

# A Plasma Torus Around a Young Low-Mass Star

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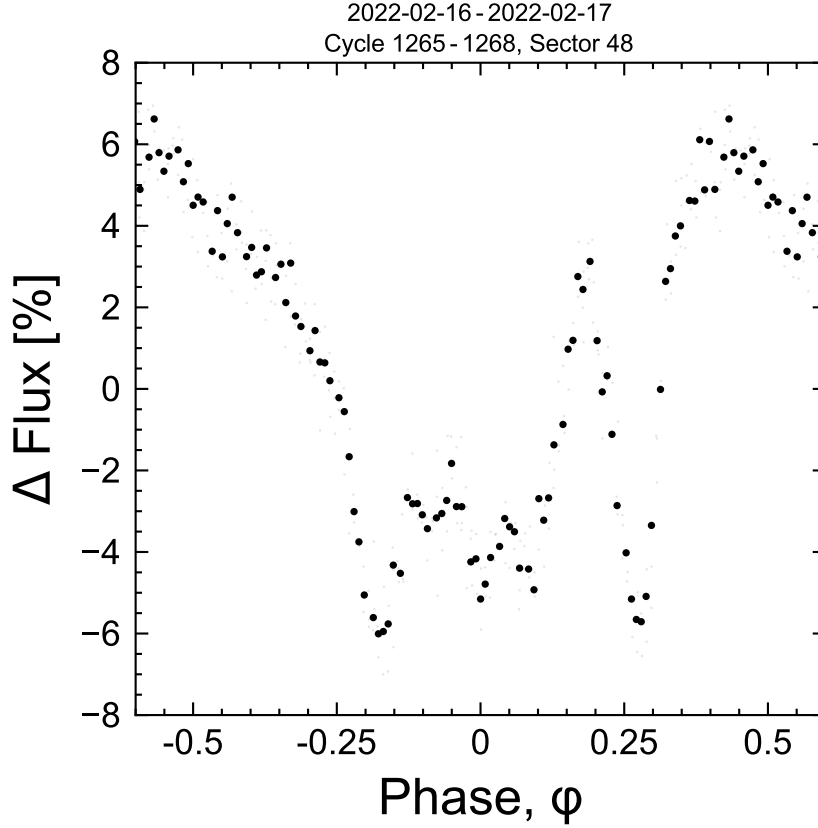
Roughly one percent of red dwarfs younger than 100 million years show structured, periodic optical light curves suggestive of transiting opaque material that corotates with the star<sup>1–4</sup>. The composition, origin, and even the existence of this material are uncertain. The main alternative hypothesis is that these complex periodic variables (CPVs) are explained by complex distributions of bright or dark regions on the stellar surfaces<sup>5</sup>. Here, we present time-series spectroscopy and photometry of a rapidly-rotating ( $P=3.9$  hr) CPV, TIC 141146667. The spectra show coherent sinusoidal Balmer emission at twice to four times the star’s equatorial velocity, demonstrating the existence of extended clumps of circumstellar plasma — a plasma torus. Given that long-lived condensations of cool ( $10^4$  K) plasma can persist in the hot ( $10^6$  K) coronae of stars with a wide range of masses<sup>6–11</sup>, these data support the idea that around the lowest-mass stars, such condensations can be optically thick; the exact origin of the material and its microphysical opacity remain unclear.

## 1 Main

M dwarfs, stars with masses below about half that of the Sun, are the only type of star to offer near-term prospects for detecting the atmospheres of rocky exoplanets with surface water<sup>12</sup>. Investment with JWST has proceeded accordingly. How an M dwarf’s evolution influences its planets—especially the retention of their atmospheres—has concurrently become a major theme in exoplanet and stellar astrophysics. Previous work has established that most M dwarfs host close-in planets<sup>13</sup> that are often subject to long circumstellar disk lifetimes<sup>14</sup>, to large doses of UV radiation<sup>15</sup>, and to a high incidence of flares and coronal mass ejections<sup>16</sup>. However, despite excellent work in these areas, the properties of the plasma and magnetospheric environments that bathe the young, close-in exoplanets have remained challenging to quantify.

One glaring example of our current ignorance is the complex periodic variables (CPVs). While Figure 1 highlights the main object of interest in this article, over one hundred analogous objects have now been found by K2 and TESS<sup>1–4,17,18</sup>. These CPVs are phenomenologically identified based on their highly structured and periodic optical light curves; most are M dwarfs with rotation periods shorter than two days. Within current sensitivity limits, none have primordial disks<sup>2,4</sup>. However,  $\approx 3\%$  of stars a few million years old show this behavior, and the observed fraction decreases to  $\approx 0.3\%$  by  $\approx 150$  Myr<sup>18</sup>.

The two leading hypotheses to explain the CPVs are either that transiting clumps of circumstellar material corotate with the star<sup>2,4,19</sup>, or that these stars represent an extreme in naturally-



**Figure 1 (Movie): TIC 141146667 is a complex periodic variable (CPV).** The online movie, available here, shows a baseline of 5,784 cycles irregularly sampled over three years. The TESS light curve is phased to the 3.930 hour period in groups of a few cycles per frame. This is the period both of stellar rotation, and (we hypothesize) of corotating clumps of circumstellar material. Raw data acquired with two minute sampling are in gray; black averages to 100 points per cycle. Similar to other stars of this class, the sharp photometric features persist for tens to thousands of rotational cycles.

occurring distributions of starspots or faculae<sup>5</sup>. While the main argument against a starspot-only explanation invokes the timescales and amplitudes of the sharpest photometric features, no independent evidence has yet been acquired for the presence of any circumstellar material. Geometrically, transiting clumps would imply an occurrence a few to at most ten times the observed rate. The clumps could therefore exist around 10-30% of M dwarfs during their early lives.

The dearth of evidence for circumstellar material around CPVs is surprising given that separate studies of young stars have, for decades, reported that stellar coronae contain both hot ( $10^6$  K) and cool ( $10^4$  K) plasma. In particular, time-series spectroscopy for stars with a wide range of masses has shown periodic high-velocity absorption and emission in Balmer lines such as  $H\alpha$ ,

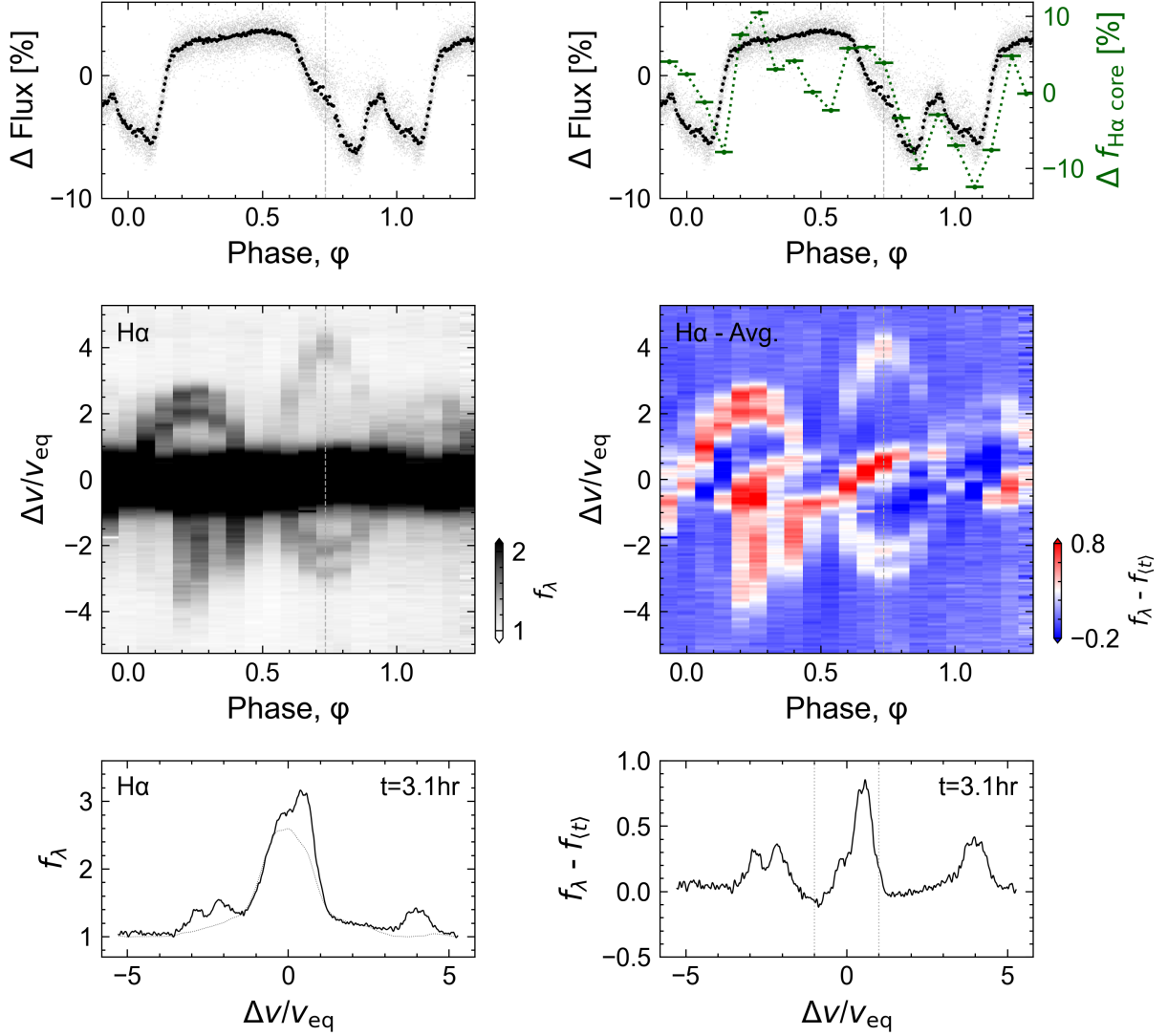
interpreted as long-lived, corotating clumps of cool plasma<sup>6,8,20,21</sup>. Such clumps are forced into corotation by the magnetic field, and the exact geometry of where the plasma can accumulate is dictated by the field’s topology. For instance, a tilted dipole field tends to yield an accumulation surface of a warped torus<sup>7</sup>, whereas in the limit of a single strong field line, accumulation occurs at the line’s apex, furthest from the star<sup>10</sup>. To date, none of these spectroscopic variables have shown any photometric anomalies<sup>4</sup>, leaving open the issue of whether they are related to CPVs.

In this study, we present the first observations of corotating clumps of cool plasma around a CPV. We identified TIC 141146667 in previous work<sup>4</sup> by searching the TESS two-minute data<sup>22</sup> for stars showing at least three sharp, periodic dips per cycle. We selected the star for spectroscopy because its brightness and rapid rotation enable efficiently studying small variations in the line profiles. We observed for five hours on 17 February 2024 (UT) using the High Resolution Echelle Spectrometer (HIRES;<sup>23</sup>) on the Keck I 10m telescope. TESS observed the star over a four week period from 30 January 2024 to 26 February 2024 with a duty cycle of 77%. During the spectral observations, TESS was performing a data downlink; TESS data collection resumed 12 hours (three rotation cycles) after the spectra were acquired. Extended Data Figure 1 shows the detailed photometric behavior of the star before and after the exact epoch of observation; the photometric morphology is similar before and after the data gap.

## 2 Results

Figure 2 shows the data from February 2024. Over timescales of years, CPVs maintain a fixed period while their photometric morphology evolves. TIC 141146667 indeed evolved relative to the February 2022 discovery data<sup>4</sup>. In February 2024, the average photometric signal showed a small brightening over 45% of the period, followed by a complex flux dip spanning 55% of the period. This eclipse feature shows two to three local photometric minima, and one to two local maxima. Its W-shape is suggestive of eclipse geometries seen in some forward models of warped plasma tori<sup>24</sup>.

The spectroscopy shows emission well beyond the star’s equatorial velocity ( $v_{\text{eq}}=130 \text{ km s}^{-1}$ ). There are at least two distinct emission components, separated by half a cycle in phase. The first component has clearer sinusoidal behaviour and is double-peaked, with peak semi-amplitudes of  $K_1=2.1 v_{\text{eq}}$  and  $2.7 v_{\text{eq}}$ . There is significant non-periodic variability in this double-peaked component: the flux excess from both peaks begins with an amplitude equal to 100% of the continuum flux early in the observation sequence, and falls to 30% by its end. The component 180° opposite in phase is similarly only detected from  $\phi=0.2$ -1.0. From  $\phi=0.2$ -0.5, this latter component appears connected to the star in velocity space. While its peak semi-amplitude of  $K_1=3.9 v_{\text{eq}}$  is achieved at both  $\phi=0.25$  and 0.75, its amplitude decreases from a 60% excess over the continuum at the beginning of the observation sequence to a 10% excess by its end. The sinusoidal period for all of these emission components is consistent with the photometric 3.930 hour period.



**Figure 2 (Movie):** Hydrogen emission from circumstellar plasma orbiting TIC 141146667. **(TODO)**For the best experience, please view the online movie available [here](#). **Panel a:** TESS light curve from 5 February 2024 to 26 February 2024 (UT) folded on the 3.930 hour period. Black points are phase-averaged; gray are the raw data. **Panel b:** Keck/HIRES H $\alpha$  spectra acquired on UT 17 February 2024. The continuum is set to unity, and the darkest color is at twice the continuum to accentuate emission outside the line core ( $|v/v_{\text{eq}}| > 1$ , for  $v_{\text{eq}}=130 \text{ km s}^{-1}$ ). While emission in the line core originates in the stellar chromosphere, the sinusoidal emission features are most readily described by a warped plasma torus. **Panel c:** Individual epochs of Panel b, visible in the online movie. The dotted line shows the time-averaged spectrum,  $f_{\langle t \rangle}$ . **Panel d:** As in Panel a, but overplotting the median-normalized H $\alpha$  light curve at  $|v/v_{\text{eq}}| < 1$ . **Panel e:** As in Panel b, after subtracting the time-averaged spectrum. In addition to circumstellar emission, the line core shows absorption during the plasma clump transits. The asymmetric stretch is set to match the dynamic range of the data. **Panel f:** Individual epochs of Panel e, visible in the online movie.

These sinusoidal emission features require circumstellar clumps of partially-ionized hydrogen to corotate with the star. Based on the period, this material’s motion is not Keplerian; it can only be explained by plasma being dragged along with the rotating stellar magnetic field. The velocity semi-amplitude of the sinusoids then gives the distance of the clumps from the stellar surface:  $2.1\text{--}2.7 R_\star$  for the closer clump, and  $3.9 R_\star$  for the other. These clumps transit in front of the star when passing from negative to positive velocity. This implies that the spectroscopic transit of the  $2.1\text{--}2.7 R_\star$  clump occurs simultaneously with the sharp photometric spike visible in the TESS data.

The behavior within the stellar  $H\alpha$  line core, at  $|\Delta v/v_{\text{eq}}| < 1$ , is more complex than outside it. For stars of this age and spectral type, one would expect emission in the line core to be generated in the stellar chromosphere and then modulated by any occulting material capable of absorbing or emitting  $H\alpha$  photons. In Figure 2e, the behavior from  $\phi=0.4\text{--}1.2$  has a simple interpretation: from  $\phi=0.4\text{--}0.9$ , a hot region first gradually crosses the stellar line profile, followed from  $\phi=0.7\text{--}1.2$  by the transit of a cool region. Phases  $\phi < 0.4$  show a mix of similar events, though the time sampling is sufficiently coarse that the interpretation is less clear. A final exercise to quantify the behavior in the line core is shown in Figure 2d, where  $f_{H\alpha \text{ core}}$  denotes the summed flux at  $|\Delta v/v_{\text{eq}}| < 1$ . This panel shows that changes in the line core flux are usually correlated with the broadband variability, except at  $\phi=0.5$ , during the transit of the  $3.9 R_\star$  clump and the occultation of the lower-velocity clump.

### 3 Discussion

Spectra of magnetically-active, rapidly rotating stars with a wide range of masses have been known to exhibit both sinusoidal emission features<sup>7,8,20,21</sup> as well as transient absorption features in their line cores<sup>6,27,28</sup> similar to Figure 2. No such stars were previously known to show complex light curves<sup>4</sup>. One interpretation for such spectroscopic variability comes from an analogy to quiescent solar prominences, which are cool condensations of plasma in the solar corona that can last days to weeks<sup>29</sup>. In our Sun’s magnetosphere, these condensations fall back to the solar surface because gravity is stronger than any magnetic tension or centrifugal force capable of sustaining them. However for stars with magnetospheric radii  $R_m$  that exceed their corotation radii  $R_c$ , the effective potential experienced by a charged particle can have a local minimum outside  $R_c$ , enabling the material to accumulate over much longer timescales<sup>9,11</sup>. Generally speaking, such material need neither transit, nor be optically thick.

Our Keck/HIRES observations are the first reported time-series spectra of a CPV, and they show that corotating circumstellar plasma clumps are present in at least one such star. Characteristic densities and masses of these clumps are  $n \sim 10^{10} \text{ cm}^{-3}$  and  $M \sim 10^{14} \text{ kg}$  (see Supplementary Methods Section 3), a similar density to solar prominences, but ten to one hundred times more massive. This observation rules out a “starspot-only” origin scenario for CPVs,<sup>5</sup> since such scenarios have no means of explaining spectroscopic emission beyond the stellar disk. Similarly, scenarios

Table 1: Selected System Parameters for TIC 141146667

Parameter	Description	Value	Source
$T_{\text{eff}}$	Effective Temperature (K)	$2972 \pm 40$	1
$R_*$	Stellar radius ( $R_\odot$ )	$0.42 \pm 0.02$	1
Age	Stellar age range (Myr)	35-150	2
$M_*$	Stellar mass ( $M_\odot$ )	$0.22 \pm 0.02$	3
$\gamma$	Systemic radial velocity ( $\text{km s}^{-1}$ )	$0.61 \pm 1.47$	4
Spec. Type	Spectral Type	M5.5Ve	4
$P_{\text{rot}}$	Rotation period (hr)	$3.930 \pm 0.001$	5
$v_{\text{eq}}$	Equatorial velocity ( $2\pi R_*/P_{\text{rot}}$ ) ( $\text{km s}^{-1}$ )	$130 \pm 4$	6
$v_{\text{eq}} \sin i_*$	Projected rotational velocity ( $\text{km s}^{-1}$ )	$138 \pm 8$	4
$i_*$	Stellar inclination $2\sigma$ lower limit (deg)	$>63$	4
$d$	Distance (pc)	$57.54 \pm 0.09$	7
$R_c$	Keplerian corotation radius ( $R_*$ )	$1.82 \pm 0.10$	6
$a_1$	Clump 1 orbital radius ( $R_*$ )	2.1-2.7	4
$a_2$	Clump 2 orbital radius ( $R_*$ )	3.9	4
$\langle \text{EW}_{\text{H}\alpha} \rangle$	Time-averaged H $\alpha$ line core equivalent width ( $\text{\AA}$ )	X.X	Y
Range( $\text{EW}_{\text{H}\alpha}$ ) <sub>1</sub>	H $\alpha$ equiv. width range from Clump 1 ( $\text{\AA}$ )	X.X	Y
Range( $\text{EW}_{\text{H}\alpha}$ ) <sub>2</sub>	H $\alpha$ equiv. width range from Clump 2 ( $\text{\AA}$ )	X.X	Y

NOTE— \* Given only  $v \sin i$  and  $2\pi R_*/P_{\text{rot}}$ ,  $\cos i = 0.11^{+0.11}_{-0.08}$ . Provenances are: 1: SED fit <sup>4</sup>. 2: Gaia DR3 photometry and lack of lithium (see 3). 3: PARSEC v1.2S <sup>25</sup>. 4: Keck/HIRES. 5: TESS light curve. 6: Derived quantity. 7: Gaia DR3 geometric <sup>26</sup>.

in which the circumstellar material is made only of dust are also ruled out. While dust may be present, to explain the H $\alpha$  emission the clumps must include plasma with a significant population of hydrogen atoms in the  $n=3$  excited state. While this plasma is undoubtedly sculpted by the star's magnetic field, it could plausibly originate from three sites: the star, an old and undetected disk, or outgassing rocky bodies. This latter possibility would render CPVs as extrasolar analogs of the Jupiter-Io plasma torus (e.g. Ref. <sup>30</sup>).

The other potential analog for the CPVs are the  $\sigma$  Ori E variables, a rare subset of B stars with radiatively-driven winds that accumulate into warped plasma tori <sup>7,24</sup>. These tori tend to have dense antipodal accumulations of plasma sculpted by tilted-dipole magnetic fields, and the transits of these clumps are thought to produce the observed broadband photometric variability through bound-free scattering <sup>7</sup> and Thomson scattering <sup>31</sup>. For  $\sigma$  Ori E and almost all of its analogs, the result is light curves that appear “simple”, resembling those of eclipsing binaries <sup>24</sup>. The two known exceptions, HD 37776 and HD 64740, show complex light curves resembling CPVs <sup>4,32</sup> and have spectropolarimetric magnetic field maps indicating strong contributions from higher-order magnetic moments <sup>33,34</sup>. There are two implications: first, the complexity of CPVs may be a direct consequence of magnetic fields with highly multipolar contributions. Second, CPVs can be a source of astrophysical false positives in photometric searches for eclipsing binaries and transiting exoplanets around young pre-main sequence M dwarfs <sup>35,36</sup>.

Pressing issues for future work include determining the composition and origin of the circumstellar material, understanding the exact role of the stellar magnetic field, and exploring the implied space weather experienced by the close-in rocky exoplanets that, statistically<sup>13</sup>, are likely to be present in most CPV systems.

The material's composition – either pure plasma, or else a dusty plasma – can be clarified by time-series optical and infrared spectrophotometry. While observations of CPVs in the optical have previously suggested chromaticity consistent with dust<sup>19,37,38</sup>, a gray opacity source such as electron scattering in a plasma transiting over starspots might also produce chromatic features<sup>39</sup>. The composition and size distribution of any dust that is present could be determined by measuring the extinction curve for one or more CPVs from 1-10  $\mu\text{m}$ . Composition and size distributions similar to debris from rocky bodies seen around white dwarfs<sup>40</sup> would indicate a rocky-body origin. Compositions and sizes similar to the ISM would be indicative of condensed dust in an M dwarf wind, similar to that formed in the environments of more evolved stars<sup>41</sup>.

The role of the star's magnetic field could be better understood through new observations, and new theory. From the theoretical perspective, there is an urgent need for rigid-field (magneto)-hydrodynamic modeling to go beyond previous work<sup>7,24</sup> and to explore the effects of non-dipolar field contributions. In particular, dynamo simulations of fully-convective M dwarfs have suggested that global-scale mean fields might be confined to a single hemisphere<sup>42</sup>; such fields could yield accumulation surfaces quite different from those that have previously been explored<sup>24</sup>. Observationally, spectropolarimetry has the potential to assess both the field strength and topology. An independent probe could also be connected the recent work<sup>43</sup> showing that CPVs are variable radio emitters with emission components that can be not only persistent, but also short-lived and highly polarized. In particular, detecting radio emission produced by an electron cyclotron maser instability<sup>44</sup> would provide a measurement of the field strength at the site of the emitting region.

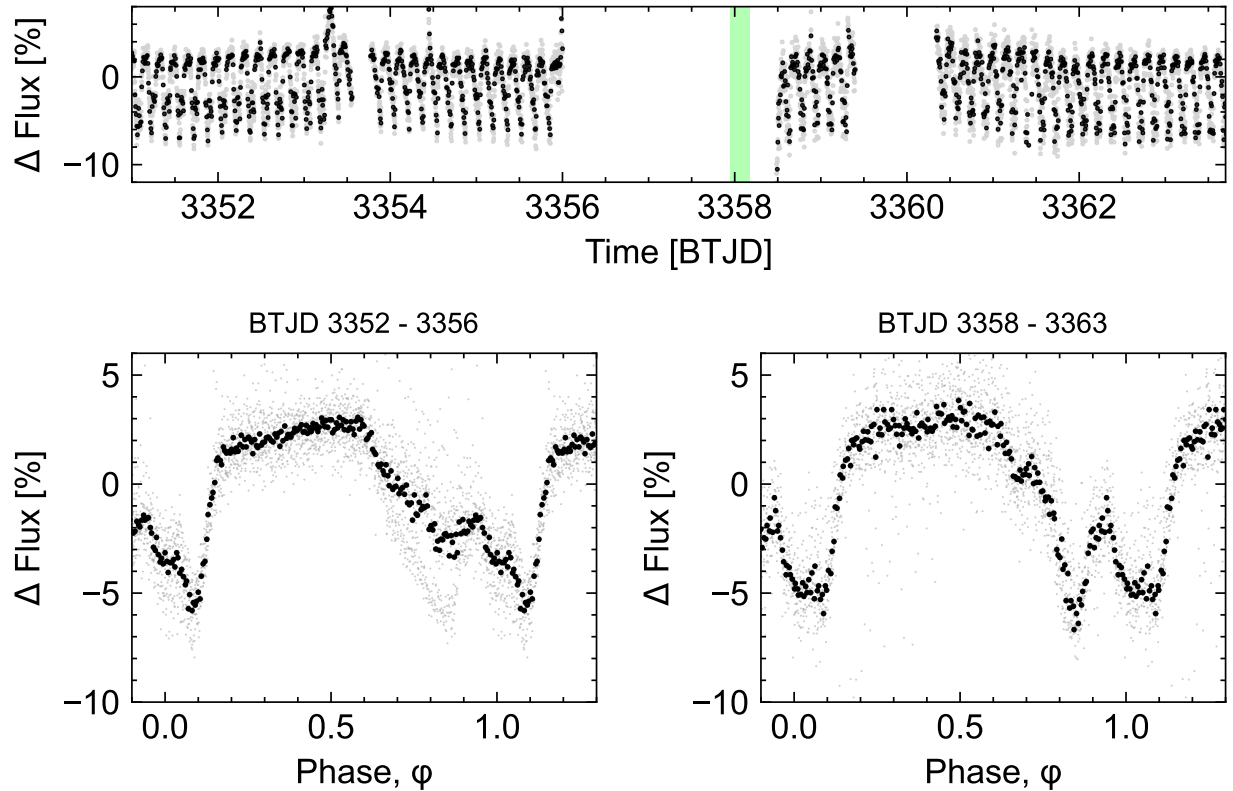
It is currently unclear what, if any, relationship CPVs have to the close-in rocky exoplanets that exist around most M dwarfs<sup>13</sup>. However, 0.3-3% of young M dwarfs show the CPV phenomenon<sup>18</sup>, and our data show that the phenomenon occurs when clumps of circumstellar material transit the star. The implied geometric correction suggests that an appreciable minority (10-30%) of young M dwarfs – the rapidly rotating ones with centrifugal magnetospheres – host similar circumstellar environments to the CPVs.

## Methods

### Observations & Data Reduction

*Photometry:* TESS observed TIC 141146667 ( $T=13.3$ ) in Sectors 14, 15, 21, 41, 48, and 75. Two-minute data were acquired during Sectors 41, 48 (TESS DDT039, PI: Kunimoto), and 75 (TESS Program G06030, PI: Bouma). The data from Sectors 14, 15, and 21 had a 30-minute cadence, which smears sharp features over the  $<4$  hour period (see <sup>19</sup>). The field is not crowded: the nearest known star, TIC 141146666 ( $T=14.5$ ), is  $25''$  from TIC 141146667 and is photometrically stable in the pixel-level TESS data.

Figure 1 shows the TESS Sector 75 data acquired near the epoch of spectroscopy. The gap



Extended Data Figure 1: Photometric evolution of TIC 141146667 near the Keck/HIRES observation (green bar). **Panel a:** TESS simple aperture photometry. The main data gaps were caused by scattered light from the Earth (BTJD 3356-3358.5) and Moon (BTJD 3359.5-3360.5). Raw two minute data are in gray; black time-averages ten minute sampling. **Panels b,c:** Folded light curve before and after spectroscopy. Raw two minute data are in gray; black phase-averages to 100 points per cycle. In the BTJD 3352-3356 window, a state switch occurred near BTJD 3353, in which the dip at  $\phi \approx 0.8$  disappeared. While the large, complex eclipse feature remained present before and after the HIRES sequence, its photometric shape evolved during the data gap.



in coverage from BTJD 3356.0 - 3358.5 occurred because the Earth was within  $25^\circ$  of the TESS camera’s boresight, yielding high levels of scattered light; this gap included the Keck/HIRES observation epoch (green bar). From BTJD 3359.4 - 3362.0, the Moon then passed within  $25^\circ$  of the camera’s boresight. Based on the observed level of scattered light in the optimal TIC 141146667 aperture, we manually masked out times from 3359.40 - 3360.13, and judged the remainder of the data during the lunar approach to be usable. Small data gaps from BTJD 3353.55 - 3353.77 and from BTJD 3360.12 - 3360.33 were caused by data downlinks at the spacecraft’s perigee and apogee, respectively.

Figure 1 shows that a large, complex eclipse feature was present before and after the HIRES data were acquired. From BTJD 3352 - 3356, this eclipse had two sharp local minima; the local minimum at  $\phi \approx 0.8$  disappeared following the flare at BTJD 3353, yielding an eclipse more closely resembling a long “V” than a “W”. Similar state changes have previously been noted and discussed<sup>2,4</sup>. The photometric shape therefore evolved during the twelve cycles spanning the 3356 - 3358 gap, since the average shape from 3358-3363 more closely resembles the initial “W”.

*Spectroscopy:* We observed TIC 141146667 ( $V=16.2$ ) with Keck/HIRES for five hours over a second-half night spanning 17 February 2024 10:47 to 16:13 (UT). The star’s airmass over this window spanned  $z=1.2$ - $2.2$ , and we opted for a fixed 15 minute cadence over the entire sequence, except for a final 10 minute exposure due to increasing sky brightness at sunrise. We observed without the iodine cell and used the C2 decker ( $0''.86 \times 14''.0$ ) in the red instrument configuration, yielding a spectral resolution  $R \approx 45,000$  ( $\delta v \approx 6.7 \text{ km s}^{-1}$ ;  $\delta v/v_{\text{eq}} \approx 0.05$ ). We binned the CCD readout by a factor of three in the spatial dimension, yielding  $\approx 1,000$  photons ( $S/N=33$ ) per pixel in the continuum at  $6500 \text{ \AA}$ , at minimum airmass. Strong winds contributed to  $1''.2 \pm 0''.2$  seeing over the night, but conditions were otherwise favorable. We reduced the echelleogram to a one-dimensional spectrum using the standard techniques of the California Planet Survey<sup>45</sup>. Figure 2b shows the result in the vicinity of  $H\alpha$  without any additional processing.

## Stellar Parameters

*Radial Velocity*—We measured radial velocities of TIC 141146667 from our HIRES spectra using a pipeline that we developed for rapidly rotating stars. Our method is based on template-matching against synthetic spectra produced by the PHOENIX stellar atmosphere code<sup>46</sup>. We used the PHOENIX models with solar metallicity and alpha element abundances, and calibrated our pipeline using the standard stars described by<sup>47</sup>. We used velocity standards spanning spectral types from G2 to M4 (Barnard’s Star), irrespective of rotation rate. We used `barycorrpy`<sup>48</sup> to calculate the velocity corrections due to Earth’s motion around the solar system barycenter and due to Earth’s daily rotation about its axis. Our analysis code reproduces the systemic velocities of known velocity standards<sup>47</sup> with an RMS of  $0.66 \text{ km s}^{-1}$ .

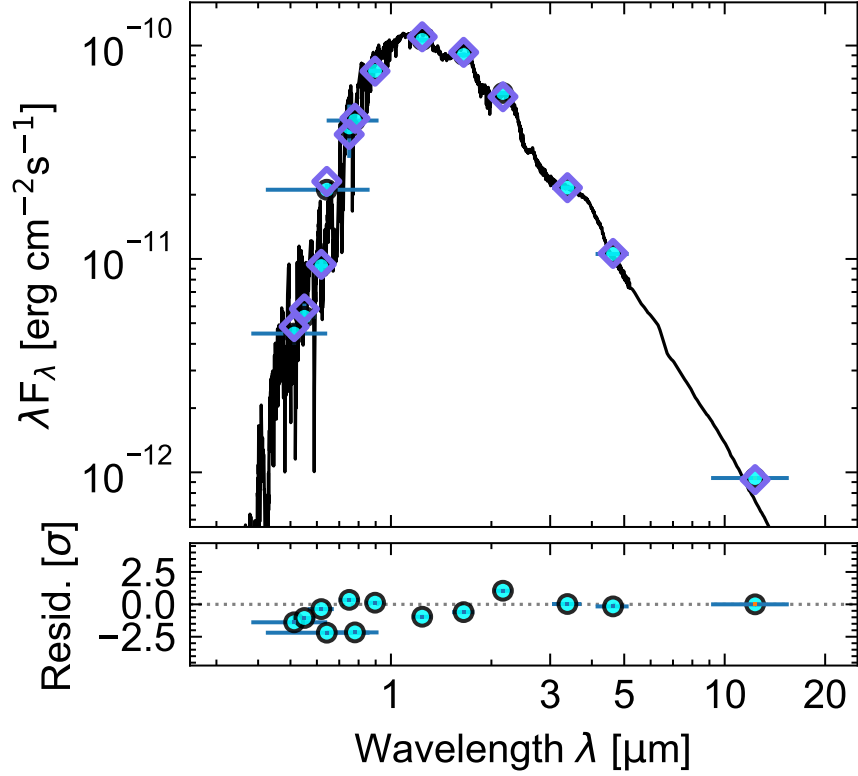
For TIC 141146667, we measured the radial velocities using regions near the K I ( $7700 \text{ \AA}$ ) resonance line and three TiO bandheads ( $5160 \text{ \AA}$ ,  $5450 \text{ \AA}$ , and  $5600 \text{ \AA}$ ). We selected these regions because they provided the best matches between the synthetic and observed spectra. We then av-

eraged the resulting redshift measurements over each order to produce the final measurement. We used the scatter of resulting velocity measurements between orders to assign the RV uncertainty at each epoch. The uncertainty-weighted mean systemic velocity over all epochs on 17 February 2024 was  $\gamma=0.6\pm1.5\text{ km s}^{-1}$ . The relative radial velocities about this mean are given in Table 2.

*Viewing Orientation*—We fitted the rotational broadening of the K I (7700 Å) resonance line using the broadening kernel suggested by <sup>49</sup>; taking the mean and standard deviation of the resulting value over all epochs yielded  $v_{\text{eq}} \sin i=138\pm8\text{ km s}^{-1}$ , consistent with the visual line broadening  $\Delta\lambda\approx3\text{ Å}$ . The star’s equatorial velocity  $v_{\text{eq}}$  based on its apparent size and rotation period is  $130\pm4\text{ km s}^{-1}$ . While this suggests that the viewing orientation could be nearly edge-on, the formal constraint is rather weak, with  $i>63^\circ$  at  $2\sigma$  (2.5<sup>th</sup> percentile of the inclination posterior).

*No Evidence For Binarity*—Any significant periodicity in the radial velocity time-series is ruled out at the rotation period for semi-amplitudes above  $2.85\text{ km s}^{-1}$  (at  $3\sigma$  confidence). This sets an upper limit on the mass of any putative companion at the four hour period of  $m \sin i < 2.4 M_{\text{Jup}}$ . Regarding possible companions at wider separations, the Gaia DR3 renormalized unit weight error (RUWE), a proxy for the goodness of fit for a single-source astrometric model to the Gaia astrometry, is 1.23, within the usual range for apparently single sources. There are no resolved sources in the Gaia DR3 point source catalog. Finally, we checked the TESS light curve for evidence of secondary photometric periods by subtracting the mean CPV signal over each sector and performing a phase-dispersion minimization analysis <sup>50,51</sup>. There were no secondary periods in the TESS data. Previous work <sup>4</sup> has shown that about 30% of CPVs show evidence for excess noise above the Gaia single-source astrometric model, and about 40% of CPVs show evidence for unresolved binary companions based on the presence of secondary photometric periods. This agrees with analyses showing that multi-periodic low-mass stars are generally unresolved binaries <sup>52</sup>. Overall, the CPV binary fraction seems consistent with that for field M dwarfs <sup>53</sup>, pointing to a weak or non-existent connection between the CPV phenomenon and (wide) binarity. For TIC 141146667 specifically, while we find no evidence for stellar multiplicity, our data are minimally constraining for the scenario of a low-luminosity companion ( $F_1/F_2\lesssim0.1$ ) at with apparent separations below  $0''.1$ .

*Effective temperature, radius, mass, and spectral type*—We adopted the star’s effective temperature and radius measured using the spectral energy distribution (SED) fitting procedure described by <sup>4</sup>. To summarize, this approach used `astroARIADNE` <sup>55</sup> with the BT-Settl stellar atmosphere models <sup>54</sup>, assuming the <sup>56</sup> solar abundances and the <sup>57</sup> water line lists. This approach fitted for the stellar effective temperature, radius, reddening, surface gravity, metallicity, and distance by comparing the measured broadband magnitudes against pre-computed model grids. Specifically, we performed the fit using the broadband magnitudes from Gaia DR2, APASS, 2MASS, SDSS, and WISE  $W1$  and  $W2$ . The resulting best-fit SED is shown in Figure 2. This method has the most constraining power for the star’s effective temperature ( $2972 \pm 40\text{ K}$ ) and radius ( $0.42 \pm 0.02 R_\odot$ ); the surface gravity, metallicity, and reddening are only weakly constrained. We determined the star’s spectral type to be M5.5Ve by visually comparing the HIRES spectra against the photometric standards tabulated by <sup>58</sup>. This result agrees with the effective temperature found from



Extended Data Figure 2: Spectral energy distribution of broadband photometric magnitudes plotted over the best-fit BT-Settl stellar atmosphere model <sup>54</sup>. This plot was made from an adaptation of `astroARIADNE` <sup>55</sup>. The photometry extends from the Gaia DR3 blue passband to WISE W3; the W4 passband (22  $\mu\text{m}$ ) did not yield a confident detection. This fit yields the star’s temperature and size. The lack of excess infrared flux relative to the photospheric model sets an upper limit on emission from circumstellar dust.

the SED fitting <sup>59</sup>.

Given the effective temperature, stellar radius, and age range (35-150 Myr) derived below, we then estimated the stellar mass by interpolating against the PARSEC v1.2S isochrones <sup>25</sup>. Specifically, we used the distance metric defined in Equation 8 of <sup>4</sup> to select the model mass closest to a given observed temperature, radius, and age. This exercise yielded a mass of  $M_{\star}=0.20 \pm 0.01 M_{\odot}$  assuming an age of 35 Myr, or a mass of  $0.25 \pm 0.01 M_{\odot}$  assuming an age of 150 Myr. These masses imply Keplerian corotation radii  $R_{\text{cr}}/R_{\star}=1.75 \pm 0.07$  and  $R_{\text{cr}}/R_{\star}=1.89 \pm 0.07$ , respectively; this size scale is relevant because it is theoretically expected to set the inner boundary at which corotating material might accumulate (e.g. <sup>7,11</sup>). Our final quoted  $M_{\star}$  and  $R_{\text{cr}}$  values adopt the average of these extremes and a quadrature sum of their statistical uncertainties; we caution however that a more precise age would be needed to resolve the systematic uncertainties in these parameters.

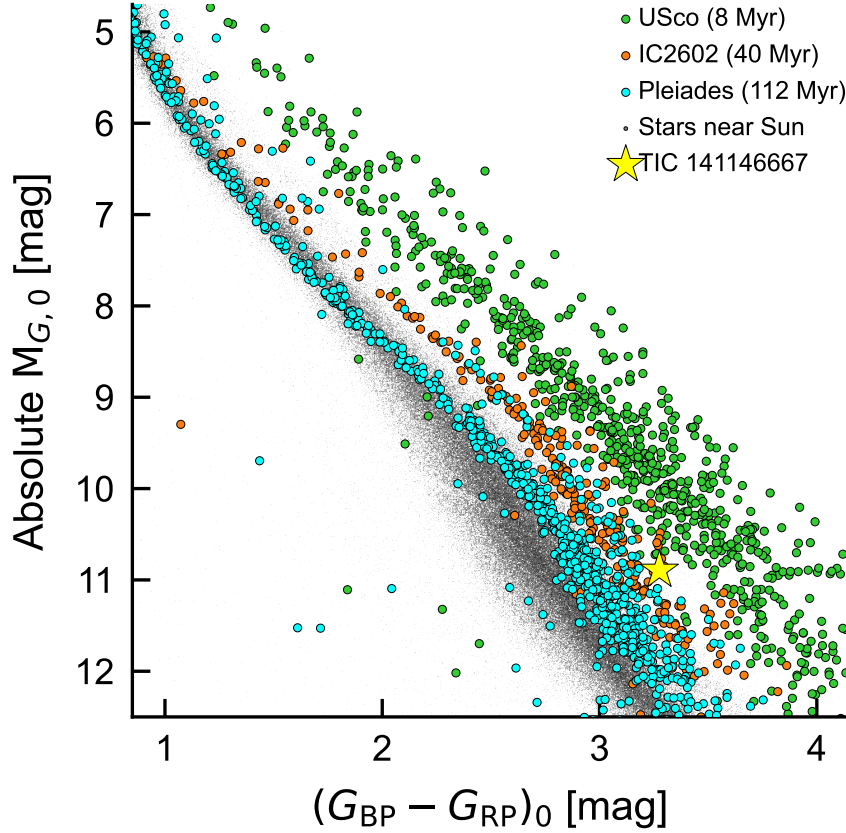
*Age: No Obvious Association Membership*—Previous work <sup>4</sup> has found that over 90% of

CPVs are associated with known young moving groups based on their positions and kinematics. TIC 141146667 is in the minority. We calculated the probability of TIC 141146667 being part of any of the nearby known groups using BANYAN $\Sigma$  v1.2<sup>60</sup>. That particular model classifies it as a field star at  $>99.9\%$  confidence. We also searched the local vicinity of TIC 141146667 for neighbors with similar projected on-sky velocities using `comove`<sup>61</sup>. This yielded no strong candidates for co-moving stars with projected tangential velocities  $\Delta v_T < 5 \text{ km s}^{-1}$  that share its isochronal youth.

*Age: Isochrones*—The color and absolute magnitude of TIC 141146667 suggest that it is a pre-main sequence M dwarf, similar to all other known CPVs<sup>2,4,62</sup>. The star’s proximity ( $d=58 \text{ pc}$ ) and its high galactic latitude ( $b=+53^\circ$ ) yield negligible interstellar reddening along the line of sight<sup>63</sup>. Figure 3 shows the location of the star in the color–absolute magnitude diagram (CAMD) relative to young stellar populations including Upper Scorpius (USco), IC 2602, and the Pleiades. To make this diagram, we adopted the USco members in the  $\delta \text{ Sco}$  and  $\sigma \text{ Sco}$  sub-associations from<sup>64</sup>, and the IC 2602 and Pleiades members from<sup>65</sup>. We assumed an average  $V$ -band extinction  $A_V = \{0.12, 0.11, 0.10\} \text{ mag}$  for USco<sup>66</sup>, IC 2602<sup>65</sup>, and the Pleiades<sup>65</sup> respectively. We dereddened the photometry using the extinction coefficients  $k_X \equiv A_X/A_0$  tabulated in<sup>67</sup>, assuming that  $A_0 = 3.1E(B - V)$ .

Figure 3 shows that TIC 141146667 falls between the USco and Pleiades sequences, while nearly overlapping with IC 2602. However, the precision of the implied age is set by the intrinsic scatter of these calibration sequences; the most luminous stars in the Pleiades of the same color have a similar absolute magnitude as TIC 141146667. Previous work<sup>62</sup> has also noted that in the Gaia passbands, CPVs tend to be photometrically redder and more luminous than single stars in any given cluster, similar to other rapid rotators. While this effect complicates any attempt at age inference based on the Gaia photometry, it suggests that the Pleiades may be a better comparison population than IC 2602. Broadly, we take the star’s location in the color–absolute magnitude diagram to suggest age bounds  $t_{\text{CAMD}} \sim 30\text{--}150 \text{ Myr}$ .

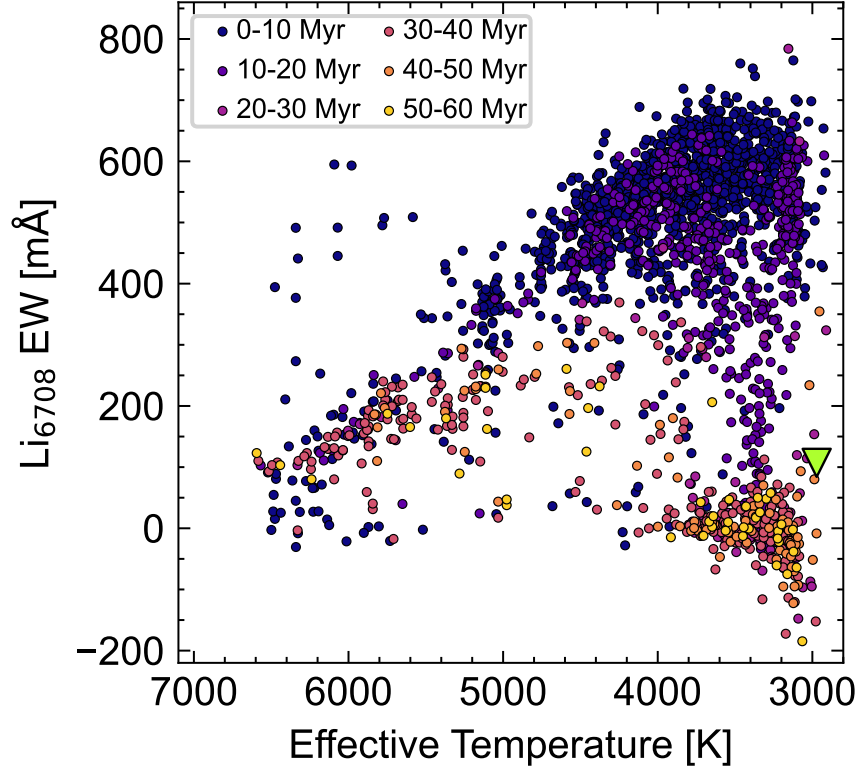
*Age: Lithium*—The depletion of lithium due to  ${}^7\text{Li}(p, \alpha){}^4\text{He}$  burning in the cores of low-mass stars has been studied for over sixty years<sup>68–70</sup>.<sup>71</sup> provided an instructive recent overview: an abbreviated summary is that sufficiently cool and young M dwarfs show the  $6707.8 \text{ \AA}$  doublet in absorption,  $\gtrsim 10\%$  below their “continua”. Unlike for Sun-like stars, the continuum for M dwarfs is poorly defined due to their molecular absorption. We attempted a lithium measurement by constructing a wavelength-binned and Doppler-corrected TIC 141146667 spectrum, assigning its uncertainties based on the measured scatter across the five hour dataset. We then compared this average spectrum against the nearest matching template from<sup>58</sup>. The data show a small depression near the expected lithium wavelength, potentially consistent with the  $\Delta\lambda \approx 3 \text{ \AA}$  line broadening. This feature nominally yields  $\text{EW}_{\text{Li}} = 71_{-13}^{+18} \text{ m\AA}$ , where the statistical uncertainties are evaluated using a bootstrap resampling technique from the statistical uncertainties in the spectrum. However the systematic uncertainties associated with the continuum normalization are larger, and likely comparable to the amplitude of the feature; we therefore treat the result of this measurement as a  $2\sigma$  upper limit:  $\text{EW}_{\text{Li}} < 107 \text{ m\AA}$ .



Extended Data Figure 3: Dereddened Gaia DR3 color vs. absolute magnitude diagram of TIC 141146667 and comparison samples. TIC 141146667 is on the pre-main sequence; stars with the same color on the main sequence are  $\approx 1.5$  magnitudes fainter. The star's location in this diagram broadly suggests an age of 30-150 Myr.

Despite uncertainties in the details, what can be stated with confidence is that lithium is not abundant in the spectrum of TIC 141146667. Figure 4 compares our upper limit against the equivalent width measurements reported by <sup>72</sup> based on the Gaia-ESO spectroscopic survey; Figure 5 shows the associated raw spectra. If the star were  $\lesssim 20$  Myr old, at its temperature we would expect to see lithium in abundance ( $> 400$  mÅ). Since we do not, we can set an empirical bound on the lithium-derived age of  $t_{\text{Li,emp}} \gtrsim 20$  Myr. The <sup>73</sup> lithium isochrones provide a point for theoretical comparison, and suggest that since  $M_K \approx 6.67$  mag,  $t_{\text{Li,th}} \gtrsim 35$  Myr is the theoretical age at which complete depletion occurs in a star with this luminosity (see e.g. Figure 7 from <sup>71</sup>).

*Age: Summary*—The main indicators for the youth of TIC 141146667 are *i*) that it is a complex periodic variable, and *ii*) that it is 1.5 magnitudes brighter than main sequence stars of the same color, while showing no indicators for binarity. The first item constitutes evidence for youth since all known CPVs are  $\lesssim 200$  Myr <sup>4</sup>. The reference sequences for the Pleiades (112 Myr, <sup>74</sup>) show a few stars of equal luminosity and the same temperature, suggesting a photometric isochronal age



Extended Data Figure 4: An upper limit on photospheric lithium for TIC 141146667 (green triangle) yields a lower limit on the star’s age of  $\gtrsim 20$  Myr. Comparison stars are from the Gaia-ESO survey <sup>72</sup>; rich clusters in each age bin include NGC 2264 (4.5 Myr),  $\lambda$  Ori (8.7 Myr),  $\gamma^2$  Vel (16.4 Myr), NGC 2547 (35.0 Myr), IC 2602 and IC 2391 (42.0 Myr), and NGC 2451A (50.0 Myr).

upper limit  $\lesssim 150$  Myr. The weak lithium absorption suggests an age of at least 20 Myr based on an empirical comparison using Gaia-ESO spectra, or at least 35 Myr based on the <sup>73</sup> isochrones. These considerations yield our adopted age range of 150 Myr.

*Upper and Low Bounds on Dust*—An upper limit on the amount of hot dust follows from the lack of an infrared excess. A lower limit follows if one assumes that most of the broadband optical depth comes from dust absorption and scattering, rather than any radiative processes associated with the plasma.

Regarding the upper limit, Figure 2 shows the SED. While AllWISE <sup>75</sup> yielded a confident W3 detection ( $9.8\sigma$ ), the W4 extraction yielded only a marginal indication ( $1.7\sigma$ ) of detectable flux. Similar to other CPVs <sup>2,4</sup>, the photometric uncertainties from WISE W1 and W2 allow at most a  $\lesssim 2\%$  excess at  $3\text{--}5\ \mu\text{m}$  relative to the stellar photosphere, and a  $\lesssim 5\%$  excess at  $10\ \mu\text{m}$  (W3). To estimate the implied mass bound, we assume a dust temperature  $T_d=1500$  K, typical for dust near the star (see <sup>17</sup> for discussion regarding dust sublimation). We then treat emission from the dust and the star as Planck functions, and require  $L_d < fL_*$ , where the factor  $f$  is set

by photometric precision of WISE and  $L_d$  is the bolometric dust luminosity. Given the reported uncertainties, we numerically find  $f < 6 \cdot 10^{-3}$ . From the Stefan-Boltzmann law we can then write  $A_d < f(T_*/T_d)^4 Q_{\text{em}}^{-1} (4\pi R_*)^2$ , for  $A_d$  the total emitting surface area of the dust, and  $Q_{\text{em}}$  is an emission efficiency parameter. Converting this constraint to a dust mass requires an assumption regarding the grain properties. We assume a grain density  $\rho_d = 3 \text{ g cm}^{-3}$  typical for silicate grains, a fixed grain size  $a = 1 \mu\text{m}$  <sup>19,37,38</sup>, and no self-absorption. This enables the assumption that  $A_d = N\pi a^2$ , for  $N$  the total number of dust grains. This in turn yields an upper limit on the dust mass of

$$M_{\text{dust}} \lesssim 4 \cdot 10^{17} \text{ g} \left( \frac{f}{6 \cdot 10^{-3}} \right) \left( \frac{T_*}{3000 \text{ K}} \frac{1500 \text{ K}}{T_d} \right)^4 \left( \frac{Q_{\text{em}}}{1} \right)^{-1} \left( \frac{R_*}{0.4 R_\odot} \right)^2 \left( \frac{a}{1 \mu\text{m}} \right) \left( \frac{\rho_d}{3 \text{ g cm}^{-3}} \right). \quad (1)$$

The analogous lower limit follows from requiring the optical depth from absorption and scattering  $\tau$  to be at least unity. The optical depth can be written  $\tau = n\sigma\ell = N\sigma$ , where  $\sigma$  is the cross-section,  $n$  is the number density,  $\ell$  is the path length, and  $N$  is the column density. For spherical dust grains in the optical,  $\sigma = Q_{\text{ext}}\pi a^2$ , where  $Q_{\text{ext}}$  is the extinction efficiency parameter, tabulated e.g. by <sup>76</sup> in their Figure 13. <sup>77</sup> calculated the relevant cloud mass scaling assuming a spherical dust clump of size  $r$ , and they estimated

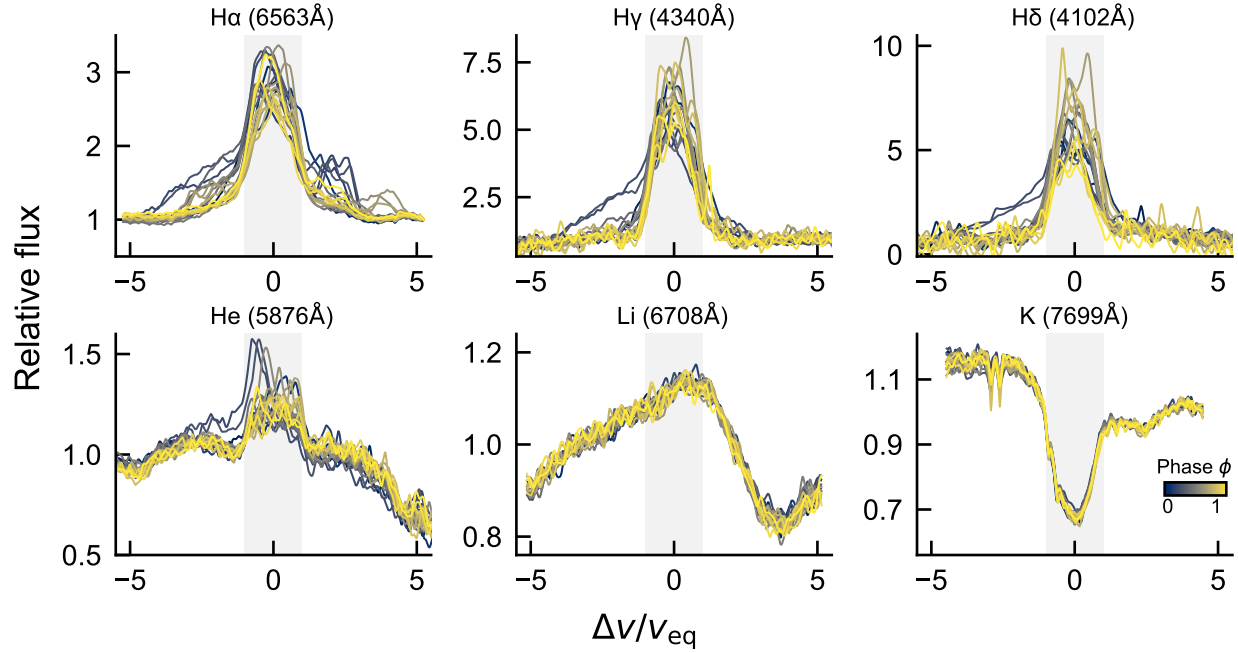
$$M_{\text{dust}} \gtrsim 2 \cdot 10^{15} \text{ g} \left( \frac{\tau}{1} \right) \left( \frac{Q_{\text{ext}}}{3} \right)^{-1} \left( \frac{r}{0.1 R_*} \frac{R_*}{0.4 R_\odot} \right)^2 \left( \frac{a}{1 \mu\text{m}} \right) \left( \frac{\rho_d}{3 \text{ g cm}^{-3}} \right). \quad (2)$$

Three relevant objects for comparison to these limits include solar prominences, planetesimals, and comets. Prominences of the Sun typically have gas masses of order  $10^{14} \text{ g}$ - $10^{16} \text{ g}$  <sup>29</sup>. A planetesimal of mass  $\approx 10^{15} \text{ g}$  with a bulk density of  $1 \text{ g cm}^{-3}$  would have a diameter of order one kilometer. Halley's comet has a mass of order  $10^{17} \text{ g}$  <sup>78</sup>, of which  $\sim 10^{14} \text{ g}$  is shed per orbit, most of which inspirals toward the Sun due to Poynting-Robertson drag. Broadly, these calculations suggest that if dust is responsible for the broadband variability of CPVs, it would need to be concentrated in clumps with masses in the range of  $10^{15}$ - $10^{17} \text{ g}$ .

### Spectroscopic Variability

Figure 5 shows a few regions of interest in the HIRES spectra, which cover 3650-7960 Å. Higher order Balmer lines including  $H\gamma$  and  $H\delta$  (the  $n = 5 \rightarrow 2$  and  $n = 6 \rightarrow 2$  transitions respectively) do show some variability outside the line core. However, this variability is not clearly periodic in the same manner as the emission seen in  $H\alpha$ . This could be because there are insufficient hydrogen ions in the relevant excited states, or due to the lower precision of the spectra in these bluer regions. The Ca HK doublet for instance is also detectable in emission, however the continuum near it is not. Chromospheric emission lines in the magnesium triplet order are also detectable, but sufficiently blended to be rendered unusable.

One notable feature is that  $H\alpha$ ,  $H\gamma$ ,  $H\delta$ , and He 5876 Å all show a blue excess at  $\phi \approx 0.2$ . At the same epoch, only  $H\alpha$  clearly shows a resolved red excess as well, although  $H\gamma$  and  $H\delta$  are



Extended Data Figure 5: Time evolution of select regions in the Keck/HIRES spectra from 17 February 2025. The horizontal axis shows  $\Delta v \equiv c(\lambda - \lambda_0)/\lambda_0$ , the relative velocity centered on each line's rest wavelength, normalized by the stellar equatorial velocity.

broader at this time. Given the sudden rise of this emission in  $<15$  minutes, and the association between He 5876 Å and stellar outflows at high excitation energy, this component of the spectra might be more easily associated with a flare than with a stable, periodic component.

Finally, the Li I 6708 Å doublet, which shows no obvious absorption, as well as the broad K I 7699 Å feature are both shown in Figure 5. In the latter, narrow telluric absorption features overlap the blue wing of the line. Neither of these regions shows any notable variability.

#### Modeling the Emitting Clump

The density and mass of the material...

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Parameter	Host	Source
Identifiers		
TIC	141146667	TESS
Gaia	860453786736413568	Gaia DR3
Astrometry & Radial Velocity		
$\alpha_{2000}$	11:05:15.09	Gaia DR3
$\delta_{2000}$	+59 15 05.57	Gaia DR3
$\mu_{\alpha}$ (mas yr <sup>-1</sup> )	-73.933 ± 0.022	Gaia DR3
$\mu_{\delta}$ (mas yr <sup>-1</sup> )	32.262 ± 0.024	Gaia DR3
$\pi$ (mas)	17.324 ± 0.025	Gaia DR3
RUWE	1.23	Gaia DR3
RV (km s <sup>-1</sup> )	0.61 ± 1.47	HIRES
Photometry		
<i>TESS</i> (mag)	13.283 ± 0.010	TIC8
<i>G</i> (mag)	14.701 ± 0.002	Gaia DR3
<i>G</i> <sub>BP</sub> (mag)	16.664 ± 0.008	Gaia DR3
<i>G</i> <sub>RP</sub> (mag)	13.398 ± 0.006	Gaia DR3
<i>G</i> <sub>BP</sub> - <i>G</i> <sub>RP</sub> (mag)	3.276 ± 0.010	Gaia DR3
<i>J</i> (mag)	11.401 ± 0.022	2MASS
<i>H</i> (mag)	10.793 ± 0.021	2MASS
<i>K<sub>s</sub></i> (mag)	10.473 ± 0.016	2MASS
<i>W1</i> (mag)	10.276 ± 0.023	ALLWISE
<i>W2</i> (mag)	10.070 ± 0.020	ALLWISE
<i>W3</i> (mag)	9.838 ± 0.045	ALLWISE
Physical Properties		
<i>T<sub>eff</sub></i> (K)	2972 ± 40	<sup>4</sup> SED fit
<i>R<sub>★</sub></i> ( <i>R</i> <sub>⊙</sub> )	0.42 ± 0.02	<sup>4</sup> SED fit
<i>P</i> <sub>rot</sub> (hours)	3.930 ± 0.001	TESS
<i>v</i> <sub>eq</sub> (km s <sup>-1</sup> )	130±4	Derived
<i>v</i> <sub>eq</sub> sin <i>i</i> <sub>★</sub> (km s <sup>-1</sup> )	138 ± 8	HIRES
<i>i</i> <sub>★</sub> (°)	>63	Derived
<i>A<sub>V</sub></i> (mag)	0	<sup>63</sup>
<i>M</i> <sub>★</sub> ( <i>M</i> <sub>⊙</sub> )	0.22 ± 0.02	PARSEC <sup>25</sup>
EW <sub>Li</sub> (mÅ)	<107	HIRES (2σ)
<i>t</i> <sub>CAMD</sub> (Myr)	30-150	Gaia DR3
<i>t</i> <sub>Li,emp</sub> (Myr)	>20	HIRES, <sup>72</sup>
<i>t</i> <sub>Li,th</sub> (Myr)	>35	HIRES, <sup>73</sup>
<i>t</i> <sub>adopted</sub> (Myr)	35-150	—

Extended Data Table 1: Properties of TIC 141146667. References: Gaia DR3 <sup>26</sup>, TESS <sup>22</sup>, TIC8 <sup>79</sup>, 2MASS <sup>80</sup>, ALLWISE <sup>75</sup>.

Time [JD <sub>UTC</sub> ]	RV (km s <sup>-1</sup> )	$\sigma_{\text{RV}}$ (km s <sup>-1</sup> )
60357.450329	2.73	5.86
60357.461255	-4.40	2.37
60357.472181	-0.19	2.64
60357.483109	3.84	2.87
60357.494030	7.53	7.53
60357.504949	-1.98	1.44
60357.515873	1.02	1.21
60357.526794	0.64	7.03
60357.537717	-2.91	2.71
60357.548639	8.93	6.75
60357.559566	5.95	8.84
60357.570487	-2.25	3.06
60357.581408	1.84	1.34
60357.592330	2.41	8.24
60357.603251	-7.04	3.94
60357.614172	-2.24	3.07
60357.625095	-2.83	7.55
60357.636019	-0.59	2.26
60357.646940	1.84	2.91
60357.657861	4.54	3.95
60357.668781	6.21	12.14

Extended Data Table 2: TIC 141146667 radial velocities relative to the systemic velocity.

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549 **Correspondence** Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to ...

550 **Code availability** We provide access to a GitHub repository including all code created for the analysis of  
551 this project that is not already publicly available.