

## RESEARCH ARTICLE



# Lichens facilitate seedling recruitment in alpine heath

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## Abstract

**Questions:** How do mat thickness, physical structure and allelopathic properties of terricolous mat-forming lichens affect recruitment of vascular plants in dwarf-shrub and lichen heath vegetation?

**Location:** The mountains of Dovrefjell, central Norway.

**Methods:** In autumn, seeds of ten vascular plant species were collected and sown in a common garden experiment with mats of six lichen species and bare soil controls as experimental treatments. We recorded growing season soil temperature and moisture, and seedling recruitment and growth after one year. The effect of lichen secondary compounds on germination was tested in a growth chamber experiment and compared to the lichen–plant interactions detected under field conditions.

**Results:** The lichen mats buffered extreme soil temperatures and soil drying in dry weather, with soils below the thickest mats (*Cladonia stellaris* and *C. rangiferina*) experiencing the lowest temperature fluctuations. Seedling recruitment and seedling growth in the field and seed germination in the lab were species-specific. Seedling recruitment rates were overall higher within lichen mats than on bare soil, but the c. 6.5-cm-thick mats of *C. stellaris* reduced recruitment of many species. The lab experiment suggested no overall strong effect of lichen allelopathy on seed germination, and effects on seed germination were only moderately correlated with the lichen–plant interactions observed for seedling recruitment in the field.

**Conclusions:** In harsh environments like alpine dwarf-shrub and lichen heaths, the presence of lichens and the resulting amelioration of the microclimate seem more important for vascular plant recruitment than are allelopathic effects often reported in lab experiments. We might therefore expect most terricolous lichens, depending on the plant species in focus, to facilitate rather than hamper the early stages of plant recruitment into lichen-dominated arctic-alpine heath vegetation.

## KEYWORDS

*Alectoria*, *Cetraria*, *Cladonia* heath, *Flavocetraria*, ground lichen, lichen secondary metabolites, lichen–plant interaction, microclimate, seedling emergence, soil moisture, *Stereocaulon*, tundra, vascular plant colonization

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# 1 | INTRODUCTION

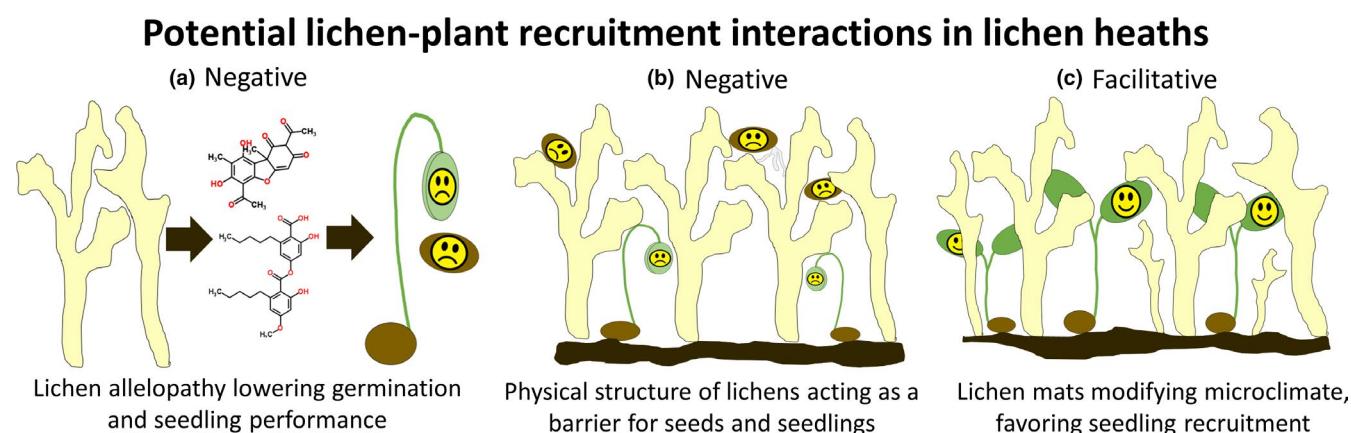
Terricolous lichens (i.e., lichens growing on soil) dominate the vegetation of roughly 8% of terrestrial ecosystems, among them arctic and alpine heaths (Ahti, 1977; Crittenden, 2000; Larson, 1987; Nash, 2008). The species composition and abundance of terricolous lichens on arctic-alpine heaths vary with elevation, topography, and continentality (Haapasaari, 1988). Lichens are particularly dominant in convex parts of exposed and well-drained heaths (Crittenden, 2000; Vistnes & Nellemann, 2008), where standing lichen biomass can reach 1,200 g/m<sup>2</sup> (Nellemann, Jordhøy, Støen, & Strand, 2000). Terricolous lichens are ecologically important as the main food resource for reindeer and caribou in winter (Boertje, 1984; Danell, Utsi, Palo, & Eriksson, 1994) and contribute substantially to the arctic-alpine carbon pool (Lange, Hahn, Meyer, & Tenhunen, 1998). Species with N<sub>2</sub>-fixing cyanobacteria, such as *Stereocaulon* spp., further contribute to nitrogen enrichment of the often N-deficient heaths (Crittenden, 1989).

Recent studies report declines in lichen abundance in arctic-alpine areas (Fraser, Lantz, Olthof, Kokelj, & Sims, 2014; Løkken, Hofgaard, Dalen, & Hytteborn, 2019; Maliniemi, Kapfer, Saccone, Skog, & Virtanen, 2018; Vanneste et al., 2017; Vuorinen et al., 2017), often driven by expansion of vascular plants, and in particular shrubs (Cornelissen et al., 2001; Fraser et al., 2014; Vanneste et al., 2017). Whether the negative effects of vascular plants on lichen communities are mediated by expansion of the already established plants within or close to lichen mats, or by colonizing plants from outside, is not known. Many lichens are indeed sensitive to shading from plants or their litter (Palmquist, Jonsson, & Nash, 2008), whereas the low seedling densities often reported on arctic-alpine lichen heaths (Evju, Hagen, & Hofgaard, 2012; Graae et al., 2011) suggest it is difficult for plants to recruit here. Plant recruitment in lichen heaths may be hampered by lichen secondary metabolites (i.e., allelopathy), by mechanisms related to the lichens' physical structure, or by harsh environmental conditions (Figure 1).

In summer, lichen heaths often experience droughts, which Moles and Westoby (2004) identified as the second most important cause of seedling mortality. On the other hand, lichens modify microclimatic conditions in ways that may support seedling survival, as they maintain soil moisture (Broll, 2000; Kershaw & Rouse, 1971; Molina-Montenegro et al., 2013) and prevent extreme temperatures due to high reflectivity and low thermal conductivity (Broll, 2000; Kershaw, 1977). Lichens furthermore reduce wind erosion and plant evapotranspiration through shelter effects (Molina-Montenegro et al., 2013).

The physical structure of lichens may have contrasting effects on plant recruitment. Lichen mats act as efficient seed traps (Sedia & Ehrenfeld, 2003), but can also prevent seeds or seedlings from reaching the ground. A classic example is Allen's (1929) observation of seedlings pulled out of the soil by repeated lichen thalli expansion and contraction driven by fluctuations in moisture. Some species (e.g., *Cladonia stellaris*) have upright, branched, shrub-like thalli and form very thick and dense mats with low light penetration and high insulation capacity. Others (e.g., *Flavocetraria nivalis*) form upright, but thinner and more open mats that provide less thermal insulation (Crittenden, 2000), but may be easier for seeds and seedlings to penetrate. However, most lichen-plant recruitment interaction studies under field conditions have focused on *Cladonia* spp. (Allen, 1929; Brown & Mikola, 1974; Hawkes & Menges, 2003; Kytöviita & Stark, 2009; Sedia & Ehrenfeld, 2003) in various vegetation types, whereas less is known about the interactions between other ecologically successful genera of terricolous lichens (e.g., *Cetraria*, *Stereocaulon* and *Alectoria*; Crittenden, 2000) and plant species that co-occur in arctic-alpine vegetation.

Lichen secondary metabolites may also inhibit establishment and growth of vascular plants. Direct lichen allelopathic effects may inhibit germination, radicle and hypocotyl growth (Hobbs, 1985; Latkowska, Bialczyk, Lechowski, & Czaja-Prokop, 2008; Nishitoba, Nishimura, Nishiyama, & Mizutani, 1987; Peres, Mapeli, Faccenda,



**FIGURE 1** Visual representation of how lichens may affect the recruitment phase of vascular plants. In scenario (a) lichen allelopathy inhibits seed germination and early seedling development and reduces the number of mycorrhizae associations of the seedling. In scenario (b) the physical structure of lichen mats prevents seeds and root radicles of germinating seeds from reaching the soil, and emerging seedlings may fail to penetrate the lichen mat. In scenario (c) lichens may facilitate plant recruitment by modifying the microclimate, in particular shelter against wind, extreme temperatures, and drought, which are harmful for emerging seedlings



Gomes, & Honda, 2009; Pyatt, 1967; Sedia & Ehrenfeld, 2003; Tigre et al., 2012). Importantly, most findings of allelopathy are results from in vitro experiments, often with pure lichen compounds at high concentrations, and clear evidence for lichen allelopathy under natural conditions is scarce (Favero-Longo & Piervittori, 2010). Under field conditions, allelopathy has been suggested to indirectly affect seedling growth by inhibition of soil microorganisms and mycorrhizal fungi (Brown & Mikola, 1974; Fisher, 1979; Sedia & Ehrenfeld, 2003), although the generality of these findings has been challenged (Kytöviita & Stark, 2009; Stark & Hyvärinen, 2003; Stark, Kytöviita, & Neumann, 2007). Furthermore, the allelopathic effects depend on the specific secondary compounds and plant species in focus (Brown & Mikola, 1974; Favero-Longo & Piervittori, 2010; Hobbs, 1985; Peres et al., 2009).

Whether the lichens' negative effects via allelopathy and physical structure or facilitation via amelioration of the microclimate is more important for plant recruitment is an open question. Therefore, we here combine field and laboratory experiments to investigate how terricolous lichens affect the early recruitment phase of plants in dwarf-shrub and lichen-dominated heath vegetation typical for arctic-alpine areas. We test the response of plant species with different growth forms, seed sizes and seedling morphologies, which we expect to interact uniquely with the lichen species. In a field experiment, we aimed to answer the following questions: (a) is soil microclimate (i.e., temperature and moisture) affected by lichen species and lichen mat thickness? Is (b) seedling recruitment and (c) seedling growth affected by lichen species and lichen mat thickness? Because allelopathy is hard to distinguish from other factors under natural conditions, we conducted a complementary laboratory experiment where we asked: (d) is seed germination affected by lichen allelopathy? To reveal the importance of lichen allelopathy under natural conditions we asked: (e) are the same lichen-plant interactions detected for seed germination in the laboratory and seedling recruitment in the field?

## 2 | METHODS

### 2.1 | Study site

The field study was conducted at an exposed dwarf-shrub and lichen heath, surrounded by subalpine birch forest in the mountains of Dovrefjell, Central Norway, close to Kongsvoll Biological Station (c. 930 m a.s.l., 62°18'5.75517" N, 9°36'24.00385" E). The bedrock at the site consists of lightly eroded actinolite-hornblende amphibolite (Geological Survey of Norway, <https://www.ngu.no/en/>, accessed 11 July 2017). The vegetation is dominated by *Empetrum nigrum* ssp. *hermaphroditum*, *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*, *Vaccinium vitis-idaea*, *Betula nana* and *Salix glauca*, and the lichens *Alectoria ochroleuca* and *Flavocetraria nivalis*. Such dwarf-shrub and lichen heaths predominantly occur above the forest line, but can also be found on locally exposed areas within subalpine forests like our study site (Fremstad, 1997) (see Appendix S1 for a photo from the study site). The studied dwarf-shrub and lichen heath is

thus representative for such vegetation in general and the findings especially relevant for arctic-alpine areas where these heaths are widespread.

Dovrefjell has a slightly continental climate with short warm summers and long cold winters. At the weather station Fokstugu (930 m a.s.l.) ca. 26 km south of the study site, the mean annual precipitation was 435 mm (Førland, 1993) and the mean annual temperature −0.1°C (Aune, 1993) for the period 1961–1990. For the same period, the warmest month was July with an average monthly temperature of 9.8°C, and the coldest was January, at −8.8°C on average (Aune, 1993).

### 2.2 | Lichen and seed material

In a parallel field and laboratory experiment, we studied the interactions between six locally abundant terricolous lichen species: *Alectoria ochroleuca*, *Cetraria islandica*, *Cladonia arbuscula*, *Cladonia stellaris*, *Flavocetraria nivalis* and *Stereocaulon paschale* and 11 vascular plant species: *Anthoxanthum nipponicum*, *Avenella flexuosa*, *Betula nana*, *Bistorta vivipara*, *Dryas octopetala*, *Luzula spicata*, *Pinus sylvestris*, *Salix glauca*, *Silene acaulis*, *Solidago virgaurea* and *Vaccinium myrtillus* common in subalpine and low-alpine vegetation. These 11 plant species were chosen because they represent a variety of growth forms (tree, shrub, dwarf-shrub, graminoid and forb), have been observed as adult plants growing within terricolous lichens (negative effects of lichen secondary metabolites on plant recruitment are more likely to have developed in co-occurring lichen and plant species; Hobbs, 1985), have seeds (bulbils for *Bistorta vivipara*, hereafter referred to as seeds) of different sizes which might affect their recruitment potential, and have seedlings that are easy to distinguish from each other. The lichen species were chosen because of their dominance in arctic-alpine vegetation, and because they produce different secondary metabolites, have different growth forms (fruticose vs. cetrarioid) and physical structure of their mats (e.g., height and density), resulting in a variety of microenvironments for the recruiting plant species (Table 1).

The lichens and seeds were collected close to the study site in September and October 2013. For one species, *Pinus sylvestris*, seeds were supplied by The Norwegian Forest Seed Center originating from Oppdal at c. 600–650 m a.s.l., c. 35 km north of the study site. We planned to use all plant and lichen species in both the laboratory and field experiment, but due to seed limitation *Dryas octopetala* was used only in the laboratory and *Bistorta vivipara* only in the field experiment. See The Norwegian Biodiversity Information Centre (NBIC) (<https://www.biodiversity.no/>, accessed 23 October 2018) for unified nomenclature of lichen and plant species.

### 2.3 | Field experiment

In the field, seventeen plastic trays (56 × 26 × 8 cm) were divided into four plots each, for a total of 68 plots. Each plot was filled with one liter of commercial garden soil. The trays had holes to drain water, and the vegetation underneath was removed so that the plots were



**TABLE 1** Characteristics of lichen and vascular plant species used in the study, including growth form (fruticose here referring to lichens with upright, shrub-like thalli with cylindrical branches, and cetrarioid to lichens with upright, modified lobes and leaf-like thalli with dorsiventral morphology), mat thickness in the field experiment (mean  $\pm$  SE,  $n = 8$  except for 7 in *C. islandica*) and secondary metabolites of the lichen species, and growth form and seed mass (mg) of the plant species. The lichen species are listed by increasing mat thickness

Lichen species	Growth form	Mat thickness (cm $\pm$ SE)	Secondary metabolites <sup>a</sup>
<i>Flavocetraria nivalis</i>	Cetrarioid	1.9 $\pm$ 0.2	Usnic acid and protolichesterinic acid
<i>Alectoria ochroleuca</i>	Fruticose	1.9 $\pm$ 0.4	Usnic acid and diffractaic acid
<i>Stereocaulon paschale</i>	Fruticose	2.1 $\pm$ 0.2	Atranorin and lobaric acid
<i>Cetraria islandica</i>	Cetrarioid	2.6 $\pm$ 0.3	Fumarprotocetraric acid and protolichesterinic acid
<i>Cladonia arbuscula</i>	Fruticose	3.8 $\pm$ 0.3	Usnic acid and fumarprotocetraric acid
<i>Cladonia stellaris</i>	Fruticose	6.8 $\pm$ 0.4	Usnic acid and perlatolic acid
Vascular plant species	Growth form	Seed mass (mg) <sup>b</sup>	
<i>Anthoxanthum nipponicum</i>	Graminoid	0.4878	
<i>Avenella flexuosa</i>	Graminoid	0.5	
<i>Betula nana</i>	Shrub	0.3184	
<i>Bistorta vivipara</i>	Forb	2.73	
<i>Dryas octopetala</i>	Dwarf-shrub	0.706	
<i>Luzula spicata</i>	Graminoid	0.259	
<i>Pinus sylvestris</i>	Tree	6.0	
<i>Salix glauca</i>	Shrub	0.163	
<i>Silene acaulis</i>	Forb	0.3	
<i>Solidago virgaurea</i>	Forb	0.55	
<i>Vaccinium myrtillus</i>	Dwarf-shrub	0.3	

<sup>a</sup>Info on secondary metabolites from Krog, Østhagen, and Tønsberg (1994) and Holien and Tønsberg (2008).

<sup>b</sup>Seed mass data accessed from Royal Botanic Gardens Kew (2018). Seed Information Database (SID), Version 7.1. Retrieved from: <http://data.kew.org/sid/> (October 2018).

at level with the surrounding vegetation. Each of the six lichen species had eight replicate plots randomly assigned to the trays. Two types of controls were used with ten replicates each: (a) bare soil where seeds were sown and (b) bare soil without seeds to control for external seed influx (see Appendix S1 for a field design figure). At least one plot per tray was assigned to a control treatment, and each lichen species had one replicate per tray only.

For *Cladonia stellaris* and *Cladonia arbuscula*, coherent mats were collected and transplanted into the plots. As *Alectoria ochroleuca*, *Cetraria islandica*, *Flavocetraria nivalis*, and *Stereocaulon paschale* form less coherent mats, the plots were filled with several smaller lichen samples representing how they naturally grow. A mixture of 30 seeds from each of the 10 plant species, except for *Pinus sylvestris* with only 10 seeds and *Salix glauca* with only 15 seeds due to limited seed availability, was sown on top of each lichen species and bare soil sowing control plot (the "lichen treatments") in October 2013. This gives a total of 265 seeds per plot, and as each plot was  $\sim 365 \text{ cm}^2$ , the seed density was 0.73 seeds per  $\text{cm}^2$ . This density is higher than the expected natural seed rain in such vegetation (Graae et al., 2011; Molau & Larsson, 2000) and ensured that seed availability would not constrain seedling recruitment. String was tied in a grid over the trays to prevent the lichens from being blown out. From October to May the trays were placed in a sheltered scrub community dominated by *Salix* spp., graminoids and bryophytes at the study

site to reduce wind exposure during winter and were moved c. 35 m to a neighboring exposed dwarf-shrub and lichen heath in late May, which is the most representative environment for the lichen species used in this experiment.

In late May 2014, temperature loggers (Micro-T DS1921G, Maxim Integrated Products, Sunnyvale, CA, USA) were placed 0.5 cm below the soil surface in each plot to measure the soil temperature every second hour. Soil moisture (% volumetric soil water content) was measured once in each plot during overcast conditions after rain (26 August 2014) and again during dry conditions on a sunny day after one day without rain (28 August 2014) with a hand-held 5 cm long soil moisture probe set to option "organic soil" (TRIME-PICO32, IMKOGmbH, Mannheim, Germany). In late August and early September 2014, the temperature loggers were collected and the seedlings harvested. Mean, maximum and minimum temperatures were calculated for the period 13 June 2014–31 August 2014. Seedlings were identified, counted, rinsed in water to remove soil fragments, and oven-dried at 70°C for 72 hr. All seedlings of each species from each plot were weighed together to obtain a measure of average dry seedling biomass (mg). The thickness of the lichen mats (average of three measurements from soil surface to highest lichen thallus point at different fixed locations) was measured for each plot at the end of the experiment (Table 1).



## 2.4 | Laboratory experiment

In the laboratory, samples of each of the six lichen species were cleaned of debris, dried, and crushed with a hand blender. Two grams of crushed lichen was added underneath filter paper in five Petri dishes for each of the ten species sown and a control. Thirty seeds, except for *Pinus sylvestris* with 10 and *Salix glauca* with 15 seeds, were placed on the filter paper and 6 ml of distilled water was added. The controls had only filter paper, water and seeds. The Petri dishes were sealed with parafilm and kept in darkness at 3°C for 12 weeks. After this cold stratification, the Petri dishes were transferred to growth chambers (E-36L, Percival Scientific, Perry, IA, USA) for six weeks with 20-hr daylight (representative for mid-June growing season photoperiod in central Norway) with  $\sim 200 \mu\text{m m}^{-2} \text{s}^{-1}$  photosynthetically active radiation at 20°C and 4-hr darkness at 10°C. Every week, 2 ml of distilled water was added, and the Petri dishes were rotated within the chamber. More water (1–2 ml) was added if signs of desiccation on the filter paper occurred. Germinated seeds were counted and then removed from the Petri dishes weekly over 6 weeks.

## 2.5 | Statistical analyses

To test whether the soil microclimate was affected by the lichen treatments (question 1), we fitted linear mixed-effects models with Gaussian errors and with each microclimate parameter (mean soil temperature, maximum soil temperature, minimum soil temperature, soil moisture wet day and soil moisture dry day) as response variable, lichen treatment, lichen mat thickness and their interaction as fixed effects, and tray as random factor.

To test if seedling recruitment in the field experiment was affected by the lichen treatments (question 2), we fitted a generalized linear mixed-effects model with binomial errors and logit link-function, with proportion seedling recruitment as response variable, lichen treatment, lichen mat thickness, plant species and their interaction as fixed factors, and tray and plot (nested within trays) as random factors. In this analysis, plot was also included in the random structure because of several observations (i.e., plant species) per plot. Numbers of seeds sown for each species were added as weights in the models. For *Vaccinium myrtillus*, the only species with external seed influx from the control plots without sowing, the mean influx (0.7 seedling) was subtracted from the data prior to the analyses. Estimates were back-transformed (from logit scale to probability scale) to obtain recruitment rates, and these rates are presented in the figures and text as they account for the nested structure of our experimental design.

Similarly, to test if seedling biomass was affected by the lichen treatments (question 3), we fitted linear mixed-effects models with average seedling weight as response variable, lichen treatment, lichen mat thickness, plant species and their interactions as fixed factors, and tray and plot (nested within trays) as random factors. Seedling numbers were added as weights in the model because the number of recruited seedlings (i.e., the sample size) varied among

plant species and plots. Two species were excluded from the field recruitment and growth analyses: *Betula nana* because of low emergence rates in all treatments, and *Salix glauca* because most seedlings were dead when counted and harvested in autumn (see Appendix S2 for counts of live and dead seedlings).

To test if seed germination in the lab was affected by lichen treatments (question 4), we fitted a generalized linear model with binomial errors and logit link function, with the proportion of germinated seeds as response variable, and lichen treatment, plant species and their interaction as fixed factors. Estimates were back-transformed to obtain germination rates.

Finally, we used a Spearman rank correlation test to test for correlation between the field recruitment and laboratory germination estimates (question 5). Control treatments were excluded and only the seven plant species shared in both experiments were included.

To visualize the lichen–plant interactions in the field recruitment and lab germination experiment and explore possible clusters, we constructed heatmaps with hierarchical clustering (two-dimensional representations where the recruitment and germination estimates of all combinations of plant species and lichen treatments are shown with colors and ordered by similarity) with the gplots R package. Dendrograms were constructed with hierarchical agglomerate Ward clustering based on Jaccard dissimilarities calculated in the vegan R package. Numbers of clusters for the lichen treatment and plant species dendrograms were manually chosen based on their separation heights and by visual inspection of the clusters' ecological meaning.

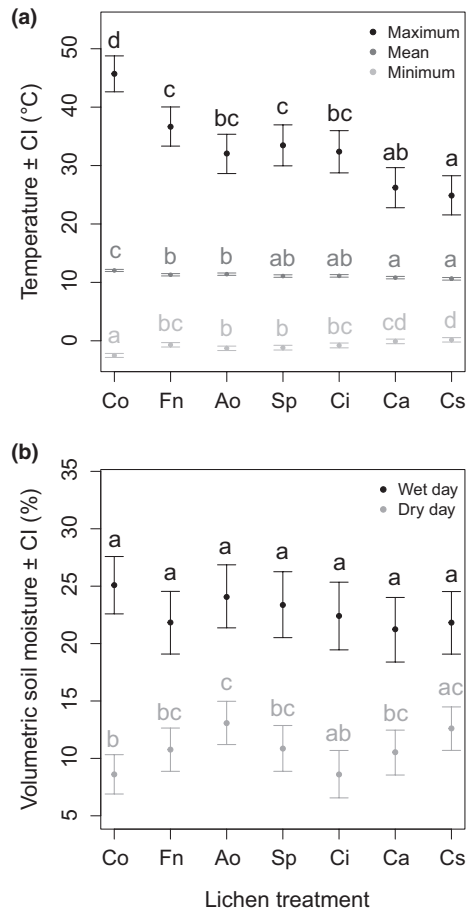
For question 1–4, model selection was based on the Akaike information criterion (AIC, see model selection results in Appendix S3). Small-sample corrected AIC ( $\text{AIC}_c$ ) was used for model selection in question 1. Anova and summary tables of models presented in the manuscript are in Appendix S4. Differences in soil microclimate among lichen treatments were tested using multiple comparisons with the Tukey method in the multcomp R package. For the mixed models (seed germination and seedling recruitment and biomass) we used the emmeans R package for pairwise comparisons. All statistical analyses were done in R 3.1.2 (R Core Team, R Foundation for Statistical Computing, Vienna, Austria). Mixed-effect models were fitted with the lme4 R package. Primary data is available in Appendix S5 (seedling recruitment and seedling biomass in field) and Appendix S6 (seed germination in lab).

## 3 | RESULTS

### 3.1 | Soil microclimate – field experiment

Lichen treatment was a better predictor of all soil microclimate variables than was lichen mat thickness (Appendix S3). The presence of lichens reduced mean and maximum soil temperatures and increased minimum soil temperatures compared to the bare soil control (Figure 2a). Temperature buffering was strongest beneath *Cladonia stellaris* and *Cladonia arbuscula* (Figure 2a), which had the thickest mats (Table 1). This was especially evident for





**FIGURE 2** Estimated soil microclimate conditions in the field experiment with temperature (maximum, mean and minimum) (a) and moisture (wet and dry day) (b) with 95% confidence intervals for each lichen treatment. Treatments with no letters in common are significantly different ( $p < 0.05$ ), tested using multiple comparisons with the Tukey method. The lichen treatments are ordered by increasing mat thickness and abbreviated as follows: Co; Control (bare soil), Fn; *Flavocetraria nivalis*, Ao; *Alectoria ochroleuca*, Sp; *Stereocaulon paschale*, Ci; *Cetraria islandica*, Ca; *Cladonia arbuscula* and Cs; *Cladonia stellaris*

maximum temperature, which differed by more than 20°C between *Cladonia stellaris* (24.9°C, 95% CI = 21.6–28.3) and the bare soil control (45.7°C, 95% CI = 42.6–48.8; Figure 2a).

Soil moisture differed between treatments under dry conditions, but not under wet conditions (Figure 2b). On the dry and sunny day, the driest soils occurred in the bare soil control (8.6%, 95% CI = 6.9–10.3) and beneath *Cetraria islandica* (8.6%, 95% CI = 6.6–10.7), whereas the soils beneath *Alectoria ochroleuca* (13.1%, 95% CI = 11.2–15.0) and *Cladonia stellaris* (12.6%, 95% CI = 10.7–14.5) were moister (Figure 2b).

### 3.2 | Seedling recruitment – field experiment

The effects of the lichen treatments on seedling recruitment were complex and plant species-specific (Figure 3), as demonstrated by strongest statistical support for the model including

the plant–lichen treatment interaction (Appendix S3). For some plant species (*Bistorta vivipara* and *Luzula spicata*) the lichen species did not seem to affect the recruitment, whereas for the other six plant species recruitment rates were overall higher and differed between lichen species, or between some lichen species and the bare soil control (Figure 3). Most species had recruitment rates below 40%, except *Pinus sylvestris* with recruitment rates approaching 80% (Figure 3).

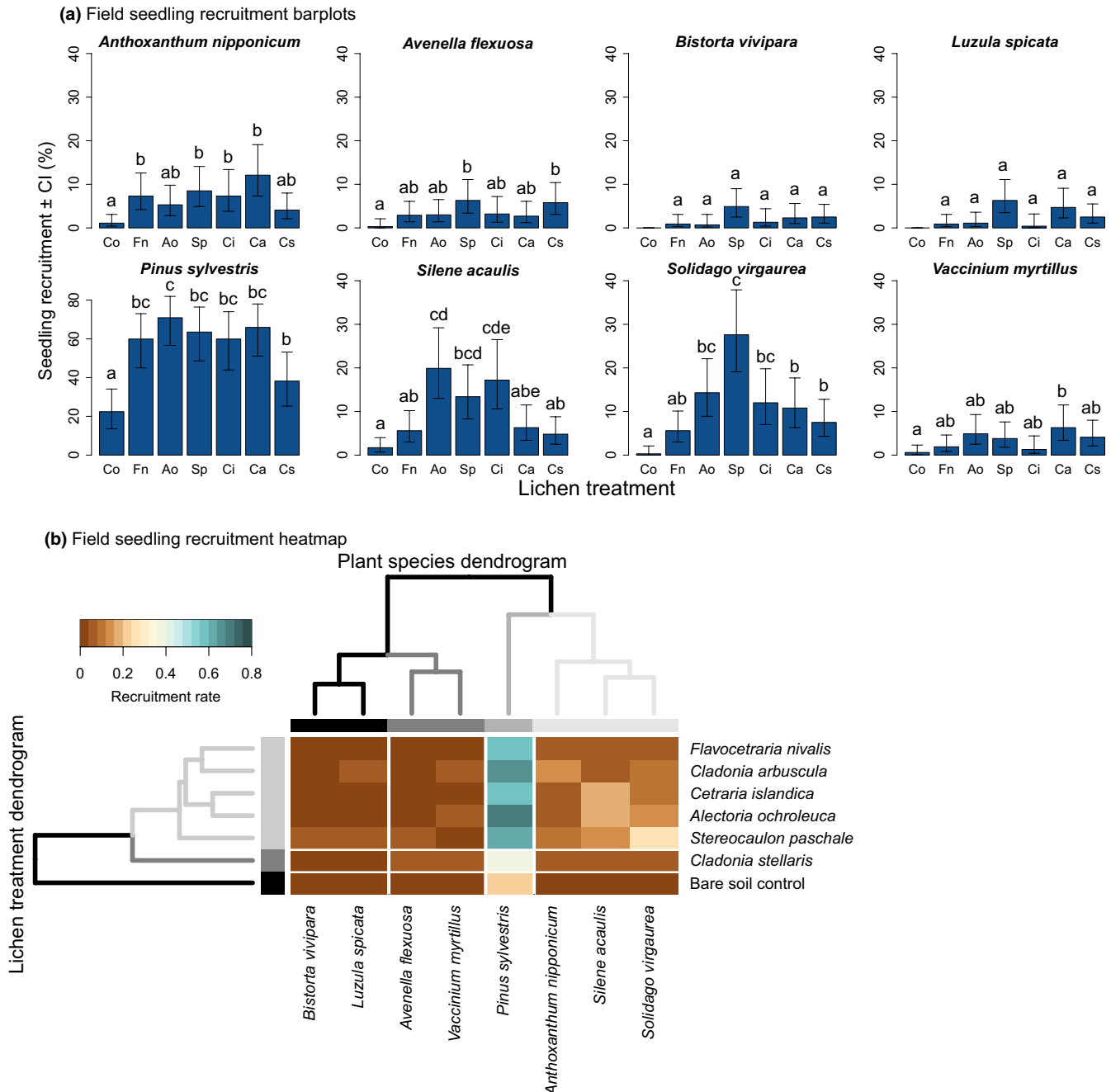
Based on their effect on seedling recruitment, the lichen treatments cluster into three groups: one with bare soil control only, one with *Cladonia stellaris* only, and a third with the remaining five lichen species (Figure 3b; Appendix S7). The bare soil controls stand out with overall low recruitment, and not a single seedling of *Bistorta vivipara* and *Luzula spicata* recruited here (Figure 3a). Many germinating seeds were observed on the bare soil controls during early summer (Kristin O. Nystuen, pers. obs.), suggesting high post-germination mortality. Compared to other lichen species, *Cladonia stellaris* supported low recruitment of many plant species, whereas for *Avenella flexuosa* the recruitment in *Cladonia stellaris* was comparatively high (Figure 3). The remaining five lichens supported higher recruitment overall, but still depending on the plant species in focus. Some of the species had relatively high recruitment rates within *Stereocaulon paschale*, especially *Solidago virgaurea* (Figure 3).

### 3.3 | Seedling growth – field experiment

The lichen treatments' effects on seedling growth were species-dependent, as indicated by strongest statistical support for the model with lichen treatment–plant species interaction in Appendix S3. Most plant species had small seedlings below 5 mg in dry weight, whereas *Pinus sylvestris* and *Solidago virgaurea* had heavier seedlings (Figure 4). Seedling weight of these two species was also detectably affected by the lichen treatments, whereas for the remaining six species, with fewer recruited seedlings (Figure 3), there were no statistically detectable differences among treatments (Figure 4). *Cladonia stellaris* clearly affected the growth of *Pinus sylvestris* negatively, and weight of the seedlings here was only half the weight of the heaviest seedlings found in *Stereocaulon paschale* and *Alectoria ochroleuca* (Figure 4).

### 3.4 | Seed germination – laboratory experiment

Seed germination in the Petri dishes differed among plant species, and the lichen species had species-specific effects on the plant species (strongest statistical support for the model with plant–lichen treatment interaction; Appendix S3). Six out of ten plant species were detectably affected by the lichen treatments (Figure 5a). The lichen treatments' species-specific influence on seed germination is also demonstrated in the heatmap in Figure 5b, where the lichen dendrogram did not separate until height 0.38 (Appendix S7), indicating that the treatments have few common effects on seed germination.

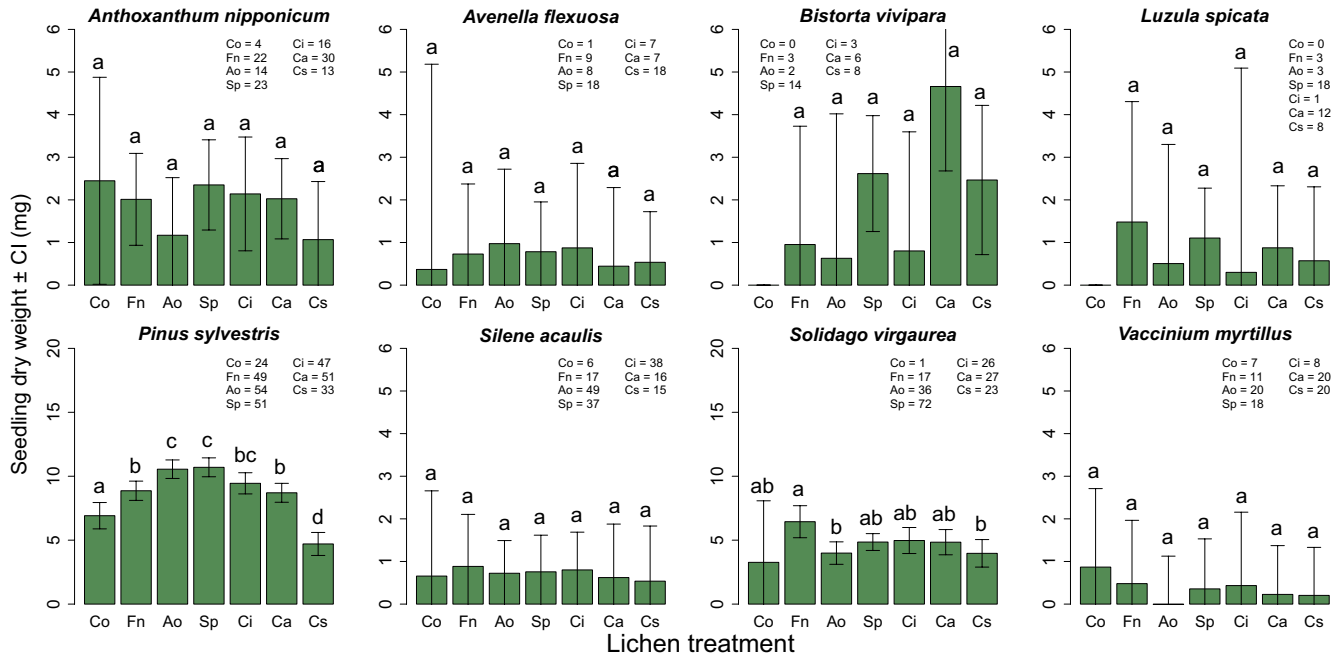


**FIGURE 3** Seedling recruitment in the field experiment across lichen treatments. (a) Barplots showing mean estimated seedling recruitment and 95% confidence intervals. Notice that the recruitment scale of *Pinus sylvestris* differs from that of the other plant species. The lichen treatments are ordered by increasing mat thickness and abbreviated as follows: Co; Control (bare soil), Fn; *Flavocetraria nivalis*, Ao; *Alectoria ochroleuca*, Sp; *Stereocaulon paschale*, Ci; *Cetraria islandica*, Ca; *Cladonia arbuscula* and Cs; *Cladonia stellaris*. Treatments with no letters in common are significantly different ( $p < 0.05$ ), as revealed by pairwise comparisons. (b) Heatmap of mean estimated seedling recruitment rates in the lichen treatments with clustering of plants (top) and lichen treatments (left). The plant and lichen dendrograms were cut at manually chosen heights (see Appendix S7)

For two plant species (*Silene acaulis* and *Vaccinium myrtillus*) we found interesting patterns concerning lichen secondary compounds. Germination of *Silene acaulis* was clearly enhanced in *Cetraria islandica* and *Stereocaulon paschale* (Figure 5a), the only two lichens without usnic acid (Table 1), whereas *Vaccinium myrtillus* germinated best in *Flavocetraria nivalis* and *Cetraria islandica*, which are the only lichens with protolichesterinic acid (Table 1).

### 3.5 | Comparison between field and laboratory results

Estimated recruitment rates in the field and germination rates in the laboratory were moderately correlated (Spearman's rho = 0.45,  $p = 0.003$ ), indicating only partial correspondence between the field and laboratory results.



**FIGURE 4** Estimated biomass (mg dry weight) of the emerged seedlings in the field experiment across lichen treatments with 95% confidence intervals. Notice that the seedling weight scale of the heavy *P. sylvestris* and *S. virgaurea* differs from those of the six other plant species. Legends show number of seedlings emerged in each lichen treatment. The lichen treatments are ordered by increasing mat thickness and abbreviated as follows: Co; Control (bare soil), Fn; *Flavocetraria nivalis*, Ao; *Alectoria ochroleuca*, Sp; *Stereocaulon paschale*, Ci; *Cetraria islandica*, Ca; *Cladonia arbuscula* and Cs; *Cladonia stellaris*. Treatments with no letters in common are significantly different ( $p < 0.05$ ), as revealed by pairwise comparisons

## 4 | DISCUSSION

This study suggests that terricolous lichens facilitate rather than prevent seedling recruitment under stressful, natural conditions and that the effects of lichens on seedling recruitment are related more to their physical structure and resulting microclimate modifications than to allelopathy. **The lichen mats prevent large temperature fluctuations and conserve soil moisture**, and this may have caused the increased recruitment we observed within lichen mats compared to bare soil. Importantly, the effects of lichen mats on seedling recruitment and growth were species-specific, and for *Cladonia stellaris*, a lichen with thick and dense mats, the overall facilitative effect was replaced by restrained recruitment and growth conditions for many plant species.

### 4.1 | Damped microclimatic variation under lichens

Microclimatic conditions strongly affect plant species distributions in alpine habitats and are known to vary across small distances (Graae et al., 2012; Opedal, Armbruster, & Graae, 2015; Scherrer & Körner, 2011). Our results suggest that some of this small-scale variation may be related to variation in lichen cover and assemblages, because the lichen species differ in their effect on microclimate. In general, temperatures beneath lichens were less extreme than on the bare soil controls. Large temperature fluctuations are favorable for germination of many species, especially those with small seeds and low competitive ability (Fenner & Thompson, 2005). However, despite having the largest

temperature fluctuations, the bare soil controls did not have higher recruitment rates of small-seeded species (such as *Luzula spicata*, *Silene acaulis* and *Vaccinium myrtillus*). Furthermore, large temperature fluctuations can also be detrimental for seedlings (Cavieres, Badano, Sierra-Almeida, & Molina-Montenegro, 2007), and the low recruitment we observed on bare soil may partly represent seedling mortality during summer. On bare soil, maximum temperatures reached 45°C, 10–20 degrees higher than within the lichen mats, and soil drying was pronounced.

Under dry conditions, *Cetraria islandica* was the only lichen below which the soil was as dry as in the bare soil controls. Lichen water absorption and retaining abilities may vary among species (Larson, 1979) and depend on morphology (Larson, 1981) and thallus size (Gauslaa & Solhaug, 1998). Our focal lichen species varied extensively in morphology, and lichen species was a better predictor of soil microclimate than was lichen mat thickness in itself. For instance, the soil beneath *Cetraria islandica* became much drier than beneath *Stereocaulon paschale*, which has thinner mats. This could be due to poor water retention of *Cetraria islandica* combined with its open mat structure and dark color.

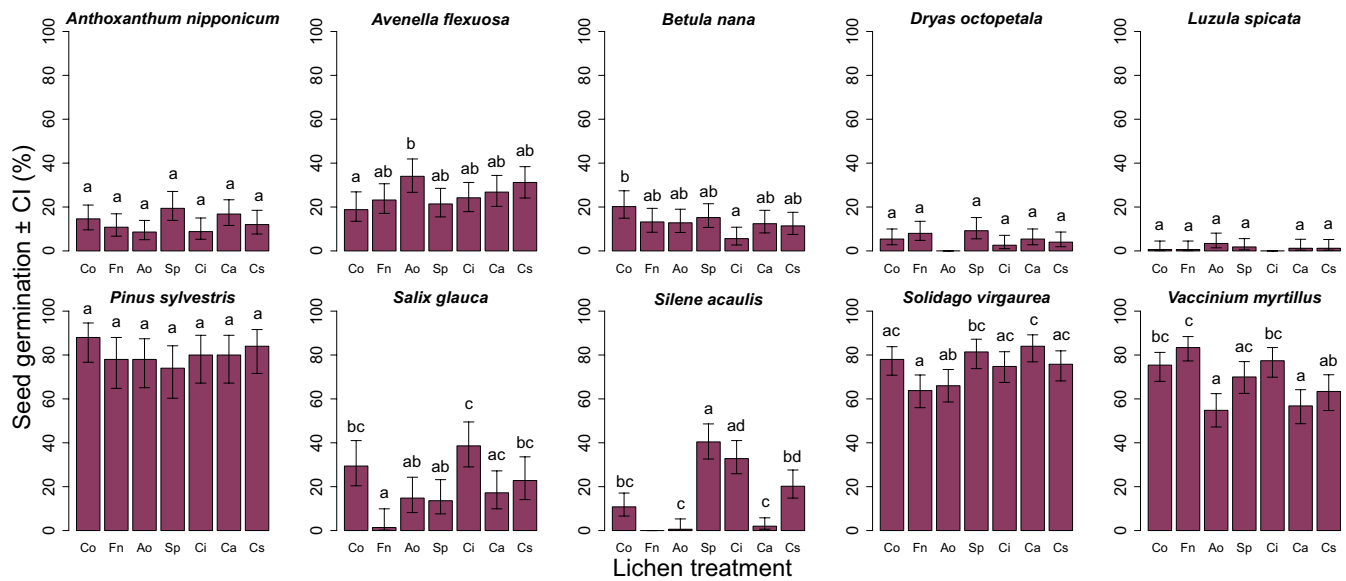
### 4.2 | Lichens facilitate seedling recruitment

We found that the presence of lichens increased seedling recruitment rates compared to recruitment on bare soil. High seedling numbers within lichen mats have also been reported for subarctic forests (Brown & Mikola, 1974; den Herder, Kytoviita, & Niemela,

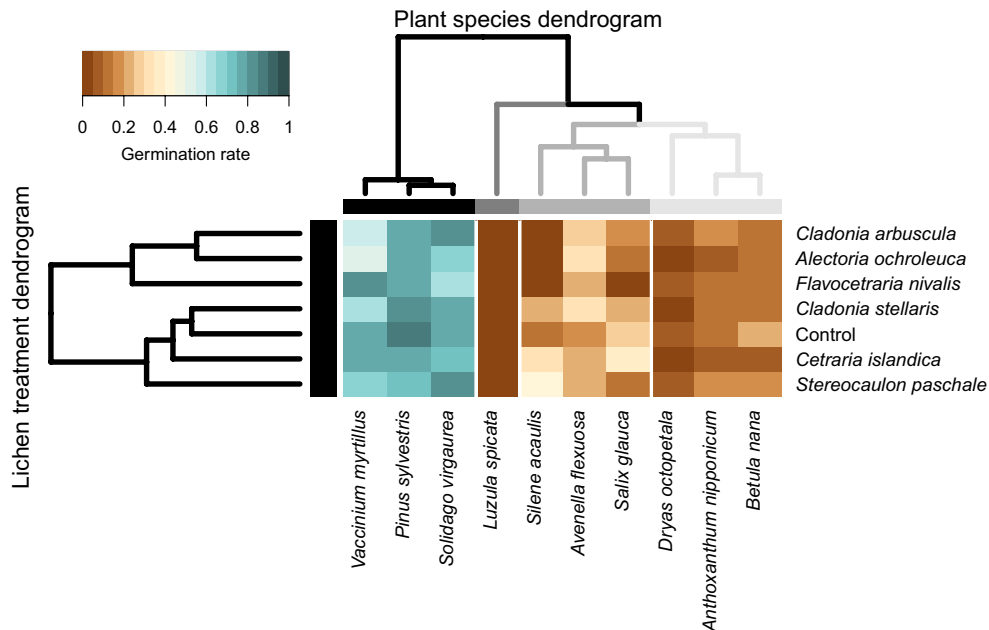




## (a) Lab seed germination barplots



## (b) Lab seed germination heatmap



**FIGURE 5** Seed germination in the laboratory experiment across lichen treatments. (a) Barplots showing mean estimated seed germination and 95% confidence intervals. The lichen treatments are abbreviated as follows: Co; Control (water only), Fn; *Flavocetraria nivalis*, Ao; *Alectoria ochroleuca*, Sp; *Stereocaulon paschale*, Ci; *Cetraria islandica*, Ca; *Cladonia arbuscula* and Cs; *Cladonia stellaris*. Treatments with no letters in common are significantly different ( $p < 0.05$ ), as revealed by pairwise comparisons. (b) Heatmap of mean estimated mean germination rates in the lichen treatments with clustering of plants (top) and lichen treatments (left). The lichen treatment dendrogram did not separate until height 0.38 and supported no ecologically meaningful clustering of the lichens (see Appendix S7)

2003; Steijlen, Nilsson, & Zackrisson, 1995; Zackrisson, Nilsson, Steijlen, & Hornberg, 1995) and for the treeline ecotone (Dufour-Tremblay, De Vriendt, Lévesque, & Boudreau, 2012). The recruitment rates within lichens observed in our study (below 40% for all species except *Pinus sylvestris*) are within the expectations for such systems (Graae et al., 2011; Steijlen et al., 1995) and therefore contrast with the negative effects of lichen physical structure and allelopathy on seedling recruitment as reported by Hawkes and

Menges (2003), Hobbs (1985), and Sedia and Ehrenfeld (2003) at lower elevations, and possibly more benign environments. Hawkes and Menges (2003) found, however, that the negative effect of lichens was weaker under more severe environmental stress. Indeed, on exposed heaths dominated by terricolous lichens, the vegetation is sparse and the sheltering effect of lichens may be an advantage for seedling recruitment in accordance with the Stress Gradient Hypothesis (Bertness & Callaway, 1994).



The increased importance of facilitation in stressful habitats could explain the lower recruitment observed on bare soils, as bare soils otherwise tend to promote seedling recruitment, also in arctic-alpine vegetation (Lembrechts et al., 2016; Milbau, Shevtsova, Osler, Mooshammer, & Graae, 2013). However, recruitment is often better in small gaps, or for big gaps, close to the edge and not in the center, especially in harsh environments (Houle & Fillion, 2003; Lembrechts, Milbau, & Nijs, 2015). The bare soil plots in our study were quite big and comparable to the severe disturbances performed by Evju et al. (2012) on exposed heaths where few seedlings recruited. Furthermore, the ability of lichens to trap seeds (Sedia & Ehrenfeld, 2003) is important in wind-exposed sites like lichen heaths. This could explain the low recruitment of *Salix glauca* and *Solidago virgaurea* on bare soils in our study, as both species have seeds with hairy appendages that could easily be blown away.

Only lichen species with dense and thick mats (e.g., *Cladonia stellaris*) seem to affect plant recruitment negatively. This may be caused by a combination of seeds not being able to reach the soil and seedlings not being able to emerge through the mat. Plant species with long and thin cotyledons (e.g., the graminoid *Avenella flexuosa*) may establish more successfully in thick and dense mats [cf. the observations of Sydes and Grime (1981) of seedlings emerging in leaf litter].

### 4.3 | Lichens affect seedling growth

Dense and thick lichen mats (e.g., *Cladonia stellaris*) seem to affect seedling growth of many plant species negatively. Seedling growth of the treeline-forming *Pinus sylvestris* (Körner, 2012) was clearly reduced in *Cladonia stellaris* compared to lichen species forming thinner mats, and this reduced growth, as well as the low recruitment rates, could slow down potential upward migration of *Pinus sylvestris* into low-alpine *Cladonia stellaris*-dominated heaths. Brown and Mikola (1974) also reported reduced growth of *Pinus sylvestris* seedlings within *Cladonia stellaris* and suggested that allelopathy restricted ectomycorrhiza formation. In a later study, Kytöviita and Stark (2009) found no negative effect of usnic acid (one of the secondary metabolites in *Cladonia stellaris*) on *Pinus sylvestris* growth and suggested other compounds or lichen structure as explanations for the reduced growth. Zamfir (2000) found that light availability decreased dramatically as they moved down the thick (c. 6 cm) lichen mats of *Cladonia* spp., with only about 7% of the available light reaching the soil below. We therefore suggest that for *Cladonia stellaris*, low light availability rather than allelopathy during the initial phase of stem and root elongation contributed to the growth reduction of *Pinus sylvestris* and other species in our field experiment.

### 4.4 | Limited lichen allelopathic effects on seed germination

Our laboratory experiment assessing allelopathic effects of lichens suggests no consistent negative effect on seed germination. Some species were more sensitive to the lichen treatments (such as *Silene acaulis*, *Salix glauca* and *Vaccinium myrtillus*), demonstrating

the importance of species-specific effects as shown by Escudero, Martínez, de la Cruz, Otálora, and Maestre (2007) and Favero-Longo and Piervittori (2010). In our study only germination of two plant species was seemingly affected by lichen secondary compounds acting alone: *Silene acaulis* with higher germination in lichens devoid of usnic acid (*Cetraria islandica* and *Stereocaulon paschale*), and *Vaccinium myrtillus* with highest germination in protolichetonic-producing lichens (*Cetraria islandica* and *Flavocetraria nivalis*). The allelopathic effect of certain metabolites may vary among plant species (Peres et al., 2009), and plant responses to different lichen species may be complicated by mutual adaptation of plants and lichens (Hobbs, 1985). In our study, however, the lichen secondary metabolites were not distinguished from one another or from other compounds, and we cannot ascertain which compounds affected germination. *Stereocaulon paschale*, for instance, has N<sub>2</sub>-fixing cyanobacteria (Kytöviita & Crittenden, 2007), potentially resulting in more available nitrogen (Nash, 2008), which in turn may increase germination (Baskin & Baskin, 2014) and plant growth (Körner, 2003). Although not apparent for all plant species (but for *Silene acaulis* and *Solidago virgaurea*), this could have contributed to high germination in the lab as well as recruitment and growth in the field in association with *Stereocaulon paschale* compared to most of the other lichen species.

The germination responses to lichens observed in the lab were only partly confirmed in the field, suggesting a minor effect of lichen allelopathy on seed regeneration under natural conditions. We did not measure secondary metabolites under field conditions, but concerning *Cladonia stellaris* and usnic acid, Stark et al. (2007) found no traces in rainwater percolated through the mat or in the soils beneath. Our findings therefore support recent studies suggesting that allelopathic effects of lichens on vascular plants under natural conditions are weaker than traditionally thought (Favero-Longo & Piervittori, 2010; Stark et al., 2007).

## 5 | CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR VEGETATION DYNAMICS

Our study shows that lichens facilitate recruitment of vascular plants in dwarf-shrub and lichen heaths, but also that lichen-plant interactions are likely to be species-specific. Overall, the observed lichen-driven modification of microclimate indicates more benign conditions for seedling recruitment. Together, these findings suggest that the ecological importance of lichen allelopathy under natural conditions might be overestimated based on the findings in laboratory experiments, at least in stressful habitats. We might therefore expect most lichens to facilitate rather than hamper vegetation changes in dry tundra heaths. While lichens may facilitate recruitment of seedlings of some species in harsh environments, the effect of lichens may be different for later life stages. High seedling mortality during the first years is common on heaths as well as other tundra habitats (Graae et al., 2011; Milbau et al., 2013), and for heaths associated with low winter temperatures (Milbau et al., 2013). The lichen mats may protect against very low winter temperatures, though, as observed



during summer for the species with thick mats. For herbaceous species with broad leaves, re-emerging through the densest lichen mats every spring could get harder as they grow bigger. When seedlings eventually grow past the protective lichen canopy, their survival may depend on adaptations to conserve water and withstand wind erosion and low temperatures, especially on the most exposed heaths.

Nevertheless, vascular plants are expanding at the cost of terrestrial lichens, e.g., in low-arctic Canada (Fraser et al., 2014) due to increase of tall and dwarf shrubs, and on Scandinavian low-alpine summits due to increase of the shrub *Betula nana* (Vanneste et al., 2017). Accumulation of leaf litter from deciduous shrubs, or other plant litter, can result in death of fruticose lichens (Cornelissen et al., 2001). This suggests that certain vascular plants, and especially those adapted to drought and/or with prostrate growth forms, such as *Betula nana* (de Groot, Thomas, & Wein, 1997), are able to expand and outcompete shade-intolerant lichens in heaths despite the stressful environment.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflict of interest to report.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

KS, BJG, GRS, HH and KON designed the study; KS, KON and BJG did fieldwork; KS performed the laboratory experiment; KON, ØHO and KS analyzed the data; KON and KS wrote the paper with input from all authors.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The two datasets analyzed in the current study are available as Appendices S5 and S6.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

**Appendix S1.** Schematic figure and photo of the field design.

**Appendix S2.** Figure with number of live and dead seedlings in the lichen treatments after one year.

**Appendix S3.** Table with model selection results for the four first research questions in the study.

**Appendix S4.** ANOVA and summary statistic tables of the models presented in the paper.

**Appendix S5.** Seedling recruitment and biomass data for the field experiment.

**Appendix S6.** Seed germination data for the laboratory experiment.

**Appendix S7.** Dendrograms for lichen treatments and plant species used in Figures 3 and 5 with heights.

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