Specialist and generalist bee visitors of an endemic beardedtongue (*Penstemon caryi*: Plantaginaceae) of the Big Horn Mountains, Wyoming

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SPECIALIST AND GENERALIST BEE VISITORS OF AN ENDEMIC BEARDTONGUE (PENSTEMON CARYI: PLANTAGINACEAE) OF THE BIG HORN MOUNTAINS, WYOMING

V.J. Tepedino1,5, T.L. Griswold1, J.E. Freilich2,3, and P. Shephard2,4

ABSTRACT.—Insect exclusion from the flowers of Penstemon caryi showed that fruits are not produced unless pollen is moved between flowers by pollinators. We recorded over 30 species of bees visiting the flowers, and about a third of the bee species were common. Flower visitors were primarily pollen-collecting female bees, most of which also carried pollen on areas of the head that strongly implicated them as pollinators. While larger bees were generally more common on the flowers than smaller bees, there appeared to be no difference between size groups in (1) the percent of females collecting Penstemon pollen, (2) the percent of collected pollen that was Penstemon pollen, or (3) the percent of individuals that carried pollen in areas likely to effect pollination. Two long-tongued species, Anthophora ursina (Apidae) and Osmia brevis (Megachilidae), dominated the collections. These 2 species have very different host associations with Penstemon flowers: the specialist O. brevis collects pollen only from species of beardtongues in the western United States, while the generalist A. ursina uses a wide spectrum of plant species for pollen and seems to express fidelity to Penstemon flowers only when those flowers are abundant. There was no evidence that specialists are superior to generalists as pollinators of P. caryi.

RESUMEN.—La exclusión de insectos de las flores de Penstemon caryi mostró que no hay producción de frutos a menos que el polen se mueva entre las flores mediante un polinizador. Registramos a más de 30 especies de abejas que visitaron las flores, de las cuales alrededor de un tercio eran especies comunes. Principalmente fueron abejas hembras recolectoras de polen quienes visitaron las flores; la mayoría de estas abejas también llevaba polen en ciertas partes de sus cabezas, lo que implicó fuertemente que eran polinizadoras. A pesar de que fue más común encontrar abejas de mayor tamaño en las flores, en comparación con abejas más pequeñas, al parecer no hubo ninguna diferencia entre los grupos de diferentes tamaños en materia de (1) el porcentaje de hembras que recolectaron polen de Penstemon; (2) el porcentaje de polen recolectado que fue de Penstemon; o (3) el porcentaje de individuos que llevaban polen en las áreas que más comúnmente afectan la polinización. Hubo dos especies de lenguas largas que dominaron la colecta de polen: Anthophora ursina (Apidae) y Osmia brevis (Megachilidae). Estas 2 especies tienen una asociación ecológica muy diferente con las flores Penstemon. La especialista O. brevis solo recolecta polen de especies de Penstemon al occidente de los Estados Unidos; por su parte, la generalista A. ursina utiliza una amplia gama de especies de plantas para obtener polen y al parecer muestra lealtad a las flores Penstemon solamente cuando tales flores abundan. No se encontró evidencia de que las especialistas son superiores a las generalistas en cuanto a su desempeño como polinizadoras de P. caryi.

Pollination biologists predict the kinds of visitors to flowers using characteristics such as flower color, size, morphology, and resource delivery (e.g., Waser et al. 1996, Fenster et al. 2004). One taxon whose flower attributes and pollinators have attracted much recent attention is the beardtongues, genus Penstemon (Plantaginaceae). Thomson, Wilson, and colleagues (Thomson et al. 2000, Castellanos et al. 2003, 2006, Wilson et al. 2004, 2006, 2007) have cast most beardtongues into 2 readily recognizable pollination syndromes: hummingbird- and bee-adapted species. They describe 2 suites of associated flower characteristics. In general, hummingbird flowers are pink to bright red, with relatively narrow and long corollas and exerted anthers. These flowers produce dilute nectar and dispense pollen liberally with each effective visit. In contrast, bee flowers are blue to violet, with relatively short and wide corollas and anthers of various degrees of in- and exsertion. These flowers produce sugar-rich nectar and dispense their pollen gradually in small portions. It is more difficult to predict the types of bees associated with bee-syndrome beardtongue species; the clearest connection appears to be between size of flower and visitor (Wilson et al. 2004).

Here we describe the pollinators associated with the rare Penstemon caryi Pennell (section

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Habroanthus; Wolfe et al. 2006), an endemic of the Big Horn Mountains of north central Wyoming and south central Montana. Cary’s penstemon is a former candidate for listing under the U.S. Endangered Species Act, a current USDA Forest Service sensitive species, and a species of concern in Wyoming and Montana (Heidel and Handley 2004). Pollination is an important process for rare plants (Kearns et al. 1998) and a concern for those who manage their populations, as most rare plants are unable to reproduce sexually unless pollen is transferred between the flowers (e.g., Tepedino 2000).

Our first objective was to determine if sexual reproduction by *P. caryi* flowers was enabled by pollinators. Our second objective was to determine if color and size of *P. caryi* flowers accurately predicted the kinds of insects that visited and were likely pollinators. The flowers of *P. caryi* are blue to purple, with violet nectar guides. The flowers are also large (20–28 mm in length) and strongly bilabiate, with an abruptly inflated throat and a slightly exserted staminode (C.C. Freeman, “Penstemon” in Plantaginaceae, Flora of North America, Vol. 17, submitted); they augur large bees. Our third objective was to classify bee species visiting penstemon flowers as specialists or generalists based on our pollen-collection records and information in the literature. Our last objective was to determine if pollen specialists (oligoleges) were more efficient foragers or more important pollinators (polyleges).

**Methods**

We studied *P. caryi* at The Nature Conservancy’s Ten Sleep Preserve in Washakie County, Wyoming, on the west slope of the Big Horn Mountains. The site covers about 40 acres and supports over 3000 *P. caryi* ramets. More detailed site descriptions and locations can be found in Fertig (2002) and Heidel and Handley (2004), which also list associated species.

To determine if *P. caryi* flowers set fruit without pollinator visitation (autogamy), we used 1-mm² white tulle bags to cover one inflorescence, with a variable number of flowers, on each of 20 randomly selected plants before any flower buds had opened. At the same time, a similarly sized, but unbagged, inflorescence on a nearby plant was marked as an open-pollinated comparison. Inflorescences from these 2 treatments were subsequently collected, and the number of fruits (but not seeds) per flower were recorded and compared.

Visitors to *P. caryi* flowers were collected at 2 sites with abundant blooming plants on the Ten Sleep Preserve on 3 days (28–29 May 1998, 17 June 1999). Both sites were surrounded by juniper/sagebrush grasslands (Heidel and Handley 2004). Collections were made from mid-morning to late afternoon as 2 collectors walked among the plants for several hour-long periods. Bees were captured with a butterfly net and transferred immediately to cyanide vials. Bees were subsequently pinned, labeled, and taken to the laboratory for identification, measurement, and examination of pollen (taxonomy follows that of Michener 2000; specimens are in the collection of the USDA ARS Bee Biology and Systematics Lab, Utah State University, Logan, UT).

Each specimen was examined under a binocular microscope for the presence of pollen in the scopa (the hairy pollen-collecting apparatus of bees, either on the hind legs or, for megachilids, on the ventral abdomen) and on areas that would contact the anthers and stigma of *P. caryi* flowers (i.e., the frons, clypeus, and the supraclypeal parts of the head). Pollen of pollen-collecting bees was sampled from the scopa with a forceps, transferred to a slide, stained with Calberla’s solution (Kearns and Inouye 1993), and identified at 400X as either *Penstemon* or non-*Penstemon* pollen using a pollen reference collection. Although we were unable to distinguish pollen among different species of contemporaneously blooming Plantaginaceae, other *Penstemon* species were over 500 m away and other members of the family were few in number. Thus, we are confident that most pollen was from *P. caryi*.

**Results**

The results of our experimental pollination comparisons were unequivocal: no flower from any bagged inflorescence (*n* = 20) produced fruit, while 89.1% (*SD = 12.5*) of open-pollinated flowers on marked inflorescences produced seeded fruits (*n* = 17; 3 inflorescences were lost). Thus, pollinators were required for sexual reproduction to occur in *P. caryi*.

We collected over 30 species of bees on the flowers of *P. caryi*, the overwhelming majority of which were solitary (only members of the genus *Bombus* were eusocial); other potential
 pollinating insects, such as wasps or flies, were uncommon or absent. Bee species represented by more than one individual are shown in Table 1 (a list of uncommon species is available from Tepedino). Species richness of Penstemon flower-visitors was dominated by members of the bee genus Osmia (9 common and several uncommon species). Two species of long-tongued bees in 2 families numerically dominated the collection: Anthophora ursina (Apidae) and Osmia brevis (Megachilidae). Conspicuous because of their low numbers or total absence were the usually common, small sweat bees of the subgenus Lasioglossum (Dialictus) (all <7 mm in length) and pollen wasps (Pseudomasaris spp.).

Most bee visitors to the flowers of P. caryi were females and pollen-collectors (64.0% overall; Table 1), and most of the pollen collected (total of 105 females) was Penstemon pollen (averages between 73.9% and 100%). Pollen loads carried by females of the 2 dominant species, the generalist A. ursina and the specialist O. brevis, averaged 96.6% and 100% Penstemon pollen, respectively. Thus, most female bee visitors were either specialized on, or displaying temporary localized constancy to, Penstemon flowers.

In flowers of all but one species of Penstemon, both pairs of fertile anthers are located dorsally while the sterile staminode is positioned ventrally; after the anthers have dehisced, the dorsally positioned style develops a hook at the distal end, bringing the receptive stigma into more direct contact with foraging bees. With the exception of the short-tongued species Andrena sola and Lasioglossum sisymbrii, most female bees carried Penstemon pollen on those areas of the head (supraclypeal area, frons, and vertex) likely to contact both anthers and stigma and, therefore, to effect pollination (Table 1). On average, 73.1% (A. ursina) and 82.6% (O. brevis) of females of the dominant species carried Penstemon pollen on one or more areas of the head.

It was difficult to test the expectation that common bee visitors to P. caryi flowers exhibit large body sizes, because we have no estimate of the size distribution of all bees active in the community against which to compare them. Our best possible effort was to note that 4 of the 5 most abundant bee taxa collected on P. caryi flowers were equal to or greater than the median species body length and that, conversely, 5 of the 7 least common of these species were below the median body size of the collection (Table 1). Thus, it would appear that larger bees are more common on the large flowers of Cary’s penstemon, though there are several exceptions.

While larger bees were more common, they were no more likely to collect Penstemon pollen

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*Specimens misplaced and unavailable for examination; length conservatively estimated based on size of queens of most abundant species in northern Wyoming.
large end of the size-frequency distribution of more common species collected were at the expectation that bee visitors to the large flowers flowering season. Thus, the outcome of our size comparisons should be regarded as tentative. Of the 30+ bee species found on Penstemon caryi collection is. Of the 2 dominant species, one, O. brevis, is an oligolege, while the other, A. urticae, is a polylege. In addition, 9 of the 15 most common bee species were members of the genus Osmia, many of whose species have an affinity for visiting and collecting pollen from Penstemon flowers (Crosswhite and Crosswhite 1966, Tepedino et al. 1999). Indeed, all of the Osmia species collected from P. caryi have been recorded visiting other beardtongues, though it is not clear how many are polyleges as opposed to oligoleges. A few of these predictable Penstemon visitors in the western United States (e.g., O. brevis and Osmia eduliae) also possess basket-forming proclinate hairs on the supra-clypeal and frons areas of the head that seem to be adaptations for collecting pollen from nototribic flowers (Müller 1996), such as penstemons (Tepedino et al. 1999). While this pollen-collecting apparatus is also possessed by some other Penstemon specialists (Grisswold and Rightmeyer unpublished data), it is unclear that its absence is a disadvantage for other common Penstemon foragers (e.g., Osmia albilateralis, Osmia bruneri, Osmia gaudiosa, Osmia sanrafaelae, and A. urticae; Table 1).

An instructive comparison is between the 2 dominant visitors of P. caryi flowers: the
specialist *O. brevis*, which possesses proclinate hairs, and the generalist *A. ursina*, which lacks them. These species are quite different in their association with beardtongue flowers. *Osmia brevis* is a *Penstemon* oligolege that, in addition to *P. caryi*, has been recorded collecting pollen from *Penstemon secundiflorus* and *Penstemon spectabilis* (Crosswhite and Crosswhite 1966), *Penstemon debilis* and *Penstemon caespitosus* (McMullen 1998), *Penstemon harringtonii* (Nicholson 1998), *Penstemon penlandii* (Tepedino et al. 1999), *Penstemon scariosus var. albifluvis* (Lewinsohn and Tepedino 2007), *Penstemon haydenii* (Tepedino et al. 2007), *Penstemon speciosus* and *Penstemon kingii* (J.H. Cane personal communication), and is known to visit at least an additional 31 other *Penstemon* species (Griswold unpublished data). In contrast, *A. ursina*, a polylege, collects pollen from many plant families. For example, the USDA ARS bee collection in Logan, Utah, harbors 112 individuals (*P. caryi* visitors omitted) that have been recorded from 15 plant families of primitive (e.g., Ranunculaceae) to derived (e.g., Asteraceae) status. A brief trip to the Ten Sleep Preserve in June 2010 yielded numerous female *A. ursina* visiting *Penstemon* (2 species), *Astragalus* (several species), *Lupinus*, *Castilleja*, and *Cerasium*.

These differences between the dominant visitors in host-plant associations, and in the presence of the pollen-collecting apparatus on the head, have not resulted in any obvious corresponding difference in pollen-foraging efficiency or in likelihood of pollination. Most females of both species (indeed, of almost all common species) collected a high percent of *Penstemon* pollen on a given foraging trip and carried pollen on the head, irrespective of the presence of a pollen basket (Table 1). Thus, *Penstemon* oligoleges do not appear to be superior to polyleges as pollinators of *Penstemon* flowers. Again, only more detailed observations and comparisons can determine if specialized females with or without proclinate hairs are more efficient *Penstemon* pollen foragers and pollinators than are generalized females without such hairs.

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