reported in parallel studies of rainbow trout (Prat et al., 1998; Davail et al., 1998). Two splice variants of VtgR are widely distributed in teleosts and tetrapods, and the ovarian form lacking the *O*-linked sugar domain is probably responsible for the Vtg uptake (Bujo et al., 1995; Okabayashi et al., 1996; Prat et al., 1998; Mizuta et al., 2013). In addition to the classical LR8 type, the LDLR-related protein 13 named Lrp13 has been shown to bind the cutthroat trout VtgAs and the VtgAa in perch and tilapia, and Lrp13 has been implicated as an important mediator of yolk deposition in other oviparous vertebrates (Reading et al., 2011; Hiramatsu et al., 2015; Mushirobira et al., 2015). In this study we addressed some of the remaining issues pertaining to the evolutionary history of the Vtgs and VtgRs in vertebrates and the origin and possible ancestral role of the phosvitinless VtgC. Further, we elucidated the hepatic synthesis and ovarian uptake of Vtg in Atlantic salmon by quantifying the expression of the *vtg* and *vtgr* genes in maturing females during the annual reproductive cycle.

Results

Conserved synteny of fish *vtgs* and *vtgrs*

The tetraploid Atlantic salmon genome was found to contain four *vtg* genes named *vtgAsa1*, *vtgAsa2*, *vtgAsb* and *vtgC*, which are positioned on the homeologous chromosomes Ssa10 and Ssa23 (Figure 1). Salmon *vtgAsb* is flanked by the *ctbs* and *ssx2ip* genes, while *vtgC* and the duplicated *vtgAsa1* and *vtgAsa2* are neighbor genes of *adgrl2* and *adgrl4*, respectively. Similarly, the latter genes are positioned adjacent to the *vtgC* orthologs in the other species examined, and *ctbs* and *ssx2ip* are flanking the tandem repeated *vtgABs* or *vtgAa* and *vtgAb*. Conserved synteny of the *vtg* genes was also found in the African coelacanth (*Latimeria*

chalumnae), but the *vtgC* ortholog and the *vtgABII-vtgABIII* duplicates are mapped to two unassembled scaffolds. The spotted gar (*Lepisosteus oculatus*) genome harbors two tandem repeated *vtgC* genes named *vtgC1* and *vtgC2*, which both contain the single exon encoding the serine repeats of the phosvitin domain. Intriguingly, the *vtgC* identified in the holocephalian elephant fish (*Callorhinchus milii*) codes for a Vtg possessing the shortened phosvitin sequence SSDSSSASSSSQESS (pos. 1116-1130). This apparently represents a truncation of this hypervariable region, which have been further modified in teleosts, resulting in the complete loss of phosvitin together with the C-terminal domains.

The fish *vtgr* genes also showed conservation of synteny between the cartilaginous, lobe-finned and ray-finned fish species examined (Fig. 1). In Atlantic salmon, the duplicated *vtgr* genes designated *vtgr1* and *vtgr2* are mapped to the homeologous chromosomes Ssa13 and Ssa01. The salmon *vtgr* duplicates are flanked by paralogs of *sh3bp2* and *kcnv2a*, which are also neighbor genes of the single *vtgr* in three-spined stickleback (*Gasterosteus aculeatus*) and spotted gar. The single coelacanth *vtgr* is flanked by *smarca2* and *kcnv2*, which in elephant fish are flanking the *vtgr1* duplicate and the low density lipoprotein receptors *lrp1* and *lrp2*, while the *vtgr2* paralog is positioned on a separate scaffold. The predicted elephant fish VtgR1 and VtgR2 share less than 50% sequence identity compared to 91% identity between the two salmon VtgR paralogs.

Single complete salmon Vtg and multiple Vtgr splice variants

Salmon *vtgAsa1* consists of 34 exons and codes for a complete protein of 1659 amino acids (aa) with a calculated molecular weight (Mw) of 182,662 Da (Supplemental Figure S1). The truncated VtgAsb protein of 459 aa (Mw 50,683 Da) comprising the N-terminal signal peptide and the LvH region was predicted from the open reading frame within exons 1-9 using the

conventional gt-ag intron splice sites. The salmon *vtgC* gene consists of 27 exons and codes for an incomplete protein of 1281 aa (Mw 142,950 Da) lacking phosvitin and the C-terminal β' and CT domains. We searched for palindromic estrogen responsive elements (ERE) with the consensus aggtcannntgacct sequence in the putative promoter regions of the salmon *vtg* genes and identified imperfect ERE motifs within a region of 690 bp (*vtgAsa1*), 213 bp (*vtgAsb*) and 197 bp (*vtgC*) upstream of the ATG translational start site (Supplemental Figure S2). The proximal ERE of salmon *vtgAsa1* was shown to be identical to the functional ERE reported in the rainbow trout *vtgAsa* promoter (Bouter et al., 2010).

Salmon *vtgr1* and *vtgr2* were shown to be alternatively spliced in the exon coding for the *O*-linked sugar domain. The *vtgr1* gene consists of 20 exons coding for the complete receptor of 873 aa (X1 variant, Mw 96343 Da), while the short X3 variant of 852 aa is lacking the sugar domain, which is partially deleted in the X2 variant of 859 aa (Supplemental Figure S3). Salmon *vtgr2* contains 19 exons coding for a complete receptor of 863 aa (X1 variant, 95346 Da), while the short X2 variant of 842 aa is missing the *O*-linked sugar domain. We examined the tissue expression of the splice variants of salmon *vtgr1* and *vtgr2* by performing qPCR on cDNAs from early vitellogenic ovary, liver, brain and heart (Fig. 2). Both receptors expressed the short variant lacking the sugar domain at high levels in the ovary compared to the brain and heart. The complete *vtgr2* was expressed at low levels in ovary, brain and heart, while the expression of the complete *vtgr1* was limited to the brain. Only the short *vtgr1* variant was expressed at significant levels in the liver.

Expression of salmon *vtgs* and *vtgrs* during maturation

Salmon females and males were kept together in seawater net pens from May 2013 to May 2015 and were then transferred to indoor freshwater tanks until spawning in Sep - Oct 2015.

GSI levels in females gradually increased from <1% in Sep 2014 to above 20% in Aug 2015 (Fig. 3), while mean body weight increased from 5.75 kg to 10.33 kg. Plasma E_2 was maintained at low levels (< 5 ng/ml) until June 2015, but then strongly increased to peak levels of 27 ng/ml in Aug 2015, while highly variable E_2 levels were measured in Sep 2015 at the time of ovulation.

We quantified the expression of the functional salmon *vtg* and *vtgr* genes in the liver, ovary and brain of maturing females during the previtellogenic, vitellogenic and post-vitellogenic stages. Salmon *vtgAsa1, vtgAsb* and *vtgC* were mainly expressed in the liver, and the levels strongly increased at early vitellogenesis (Fig. 4). The expression of *vtgAsa1* and *vtgC* were similar at the vitellogenic stage, but the levels of *vtgAsa1* peaked at about 40 and 1000 times higher levels than *vtgC* and *vtgAsb*, respectively, prior to spawning. The three genes were expressed at much lower levels in the ovary and brain, although the ovarian expression of *vtgAsa1* increased significantly during maturation. The ovarian levels of the *vtgC* and *vtgAsb* transcripts were relatively stable compared to the variable levels measured in the female brain.

Contrasting with the very low expression of the three salmon *vtg* genes at the previtellogenic stage, both *vtgr1* and *vtgr2* were abundantly expressed in the previtellogenic ovary (Fig. 5). Then the expression of the two paralogs gradually decreased during vitellogenesis and the lowest levels were measured concomitant with the peaked levels of plasma E_2 in Aug 2015. The low and stable mRNA levels in the brain consisted mainly of the *vtgr1* transcript, while both genes were expressed at very low levels in the liver (data not shown).

Discussion

Multiplicity of Vtg ligands and receptors have been reported in various teleost species, but the number of functional genes and their concerted expression profiles have been largely unknown, particularly in salmonids. This study resolved the repertoire of *vtg* and *vtgr* genes in Atlantic salmon, which was shown to express only one complete Vtg protein, but two genetic distinct receptors of the LR8 type. The mapping of the salmon *vtgAsa* and *vtgAsb* together with the *vtgr1* and *vtgr2* paralogs to the homeologous chromosomes ascertains the tetraploid origin of the gene pairs in salmonids. Lineage-specific tandem duplications have resulted in multiple *vtg* genes in teleosts, including Northern pike (*Esox lucius*) representing the closest phylogenetic order of the tetraploid salmonids (Supplemental Figure S4). Contrasting with non-salmonids, only one complete Vtg has to our knowledge been documented in salmonids, although we noted the reports on two similar *vtgAsa* genes coding for the C-terminal region in rainbow trout and Arctic char (*Salvelinus alpinus*) (Le Guellec et al., 1988; Ren et al., 1996; Berg et al., 2004). A single complete Vtg protein was characterized in rainbow trout (Banoub et al., 2003) that does not support the suggested transcription of the adjacent *vtg2* gene (Mouchel et al., 1997), which is probably orthologous to the *vtgAsa2* pseudogene in Atlantic salmon (Buisine et al., 2002; this study). The intact salmon *vtgAsa1* was found to be identical to the partial *vtg* sequence obtained from E_2 stimulated males (Yadetie et al., 1999), and the calculated molecular weight of the complete protein is comparable to the 187,335 Da obtained by *de novo* sequencing the single Vtg isolated from Atlantic salmon (Banoub et al., 2004). Truncated Vtgs have been predicted from exons 1-7 of the multiple *vtgAsa* genes in rainbow trout and from *vtgAsb* genes in other salmonids (Buisine et al. 2002), but it is unknown whether they are dimerized and internalized for storage in the oocyte, and eventually used by the developing embryo. Although the N-terminal region of tilapia Vtg was shown to interact with Vtgr *in vitro* (Li et al., 2003), the folding and dimerization of Vtgs probably involve the Cys-rich C-terminal region (Mouchel et

198 al., 1996). Several studies have documented that Vtgs have been co-opted for other purposes
199 than reproduction, and serum Vtg in Atlantic salmon was shown to neutralize infectivity of
200 infectious pancreatic necrosis virus (Garcia et al., 2010). The function of lipovitellin and
201 phosvitin domains of fish Vtgs as novel players in maternal immunity (Li et al., 2008; Sun and
202 Chang, 2015) suggests that the LvH domain of the truncated salmonid Vtgs may play a role as
203 immune competent molecules, similar to what is seen in the mammalian ortholog of Vtgs, the
204 von Willebrand factor (Kreuz, 2008). Expression of the salmon *vtg* and *vtgr* genes in the brain
205 may relate to signal transduction or general lipid metabolism in the nervous system as suggested
206 in the cutthroat trout (Mizuta et al., 2013).
207
208 Appropriate composition of the accumulated Vtgs in the growing oocyte is probably essential
209 for the viability of the embryo and newly hatched larvae. The ratios of the yolk Vtg subtypes
210 differ substantially among teleosts that utilize different reproduction strategies and early life
211 histories (Finn et al., 2002; Hiramatsu et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2015). The VtgAa, VtgAb,
212 and VtgC types were shown to contribute substantially to the pool of yolk protein in ratios of
213 1.4:1.4:1 in striped bass (*Morone saxatilis*) spawning nearly neutrally buoyant eggs in
214 freshwater (Williams et al., 2015), while the marine goldsinny wrasse (*Ctenolabrus rupestris*)
215 ovulates floating eggs whose yolk is almost entirely comprised of yolk proteins derived from
216 VtgAa (Kolarevic et al., 2008). Salmonids spawn in freshwater and the large benthic eggs
217 contain small amounts of VtgC when compared to the complete VtgAsa. Sakhalin taimen
218 (*Hucho perryi*) showed VtgAsa:VtgC ratios of ~22:1 in serum and vitellogenic yolk (Amano et
219 al., 2010), while >100 times higher serum levels of VtgAs compared to VtgC was measured in
220 cutthroat trout at late vitellogenesis (Mushiroba et al., 2013). Correspondingly, the ovarian
221 expression of *vtgAsa* in Atlantic salmon and cutthroat trout peaked before spawning at about

40 and 140 times higher levels, respectively, than the *vtgC* levels (Mushiroba et al., 2013; this study).

The phosvitinless VtgC remains as an unprocessed LvH-LvL conjugate in the oocyte yolk and probably functions as nutrition in late-stage larvae (Finn, 2007; Finn and Kristoffersen, 2007; Reading et al., 2009). However, the ovarian uptake of VtgC is largely unknown and no ovarian lipoprotein receptor was found to bind white perch VtgC, while the cutthroat trout VtgC was shown to bind to an unidentified oocyte receptor (Reading et al., 2011; Hiramatsu et al., 2015). Dephosphorylation of chicken and mosquito Vtgs reduced their uptake by oocytes indicating that the phosphorylated phosvitin may play a role in Vtg receptor recognition (Miller et al., 1982; Dhadialla et al., 1992; Chen et al., 1997). The identification of two *vtgr* genes in the elephant fish possessing a VtgC with a shortened phosvitin could shed light on possible co-evolution of receptor-ligand pairs in vertebrates (Li et al., 2003). The tandem duplication of *vtgC* seen in spotted gar might have occurred before lepisosteids separated from teleosts and was followed by neofunctionization of a phosvitinless VtgC paralog in the latter group. The loss of serine repeats probably occurred by removal of the phosvitin coding exon concomitant with the loss of the C-terminal domains.

The striking difference between the serine-rich Vtgs of tetrapods and the invertebrates Vtgs lacking the phosphate-and calcium-carrying polyserine tracts led Wahli (1988) to cautiously speculate that this could be related to skeleton formation in the developing vertebrates. We consistently traced the loss of phosvitin back to chondrichthyean fishes by the identification of a very short serine sequence in the VtgC ortholog of elephant fish, and relative low serine content was reported in the phosvitin domain of a complete Vtg in the catshark (*Scyliorhinus torazame*) (Yamane et al., 2013). By losing its phosvitin domain, the VtgC may have lost its

ability to contribute to bone formation, but still functional in transporting other nutrients for storage in the oocyte, or in contributing an immune function. It should be noted that the absence of bone in the endoskeleton of the elephant fish was consistently associated with the lack of genes encoding secreted calcium-binding phosphoproteins (Venkatesh et al., 2014). The accumulation of partially and completely processed yolk components in chondrichthyean fishes might be related to their different reproductive modes, including placental species in which yolk metabolites and yolk granules are made available to the developing embryo by different means (Hamlett, 1989; Dulvy and Reynolds, 1997).

The expression of two genetically distinct VtgRs in Atlantic salmon agrees with the identification of two highly similar *vtgr* genes in rainbow trout (Prat et al., 1998; Davail et al., 1998), and Western blot analysis of cutthroat trout VtgR revealed a broad band of 95-105 kDa that was suggested to represent two similar sized receptors (Mizuta et al., 2013). Contrasting with the increased hepatic expression of salmon *vtgAsa1* during maturation, the ovarian expression of the *vtgr* paralogs peaked at the previtellogenic stage and gradually decreased concomitant with the increased plasma E_2 levels and ovarian growth. Accordingly, activated estrogen receptors have been shown to stimulate *vtg* transcription and to stabilize *vtg* transcripts (Brock and Shapiro, 1983; Flouriot et al., 1996; Bouter et al. 2010), but may also repress *vtgr* transcriptional activity as reported in largemouth bass (*Micropterus samonides*) (Dominguez et al., 2014). The decreased ovarian expression of the salmon *vtgrs* during vitellogenesis seems to contradict the 100-fold increase in number of receptors per oocyte in rainbow trout (Lancaster and Tyler, 1994; Rodriguez et al., 1996). The apparent discrepancy is probably not explained by the recycling of the oocyte receptors, because recycled proteins are generally degraded more rapidly than those confined to the cell surface (Hare and Taylor, 1991). The stability of the VtgR proteins is unknown, but is likely comparable to the turnover rates of the LDLR, which

was reported to degrade in macrophages and fibroblasts with $t_{1/2}$ of ~2 h and 12-13 h, respectively, at 4 °C (Yoshimura et al., 1988; Hare, 1990). Additionally, the two oocyte VtgRs are dominated by the splice variants lacking the *O*-linked sugar domain, which was shown to hinder proteolytic cleavage of the extracellular domain in mammalian LDLRs (Kozarsky et al., 1988; Magrané et al., 1999). Knowledge about the stability of the *vtgr* transcripts is lacking, but mRNA stabilization through AU-rich elements as reported for *ldlr* mRNAs (Li et al., 2009; Adachi et al., 2014) is probably insufficient to maintain the oocyte receptors for an extended period. Further studies are therefore needed to clarify the molecular mechanisms underlying the coordinated increase in the hepatic synthesis and ovarian uptake of Vtgs during vitellogenesis.

Materials and methods

Identification of fish *vtg* and *vtgr* genes

Fish *vtg* and *vtgr* sequences were retrieved from phylogenetic distant species representing cartilaginous, lobe-finned and ray-finned fishes by searching the gene databases at http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov and http://www.ensembl.org (release 87) (Aken et al., 2016). Accession numbers are given in Supplemental Table S1. The identity of unannotated genes were determined by BLAST analysis (Altschul et al., 1997) with the sequences against known orthologs and by examination of the flanking genes for conserved synteny. Molecular weight of the predicted salmon proteins was calculated using the Compute Mw tool (Gasteiger et al., 2005).

Experimental fish and tissue sampling

Atlantic salmon females and males were reared by the AquaGen breeding company. The hatched larvae were start-fed in Feb 2012, and the one-year old smolts were transferred to sea-water net-pens in the Hemne fjord (63 °N, 9 °E) in May 2013. The fish were kept at natural temperature and photoperiod during seawater phase, except for the artificial light (LD 24:0)

during Jan - May 2014 to avoid early maturation in males (Leclercq et al., 2011), and from Mar 2015 until freshwater transfer to accelerate sexual maturation to promote sexual maturation (Taranger et al., 1999). In May 2015 the fish were transferred into indoor freshwater tank (60 m^3) and reared at 16 °C and at short day photoperiod (LD 8:16). The temperature was gradually decreased to 7 °C during nine days in mid Aug 2015 to induce final maturation and spawning that occurred in Sep - early Nov 2015. Temperature was recorded regularly at 3 m and 6 m depth in the seawater net-pens and in the freshwater tanks (Supplemental Figure S5). During seawater phase the fish were fed according to appetite with Ewos Opal 120 until one year before ovulation, when they were fed with Ewos Opal Breed. The fish were not fed after transfer to freshwater.

Ovary, liver and brain were sampled from five females once a month during Sep 2014 - Sep 2015, while heart was dissected from three females in Sep-Oct 2014. The fish were sacrificed with an overdose of tricaine methanesulphonate (200 mg/L, Pharmaq, Norway) according to suppliers instructions, followed by spinal transection. Body and ovary weights were registered for calculating gonado-somatic index (GSI). Dissected samples from ovary, liver, brain and heart were immediately added RNA*later* (Sigma) and stored at -20°C before extraction of total RNA. Blood was drawn from the caudal vein using heparinized vacuum tubes, and plasma was collected after centrifugation at 500 rpm for 10 min at 4°C. The plasma was kept on ice for 1-5 hr and stored at -80°C freezer until the measurement of E_2 titer using ELISA kit from Cayman chemical (Ann Arbor, MI, USA) (Næve et al., unpublished).

RNA extraction and qPCR

Total RNA was extracted from the salmon tissues using PureLink® RNA Mini Kit (Thermo Fisher Scientific), by adding 20 mg tissue to 800 µL lysis buffer according to manufacturer's instructions. DNA was removed using On-column PureLink ® DNase (Thermo Fisher Scientific). RNA purification was optimized from the fat-rich ovary by homogenizing 50-100

mg tissue in 1 mL Isol-RNA Lysis Reagent (5 Prime, Careforde). RNA quantity and quality were measured using a 1000-ND Nanodrop spectrophotometer, and the RNA was stored at -70°C. cDNA was synthesized by adding 150 ng RNA into a 10 µL reaction using TaqMan® Reverse Transcription Reagents (Applied Biosystems) and stored at -20°C. The relative expression levels of the *vtg* and *vtgr* genes identified in Atlantic salmon were determined by quantitative real-time PCR (qPCR) with elongation factor 1α (*ef1α)* as reference gene (Mushirobira et al., 2015). The *ef1α* gene was evaluated as the most stable reference gene among 6 different reference genes tested for 8 distinct tissues in the Atlantic salmon (Olsvik et al., 2005), and *ef1α* transcript levels were not different across various ovarian stages when mRNA prepared from the ovaries of rainbow trout was used as template (Luckenbach et al., 2008). Specific primers for the Atlantic salmon genes and splice variants were designed using the Primer3 software (Koressaar and Remm, 2007; Untergasser et al., 2012) (Supplemental Table S2). A two-fold standard dilution of pooled cDNAs was set up for each primer set to determine the amplification efficiency. Non-specific contamination in the qPCR reaction was ruled out by including controls without template and melting curve analysis was performed to verify the measurement of a single specific product. SDS 2.3 software (Applied Biosystems) was used to collect all data that was thereafter analyzed using RQ manager 1.2 (Applied Biosystems). The qPCR was run in triplicates on a LightCycler®480 using LightCycler® 480 SYBR Green I Master (Roche) in a total volume of 12 µL containing 6 µL diluted (1:10) cDNA, 5 µL SYBR Green I Master, and 0.5 µL of 10 µM forward and reverse primers. The cycling profile was 5 min at 95°C, followed by 45 cycles of 95°C for 15 s, 60°C for 15s and 72°C for 15 s. Relative gene expression during the annual reproductive cycle was quantified by the log2 Pfaffl method using the equation of Pfaffl values (Livak and Schnittgen, 2001). Tissue expression of the *vtgr* splice variants was evaluated using the cycle threshold (Ct) values. The final data were analyzed by One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) followed by Tukey-

Kramer Honestly Significant Difference (TukeyHSD) and presented as means ± standard error of the mean (SEM) using the R software package (R Core Team 2016).

Ethics statement

In accordance to Norwegian and European legislation related to animal research, formal approval of the experimental protocol by the Norwegian Animal Research Authority (NARA) is not required because the experimental conditions are practices undertaken for the purpose of recognized animal husbandry. Such practices are exempted from the European convention on the protection of animals used for scientific purposes (2010/63/EU), cf. article 5d and do not require approval by the Norwegian ethics board according to the Norwegian regulation on animal experimentation, § 2, 5a, d "non-experimental husbandry (agriculture or aquaculture)" and "procedures in normal/common breeding and husbandry".

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to two anonymous referees for the extensive and very helpful reviews of our paper.

Author's Contributions

Ø.A. and H.T. designed the study. I.N. and M.M. provided the tissue samples, and C.X. and K.H.K. performed the laboratory analyses. G.T. analyzed the data, and Ø.A. wrote the manuscript with contributions from all authors.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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626

627 # Figure legends

628

629 **Figure 1**. Synteny analysis of the *vtg* (left column) and *vtgr* genes (right column) identified
630 in Atlantic salmon, three-spined stickleback, spotted gar, African coelacanth and elephant
631 fish. Homologous genes are shown in same color. Linkage group and scaffold identity are
632 included, and vertical bar indicates intervening genes. Gene IDs and chromosomal positions
633 are given in Supplemental Table S1.

634

635 **Figure 2**. Tissue expression of the splice variants of Atlantic salmon *vtgr1* and *vtgr2* measured
636 by qPCR. cDNAs from each tissue were pooled from two females sampled in Sep-Oct 2014.
637 Expression levels are denoted by the cycle threshold (Ct) values meaning that high expression
638 gives low Ct value. The y-axis is reversed for better visualization of the values given as mean
639 and error bars for SEM. Samples without detectable expression were marked as ”not detected”
640 (ND).

641

642 **Figure 3**. **A**. Plasma E_2 titer, and **B**. Gonado-somatic index (GSI, ●) in Atlantic salmon females
643 during pre-vitellogenesis (I), vitellogenesis (II) and post-vitellogenesis (III). The stages were
644 determined by histological examination of ovarian samples (Næve et al., unpublished). Plasma
645 E_2 levels are presented as mean ± SEM, except for the single values at Dec 2014 and Jan 2015.
646 Different letters denote significant differences tested by ANOVA analysis (P<0.05).

647

648 **Figure 4**. Relative expression levels of the Atlantic salmon *vtgAsa1* (black), *vtgAsb* (blue)
649 and *vtgC* (red) in female liver (**A**), ovary (**B**) and brain (**C**) during an annual reproductive
650 cycle. No brain was sampled in Feb 2015 and prior to spawning. *ef-1α* was used as reference
651 gene. Values are presented as mean ± SEM (n=5-7). ANOVA p-values for the three genes are

652 shown in the plots. Time points not sharing a letter were significantly different from each
653 other.
654
655 **Figure 5**. Relative expression levels of the Atlantic salmon *vtgr1* and *vtgr2* in female ovary
656 (**A**) and brain (**B**) during an annual reproductive cycle. *ef-1α* was used as reference gene.
657 Values are presented as mean ± SEM (n=5-7). ANOVA p-values for the two genes are
658 included. Gene expression in brain was not measured in Aug-Sep 2015. Time points not
659 sharing a letter were significantly different from each other.
660

Legends for Supplemental materials

Supplemental Figure S1. Sequence alignment of Atlantic salmon VtgAsa1, VtgAsb and VtgC. The heavy and light lipovitellin (LvH, LvH), phosvitin (Pv), β' and CT domains are indicated.

Supplemental Figure S2. Putative estrogen responsive elements (EREs) in the promoter region of Atlantic salmon v*tgAsa1, vtgAsb and vtgC*. Imperfect ERE half sites are shown in bold and translational start site is underlined.

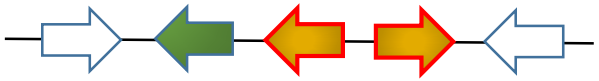
Supplemental Figure S3. Alignment of Atlantic salmon VtgR1 and VtgR2. The following domains are highlighted: Eight ligand-binding domains (LBDs) shaded, three epidermal growth factor-like domains (EGF) in bold italics, consensus YWTD motifs in bold, *O*-linked sugar domain in underlined bold letters, transmembrane domain (TM) and cytoplasmic domain (CD) underlined. Dashes are inserted for optimal alignment. The *O*-linked sugar domain in the complete receptor variants is lacking in the short splice variants and is partially deteled in the middle variant of VtgR1.

Supplemental Figure S4. Water temperature during seawater and freshwater phases of the experimental period.

Supplemental Figure S5. Chromosomal positions of the Northern pike (*Esox lucius*) *vtg* genes identified by searching at NCBI.

687 **Supplemental Table S1**. Gene ID and genomic location of the *vtg* and *vtgr* genes in the five
688 fish species examined.
689
690 **Supplemental Table S2**. Primer sequences for real-time qPCR of the *vtg* and *vtgr* genes in
691 Atlantic salmon. F-forward, R-reverse.
692

Ssa23



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Ssa13

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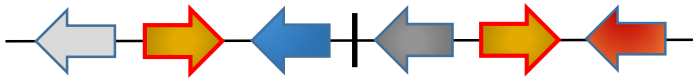
Ssa10



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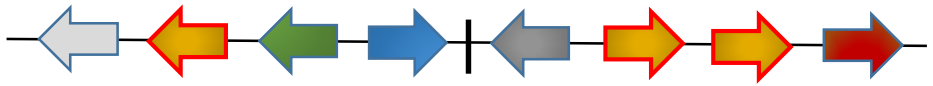
LGVIII



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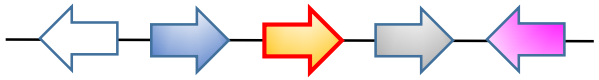
LGXIV



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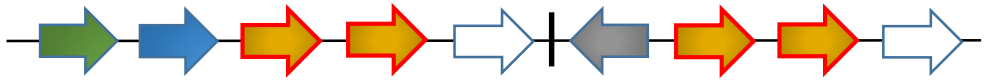
LG10



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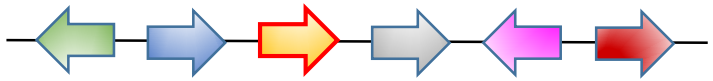
LG2



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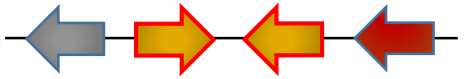
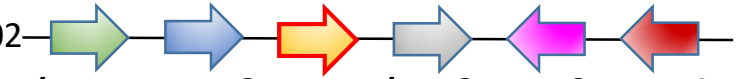


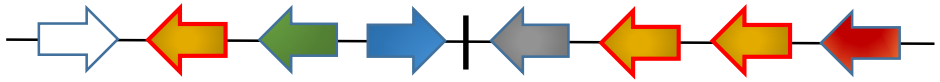
ctbs vtgABIII vtgABII ssx2ip

JH127502

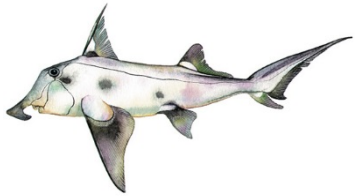


dspp smarca2 vtgr kcnv2 pum3 carm1

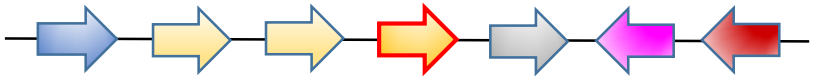
Sc7



ifi441 vtgC adgrl4 adgrl2 ctbs vtgABIII vtgABII ssx2ip

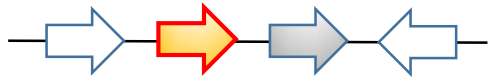


Sc24

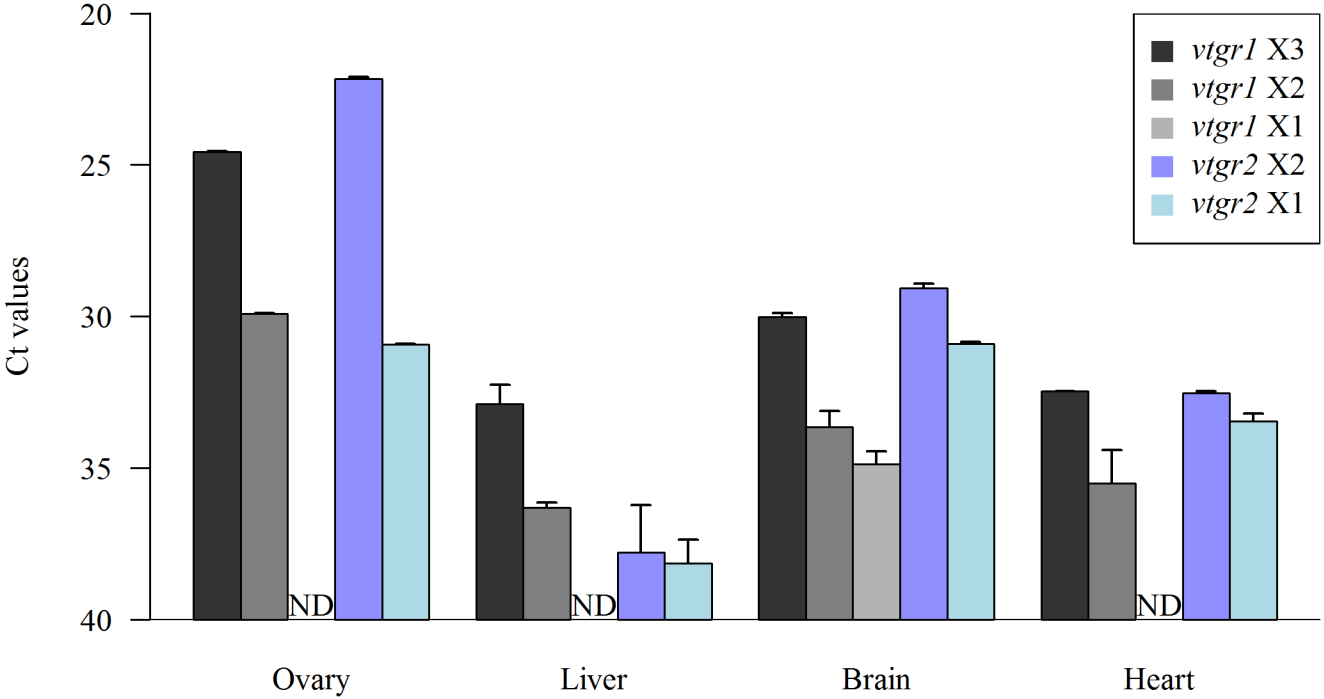


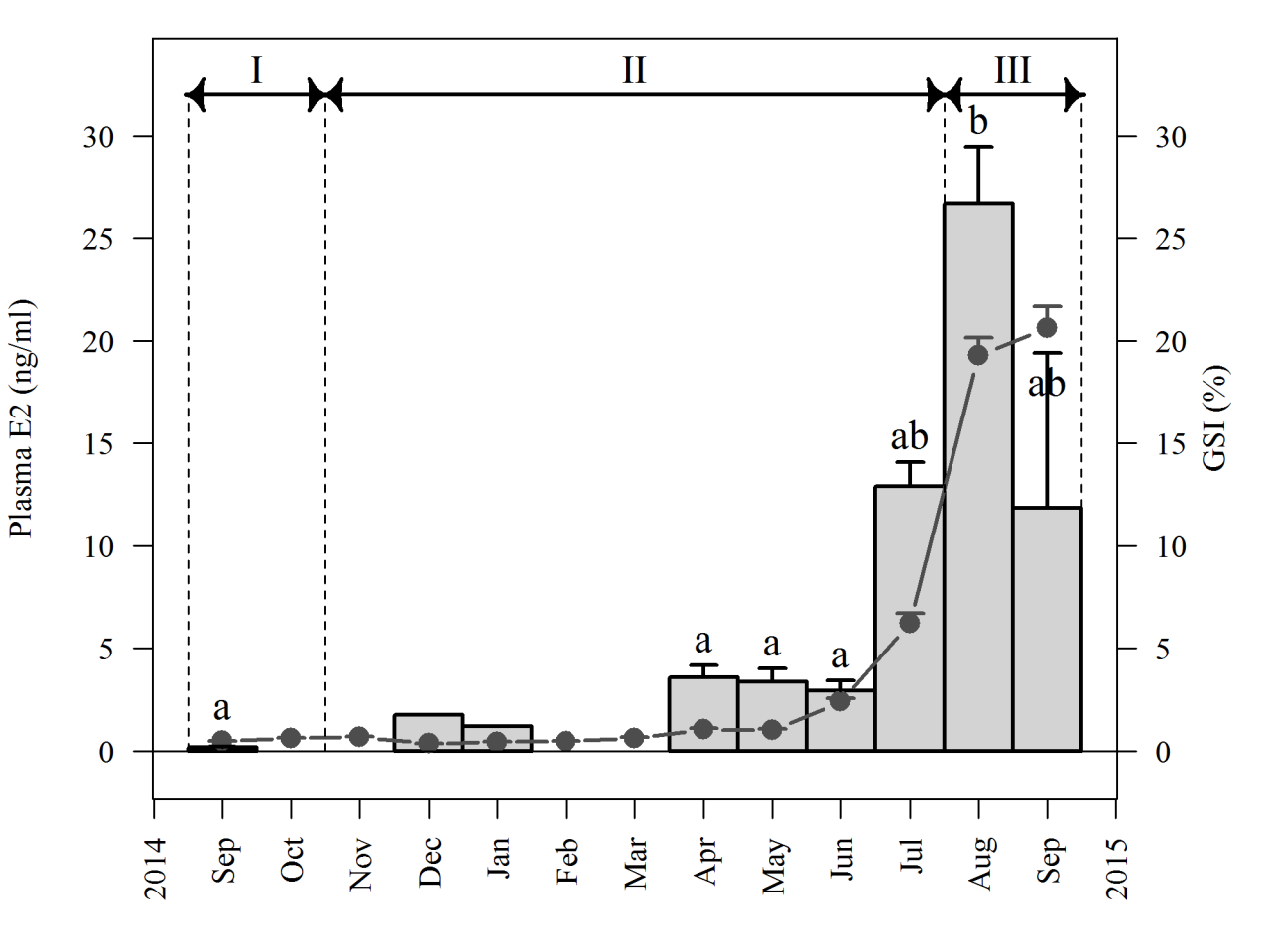
smarca2 lrp2 lrp1 vtgr1 kcnv2a pum3 carm1

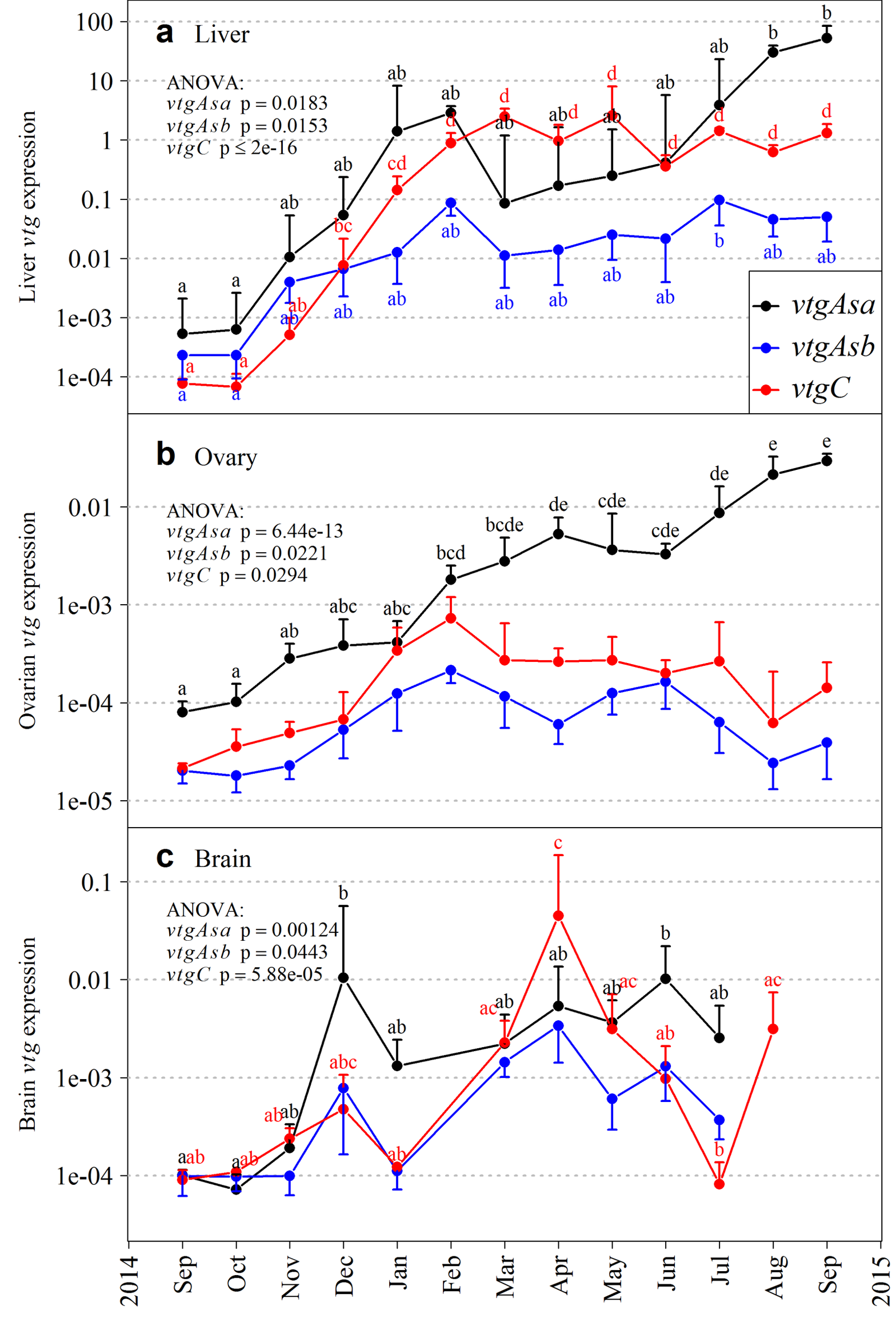
Sc412

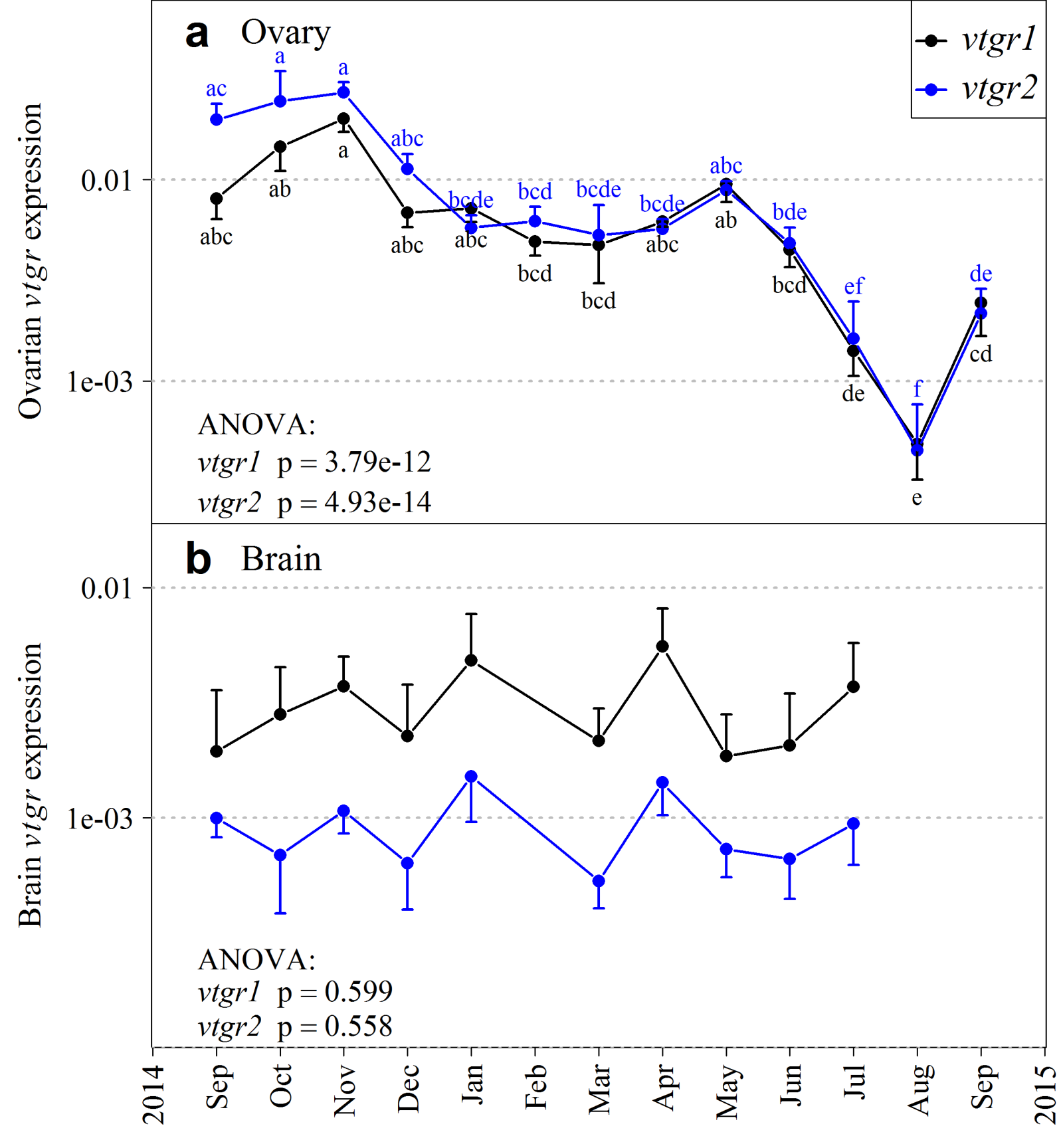


nbufa7 vtgr2 kcnv2b rfx2


20
25
30
35
40
Ct values
ND
ND
ND
Ovary
Liver
Brain
Heart
vtgr1 X3
vtgr1 X2
vtgr1 X1
vtgr2 X2
vtgr2 X1


I
II
III
Plasma E2 (ng/ml)
GSI (%)
0
5
10
15
20
25
30
a
a
a
ab
b
ab
2014
Sep
Oct
Nov
Dec
Jan
Feb
Mar
Apr
May
Jun
Jul
Aug
Sep
2015


a Liver
ANOVA:
vtgAsa p = 0.0183
vtgAsb p = 0.0153
vtgC p ≤ 2e-16
Liver vtg expression
100
10
1
0.1
0.01
1e-03
1e-04
vtgAsa
vtgAsb
vtgC
b Ovary
ANOVA:
vtgAsa p = 6.44e-13
vtgAsb p = 0.0221
vtgC p = 0.0294
Ovarian vtg expression
0.01
1e-03
1e-04
1e-05
c Brain
ANOVA:
vtgAsa p = 0.00124
vtgAsb p = 0.0443
vtgC p = 5.88e-05
Brain vtg expression
0.1
0.01
1e-03
1e-04
2014
Sep
Oct
Nov
Dec
Jan
Feb
Mar
Apr
May
Jun
Jul
Aug
Sep
2015


a Ovary
vtgr1
vtgr2
Ovarian vtgr expression
0.01
1e-03
ac
a
a
abc
abc
ab
a
abc
abc
bcde
bcd
bcd
bcde
bcd
abc
ab
bde
bcd
ef
de
de
f
e
cd
ANOVA:
vtgr1 p = 3.79e-12
vtgr2 p = 4.93e-14
b Brain
Brain vtgr expression
0.01
1e-03
ANOVA:
vtgr1 p = 0.599
vtgr2 p = 0.558
2014
Sep
Oct
Nov
Dec
Jan
Feb
Mar
Apr
May
Jun
Jul
Aug
Sep
2015