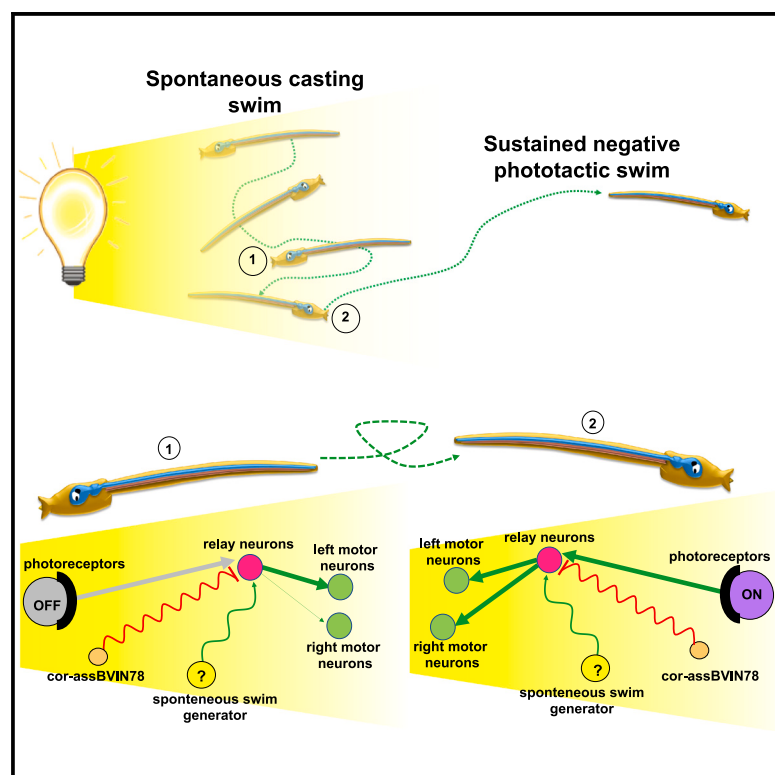


Current Biology

A single oscillating proto-hypothalamic neuron gates taxis behavior in the primitive chordate *Ciona*

Graphical abstract



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In brief

Ciona is a model for chordate neural circuit analysis. Chung et al. identify a single slow-oscillating GABAergic neuron in the *Ciona* larval forebrain, which, when ablated, leads to extended spontaneous swim bouts. The *Ciona* connectome predicts that this neuron inhibits the negative phototaxis circuit via cholinergic midbrain interneurons.

Highlights

- *Ciona* larvae have a single slow-oscillating GABAergic forebrain neuron
- This neuron projects to cholinergic midbrain interneurons of the phototaxis circuit
- Ablation of this neuron evokes phototaxis-like swims in the absence of light cues
- This oscillating inhibitory neuron has gating activity on the phototaxis circuit



Article

A single oscillating proto-hypothalamic neuron gates taxis behavior in the primitive chordate *Ciona*

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SUMMARY

Ciona larvae display a number of behaviors, including negative phototaxis. In negative phototaxis, the larvae first perform short spontaneous rhythmic casting swims. As larvae are cast in a light field, their photoreceptors are directionally shaded by an associated pigment cell, providing a phototactic cue. This then evokes an extended negative taxis swim. We report here that the larval forebrain of *Ciona* has a previously uncharacterized single slow-oscillating inhibitory neuron (neuron *cor-assBVIN78*) that projects to the midbrain, where it targets key interneurons of the phototaxis circuit known as the *photoreceptor relay neurons*. The anatomical location, gene expression, and oscillation of *cor-assBVIN78* suggest homology to oscillating neurons of the vertebrate hypothalamus. Ablation of *cor-assBVIN78* results in larvae showing extended phototaxis-like swims, even in the absence of phototactic cues. These results indicate that *cor-assBVIN78* has a gating activity on phototaxis by projecting temporally oscillating inhibition to the photoreceptor relay neurons. However, in intact larvae, the frequency of *cor-assBVIN78* oscillation does not match that of the rhythmic spontaneous swims, indicating that the troughs in oscillations do not themselves initiate swims but rather that *cor-assBVIN78* may modulate the phototaxis circuit by filtering out low-level inputs while restricting them temporally to the troughs in inhibition.

INTRODUCTION

The tunicates, owing to their position in phylogeny as chordates and the closest extant relatives of the vertebrates,¹ are valuable model animals for genetics, genomics, embryology, and neurobiology. Of particular interest to researchers are the tadpole larvae of ascidians, such as those of the solitary ascidian *Ciona*. The central nervous system (CNS) of *Ciona* larvae highlights the common body plan of chordates: not only does it develop from a neural plate, but it also has an anterior-to-posterior anatomy that parallels that of vertebrates. Regions within the *Ciona* larva CNS show gene expression, neuron classification, and synaptic connectivity that tie them to the vertebrate forebrain, midbrain, hindbrain, and spinal cord (Figure 1A).^{2–4} For historical reasons, these domains were called the *anterior sensory vesicle*, *posterior sensory vesicle*, *motor ganglion*, and *caudal nerve cord*, respectively. Because of compelling data linking these CNS domains in *Ciona* and vertebrates, and for the sake of clarity, we will refer to them here by their more familiar vertebrate homolog names. Despite these similarities to vertebrate CNSs, the split of the tunicates

and vertebrates is ancient, and moreover, the *Ciona* larval CNS stands apart in its simplicity, having only ~180 neurons.

The availability of the *Ciona* larval connectome dataset, combined with easily assayed and quantified behaviors, has allowed for the investigation of individual neurons in circuits driving behaviors.^{3,5–7} One such *Ciona* larval behavior is negative phototaxis. The minimal neural circuit for phototaxis is well described and consists of a relay of four neuron types starting with photoreceptors to primary and then secondary interneurons and finally to motor neurons.^{6,8} Negative phototaxis is a robust behavior that appears in late-stage larvae and is thought to aid in dispersal and settling.^{9,10} Experimentally, *Ciona* larvae display negative phototaxis when presented with constant, but directional, illumination (Video S1). Phototaxis initiates spontaneously with casting swims, in which larvae attempt to discern the direction of illumination with the aid of a pigmented cell that directionally shades the outer segments of their photoreceptors.¹⁰ As larvae turn away from the light, the pigment cell casts a shadow on the photoreceptors, providing a directional cue. However, it appears that not all casting swims are successful, as many



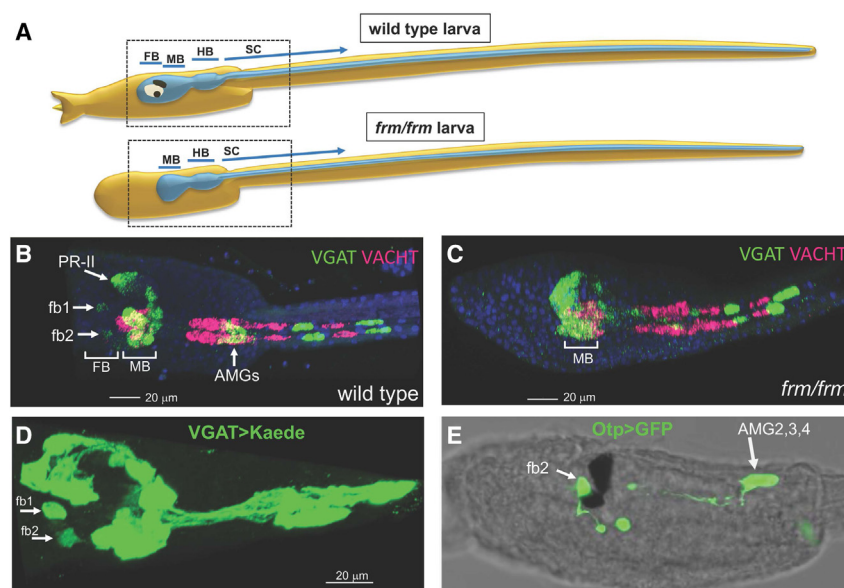


Figure 1. Inhibitory neurons in the *Ciona* larval forebrain

(A) Cartoons of wild-type and *frm/frm* larvae. The CNS is depicted in blue and labeled with the major domains: forebrain (FB), midbrain (MB), hindbrain (HB), and spinal cord (SC). Top and bottom dashed boxes indicate the approximate regions shown in (B) and (C), respectively.

(B and C) Hybridization chain reaction *in situ* hybridization for VGAT and VACHT in wild-type and *frm/frm* larvae, respectively. The two VGAT⁺ neurons labeled **fb1** and **fb2** are absent in the *frm/frm* mutant, as are the group II photoreceptors (PR-II). (D) Expression of the fluorescent protein Kaede under control of the VGAT promoter. The image is a confocal projection of a larva immunostained with anti-Kaede antibodies.

(E) **fb2** and AMG2,3, and 4 are labeled with a reporter construct expressing GFP under control of the *Otp* promoter. Immunostaining with anti-GFP antibodies is shown. Anterior is to the left in all panels.

See also [Figure S1](#) and [Video S1](#).

spontaneous swims terminate after only a few seconds without leading to sustained taxis swims.

The necessity of directional shading of the photoreceptors is evident in larvae unable to synthesize pigment (melanin) due to a mutation in the tyrosine hydroxylase gene.^{10,11} Although these larvae initiate spontaneous swims and their photoreceptors remain functional, all spontaneous swims quickly terminate, and phototaxis is never observed. Similarly, when wild-type larvae are observed in the absence of visual cues (i.e., under far-red illumination), phototaxis is absent, but short spontaneous swims persist. Spontaneous swims occur at a frequency of 2.6 ± 1.1 swims/min, whereas treating larvae with the GABA_A receptor antagonist picrotoxin increases the spontaneous swim frequency to 7.2 ± 2.8 swims/min, indicating that the initiation of spontaneous swims is under inhibitory regulation.⁶ Spontaneous swims are even more profoundly disrupted in larvae homozygous from the forebrain mutant *frimousse* (*frm/frm*) ([Figure 1A](#)).^{12,13} Two distinct behavioral phenotypes are observed in *frm/frm* larvae. The majority display only short spontaneous swims, but with increased frequency (8.1 ± 5.1 swims/min), as well as with greatly reduced variability in the interval between swims.⁶ A subset of *frm/frm* larvae show long spontaneous taxis-like swims, but which occur in the absence of visible light. In our report, we highlight the absence of a single slowly autonomously oscillating inhibitory neuron as one of the forebrain defects observed in *frm/frm* larvae. In wild-type larvae, this inhibitory neuron targets the phototaxis circuit. Ablation of this neuron results in spontaneous long swims resembling taxis swims, but which occur independently of visual cues. The expression of the transcription factor *Otp* by this neuron suggests shared origins with oscillating hypothalamic neurons.

RESULTS

Inhibitory neurons in the forebrain

We previously reported that the *Ciona* larval midbrain contains a cluster of VGAT-positive (VGAT⁺) neurons, but we failed to

identify VGAT⁺ neurons in the forebrain outside of a subset of photoreceptors.⁶ However, upon closer inspection, we found two additional VGAT⁺ forebrain neurons (provisionally named **fb1** and **fb2**; [Figure 1B](#)). These two neurons, as well as the VGAT⁺ photoreceptors, were absent in *frm/frm* larvae ([Figure 1C](#)).¹³ **fb1** and **fb2** were also observed in a stable transgenic line expressing Kaede fluorescent protein under the control of the VGAT promoter ([Figure 1D](#)).¹⁴ The ventral neuron (**fb2**) is the same as the previously described *Otp*-expressing VGAT⁺ neuron ([Figures 1E](#) and [S1A](#)) that was identified with a reporter plasmid containing the *Otp* cis-regulatory region.^{15,16} We also observed expression of the *Otp* reporter in three of the seven ascending motor ganglion neurons in the hindbrain (AMGs; specifically, AMGs 2, 3, and 4; [Figure 1E](#)). An *in situ* hybridization for *Otp* in *Ciona* larvae shows much wider expression than that observed with the reporter construct, including additional neurons in the forebrain ([Figure S1B](#)).

We previously reported that the number and position of neurons, as assessed by *in situ* hybridization, are consistent between *Ciona* larvae, being nearly identical in the hindbrain and highly similar in the midbrain.⁶ These observations allowed the mapping of three-dimensional fluorescent *in situ* expression datasets to the single three-dimensional connectome reconstruction to predict neurotransmitter use within the CNS. By similar reasoning, **fb2** was consistently observed in *Ciona* larvae and in a consistent location, indicating that this neuron should be present in the 177 neurons identified in the *Ciona* connectome. To identify **fb2** among the connectome neurons, we registered three-dimensional VGAT *in situ* datasets to the connectome reconstruction using known VGAT⁺ neurons as anchors, as described previously.⁶ Based on the registration, **fb2** mapped to coronet-associated brain vesicle intrinsic neuron 78 (cor-assBVIN78)^{8,17} ([Figure 2A](#)). The reconstruction of cor-assBVIN78 from the connectome electron micrographs is strikingly similar to **fb2** in terms of the shape of the soma, the length of the axon, and the highly branched axonal terminus ([Figures 2B](#) and [2C](#)). Due to the known minor variations in neuron location

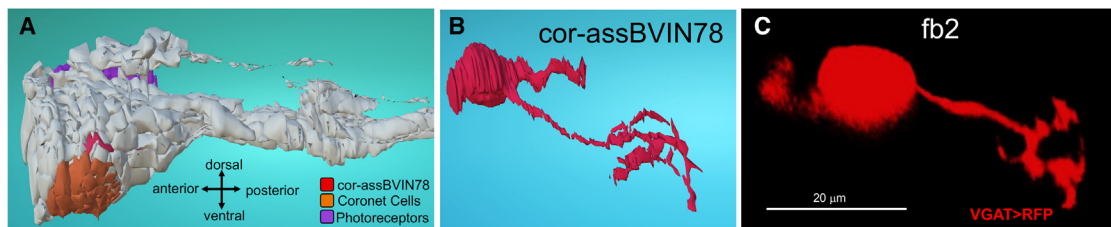


Figure 2. Mapping of fb2 to the *Ciona* connectome

(A) The location of neuron cor-assBVIN78 in the reconstructed CNS of the connectome larva. Also indicated are the coronet cells and the photoreceptors.

(B) Reconstruction of neuron cor-assBVIN78 from the connectome.

(C) Maximum intensity projection of confocal imaging of neuron fb2, labeled with RFP driven by the VGAT promoter. (A) and (B) are from the *Cionectome* connectome viewer (<https://morphonet.org/2Tn9x6ZF>).

between larvae, we also investigated the neurons surrounding cor-assBVIN78 as candidates, none of which strongly resembled fb2 (Figure 3A). Three of the surrounding neurons could easily be ruled out (coronet neurons 7, 10, and prRN100), and the remaining candidate neurons are all BVINs but had morphologies different from fb2. Based on similar anatomical location and cellular morphology, we conclude that cor-assBVIN78 is the most likely neuron of the connectome dataset corresponding to fb2. Moreover, a comparison of the synaptic targets of cor-assBVIN78 to those of the surrounding BVINs, as given by the connectome, shows that they vary greatly (Figure 3B), with cor-assBVIN78 standing apart in its targeting of five of the six *photoreceptor relay neurons* (prRNs). As will be presented below, the targeting of the prRNs is consistent with the activity of fb2. Because of the convergence of support for the identity of fb2, we will refer to it as cor-assBVIN78 for the remainder of this manuscript.

cor-assBVIN78 is an autonomously oscillating neuron

We examined the calcium dynamics of cor-assBVIN78 as a proxy for neural activity using either VGAT or Otp *cis*-regulatory fragments to drive jGCaMP7f or jGCaMP8m^{18,19} and observed that cor-assBVIN78 consistently showed oscillating calcium transients (Figure 4A). No other oscillating VGAT⁺ neurons were observed in larvae with GCaMP, although VGAT⁺ neurons with oscillation frequencies higher than what can be resolved temporally with GCaMP remain a possibility. Examples of time-lapse recordings from three larvae are shown in Video S2. Although the cor-assBVIN78 consistently showed oscillatory behavior, we observed variation in both period and amplitude of GCaMP fluorescence peaks both within and between larvae (Figures 4B and 5). Figure 4B shows the plots of the 1/interpeak GCaMP intervals for 10 larvae, used as an estimate of variation in oscillation frequencies. The mean peak intervals calculated for nine of the larvae clustered in the range from 0.36 to 1.06 s⁻¹, with one outlier (larva I) having a mean at 2.58 s⁻¹. Pairwise comparisons showed statistically significant differences in peak intervals between larvae (Figure 4C; Dunn's test). Time and frequency domain graphs, as well as autocorrelation, of the cor-assBVIN78 GCaMP fluorescence data for the 10 larvae are presented in Figure S2, with the dominant oscillation frequencies indicated (except for larva E, whose dominant frequency could not be distinguished from the low-frequency noise). The average oscillation frequency (excluding larvae E and I) was 0.61 ±

0.29 Hz (n = 8 larvae). The oscillation frequency of cor-assBVIN78 in larva I at 2.99 Hz was much higher than those in all other larvae.

We next examined whether cor-assBVIN78 retains oscillating activity when cultured in isolation. For this experiment, we took advantage of the fact that the transient transfection method used here (electroporation at the one-cell stage)²⁰ can result in mosaic expression. This allowed us to manually select larvae expressing the Otp reporter plasmid only in cor-assBVIN78 (e.g., larva shown in Figure S1A). Larvae selected this way, and co-expressing Otp>RFP and VGAT>jGCaMP7f, were dissociated to single cells as described previously.²¹ The dissociated cell suspension was settled on a microscope slide under a coverslip, and cells co-expressing RFP and jGCaMP7f were identified. Calcium imaging showed that the isolated cor-assBVIN78 neurons continued to oscillate in isolation (Figure 4D; Video S3). We collected jGCaMP7f data on four isolated cor-assBVIN78 neurons (Figure S3). Fourier analysis for three of the cells each yielded a single dominant frequency that averaged 0.23 ± 0.06 Hz (n = 3 cells), whereas the data from the fourth cell did not resolve to a single dominant frequency. The slower oscillation of the isolated cor-assBVIN78 neurons compared with these neurons in intact larvae could be the result of their isolation from other modulating neurons (see Figure 5, below). However, it is also possible that the slower oscillation could be due, at least in part, to the fact that the medium used to observe the isolated cor-assBVIN78s (seawater) is not optimal.

Synaptic connectivity and activity of cor-assBVIN78

The complete chemical synaptic connectivity of cor-assBVIN78, as given by the connectome, is shown in Figure 5A, with outputs from cor-assBVIN78 in red and inputs to cor-assBVIN78 in gray. The connectome quantified the physical sizes of synapses as a putative measure of synaptic strength,⁸ and this is reflected in the thickness of the lines in Figures 5A and 5B. Accordingly, the major synaptic targets of cor-assBVIN78 are the *photoreceptor relay neurons* (prRN) of the midbrain, which also receives input from the group I photoreceptors (Figure 5B). The relay neurons are so named because they project from the midbrain to the hindbrain. The connectome identifies 38 neurons as being relay neurons, six of which are prRNs, with five of these receiving synaptic input from cor-assBVIN78. Although cor-assBVIN78 is identified as being coronet cell associated, it receives only weak input from a single coronet cell. However, as a neuron

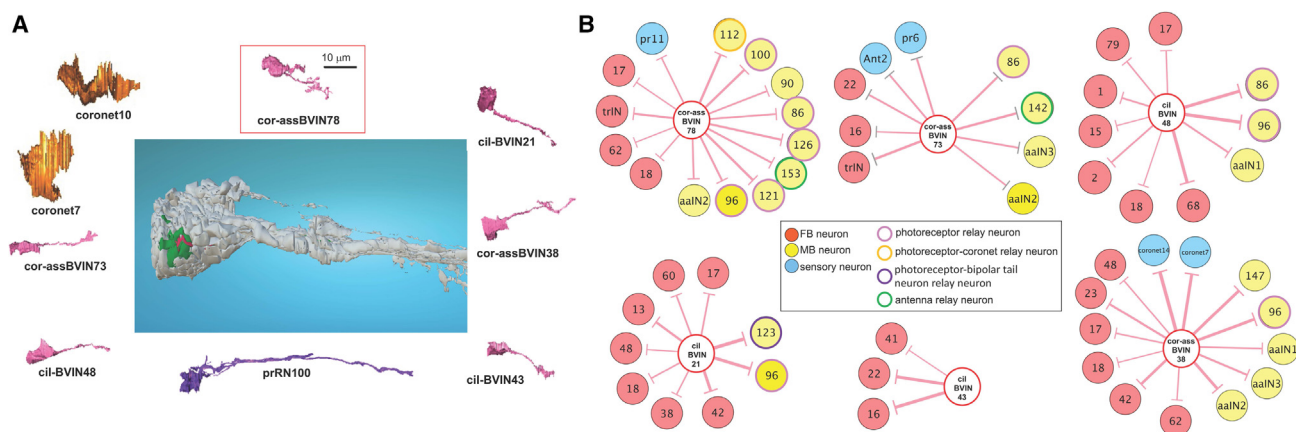


Figure 3. Candidate fb2 neurons

(A) The central panel shows the reconstructed *Ciona* CNS with cor-assBVIN78 in red and eight neighboring neurons in green. Reconstructions of each of the neurons from the connectome electron micrographs are shown. Images are from the Cionectome connectome viewer (<https://morphonet.org/2Tn9x6ZF>). (B) Chemical synaptic targets of the six candidate BVIN neurons. Target neurons are color coded depending whether they are sensory, forebrain (FB) or midbrain (MB), and numbered neuron IDs are according to Ryan and Meinertzhagen.¹⁷ Relay neurons are circled and color coded according to their classification.¹⁷ (cil-BVIN, ciliated BV intrinsic interneurons; cor-assBVIN, coronet-associated ciliated BV interneurons; prRN, photoreceptor relay neuron; aalN, anaxonal arborizing neuron.)

class, the *corr-assBVIN* cells are characterized by their ciliary projections that contact the coronet cells.¹⁷ The synaptic inputs to cor-assBVIN78 also tie it to photoreception, as it receives input from four group I photoreceptors (PRIs), as well as from brain intrinsic interneurons that receive photoreceptor input (neurons 13, 17, 50, and 16).⁸ Figure 5B places cor-assBVIN78 in the context of the minimal phototaxis circuit,^{6,8} which starts with the group I photoreceptors projecting to the midbrain prRNs, which in turn project to the left and right hindbrain *motor ganglion interneurons* (MGINs). The MGINs then project to motor neurons on their respective sides. 21 of the 23 PRIs are glutamatergic, one is GABAergic, and one is dual GABAergic and glutamatergic. The significance of the single GABAergic and GABAergic/glutamatergic photoreceptors is not known, but they were found in all larvae examined.⁶ The prRNs are predicted to be primarily cholinergic, and thus, this circuit appears to be an excitatory relay to the cholinergic MGINs.⁶ By contrast, cor-assBVIN78, due to its expression of VGAT, is predicted to be inhibitory, and its synaptic input to the prRNs suggest a gating function in the phototaxis pathway. Evidence for gating by cor-assBVIN78 was gained by simultaneous calcium imaging of cor-assBVIN78 and cholinergic midbrain neurons (Figures 5C and 5D). During calcium imaging, we occasionally observe spontaneous calcium transients in VACHT-positive (VACHT⁺) midbrain neurons. As shown in Figure 5, spikes in VACHT⁺ neurons correspond to troughs in cor-assBVIN78 calcium activity (see also Video S4). We assume that this is a prRN neuron, although we do not at present have a molecular marker that distinguishes the six prRNs from other midbrain relay neurons. However, our published quantification of *in situ* hybridization results from multiple larvae found only 11 ± 1 VACHT⁺ midbrain neurons,⁶ which, together with the connectivity data shown in Figure 5A, is consistent with this spiking VACHT⁺ neuron being a prRN. We also observed examples of spontaneous spikes in midbrain VACHT⁺ neurons that do not correlate with cor-assBVIN78 activity (not shown).

Ablation of cor-assBVIN78 results in long sustained spontaneous swims

Further evidence for gating activity of cor-assBVIN78 in the phototaxis pathway comes from loss-of-function analysis. cor-assBVIN78 was ablated in larvae carrying the stable VGAT>Kaede transgene using a UV laser. cor-assBVIN78 was identified based on Kaede fluorescence; then, an area restricted to cor-assBVIN78 was selected and scanned with a UV laser at high intensity for ablation. Mock-ablated larvae underwent the same treatment, except that a scanning area of the same size was selected either anterior or posterior to cor-assBVIN78. Additional controls were treated as above but received no ablation. As shown in Figure 6A, cor-assBVIN78 was effectively ablated by this approach, and only fluorescent debris was observed in the area of the ablation (circle in the right panel). Because our labeling is restricted to VGAT-expressing neurons, we cannot be certain that neighboring neurons were not damaged by the ablation. However, mock ablations should largely control this possibility. Following ablations, larvae were recovered from the slides, and swimming behavior was recorded in 3-min sessions using only far-red illumination. The larvae from one experiment were combined in a single arena, and a previously described custom software script was used to track individual larva.⁶ Figure 6B and Video S5 show combined swims for all larvae in the arena (7 control; 6 mock-ablated; and 9 cor-assBVIN78-ablated), with each swim a separate color, whereas Figure S4A shows the swim tracks for individual larvae. A repeat experiment of the mock and cor-assBVIN78 ablations with a separate group of larvae is shown in Figure S5 and Video S6, with individual swims shown in Figure S4B. For comparison of the swimming behavior of ablated and mock-ablated larvae to normal larvae, we also collected a dataset of swims from unmanipulated larvae recorded both under far-red illumination and in the presence of directional visible light, which evokes phototaxis.^{6,10} Representative swim traces from this group are shown in Figure S6.

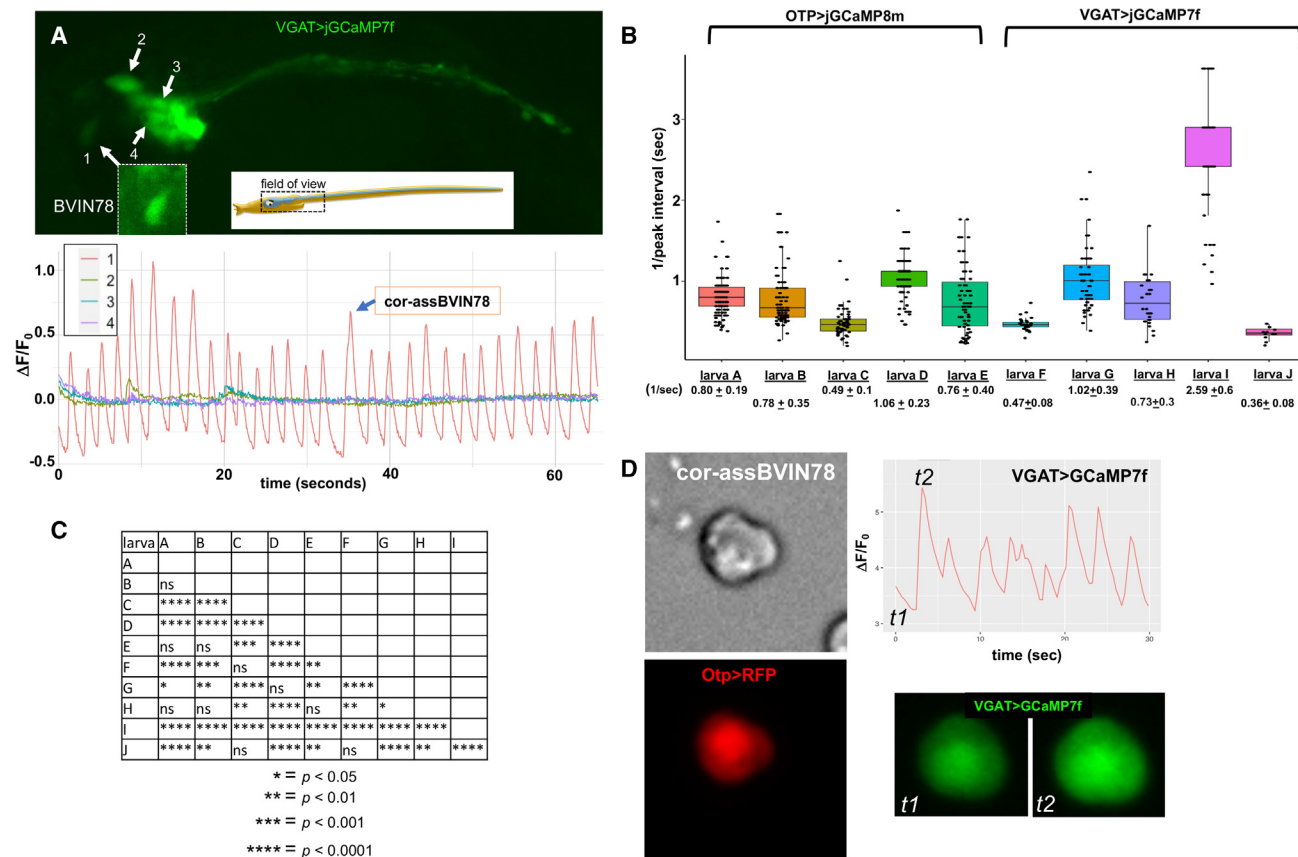


Figure 4. Activity of cor-assBVIN78

(A) Calcium imaging of cor-assBVIN78 using jGCaMP7f driven by the VGAT promoter (*VGAT>jGCaMP7f*). The chart shows relative changes in fluorescence over time for the four cells indicated, including cor-assBVIN78 (cell1).

(B) Box plots of 1/interpeak intervals for five *Otp>jGCaMP8m*- and five *VGAT>jGCaMP7f*-expressing larvae (A–J).

(C) Pairwise comparisons of the interpeak intervals for the 10 larvae shown in (B). p values were adjusted by the Holm method.

(D) Isolated cor-assBVIN78 neuron expressing *Otp>RFP* and *VGAT>jGCaMP7f*. Chart shows normalized GCaMP7f fluorescence for the isolated cell. The center line is the median. The lower and upper box limit correspond to the first and third quartiles. The upper and lower whisker extends from the box limit to the largest value no further than 1.5 * IQR from the box limit. All data points were shown. See also [Figures S2](#) and [S3](#) and [Videos S2](#) and [S3](#).

The most obvious difference between the control groups (no ablation and mock ablation) and the cor-assBVIN78-ablated group is the presence of long sustained swims in the latter group ([Figures 6B](#) and [6C](#); [Figures S4](#) and [S5](#)). The long swims in the cor-assBVIN78-ablated larvae were observed despite the absence of visual cues (i.e., they were recorded under far-red light). Significantly, cor-assBVIN78 ablation did not result in continuous swimming. Rather, the larvae swam in spontaneous bouts that averaged 10.8 ± 10.4 s ($n = 98$ swims). This was not significantly different from the duration of swims observed for normal larvae during phototaxis (18.5 ± 19.5 s; $n = 24$ swims; $p_{adj} = 0.52$, Dunn's test). The swims from both the cor-assBVIN78-ablated and normal phototactic swims were significantly longer ($p_{adj} < 10^{-6}$, Dunn's test) when compared with the three control groups: mock ablated, control (manipulated, but not ablated), and unmanipulated, which averaged 1.9 ± 2.1 s ($n = 33$ swims), 1.6 ± 4.4 s ($n = 62$ swims), and 3.2 ± 3.3 s ($n = 68$ swims), respectively (all controls were recorded under far-red light). Thus, ablation of cor-assBVIN78 evokes swims of similar length

to those observed in phototaxis. Moreover, in both the cor-assBVIN78-ablated and the phototaxis swims, we observed a mixture of both straight and tortuous swims ([Figures 6B](#) and [S6](#)). We also analyzed the ablation dataset for the length of the resting intervals between swims and the frequency of swims ([Figures 6D](#) and [6E](#)). We found no significant differences in these parameters between the cor-assBVIN78 ablated, mock ablated, and unmanipulated control larvae. The results also indicate that cor-assBVIN78 ablation phenocopies one aspect of the behavioral phenotype of *frm/frm* larvae. In *frm/frm*, we observed that the majority of larvae exhibited only short spontaneous swims—but with a higher frequency and lower variability. However, and similar to cor-assBVIN78-ablated larvae, a subset of *frm/frm* larvae exhibited long swims in the absence of visual cues (in fact, *frm/frm* larvae have no photoreceptors). The *frm* mutation is much more extensive than the simple loss of cor-assBVIN78 and results in the transfer of the entire forebrain to the epidermis.^{12,13} Nevertheless, the behavior of long-swimming *frm/frm* larvae is consistent with the removal of an inhibitory input from the forebrain. The

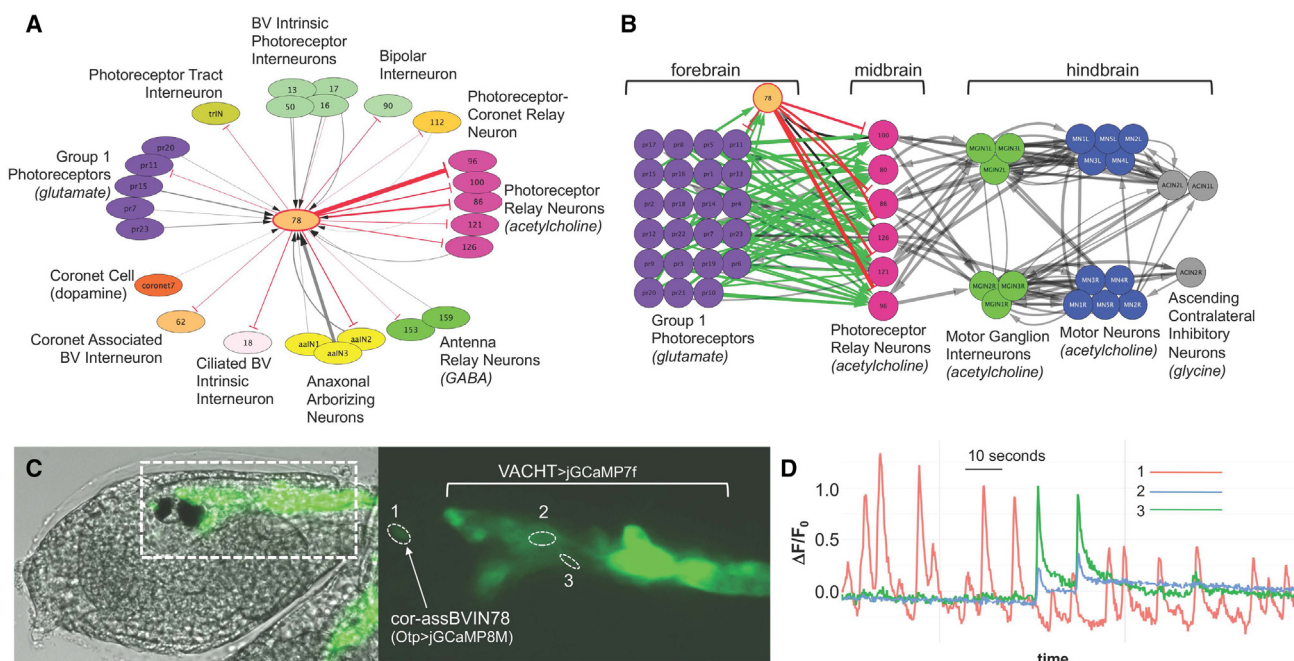


Figure 5. Connectivity and activity of cor-assBVIN78

(A) Synaptic connectivity of cor-assBVIN78 (shortened to "78" in A and B) as given by the *Ciona* connectome. Gray lines indicate synaptic inputs and red lines indicate synaptic outputs.

(B) Minimal phototaxis circuit with the inhibitory inputs from cor-assBVIN78 shown in red. Green lines indicate projections from photoreceptors. All other synaptic connections are in gray.

(C) Expression of jGCaMP8M from the *Otp* and *VACHT* regulatory elements in the larval CNS.

(D) Normalized calcium fluorescence for the circled regions of interest (ROIs) in (C). ROI1 corresponds to cor-assBVIN78. ROIs 2 and 3 appear to be the soma and axon of the same *VACHT*⁺ neuron, respectively. The thickness of the lines in (A) and (B) is proportional to the physical size of the synapse as determined from electron micrographs.

See also [Video S4](#).

reason why only some *frm/frm* larvae are able to initiate long swims suggests a variable penetrance of the *frm* phenotype, with differing degrees of CNS disruption. Whether the absence of cor-assBVIN78 also plays a role in the altered frequency of short spontaneous swims in *frm/frm* larvae is not readily discernible from the results of the ablation. The rhythm of spontaneous swims is best observed in wild-type larvae recorded under far-red illumination or in *frm/frm* larvae. In both cases, long taxis-like swims are rare, and the short spontaneous swims lasting 1–2 s and occurring every 9–15 s on average are easily quantified. In cor-assBVIN78-ablated larvae, we observed almost exclusively long swims lasting tens of seconds, so that the underlying short spontaneous swim frequency could not be quantified.

Labeling of cor-assBVIN78 with transgenic reporters shows that it projects to the midbrain (e.g., [Figure 1E](#)), and the connectome predicts that primary targets in the midbrain are the prRNs ([Figure 5B](#)). Thus, we predict that the behavioral phenotype resulting from cor-assBVIN78 ablation will be accompanied by increased firing of the prRNs. Although we do not have a driver that is specific for the prRNs, they are predicted to make up approximately half of the ~11 midbrain *VACHT*⁺ neurons.⁶ To determine if elevated firing of *VACHT*⁺ midbrain neurons in cor-assBVIN78-ablated compared with mock-ablation larvae could be detected, embryos were first electroporated with *Otp*>RFP

and *VACHT*>jGCaMP7f. At the larval stage, cor-assBVIN78 was ablated, as above, but using the *Otp*>RFP fluorescence as a guide. [Figures 6F](#) and [6G](#) show the plots of GCaMP fluorescence captured in 2-min imaging sessions for cor-assBVIN78-ablated and mock-ablation larvae, respectively. Because the *VACHT*⁺ neurons are clustered in the midbrain, we could not resolve individual neurons, rather we analyzed the indicated region of interest (ROIs 1–4 in each panel) that covers the *VACHT*⁺ neurons in the midbrain. Consistent with our predictions, extensive spiking was observed in the cor-assBVIN78-ablated larva (particularly ROI 1; [Figure 6F](#)). The extent of spiking in the *VACHT*⁺ neurons in the mock-ablated was much less extensive ([Figure 6G](#)).

DISCUSSION

Identity of fb2

The cross-identification of a single neuron between disparate datasets, such as between a single serial-section EM reconstruction and light microscopy images, as presented here, is inherently problematic. Although light microscopy images of multiple larvae showed a consistent location for *fb-2* in the CNS, the fact that we have only one connectome dataset limits the confidence of our three-dimensional registration approach. Likewise, our results highlighting a similar cellular morphology

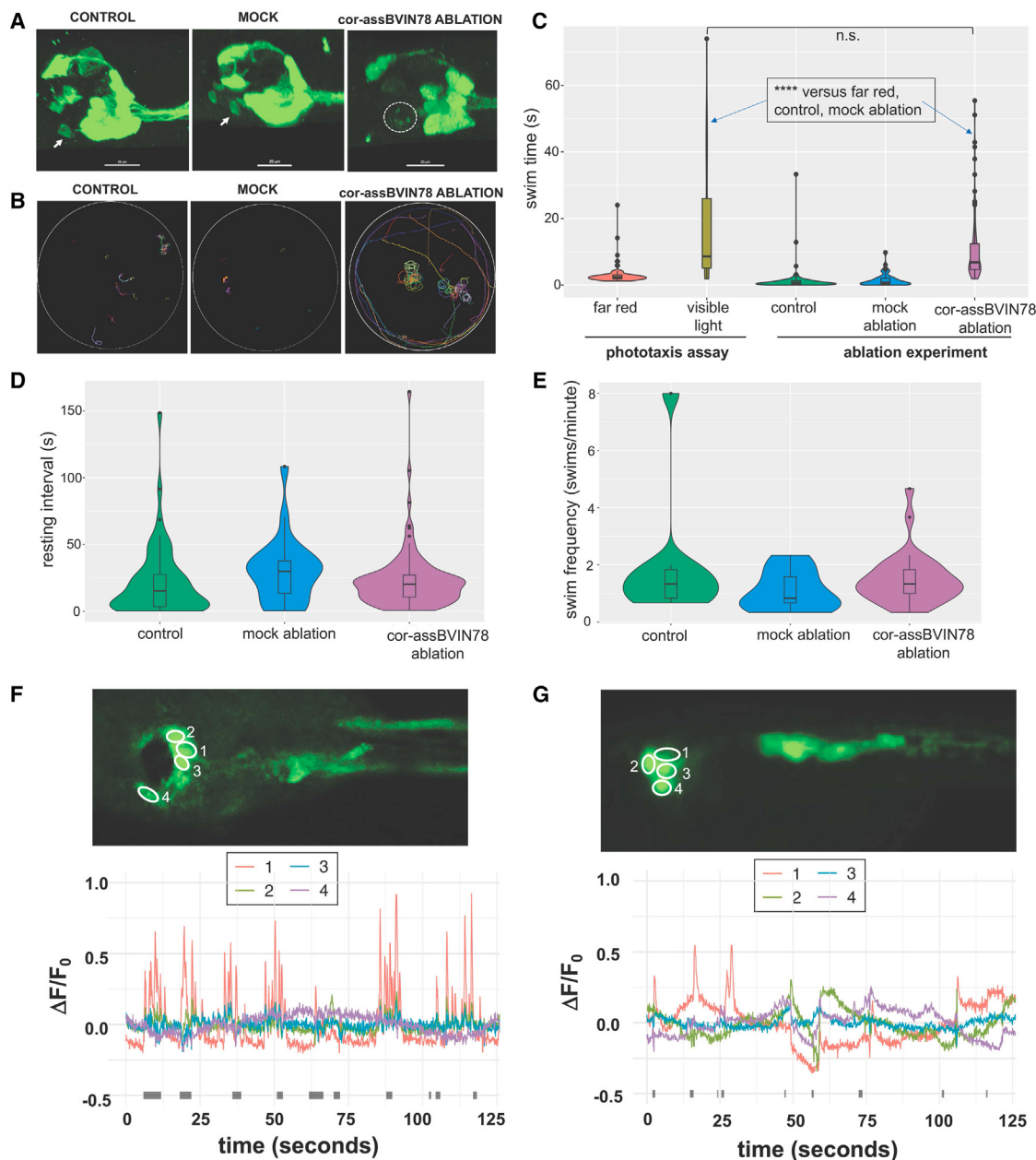


Figure 6. Ablation of cor-assBVIN78

(A) Laser ablation of cor-assBVIN78 in larvae stably expressing VGAT>Kaede. Arrows in “Control” and “Mock” indicate cor-assBVIN78. The circle in the right panel (cor-assBVIN78 ABLATION) indicates cell debris. Samples were immunostained with anti-Kaede antibody before confocal microscopy.

(B) Swim tracks from eight control, six mock ablated, and nine cor-assBVIN78-ablated larvae. Each swim is assigned an arbitrary color. Swims for individual larvae are shown in Figure S4.

(C) Violin plots of the duration for swims from a phototaxis assay of unmanipulated larvae (left), and unablated (control), mock ablated, and cor-assBVIN78-ablated, larvae (right). (Dunn’s test; **** $p_{adj} < 0.001$; n.s., not significant.)

(D) Violin plots of the resting interval between swims in control (unmanipulated larvae), mock-ablated, and cor-assBVIN78-ablated larvae. $p > 0.05$ for all comparisons.

(E) Violin plots of swim frequency (swims/min) in control (unmanipulated larvae), mock-ablated, and cor-assBVIN78-ablated larvae. $p > 0.05$ for all comparisons.

(F and G) Plots of VACHT-jGCaMP7f in cor-assBVIN78-ablated, and mock-ablated, larvae, respectively. The numbered circled regions in the top panel correspond to the traces shown in the plots. Gray bars along the x axis indicate periods in which tail beating was observed.

See also Figures S4, S5, and S6 and Videos S5 and S6.

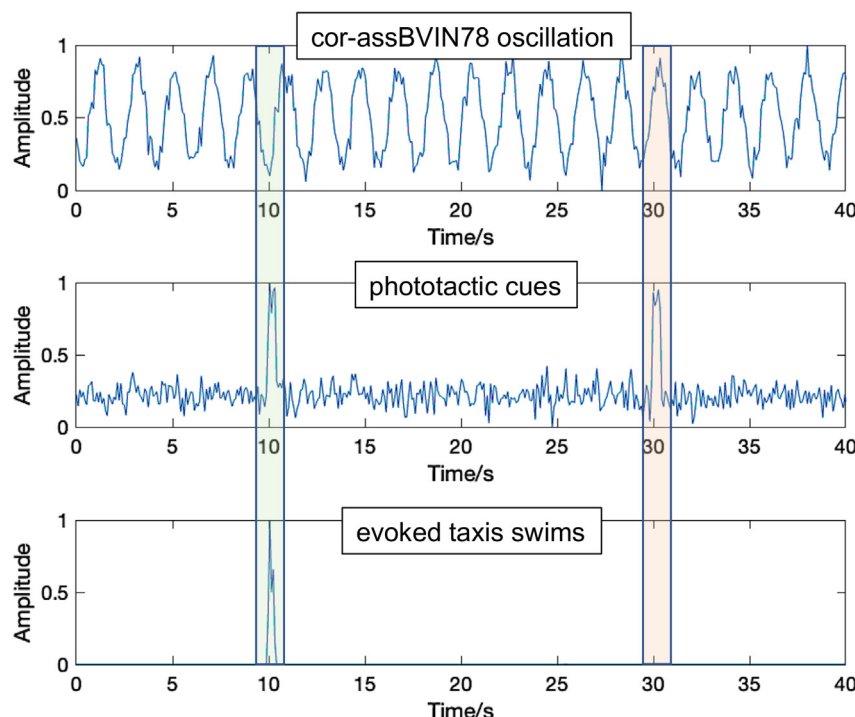


Figure 7. Model for cor-assBVIN78 gating of phototaxis

Hypothetical data illustrating the proposed filtering and gating activity of cor-assBVIN78 in the phototaxis circuit. Phototaxis cues generated via casting swims that correspond temporally to troughs in cor-assBVIN78 oscillations can evoke taxis swims (green box), whereas those corresponding temporally to peaks do not (red box). In addition, small fluctuations, indicated by the added noise to the phototactic cue graph, may not evoke swims even when corresponding temporally to troughs due to the proposed filtering activity of cor-assBVIN78.

attributes of sensory cells. Although their function is unknown, they have been speculated to play a role in circadian rhythms.¹⁶ Thus, cor-assBVIN78 is the first non-sensory neuron of the *Ciona* forebrain with a known function.

cor-assBVIN78, spontaneity, and phototaxis

In *Ciona* larvae, negative phototaxis initiates with spontaneous casting, which can then transition to a phototaxis swim—if a

directional light cue is received.¹⁰ The results presented here indicate that cor-assBVIN78 acts on this transition. A plausible neural circuit for phototaxis in *Ciona* has been proposed and consists of a relay from glutamatergic photoreceptors to motor neurons via two classes of cholinergic interneurons (Figure 5B).^{6,8} The presence of an inhibitory neuron, particularly a slow-oscillating one, acting on the prRN was not predicted by the circuit model. Nevertheless, loss of this neuron has profound behavioral effects. The results presented here provide several clues to the role of cor-assBVIN78 in the phototaxis circuit. Although our results show that the ablation of cor-assBVIN78 is sufficient to evoke sustained taxis-like swims, we do not observe spontaneous swims in intact larvae corresponding to the rhythm of cor-assBVIN78. In other words, the troughs in cor-assBVIN78 inhibition, which occur at an average frequency of 0.62 Hz, alone are not sufficient to evoke swimming. This suggests that the inhibitory action of cor-assBVIN78 may act as a filter to suppress spurious inputs to the phototaxis circuit. However, this does not explain the oscillatory activity of cor-assBVIN78. Data presented here indicate that the oscillating inhibition by cor-assBVIN78 gates the activity of the photoreceptor relay neurons, making them preferentially responsive to phototactic cues arriving during troughs (Figure 7). Observations of spontaneously firing cholinergic relay neurons support this hypothesis (Figures 5C and 5D). Nevertheless, although the connectome indicates that these cholinergic neurons are likely to be prRNs, in the absence of a definitive marker for the prRNs, the identity of these neurons is speculative. The net effect of cor-assBVIN78 activity appears to add an inhibitory element to the transition from casting to taxis. This may explain why many casting swims do not transition to phototactic swims.¹⁰ Moreover, the rhythm of the spontaneous swim generator at ~2.6/min (0.43 Hz) is not synchronized with cor-assBVIN78 oscillation, and moreover,

BVIN 78 and the *Ciona* forebrain

The parallel anatomy, gene expression, and function of tunicate larval and vertebrate nervous systems have been extensively documented.² The most anterior part of the *Ciona* CNS shows hallmarks that link it to a hypothetical proto-forebrain structure in the common ancestor of vertebrates and tunicates. These hallmarks include, for example, the expression of the transcription factors *Otx* and *Dmrt*.^{4,22,23} *In situ* hybridization surveys for markers of small-molecule neurotransmitter use show little or, for some markers, no expression in larval forebrain neurons. The few expressing neurons are the photoreceptors, which express both VGLUT and VGAT,^{6,24} the coronet cells that appear to be dopaminergic,²⁵ and, as reported here, *fb1* and *fb2* that express VGAT. For the remaining forebrain neurons, one possibility is that many are peptidergic²⁶ or, alternatively, that they are quiescent with respect to neurotransmitter use until after metamorphosis. Nevertheless, the connectome predicts extensive synaptic connectivity between *Ciona* forebrain neurons, as well as extensive descending projections.⁸ Despite this, and in contrast to the *Ciona* larval midbrain, which has a clear role as an integrating and relay center for sensory inputs,^{3,6,7} the function of *Ciona* forebrain remains poorly characterized. Among the *Ciona* larval forebrain neurons with known function are the photoreceptors, but they, in fact, originate more posteriorly and then migrate to the forebrain.²⁷ The coronet cells have

the two appear to act in opposition. Thus, their interaction should add an element of noise, or uncertainty, to the frequency of phototaxis, which would otherwise be a more predictable rhythmic behavior driven by the spontaneous swim generator. Thus, the oscillatory action of *cor-assBVIN78* may impart a selective advantage to larvae by modifying phototaxis so as to make it less overtly rhythmic and thereby less predictable, possibly helping to avoid predation. The variation observed in the frequency and amplitude of the oscillations, both within and between larvae, may accentuate this effect.

Relationship of *cor-assBVIN78* to the central pattern generator

Ciona larvae alternate activation of the left and right flanks of tail muscles to generate rhythmic swimming. Components of the central pattern generator (CPG) have been identified in *Ciona* larvae and include left and right pairs of contralaterally projecting inhibitory (glycinergic) neurons that target the right and left MGINs of the hindbrain, respectively.²⁸ In addition, one left/right pair of the 10 hindbrain motor neurons has been shown to have autonomous oscillating behavior that determines swim rhythmicity.^{5,29} Moreover, recent experiments in which larvae were cut into progressively smaller segments demonstrated that a fragment containing only the hindbrain and an anterior segment of the spinal cord (referred to as the caudal nerve cord) was able to autonomously initiate periodic and rhythmic swim bouts.³⁰ Taken together, these results point to the central pattern generator as residing exclusively in the hindbrain and spinal cord. The physical location and slow oscillation of *cor-assBVIN78* suggest that it is not a component of the CPG, but rather acts upstream. In addition, we observed that ablation of *cor-assBVIN78* did not result in continuous swimming. Rather, the ablated larvae swim in discrete bouts, similar to phototactic swims. Thus, although *cor-assBVIN78* appears to act to temporally inhibit the initiation of swim bouts, it does not appear to be essential for their termination. Perhaps, the mechanisms determining the persistence and termination of evoked swim bouts may be inherent to the CPG.

cor-assBVIN78 and other chordates

With fewer than 50 neurons, the diminutive size of the *Ciona* larval forebrain relative to those of vertebrates presents an opportunity to explore the function of individual neurons, as is done here for *cor-assBVIN78*. However, linking individual cell types between clades as distantly related as tunicates and vertebrates is more challenging. Nevertheless, the anatomical location, expression of *Otp*, oscillatory activity, and synaptic connectivity with the visual system all point to a link between *cor-assBVIN78* with an ancient chordate neuronal type that also went on to populate the vertebrate hypothalamus.^{31,32} The neighboring dopaminergic coronet cells of the *Ciona* forebrain are also thought to have ties to the hypothalamus.¹⁶ Oscillatory behavior in the hypothalamus has been studied predominantly in the context of regulating circadian cycles.³¹ However, it is unlikely that *cor-assBVIN78* is involved in circadian rhythms in *Ciona* larvae. The larval stage is brief in *Ciona*, lasting only 1 or 2 days, following which the animal undergoes metamorphosis, which includes extensive remodeling of the nervous system.³³ Moreover, no circadian behavior has been described in *Ciona*

larvae, and the *Ciona* genome appears to have lost many of the canonical clock genes, including *clock* and *per*.^{34,35} Rather, as we proposed above, *cor-assBVIN78* appears to have a role in regulating rhythmic taxis behavior. Whether this is a unique mechanism to *Ciona* (or tunicates), or is more widespread, remains to be determined.

STAR★METHODS

Detailed methods are provided in the online version of this paper and include the following:

- KEY RESOURCES TABLE
- RESOURCE AVAILABILITY
 - Lead contact
 - Materials availability
 - Data and code availability
- EXPERIMENTAL AND STUDY PARTICIPANT DETAILS
- METHOD DETAILS
 - Histological methods
 - Dechoriation and Electroporation
 - Reporter Plasmids
 - GCaMP imaging
 - Larva dissociation and cell imaging
 - Laser Ablation of BVIN78
 - Behavioral Assays
- QUANTIFICATION AND STATISTICAL ANALYSIS
 - Behavioral assay analysis
 - GCaMP analysis
- ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION

Supplemental information can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2023.06.080>.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

J.C, E.N.-S., and M.J.K. designed and conducted the experiments, analyzed the data, and assisted in writing the original draft. Y.M assisted in data analysis and curation. C.B. wrote software and conducted 3D registration. T.L, B.G., and E.F. wrote software for connectome visualization, and W.C.S. supervised the project, designed experiments, analyzed data, wrote the original draft, and obtained funding.

DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

The authors declare no competing interests.

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STAR★METHODS

KEY RESOURCES TABLE

REAGENT or RESOURCE	SOURCE	IDENTIFIER
Antibodies		
Kaede anti rabbit	MBL	PM012M
goat anti-rabbit AlexaFluor488	Invitrogen	A11034
rabbit anti-GFP	Invitrogen	A11122
Chemicals, Peptides, and Recombinant Proteins		
Sodium thioglycolate	Sigma	T0632
Protease E	Sigma	P5147
Trypsin	Sigma	T4799
collagenase	Sigma	C9891
MS222	Sigma	E10521
Ultra low melt agarose	Sigma	A5030
Mannitol	Fisher	M124
Methyl cellulose	Sigma	M0387
TAPS	Sigma	T0647
Deposited data		
Images and time-lapse data	Brain Imaging Library	https://doi.org/10.35077/g.935
Experimental Models: Organisms/Strains		
<i>Ciona robusta</i> wild caught (formerly <i>Ciona intestinalis</i> type A)	Santa Barbara Harbor	N/A
<i>Ciona robusta</i> VGAT>Kaede transgenic	Ciona Intestinalis Transgenic Line Resources (CITRES)	Tg[MiCIVGATK]2
Recombinant DNA		
Otp>CiRFP	This manuscript	N/A
Otp>jGCaMP8m	This manuscript	N/A
VGAT>jGCaMP7f	This manuscript	N/A
VACHT>jGCaMP7f	This manuscript	N/A
Software and Algorithms		
Original codes	https://github.com/CionaLab/phnn	https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8067485
Fiji	https://imagej.net/Fiji	2.13.1
MATLAB	https://www.mathworks.com/products/matlab.html	2023a
R	https://www.r-project.org/	4.3.0
Tidyverse	https://www.tidyverse.org	https://doi.org/10.21105/joss.01686
Rstatix	https://CRAN.R-project.org/package=rstatix	0.7.2
Ggpmisc	https://CRAN.R-project.org/package=ggpmisc	0.5.2
Other		
ORCA-Flash V4.0 C11440-22CU camera	Hamamatsu	C11440-22CU
Zoom 7000 lens	Navitar	ZOOM 7000
52mm red 25 filter	Tiffen	52R25
BioLED optical head, Precision LED Spot light, 700 nm	Mightex Systems	BLS-PLS-0700-01-S
BioLED optical head, Precision LED Spot light, 505 nm	Mightex Systems	BLS-PLS-0505—030-04
BioLED light source control module	Mightex Systems	BLS-SA04-US

(Continued on next page)

Continued

REAGENT or RESOURCE	SOURCE	IDENTIFIER
VGAT <i>in situ</i> probe	Molecular Instruments	https://www.molecularinstruments.com
VACHT <i>in situ</i> probe	Molecular Instruments	https://www.molecularinstruments.com
OTP <i>in situ</i> probe	Molecular Instruments	https://www.molecularinstruments.com

RESOURCE AVAILABILITY

Lead contact

Further information and requests for resources and reagents should be directed to the lead contact, William C. Smith (w_smith@ucsb.edu).

Materials availability

Plasmids generated in this study are available upon request.

Data and code availability

- All images and time lapse data generated for this paper have been deposited at the Brain Image Library (<https://brainimagelibrary.org/>). DOIs are listed in the [key resources table](#).
- All original code has been deposited at Github (<https://github.com/CionaLab/phnn>) and Zenodo (<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8067485>) and is publicly available as of the date of publication. DOIs are listed in the [key resources table](#).
- Any additional information about the data reported in this paper is available from the [lead contact](#) upon request.

EXPERIMENTAL AND STUDY PARTICIPANT DETAILS

Adult *Ciona robusta* (aka, *C. intestinalis* type A) were collected at the Santa Barbara Harbor with the exception of the stable VGAT>Kaede line (Tg[MiCiVGATK]2; obtained from CITRES <https://marinebio.nbrp.jp/ciona/>), which was cultured at the UC Santa Barbara Marine Laboratory, a continuous-flow seawater system. Larvae were generated by dissecting gametes from adults. VGAT>Kaede transgenic larvae were produced by crossing wild type eggs with frozen VGAT>Kaede sperm aliquots. Electroporated embryos were first dechorionated before being electroporated with the construct of interest. All embryos were incubated at 18°C for optimal growth conditions.

METHOD DETAILS

Histological methods

Hybridization chain reaction *in situ* was performed as described previously, including probes for VGAT and VACHT.⁶ The mRNA sequence to which the probe set was chosen for Otp included 1898 bases, beginning UUUUUAAGU (at 5' end) and ending with UAAAUCCCC (3'). The immunostaining procedure was performed as described previously.³⁶ For labeling of larvae expressing Kaede, an anti-Kaede (rabbit) primary (MBL) was used, followed by a goat anti-rabbit AlexaFluor488 (Invitrogen). Animals expressing GCaMP were labeled using a rabbit anti-GFP primary (Invitrogen) and anti-rabbit AlexaFluor488 secondary (Invitrogen).

Dechorionation and Electroporation

Fertilized eggs were dechorionated with 1% sodium thioglycolate and 0.05% protease E²⁰ or with 0.1% Trypsin in 10mM TAPS pH 8.2,³⁷ and washed extensively with sea water. Approximately, 300 ul of fertilized eggs were mixed with 20-60 ug DNA in 500 ul 0.77 M mannitol solution and electroporated at 0.05 kV.²⁰ Fertilized eggs were washed extensively with sea water and cultured at 18°C in sea water with or without 0.1% methyl cellulose.

Reporter Plasmids

To generate the Otp>CiRFP, the Otp *cis*-regulatory fragment, as described in Lemaire et al.¹⁶, was amplified by PCR and ligated into Xho1 and Sph1 restriction sites of pSP72-1.27 mRFPci, which has a codon optimized RFP for *Ciona* expression.³⁸ The published Otp *cis*-regulatory fragment includes the first 112 amino acids of Otp. This expression strategy did not result in a functional GCaMP, perhaps due to the extra amino acids. Therefore, to make Otp>jGCaMP8m, the native ATG of Otp was mutated using a gBlock (IDT) before jGCaMP8m was added. jGCaMP8m was amplified using the following primers which add a *Ciona*-specific Kozak sequence: CCtctagaCAGAAAAAATGacgcgtcgcaagaagaccttc and ttGAATTCttacttcgctgtcatcattgttac. The plasmid jGCaMP8m was obtained from Addgene (#162381). VGAT>GCaMP7f was synthesized by Twist bioscience (<https://www.twistbioscience>).

com/) and contains a 2.5Kb VGAT *cis*-regulatory fragment and jGCaMP7f with the above *Ciona* Kozak sequence. To generate VACHT>GCaMP7f, GCaMP7f was PCR amplified and inserted into pSPC*i*VACHTK.¹⁴

GCaMP imaging

Larva expressing transgenes for VGAT>jGCaMP7f, Otp>jGCaMP8m or VACHT>jGCaMP7f were mounted under coverslips raised with ~80 μ m spacers made with adhesive reinforcement labels (Avery, #5729) on glass slides in filtered seawater at 24–26 hour post fertilization. Larva were held stationary by removing excess water under coverslips. Time series of 1–3 minutes were acquired at a frame rate of 10–15 frames per second with a Leica DM6B fluorescence microscope with a 20X lens at 18C. Single cells were imaged at a frame rate of 3–5 frames per second for 30 seconds.

Larva dissociation and cell imaging

Eggs were co-electroporated with Otp>RFP and VGAT>GCaMP7f expression plasmid. The resulting larvae were screened for those expressing RFP only in BVIN78 (and not in the AMGs) using a fluorescence stereomicroscope. At 26 hours post fertilization, the selected larvae were dissociated to single cells using a modified zebrafish cell dissociation protocol.³⁹ The larvae were placed in 500 μ L dissociation mix (0.25% trypsin and 4 mg/ml collagenase calcium-free artificial seawater). Larvae were pipetted every 30 seconds at 30°C until intact larvae were no longer visible (~5 minutes). To stop the dissociation, 800 μ L of calcium-free seawater was added and the sample was centrifuged for 5 minutes at 700 x g. The cells were washed twice with 1 mL of calcium-free seawater, then resuspended in 20–40 μ L of seawater and settled on a microscope slide under a coverslip for imaging on a LEICA DM6B fluorescence microscope.

Laser Ablation of BVIN78

Wild type eggs were fertilized with sperm from a stable VGAT>Kaede transgenic transgenic line.¹⁴ Following hatching at ~21 hour post-fertilization at 18C, the larvae were selected for VGAT>Kaede expression using a fluorescence stereomicroscope, anesthetized with 100 μ g/mL MS222, and then mounted individually on glass slides under coverslips raised with ~50 μ m spacers strips cut from Nunc aluminum seal tape (ThermoFisher, cat. no. 232698). Using the epifluorescence function of an Olympus Fluoview1000 scanning confocal microscope, Kaede was first photoconverted to red using the UV filter cube. Then, with confocal scanning using the 546 laser and an optical zoom of 10–12x under the 40x oil lens, the cell to be ablated was first identified and a region of interest demarcated. Neuron BVIN78, or an adjacent cell in the forebrain (mock ablation), was selected. The selected cell was then ablated using a 405 nm laser at 95% intensity for 150 seconds. Unablated (control) larvae were treated with MS222 and mounted on slides. Larvae were then recovered from the microscopic slides, placed into a petri dish of seawater to recover from the MS222 for at least 30 minutes, and then assessed for spontaneous swims.

Behavioral Assays

For imaging spontaneous swimming behavior, larvae at 25 hours post-fertilization were placed in an imaging arena consisting of 45 mm X 14 mm circular depression made in 60 mm petri dish of 1% agarose in seawater (*i.e.*, the walls and floor were made of 1% agarose to prevent the larvae from sticking). The depression was filled with seawater containing 0.1% ultra low-melt agarose, which remains liquid but helps prevent the larvae from becoming caught to the air-water interface. The petri dish was placed on a stage and recorded under far-red (700 nm) LED illumination with Hamamatsu ORCA-Flash V4.0 C11440-22CU camera fitted with a Navitar Zoom 7000 lens. Swims were recorded in three-minute capture sessions at 10 frames per second. For imaging phototactic swims, larvae were recorded with a directional 505 nm light, as described previously.^{6,10} Image capture was the same as above, but a larger arena was used for this assay (85 X 10 mm).

QUANTIFICATION AND STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Behavioral assay analysis

Larval swims were analyzed from two different clutches of larvae at 25 hours post fertilization, and three minute recordings of spontaneous swimming were made for each clutch with two to three replicates for each group. Spontaneous swimming was assessed by identifying the starting and stopping frames for each swim bout. This assessment was done using a previously described automated tracker⁶ with added manual annotations. The projected paths of each larva were visualized using the MTrackJ plugin to ImageJ.⁴⁰ Kruskal-Wallis test and Dunn's test were performed to determine the pairwise difference between groups. For box plots, the center line is the median. The lower and upper box limit correspond to the first and third quartiles. The upper and lower whisker extends from the box limit to the largest value no further than 1.5 * IQR from the box limit. Outliers are shown as points.

GCaMP analysis

GCaMP movies were analyzed in ImageJ.⁴¹ After selecting regions of interest (ROIs), fluorescence intensity was measured. The baseline value of fluorescence (F_0) was defined as 20% of the mean fluorescence for each ROI. F_0 was then used to calculate $\Delta F/F_0$ as $(F - F_0)/F_0$.¹⁸ The artifactual drift in $\Delta F/F_0$ over time was removed by taking the residual from a linear model with $\Delta F/F_0$ as the dependent variable and time as the independent variable in R. Autocorrelation and Fourier transform were performed in MATLAB R2023a (<https://www.mathworks.com>) on the residuals to determine the dominant frequencies.⁴² The peaks were

determined by finding the local maxima of $\Delta F/F_0$ using ggpmisc 0.5.2 (<https://github.com/aphalo/ggpmisc>). Kruskal-Wallis test was performed to detect the difference between the 1/peak intervals among the groups. One-tailed Dunn's test was performed *post hoc* to determine the pairwise difference between groups. Holm–Bonferroni method was used for multiple comparison correction. Both tests were performed using rstatix 0.7.2 (<https://rpkgs.datanovia.com/rstatix/>). The groups contain the following number of peaks: A 142, B 87, C 57, D 124, E 71, F 29, G 56, H 30, I 63 and J 12. Data processing was performed with Tidyverse⁴³ in R 4.3.0 (<https://www.R-project.org/>), if not otherwise specified. For box plots, the center line is the median. The lower and upper box limit correspond to the first and third quartiles. The upper and lower whisker extends from the box limit to the largest value no further than $1.5 \times \text{IQR}$ from the box limit. All data points are shown with horizontal jitters.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

An interactive connectome viewer, the *Cionectome* is available at <https://morphonet.org/2Tn9x6ZF>.