

Demographic consequences of partner diversity and turnover in a multi-species ant-plant mutualism

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Abstract

Mutualisms commonly involve multiple partner species but the ecological consequences of partner
3 diversity remain poorly understood. Partner diversity may benefit a focal mutualist through mechanisms that mirror positive effects of species diversity on ecosystem function, such as sampling effect, complementarity or portfolio effect. In sequential mutualisms, partner identity can change
6 over time due to environmental variability or competitive displacement. Here we asked: how do partner diversity and turnover influence host demography and long-term fitness, and which mechanisms explain these effects? We studied the sequential multi-species food-for-protection mutualism
9 involving an EFN-bearing plant (tree cholla cactus *Cylindropuntia imbricata*) and multiple species of nectar-feeding ants (*Crematogaster opuntiae*, *Liometopum apiculatum*, and other less frequent ants) that provide defense from herbivores. We used a 20-year dataset on plant vital rates and partner
12 identity to quantify the demographic consequences of association with different ant partners and the frequency and direction of turnover between mutually exclusive partner associations across the plant life cycle. We then constructed a stochastic, multi-state Integral Projection Model (IPM)
15 to investigate how different patterns of partner richness, composition, and sequential turnover affect population fitness under fluctuating environmental conditions. We found that, while ant partners had different impacts on plant vital rates (*C. opuntiae*-tended plants had advantages in growth and
18 survival when small, and *L. apiculatum*-tended plants had floral viability advantages), plant fitness was similarly elevated by ant visitation for any level of partner identity and richness, because effects on the highest-sensitivity vital rates were consistent across partner species. Furthermore, there was
21 no evidence that benefits of partner diversity manifest in the context of fluctuating environments (i.e., the portfolio effect). In contrast to much of the previous literature, this study highlights that demographic benefits of mutualism can be surprisingly robust to diversity and turnover of partners.

Introduction

Mutualisms, species interactions where all participants receive net benefits, are key components of ecological communities and can enhance the fitness and population growth rates of the partners involved. While traditionally framed as pairwise (+/+) interactions, mutualisms are often embedded within multispecies networks in which a focal species interacts with multiple partners over space or time (Bascompte, 2009; Palmer et al., 2010). In such systems, partner diversity can arise either from simultaneous interactions or sequential ones, where individual hosts experience turnover in partner identity over time (Djiéto-Lordon et al., 2005; Ness et al., 2006). A focal mutualist may interact with multiple guilds of partner types (e.g., plants that interact with pollinators, seed dispersers, soil microbes, and ant defenders) or with multiple partner species within the same guild (e.g., plants visited by multiple pollinator species). Understanding how this kind of sequential partner diversity affects host fitness is a pressing question in mutualism ecology—especially under environmental variability, where different partners may confer benefits unevenly across space or time (Frederickson, 2005; Palmer et al., 2010; Rogers et al., 2014; Thibaut et al., 2012).

In this study, we evaluate several mechanisms through which partner diversity might influence mutualistic function, drawing from broader biodiversity–ecosystem function theory (Barrett et al., 2015; Ushio, 2020; Winfree, 2020). First, sampling effect occurs in systems with a distinct hierarchy of fitness effects (a consistent ranking of best to worst mutualists), when diversity increases the likelihood of including a high-quality partner (Batstone et al., 2018; Frederickson, 2013). There is no benefit of diversity here *per se*, rather, missed opportunity costs arise in systems with sequential partner associations where less beneficial partners may preclude colonization by better mutualists (Miller, 2007). Second, complementarity occurs in systems where partners differ functionally, when diversity increases the net benefits received by focal mutualist beyond what a single partner species could offer (Batstone et al., 2018). Positive diversity effects through complementarity need not be additive: interference or synergies between partners can make their combined effect different than expected from the sum of complementary functions (Afkhani et al., 2014). Even within a

single mutualist guild, the benefits conferred by alternative partner species can vary by method,
 51 efficiency, or timing of benefit conferral (Bronstein et al., 2006; Stachowicz and Whitlatch, 2005a;
 Stanton, 2003). Third, portfolio effects stabilize host fitness across variable environments when
 different mutualists respond asynchronously to environmental fluctuations (Alarcón et al., 2008;
 54 Batstone et al., 2018; Loreau, 1999; Lázaro et al., 2022; Ollerton et al., 2006). In this context,
 the portfolio effect implies that inter-annual variation in partner identity—especially if driven by
 environmental conditions—could stabilize overall plant fitness across years. For example, if a high
 57 quality defensive partner is more likely to occur during dry years and a moderately defensive
 partner dominates in wet years, the shifting presence of these species could buffer the focal plant
 from herbivore damage under variable conditions. Critically, portfolio effects require asynchronous
 60 environmental responses among partners, such that declines in one partner’s benefits are offset by
 others, stabilizing the focal mutualist’s fitness over time (Hautier et al., 2014; Loreau, 1999; Tilman
 et al., 1994). This concept is well developed in biodiversity–ecosystem functioning literature, but
 63 has rarely been applied to mutualisms in which partner diversity is realized through turnover rather
 than coexistence. While portfolio effects have been well studied in plant and animal communities,
 their role in mutualisms—particularly where partner diversity is sequential (turnover) rather than
 66 simultaneous—is less explored (Ushio, 2020).

Partner diversity can affect a focal mutualist differently depending on whether partners are
 present simultaneously or sequentially (i.e., via partner turnover) (Barrett et al., 2015; Bruna et al.,
 69 2014; Dattilo et al., 2014; Djiéto-Lordon et al., 2005; Ness et al., 2006; Ushio, 2020). In simultaneous
 associations, partner interactions frequently lead to competition and interference (Batstone et al.,
 2018; Kiers et al., 2003; Trøjelsgaard et al., 2015; Wulff, 2008), reducing the net benefits received by
 72 the focal mutualist. Sequential associations have been shown to reduce these competitive partner-
 partner interactions, thereby boosting the focal mutualists benefits (Stachowicz and Whitlatch,
 2005b; Wolfin et al., 2023) and leading to more stable interactions Johnson and Bronstein (2019).
 75 Turnover can happen at different timescales, from minutes to years (Horvitz and Schemske, 1986;
 Oliveira et al., 1999). The timing, frequency, and directionality of partner turnover can influence

the net fitness benefits to the host, particularly if turnover allows accumulation of complementary
benefits or buffers environmental variability via portfolio effects (Fiala et al., 1994; Sachs et al., 2004;
Ushio, 2020). If partner identity changes systematically across ontogeny, such as through succession
of partners aligned with host life stages, this may further affect fitness outcomes (Dejean et al.,
2008; Fonseca and Benson, 2003; Noe and Hammerstein, 1994). For example, plant susceptibility
to enemies can change across life stages (Barton and Koricheva, 2010; Boege and Marquis, 2005),
so the benefits of a diverse guild of defensive mutualists are greatest when more defensive partner
species align with more vulnerable life stages (Dejean et al., 2008; Djiéto-Lordon et al., 2005). Thus,
the duration and order of interactions may be just as important as the identities of the interacting
partners.

Defensive ant-plant mutualisms – where plants provide food and/or housing to ants that in turn
defend them from enemies – are widespread interactions that offer valuable model systems for the
ecology and evolution of mutualism (Bronstein, 1998; Bronstein et al., 2006). Extrafloral nectar
(EFN) -bearing plants can serve as dietary resources that promote ant abundance and colony size
(Byk and Del-Claro, 2011; Donald and Miller, 2022; Ness et al., 2006, 2009). In turn, presence
of defensive ant partners is often linked to reductions in herbivory (Rudgers, 2004; Trager et al.,
2010) and demographic advantages for the plant partner (Báez et al., 2016). Defensive ant-plant
mutualisms are commonly multi-species, where a guild of ant partner species share, and often
compete for, a plant mutualist (Agrawal and Rutter, 1998; Beattie, 1985; Bronstein, 1998; Trager
et al., 2010). Ant partners can vary in their ability to deter herbivores (Bruna et al., 2014) and
visitation by low quality ant partners can prevent visitation by higher quality partners, causing
a reduction in fitness through missed opportunity costs (Fraser et al., 2001; Frederickson, 2005).
Susceptibility to herbivory can also vary significantly throughout the life stages of the plant (Boege
and Marquis, 2005), suggesting that the order and timing of successive partners is important to the
fitness impacts of the combined partner guild (Barton and Koricheva, 2010; Boege and Marquis,
2005; Fonseca and Benson, 2003). Finally, herbivore identity and pressure can vary inter-annually
(Wetzel et al., 2023), much like mutualist identity and presence, meaning the threat plants face can

vary just as much as the protection they receive due to temporal stochasticity. Previous studies
105 have investigated how ant partner diversity affects plant fitness (Dattilo et al., 2014; Fiala et al.,
1994; Gaume et al., 1998; Ludka et al., 2015; Palmer et al., 2010), however little is known about
the combined effects of partner identity, directional partner turnover and temporal stochasticity,
108 particularly because the long-term data needed to quantify fluctuations in ant-plant interactions
are rarely available. Specifically, sequential associations require much longer-term data in order to
analyze, due to an accumulation of partners across time rather than the ability to capture multiple
111 at once.

This study examined the consequences of partner diversity in a food-for-protection mutualism
between the tree cholla cactus (*Cylindropuntia imbricata*), a long-lived EFN-bearing plant, and
114 multiple species of ant partners. Tree cholla are tended by two common ant partners and several
additional rarer species, all of which collect EFN in exchange for defense against herbivores. These
ant species locally co-occur, but individual plants are typically tended by only one species that
117 patrols the plant around-the-clock and maintains control of the plant’s nectar resources, usually
for an entire growing season (Donald and Miller, 2022; Ohm and Miller, 2014). Switches between
partner species, or between vacancy and ant occupancy, commonly occur from one growing season
120 to the next (Miller, 2007). Prior experiments suggested a hierarchy of mutualist quality, with *Li-*
ometopum apiculatum providing strong anti-herbivore defense and *Crematogaster opuntiae* having
net negative effects because herbivore deterrence is outweighed by deterrence of pollinators (Miller,
123 2007; Ohm and Miller, 2014). Even the basic quantification of how different ant species affect
host demography across the plant life cycle is rarely possible, particularly in long-lived perennials.
Most studies evaluate short-term fitness proxies like seed set or herbivory at a single life stage
126 (Bruna et al., 2014; Palmer et al., 2010; Trager et al., 2010), while few trace demographic effects
across multiple stages. Similarly, while turnover of mutualist partners is known to occur (Djiéto-
Lordon et al., 2005; Ness et al., 2006), long-term data documenting patterns and consequences of
129 partner switching are uncommon, especially in field systems. Thus, this study provides unique
empirical insight into how mutualist quality and temporal partner dynamics shape host population

trajectories.

Here we used a unique long-term data set that allows us to explore mutualistic associations with multiple partner species, longitudinal dynamics of partner turnover and demographic effects of alternative partners that vary across plant size structure and across nearly 20 years of inter-annual fluctuations. The long-term nature of this observational dataset gives us the power to investigate whether, and through which mechanism(s), partner diversity affects the fitness benefits of ant visitation. Specifically, we asked:

1. What are the vital rate effects of association with alternative partners and how do these effects fluctuate across years?
2. What are the frequency and direction of partner turnover across the plant life cycle?
3. What is the net effect of partner diversity on plant fitness, and what mechanism(s) explain(s) this effect?

To answer these questions we used a hierarchical Bayesian statistical approach to estimate demographic vital rates for hosts in different states of ant occupancy and to quantify state-dependent partner turnover from the long-term data. We then used a stochastic, multi-state integral projection model (IPM) which combines diverse effects on vital rates and pathways of partner turnover to quantify effects of partner diversity on plant fitness.

Methods

Study System

This study was conducted at the Sevilleta Long-term Ecological Research site (SEV-LTER), located within the Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge in central New Mexico, USA. Our study area in the Los Piños mountains (34°20'5.3"N, 106°37'53.2"W) is characterized by steep, rocky slopes and perennial vegetation including grasses (*Bouteloua eriopoda* and *B. gracilis*), yuccas, cacti, and junipers. Tree cholla cacti are common in such high Chihuahuan desert habitats (Benson, 1982).

These arborescent plants produce cylindrical segments with large spines. In the growing season
156 (May to August in New Mexico), they initiate new vegetative segments and flowerbuds at the ends
of existing segments. While most plants produce new segments every season, only those which
are reproductively mature produce flowerbuds. Like other EFN-bearing cacti, tree cholla secrete
159 nectar from specialized glands on young vegetative segments and flowerbuds (Ness et al., 2006;
Oliveira et al., 1999). Flowerbuds produce more and higher-quality EFN than vegetative segments,
making reproductive cholla valuable mutualist partners (Miller, 2014). Smaller, non-flowering cholla
162 produce little to no EFN and are commonly vacant (no ant visitation) (Miller, 2014).

Tree cholla EFN is collected by several ground-nesting ant species. At SEV-LTER, cholla are vis-
ited primarily by two species, *Crematogaster opuntiae* and *Liometopum apiculatum*, as well as other
165 rarer species, including *Forelius pruinosus* and unidentified species in the genera *Aphaenogaster* and
Camponotus. *L. apiculatum* are the most frequent visitors with 25% – 60% of tree cholla tended by
these ants in a given year, followed by *C. opuntiae* (5% – 20%) (Donald and Miller, 2022). Between
168 30% – 80% of cacti are vacant in any given year. Workers of different species rarely co-occur on
individual plants, likely due to interspecific competition. For example, staged introductions of *C.*
opuntiae to *L. apiculatum*-tended plants, and vice versa, provoke aggressive responses by residents
171 (*personal observation*).

Several insect herbivores and seed predators specialize on tree cholla (Mann, 1969), and defense
against these enemies is the main pathway by which ant visitation affects plant demography. The
174 Cerambycid beetle *Moneilema appressum* and an unidentified weevil (Coleoptera: Curculionidae)
of the genus *Gerstaekeria* feed on vegetative and reproductive structures as adults and their larvae
feed internally. Two species of cactus bugs, *Narnia pallidicornis* and *Chelinidea vittiger* (Hemiptera:
177 Coreidae), feed on all cholla parts with a preference for flower buds; their damage can induce floral
abortion (Miller et al., 2006). A seed predator, *Cahela ponderosella* (Lepidoptera: Pyralidae),
oviposits in open flowers and larvae eat seeds in developing fruits. These consumers can have
180 significant negative impacts on plant fitness and depress population growth (Miller et al., 2009).
Prior experiments showed that ant-tended tree cholla experience less herbivory and seed predation

than plants from which ants were excluded (Miller, 2007; Ohm and Miller, 2014).

Data Collection

This study is based on long-term data spanning 2004 to 2023 that documented plant demographic rates in relation to their ant partner status. From 2004 to 2008, we censused 134 plants distributed across three spatial blocks. This initial census group was discontinued in 2009, when we established six 30×30 -meter plots and tagged all tree cholla within those plots. Two additional 30×30 -meter plots were added in 2011, and this group of eight plots (mean \pm SD Tree cholla per plot: 87.30 ± 18.28) has since been censused annually through 2023 (with the exception of 2020 due to the pandemic shutdown). These censuses were exhaustive, tracking every single plant and searching the entire plot for any new ones. For all plants, in May or early June of each year we recorded plant survival since the last survey (if the plant had any green flesh left it was considered alive) and, for survivors, we recorded height (cm), maximum crown width (cm), and crown width perpendicular to the maximum (cm) (sections with green were measured for size). Size measurements were used to calculate plant volume (cm^3) based on the volume of an elliptical cone. We measured reproduction by counting flowerbuds, and in most years we distinguished between flowerbuds that were viable versus aborted (this differentiation was a visual assessment). We recorded the ant species presence and identity (or vacancy if no ants present). Occurrences of more than one ant species on one plant were rare (less than 5% of observations), and for the purpose of this analysis we classified the plant as being occupied by the more abundant species. Plots were searched for new recruits each year, and these were added to the census. These data allowed us to link each plant's demographic fate (survival, growth, and reproduction) to its state of ant visitation. In total, the data set includes a total of 9,787 observations of 1,141 individuals across 15 complete transition years (spanning May/June of year t to May/June of year $t + 1$) (Miller, 2020). In addition to missing the year 2020, there are gaps in the time series where we switched plots or plants (and thus broke up transition years for growth/survival and partner turnover) or where we did not distinguish between viable and aborted flower buds.

To complete the tree cholla life cycle, we used additional, smaller data sets from previously published studies to estimate seed and seed bank parameters. These studies were conducted at the same sites using the same plants as our study. Ohm et al. 2014 provide data on the number of seeds per fruit for plants tended by *L. apiculatum*, *C. opuntiae*, or no ants (experimental exclusion), accounting for their effects on pollinator visitation. Elder and Miller 2016 provide data on seed entry to the seed bank and seedling germination and survival rates.

Multi-state Integral Projection Model

The demographic data were used to parameterize a multi-state Integral Projection Model (IPM). IPMs describe population dynamics in discrete time with functions that relate vital rates to continuous state variables, typically size (Ellner et al., 2016). While IPMs are a natural choice for populations with continuous size structure, they can also be modified to accommodate a combination of continuous and discrete state variables, as we do here. We constructed a stochastic, multi-state IPM that stitches together population structure associated with plant size and ant state, allowing us to determine the individual fitness effects of each ant species and the composite effects of multiple partners, with ant transition dynamics and inter-annual variability modeled explicitly.

Given the low frequency of ant occupancy states other than *L. apiculatum* and *C. opuntiae* (<8% of observations) we combined all other ants into an “Other” category, such that our multi-state IPM included four possible ant states: vacant, *L. apiculatum*, *C. opuntiae*, and Other. The “Other” category was made up of *Forelius pruinosus* (3.5% of observations), unidentified species belonging to the genera *Camponotus* (0.9%), *Aphaenogaster* (0.4%), *Myrmecocystus* (0.08%), *Tetramorium* (0.02%), *Brachymyrmex* (0.02%), and additional ants not identified to genus or species (2.8%). Given our objective of quantifying demographic effects across the plant size distribution, there was not sufficient size representation of these low-frequency partner species in the long-term data to treat these as separate partner states.

Ant state is included as a predictor variable in IPM sub-models where there are biologically realistic pathways through which ants could have an impact. For example, prior experimental

work indicates that ant tending can reduce vegetative tissue loss and floral abortion, while also potentially reducing pollinator visitation (Miller et al., 2009; Ohm and Miller, 2014). Therefore, ant state was included in sub-models for survival, growth, flowerbud viability, and seed number per flowerbud. In contrast, we have no reason to expect that ant tending can directly influence the probability of flowering or flowerbud production independently of its influence on plant size, so these sub-models do not include ant state as a predictor variable.

We modeled the tree cholla life cycle using continuously size-structured plants where number of plants of size x and ant state a in year t ($n(x, a)_t$) predicts the number of plants of size x' and ant state a' in year $t + 1$ ($n(x', a')_{t+1}$) based on a size- and ant-specific vital rates. The model also includes two discrete seed banks (B_t^1 and B_t^2) corresponding to 1 and 2-year old seeds. Seed bank dynamics are given by:

$$B_{t+1}^1 = \delta \sum_{a=1}^A \int_L^U \kappa(a) P(x; \boldsymbol{\tau}^P) F(x; \boldsymbol{\tau}^F) V(a; \boldsymbol{\tau}_a^V) n(x, a)_t dx \quad (1)$$

$$B_{t+1}^2 = (1 - \gamma_1) B_t^1 \quad (2)$$

Functions $P(x; \boldsymbol{\tau}^P)$ and $F(x; \boldsymbol{\tau}^F)$ give the probability of flowering in year t and the number of flowerbuds produced in year t , respectively, by plants of size x in year t . The proportion of flowerbuds that remain viable through fruit set ($V(a; \boldsymbol{\tau}_a^V)$) and the number of seeds per fruit ($\kappa(a)$) is dependent on ant state a . The vectors $\boldsymbol{\tau}$ give year-specific deviates (mean zero) and appear in functions for which we can estimate temporal stochasticity from the long-term data; superscripts indicate the corresponding vital rate and, when present, the a subscript indicates that deviates are specific to plants in ant state a . For example, temporal deviates $\boldsymbol{\tau}_a^V$ describe better- and worse-than-average years for flowerbud viability, and plants in different ant states can fluctuate independently (good years for *L. apiculatum*-occupied plants may be bad years for *C. opuntiae*-occupied plants, for example). Seed production is integrated over the size distribution, from the lower L to upper U size limits, and summed over all possible ant states ($A = 4$) giving total seed production. Seeds are multiplied by the probability of escaping post-dispersal seed predation (δ) to give the number of seeds that enter the one-year old seed bank. Plants can recruit out of the year-one seed bank

with probability γ_1 or transition to the two-year seed bank with a probability of $1 - \gamma_1$. Seeds in
 261 the two-year seed bank are assumed to either germinate with probability γ_2 or die.

For the above-ground part of the life cycle, the number of plants of size x' and ant state a'
 in year $t + 1$ is given by survival/growth transitions from size x and ant state a in year t , plus
 264 germination out of the seed banks:

$$n(x', a')_{t+1} = (\gamma_1 B_t^1 + \gamma_2 B_t^2) \eta(x') \omega \rho_0(a') + \sum_{a=1}^A \int_L^U S(x, a; \boldsymbol{\tau}_a^S) G(x', x, a; \boldsymbol{\tau}_a^G) \rho(x, a, a') n(x, a)_t dx \quad (3)$$

The first term in Eq. (3) estimates the number of individuals recruiting from a one- or two-year
 267 seed bank to a plant of size x' and ant state a' based on the recruit size distribution $\eta(x')$ and
 the probability of over-winter seedling survival (ω) from germination (late summer) to the census
 (May). This term is multiplied by $\rho_0(a')$, which gives the probability that a new recruit has ant
 270 state a' upon its first appearance in the census ($\sum \rho_0(a') = 1$). The second term represents all
 possible transitions from size x and ant a to size x' and ant a' , conditioned on survival. Survival
 ($S(x, a; \boldsymbol{\tau}_a^S)$) and growth from size x to x' ($G(x', x, a; \boldsymbol{\tau}_a^G)$) are both dependent on initial size and
 273 ant state. As above, these functions include inter-annual variability through year-specific deviates
 that can vary by ant state ($\boldsymbol{\tau}_a$). Finally, ant transition function $\rho(a', a, x)$ gives the probability that
 an individual transitions from ant state a to a' in the next census, conditional on initial size x .

276 *Statistical modeling and parameter estimation*

We parameterized the IPM using a series of generalized linear mixed models in a hierarchical
 Bayesian framework. Vital rate models included spatial and temporal random effects associated
 279 with plot and year variation, respectively (only year variation is used in the IPM), and included
 plant size (the natural logarithm of volume, $\log(\text{cm}^3)$; x, x'), ant partner state (a, a'), or both as
 fixed-effect predictor variables. As in the IPM, our statistical modeling assumed that demographic
 282 effects of ant occupancy are limited to survival, growth, and flowerbud viability.

Growth. We fit the growth sub-model ($G(x', x, a; \tau_a^G)$) to data on size in year $t + 1$ (y^G) using the skewed normal distribution to account for left-skewed size transitions (at some initial sizes, transitions below the expected future size were more common than transitions above it). The skew-normal has three parameters corresponding to location (\hat{G}), shape (σ), and scale (α):

$$y_i^G \sim \text{SkewedNormal}(\hat{G}_i, \sigma_i, \alpha_i) \quad (4)$$

$$\hat{G}_i = \beta_{a[i]}^0 + \beta_{a[i]}^1 x_i + \beta_{a[i]}^2 x_i^2 + u_{\text{year}[i], a[i]} + w_{\text{plot}[i]} \quad (5)$$

$$\log(\sigma_i) = \beta^3 + \beta^4 x_i \quad (6)$$

$$\alpha_i = \beta^5 + \beta^6 x_i \quad (7)$$

Here, the location parameter for the i th observation \hat{G}_i is defined as a second-order polynomial with ant-size interactions because preliminary analysis found this was an improvement over a linear relationship. The location parameter of the skew-normal is not the mean, but the mean can be derived as $\hat{G} + \frac{\sigma\alpha}{\sqrt{1+\alpha^2}} \sqrt{\frac{2}{\pi}}$. The year- and ant-specific random effect u (which parameterizes the τ_a^G vectors) and plot-specific random effect w are normally distributed with variances σ_{year}^2 and σ_{plot}^2 , respectively. Parameters σ_i and α_i control residual variance and skewness, respectively, and were defined as linear functions of initial size x_i (σ_i is strictly positive and was modeled with a log link function). Due to data constraints, we modeled growth variance and skewness as size-dependent but not dependent on ant occupancy state.

Survival. The survival sub-model ($S(a, x; \tau_a^S)$) estimates the probability of survival from year t to year $t + 1$, with fixed effects of size x and ant partner a in year t . We fit this model to the survival data (alive or dead) using a Bernoulli distribution with a similar linear predictor for the probability of survival as in the growth model but with a logit link function and without the second-order influence of size.

Reproduction. The flowering sub-model ($P(x; \tau^P)$) estimates the probability of reproducing in year t , with fixed effects of size x in year t and random effects of plot and year. We fit this model to the reproductive status data (vegetative or flowering) using a Bernoulli distribution and a logit

link function, similar to the survival model above but with no ant effects. The flowerbud function
 309 $F(x; \boldsymbol{\tau}^F)$ estimates the total flowers produced by a reproducing plant in year t , with fixed effects of
 size x in year t . We fit this model to flowerbud count data (sum of viable and aborted buds) using
 a zero-truncated negative binomial distribution with a log link and normally distributed year and
 312 plot random effects.

The flowerbud viability sub-model ($V(a; \boldsymbol{\tau}_a^V)$) estimates the probability that flowerbuds pro-
 duced in year t remain viable, with fixed effects of ant partner a in year t . We fit this model to
 315 floral viability data using a binomial distribution where trials and successes are given by the total
 number of flowerbuds and the number that are viable, respectively. This model used a logit link
 function and included random effects for plot and year following the same structure as the survival
 318 model, with ant-specific year random effects.

Estimates for the number of seeds per fruit were obtained from a field experiment which excluded
 ants from flowering plants (Ohm and Miller, 2014). This experiment only included vacant or *L.*
 321 *apiculatum* and *C. opuntiae* -tended plants, so we assumed that plants tended by Other ants had
 the same number of seeds per fruit as vacant plants (our results showed very little sensitivity to
 this assumption). Additional reproductive parameters for the number of seeds per fruit, probability
 324 of entry to the seed bank, germination rates, and recruit size were estimated following methods
 described in Appendix A.

Ant Transitions. The ant transition model ($\rho(x, a, a'; \boldsymbol{\tau}^e)$) estimates the probability of a cactus
 327 being occupied by ant partner a' in year $t + 1$ given that it was occupied by initial ant partner a in
 year t , with fixed effect of initial size x . We fit this model to ant partner data using a multinomial
 distribution with a logit link function.

330 *Model-fitting.* We fit all models using Stan run through version 4.0.2 of R (R Core Team, 2023;
 Stan Development Team, 2023). We used vague priors for all parameters. For each model, we
 obtained three chains of 10,000 iterations, discarding the first 1,500 iterations. We visually assessed
 333 parameter convergence between and within chains and assessed overall model fit with posterior

predictive checks to examine how well the fitted model can generate simulated data similar to the real data.

IPM Analysis

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Analyzing the IPM required that we discretize the continuous IPM kernel into an approximating matrix. Size variable x was discretized into b bins, resulting in a $b \times b$ matrix. In our model there is
 339 additional complexity in the form of transitions between A ant states and two additional discrete states (year one and year two seed banks), leading to a matrix size of $A(b + 2) \times A(b + 2)$. We used $b = 500$ bins, which we found to be sufficient for numerically stable outputs, and extended the
 342 integration limits beyond the minimum (L) and maximum (U) observed sizes to avoid unintentional eviction using the “floor-and-ceiling” method (Williams et al., 2012).

For stochastic analyses, we estimated the approximating matrix corresponding to each t to $t + 1$ transition year. To estimate population mean fitness in a stochastic environment (λ_S) we simulated population dynamics for 500 years by randomly sampling among the 15 annual transition matrices, discarding the first 100 years of the simulation to minimize the influence of initial conditions. Sampling observed transition matrices (rather than independently sampling regression coefficients) produces demographic time series that realistically capture inter-annual variation by preserving correlations between vital rates (Metcalf et al., 2015). We tallied the total population size at each time step as $N_t = B_t^1 + B_t^2 + \sum_{a=1}^A \int n(x, a)_t dx$ and calculated the stochastic growth rate as

$$\log(\lambda_S) = E[\log(\frac{N_{t+1}}{N_t})]$$

(Rees and Ellner, 2009) We propagated uncertainty from the vital rate models using 100 draws
 345 from the joint posterior distribution of model parameters, resulting in a posterior distribution of λ_S and the derived quantities described next.

Partner diversity simulations

Using the fully parameterized multi-state IPM, we conducted simulations to quantify how diversity and identity of ant partners influenced plant fitness. From the full version of the model (described above) corresponding to the observed assemblage of partners and observed frequencies of partner transition, we created treatments corresponding to all eight “counter-factual” scenarios of diversity and composition: no ant partners (complete vacancy); one ant partner (*C. opuntiae* only, *L. apiculatum* only, Other only); two partners (all pairwise combinations of *C. opuntiae*, *L. apiculatum*, and Other); and three partners (observed scenario of all ant states). These simulations were made possible by extrapolating ant-specific demographic performance across the size distribution, even for combinations of size and ant occupancy that were rarely observed. For example, the no-partner scenario modeled a hypothetically ant-free cactus population, even though no such population exists to our knowledge, by applying the statistical knowledge gleaned from vacant plants across the size distribution. We refer to stochastic fitness associated with partner number or identity using superscripts, e.g. λ_S^0 for vacant plants (zero partners), λ_S^{1+} for any state of ant tending, λ_S^C for tending by only *C. opuntiae*, λ_S^{CO} for tending by *C. opuntiae* and Other ants, etc.

In all scenarios that included any ant partners, we preserved the observed pattern of size-dependent vacancy/occupancy (estimated through the ant transition sub-model) and manipulated partner identity conditional on occupancy by any ant. This means, for example, that the *C. opuntiae*-only scenario included two possible states, vacancy and occupied by *C. opuntiae*. While our statistical models allow us to extrapolate the demographic performance of ant-tended plants to small sizes that are typically vacant, the natural history of this system tells us that this is not biologically sensible. Small, non-reproductive plants are typically vacant because they do not produce extrafloral nectar, and once plants begin producing nectar they are nearly always ant-tended (Miller, 2014). Our simulations preserved this basic biology, avoiding tiny ant-occupied plants that do not and could not occur in nature.

The partner diversity treatment scenarios required additional assumptions about the mecha-

nisms that give rise to observed occupancy patterns. Based on evidence that EFN-bearing cacti are nearly always ant-occupied (Miller, 2014), we assume that ant partners competitively exclude one another from EFN-bearing cacti and that competition for plant partners is zero-sum. This means that, in scenarios that remove species from the partner community, remaining species gain access to plants that the removed species would have tended. In Appendix C, we present results under an alternative assumption, that ant visitation is limited by factors other than availability of cactus EFN (e.g., nesting sites or off-plant dietary resources), such that when a species is removed from the partner community, the plants it would have occupied remain vacant.

Temporal stochasticity experiments

Under the portfolio effect hypothesis, partner diversity may confer a fitness advantage when the benefits of alternative partners are not perfectly synchronized across temporal environmental variation, yielding an advantage of a diverse “portfolio” of partners when the environment fluctuates. We constructed two versions of the stochastic, multi-state IPMs that allowed us to test this hypothesis. The baseline, “non-synchronous” model described above included ants effects that could vary uniquely across time, according to the parameter estimates for the random effects (τ_a). We quantified from the fitted random effects how tightly inter-annual variation was correlated between ant states for each vital rate. The “synchronous” version included temporal fluctuations that were forced to be the same across ant states. To synchronize ant states, we averaged the ant-specific year random effects, thus ensuring that plants in all ant states fluctuated synchronously in response to temporal environmental variation. This second, synchronous version of the model effectively turns off any portfolio effect, holding all else equal. Both scenarios of temporal stochasticity, non-synchronized and synchronized, were run for all eight ant partner scenarios described above.

The range of models we created could generate many outputs; we focus our inference on the following specific contrasts. First, to determine whether ant occupancy and partner diversity are beneficial, we calculated a posterior distribution of λ_S for each of four partner richness levels (λ_S^0 , λ_S^1 , λ_S^2 , λ_S^3), averaging over composition scenarios within each level. If cactus fitness increases with partner richness, this would be interpreted as evidence for benefits of partner diversity. Second, to determine whether each partner, in isolation, confers a fitness advantage and to rank alternative partners, we contrasted the fitness of each single partner scenario (λ_S^C , λ_S^L , λ_S^O) against vacancy (λ_S^0). Third, to determine whether any benefits of diversity are due to the sampling effect or complementarity, we contrasted the fitness of multi-partner scenarios against the single best partner scenario. If the best multi-partner scenario exceeds the fitness associated with the best single partner, this would be interpreted as evidence of complementarity. Alternatively, the sampling effect hypothesis predicts that no multi-partner scenario yields higher plant fitness than the best single partner. It is also possible that multi-partner scenarios yield lower fitness than the single best partner, which would be consistent with an opportunity cost of diversity. Fourth, to quantify any contribution of the portfolio effect, we contrasted λ_S of the full (four-state) scenario to vacancy for synchronized and non-synchronized responses to temporal stochasticity. If the portfolio effect confers a benefit of diversity, the fitness advantage of having all vs. no partners should be greater when temporal fluctuations are not synchronized across ant states.

We base our statistical inferences on the posterior probability distributions of the contrasts described above. For example, the contrast of *C. opuntiae* (λ_S^C) with vacancy (λ_S^0) yields a posterior distribution of the difference $\Delta\lambda_S^{C-0}$. We can quantify from this distribution our certainty in the mutualistic effect of *C. opuntiae*, given the data, as $Pr(\Delta\lambda_S^{C-0} > 0)$. We apply similar logic to other contrasts described above. We interpret contrast probabilities ≥ 0.95 as statistically significant differences.

Results

*What are the effects of association with alternative partners on vital rates
and how do these effects fluctuate across years?*

Over the 20-year data set, we found that ant partners influenced cactus demographic performance, and different ant partners had contrasting effects across host vital rates. Ant-tended plants had a growth advantage over vacant plants, especially at smaller sizes (Figure 1). For the smallest sizes that were likely to be ant-tended (minimum observed size of ant-tended plants was $0.8 \log(\text{cm}^3)$; solid lines in Figure 1) there were modest differences between partner species, with the greatest growth advantage associated with *C. opuntiae* followed by *L. apiculatum* and then Other ants. At the largest sizes, growth trajectories of ant-tended and vacant plants were nearly indistinguishable. For all ant states, growth was left-skewed, with transitions to sizes below the mean were more frequent than sizes above the mean.

Similarly, for plants which were large enough to have ant visitors, visitation enhanced cactus survival (Figure 2). Mean survival rates ranged from 7.7% to 99.9%, with the smallest plants the most vulnerable to mortality. *C. opuntiae*-occupied plants had a survival advantage over other ant-tended plants, particularly at smaller sizes, consistent with positive effects on growth. At larger sizes, plants in any state of ant occupancy had a survival advantage over vacant plants. Plants smaller than $-2 \log(\text{cm}^3)$ were predicted to experience negative effects of ant visitation, but this was based entirely on extrapolated survival estimates of ant-tended plants. Plants in this size range were never observed to be ant-tended and, because the IPM preserves the size-dependence of vacancy, benefits of vacancy at small sizes are never realized in the IPM.

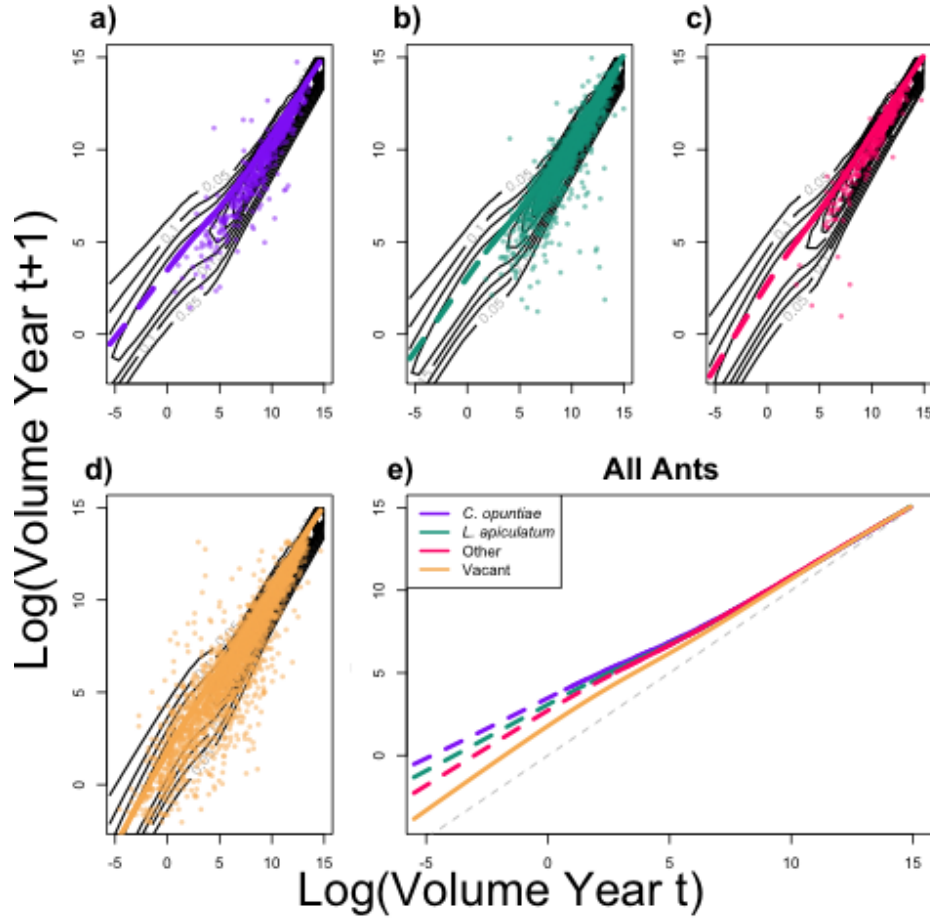


Figure 1: The next predicted size of tree cholla based on previous size in relation to ant partner (a, *C. opuntiae*; b, *L. apiculatum*; c, Other; d, Vacant, e, all states combined). Points show observed size transitions, colored lines are the mean next size, and contours show probability density of the skewed normal growth model. Dashed lines indicate extrapolation while solid lines indicate the range of observed data. They gray dashed line indicates no growth (areas above this line show growth while areas under it show shrinkage).

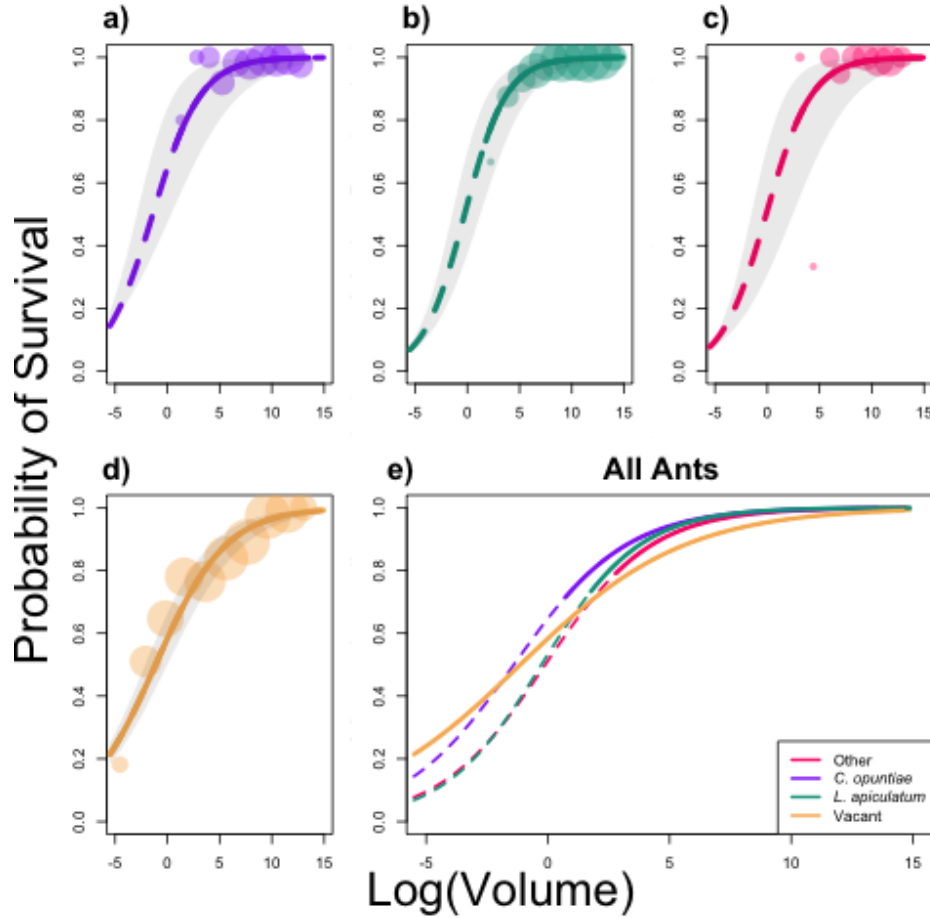


Figure 2: Probability of survival in relation to size and ant partner. Layout as in Fig. 1, except here points show data as binned means, where point size is proportional to number of observations. Grey areas show the 90% confidence interval for the mean.

Ant visitation was associated with increased floral viability and ant identity determined the strength of viability benefits. Mean viability rates spanned 55–81% (Figure 3). *L. apiculatum*-tended plants had the highest mean viability rate (86.1% [95% credible interval: 77.6–92.4%]), while there were similar viability rates for vacant (60.0% [44.3–75.0%]), Other-tended (60.6% [43.7–75.5%]), and *C. opuntiae*-tended plants (57.1% [40.6–72%]). Furthermore, *C. opuntiae*-tended plants had fewer seeds per fruit (115.0[79.5–165.5] seeds) than vacant (147.2[114.1–189.9] seeds) or *L. apiculatum*-tended plants (142.4[100.7–200.2] seeds), likely due to pollinator interference (Ohm

and Miller, 2014).

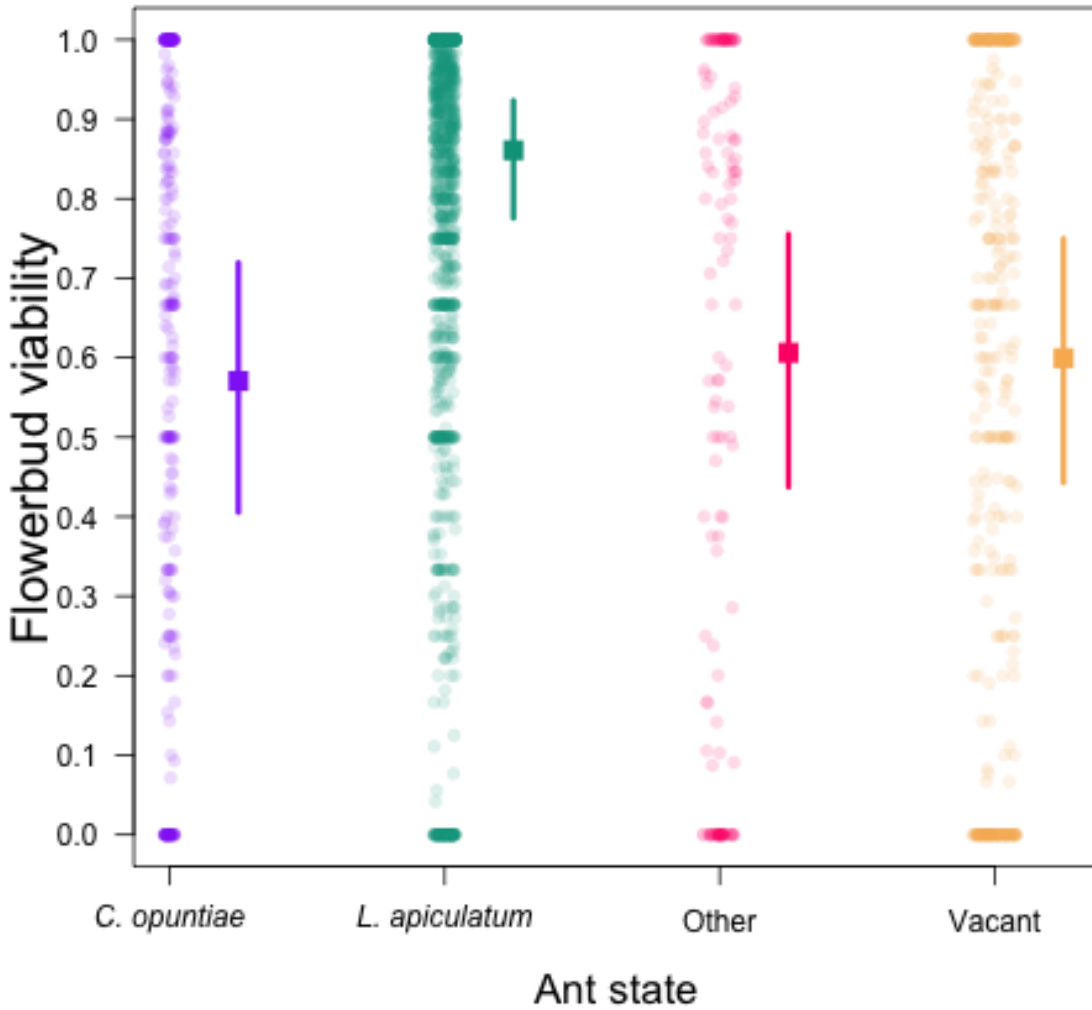


Figure 3: Flowerbud viability in relation to ant partner status. Points show observed data (fraction of initiated buds that flower). Points and bars show the means and 95% credible intervals for each group.

450 Inter-annual fluctuations in demographic rates (estimated as statistical random effects) were generally positively correlated between ant states, limiting the potential for benefits of diversity

through the portfolio effect (Figure 4). However, the degree of correlation depended on the vital
 453 rate and pair of ant partners. Across vital rates, random effects for cactus growth were the most
 strongly correlated between ant states (mean pairwise correlation: 0.63) and random effects for
 survival were the least correlated (mean pairwise correlation: 0.36). Certain partner pair / vital
 456 rate combinations were effectively independent in their yearly fluctuations (such as survival of
C. opuntiae and Other-tended plants) while others were almost completely synchronous (such as
 growth of Vacant and *L. apiculatum*-tended plants).

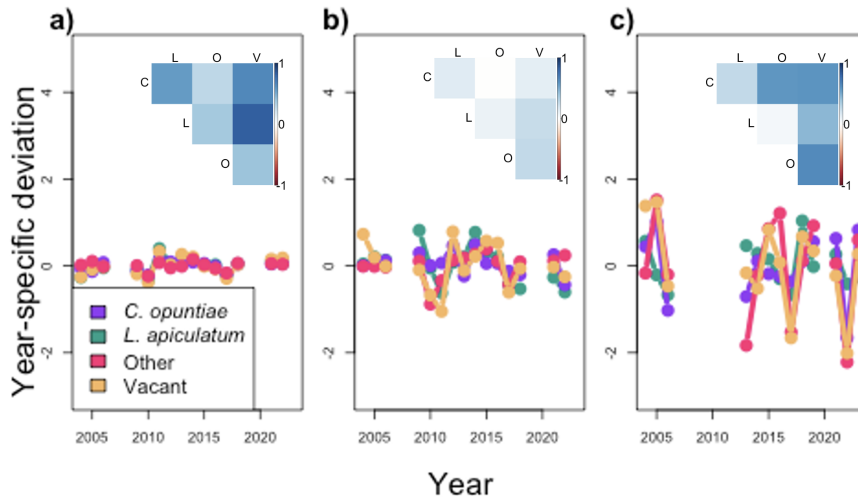


Figure 4: Year-specific random effects from statistical models for growth (a), survival (b), and floral
 viability (c) in relation to ant partner status. Inset panels show correlation coefficients (Pearson's
 r) for each pair of time series. All random effects have mean zero such that positive values indicate
 better-than-average years and negative values indicate worse-than-average years. Values are missing
 where there were no data available for that year.

459 *What are the frequency and direction of partner turnover across the plant
 life cycle?*

A majority (55%) of plants surveyed in the long-term data experienced at least one ant state
 462 transition, with distinct size-dependent and directional patterns (Figure 5). Vacancy was the most

likely ant state of small plants ($\leq 10 \log(\text{cm}^3)$). Even when small plants were ant-tended at the start of the transition year, they were most likely to transition back to vacancy (Figure 5 b-d).

465 The probability of becoming ant-tended increased with size, though it was not equally likely to be tended by any partner. For large plants that were initially vacant or tended by *L. apiculatum* or Other ants, *L. apiculatum* was the most likely next partner, suggesting that this species is able to
468 colonize plants that were previously vacant or occupied by Other ants, and effectively retain plants that it previously occupied. *C. opuntiae* were also able to retain plants they previously occupied, but not as well as *L. apiculatum*: for plants that began the transition year with *C. opuntiae*, the
471 probability that those plants remain occupied by *C. opuntiae* at the end of the transition year is only slightly greater than the probability of take-over by *L. apiculatum*, while take-over in the other direction was extremely rare. It is also notable that transitions away from the initial state
474 of *L. apiculatum* were almost always transitions to vacancy (Figure 5 d), while transitions away from the initial states of *C. opuntiae* and Other were often transitions to other ants. This suggests a competitive hierarchy whereby *L. apiculatum* may abandon low-value plants with little nectar
477 production but is almost never displaced from high-value plants.

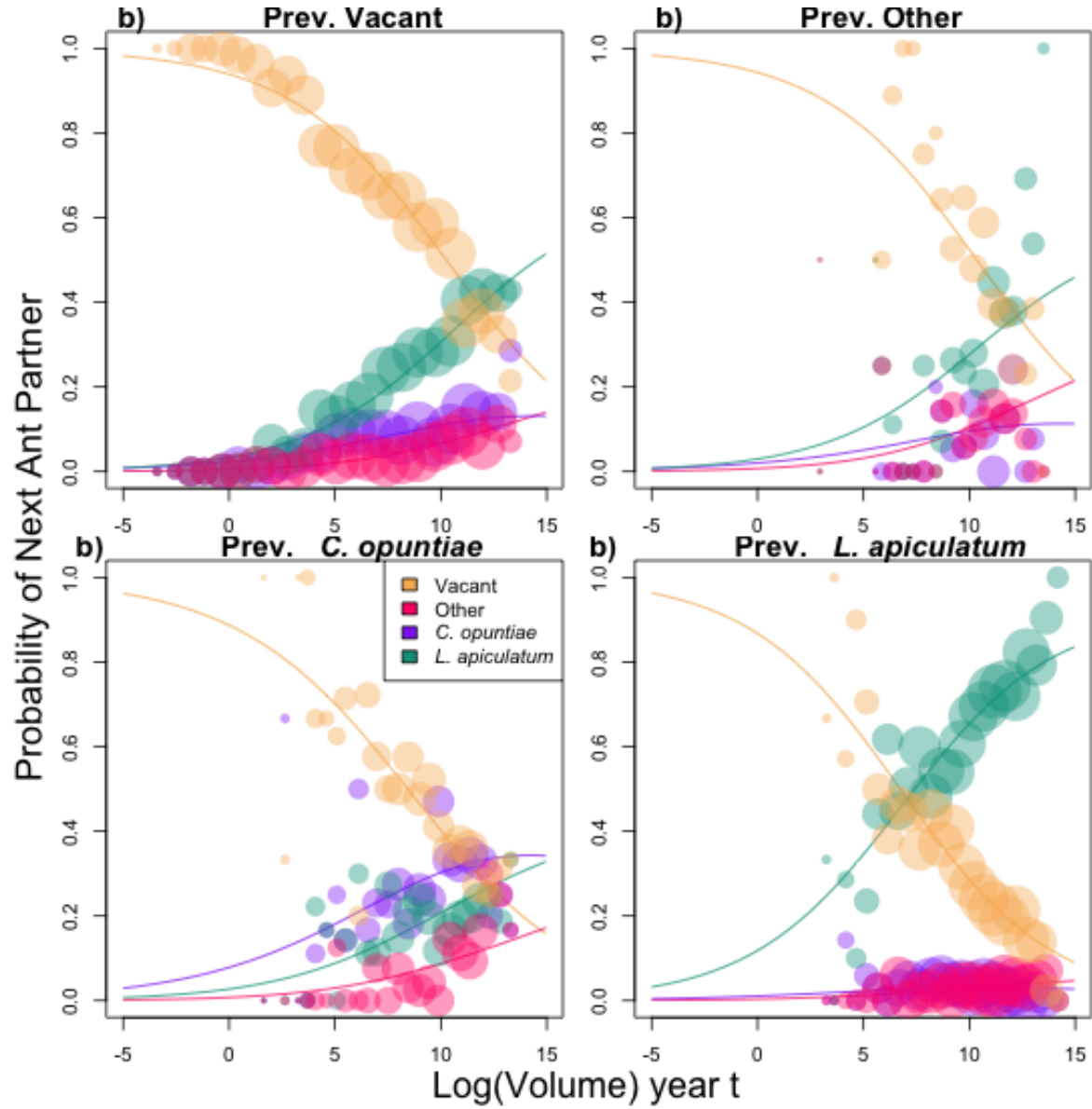


Figure 5: The probability of ant state based on plant size and previous ant state. Each panel shows size-dependent probabilities of the next ant state conditional on the previous ant state and size. Solid lines represent predictions of the multinomial statistical model and points show data binned over size intervals, where point size is proportional to the number of observations.

*What is the net effect of partner diversity on plant fitness, and what
mechanism(s) explain(s) this effect?*

By integrating vital rates, temporal fluctuations, and ant transition dynamics into the stochastic, multi-state IPM we can evaluate the fitness implications of different scenarios of partner identity and diversity (Figure 6). First, there was strong evidence that ant visitation had mutualistic fitness effects on plant partners. The lowest mean stochastic fitness was λ_S^0 , the fitness of the cholla with no partners (Figure 6 a). Across all 1+ partner scenarios, we found that the λ_S^{1+} posterior distributions were greater than λ_S^0 with nearly 100% certainty. This indicates that ant visitation elevates fitness no matter the number of partners. Furthermore, we found no benefit of partner diversity, with the fitness associated with one, two, or three partners roughly equivalent (Figure 6 a). The one- and two-partner scenarios were statistically consistent but there was a modest reduction in fitness in the three-partner scenario compared to two partners ($Pr(\Delta\lambda_S^{2-3} = 0.95)$), consistent with a weak cost of diversity at the highest level. Patterns of λ_S in relation to partner richness were generally consistent between scenarios of non-synchronous and synchronous inter-annual fluctuations.

Partner identity and composition were not strongly consequential for plant fitness (Figure 6 b-c). Among the one-partner scenarios, there was no strong evidence for any single best partner species (Figure 6 b). While a hypothetical *L. apiculatum*-only population had the highest mean fitness, it was not significantly higher than *C. opuntiae*- ($Pr(\Delta\lambda_S^{L-C} = 0.7)$) or Other- ($Pr(\Delta\lambda_S^{L-O} = 0.69)$) only populations. Furthermore, the fitness of *L. apiculatum*-only was consistent with all 2-partner scenarios ($Pr(\Delta\lambda_S)$ ranged from 0.37 to 0.83). However, as above, there was evidence for an opportunity cost of diversity wherein fitness of the three-partner scenario was lower than any of the 2-partner scenarios ($Pr(\Delta\lambda_S) > 0.95$). The lack of diversity benefits are not driven by the high overall frequency of *L. apiculatum*. Using the simulations where all ants had equal frequencies across sizes (further explained in Appendix C), we found the same fitness patterns as described above.

We found no evidence that the portfolio effect generated positive effects of partner diversity,

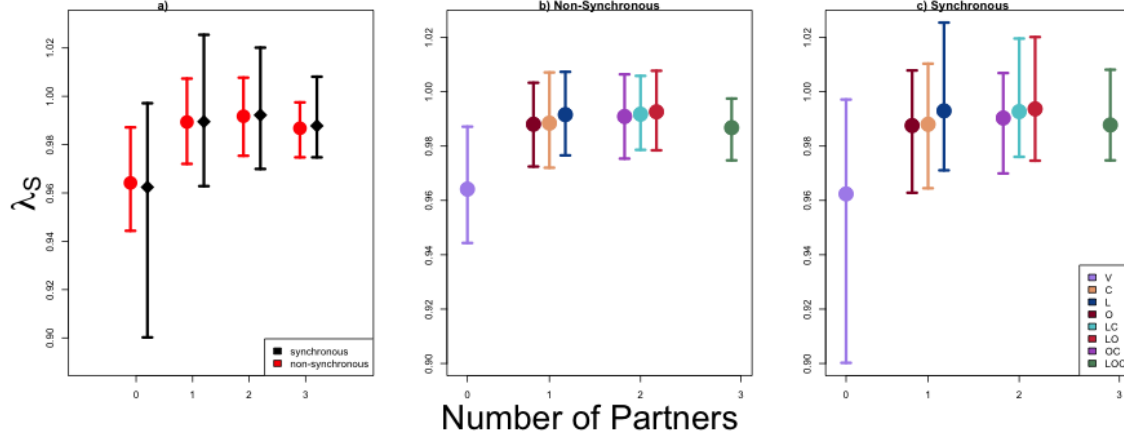


Figure 6: Tree cholla stochastic growth rate (λ_S) corresponding to number (a) or number and identity (b-c) of ant partners for synchronous and non-synchronous inter-annual fluctuations. Points and intervals show mean and 95% credible intervals from the posterior distributions of λ_S . In b-c letters in the legend correspond to ant partners as follows (V = Vacant, C = *C. opuntiae*, L = *L. apiculatum*, O = other).

as effects of partner richness and composition were highly consistent between the baseline, non-synchronous model and the model version that synchronized all ant states (Figure 6). The effect of all ant partners can be measured as $\lambda_S^3 - \lambda_S^0$. We have high confidence that this contrast is positive, and equally so for the synchronous and non-synchronous scenarios (Figure SA1).

Discussion

Mutualisms commonly involve multiple partners but the ecological consequences of partner diversity remain poorly understood. Here we show that while alternative partners may be ecologically different, their fitness effects on a shared mutualist can be effectively interchangeable and redundant. The results of our hierarchical models revealed that different ant partners exhibit different effects on vital rates, with *C. opuntiae*-tended plants experiencing advantages in growth and survival when small, and *L. apiculatum*-tended plants experiencing floral viability advantages. These results, alone, would suggest some potential benefits of partner diversity through complementarity. Yet,

our stochastic, multi-state IPM revealed that all scenarios which included any partners resulted in similarly high cactus fitness, with a statistically significant but quantitatively weak cost of diversity at the highest level. Furthermore, evidence from nearly two decades of demographic data failed to support the “portfolio effect” hypothesis, whereby benefits of diversity manifest in the context of environmental fluctuations. Overall, our results indicate that while ant visitation is strongly consequential, partner composition is much less so, suggesting that the fitness benefits of mutualism from the plant’s perspective may be surprisingly resilient to declines in partner diversity.

We attribute weak effects of partner identity and diversity to the vital rate sensitivity structure of this population. Like other long-lived, iteroparous species (Franco and Silvertown, 2004), tree cholla fitness is most sensitive to the growth and survival of established individuals (Elder and Miller, 2016; Miller et al., 2009), which are virtually guaranteed many years of reproductive opportunities once they reach a size that is protected from mortality. Differences between alternative partners were most pronounced either in reproductive rates (floral viability and seed number), which contribute relatively weakly to fitness because a long reproductive lifespan overrides individual reproductive bouts, or in growth and survival at small sizes, where mortality risk is relatively high. At larger sizes with low mortality risk, ant-tended plants had consistent growth and survival advantages over vacant plants regardless of partner identity, and that result dominates our integrative measures of fitness; differences between partner species in other vital rates and at other sizes do not register nearly as strongly. The weak reduction in fitness at the highest partner diversity level is harder to explain, but suggests some form of missed opportunity cost in a more crowded partner environment.

Our results broaden the literature on multi-species mutualisms, a majority of which has demonstrated positive effects of partner diversity through complementarity (Afkhami et al., 2021; Afkhami and Stinchcombe, 2016; Fehling, 2022; Gustafson and Casper, 2005; Hernandez et al., 2019; Larimer et al., 2014; McKeon et al., 2012; Palmer et al., 2010; Stachowicz and Whitlatch, 2005a; Yang et al., 2024) or portfolio effect (Lázaro et al., 2022; Rogers et al., 2014; Stevens et al., 2024; Thibaut et al., 2012). For example, working in another sequentially-partnered ant protective mutualism of long-

lived plants (*Acacia drepanolobium*), Palmer et al. 2010 showed that synergies between alternative partners elevate plant fitness above what could be expected from the single best partner. However, the *Acacia* partner guild includes a “castrating” parasite that is uniquely able to boost plant growth by suppressing reproduction. We speculate that partners that differ in degree but not type, such as those in our system, may be less likely to synergize. Fewer studies have shown costs of mutualist diversity. Bruna et al. 2014 showed that ant diversity can depress fitness of the sequentially-partnered ant-plant *Maieta guianensis* due to reduced interactions with the better defender. Costs of diversity have also been documented in systems in which multiple partners interact simultaneously with a shared mutualist, likely due to interference via the host resource budget (Keller et al., 2018) or negative higher-order interactions (Barrett et al., 2015). One previous study (in a different ant-cactus system) showed neutral effects of partner diversity, but this study also showed that ant visitation was itself neutral, with no detectable effects on plant fitness (Ford et al., 2015). To our knowledge, ours is the first study documenting a strong, positive fitness effect of mutualism, regardless of mutualist identity or guild composition. As this field grows, particularly with studies that integrate multiple vital rates across the life cycle, we will be better positioned to understand whether positive, neutral, or negative effects of partner diversity predominate, and the conditions under which each might be more likely.

When partners exhibit different reactions to varying environments, interacting with a diverse portfolio of partners can lead to more consistent benefits across time (Batstone et al., 2018). Our work explicitly incorporated temporal environmental stochasticity, yet we find no evidence for the portfolio effect as a mechanism of diversity benefits. In ant-plant defensive mutualisms, any portfolio effect would emerge from fluctuations in the community of herbivores, and ant-specific responses to each herbivore species. Instead, we found that inter-annual fluctuations in vital rates were largely synchronized across plants in different ant states, suggesting other drivers of inter-annual variation that are shared across the population – notably, weather – override any fluctuations in herbivore composition and ant-herbivore interactions. Dallas et al. 2022 found that while the portfolio effect was easy to show in theoretical models, it is infrequently detected in empirical data across many

570 systems. This indicates that the portfolio effect may be difficult to detect, disguised by different mechanisms, or uncommon in nature.

This study highlights the value of long-term data in investigating species interactions. Previously studies have analyzed how partner identity and partner turnover impact focal mutualist fitness (Barrett et al., 2015; Bruna et al., 2014; Dejean et al., 2008; Fonseca and Benson, 2003; Noe and Hammerstein, 1994; Trojelsgaard et al., 2015). Separate studies have analyzed how inter-annual variability impacts focal mutualists (Alarcón et al., 2008; Alonso, 1998; Horvitz and Schemske, 1990; Lázaro et al., 2022; Ollerton et al., 2006). The long term data set we used gave us the ability to consider, for the first time, the combined effects of partner identity, partner turnover, and temporal stochasticity. By piecing together complete life cycle information from long-term data, we gain a more nuanced understanding of the fitness consequences of ant visitation. For example, our previous study that focused only on reproductive vital rates suggested that *C. opuntiae* has overall parasitic fitness effects because activity of this species within tree cholla flowers can deter pollinators and reduce seed set (Ohm and Miller, 2014). Yet, the more complete analysis presented here, which accounts for reduced seed set alongside other demographic advantages in higher-sensitivity vital rates, indicates that this species is clearly a mutualist.

As with any study, there are limitations to consider when interpreting our results. First, we used observational data to infer ant effects on plant demography. However, we have previously conducted experimental manipulations which revealed that ant presence has causal effects on plant demographic rates through anti-herbivore defense (Miller, 2007; Ohm and Miller, 2014). The combination of long-term observational data backed up by experimental results gives us greater confidence in our causal interpretations. Second, we have not explicitly incorporated ant-herbivore interactions, even as these are the primary pathway through which ants influence plant demography. Surveys of herbivore damage from our long-term data are consistent with protective benefits of ant visitation (Figure A2), and more explicit inclusion of plant-herbivore-defender interactions could be a valuable future direction. Third, the rarity of several ant partner species imposed a practical constraint on assessing effects of partner diversity, since we needed to combine these into

an “Other” category that might mask important differences. As more long-term data accumulate, we may gain more information with which to further unpack this group of species.

Conclusion. This study highlights that while partners within a mutualistic guild can be ecologically different, they may still be interchangeable in their net effects on fitness of a shared mutualist based on where their effects occur in the life cycle. Contrary to much of the literature on multi-species mutualisms, we find that while ant partners are beneficial, partner diversity has no measurable benefit to their shared mutualist and may even be somewhat costly. As studies accumulate across different types of multi-partner mutualisms, particularly those spanning simultaneous/sequential partnerships and leveraging demographic data from the complete life cycle, our field will be better poised to understand whether, how, and under what conditions mutualist diversity is neutral, costly, or beneficial.

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Data and Code Availability

This section will be filled out once double blind reviews are complete.

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Appendix A: Additional Methods and Parameters

In addition to the models described in the body of the paper, we fit several other models using data from previous studies. These models are described below.

Seeds Per Fruit. With data from Miller et al. (2006), we fit a model for the number of seeds produced by every fruit on a cholla ($\kappa(a')$) in year $t + 1$ based on the ant partner a' in year $t + 1$. We fit this model to seed data y^κ using a Negative Binomial distribution and the log link function:

$$y^\kappa \sim \text{NegativeBinomial}(\hat{\kappa}, \hat{\phi})$$

$$\hat{\phi} = \beta_0^\phi$$

825 The data used for this model did not include data on ants in the “other” category, so we used the data from vacant plants to parameterize seeds per flower for plants with “other” ants in the IPM.

We found that vacant plants produced the most mean seeds (147.2 per fruit), followed by *L. apiculatum* tended plants (142.4 per fruit), and finally, *C. opuntiae* tended plants (115.0 per fruit).
828

Recruit Size Distribution. We fit this model to recruit size data y^η using a Normal distribution with the identity link function:

$$y^\eta \sim N(\hat{\eta}, \hat{\sigma})$$

where $\hat{\sigma}$ is estimated with a non-informative prior.

We found that the mean size of recruits is $\log(-2.097)m^3$ with an interquartile range from
831 $\log(-2.173)m^3$ to $\log(-1.712)m^3$.

Germination. With germination data Miller (2007), we fit two models for the probability of germinating from the first year seedbank (γ_1) or the second year seedbank (γ_2) in year $t + 1$, with no fixed or random effects. These models were fit to germination data $y^{\gamma_1}, y^{\gamma_2}$ using the binomial distribution with logit link functions:

$$y^{\gamma_1} \sim \text{Binomial}(\hat{\gamma}_1)$$

$$y^{\gamma_2} \sim \text{Binomial}(\hat{\gamma}_2)$$

We found that the mean germination rates for seeds in the seedbank for one year is 0%, with an interquartile range of 0% and 1%. We found that the mean germination rates for seeds in the
834 seedbank for a second year is 0%, with an interquartile range of 0% to 0.4%. Seeds are more likely to germinate in their first year in the seedbank, but most seeds will never germinate.

Pre-Census Survival. With recruit census data Miller et al. (2006), we fit a model for the probability of a seedling (which germinates in early Fall) surviving to when we census in May (δ) of year $t + 1$ (accounting for missed mortality events), with fixed effects of the previous size x and random effects of the transect m . We fit this model to pre-census survival data y^δ using a Bernoulli distribution with a logit link function:

$$y^\delta \sim \text{Bern}(\hat{\delta})$$

where $m \sim N(0, \sigma_{\text{transect}}^2)$ is the random effect of transect where the recruited individual was
837 analyzed for survival.

We found that plants have a 16.2% probability of surviving from germination to the next census. Our model estimated this very well, expecting a 16.3% probability.

840 *Portfolio Effect.* We compared the effects of partner diversity (estimated as $\lambda_S^4 - \lambda_S^0$) for the synchronized and non-synchronized models. We determined that non-synchronous effects of ant partners are greater than synchronous effects of ant partners only 50% of the time. This means
843 there is no evidence of portfolio effect in this system.

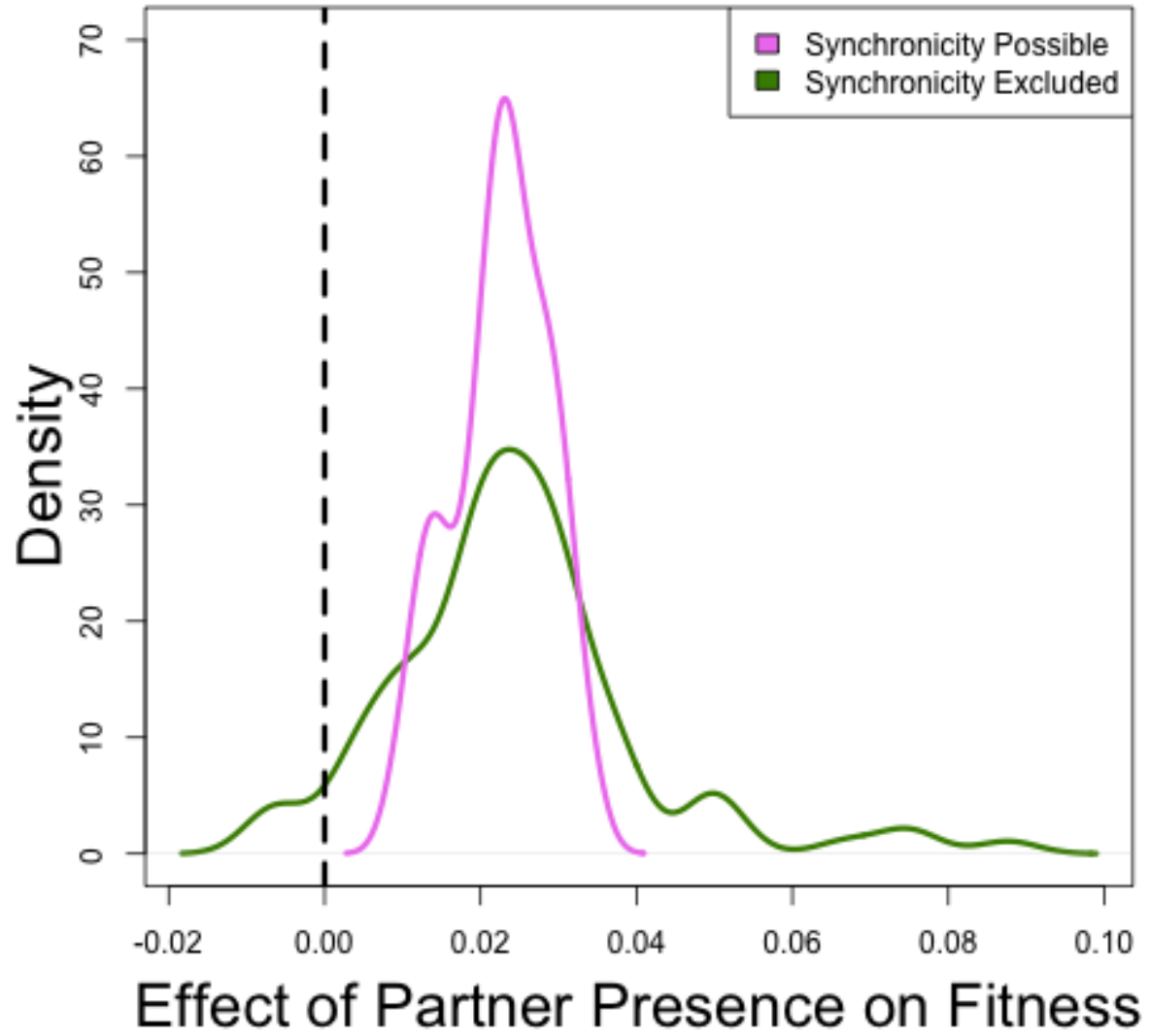


Figure A1: The distributions of $\lambda_S^4 - \lambda_S^0$ for the non-synchronous and synchronous models are shown in pink and green respectively. The vertical dashed line shows where the effect of partners on the fitness of the cholla is 0 (to the left the partners have a negative effect, to the right the partners are beneficial).

Appendix B: Observed Herbivory Data

Herbivory is an important driver in this population and shapes the range and demography of cholla. Herbivore presence has been shown to negatively impact growth and fecundity of cholla populations (Miller et al., 2009). Ant visitors are believed to offer defensive benefits to the plants they tend in this system, leading to the hypothesis that ant presence would be correlated with reduced herbivory. Therefore, herbivore protection is the likely driver behind the increased survival, growth, and reproductive rates of tended plants. Fluctuations in herbivore communities across time would also lead to potentially important fluctuations in ant visitor responses and therefore cholla demographic responses.

Here we conduct an analyses of herbivory levels on plants with different ant visitors and contrast them to herbivory levels on plants with no visitors. Evidence that herbivory is decreased for tended plants further strengthens the results presented in this paper that ant presence is beneficial on a demographic level for cholla.

Herbivory data was collected during censuses any time herbivores were identified on a plant. This involved noting the type and quantity of herbivores observed. This data has been taken consistently since 2017, so the analysis below considers 6 years of data. We considered only plants which were reproducing, since prior work shows that flowering significantly elevates herbivore pressure (Miller et al., 2006). The proportion of reproducing plants that experienced herbivory was calculated for each ant state separately. Analysis showed that ant presence is correlated with lower herbivore visitation. 40% of vacant cacti experienced herbivory. Plants tended by Other ants experienced similar, though lower, levels of herbivory on reproducing plants, with herbivores detected on 37.5% of plants. Herbivores were detected on 25% of plants tended by *C. opuntiae* ants and on 11% of plants tended by *L. apiculatum* ants. These results indicate that ant presence is correlated with lower levels of herbivory and that partner identity has an impact on the level of herbivory. They also indicate that the partner correlated with the lowest levels of herbivory is *L. apiculatum* ants. These findings are consistent with literature findings which show that *L. apiculatum* ants

are the most aggressive (therefore the most effective against herbivores), but differ from previous findings that *C. opuntiae* may not offer defensive benefits (Miller, 2007).

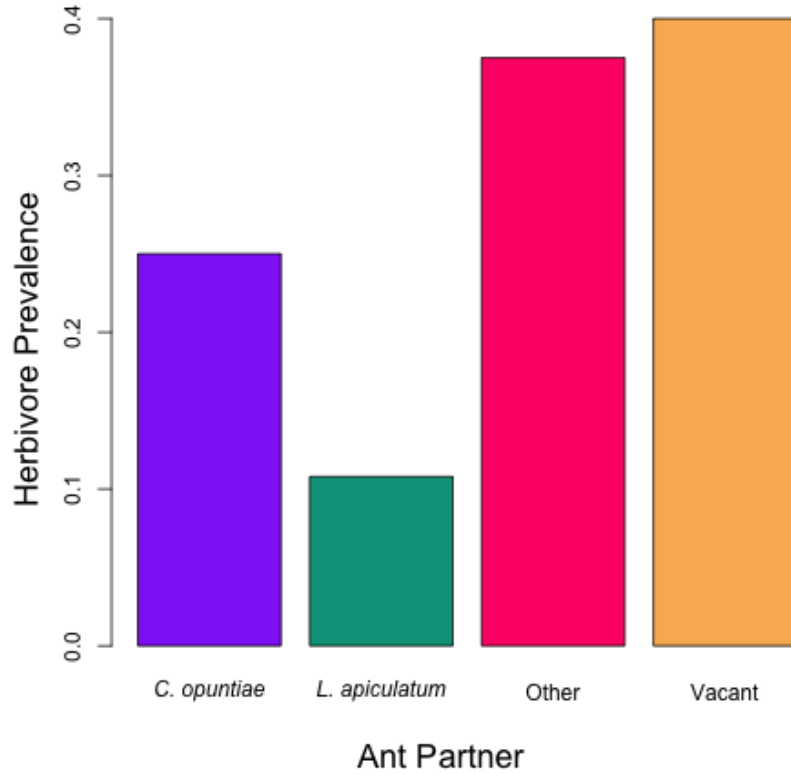


Figure A2: The proportion of reproducing plants which are visited by herbivores. Each bar represents the subset of the cacti population in a different ant state.

Appendix C: Alternative Ant Transition Simulations

In addition to the competitive exclusion model defined and analyzed in the body of the paper, we simulated results from several other potential models. We chose to include competitive exclusion as our primary results in the paper because we believe it to be the most biologically realistic. However, in building and testing of alternative models we found that the method of ants occupying plants significantly impacts the fitness of the population. We tested two alternative transition models,

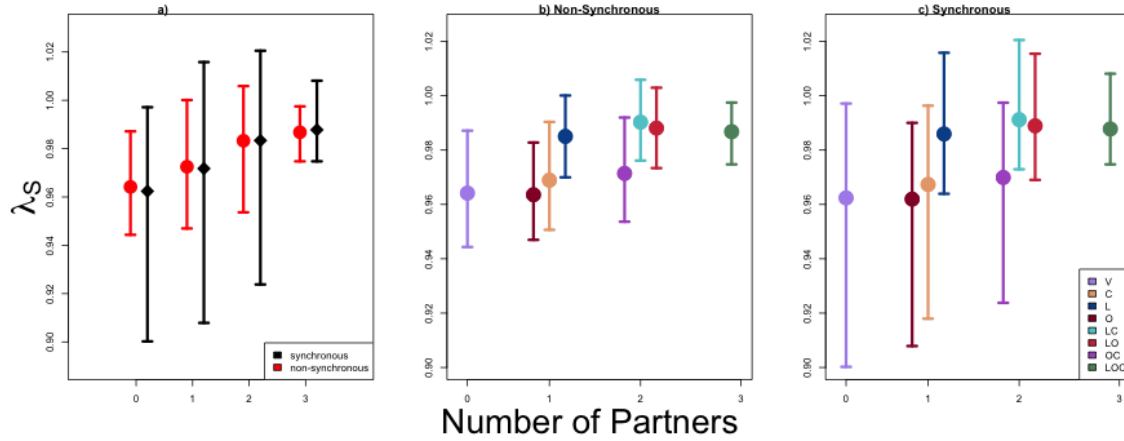


Figure A3: Panel a) the mean estimated λ_{NS} and λ_S for different numbers of partners (0-3) for the synchronous IPM (black circle) and the non-synchronous IPM (red diamond). The lines show the posterior distribution spread of the estimated λ values. Panels b-c) the mean estimated λ_{NS} and λ_S respectively, for each simulated combination of ant partner as the filled in circles. The lines show the posterior distribution spread of estimated λ values. The letters in the legend correspond to what ant partners are present (V = Vacant, C = *C. opuntiae*, L = *L. apiculatum*, O = other).

one called the frequency based model and one called the equal likelihood model.

879 *Frequency Based Model.* The first alternative hypothesis we tested was what we called the frequency based model. In this model rather than the proportion of vacant cacti being maintained, the proportion of cacti occupied by each species is maintained and when one is removed it is replaced
882 with vacancy. This version of the model assumes that the frequency of each ant we see is reflective of the real frequency of populations rather than some other mechanism. With this model we found very clear evidence of Sampling Effect in the system. When only *C. opuntiae*, Other ants, or both
885 ants are present, there is very little difference in the fitness of the cacti from when no partners are present. Only when *L. apiculatum* ants are present do we see an increase in the fitness of the focal mutualist (Figure A3a). In this simulation, the more partners that are present the higher
888 the fitness of the focal mutualist is, confirming that partner diversity would be beneficial through sampling effect if this transition model were correct. (Figure A3b).

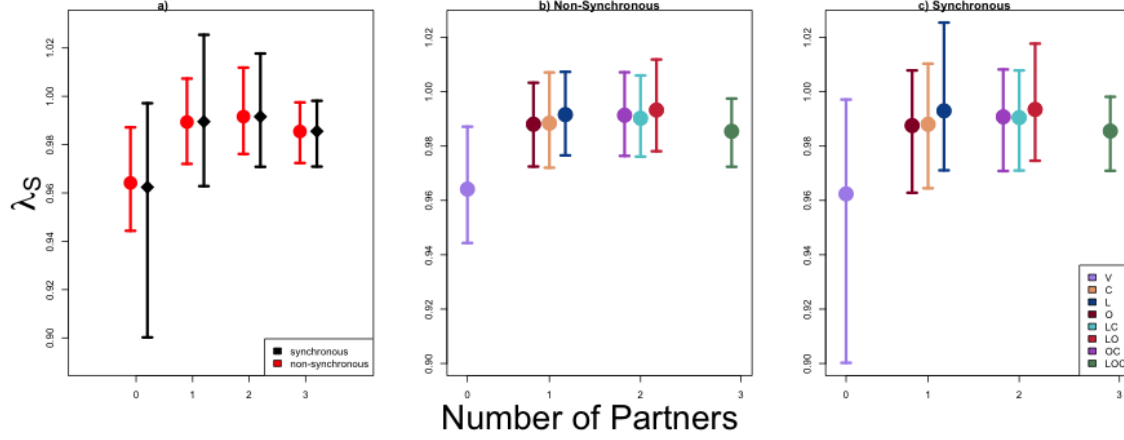


Figure A4: Panel a) the mean estimated λ_{NS} and λ_S for different numbers of partners (0-3) for the synchronous IPM (black circle) and the non-synchronous IPM (red diamond). The lines show the posterior distribution spread of the estimated λ values. Panels b-c) the mean estimated λ_{NS} and λ_S respectively, for each simulated combination of ant partner as the filled in circles. The lines show the posterior distribution spread of estimated λ values. The letters in the legend correspond to what ant partners are present (V = Vacant, C = *C. opuntiae*, L = *L. apiculatum*, O = other).

Equal Likelihood Model. The second alternative hypothesis we tested was what we called the equal likelihood model. In this model we preserved the observed pattern of size-dependent vacancy/occupancy, but occupancy was manipulated to be equally likely for all partner identities. This was designed to remove the effect overwhelming numbers of *L. apiculatum* ants may have. Despite very different proportions, we found very similar outcomes to the competitive exclusion model analyzed in the paper. All ants are beneficial, but having more than one is not necessarily any better than having an individual species as a partner (Figure A4b). Partner presence is beneficial, but neither identity nor number of partners appears to be important (Figure A4a).

Appendix D

Below are the results reported of all statistical models not described in the main body of the text.

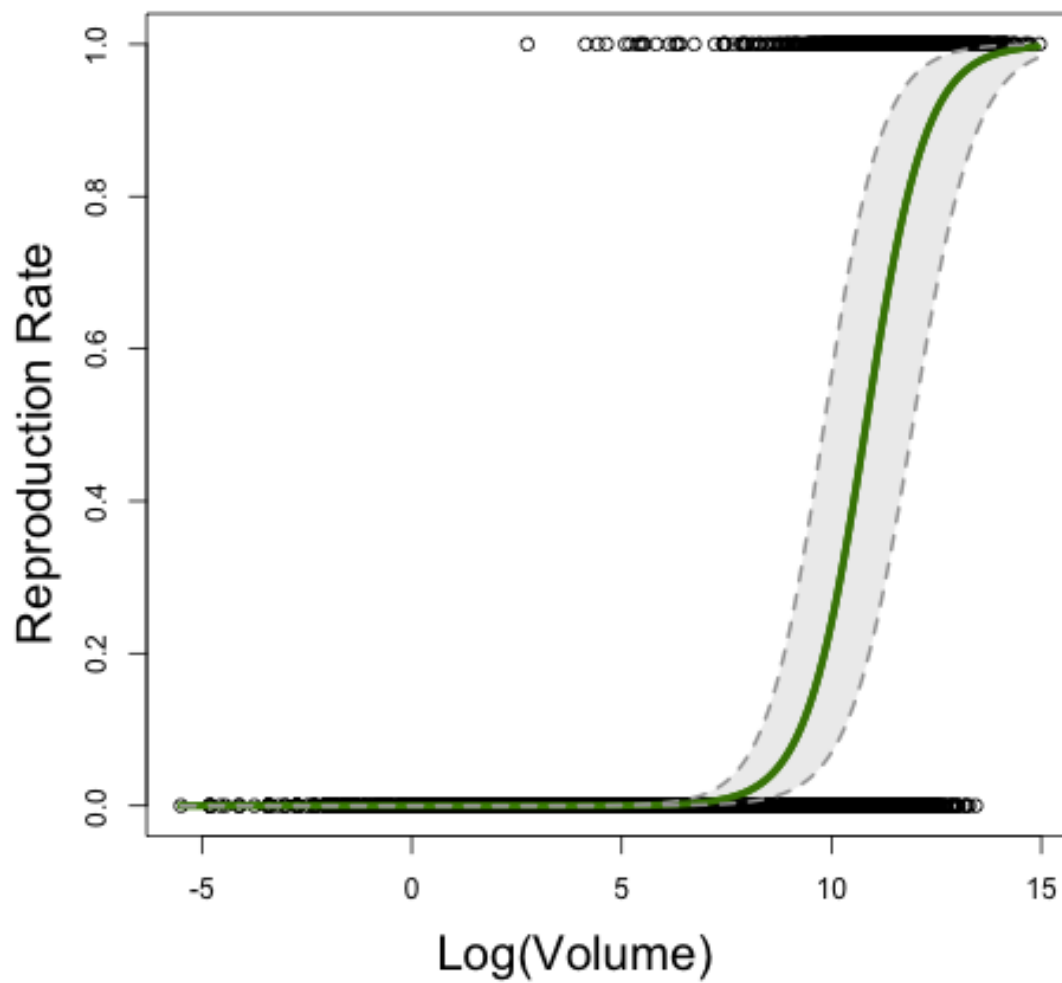


Figure A5: The probability of a cholla plant reproducing based on its size. The green line shows the average probability, the gray surrounding area shows the 90% confidence interval, and the black points show the actual data.

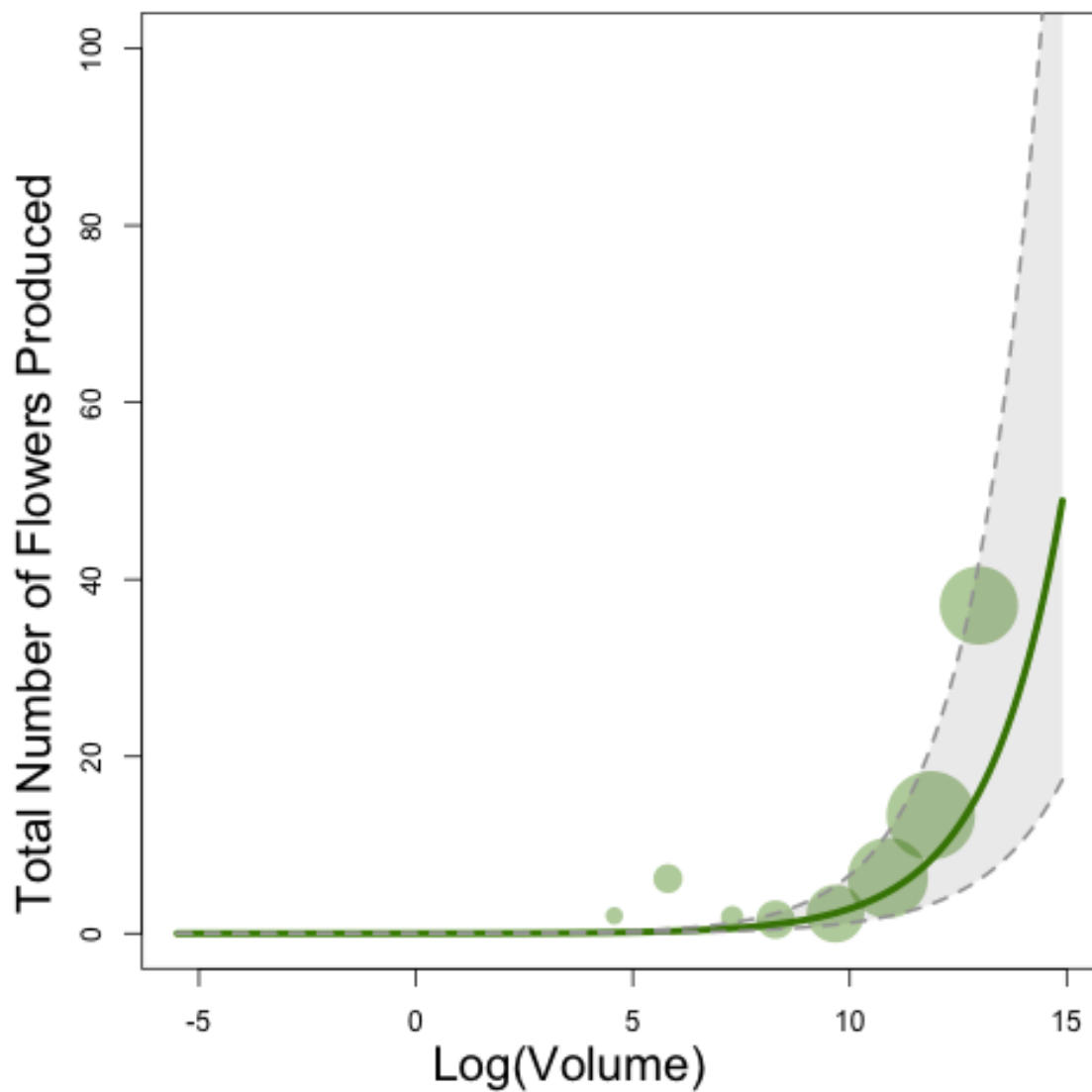


Figure A6: The number of flowers produced by a cholla plant based on its size. The green line shows the average number of flowers produced, the gray surrounding area shows the 90% confidence interval, and the green points show the binned data.

900 *Reproduction Model.* The probability of a plant reproducing in a given year is highly size dependent. The mean probability of reproducing remains at about 0% until the plant reaches a medium size, after which the mean probability of reproducing increases steadily before reaching about 100%
903 at large sizes (Figure A5).

The number of flowers produced by a reproducing plant is also highly size dependent. The mean number of flowers produced are 0 until the plant reaches a medium size, after which the
906 mean number of flowers produced increases to about 45 at the largest sizes (Figure A6).

Seeds Per Flower Model. Each viable flower on a plant produces between 97 and 257 seeds (Figure A7). This number is affected by the ant partner present, as shown in previous work (Ohm and
909 Miller, 2014). *C. opuntiae* tended plants produce a mean of 115 seeds per flower. *L. apiculatum* tended plants produce a mean of 143 seeds per flower. Vacant plants produce a mean of 148 seeds per flower. Comparison between posterior distributions revealed that *C. opuntiae* tended plants
912 produced fewer seeds per flower than *L. apiculatum* tended plants and vacant plants 80% and 87% of the time. Vacant plants produced more seeds per flower than *L. apiculatum* tended plants only 57% of the time.

915 *Pre-census Survival Model.* Pre-census seed survival rates fall between 0% and 95% with the mean pre-census seed survival at 18%.

Germination Model. Seeds have a slightly higher probability of germinating in year one than in
918 year two. Seeds in year one experience germination rates between 50% and 100% with a mean of 62% germination. Seeds in year two experience germination rates between 50% and 98% with a mean of 58% germination.

921 New recruits are expected to be between the sizes of 0.11 cm^3 and 0.38 cm^3 with a mean size of 0.20 cm^3 .

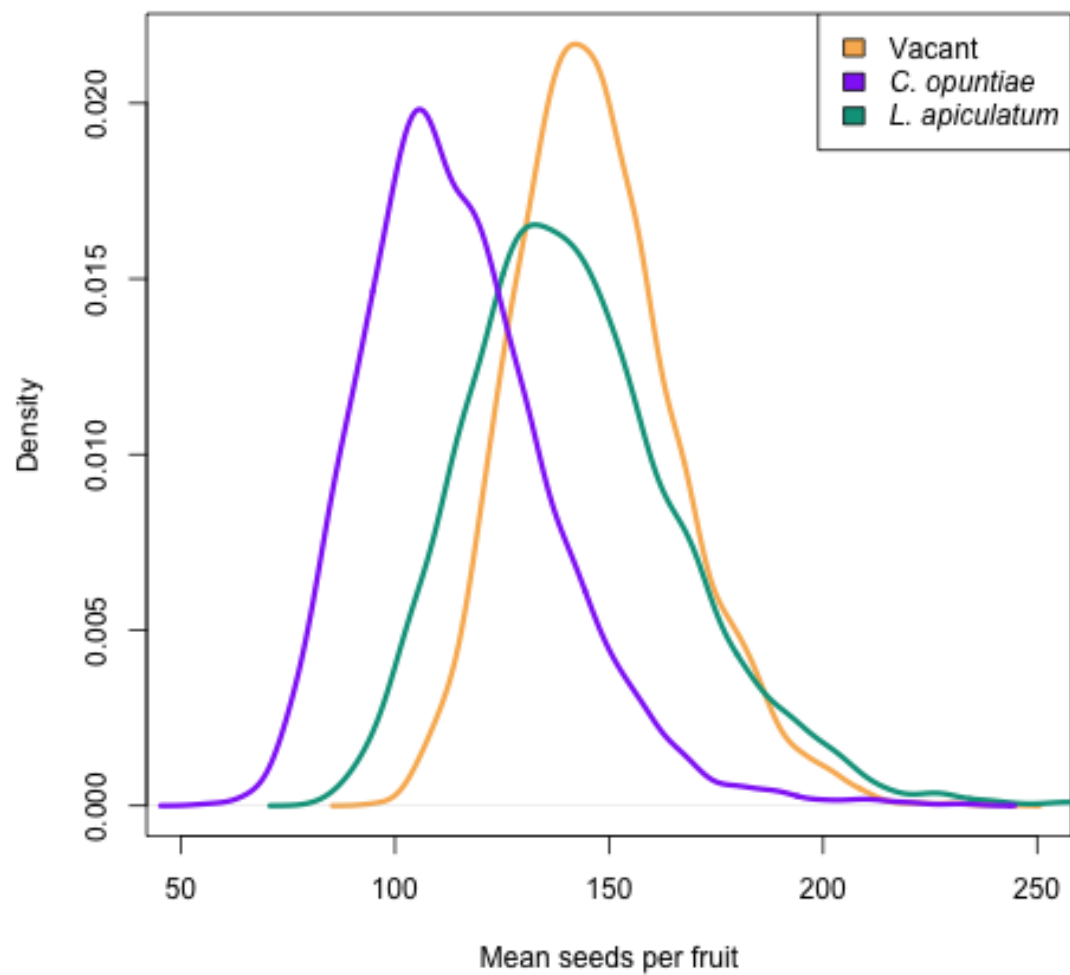


Figure A7: The mean number of seeds produced per fruit by the ant partner present. The teal, purple, and yellow lines show the mean seeds produced by each flower on plants tended by *L. apiculatum* ants, *C. opuntiae* ants, and no ants respectively.