# Title: Moisture availability drives widespread regeneration of aspen seedlings following the Cameron Peak Fire, northwestern Colorado

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# Abstract [350 words]

## Background

Changing fire regimes and climate conditions have decreased post-fire conifer regeneration densities in many ecosystems across western North America. In the Southern Rocky Mountains, sparse post-fire regeneration of conifers has often been accompanied with abundant regeneration of quaking aspen, much of which is from vegetative resprouting. While aspen also produce abundant lightweight seed that can disperse great distances, we know considerably less about the patterns and drivers of post-fire establishment of aspen from seed. To understand the potential for severe fire to catalyze shifts to aspen dominated forests, we studied recently burned conifer-dominated forests and asked (1) how does post-fire regeneration of conifers and aspen vary? (2) how are aspen and conifer seedlings distributed within sites? and (3) how do site and microsite conditions influence aspen seedling establishment? To answer these questions, we conducted field surveys at 36 sites within the Cameron Peak Fire burn scar.

## Results

Two years following fire, we found widespread but highly variable establishment of aspen seedlings, despite the absence of aspen in the pre-fire stand. Aspen seedlings often outnumbered conifer seedlings and occurred within the same local neighborhood as conifer seedlings. Site and microsite factors influenced patterns of aspen seedling establishment. Aspen seedlings were more likely to occur at higher elevations, where they were often clustered within concave microsites with bryophyte substrates and near large coarse woody debris.

## Conclusions

# Keywords

aspen, post-fire tree regeneration, seedling, *Populus tremuliodes,* sexual establishment

# Background

Over the past two decades, fires have become more frequent, larger, and more severe across the western United States (the West) ([Parks and Abatzoglou 2020](#ref-parks2020WarmerDrierFire), [Iglesias et al. 2022](#ref-iglesias2022USFiresBecame)), largely due to climate warming ([Abatzoglou and Williams 2016](#Xb2c9e850c0ec1283a06a871949844aa875af530)), more frequent human ignitions ([Balch et al. 2017](#ref-balch2017HumanstartedWildfiresExpand)), and past land management practices ([Allen et al. 2002](#X38019930a7963793e8077c52e50c6cb3b6ad2bd)). Not only is fire activity changing, numerous studies across the West have shown low post-fire regeneration densities, and even complete regeneration failure, is increasingly common ([Stevens-Rumann and Morgan 2019](#X621eff21b20d26397ca583d3c14a7b6bd8eb0d1), [Coop et al. 2020](#X11a688d84acc973314350de60810e0a8ca4666e)). Low post-fire regeneration has largely been attributed to increased fire behavior and severity. However, the effects of changing fire regimes and climate on post-fire recovery are mediated by species-specific traits that drive seed production, germination, and seedling survival and growth, as well as biotic interactions in early seral communities Davis et al. ([2023](#ref-davis2023ReducedFireSeverity)). Understanding the complexity of these ecological relationships is not only a central challenge for fire ecology but also has huge implications for society.

There are three primary mechanisms that drive post-fire tree regeneration: vegetative resprouting, germination of seed from live tree residuals or the unburned forest, or germination of seeds from canopy seed banks. Notably, species may rely upon several of these strategies and the importance of each strategy may vary across populations. For example, lodgepole pine (*Pinus contorta*) produces both serotinous cones, which remain closed until heated and provide a post-fire canopy seedbank, and non-serotinous cones ([Lotan 1976](#ref-lotan1976ConeSerotinyFire)). Serotinous cones are often more common on older trees and at lower elevations, which both are associated with an increased risk of wildfire ([Tinker et al. 1994](#X239825c1c3562b1363a066a13149f586b29875f), [Schoennagel et al. 2003](#ref-schoennagel2003InfluenceFireInterval)). Because an individual’s regeneration traits in part reflect the system’s history of wildfire, changes in disturbances regimes may compromise regeneration mechanisms and trigger shifts in forest structure and composition ([Johnstone et al. 2010](#ref-johnstone2010ChangesFireRegime)).

In forests of western North America, sparse post-fire regeneration of conifers has often been accompanied with abundant regeneration of quaking aspen Andrus et al. ([2021](#ref-andrus2021FutureDominanceQuaking)). Unlike most conifers in these systems, which rely upon germination of seed from live trees or from canopy seed banks, aspen is capable of resprouting vegetatively from root systems that survive fire ([Baker 1925](#ref-baker1925AspenCentralRocky)). While aspen often resprout vigorously following fire, quaking aspen also produce abundant lightweight seed that can facilitate shifts from conifer to aspen dominated forests in areas that lack aspen in the pre-fire stand ([Turner et al. 2003](#ref-turner2003PostfireAspenSeedling), [Johnstone et al. 2010](#ref-johnstone2010ChangesFireRegime)). Notably, the ensuing changes in plant-soil feedbacks, which lead to fuel complexes that promote low severity fire, along with continued vegetative regeneration of aspen can promote the persistence of an aspen-dominated community ([Johnstone et al. 2020](#ref-johnstone2020FactorsShapingAlternate), [Walker et al. 2023](#ref-walker2023ShiftsEcologicalLegacies)). While aspen seedling establishment is common across Canada, Alaska, and the Great Lakes and Northeast regions of the United States, across the western United States asexual reproduction from root suckering is understood to be far more common ([Landhäusser et al. 2019](#Xbbcc5e66aa8cf65dff2ed6af463e6939df30e2a)), likely due to trade-offs in growth, defense, and reproduction ([Mock et al. 2012](#ref-mock2012WidespreadTriploidyWestern), [DeRose et al. 2015](#ref-derose2015CytotypeDifferencesRadial), [2022](#ref-derose2022PolyploidyGrowthDefense)). Understanding the factors that drive aspen seedling establishment is central to predicting where fires may catalyze shifts from conifer to aspen dominance ([Gill et al. 2017b](#ref-gill2017PopulusTremuloidesSeedling), [Kreider and Yocom 2021a](#ref-kreider2021LowdensityAspenSeedling)).

The potential for aspen to colonize new areas through aspen seedling recruitment depends on several factors. Aspen produce abundant light-weight seeds that can be transported several kilometers by strong winds ([Turner et al. 2003](#ref-turner2003PostfireAspenSeedling), [Landhäusser et al. 2019](#Xbbcc5e66aa8cf65dff2ed6af463e6939df30e2a)), nonetheless most seedling establishment occurs near live adult trees ([Gill et al. 2017b](#ref-gill2017PopulusTremuloidesSeedling), [Kreider and Yocom 2021b](#Xb37a08252af320b6a65b3f38a24c3f3726e41e1)). Given seed arrives, successful germination occurs on moist substrates, which are often located within microdepressions where water collects or near coarse woody debris that provides shade ([Kreider and Yocom 2021b](#Xb37a08252af320b6a65b3f38a24c3f3726e41e1), [Carter et al. 2024](#X518c5e11f1226b7f0686c896ea7fda75925f525)). In addition to adequate soil moisture, germinants require partial or direct sunlight to survive because aspen seeds lack an endosperm ([Landhäusser et al. 2019](#Xbbcc5e66aa8cf65dff2ed6af463e6939df30e2a)). Thus seedling establishment is far more likely to occur at sites that were recently burned or harvested, where competition for light is limited ([McIlroy and Shinneman 2020](#ref-mcilroy2020PostfireAspenPopulus)). While the root systems of young seedlings are developing and capable of accessing water close to the soil surface they are highly vulnerable to drought ([Landhäusser et al. 2019](#Xbbcc5e66aa8cf65dff2ed6af463e6939df30e2a)). Finally, recruitment into the canopy is often limited by herbivory because aspen are a favored food of many ungulates, and continued browsing can severely limit aspen height growth ([Romme et al. 1995](#ref-romme1995AspenElkFire), [Ripple and Larsen 2000](#ref-ripple2000HistoricAspenRecruitment)). While these filters are generally well understood, more research is necessary to understand when and where aspen seedling establishment will result in mature aspen forest ([Gill et al. 2017a](#X20c3490eb62bbd0e5e5969f3850fe7d9843e3d5)).

Within conifer-dominated forests that burn at high-moderate severity during the Cameron Peak Fire, we asked (1) how does post-fire regeneration of conifers and aspen vary? (2) how are aspen and conifer seedlings distributed within sites? and (3) how do site and microsite conditions influence aspen seedling establishment? For question 1, we hypothesized that tree regeneration patterns would be driven by regeneration traits. Specifically, we expected that regeneration of most conifers would be limited two years following fire, but lodgepole pine seedlings would be relatively abundant in stands where it was present pre-fire due to the species’ capacity to produce serotinous cones. We also expected that aspen seedlings would be widespread, but at relatively low densities due to the species’ capacity to produce abundant light-weight seeds. For question 2, we hypothesized that both aspen and conifer seedlings would be spatially clustered within plots with seedling establishment, due to local variation in microclimate, soils, and seed availability. For question 3, we hypothesized that aspen seedlings would be more likely to occur at high elevations, cooler and wetter aspects, with high conifer seedling densities Within sites with aspen seedlings. At the local scale, we hypothesized that microsite features associated with increased moisture availability, including the presence of CWD, concave topography, and substrates with high proportions of bryophyte cover.

# Methods

## Study area

We surveyed aspen seedling regeneration across upper montane and subalpine forests that burned in the Cameron Peak Fire located in northern central Colorado (Fig. ). Over the period from August to December 2020, the fire burned across 845 square kilometers ([MTBS Project 2024a](#ref-mtbsproject2024MTBSDataAccessa)). Approximately 61% of the fire burned at moderate to high severity ([MTBS Project 2024b](#ref-mtbsproject2024MTBSDataAccess)), including a wide gradient of elevation ranging from about 1636 to 3544 meters above sea level. Generally, winters are cold (1991-2020 mean January daily minimum temperature: -11°C) and summers are hot (1991-2020 mean July daily maximum temperature: 23.5°C), but across this elevation gradient there is considerable variation in climate. Mean annual temperatures range from -1.4 to 9.3°C and mean annual precipitation ranges from 361 to 1145 mm [1991-2020 means; PRISM Climate Group ([2021](#Xc6a61ae9e57c85d16f010348d89f94dac75b6d1))]).

![](data:application/octet-stream;base64,)

**Figure** **:** The study area, study sites (triangles), and the distribution of live and burned aspen. The inset map displays the study area relative to western United States.

Pre-fire forest composition and structure within the Cameron Peak burn scar also varied with elevation. Lower elevation zones below 2800 m were characterized by dry and mesic montane forests, dominated by ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa*), with lesser components of Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*). Moderate and higher elevation stands between approximately 2800 – 3300 m were made up of subalpine forest, dominated by Engelmann spruce (*Picea engelmannii*), subalpine fir (*Abies lasiocarpa*), and lodgepole pine (*Pinus contorta*). In the two decades prior to the fire, outbreaks of mountain pine beetles (*Dendroctonus ponderosae*), spruce beetles (*Dendroctonus rufipennis)*, and western balsam bark beetles have caused mortality of pine, Engelmann spruce, and subalpine fir, respectively, across about 40% of the burned area ([Rodman et al. 2021](#ref-rodman2021EffectsBarkBeetle)). Only about 3% of the area burned was dominated by aspen prior to fire, most (~80%) of which occurred between 2236 and 2873 m in elevation. About 37% of the aspen forest burned at high severity.

## Study sites

We surveyed 34 sites in the summer of 2022 (Fig. ). Sites were randomly located using geospatial data describing the extent and severity of the Cameron Peak fire from the Monitoring Trends in Burn Severity (MTBS) Project ([2024b](#ref-mtbsproject2024MTBSDataAccess), [2024a](#ref-mtbsproject2024MTBSDataAccessa)) and the extent of pre-fire aspen cover from Cook et al. ([2024](#ref-cook2024MappingQuakingAspen)). We combined these data sources to identify areas that: (a) burned at high or moderate severity and (b) were located >50 m and <1000 m away from a pre-fire patch of aspen. Sites were further limited to accessible areas, defined as public land within 1000 m of a road or 500 m away from a trail and no more than 1 km up the trail. To reduce the potential effects of psuedoreplication, all sites were located >400 meters apart. Despite the extensive area burned, the accessible area was notably restricted by a limited road network and post-fire treatments (e.g., aerial mulching) and damage to infrastructure. Collectively, these sites span broad gradients in elevation (2462 - 3255 m), mean annual daily temperature (-0.2 - 5.6°C), and mean annual total precipitation (431 - 1069 mm) (Table S).

## Field data collection

At each site, we recorded the coordinates, elevation, slope, aspect, and pre-fire tree-species composition. We then established two perpendicular 2 x 50 m transects that intersected at the midpoint ([Andrus et al. 2021](#ref-andrus2021FutureDominanceQuaking)). We tallied the presence of all conifer seedlings, aspen seedlings, and aspen root suckers within each transect and recorded their location along the transect within 2 x 2m subplots. Aspen seedlings were differentiated from root suckers using methods outlined by Kreider et al. ([2020](#X44bfc23e7c771928f103170a5120f8dbe5a4826)), which have been demonstrated to be more than 95% accurate ([Kreider and Yocom 2021a](#ref-kreider2021LowdensityAspenSeedling)) and were shown to be effective in our study area ([Carter et al. 2024](#X518c5e11f1226b7f0686c896ea7fda75925f525)). Along each transect, we also collected information on percent herbaceous cover in three 1 x 1 m quadrats located every 20 m along each transect.

To test the hypothesis that microsite conditions influence aspen seedling, we additionally recorded information on proximity to coarse woody debris, substrate conditions, and microtopographic condition for each aspen seedling. We characterized the microtopography as flat, concave, or convex within 2.5 cm of seedling (hereafter ‘small microtopography’) and within 50 cm of seedling (hereafter ‘large microtopography’). We also recorded the presence or absence of small (diameter = 2.5-10 cm) and large (diameter >10 cm) coarse woody debris (CWD) within 10 cm of seedling. We also collected microsite conditions at 5 meter intervals along each transect to serve as a baseline of the relative abundance each condition across the site.

## Data analysis

### Patterns of post-fire regeneration

To understand how pre-fire forest composition affects initial species composition, we quantified the number of plots where each species was present pre- and post-fire.

### Clustering of seedlings

We tested if seedlings were clustered using a Chi-squared goodness-of-fit-test where the null hypothesis was complete spatial randomness (i.e., that seedlings were equally distributed across the subplots). Because clustering is difficult to detect at low densities, we only tested for clustering of seedlings in plots with at least 1000 seedlings per ha (i.e., or on average 2 seedlings per subplot). To quantify statistical significance, we used a bootstrapping approach with 1000 replications. We performed this analysis separately for each plot and tested for spatial randomness for the aspen seedlings and then for all conifer seedlings combined. We also tested if conifer and aspen seedlings were more likely to co-occur at each plot, using a Chi-squared goodness-of-fit-test where the null hypothesis was that conifer seedlings were equally likely to occur in subplots with and without aspen seedlings. As above, we performed this analysis separately for each site and used a bootstrapping approach with 1000 replication to determine the statistical significance. All tests were performed in R ([R Core Team 2024](#X4bd034c52731e178b4de125c2c778bdc533803c)).

### Site-level drivers of post-fire aspen seedling regeneration

To understand the site factors affecting postfire aspen seedling establishment, we used a zero-inflated generalized linear modeling approach with a negative binomial distribution (ZINB) to model the total number of seedlings observed at a site. Zero-inflated models are useful for modeling an abundance of zeros ([Zuur et al. 2009](#ref-zuur2009Chapter11ZeroTruncated)), such as the high number plots without postfire aspen seedlings that we observed here. As predictor variables we tested elevation and heat load, which we calculated using plot-level information on slope, aspect, and latitude ([McCune and Keon 2002](#ref-mccune2002EquationsPotentialAnnual)). As an indicator of seed availability, we included distance to live aspen. Finally, as indicators of site quality and competition, we tested for effects of herbaceous cover and conifer seeding density, which was log transformed to the align with the log transformation applied to the aspen seedling densities. Prior to building the model, all variables were standardized to allow for easier comparison of coefficients. We trimmed the full model by dropping each predictor variable individually and using likelihood ratio tests to compare the full model with the reduced model ([Zuur et al. 2009](#ref-zuur2009Chapter11ZeroTruncated)). Variables were trimmed first from the zero part of the model and then the count component. As a measure of model performance, we calculated a pseudo R2, defined as the squared correlation between the model’s actual and predicted response. To visualize the effects of each significant predictor variables, we calculated the conditional predicted aspen seedling density as a function of the predictor, holding all other predictor variables to their mean value. The ZINB models were fit n R ([R Core Team 2024](#X4bd034c52731e178b4de125c2c778bdc533803c)) using the *glmmTMB* package ([Brooks et al. 2017](#ref-glmmTMB)), likelihood ratio tests were performed using the *lmtest* package ([Zeileis and Hothorn 2002](#ref-lmtest)), pseudo R2 was calculated using the *performance* package ([Lüdecke et al. 2021](#ref-performance)), and conditional predictions were constructed using the *marginaleffects* package ([Arel-Bundock et al. 2024](#ref-marginaleffects)) and plotted using the *ggplot2* package ([Wickham 2016](#ref-ggplot2)).

### Microsite drivers of aspen seedling establishment

To understand if aspen seedlings preferentially established in different microsite conditions, we followed the approach outlined by Kreider and Yocom ([2021b](#Xb37a08252af320b6a65b3f38a24c3f3726e41e1)). Briefly, we first modeled the probability that aspen seedlings occur in each category of the predictor variable using a mixed effect multinomial logistic regression that included a random intercept term of site identity. We then modeled the probability that systematically surveyed points occurred in each category of the variable, also using a using a mixed effect multinomial logistic regression that included a random intercept term of site identity. We used these two models to quantify microsite preference following methods outlined by Krieder and Yocom ([2021b](#Xb37a08252af320b6a65b3f38a24c3f3726e41e1)), where:

and *P(occurrence)* is the probability of seedling occurring in a given microsite condition and *P(availability*) is the probability of a given microsite condition is available. Here, preference values greater than zero indicate seedlings established in that microsite condition more often than expected based on the systematic sample. Multinomial regression was performed in R ([R Core Team 2024](#X4bd034c52731e178b4de125c2c778bdc533803c)) using the *mclogit* package ([Elff 2023](#ref-mclogit)).

# Results

## Post-fire seedling establishment within the Cameron Peak Fire

Across sites that were dominated by conifers prior to fire and then severely burned, we found limited seedling regeneration two years following fire (Table ). Aspen seedlings were present at 62% of plots, with a mean density of 1155 seedlings per hectare. Conifer seedlings were present at a similar proportion of sites (59% of plots), but at a lower density on average when present (Table ).

**Table** **:** Post-fire seedling density for plots with seedlings present.

| species | n | mean | median | min | max |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| subalpine fir | 1 | 150 | 150 | 150 | 150 |
| lodgepole pine | 16 | 384 | 250 | 50 | 1,350 |
| Engelmann spruce | 3 | 200 | 150 | 50 | 400 |
| ponderosa pine | 3 | 133 | 100 | 50 | 250 |
| quaking aspen | 21 | 1,155 | 300 | 50 | 7,850 |

Generally, the conifer species present in the post-fire community reflected the pre-fire community. Lodgepole pine seedlings were present at 55.6% of sites were lodgepole was present prior to fire (Fig. ). In contrast, Engelmann spruce and subalpine fir seedlings were only present at 9.5% and 4.8% of sites where they occurred prior to fire. Ponderosa pine occurred at 42.9% of sites and Douglas fir seedlings were entirely absent post-fire; however, the sample size for both species was small (nponderosa pine=7 sites; nDouglas fir=2 sites). Post-fire seedlings of lodgepole pine and Engelmann spruce were both observed at one plot where they were absent in the pre-fire community (Fig. ).

![](data:application/octet-stream;base64,)

**Figure** **:** Patterns of post-fire species presence by pre-fire species presence.

## Clustering

Within plots with aspen seedlings, on average 12.1% of the fifty 2 x 2 m subplots contained aspen seedlings (mean=6 subplots; range=1 - 30 subplots). About 56% of aspen seedlings occurred in subplots with another aspen seedling, with densities ranging from 0.25 to 6.5 seedlings per square meter (mean=0.95 seedlings per square meter). Across the 6 sites with at least 1,000 aspen seedlings per hectare, aspen seedlings were significantly (p<0.05) clustered at all sites (Table S).

Within plots with conifer seedlings, on average only 9.2% of the fifty 2 x 2 m subplots contained seedlings (mean=4.6 subplots; range=1 - 21 subplots). About 33% of conifer seedlings occurred in subplots with another conifer seedling and densities for subplots with conifer seedlings varied between 0.25 to 2 seedlings per square meter (mean=0.4 seedlings per square meter). We found multiple ponderosa pine seedlings in 17% of subplots with ponderosa pine seedlings, multiple lodgepole pine in 32% of subplots with lodgepole pine seedlings, multiple Engelmann spruce in 20% of subplots with Engelmann spruce, and multiple subalpine fir in 50% of subplots with subalpine fir. Across the 2 sites with at least 1,000 conifer seedlings per hectare, conifer seedlings were significantly (p<0.05) clustered at all sites (Table S). Sites with at least 1,000 conifer seedlings per hectare were dominated by lodgepole pine, however at one of these sites we observed lodgepole and Engelmann spruce co-occurring in three of the seven subplots where spruce was present.

We also found that conifer seedlings were significantly (p<0.05) more likely to occur in subplots with aspen than expected by complete spatial randomness (Table S). However, only two sites had sufficient densities of both aspen and conifer seedlings to test this hypothesis. At these sites we found most (67 - 89%) of the subplots with conifer seedlings also had aspen seedlings. Most of this co-occurrence included lodgepole pine; 21 out of 26 subplots had both lodgepole pine and aspen seedlings. However, Engelmann spruce co-occurred with aspen seedlings in three of the seven subplots where spruce seedlings were present.

## Site-level drivers of post-fire aspen seedling density

Site-level variability in bioclimatic conditions influenced the density of aspen seedlings observed two-years following the Cameron Peak fire. Our model of aspen seedling density explained a moderate amount of the variation (pseudo R2= 0.42) and correctly predicted 95% of the sites where aspen seedlings were observed (20 of the 21 sites with aspen seedlings), but only 31 % of the absences (4 of the 13 sites without aspen seedlings). In the zero component of the model, only elevation was the only significant predictor (Table ). Plots without aspen seedlings occurred at lower elevations (standardized β = -0.79; standard error = 0.4; Fig. ). In the count component of the model, elevation and the density of conifer seedlings were significantly related to aspen seedling density (p<0.05; Table ). Fig. B-D). Density increased with elevation (standardized β = 0.73; standard error = 0.25; Fig. B). Aspen seedling density also increased with the natural log of conifer seedling density (standardized β = 1.16; standard error = 0.23; Fig. C).

**Table** **:** Summary of zero-inflated negative binomial model selection results for absence (zero model) and abundance (count model) of post fire aspen stems. χ2 test statistics and p-values are from likelihood ratio tests comparison the full model to a reduced model where the focal predictor is dropped. AIC values are for the reduced model (i.e., higher AIC indicates removing this variable reduces model fit).

| Component | Predictor | AIC | χ2 | p |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Zero | Elevation | 379.6 | 4.96 | 0.026 |
| Zero | Heat load | 375.3 | 0.69 | 0.405 |
| Zero | Herbaceous cover | 375.5 | 0.94 | 0.332 |
| Zero | Conifer seedling density | 374.6 | 0.01 | 0.913 |
| Zero | Seed-source distance | 374.7 | 0.07 | 0.784 |
| Count | Elevation | 374.7 | 6.62 | 0.010 |
| Count | Heat load | 368.5 | 0.46 | 0.500 |
| Count | Herbaceous cover | 369.4 | 1.35 | 0.246 |
| Count | Conifer seedling density | 375.8 | 7.79 | 0.005 |
| Count | Seed-source distance | 368.2 | 0.19 | 0.663 |

![](data:application/octet-stream;base64,)

**Figure** **:** The predicted effects of elevation (A-B) and conifer seedling density (C) on patterns of aspen seedling density across the Cameron Peak fire. In all panels, the shading illustrates the 95% confidence interval.

## Microsite drivers of post-fire aspen seedling establishment

Within sites with aspen seedlings, we found microsite conditions were important predictors of aspen seedling establishment (Fig. ). Notably, aspen seedlings were about 21.5 times more likely to occur on bryophytes than any other substrate type. Seedlings also preferentially established in large and small concavities, with preferences of 13.9 and 6.5, respectively. Finally, aspen seedlings were more likely to establish in microsites near large CWD than microsites with small CWD, small and large CWD, or no CWD (preference for large CWD = 4.1)

![](data:application/octet-stream;base64,)

**Figure** **:** Aspen seedlings preferentially establish within certain microsites conditions. (A) Positive (black) and negative (blue) modeled aspen seedling microsite preferences. (B) Modeled probabilities of seedling occurrence in a given microsite condition (green) and the probability a given microsite condition is available (dark gray). In both A and B, error bars illustrate one standard error. Note that the y-axis in the substrate panel in part A is broken to better show the data.

# Discussion

Here we found widespread, but highly variable establishment of aspen seedlings across conifer forests that burned at high severity during the Cameron Peak Fire, despite the absence of aspen in the pre-fire stand. Aspen seedlings were more likely to occur at higher elevations, where they were often clustered within concave microsites, on bryophyte substrates, and near large coarse woody debris. Collectively, this adds to the support for the idea that cooler and wetter climate conditions promote aspen seedling establishment in recently burned ecosystems ([Quinn and Wu 2001](#ref-quinn2001QuakingAspenReproduce), [Buma and Wessman 2012](#ref-buma2012DifferentialSpeciesResponses), [Kreider and Yocom 2021a](#ref-kreider2021LowdensityAspenSeedling), [2021b](#Xb37a08252af320b6a65b3f38a24c3f3726e41e1)). We also found aspen seedlings were more likely to occur at sites with greater post-fire conifer seedling densities, consistent with previous research which has highlighted the potential for aspen to expand into recently burned conifer forests and shape the dynamics of burned ecosystems ([Gill et al. 2017b](#ref-gill2017PopulusTremuloidesSeedling), [Nigro et al. 2022](#ref-nigro2022WildfireCatalyzesUpward)).

## Distribution and abundance of aspen and conifer seedlings

Across the Cameron Peak fire, we found aspen seedlings at 62% of sites surveyed. This occupancy rate is similar to the highest fire-level occupancy rates reported by Kreider and Yocom ([2021a](#ref-kreider2021LowdensityAspenSeedling)), who sampled 15 fires spanning a latitudinal gradient from northern Arizona to northern Wyoming. Across these plots they reported aspen seedlings in only 13% of plots, with occupancy rate for individual fires events varying from 0 to 61% ([Kreider and Yocom 2021a](#ref-kreider2021LowdensityAspenSeedling)). In the case of the Cameron Peak fire, the high occupancy rates may be attributed to our sampling design, which included a larger area than Kreider and Yocom ([2021a](#ref-kreider2021LowdensityAspenSeedling)) and excluded areas that burned at low or moderate severity, where seedling establishment is less likely ([Turner et al. 2003](#ref-turner2003PostfireAspenSeedling)). The high occupancy rates may also reflect characteristics of the burned landscape (e.g., elevation) and weather conditions following the fire event.

In plots with aspen seedlings, our median density of 300 seedlings ha-1 and maximum density of 7850 seedlings ha-1 is comparable to median (range: 100-900; median across fires: 100 seedlings per ha-1) and maximum (range: 100-9700; median across fires: 150 seedlings ha-1) densities for the 15 fires surveyed by Kreider and Yocom ([2021a](#ref-kreider2021LowdensityAspenSeedling)). However, post-fire establishment of aspen from seed can be extremely abundant. For example, following the 2017 Brian Head and the 1998 Yellowstone fires aspen seedling densities exceeded 150,000 seedlings ha-1 ([Kaye et al. 2003](#ref-kaye2003AspenStructureVariability), [Kreider and Yocom 2021b](#Xb37a08252af320b6a65b3f38a24c3f3726e41e1)), respectively. Such dense post-fire establishment of aspen can have important implications for post-fire vegetation trajectories and rates. Yet, within the Cameron Peak fire only 38% (n= 8) of the plots with aspen seedlings surveyed here would meet local USFS requirements for restocking [741 seedlings per ha-1; USFS ([1997](#ref-usfs19971997REVISIONLAND))], and thus may have more limited effects on the post-fire ecology of this system.

Two years following fire, we found relatively low regeneration of subalpine fir and Engelmann spruce, and to a lesser extent ponderosa pine and lodgepole pine despite their presence in the pre-fire community. These low densities may have been due to post-fire weather conditions, which have emerged as important constraints on post-fire germination and initial survival of conifer seedlings in recent decades ([Stevens-Rumann and Morgan 2019](#X621eff21b20d26397ca583d3c14a7b6bd8eb0d1)). Additionally, viable seed may have been limited by pre-fire outbreaks of bark beetles ([Andrus et al. 2021](#ref-andrus2021FutureDominanceQuaking), [Rhoades et al. 2022](#ref-rhoades2022LimitedSeedViability)), which caused widespread and severe mortality across the study area in the beginning of the 21st century ([Rodman et al. 2021](#ref-rodman2021EffectsBarkBeetle)). While infilling of burned areas with conifers seedlings can continue for decades following the fire, seedling densities two-years following fire are often good predictors of recruitment failure in conifer forests across the West ([Stevens-Rumann et al. 2018](#X59b7f55b19137c4c2a7bc304c3b5f88b9e0cece)). Thus in the absence of human intervention, conifers may remain limited across the system.

While aspen seedling regeneration was not incredibly abundant across the Cameron Peak burn scar, densities of aspen seedlings often exceeded densities of conifer seedlings. Here we found aspen seedlings were present at 60% of the sites with conifer seedlings and outnumbered conifer seedlings at 83% of these sites. Further aspen seedlings and conifer seedlings were more commonly found clustered together within a site than expected by complete spatial randomness, highlighting shared environmental conditions suitable for regeneration. The co-occurrence of aspen and conifer seedlings both across and within sites suggests that rates and trajectories of post-fire recovery may be shaped by competition between aspen and conifers.

## Drivers of aspen seedling establishment

Across our study sites, aspen seedling occurrence and density increased with elevation. Higher elevations are characterized by cooler summers and greater winter snowpack accumulation and retention, which lower moisture stress. Low elevation sites, in addition to already being at the lower bounds of aspen habitat suitability ([Rehfeldt et al. 2009](#ref-rehfeldt2009AspenClimateSudden)), were also characterized by greater herbaceous cover, which may both out compete aspen seedlings and occupy the substrate preferred by seedlings ([Kreider and Yocom 2021a](#ref-kreider2021LowdensityAspenSeedling)). Nonetheless, we observed aspen seedlings as low as 2462 m, where annual precipitation averages 463 mm and mean daily temperature averages 5.6°C. In comparison, Kreider and Yocom ([2021a](#ref-kreider2021LowdensityAspenSeedling)) reported post-fire aspen seedling establishment was unlikely where average annual precipitation values were less than 750 mm on average. Yet here we found 62 % of sites with aspen seedlings normally received less than 750 mm precipitation annually. At these sites, microsite conditions controlling soil moisture maybe particularly important in controlling aspen regeneration.

Contrary to previous research which clearly shows that aspen seedlings density is greater when live aspen trees are nearby ([Kreider and Yocom 2021a](#ref-kreider2021LowdensityAspenSeedling), [2021b](#Xb37a08252af320b6a65b3f38a24c3f3726e41e1)), our modeling did not support this expectation. This may because across the Cameron Peak fire, the distance from live aspen generally increased with elevation, largely because aspen were more common at lower elevations prior to the fire and fire severity increased with elevation (Fig. S.). As result, sites with higher climatic suitability were typically at a greater distance from live seed sources. Such mismatches between landscape-patterns of climatic suitability and seed availability may limit the potential for aspen to expand into new habitats.

At the microsite scale, seedling occurrence was related to the bryophyte cover, the presence of coarse woody debris and concave microtopography, which may have connections to the accumulation and retention of seeds, moisture, and nutrients ([Fairweather et al. 2014](#Xa8aa2d86741ffb0df0f55debfdff8f830c78d37), [Kreider and Yocom 2021b](#Xb37a08252af320b6a65b3f38a24c3f3726e41e1)). Fallen logs or other large debris and local concavities may serve to collect both seeds and moisture necessary for successful establishment and survival in the first 1-3 growing seasons ([Fairweather et al. 2014](#Xa8aa2d86741ffb0df0f55debfdff8f830c78d37)). Importantly, microsite conditions favorable to aspen establishment were not evenly distributed across the fire. For example, we identified bryophytes as the dominant substrate at 1% of random samples, while we found 46% of aspen seedlings had established on bryophytes. Understanding how suitable microsites are distributed across landscapes will be central to predicting post-fire regeneration of aspen and understanding how forest change following wildfire.

# Conclusions

# **List of abbreviations**

# Declarations

## Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable

## Consent for publication

Not applicable

## Availability of data and material

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available in Dryad Research Data Repository, link (REF)

## Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

## Funding

## Authors’ contributions

**SVC**: conceptualization (equal); methodology (equal); data collection (lead); methods (supporting); writing - original draft (equal), writing - review and editing (equal); **SJH**: conceptualization (equal); methodology (equal); data collection (supporting); methods (lead); writing - original draft (equal), writing - review and editing (equal). All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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# Supplementary Material

**Table S** **:** Characteristics of study sites sampled within the Cameron Peak Fire. Annual precipitation and temperature values are 1991-2010 normals from PRISM (2021)

| Site | Latitude (°N) | Longitude (°W) | Elevation (m) | Mean annual temperature (°C) | Mean annual precipitation (mm) | Distance to live aspen (m) | Aspen seedling density (no. per ha) | Conifer seedling density (no. per ha) |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 10 | 40.588 | -105.856 | 2,898 | 1.8 | 584 | 210 | 0 | 250 |
| 11 | 40.593 | -105.861 | 2,901 | 1.8 | 584 | 783 | 100 | 0 |
| 12 | 40.590 | -105.859 | 2,926 | 1.8 | 584 | 390 | 150 | 0 |
| 13 | 40.564 | -105.876 | 3,051 | 1.3 | 820 | 114 | 0 | 50 |
| 14 | 40.560 | -105.874 | 3,040 | 1.2 | 867 | 141 | 50 | 0 |
| 15 | 40.566 | -105.868 | 3,025 | 1.3 | 761 | 331 | 0 | 0 |
| 16 | 40.564 | -105.867 | 3,012 | 1.3 | 761 | 228 | 0 | 0 |
| 17 | 40.646 | -105.866 | 2,715 | 2.8 | 546 | 104 | 50 | 0 |
| 18 | 40.642 | -105.862 | 2,739 | 2.6 | 488 | 260 | 0 | 50 |
| 19 | 40.637 | -105.861 | 2,751 | 2.4 | 502 | 158 | 100 | 0 |
| 2 | 40.616 | -105.530 | 2,519 | 5.1 | 459 | 349 | 0 | 250 |
| 20 | 40.578 | -105.863 | 2,959 | 1.4 | 723 | 461 | 3,000 | 50 |
| 21 | 40.562 | -105.829 | 3,029 | 1.3 | 804 | 361 | 400 | 300 |
| 22 | 40.548 | -105.886 | 3,206 | 0.6 | 1,000 | 192 | 50 | 0 |
| 23 | 40.549 | -105.890 | 3,259 | -0.2 | 1,069 | 156 | 1,450 | 0 |
| 24 | 40.546 | -105.890 | 3,199 | -0.2 | 1,069 | 156 | 100 | 0 |
| 25 | 40.562 | -105.810 | 3,068 | 1.3 | 712 | 808 | 3,050 | 1,300 |
| 26 | 40.562 | -105.813 | 3,099 | 1.3 | 762 | 660 | 800 | 500 |
| 27 | 40.562 | -105.816 | 3,090 | 1.3 | 762 | 594 | 800 | 250 |
| 29 | 40.612 | -105.541 | 2,599 | 5.1 | 458 | 436 | 0 | 100 |
| 3 | 40.616 | -105.534 | 2,546 | 5.1 | 459 | 358 | 0 | 0 |
| 30 | 40.615 | -105.526 | 2,462 | 5.6 | 463 | 132 | 100 | 50 |
| 31 | 40.724 | -105.584 | 2,574 | 4.9 | 431 | 190 | 0 | 0 |
| 32 | 40.722 | -105.582 | 2,611 | 4.9 | 431 | 379 | 0 | 0 |
| 34 | 40.522 | -105.774 | 3,106 | 0.6 | 786 | 851 | 1,500 | 150 |
| 35 | 40.522 | -105.772 | 3,093 | 0.6 | 786 | 869 | 400 | 0 |
| 37 | 40.523 | -105.781 | 3,119 | 0.6 | 804 | 1,097 | 0 | 150 |
| 38 | 40.524 | -105.777 | 3,154 | 0.6 | 786 | 1,107 | 7,850 | 1,750 |
| 4 | 40.596 | -105.856 | 2,850 | 1.8 | 584 | 721 | 0 | 650 |
| 5 | 40.595 | -105.855 | 2,825 | 1.8 | 584 | 605 | 50 | 450 |
| 6 | 40.594 | -105.855 | 2,835 | 1.8 | 584 | 541 | 300 | 250 |
| 7 | 40.645 | -105.862 | 2,710 | 2.6 | 488 | 201 | 3,800 | 450 |
| 8 | 40.643 | -105.864 | 2,724 | 2.8 | 546 | 63 | 150 | 250 |
| 9 | 40.589 | -105.854 | 2,865 | 1.8 | 584 | 348 | 0 | 50 |

**Table S** **:** Summary of tests of complete spatial randomness for aspen seedlings.

| Site | density (no. per ha) | χ2 | p |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 7 | 3,800 | 601.6 | 0.001 |
| 20 | 3,000 | 586.7 | 0.001 |
| 23 | 1,450 | 441.7 | 0.001 |
| 25 | 3,050 | 502.1 | 0.001 |
| 34 | 1,500 | 86.7 | 0.003 |
| 38 | 7,850 | 237.6 | 0.001 |

**Table S** **:** Summary of tests of complete spatial randomness for conifer seedlings.

| Site | density (no. per ha) | χ2 | p |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 25 | 1,300 | 231.7 | 0.001 |
| 38 | 1,750 | 83.6 | 0.002 |

**Table S** **:** Summary of tests of independence of aspen and conifer seedlings.

| Site | conifer density (no. per ha) | aspen density (no. per ha) | χ2 | p |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 25 | 1,300 | 3,050 | 22.15 | 0.001 |
| 38 | 1,750 | 7,850 | 4.83 | 0.039 |

![](data:application/octet-stream;base64,)

**Figure S****:** Residual diagnostic plots from the zero-inflated negative binomial model of aspen seedling density. Plots were generated using the DHARMa package (Hartig 2024)

![](data:application/octet-stream;base64,)

**Figure S****:** Plots of the simulated residuals from the zero-inflated negative binomial model of aspen seedling density as a function of elevation (left) and conifer seedling density (right). Plots were generated using the DHARMa package (Hartig 2024)

![](data:application/octet-stream;base64,)

**Figure S****:** The relationship between elevation and aspen’s distribution across the area burned in the Cameron Peak Fire. A) Boxplots comparing the elevation range of areas with and without aspen prior to the fire. B) Boxplots comparing the elevation by fire severity. C) The density of observations for areas that burned in the Cameron Peak fire that were greater than 50 m from live aspen and less than 1000 km from live aspen prior to the fire by elevation and distance to seed source.