Soliton crystals in Kerr resonators

Daniel C. Cole1,2, Erin S. Lamb1, Pascal Del’Haye1,†, Scott A. Diddams1, and Scott B. Papp1

1National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), Boulder, CO 80305, USA

2Department of Physics, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO 80309, USA

†Present address: National Physical Laboratory (NPL), Teddington, TW11 0LW, United Kingdom

Corresponding author: [daniel.cole@nist.gov](mailto:daniel.cole@nist.gov)

**Self-organized solitons confined to an optical resonator would offer unique capabilities for experiments in communication, computation, and sensing with light. Here we report the observation of soliton crystals in monolithic Kerr microresonators—spontaneously and collectively ordered ensembles of co-propagating solitons whose interactions discretize their allowed temporal separations. We unambiguously identify and characterize soliton crystals through analysis of their ‘fingerprint’ optical spectra, which arise from spectral interference between the solitons. We identify a rich space of soliton crystals exhibiting crystallographic defects, and we perform time-domain measurements to directly confirm our inference of their crystal structure. Soliton crystallization is explained by long-range soliton interactions mediated by resonator mode degeneracies, and we probe the qualitative difference between soliton crystals and the disorganized soliton liquid that would form in the absence of these interactions. Our work explores the physics of monolithic Kerr resonators in a regime of dense soliton occupation and offers a way to increase the efficiency of Kerr combs; further, the extreme degeneracy of the configuration space of soliton crystals suggests an implementation for an on-chip optical buffer.**

Optical solitons have recently found a new realization in frequency combs generated in passive, monolithic Kerr-nonlinear resonators1 (microcombs). These microcombs are a major step forward in frequency-comb technology2 because they enable generation of combs in platforms having low size, weight, and power requirements. When a continuous-wave pump laser is coupled into a whispering-gallery mode of a high-Q Kerr resonator, broad optical spectra are generated through cascaded four-wave mixing. With appropriate power and laser-resonator frequency detuning, the resulting fields modelock to form circulating dissipative Kerr-cavity solitons3–10. These solitons are pulsed excitations atop a non-zero continuous wave background, and have robust deterministic properties that may be tailored through resonator design11,12 and tuned in real-time through manipulation of the pump laser. Microcombs based on solitons extend the range of accessible comb repetition rates and provide a route towards chip-integrated self-referenced comb technology.

Single solitons and ensembles of several co-propagating solitons have been reported in Kerr resonators constructed from a variety of crystalline and amorphous materials3–7, with repetition rates ranging from 22 GHz6 to 1 THz7. Formally equivalent to monolithic Kerr resonators are lower repetition-rate fibre-loop resonators, where generation and control of soliton ensembles has recently been explored experimentally13–16. These systems are described by a driven and damped nonlinear Schrodinger equation known as the Lugiato-Lefever equation within the field of microcombs. This equation supports stationary nonlinear periodic wave solutions variously known as primary comb, cnoidal waves, and Turing patterns, and also supports localized soliton-like solutions8,9,17–19. Numerical studies of related quasi-continuous-wave-pumped fibre-loop resonators20–22 have characterized stationary and non-stationary nonlinear wave arrays which form spontaneously through modulation instability20. An analogy to the states of matter presented in these studies has subsequently been extended to other systems including e.g. single-pass nonlinear fibre systems23 and the harmonically mode-locked fibre laser24,25, where a mechanism of soliton crystallization specific to that laser system was identified that is based on two different timescales of the laser gain medium26.

In this work, we present an observation of and model for soliton crystallization in passive, monolithic Kerr resonators. The soliton crystals we have observed are self-organized ensembles of independent, particle-like excitations, which fill the angular domain of the resonator. These ensembles exhibit a rich configuration space supporting various crystallographic defects27: vacancies (Schottky defects), shifted pulses (Frenkel defects), and periodicity over multiple scales (superstructure). These defects present evidence that soliton crystals are distinct from primary comb, and the crystallization mechanism that we have identified is different from the basic nonlinear dynamics of the system that lead to the well-known primary comb and spatiotemporal chaos (also known as modulation-instability comb)8–10,28 solutions. In contrast with soliton crystals, primary comb and spatiotemporal chaos are extended patterns from which constituent pulses cannot be isolated and which are not degenerate with single solitons in the microcomb power-detuning phase plane8.

Soliton crystals introduce a new regime of soliton physics into the field of microcombs. In passive continuous-wave-pumped ring resonator systems solitons exhibit locally attractive interactions at small separations that culminate in pair-annihilation or merger14,29; thus without, for example, manipulation of the pump laser to control these interactions30, it has so far only been possible to observe sparsely populated ensembles of well-separated solitons in experiment. In contrast, soliton crystals consist of tightly packed solitons that fully occupy the resonator and exhibit novel collective temporal ordering. Crystallization of Kerr solitons manifests in our experiments with distinctive ‘fingerprint’ optical spectra arising from spectral interference between interacting solitons – similar spectra have been previously reported, but until now remained unexplained31,32.

A series of physical effects supported by the resonator itself is responsible for soliton crystals, and differentiates them from previously reported single- and multi-soliton microcombs. First, since the solitons are tightly packed, a soliton crystal has intracavity optical power similar to the spatiotemporal chaos that precedes it in the experiment and that fills the angular domain of the resonator3,8. Hence, soliton crystals form stably through adiabatic pump-laser frequency scans, without the complex techniques used in other demonstrations of Kerr solitons to avoid dissipation of the solitons due to thermal changes. Second, destructive soliton collisions are eliminated through a naturally arising collective soliton interaction mediated by an extended background wave in the cavity. This wave is the result of interference between the pump laser and excess light of a different frequency that is present due to spectrally localized enhancement of conversion efficiency caused by an avoided mode crossing in the resonator spectrum.

**Results**

**Adiabatic generation of soliton crystals.** We generate soliton crystals in silica Kerr whispering-gallery-mode resonators with free spectral ranges (FSR) of ~26 GHz33 and ~16.4 GHz34 and anomalous dispersion. Our experimental procedure is depicted in Fig 1a. A tapered optical fibre provides evanescent coupling of a ~30 mW telecommunications-band pump laser into a resonator whispering-gallery mode and out-couples the generated Kerr-soliton-crystal frequency comb. Emerging from the resonator is a pulse train with highly ordered temporal separations between pulses, which we explore in detail throughout the remainder of this paper.

We form soliton crystals by using a slowly decreasing pump laser frequency scan from ‘blue’ to ‘red’ laser-cavity detuning that terminates after the soliton comb has been initiated3. This is similar to the experimental procedure that we reported previously in generation and characterization of phase-locked microcombs31,32, for which a frequency-domain description has recently been developed35. To explore the process of Kerr-soliton-crystal formation, we record the optical power transmitted through the tapered fibre during the laser frequency scan; see Fig. 1b. By optical filtering of the pump-laser frequency, we also measure the intensity of new comb light generated by four-wave mixing. The characteristic sawtooth shape of the resonance is due to thermal bistability effects36. Three qualitatively different regimes can be identified in these traces: 1. Formation of initial primary comb8–10,28; 2. The chaotic waveform preceding the crystal; and 3. The Kerr soliton crystal. The continuity or near continuity of the taper transmission during the transition from chaos to crystal contrasts with the dramatic “soliton steps” that have been previously reported3,6. This indicates that the intracavity optical power of the crystal is similar to that of the chaos, which enables generation and stabilization of the crystals through arbitrarily slow scans of the pump laser’s frequency (for example, we are able to generate soliton crystals by adjusting the pump laser’s frequency by tuning the voltage across a piezo-electric crystal by hand over several seconds). We observe behaviour consistent with a low-noise frequency comb following transition to the Kerr crystal not only through the fibre-taper transmission and comb-intensity signals, but also in the microwave repetition frequency signal obtained by photodetection of the entire comb; see Fig. 1c.

The most striking aspect of Kerr crystals is their optical spectra, which feature dramatic line-by-line intensity variations due to multiple-soliton interference. Figure 1d presents measurements (black traces) delineating a particular progression from primary comb to chaotic comb to crystal for the prototypical Kerr crystal in the bottom panel, which is composed of a train of 24 solitons evenly separated in time with a single vacancy. Here the optical spectrum can be understood as the destructive interference between a tightly-packed train of 24 solitons circulating the cavity, which yields the prominent comb lines spaced by 24 resonator FSR, and a single, out-of-phase soliton that both “fills in” the spectrum and produces the vacancy in the time domain. We model these spectra to obtain predictions for their intracavity intensity pattern (Fig. 1e) using the spatio-temporal Lugiato-Lefever equation8 (LLE). The numerical results, colour-coded to indicate the primary comb, chaotic, and crystal regimes, have accuracy demonstrated by agreement with experiment over the wide logarithmic scale variations of the spectra. We note, however, that while both single solitons and few-soliton ensembles are steady-state solutions to the LLE, the 23-soliton crystal in Fig. 1d is not—when it is evolved under the LLE the solitons exhibit attractive interactions and pair-wise annihilation (see Supplementary Information). In fact, none of the crystals we present are stable solutions of the LLE, but they are solutions to a perturbed LLE with an altered dispersion term, as described below.

**Mechanism of Kerr soliton crystallization.** The key to understanding why soliton crystals exist can be seen in their spectra. We observe excess Kerr comb generation relative to the expected hyperbolic-secant spectrum (not shown), e.g. 6 dB near 1547 nm and 18 dB near 1541 nm in Fig. 1d, due to accidental degeneracies of the resonator mode family that supports our combs and other mode families. Such mode crossings lead to a dispersive change in the comb-resonator frequency detuning about the crossing, either increasing or decreasing the efficiency of comb formation. Mode crossing phenomena have been discussed previously: in anomalous-dispersion resonators they can inhibit the formation of Kerr solitons4,6, while they can facilitate the formation of Kerr combs in normal-dispersion resonators37. In our work in the anomalous-dispersion regime, mode crossings play a critical role in stabilizing attractive interactions within tightly-packed, multiple-soliton ensembles. Formally, the result of a mode crossing is the incorporation of an extended background wave into the soliton waveform circulating in the resonator. This wave corresponds to the interference of excess light with the pump laser. When several of these perturbed solitons co-propagate in a resonator, they interact through their extended waves and arrange themselves such that the waves constructively interfere. Each soliton then lies at the peak of an extended background wave in the resonator, similar to predictions for bi-chromatically pumped Kerr combs38. Importantly, temporal separations between solitons are therefore required to be multiples of this wave’s period, and the wave stabilizes the crystal against the attractive interactions discussed above. Further, the wave’s amplitude, and thus the strength of the crystal against perturbations, increases with the number of co-propagating perturbed solitons. Finally, we note that a mode-crossing which predominantly affects a single frequency comb mode leads, effectively, to the injection of a single continuous-wave (CW) laser into the cavity waveform, giving this interaction infinite range at least within the assumption of single-mode perturbation.

The mechanism for soliton crystallization that we observe is a synthesis of and elaboration upon previously reported phenomena: it has been shown that local interactions between cavity solitons can arise through decaying oscillatory tails39, leading to the formation of small, locally ordered soliton molecules. Further, it has been shown that the injection of an additional CW laser into a passive fibre-ring resonator can result in the generation of uniform distributions of solitons40 – this can be viewed as CW-soliton interaction. In our experiments the ‘injected’ CW laser is provided naturally by the solitons themselves.

As one specific example of spontaneous crystallization driven by the extended background wave, the spectrum in the bottom of Fig. 1d exhibits excess power near optical modes 5 x 24=120 (1547 nm) and 7 x 24=168 (1541 nm), counted from the pump laser. Also visible is suppressed comb generation where the comb-resonator detuning has been increased. Here 24 FSR is the spacing of the prominent primary-comb lines arising from the modulation instability phase-matching condition, and 24 is approximately the maximum number of soliton pulses that can be seeded into the resonator. A phenomenological application of coupled-mode theory41 could be employed to calculate the spectrum of the solitons perturbed by the mode crossing, but we find that to explain the existence of this 23 soliton crystal, and the apparently exact circumferential spacing of the pulses by radians, it is sufficient to incorporate into the LLE a reduced comb-resonator detuning on only mode 120 or on mode 168, where the excess power is largest. Then the crystal is a steady-state solution of the resulting perturbed LLE.

**A superstructured spectrum and contrast with the soliton liquid.** With the above understanding of soliton crystallization in place, we can consider a range of crystal configurations that can be explained through this universal model. To begin, we consider a second crystal spectrum, shown in Fig. 2, which was first reported by Del’Haye et al.32 This crystal exhibits superstructure—the soliton train is nearly periodic in a small unit cell but is modulated with a larger periodicity. This results from the frustrated uniform distribution of 16 solitons with allowed inter-soliton separations of 2πn/49 radians; one pair is spaced by 4 x 2π/49 instead of 3 x 2π/49 radians. Excess power is apparent in the spectrum at mode 49 (highlighted by the red circle in the plot), and we simulate this crystal by phenomenologically reducing the comb-resonator detuning on mode 49 so that the experimental and simulated spectra agree. The background wave resulting from the constructive interference of the extended waves of the solitons, each having an angular period of 2π/49, is visible in the plots of the simulated intensity in Figs. 2b and 2c.

To gain insight into crystal generation, we simulate laser frequency scans across the resonance that generate this crystal in the presence of the mode crossing on mode 49. Example scans are shown for the case without the mode crossing (green) and with it (blue) in Fig. 2d. In both scans, solitons emerge from chaos as the frequency of the laser

is decreased. In the presence of the mode crossing, they are generated with inter-soliton separations of 2πn/49 radians. A greater number of solitons emerge from chaos in the presence of the mode crossing, and this higher number helps to stabilize the crystal against thermal changes in the experiment. Further, upon continuation of the simulation, some of the solitons in the scan without the mode crossing interact attractively and pair-annihilate, while the crystallized ensemble resulting from the scan with the mode crossing remains stable indefinitely.

We investigate the pair-distribution function (PDF) for the soliton ensembles generated by these scans. The PDF is the probability that a soliton exists at position θo + Δθ given that a different soliton exists at position θo, normalized to the density. This is a useful metric to classify particle interactions which we borrow from condensed matter physics (see e.g. Ref. 42, especially Fig. 2, and Ref. 43, especially Fig. 1.1 and Chapter 3). We note that for numerically calculated discrete PDFs the absolute scaling of the PDF is not important, as it depends on the density of numerical sampling. In Fig. 2e, we plot the average PDFs for 10000 simulated scans with and without the mode crossing. The result for the case with a mode crossing is sharply peaked, indicating that the allowed inter-soliton separations take on discrete values. The result for the case without the mode crossing is continuous, with a peak near the most likely nearest-neighbour separation and periodic revivals at its multiples, falling to the value of the PDF for uncorrelated soliton positions (the density) at large separations. This is exactly the expected form of the PDF for a liquid42,43. For comparison, we plot a PDF (black, Fig. 2e) generated by simulation of a simple particle ensemble with mean inter-particle separation of Δθ = 0.155π and normally distributed noise on this value with standard deviation of σδθ = 0.18 Δθ. Thus, with a particle labelled by n = 0 fixed at θ = 0, the position of particle n is θo = nΔθ + Σnδθi, with δθi the instantiations of the random variable representing the noise on the pulse spacings.

**Soliton crystal configuration space.** We observe a rich variety of soliton crystals explained by ordering in accordance with an extended background wave as described above; many of the optical spectra are plotted in Fig. 3. Operationally, we adjust the pump laser power to provide repeatable conditions for creating particular crystals; more complex crystals occur with increased laser power, which intensifies the fluctuations in the chaos that precedes crystal generation and provides less well-ordered initial conditions. Once a crystal is generated, it is stable to small adjustments in the pump power and detuning, as the crystal structure is determined by the initial conditions for soliton formation rather than by an explicit dependence on pump power or detuning. The crystals we observe exhibit vacancies (Schottky defects)27, Frenkel defects27, disorder, or superstructure, or some combination thereof. A Frenkel defect consists of the shifting of a soliton in an otherwise uniform crystal. Disordered crystals are crystals in which the solitons fall on the peaks of the extended background wave, but their distribution across these peaks varies without any apparent regular order or favoured period.

We highlight the crystal plotted in Fig. 3n. This crystal exhibits both superstructure, with a superlattice period of radians, and a Frenkel defect. Three identical supercells per resonator round-trip yield a spectrum which has light in optical modes spaced by three resonator FSR, because the waveform’s period has been reduced threefold. The Frenkel defect, occurring once per round-trip, contributes the single-FSR lobes to the spectrum. The result is three bursts of 8, 9, and 10 solitons respectively.

Fig. 3o shows a soliton crystal with inter-soliton separations that are slightly irregular and which we have not simulated as a steady-state solution of any perturbed LLE. We expect that the formation of the crystal and the distribution of solitons are dictated by mode interactions, but that in this case our simple approximation of a perturbation to the LLE by a reduced comb-resonator detuning on a single comb mode is not appropriate.

Finally, we highlight the series of crystals plotted in Figs. 3p-3t. This series of crystals was generated by moving the pump laser closer to a mode-crossing in steps of integer multiples of the resonator FSR. This data demonstrates the influence of the background beating between the pump laser and the mode-crossing in determining the configuration of solitons in the resonator.

**Time-domain measurements of Kerr soliton crystallization.** It is recognized in ultrafast optics that it is not generally possible to infer the time-domain waveform of an optical signal from its power spectrum without additional information44. In the limit of a delta-function reference pulse, optical cross-correlation directly measures the time-domain waveform. To approximate this limit, we perform cross-correlation measurements with a reference pulse of duration comparable to that of the solitons, which allows us to precisely identify and characterize crystals and their defects. These measurements, together with our knowledge of the LLE and its solution space, confirm our interpretation of spectral data. We show a representative measurement below; for details see the Methods.

In Fig. 4, we plot the simulated time-domain waveforms of the reference pulse and crystal 3j (panel a), the simulated and measured cross-correlation signals (panel b), and the temporal spacing between peaks of the cross-correlation signals (panel c). We observe agreement between the measured and simulated cross-correlation signals, confirming both our generic interpretation of the spectrum as a superposition of solitons and the specific inversion of this spectrum to determine the distribution of the solitons in this disordered crystal. Beyond confirming our interpretation of the data, the cross-correlation measurement represents the incorporation of a new tool into the repertoire of techniques available for investigating Kerr combs.

**Discussion**

Our observation and explanation of spontaneous soliton crystallization in monolithic Kerr resonators advances the field of microcombs by exploring microcomb soliton physics in a new tightly packed regime, and it demonstrates that adiabatic soliton generation is possible in these systems with the help of avoided mode-crossings. A major benefit of using soliton crystals for microcomb applications is the enhanced efficiency Pcomb/Ppump of these combs, because Pcomb scales linearly with the number of solitons co-circulating in the resonator, each of which converts a fixed amount of power from the pump to the comb while preserving the level of the CW background. Soliton crystallization in Kerr resonators suggests a new route for customizability of frequency-comb spectra and time-domain waveforms through engineering of mode interactions4,37. An important note for applications is that the bandwidth of a soliton crystal is determined by the bandwidth of its constituent solitons, which are identical, independent excitations with properties determined by the resonator; thus, broadband soliton crystals could be generated through engineering of a suitable resonator dispersion profile, as has been demonstrated for single- and few-soliton ensembles11,12. Our work and other theoretical work38,40 suggests that it may be possible to use a mode crossing or a bichromatic pump to generate a seed crystal for creating complex, custom soliton trains, which could be populated through the use of a pulsed pump laser. Potential applications of storage and manipulation of solitons in nonlinear resonators have attracted considerable interest13–16,29,45, and soliton crystals in monolithic Kerr resonators present a possible mechanism for chip-integrated optical data storage and manipulation that exploits the enormous degeneracy of soliton crystal configuration space. We expect that soliton crystals possess greater stability to environmental fluctuations than other soliton ensembles, and this is a promising avenue for further research. Finally, we point out that it would be interesting if future work could experimentally probe the soliton crystallization phase transition by tuning the coupling between the degenerate resonator modes responsible for crystallization, and it would be worth exploring the relationship between self-organized soliton crystals and manifestly quantum fluids of light with interactions arising through optical nonlinearity46.

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**Acknowledgements**

We thank Daniel Hickstein and Kyle Beloy for comments on the manuscript, and Ki Youl Yang and Kerry Vahala for providing the 16 GHz wedge resonators. This material is based upon work supported by the Air Force Office of Scientific Research under award number FA9550-16-1-0016. Additional support is provided by the NIST-on-a-Chip program and the DARPA QuASAR and PULSE programs. DC acknowledges support from the NSF GRFP under Grant No. DGE 1144083. This work is a contribution of the US government and is not subject to copyright in the United States of America.

**Author Contributions**

E.L., D.C., P.D.’H., and S. P. performed the crystal generation experiments. D.C. analysed the data, developed the model, and performed the numerical simulations. E.L. performed the cross-correlation experiments. D.C. wrote the manuscript. All authors discussed the experiments and the model and contributed to revision of the manuscript.

**Author Information**

The authors declare no competing financial interests.

Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to Daniel.cole@nist.gov

**Figure legends**

Figure 1. Generation of a soliton crystal using the Kerr nonlinearity in a -nonlinear medium (here silica). (a) Depiction of generation and measurement of a crystal. Inset, plotted on logarithmic scale, depicts the summation of many single soliton waveforms to yield a crystal with a strong background oscillation. The right panel shows possible applications of the system in radiofrequency (RF) waveform generation, spectroscopy, and integrated photonics. (b) Taper transmission and comb power during crystal generation. A thermal shift of the resonance leads to the non-Lorentzian taper transmission profile. Three regimes are visible: primary comb (green), chaos (red), and crystal (blue). (c) A narrow measured RF beat indicates crystallization. (d) Progression of experimental optical spectra (black) through the three regimes, with simulations (colour). Range of each plot is 100 dB. (e) Simulated time-domain waveforms corresponding to the optical spectra plotted in (d), plotted against the angular coordinate in a co-rotating frame (arbitrary vertical scale).

Figure 2. Investigation of a superstructured crystal. (a) Experimental (black) and simulated (blue) optical spectra, with the red circle indicating the mode-crossing discussed in the text. (b, c) Simulated time-domain power of 16 nearly-uniformly distributed solitons, corresponding to the simulated spectrum in (a), on linear (b) and logarithmic (c) scales. (d) Bottom: Plots of the intracavity power during a simulated scan across the resonance, without (green) and with (blue) a mode crossing. Top: Final waveforms. Inset: Histogram of the number of solitons generated in 10000 simulated scans. (e) Average pair-distribution functions for 10000 simulated scans across the resonance with (blue) and without (green) a mode crossing. The width of the peaks in the discrete pair-distribution functions is a single bin. The expected PDF of a simple 1-d liquid (see text) is plotted for comparison (black).

Figure 3. A taxonomy of soliton crystals. Measured optical spectra are shown in black, simulations are shown in colour. Schematic depictions of the soliton distribution in the resonator are shown to the right of each spectrum. Major ticks in the schematic diagram indicate the location or expected location of a soliton. Minor ticks indicate peaks of the extended background wave due to the mode crossing. (a) A perfect soliton crystal, consisting of 25 uniformly-distributed solitons. (b-e) Soliton crystals exhibiting vacancies. (f-i) Soliton crystals exhibiting Frenkel defects. Shifted solitons still lie at peaks of the extended background wave. (j) A disordered crystal. (k-n) Crystals exhibiting superstructure. (o) A crystal with irregular inter-soliton spacings. Darker shading indicates a smaller inter-soliton spacing. The range in inter-soliton spacings is 3 % of the mean. (p-t) A series of crystals generated as the pump laser is moved progressively closer to the stabilizing mode crossing.

Figure 4. Intensity cross-correlation measurements of crystal (j) from Fig. 3. (a) Simulated crystal (red) and reference (blue) intensity profiles. (b) Measured (black) and simulated (green) cross-correlation signals. The contrast between peaks of the cross-correlation signal, for both theory and experiment, is limited by the duration and shape of the reference pulse, and increases between soliton pairs with larger temporal separations. (c) Temporal separations between adjacent peaks for the measured (black) and simulated (green) cross-correlation signals. Mean fractional error is 3.5 %.

**Methods**

**Crystal generation:** Soliton crystals are generated in 16.5 GHz FSR disk34 and 26 GHz FSR rod33 silica resonators. The disk resonator has anomalous dispersion of ~5 kHz/mode; the rod resonator is described in Ref. 24. For crystal generation, a telecom-wavelength pump laser (typically 1550–1565 nm) is coupled into a whispering-gallery mode of the resonator using a tapered optical fiber47 and scanned with decreasing optical frequency across the resonance. A sawtooth-shaped frequency scan is used, with a period between 10 ms and 1 s. The scan range is typically on the order of 3 GHz, for scan rates from 3 to 300 GHz/s. Soliton crystals may also be generated by scanning the pump frequency arbitrarily slowly by hand. The pump laser’s power is set to between 2.5 and 6 times the measured absolute threshold power for parametric oscillation, which typically results in 30–80 mW power input to the taper. To measure the optical spectrum of primary comb, chaos, or soliton crystal, the frequency scan is stopped at an appropriate point where the desired state exists. During the laser scan, the resonator absorbs laser power and heats up, which leads to an increase in the resonant wavelength due to thermo-optic effects that increase the optical path length. This results in a triangular, rather than Lorentzian, lineshape as the laser frequency is decreased36, a greatly increased resonance linewidth, and a hysteretic lineshape that is dependent upon the direction of the scan.

Diagnostics collected during crystal generation include the optical power transmitted through the tapered fibre, this same power with the pump frequency removed using a spatial-light modulator or optical band-reject filter, and the repetition-rate signal of the generated optical waveform collected by a 50 GHz photodiode.

Because crystal generation relies on a coupling between nominally orthogonal mode families in the resonator, it is sensitive to the position of the tapered optical fibre. The taper contacts the resonator and provides the coupling between mode families. The optimum taper position for crystal generation, in terms of position within the plane perpendicular to propagation and position along the taper’s axis, is determined experimentally.

**Numerical simulations:** For technical details of the numerical simulations we perform for this work, please see the Supplementary Information.

**Simulation of soliton crystals:** The simulation of a soliton crystal exploits two independent experimental observations which are mutually confirmatory. First, the time-domain pulse train is deduced from the complicated shape of the optical spectrum of a soliton crystal by beginning with the assumption that the spectrum arises from a superposition of solitons, with no invocation of the crystallization theory we have presented above. A simple example is the pulse train corresponding to the “primary-comb-plus-soliton” spectrum in Fig. 1d, in which a soliton is added out of phase to a uniform soliton pulse train having a primary-comb-like spectrum. This soliton contributes the underlying single-FSR spectral envelope and eliminates a soliton from the pulse train in the time domain. Crystals with Frenkel defects may be understood in this way as well: the lobed structure in the spectrum is due to the spectral interference between an out-of-phase soliton which is added to the pulse train to remove a soliton, as above, and an in-phase soliton which is added to yield the shifted pulse.

Once the pulse train corresponding to the general structure of the spectrum has been deduced, the experimental spectrum can be compared to the spectrum of this pulse train calculated as a simple superposition of sech2 pulses. This comparison reveals localized excess power in the experimental spectrum, which is evidence of a mode crossing. The strength of the mode crossing, controlled in the experiment by the taper-induced coupling between the modes, is determined phenomenologically from the magnitude of the excess power, and reduced comb-resonator detuning on a single optical mode is incorporated into a perturbed LLE as described in the Supplementary Information. It is then verified that the pulse train whose spectrum matches the experimental data is a steady-state solution to this perturbed LLE, which requires the inter-soliton separations to be multiples of the period of the beat between the excess power and the pump laser. This period is 2π/μx, where μx is the mode number at the crossing. This process connects the presence of excess power on a single optical mode of the spectrum to the general shape of the spectrum, two observations which a priori are not related.

This process is applied for all of the crystal states presented in Fig. 3 except for the disordered crystals and the crystal 3o. For 10 of the 13 experimental crystal spectra to which we apply the model, the stabilizing mode crossing is visible in the data but not necessarily shown in the figure; for the other three the position of the mode crossing is inferred from the distribution of solitons and other crystal states observed in the same resonator. To model the disordered crystals, the pulse train is not deduced from the shape of the optical spectrum. Instead, excess power due to a mode crossing is identified through the presence of an asymmetry in the spectrum about the pump. The location of the excess power then fixes the allowed inter-soliton separations in the resonator, after which an exhaustive search is performed until a pulse train is found that yields the experimental spectrum. As described in the text, we have not simulated spectrum 3o as a steady-state solution to any perturbed LLE, which we expect is because the crystal is stabilized by a more complex spectrum of excess power.

**Instability of soliton crystals under the LLE:** None of the crystals we present are steady-state solutions to the unperturbed LLE. To arrive at this conclusion, we note that the temporal width of the pulses is determined by the bandwidth of the spectrum. This sets a lower bound on the range of their attractive interactions, which is too large for any of the crystals to be stable.

In Figure S4 in the Supplementary Information, we demonstrate the crystallization of an initially non-uniform pulse train due to the presence of a mode crossing, as well as the instability of the same pulse train without the mode crossing to stabilize it.

**Cross-correlation measurements:** Figure S1 (see Supplementary Information) presents a schematic depiction of the cross-correlation measurements, for which we use a commercial optical cross-correlator with a LiNbO3 crystal. We use for a reference pulse the output of an electro-optic comb generator48 whose repetition rate is locked to the repetition rate of the ~16.5 GHz crystal pulse train and which is generated from the same pump laser. When the reference pulse and the soliton crystal pulse train are sent together into the nonlinear crystal exhibiting the χ2 nonlinearity at 90o angles to each other, an amount of light proportional to the product of their intensities, at the sum of their frequencies, is emitted in a third direction. By measuring the average power of this emitted light while scanning the relative delay, we measure the intensity cross-correlation between the crystal and the reference pulse.

We operate our experiment in a through-coupled configuration, which results in destructive interference between the out-coupled solitons and the through-coupled pump. The solitons manifests as dips in the through-coupled intensity, resembling so-called dark solitons8. To correct this we use a spatial light modulator to rotate the phase of the pump laser by π so that it constructively interferes with the solitons, yielding solitons riding atop a CW background. This CW background is larger than the CW background which exists inside the cavity because it arises from the pump laser which is transmitted past the resonator.

The simulated cross-correlation signal is sensitive to the intensity profile of the reference pulse. We can measure only its intensity autocorrelation, which we combine with our knowledge of its production to estimate the intensity profile. To demonstrate that the validity of the results we present here is not sensitive to the exact assumptions we make about the intensity profile, we have also simulated the intensity cross-correlation resulting from an assumed Gaussian reference pulse with the same autocorrelation width as is measured for the reference pulse. The resulting simulated cross-correlation does not qualitatively agree as well with the experimental data in the depths of the wells between peaks because it does not contain satellite pulses which contribute to the variations in this depth, but the quantitative comparison of the temporal spacing between peaks is similar: the mean (maximum) normalized error between experiment and theory is 3.5 % (9.1 %) for the assumed electro-optic comb pulse and 4.8 % (10.6 %) for the Gaussian pulse.

The data that support the plots within this paper and other findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

**Additional References for Methods Section**

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