Title

Evidence for recovery of an ant-dispersed myrmecochorous plant community following a small-scale disturbance

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Abstract:

Many species of plants exhibit a dispersal syndrome called myrmecochory, in which nutrient rich appendages are used to recruit ants which in turn transport seeds. This food-for-dispersal mutualism is common in the understory spring ephemeral and seasonal-green plant community found in temperate deciduous forests of Eastern North America and Europe. In the Northeastern U.S. mixed deciduous forest ecoregion, common wildflower genera including *Trillium, Erythronium, Dicentra, Claytonia* and *Hepatica* are dispersed by the facultative mutualist ants *Aphaenogaster.* Current evidence suggests that this mutualistic ant-plant complex depends on intact, closed-canopy forest and that the loss of one mutualistic partner could cause the decline of the other. It is unclear if, following disturbance, this mutualistic community can recover and support typical abundances of either ants or plants. To address this shortcoming, I preformed a long-term, small-scale removal of all elaiosomes-bearing diaspores in a gridded plot in a forest understory dominated by myrmecochores. From April to May from 2009 to 2011, all seeds were removed by hand from three 50m^2 plots, each paired with control plots with no removal. Following predictions of the life history of plants and ants in this system, I returned in Summer 2017 to collect data on % coverage of ant-dispersed plants and the abundance of seed-dispersing ants relative to the entire ant community. I found that despite entirely removing three growing seasons worth of elaiosomes, ant communities were not impacted or had made a recovery within the 6 year duration of the experiment. The % coverage of ant-dispersed plants did not impact any of the members of this plant community, suggesting that these populations were not seed limited or had made a concomitant recovery. Consequently, I conclude that as long as surrounding habitat (e.g. closed canopy secondary forests) is maintained, myrmecochorous communities have a robust ability to tolerate disturbance to the mutualistic interaction.

Introduction

Seed dispersal mutualisms are important components of terrestrial food webs since they represent a source of energy flow from plants to animals. Conversely, seed dispersal mutualisms have significant impacts on primary productivity since they regulate plant populations and community structure. Most mutualisms exhibit some degree of specialization, in which there is a co-evolutionary history between animal disperser and the dispersed plant species. In the case of myrmecochorous, or ant-dispersed plants, some forest understory plants present a syndrome of traits associated with seed dispersal by generalist ants. These myrmecochores produce seeds (diaspores) with fleshy, nutrient rich appendages called elaiosomes which attract foraging ants. Ant foragers return the seeds to the parent colony, remove the elaiosomes to freed to brood, and then discard the remaining seed to ant colony middens. Elaiosomes contain nutrients that can be limiting for ant colony development, and the abundance of ant-dispersed plants in some habitats suggest this is an important food source for ant colonies.

Myrmecochory is common in understory plants following the spring ephemeral life history strategy. These relatively small flowering plants have short leafing and flowering times, often completing emergence, pollination, and seed production before the forest canopy closes. In these habitats, *Aphaenogaster* ants are numerically dominant, and evidence suggests these are the most effective dispersal mutualist for myrmecochores. *Aphaenogaster* ants rapidly discover and move diaspores, preventing seed predation by small mammals.

Given the specificity of this mutualism, there is concern that habitat modification, disturbance, or fragmentation could negatively impact myrmecochorous communities or their seed-dispersing ants like *Aphaenogaster*. Elaiosomes are a food source for *Aphaenogaster* colonies, and can be particularly important when other insect prey is not available (Clark and King, 2012). It is predicted that disturbance which removes one of the mutualistic partners could negatively impact populations of the other. Consequently, there could be cascading effects as the result of the decline of this putative mutualist ant *Aphaenogaster*.

Methods:

Results:

Discussion:

References:

Clark, R. E., and J. R. King. 2012. The ant, Aphaenogaster picea, benefits from plant elaiosomes

when insect prey is scarce. Env. Ent. 41,1405–1408.

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Figures: