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Source: Journal of Orthoptera Research, 12(2) : 135-140
Published By: Orthopterists' Society
Lubber grasshoppers, *Romalea microptera* (Beauvois), orient to plant odors in a wind tunnel

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Abstract

We tested the response of individual adult lubber grasshoppers in a wind tunnel to the odors of 3 plant species and to water vapor. Grasshoppers moved upwind to the odors of fresh-mashed narcissus and mashed Romaine lettuce, but not to water vapor, or in the absence of food odor. Males and females showed similar responses. Upwind movement tended to increase with the length of starvation (24, 48, or 72 h). The lack of upwind movement to water vapor implies that orientation toward the mashed plants was not simply an orientation to water vapor. These results support a growing data base that suggests that grasshoppers can use olfaction when foraging in the wild.

Key words

grasshopper, Romaleidae, *Romalea microptera*, olfaction, host search, wind tunnel, feeding behavior, starvation, food odors, lubber, anemotaxis

Introduction

How grasshoppers find their food has long been of interest to researchers (Uvarov 1977). Acridoids are thought to use visual, chemical, and tactile senses when searching for, identifying, biting, and accepting food (Chapman 1988, 1990). For example, many grasshopper species orient visually to emergent plants, certain colors, or to two-dimensional images drawn on paper; vertical contrasting stripes are especially attractive (Kennedy 1937, 1939; Williams 1954; Wallace 1958; Mulkern 1967, 1969; Bailey & Harris 1991; Szentesi et al. 1996).

Evidence that some grasshoppers can use olfaction to orient to food plants comes from many sources (Watson & Bratley 1940, Volkonsky 1942, Slifer 1955, Dadd 1963). In the field, grasshoppers sometimes move upwind toward odorous plants, synthetic plant chemicals, carrion, or baits (Boppré et al. 1984; Modder 1984; Bomar & Lockwood 1994b,c; Lockwood et al. 2001). For example, Chapman (1990) observed a marching band of *Chorthoices terminifera* nymphs turn upwind toward fresh grass. Also, grasshopper antennae possess numerous olfactory sensilla (Kang & Chen 1997, Bland 1989, Blaney & Simmonds 1990, Chen & Kang 2000) that respond electrophysiologically to a range of plant odors, including the green leaf odors (Blust & Hopkins 1987, White & Chapman 1990a, Dickens et al. 1993, Kang et al. 1995, Hansson et al. 1996, Njagi & Torto 1996, Chen & Kang 2000). A smaller number of olfactory sensilla are found on grasshopper palps (Blaney 1977, Blaney & Simmonds 1990), and apparently also on all parts of the legs (Slifer 1954, 1956). In addition, rates of turning, antenna-
The most controversial step in the above scenario is medium-to-long-range olfactory orientation (Bailey & Harris 1991). This is because many species in the field appear not to use olfaction in host search. Some grasshoppers remain on their food plants for most of their lives, and therefore appear not to require strong olfactory senses. Other grasshoppers wander on the ground and sample bite nearly every plant they encounter, lending support to the idea that most diet selection in acridids begins, not with olfaction, but with random biting (Dadd 1963; Mulkern 1967; Sinoir 1969, 1970; Bland 1981). Few authors have rigorously demonstrated odor orientation to undamaged plants in either the lab or field, and others found little or no evidence of olfactory orientation (Williams 1954, Dadd 1963, Mulkern 1967, Bland 1981).

In this paper we report that adult Eastern Lubber grasshoppers, *Romalea microptera* (Beauvois), orient to the odors of damaged plants in a wind tunnel. This species is excellent for this type of study because it is polyphagous, large, flightless, docile, and easily reared in the laboratory (Matuszek & Whitman 2001). In addition, early reports suggest that *R. microptera* exhibits long-distance orientation to food odors (Watson & Bratley 1940). In 2 successive years, Watson (1941) noted large numbers of *R. microptera* nymphs marching in long columns toward fields planted with narcissus, a favored food. In the 1st year, narcissus was planted about 300 m to the northeast of the hatching site, and the nymphs marched to the northeast. In the 2nd year, narcissus was planted to the west, and the nymphs marched to the west, suggesting that group marching in this species was directed toward a food source.

**Methods and Materials**

**Insects.**—Eastern Lubber grasshoppers, *Romalea microptera* (Beauvois) were obtained from the Illinois State University colony, maintained in 1 m³ wire-mesh cages at 23 to 34 °C and L:D 14:10 photoperiod, and fed Romaine lettuce, wheat bran, and oatmeal ad libitum, with supplements of green onion, green bean pods, and carrot leaves and roots, 3 times per week (Chladny & Whitman 1997, Matuszek & Whitman 2001). The colony was established from wild animals captured in Copeland, Florida in 1997. Experimental animals consisted of 9 to 35 d-old adults, and were provided with narcissus for 2 or 3 d prior to starvation.

**Wind Tunnel.**—We tested the walking response of individual grasshoppers to odors in a 183 × 30.5 × 15 cm wooden wind tunnel, with a transparent plexiglass lid (wind speed: 47 cm/s; air temperature: 30 to 32 °C; light source: eight 40 W fluorescent bulbs, 2 m above and parallel to the chamber). A double layer of black nylon screen created a noise barrier. A variable-speed fan sucked air through the odor chamber, then the tunnel, and then vented it through a duct outside the room. The tunnel was lined with white paper, which was changed with each new animal. Grid marks allowed us to measure the location of the test insect as it moved up or downwind.

**Experiment 1: Response to food odors.**—We tested individual adult *R. microptera* to each of 4 odor sources vs 3 starvation treatments, for a total of 12 odor × starvation combinations. Five to 10 different animals were used for each combination. Each animal was tested once. Odor sources included 50 g of Romaine lettuce (*Lactuca sativa* L. var. *longifolia*), green onion (*Allium cepa*), narcissus (*Narcissus pseudonarcissus*), and a no-odor (empty chamber) control. Lettuce, narcissus, and onion are favored foods for *R. microptera*. Starvation treatments included animals starved for 24, 48, or 72 h. Animals were starved by keeping them in a food and water-free container, held under similar environmental conditions as described above for the stock colony. During starvation, no cannibalism occurred.

**Experiment 2: Response to water vapor.**—We tested individual adult *R. microptera* to 2 odor sources vs 3 starvation treatments, for a total of 6 odor × starvation combinations. Six different animals were used for each combination. Odor sources used were the presence or absence of 50 g of H₂O. Starvation treatments included animals starved for 24, 48, or 72 h. Animals were starved as per Experiment 1.

**Odor preparation.**—In a separate room, immediately before the test, 50 g of fresh plant material (leaves of Romaine lettuce, or leaves, stems, and bulbs of green onion or narcissus) were chopped, macerated, and placed into a new clean 1-cm deep × 12-cm diameter plastic tray. For Experiment 2, 50 g of tap water were placed in a similar plastic tray. For no-odor controls, in both Experiments 1 & 2, we used empty clean trays.

**Testing procedure.**—For both Experiments 1 & 2, individual adult grasshoppers were placed on the floor in the exact center of the wind tunnel, facing the wall and perpendicular to the wind flow. We alternated between male and female grasshoppers for each run. After 15 min, we recorded the upwind (+) or downwind (−) distance moved by the grasshopper.

**Statistical Analysis.**—In both experiments we first used independent-measures t-tests to test for sexual differences. We then used a 2-way fixed-effect model of the GLM (general linear model) procedure for both Experiments 1 & 2, to analyze the effects of starvation time versus food type or water vapor on grasshopper movement in the wind tunnel. Post-hoc testing was conducted using the Ryan-Einot-Gabriel-Welsch (REGWQ) multiple range test. All statistical tests were conducted using SPSS version 9.0 (SPSS Inc.) or SAS (SAS Institute Inc.).

**Results**

**Experiment 1: response to food odors**

We pooled the results from males and females because we found no significant difference (two-independent sample t-test for each sex of the sample. P>0.05) in upwind distance traveled by males (x̄±s = 21.7 ± 6.7 cm, N=49) vs females (29.1 ± 7.7 cm, N=49). We then used a 2-way fixed-effect GLM procedure to examine the effect of both food type and starvation time and to check for potential interactions between starvation time and food type. This analysis demonstrated that there were significant differences among the treatments for food type F₇,₉₆=2.66, P<0.05, but no significant interaction between food type and starvation time (F₇,₉₆=1.22, P>0.05). Food type demonstrated significant differences among the various treatment groups (food type F₇,₉₆=6.26, P<0.05). Post-hoc analysis of the food type groups demonstrated 2 different REGWQ groupings. Significant differences were found in the upwind distance traveled by animals exposed to either Romaine

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*JOURNAL OF ORTHOPTERA RESEARCH 2003, 12(2)*

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Fig 1. Direction and mean distance traveled (\( \bar{x} \pm s \)) by adult *R. microptera* grasshoppers in a wind tunnel, when exposed to various food odors (starvation treatments combined). A GLM analysis demonstrated significant differences among treatments (\( F_{3,86}=5.30, P<0.05 \)). Post-hoc analysis using REGWQ multiple range test demonstrated two groupings (designated a and b). A significant difference between the mean distance traveled upwind for the narcissus and romaine lettuce-treatments compared to the no-food odor group is clearly seen. The onion-treatment group is a member of both groupings.

Fig 2. In Experiment 1, GLM analysis of the effect of starvation period on the mean distance traveled by *R. microptera* grasshoppers (food treatments combined) demonstrated a strong trend, but no significant differences among the treatments (\( F_{2,86}=2.41, P>0.05 \)).

Fig 3. Mean distance (\( \bar{x} \pm s \)) traveled upwind by adult *R. microptera* grasshoppers in a wind tunnel exposed to either the presence or absence of water vapor (starvation treatments combined). GLM analysis showed no significant difference (\( F_{1,30}=1.10, P>0.05 \)) between the 2 groups.

Fig 4. The effect of starvation period on upwind movement of *R. microptera* grasshoppers in a wind tunnel (response to water vapor and no water vapor combined). REGWQ multiple range test demonstrated 2 groupings (designated a & b) with the 72-h starved grasshoppers moving significantly further upwind than either the 24-h or 48-h starved insects. Post-hoc analysis of starvation time (for combined water and no-water treatments) demonstrated 2 different REGWQ groupings. The first group demonstrated no significant difference in the mean distance traveled by the 24-h starved (-0.3 cm), and 48-h starved (-18.5 cm), individuals. The 2nd group consisted of the 72-h starved individuals, who traveled significantly further upwind (36.1 cm) than either the 24-h or 48-h starved groups (Fig. 4).

**Discussion**

Our study demonstrates that adult lubber grasshoppers can respond to food odors by moving upwind. These results support previous work on the use of olfactory cues in the Acrididae (Chapman 1988). Among grasshoppers, *S. gregaria, S. americana*, and *M. sanguinipes* have been shown to move upwind to the odors of crushed or cut plants in wind tunnels or y-tube olfactometers (Kenedy & Moorhouse 1969, Lee et al. 1987, Hopkins & Young 1990, Njagi & Torto 1996, Szentesi et al. 1996). *M. sanguinipes* also moved upwind toward the odors of undamaged grasses and individual and mixed green leaf volatiles in the laboratory (Hopkins & Young 1990, Szentensi 1996), and *Zonocerus* species oriented in the field to plants releasing pyrrolizidine alkaloids (Boppré & Fischer 1994). In addition, many grasshoppers orient to the odors of carrion or volatile...
fatty acids, in the field or in wind tunnels (Lockwood 1989a,b; Bomar & Lockwood 1994a,b,c; Whitman et al. 1994; Lockwood et al. 2001).

In our tests, odors from fresh mashed narcissus elicited greater orientation responses than did odors from mashed onion, suggesting that plants vary in their attractiveness. Electrophysiological studies demonstrate that grasshopper sensilla can discriminate among odors (Blaney & Simmonds 1990, Ngägi & Torto 1996). Haskell et al. (1962) and Hopkins and Young (1990) also reported that different plants and individual volatile compounds elicited different levels of orientation in wind tunnels, implying that grasshoppers can discriminate among different plant odors from a distance.

Although grasshoppers possess hygrophoreceptors (Slifer 1955, Bland 1981, Blaney & Simmonds 1990), we were unable to demonstrate an upwind movement to water vapor alone, suggesting that orientation toward the mashed plants in our study was not simply a response to water vapor, but was in response to other plant volatiles. Although some authors have provided limited evidence that grasshoppers could orient toward or away from water vapors (Bodenheimer 1944; Slifer 1955; Riegert 1959, 1960; Lockwood 1989a), other have suggested otherwise (Kennedy 1937, Aziz 1957, Haskell et al. 1962, Bomar & Lockwood 1994a). Clearly, this area requires further study.

In our second experiment, upwind movement increased with starvation time, with 72-h starved individuals demonstrating a significant upwind movement when compared to either the 24-h, or 48-h starved groups. A similar nonsignificant trend was observed in Experiment 1 (Fig. 2). Previous authors have noted that hunger stimulates locomotion (Williams 1954, Kaufman 1968, Mulknern 1969, Bland 1981, Chapman 1988) or odor orientation (Haskell et al. 1962, Kennedy & Moorhouse 1969, Moorhouse 1971) in grasshoppers. However, we failed to find a significant odor × starvation interaction, suggesting that in R. microptera, increased starvation influenced response to wind, but not to odor.

Do grasshoppers commonly use olfaction when orienting to food plants in nature?—To date, only 4 grasshopper species from 3 subfamilies, have been shown to orient to plants via olfaction in the laboratory, and virtually all of these studies used cut, bruised, or macerated plants. One notable exception was Hopkins and Young (1990) who used both damaged, and whole undamaged plants. It is well known that damaged plants release different and substantially greater amounts of volatiles than undamaged plants, and thus these various laboratory studies may not accurately reflect what occurs in nature. Likewise, although grasshoppers will orient to baits, carrion, or volatile fatty acids in the field, this does not necessarily mean that they normally use olfaction to orient to plants. Observations of olfactory orientation to plants in nature are mostly anecdotal (Watson 1941, Chapman 1988) or odor orientation (Haskell 1962, Kennedy & Moorhouse 1969, Moorhouse 1971) in grasshoppers. However, we failed to find a significant odor × starvation interaction, suggesting that in R. microptera, increased starvation influenced response to wind, but not to odor.

In conclusion, our results reaffirm the idea that grasshoppers use not only visual, acoustic, thermal, gustatory, and tactile senses to monitor and orient to the environment, but also olfaction. The growing evidence of orientation to food odors by grasshoppers parallels an increasing awareness of the importance of intraspecific odor communication (pheromones) for both gregarious and solitary grasshoppers (Whitman 1990, Heifetz et al.1996, Pener & Yerushalmi 1998, Stauffert et al. 1998, Hassanali & Torto 1999, Niassy et al.1999, Torto et al. 1999, Despland 2001, Ngägi & Torto 2002), suggesting that olfaction is more important to grasshoppers than previously realized.

Acknowledgements

This research was initiated and supported by Dr. Scott Sakaluk’s Animal Behavior class and the Undergraduate Research Training (CRUI) Program at Illinois State University, and by NSF grant DBI-9978810.

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