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Title: Distribution of the myrmecoparasitic fungus *Rickia wasmannii* (Ascomycota: Laboulbeniales) across colonies, individuals, and body parts of *Myrmica scabrinodis*

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Corresponding Author: Ms. Eniko Csata, M.Sc.

Corresponding Author's Institution: Babes-Bolyai University

First Author: Bálint Markó, Ph.D.

Order of Authors: Bálint Markó, Ph.D.; Eniko Csata, M.Sc.; Katalin Erős, M.Sc.; Enikő Német, M.Sc.; Zsolt Czekes, Ph.D.; Lajos Rózsa, Ph.D.

Abstract: The ant species *Myrmica scabrinodis* plays a markedly important ecological role through much of the humid grasslands of Eurasia. It hosts a species-rich community of pathogens and parasites, including *Rickia wasmannii*, an enigmatic member of entomoparasitic laboulbenialean fungi. This study provides a descriptive ecology of *R. wasmannii* by characterizing its prevalence and distribution across several hierarchical levels: colonies, individuals, and anatomic body parts. Infections were restricted to a single ant species, *Myrmica scabrinodis*, and infected colonies occurred predominantly in wet habitats. Infections tended to be highly prevalent within infected colonies, often reaching 100% sample prevalence among workers. Individual infections exhibited an aggregated distribution typical to host-parasite systems. Workers from the aboveground part of nests (presumably older ones acting as foragers) were more infected than those from the belowground part. Fungal thalli could be found all over the body of the hosts, the head and the abdomen being the most infected parts of the body. The fungi's distribution among host body parts statistically differed between low versus high-intensity infections: the initial dominance of the head decreased with advancing infection. These findings may provide baseline data for future comparative or monitoring studies.

Title:

Distribution of the myrmecoparasitic fungus *Rickiawasmannii* (Ascomycota: Laboulbeniales) across colonies, individuals, and body parts of *Myrmicascabrinodis*

Running title:

Prevalence and distribution of *Rickiawasmannii* on ants

Authors: Bálint Markó^{1,2}, Enikő Csata¹, Katalin Erős¹, Enikő Németh¹, Zsolt Czeker¹, Lajos Rózsa³

Addresses:

¹ Hungarian Department of Biology and Ecology, Babeş-Bolyai University, 400006 Cluj-Napoca, Clinicilor 5-7, Romania, *balintm@gmail.com*, *csataeniko88@gmail.com*, *katika_eros@yahoo.com*

² Department of Ecology, University of Szeged, Középfasor 52, H-6726 Szeged, Hungary

³ MTA-ELTE-MTM Ecology Research Group, Pázmány s. 1/C, H-1117 Budapest, Hungary

*contact author: EnikőCsata

Hungarian Department of Biology and Ecology, Babeş-Bolyai University, 400006 Cluj-Napoca, Clinicilor 5-7, Romania, *csataeniko88@gmail.com*, tel: 00-40-754-416924

Abstract

The ant species *Myrmicascabrinodis* plays a markedly important ecological role through much of the humid grasslands of Eurasia. It hosts a species-rich community of pathogens and

parasites, including *Rickiawasmannii*, an enigmatic member of entomoparasitic laboulbenian fungi. This study provides a descriptive ecology of *R. wasmannii* by characterizing its prevalence and distribution across several hierarchical levels: colonies, individuals, and anatomic body parts. Infections were restricted to a single ant species, *Myrmicascabrinodis*, and infected colonies occurred predominantly in wet habitats. Infections tended to be highly prevalent within infected colonies, often reaching 100% sample prevalence among workers. Individual infections exhibited an aggregated distribution typical to host-parasite systems. Workers from the above-ground part of nests (presumably older ones acting as foragers) were more infected than those from the below-ground part. Fungal thalli could be found all over the body of the hosts, the head and the abdomen being the most infected body parts. The fungi's distribution among host body parts statistically differed between low- versus high-intensity infections: the initial dominance of the head decreased with advancing infection. These results may provide baseline data for future comparative or monitoring studies.

Keywords: ants, body part specificity, infection intensity, Laboulbeniales, parasitism, prevalence

No. of pages: 15

No. of figures: 4

No. of tables: 1

We are grateful for the reviewers' comments, they helped us improving the manuscript considerably. We addressed every question and carried out all the requested corrections. More specifically, we clarified all those aspects that were not addressed by us in the required manner in the previous version of the manuscript (e.g. methodological details in the Materials and Methods), and eliminated one GLMM analysis since the dataset behind it was very unbalanced, and the results of the analysis were anyhow non-significant. We added a more detailed paragraph on host specificity to the discussion and generally corrected all mistakes and errors that were mentioned by the reviewers. In the end the general message of the manuscript has not changed. A detailed list of responses was also prepared further on.

Detailed answers

REVIEWER #1:

General comments

R: The 'entomopathogenicity' role of Laboulbeniales in the genus *Rickia* is not clear, so this word should be carefully used in sentences as "an enigmatic member of entomopathogenic laboulbenian fungi". Nevertheless, I think that the biological interaction between Laboulbeniales and hosts has scientific relevance for fitting in the scope of the Journal of Invertebrate Pathology.

A: Indeed, generally, it is not yet clear to what extent Laboulbeniales fungi are pathogenic. Therefore we changed everywhere in the text pathogenic to parasitic when referring to Laboulbeniales. However, at least in *Rickiawasmannii* just recently some studies have demonstrated reduced longevity of infected ants and other behavioural effects as well, that lead us to conclude that a mild pathogenicity could be exerted from the part of the fungus (see Csata et al., 2014; Báthori et al., 2015). Such negative effects are also documented in other Laboulbeniales fungi: according to Riddick (2010) laboulbenian infection reduces the winter survival of *Harmonia axyridis*, while other Laboulbeniales species could reduce the mobility of their hosts (Gemeno et al., 2004), and decrease their lifespan (Strandberg and Tucker, 1974; Gemeno et al., 2004).

R: The major problem is related to the sampling methodology and methodological description. It should be more clear and subdivided by every analysis the authors performed: colony-level; within-colony infection; within-individuals; to clearly understand how the study was carried out. Especially the analysis about the habitat influence, wet vs dry, it is clear that the dry habitat influences the proportion of ant colonies, but not influencing the infection.

A: We sub-divided the methodological section and also relocated some sentences in order to have a more clear structure. As for the influence of the habitat conditions see our responses later on.

Specific comments:

R: Although English is good, it should be revised, some grammatical errors are consistent over the manuscript and some sentences are a bit confused. Example: "In most cases (e.g. all but 1 of the 11 known sites in Romania), its only or at least its primary host is *M. scabrinodis* (Csata et al., 2013)."

A: The manuscript has been carefully revised and corrected again. The sentence mentioned by the reviewer has been corrected as follows: "*Rickiawasmannii* has been reported in many European countries and in several *Myrmica* host species, but its primary host is *M. scabrinodis* Nylander,

1846(Tartally et al., 2007; Espadaler and Santamaria, 2012; Haelewaters, 2012; Csata et al., 2013; Haelewaters et al., 2015).”

R: Abstract - should be revised in order to include the revised suggestions

A: We corrected the abstract. Thus we reformulated the reference to body part specificity and corrected it to “The fungi’s distribution among host body parts...” Also, we applied other smaller corrections, but the message of the abstract did not change, since the basic results remained unchanged after the correction of the manuscript.

Highlights

R: The proportion of infected ant colonies is higher in wet habitats than in dry ones. - Is this really supported by this work? or simply, the proportion of colonies is higher in wet habitats?

A: Yes, it is supported statistically as well. We performed a Fisher’s exact test to confirm this. Thus we added an explanatory sentence on this matter to the end of the first paragraph of the 3.1. subchapter of the Results. This part of the paragraph is as follows: “Colonies in wet habitats were significantly more likely (0.67, CI: 0.53–0.78) to harbor infection than colonies in dry habitats (0.13, CI: 0.02–0.37) (QP3.0, Fisher’s exact test, $p < 0.0001$). This was not a side-effect of *M. scabrinodis*’ general preference for moist conditions, however, as infected *M. scabrinodis* colonies preferred wet habitats over uninfected ones (Fisher’s exact test, $p < 0.001$).”

R: We provide the first evidence of body part specificity in *R. wasmannii*. - Does it has specificity for body parts? It grows in all parts of the ant, including in the eyes! I think this highlight should be carefully rewritten!

A: Based on our analysis the head of an infected ant is more infected in case of light infections, than in advanced stages of infection. But indeed the emergent pattern is not an evidence for body part specificity in the narrow sense. Thus we corrected everywhere in the text the wording and now refer to this pattern as a specific distribution pattern among body parts. As we state in the Discussions: “Therefore, we also showed that the proportion (thalli on the head / thalli on the abdomen) exhibits a highly significant dependence on intensity. In cases of light infections, the head is proportionally more infected than the abdomen, while in cases of heavier infections the dominance of infection of the head diminishes. This is the first evidence so far that *Rickiawasmannii* exhibits some kind of non-random distribution pattern among body parts.” However, the fungus indeed occurs on other body parts of the host, thus whether this specificity in the pattern occurs due to some sort of body part preference (probably not) or due to other ecological-behavioural factors (e.g. due to increased frequency of head-to-head contacts in ants) (more probably) that remains to be studied. This problem is treated though in the discussion. In order to avoid confusion we reformulated the highlight point as follows: “The distribution of *R. wasmannii* shows biases among body parts.”

Introduction

R: Line 56: "Our aim here is to provide a descriptive ecology of this species, or more specifically," - not clear!

A: Corrected as follows: “Our aim in this study is to provide information on the prevalence and distribution of this fungus across different spatial scales, namely colonies, individuals, and body parts of individuals.”

R: Line 61-64: "The general assumption beyond our study is that one can obtain a fairly accurate view of a pathogen's distribution within eusocial hosts only by extending investigations to several different levels of organizational hierarchy, in parallel with each other." - Does this sentence makes sense?

A: Corrected. Now the sentence is as follows: "The general assumption of our study is that in order to obtain a fairly accurate view of a parasite's distribution within eusocial hosts one needs to extend investigations to several different levels of organizational hierarchy."

Material and methods

R: Line 91: "2.2. Study sites and periods" - periods?

A: Corrected to "period"

R: Line 93-94: "from 17.04 to 03. 06., 2010" - correct date format

A: Corrected to "from April 17 to June 03, 2010"

R: Line 110: "to prefer wet host habitats" - what is a "wet host habitat"?;"we sub-divided both sites into wet versus dry habitats prior to collections." - how?

A: Indeed, we missed to specify that. In fact in both cases wet patches were characterized by the exclusive presence of the purple moor-grass *Molinia caerulea* (and some other associated plants), a species known to prefer high water table, and humid conditions. In order to clarify this we added an explanatory sentence to the beginning of subchapter 2.3., which is as follows: "Since *R. wasmannii* is known to prefer wet host habitats (Csata et al., 2013), we subdivided both sites into 'wet' versus 'dry' habitats prior to collections on the basis of vegetation characteristics (see previously). Thus patches dominated by the purple moor-grass *Molinia caerulea*, a grass known to prefer habitats with high water table and humid conditions, were labelled 'wet', while surrounding meso-xeric meadows lacking this species and associated plants were handled 'dry' habitats"

R: Line 114: how was the species specificity confirmed? Slide preparations? Or just disregarding that other species of ants did not had any Laboulbeniales?

A: There is no need for slide preparations in order to confirm the presence of *R. wasmannii*. The fungal thalli is very conspicuous, and, compared to some related myrmecoparasitic fungi, it's quite large (see e.g. photo in graphical abstract). Thus collected samples were screened for fungal infection with the use of an Olympus stereomicroscope in laboratory conditions. In order to clarify this we inserted the following paragraph at the end of the 2.3. subchapter: "All collected samples were screened for fungalthalli using an Olympus SZ51 stereomicroscope at $\times 80$ magnification in laboratory conditions. Ants were identified at the species level with the use of various keys (Seifert, 2007; Czechowski et al., 2012, Czekes et al., 2012) in laboratory conditions with the same stereomicroscope."

R: Why 5 to 6 patches where selected in first site and in the other site 5-5?

A: The number of infected colonies was very low in dry habitats, and we found them only in one site, the site, where we surveyed 6 plots in dry habitats. We added the 6th plot in order to make sure that the pattern that was emerging from the previous 5 was not an accidental pattern. Since 6 plots were surveyed in dry habitats only, where anyhow *M. scabrinodis* occurrence was lower (and that of infected hosts even lower), and not wet (where the opposite pattern was valid), this additional 6th plot did not boost up by any means the data referring to the host *M. scabrinodis*, it merely rounded the composition of the ant assemblage of dry habitats, which is also valuable addition for any further studies inquiring the ecological conditions that infected hosts live in. In the other site no *M. scabrinodis* was found in dry habitats, so no additional survey was thought to be necessary.

R: Line 116: "individuals for" - individuals by?

A: corrected

R: Line 116-117: Why using different numbers? How many colonies of ants have you surveyed for this study?

A: The number of surveyed ant colonies is featured in Table 1, but we introduced them in the text as well after the featured averages in order to specify the sample size. In all previous publications on *R. wasmannii* *Myrmica* species were mentioned as sole hosts. Also our previous collections confirmed this (see Csata et al. 2013). However, none of these collections were as systematic, as the work presented here. Given these, from the start we knew that we had to concentrate on *Myrmica* species if we want to evaluate infection intensity, but in order to do that higher number of workers was needed, than generally. On the other hand, given the high prevalence of *R. wasmannii* (from own field experience and from unsystematic collections of other authors) we were aware that a lower number of ants was also enough to show datawise whether a species was infected or not combined with a relatively high number of colonies sampled. We refer to this in the 2nd paragraph of the discussion.

R: Line 141: "Ndry = 15 ants" - only 15 ants, compared to Nwet = 512?

A: Indeed, the data structure is very unbalanced, thus makes statistical analysis questionable. Therefore, although the GLMM analysis anyhow yielded non-significant results, we decided to remove this analysis from the manuscript and instead of it we included the following sentence in the Results: "Since the number of infected individuals from dry habitats was too low (N = 15) compared to those coming from wet habitats (N = 512), no statistical comparisons could be reliably made."

R: "Site, Sampling patch and colony IDs" - remove caps; ID - for identification?

A: Corrected, caps removed. Colony ID refers to the identification number/code of the colony. We corrected it to "colony code".

R: Line 151: these are results and should be in the results section of the manuscript!

A: Corrected, we removed the part referring to results.

R: Line 155: in line 135 author's say that they have count only in the right side of the animal and now they are considering thalli on the head/thalli on the abdomen and total number of fungal thalli - is this only in the right side or total thalli? - please provide clear methodological information.

A: We introduced a clarification in the first part of the paragraph. Thus the paragraph starts now in the following way: "The differences in the intensity of infection among body parts of the hosts were tested with GLMM (negative binomial, maximum likelihood, N = 527). As mentioned above, the number of fungal thalli on the right side of each individual was taken into account." Also in the sentence (later on in the same paragraph) mentioned by the reviewer we added "(right sides only)".

Results

R: Line 175-176: "In the larger region, former studies have shown *M. gallienii* to be occasionally infected (see Csata et al., 2013), while *M. schencki* has never been found to be infected (see Witek et al., 2014)." - this is discussion, not results!

A: Corrected, the sentence has been relocated in the discussion to the end of the second paragraph.

R: Line 192: with only 2 infected colonies in "dry habitat", present only in one of the study sites, how can the statistical analysis be applied and significant?

A: We removed the GLMM analysis, which anyhow yielded non-significant result – see our previous response

R: Figure 1 and 4 – is the total number of thalli concordant in both figures? Does this represent total number of thalli, or thalli counted in the right side of the ant?

A: Corrected. In the figure captions of both figures clarifications have been inserted.

Thus the caption for fig 1. is modified as follows: “**Fig. 1.** The distribution of ant individuals among infection classes based on the number of fungal thalli counted on the right side of each individual.”

The caption for fig. 4. is modified as follows: “**Fig. 4.** Relationship between the proportion of thalli on the head / thalli on the abdomen and the total number of thalli based on the number of fungal thalli counted on the right side of each individual.”

Discussion

R: Line 213: the dot should be a comma?

A: Corrected to comma.

R: Line 213: Is this really statically supported and shown by the present work, or most of the colonies were only in wet areas of the two study sites (one of which didn't had *M. scabrinodis* colonies in the dry patches)?

A: Yes, it is supported statistically as well. We performed a Fisher's exact test to confirm this. Thus we added an explanatory sentence on this matter to the end of the first paragraph of the 3.1. subchapter of the Results (see in our previous answer referring the one highlight point). Thus the higher prevalence in wet habitats was not merely a side-effect of *M. scabrinodis*' preference for wet habitats, as the distribution of infected *M. scabrinodis* colonies between the two habitats significantly differed from the distribution of uninfected colonies between these two habitats (see in the previous answer at Highlights). *M. scabrinodis* is indeed known to prefer more humid habitats, however, this bias is very pronounced in infected colonies.

R: Line 220: But you can compare with ecological studies performed in other insects, that provided several insights on the ecology of Laboulbeniales, including on the habitat influence...

A: Indeed. We further on treat studies on other Laboulbeniales fungi throughout the Discussion. Here we wanted to simply underline that similar studies are not available for *R. wasmannii*. However, we added a phrase referring to this possibility and now the sentence is as follows: “Since the present study is the first to outline a descriptive ecology for the occurrence of *Rickiawasmannii* in natural habitats and across wide ranges of hierarchical levels (habitats, colonies, individuals, body parts), we can make no comparisons with other studies of this myrmecoparasitic fungi (we can only draw comparison with research carried out on other Laboulbeniales). Rather, we hope that our findings will provide baseline data for future comparative or monitoring studies.”

R: Line 235: laboulbeniales should be corrected to Laboulbeniales

A: Corrected

R: Line 244: high infection of Laboulbeniales on non-insect hosts have also been reported...

A: Corrected to: “Other Laboulbeniales fungi are also known for high prevalence on their hosts.”

References

R: There is another key reference for the ecological study of Laboulbeniales not cited in the text, that I would recommend to the authors: De Kesel, A. (1996). Host specificity and habitat preference of *Laboulbeniaslackensis*. *Mycologia*, 565-573.

A: We thank the reviewer for the suggestion, we cite now the mentioned article.

R: Da Kesel 1993 is not cited in references and Da Kesel 1995 is not cited in the text, although this reference has a different year - please correct!

A: Corrected. The year was erroneously introduced in the reference, the correct year is 1993.

R: Line 342: "And" should be corrected to "Ant"

A: Corrected

References to answers (others than listed in the text)

Riddick E.W. 2010. Ectoparasitic mite and fungus on an invasive lady beetle: parasite coexistence and influence on host survival. *Bull. Insectol.* 63: 13-20

Gemeno C., Zurek L. and Schal C. 2004. Control of *Herpomyces* spp. (Ascomycetes: Laboulbeniales) infection in the wood cockroach, *Parcoblattalata* (Dictyoptera: Blattodea: Blattellidae), with benomyl. *J. Invertebr. Pathol.* 85: 132-135

Strandberg J.O. and Tucker L.C. 1974. *Filariomycesforficulae*Shanor occurrence and effects on the predatory earwig, *Labidurariptaria* (Pallas). *J. Invertebr. Pathol.* 24: 357-364.

REVIEWER #2:

General comments

R: How did you identify the fungus? Is there only one species reported from ants so you could presume it was *R. wasmannii*. And how did you identify the ants?

A: The fungus was identified by Monica Hughes, specialist in *Rickia*, co-author of our former article in which we report the finding of *Rickiawasmannii* in many Romanian host ant populations, including the two populations that we studied in the frame of this paper. We did not mention this specifically in the manuscript since we refer to the article (Csata et al. 2013). However, now we introduced a sentence in the Acknowledgments: "We are grateful for the help of Monica Hughes, who provided assistance with the identification of the fungus". Indeed, there are more myrmecoparasitic Laboulbeniales species, and currently two more (*Rickialenoirii*, *Laboulbeniacamponoti*) are known as well in Eastern Europe (see mentioned in the text and included in the references). However, these species have hosts with entirely different habitat requirements than our studied habitats, and the fungi also look recognizably different from our species. Ants were identified based on several keys, and we corrected the text accordingly inserting a paragraph to the end of the 2.3. Sampling method subchapter: "All collected samples were screened for fungalthalli using an Olympus SZ51 stereomicroscope at ×80 magnification in laboratory conditions. Ants were identified at the species level with the use of various keys (Seifert, 2007; Czechowski et al., 2012, Czekes et al., 2012) in laboratory conditions with the same stereomicroscope." Appropriate references were introduced in the References as well.

R: You collected a very low number of workers from most of the nests. Can you be sure that you did

not overlook infection in other species if you only collected less than 10 workers in a nest (especially if the prevalence among individual ants is low)- please address this point in the discussion.

A:We address this point in the discussion in the rewritten paragraphs on host specificity. In all previous publications on *R. wasmannii**Myrmica* species were mentioned as sole hosts. Also our previous collections confirmed this (see Csata et al. 2013). However, none of these collections were as systematic, as the work presented here. Given these, from the start we knew that we had to concentrate on *Myrmica* species if we want to evaluate infection intensity, but in order to do that higher number of workers was needed, than generally. On the other hand, given the high prevalence of *R. wasmannii* (from own field experience and from unsystematic collections of other authors) we were aware that a lower number of ants was also enough to show datawise whether a species was infected or not combined with the relatively high number of colonies sampled.

R: Add a section in materials and methods on how you transported ants to the lab and checked them for thalli distribution.

A: We added to the 2.3 Sampling method subchapter that ants were collected “in vials filled with 96° ethanol”, and also added a paragraph to the end of the subchapter on fungus screening and ant identification (see in a previous answer)

R: The discussion on host specificity needs clarification. (line 223 to 239). How could moisture influence the infection and sporulation process (or the spread of the fungus within the colony) of the fungus (if moisture is indeed an important factor?)

A:We rewrote that entire paragraph referring to habitat mediated host specificity and other studies (De Kesel 1996) that specifically treat this question in other Laboulbeniales species.

R: Line 246 Explain how the fungus and its interaction with the ant could be of importance for the *Maculinea* butterflies

A:We introduced an explanatory sentence, thus the section is as follows: “Data on the epidemiology of *R. wasmannii* bears a conservational relevance as well, since its host ant *M. scabrinodis* also nurses caterpillars of the socially parasitic *Maculinea* butterflies that are strictly protected all over Europe (see Witek et al., 2014). The reduced lifespan of infected host ants (Csata et al., 2013) might be relevant for the protection of *Maculinea*, since it could negatively influence the survival rate of parasitic *Maculinea* caterpillars as well.”

R: Line 271. Are there any records of Queens being infected or do you just think they could act as vectors?

A: Yes, queens can be infected as well. In fact all infected colonies have at least one infected queen according to our unpubl. data, but in the vast majority of cases all queens of such colonies are highly infected (pers. obs.). There is a publication on queens being infected (Tartally et al. 2007), thus we added this to the references and to the text. Currently the corrected sentence is as follows: “As in *Myrmica* ants the young gynes spend several days in this aboveground part of the colony (among the more infected workers) before the nuptial flight (Radchenko and Elmes, 2010; pers. obs.) and queens often carry infection as well (Tartally et al., 2007; pers. obs.), it is fair to assume that perhaps they can acquire infective spores here before their mating flight, thus enhancing the transmission of the parasite either into a newly founded colony or to a preexisting colony that is adopting a new queen.”

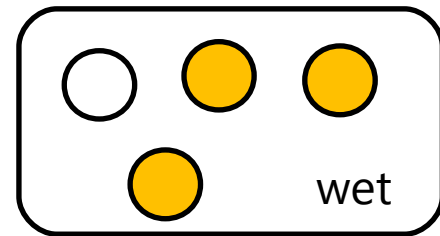
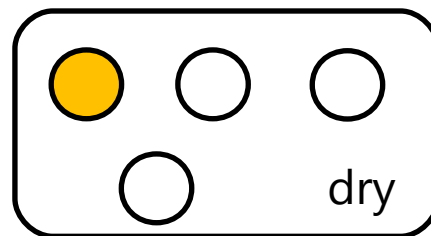
R: Line 271. Would ants invading nests of conspecifics or other ant species have a potential role in the spread of the fungus infection as well?

A:That is a possibility of course, that cannot be ruled out. However, other ant workers very rarely invade other nests, either conspecific or allospecific, unless they are social parasites as slave-maker

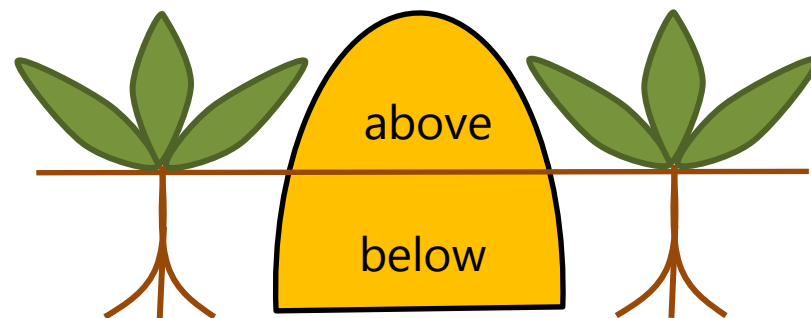
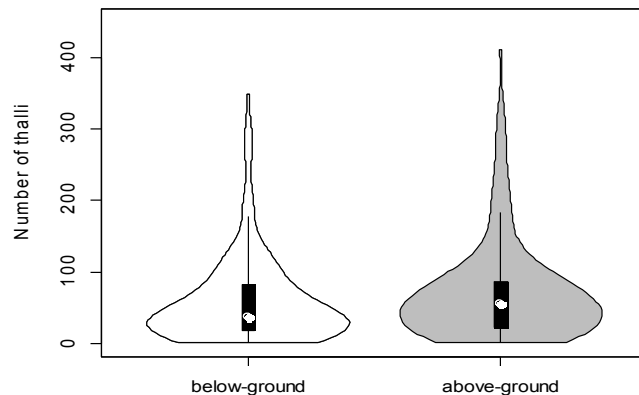
ants (e.g. amazon ants) or inquiline species. *Myrmica* ants, on the other hand, don't have slave-makers to invade them, only inquiline parasites, where parasitic queens infiltrate in the host colony. In the case of our populations it's safe to say that there are not any social parasites using our *Myrmica* species, since we have been continuously conducting studies in that area for many years now. Conflicts escalating between rival workers in the field, outside the colony, specifically between infected and uninfected foragers, could indeed lead to spore transmission. Thus, we added a phrase on this matter to the end of the 3rd paragraph of the discussion, where the matter was treated before: "Direct contact between hosts has already been demonstrated to be a major route of transmission for the related *Laboulbeniaslackensis* parasitizing carabid beetles (De Kesel, 1993; 1996), and for the myrmecoparasitic *L. formicarum* (Tragust et al., 2015) as well. Consequently, we presume that *R. wasmannii* may also rely on bodily contacts for transmission primarily among nestmates, but the importance of non-nestmate or even allospecific encounters cannot be ruled out, from this perspective (e.g. De Kesel, 1993; 1996; Tragust et al., 2015)."

habitats

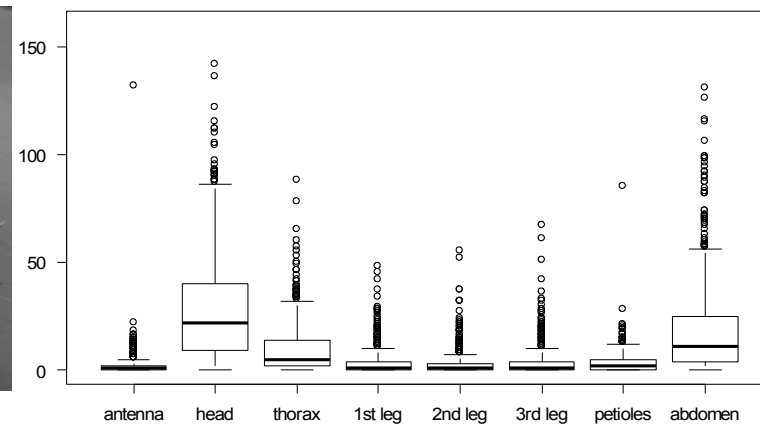
Distribution of *Rickia wasmannii* across several levels



nests



body parts



Title:

Distribution of the myrmecoparasitic fungus *Rickiawasmannii* (Ascomycetes: Laboulbeniales) across colonies, individuals, and body parts of *Myrmicascabrinodis*

Authors: Bálint Markó^{1,2}, Enikő Csata¹, Katalin Erős¹, Enikő Német¹, Zsolt Czekes¹, Lajos Rózsa³

- This is the first study on the distribution of *R. wasmannii* across several levels.
- The proportion of infected ant colonies is higher in wet habitats than in dry ones.
- Ant workers are more infected in the above- than in the below-ground nest portion.
- The distribution of *R. wasmannii* shows biases among body parts.

1 Title:

2 **Distribution of the myrmecoparasitic fungus *Rickiawasmannii* (Ascomycota: Laboulbeniales)**
3 **across colonies, individuals, and body parts of *Myrmicascabrinodis***

4
5 Authors:Bálint Markó^{1,2}, Enikő Csata¹, Katalin Erős¹, Enikő Németh¹, Zsolt Czeker¹, Lajos Rózsa³

6
7 Addresses:

8 ¹ Hungarian Department of Biology and Ecology, Babeş-Bolyai University, 400006 Cluj-Napoca,
9 Clinicilor 5-7, Romania, balintm@gmail.com, csataeniko88@gmail.com, katika_eros@yahoo.com

10 ²Department of Ecology, University of Szeged, Középfasor 52, H-6726 Szeged, Hungary

11 ³MTA-ELTE-MTM Ecology Research Group, Pázmány s. 1/C, H-1117 Budapest, Hungary

12
13 **Abstract**

14 The ant species *Myrmicascabrinodis* plays a markedly important ecological role through much of
15 the humid grasslands of Eurasia. It hosts a species-rich community of pathogens and parasites,
16 including *Rickiawasmannii*, an enigmatic member of entomoparasitic laboulbenialean fungi. This
17 study provides a descriptive ecology of *R. wasmannii* by characterizing its prevalence and
18 distribution across several hierarchical levels: colonies, individuals, and anatomic body parts.
19 Infections were restricted to a single ant species, *Myrmicascabrinodis*, and infected colonies
20 occurred predominantly in wet habitats. Infections tended to be highly prevalent within infected
21 colonies, often reaching 100% sample prevalence among workers. Individual infections exhibited
22 an aggregated distribution typical to host-parasite systems. Workers from the aboveground part of
23 nests (presumably older ones acting as foragers) were more infected than those from the
24 belowground part. Fungal thalli could be found all over the body of the hosts, the head and the
25 abdomen being the most infected parts of the body. The fungi's distribution among host body parts
26 statistically differed between low versus high-intensity infections: the initial dominance of the head
27 decreased with advancing infection. These findings may provide baseline data for future
28 comparative or monitoring studies.

29 **1. Introduction**

30 Pathogens and parasites constitute only a small proportion of the total biomass. However, they exert
31 a major influence on every form of life, making parasitism a very successful way of life (Hudson et
32 al., 2006). Among their potential host organisms, eusocial insects, and ants in particular, offer a
33 promising nutrient source, as they globally represent a huge amount of biomass and live together in
34 highly aggregated groups of genetically homogenous individuals (Schmid-Hempel, 1998). Not
35 surprisingly, ants have developed a plethora of anti-parasitic defenses that act both at individual and
36 colony levels. They produce fungicidal secretions, practice auto- and allogrooming, pathogen
37 avoidance, nest hygiene, carcass removal, and exclusion or emigration of infected individuals from
38 the colonies (Schmid-Hempel, 1998; Poulsen et al., 2002; Fernández-Marín et al., 2006; Roy et al.,
39 2006; Walker and Hughes, 2009; Heinze and Walter, 2010; Nielsen et al., 2010; Walker and Hughes,
40 2011; Konrad et al., 2012; Csata et al., 2014).

41 While some ant parasites have become iconic due to their ability to manipulate host behavior or their
42 aesthetic beauty (myrmecophilous butterflies offer a good example of both, see Thomas and Settele,
43 2004; Witek et al., 2014), unfortunately, the ecology of less charismatic ant pathogens and parasites,
44 such as microscopic fungi, is not well understood. This creates a major gap in our ecological
45 thinking, because dominant ant species often participate in particularly strong interspecific
46 interactions. They also structurally alter their habitat (the soil) and thus act as keystone species
47 (Mills et al., 1993) and as ecosystem engineers (Folgarait, 1998; Underwood and Fisher, 2006),
48 while at the same time they host various fungal parasites.

49 *Rickiawasmannii* is a myrmecophilous fungal symbiont that is widespread in Europe (Espadaler and
50 Santamaria, 2012), including Central-Eastern Europe (Csata et al., 2013). Though usually
51 considered non-pathogenic to its primary host, *Myrmica scabrinodis*, it recently was demonstrated to
52 exert certain levels of virulence (Csata et al., 2014; Báthori et al., 2015). However, we still do not
53 have basic information on its prevalence and distribution.

54 Our aim in this study is to provide information on the prevalence and distribution of this fungus
55 across different spatial scales, namely colonies, individuals, and body parts of individuals.
56 Moreover, we compare infection levels between different habitat types (wet versus dry) and also
57 between different parts of the infected colonies (aboveground versus belowground) to
58 determine whether infected ants occur under specific environmental conditions or in specific age or
59 task classes of ants residing in different parts of the nest (e.g. older individuals and foragers, who
60 are usually located on the outer perimeter). Throughout our inquiry, we only take into consideration

61 infection among members of the worker caste. The general assumption of our study is that in order
62 to obtain a fairly accurate view of a parasite's distribution within eusocial hosts one needs to extend
63 investigations to several different levels of organizational hierarchy.

64

65 **2. Materials and methods**

66

67 2.1. Study species

68 The order Laboulbeniales (Ascomycota) contains entomoparasitic fungi (Santamaria, 2001;
69 Espadaler and Santamaria, 2012), including *Rickia* species that parasitize mites (Acari), millipedes
70 (Diplopoda), mole crickets (Orthoptera: Gryllotalpidae), beetles (Coleoptera) and ants (Weir and
71 Blackwell, 2005). *Rickia wasmannii* Cavara (1899) is the most common among the
72 myrmecophilous *Rickia* species in the Holarctic (Santamaria and Espadaler, 2015), and it
73 obligatorily exploits *Myrmica* ants (see Espadaler and Santamaria, 2012; Csata et al., 2013; Witek et
74 al., 2014 for reviews). Like other Laboulbeniales, this fungus has no mycelium and thus the thallus
75 develops from a bicellular ascospore, while only sexual stages are known (Haelewaters, 2012). The
76 thalli attach to the outer layer of the cuticle and appear on the surface of the hosts as clubbed setae-
77 like structures under the stereomicroscope. Highly infected hosts appear to be unusually 'hairy'
78 even to the naked eye. Infections are usually regarded as neutral (García et al., 2010; Espadaler and
79 Santamaria, 2012), though recent studies have demonstrated increased allogrooming, increased
80 water-consumption, and reduced longevity of infected ants (Csata et al., 2014; Báthori et al., 2015).
81 *Rickia wasmannii* has been reported in many European countries and in several *Myrmica* host species,
82 but its primary host is *M. scabrinodis* Nylander, 1846 (Tartally et al., 2007; Espadaler and
83 Santamaria, 2012; Haelewaters, 2012; Csata et al., 2013; Haelewaters et al., 2015).
84 *Myrmica scabrinodis* is a widely distributed Euro-Siberian ant species inhabiting moderately humid
85 open habitats. It tolerates high soil moisture but needs high solar insolation and thus often occurs in
86 peat bogs in the temperate region. Nests are mostly built in the ground, in grass or in moss tufts.
87 Colonies are monogynous or have only a few queens, and they contain up to 2,500 workers
88 (Radchenko and Elmes, 2010).

89

90 2.2. Study sites and period

91 Collections were carried out at two locations in Cluj County, Romania (Luna de Jos: N 46.921961,
92 E 23.734032, 430 m a.s.l., and FânațeleClujului: N 46.842599, E 23.641898, 550 m a.s.l.) from
93 April 17 to June 03, 2010. Both sites are meadows of northern exposure of more than 20 ha,
94 consisting of a mosaic of meso-xeric and wet patches, which clearly differed based on their
95 vegetation; e.g. the presence of *Moliniacaerulea* was characteristic for moist patches. The first site
96 near Luna de Jos is mostly covered by meso-xeric grasslands (dominated by
97 *Festucarupicola*, *Brachypodium pinnatum*, *Agrostis tenuis*, *Poa angustifolia*) rich in dicotyledonous
98 species (e.g. *Dorycnium herbaceum*, *Filipendula vulgaris*, *Salvia pratensis*). Wet patches within the
99 grassland are dominated by *Festuca pratensis*, *Moliniacaerulea*, *Calamagrostis epigeios* or
100 *Poa pratensis*, with *Serratula inctoria*, *Cirsium rivulare*, *Sanguisorba officinalis*, *Iris*
101 *sibirica* and *Pastinaca sativa* as characteristic species. This area was traditionally used as a hayfield
102 and pasture. The other site at FânațeleClujului is a meso-xeric basiphilous grassland dominated by
103 *Festucarupicola*, *Brachypodium pinnatum*, *Elymus hispidus*, *Agrostis capillaris*, *Carex michelii*, and a
104 high representation of *Filipendula vulgaris*, *Adonis vernalis*, *Salvia pratensis*, *Clematis recta*,
105 *Plantago media*, *Lotus corniculatus* and *Trifolium montanum*. A mesic vegetation type appears in
106 small wet pits embedded within this grassland, in which *Sanguisorba officinalis*, *Moliniacaerulea*,
107 *Iris sibirica* and *Scirpus sylvaticus* are frequent. This site is mowed occasionally, and the
108 surrounding areas are intensively grazed by sheep.

109

110 2.3. Sampling methods

111 Since *R. wasmannii* is known to prefer wet host habitats (Csata et al., 2013), we subdivided both
112 sites into ‘wet’ versus ‘dry’ habitats prior to collection on the basis of vegetation characteristics
113 (see previously). Thus patches dominated by the purple moor-grass *Moliniacaerulea*, a grass known
114 to prefer habitats with high water table and humid conditions, were labelled ‘wet’, while
115 surrounding meso-xeric meadows lacking this species and associated plants were handled ‘dry’
116 habitats. Several sampling patches (circles of 2 m radius used generally for *Myrmica* species [see
117 Elmes et al., 1998] as known host ants of *R. wasmannii*) were established randomly within each
118 habitat type, located >2 m from one another in order to ensure independent sampling. We (BM, EK,
119 EN, ZC) searched systematically for ant nests (whatever the species) in these patches and collected
120 workers from each nest in order to confirm the ant species specificity of the fungus. At Luna de Jos,
121 5 and 6 sampling patches were selected in wet versus dry habitats, while 5-5 wet versus dry patches
122 were chosen at FânațeleClujului. We collected a mean of 26.66 (SE \pm 1.75, N = 92 nests) individuals

123 by *Myrmica* spp. nests and a mean of 6.86 (SE \pm 0.57, N = 72 nests) individuals per nest for other ant
124 species, all in vials filled with 96° ethanol.

125 In order to determine the within-nest localization of infected ants, we also sampled the upper
126 (above-ground part, called solaria) and the lower part of the nest (the belowground level, around the
127 brood chambers) separately in 18 randomly selected infected *M. scabrinodis* colonies in the wet
128 habitat patches at Luna de Jos. In this case, we used a \times 30 hand magnifying glass to identify the
129 species and infection status of colonies in the field. Infected ants are easy to recognize for the
130 myrmecologist, as they appear unusually hairy.

131 All collected samples were screened for fungalthalli using an Olympus SZ51 stereomicroscope at
132 \times 80 magnification in laboratory conditions. Ants were identified at the species level with the use of
133 various keys (Seifert, 2007; Czechowski et al., 2012, Czekes et al., 2012) in laboratory conditions
134 with the same stereomicroscope.

135

136 2.4. Statistical measures and analyses

137 (a) Colony-level measures

138 The colony-level prevalence of the fungus was calculated as the proportion of infected colonies
139 among all *Myrmica scabrinodis* colonies examined. Each colony which contained at least one
140 infected individual with at least one mature thallus on the cuticle was considered infected. Sterne's
141 method was applied to construct confidence intervals (Sterne, 1954; Reiczigel, 2003). Fisher's exact
142 test was used to compare colony-level prevalence between the two sites and then between different
143 habitat types (wet versus dry).

144

145 (b) Within-colony measures

146 Within-colony prevalence was expressed as the proportion of infected individuals among all
147 individuals in a sample representing a particular colony. Uninfected individuals were excluded from
148 all further analyses.

149 In order to quantify the intensity of infection (number of thalli/host individual), random sub-
150 samples of infected ant workers were taken from all infected nests, and the number of fungal thalli
151 were counted on the right side of each individual (N = 527, mean 12.25 ants/nest, SE \pm 0.84)

152 separately for each major body part (head, antennae, thorax, 1st, 2nd and 3rd legs separately, petiole
153 and postpetiole together, and abdomen) with an Olympus SZ51 stereomicroscope at $\times 80$
154 magnification, while an ocular micrometer was used to set the axial line through the ant's body
155 to separate the right and left sides. We applied Poulin's (1996) discrepancy index (the most
156 widespread index to quantify levels of parasite aggregation) to characterize the distribution of fungi
157 among host individuals.

158 In order to establish whether there is a within-colony spatial bias in infection intensity, sub-samples
159 of infected workers from the aboveground (mean 8.83 ants/nest, SE ± 0.15), and from the
160 belowground (mean 8.61 ants/nest, SE ± 0.27) parts of the nests were taken into account separately
161 in case of the 18 colonies (N = 314 ants) in which collections were spatially divided. Poulin's
162 discrepancy index was used to characterize the distribution of fungi among host individuals. The
163 Generalized Linear Mixed Model approach (GLMM, negative binomial, maximum likelihood) was
164 applied to compare infection intensities between the aboveground and belowground subsamples:
165 location was included as factor, while colony code was introduced as a random factor to handle
166 dependencies.

167

168 (c) *Within-individual measures*

169 The differences in the intensity of infection among body parts of the hosts were tested with GLMM
170 (negative binomial, maximum likelihood, N = 527). As mentioned above, the number of fungal
171 thalli on the right side of each individual was taken into account. Colony code and individual ID
172 were introduced as nested random factors. All body parts were considered separately (see above).
173 To assess potential changes of the distribution of thalli, we created an index (thalli on the head /
174 thalli on the abdomen), since the head and the abdomen were the two most heavily infected body
175 parts (see below). Then we explored the relationship between this index and the total number of
176 thalli (right sides only). Only individuals which carried at least one thallus both on the head and on
177 the abdomen were included in the analysis (N = 487).

178 Statistical procedures were carried out using Quantitative Parasitology 3.0 (Rózsa et al., 2000) and
179 the R 3.1.1 Statistical Environment (R Development Core Team 2014). GLMMs were performed
180 using *glmer.nb* function in *lme4* package (Bates et al., 2014), while the exact significance values of
181 input variables were retrieved with the use of *Anova* function in *car* package (Fox and Weisberg,
182 2011). *Relevel* function was used in order to carry out sequential comparisons among factor levels
183 when performing GLMM analyses in case of body part specificity. We applied table-wide sequential

184 Bonferroni-Holm correction to reveal the exact significance levels among different factor levels in
185 these cases. Whenever relevant, statistical significance (p) refers to two-sided probabilities, and
186 confidence intervals (CI) refer to 95% probabilities.

187

188 **3. Results**

189

190 3.1. Colony-level comparisons

191 Eleven ant species were collected altogether (Table 1), including three *Myrmica* species that are
192 potential hosts to *Rickiawasmannii*. However, only *M. scabrinodis* was infected (Table 1). Out of 76
193 *M. scabrinodis* nests examined, 42 were infected, thus colony-level prevalence was 0.55 (CI: 0.44–
194 0.67) (Table 1). Since the prevalence was similar between the two sites (QP3.0, Fisher's exact test, p
195 = 0.53), we united the two datasets. Colonies in wet habitats were significantly more likely (0.67,
196 CI: 0.53–0.78) to harbor infection than colonies in dry habitats (0.13, CI: 0.02–0.37) (QP3.0,
197 Fisher's exact test, $p < 0.0001$). This was not a side-effect of *M. scabrinodis*' general preference for
198 moist conditions, however, as infected *M. scabrinodis* colonies preferred wet habitats over uninfected
199 ones (Fisher's exact test, $p < 0.001$).

200

201 3.2. Comparisons of within-colony measures of infection

202 Once we excluded uninfected colonies, within-colony prevalence varied from 0.03 to 1.00 (mean
203 0.79, SD ± 0.26) among the 42 infected colonies. The only 2 infected colonies of dry habitats did not
204 exhibit markedly different prevalences (0.60 and 0.80) from infected colonies of wet habitats,
205 however, the low number in the former category disallowed any statistical comparisons.

206 Maximum intensity on the right side of individuals was 439 thalli, but the majority (76.85%) of
207 infected individuals bore less than 100 thalli (Fig. 1). The distribution of fungi among infected hosts
208 showed a clearly aggregated pattern, as indicated by Poulin's discrepancy index ($D = 0.52$). Since
209 the number of infected individuals from dry habitats was too low ($N = 15$) compared to those
210 coming from wet habitats ($N = 512$), no statistical comparisons could be reliably made.

211 Within-colony prevalence showed clear spatial bias within nests. Infections exhibited a slightly
212 more aggregated frequency distribution in the belowground samples according to the index of

213 discrepancy ($D_{\text{above}} = 0.478$ and $D_{\text{below}} = 0.501$). The GLMM analysis also indicated that infected
214 individuals from the belowground part of the colony bore significantly less fungal thalli than those
215 from the aboveground solaria (GLMM $t = -3.25$, $p < 0.001$; Fig. 2).

216

217 3.3. Comparisons of within-individual measures of infection: distribution across body parts

218 *Rickiawasmannii* was present on the surfaces of all major body parts, from the mandibles and
219 antennae to the abdomen, and in some extreme cases even the eyes were invaded. Its frequency
220 distribution showed a bias to the head and abdomen in particular (Fig. 3). Significant differences
221 were revealed between all body parts in the frequency of fungal thalli with the exception of the
222 three legs that carried infections similar to one another. As we were unable to measure the surface
223 areas of different body parts, we could not determinewhether the detected pattern differed from the
224 one expected by chance. The proportion (thalli on the head / thalli on the abdomen) was
225 significantly negatively influenced by the intensity of the infection ($F = 4.36$, $R^2 = 0.0089$, $p = 0.03$;
226 Fig. 4).

227

228 **4. Discussion**

229 The natural history of *Rickiawasmannii* and – speaking more generally – of
230 myrmecoparasitic Laboulbeniales fungi is rather poorly understood compared to our understanding
231 of Laboulbenialesfungi thatparasitizeother insects (e.g. De Kesel, 1996). In this study, infections
232 were restricted to a single host species, *Myrmicascabrinodis*,and infected colonies were mostly
233 concentrated in moist habitats. Individual infections exhibited the aggregated (biased) distributions
234 typical ofhost-parasite systems. Within infected colonies, workers collected from the belowground
235 part of nests carried less fungi than those collected from the aboveground solaria. The distribution
236 of fungi among host body parts statistically differed between low-intensity versus high-intensity
237 infections.Since the present study is the first to outline a descriptive ecology for the occurrence of
238 *Rickiawasmannii* in natural habitats and across wide ranges of hierarchical levels (habitats,
239 colonies, individuals, body parts), we can make no comparisons withother studies of this
240 myrmecoparasitic fungi (we can only draw comparison with research carried out on other
241 Laboulbeniales). Rather, we hope that our findings will provide baseline data for future comparative
242 or monitoring studies.

243 Our results support the view according to which the primary host of *Rickiawasmannii* is
244 *Myrmicascabrinodis*, at least in the wider study region. Other studies (e.g. Espadaler and
245 Santamaria, 2012; Haelewaters, 2012; Csata et al., 2013; Haelewaters et al., 2015) have also shown
246 that the fungus is restricted to *Myrmica* species. Thus it is not surprising that co-occurring ant
247 species from other genera were not infected. Fungal infection, when it occurred, was demonstrable
248 in the case of other species, in spite of the fact that fewer individuals were collected. The relatively
249 high number of colonies sampled helped compensate for this, as did the available data from
250 previous field studies (see Csata et al., 2013). Alternatively, the low number of *M. gallienii* and *M.*
251 *schencki* colonies (15 and 1) that were found may also explain why these species appeared to be
252 free of infection. In the larger region, former studies have shown *M. gallienii* to be an occasional
253 host (see Csata et al., 2013), but *M. schencki* has never been found to be infected (see Witek et al.,
254 2014).

255 Several *Myrmica* species are known to bear *R. wasmannii* infection in the wider region (Csata et al.,
256 2013), so we have to consider the possibility that the host specificity observed here could be
257 mediated by environmental conditions, as already proven in the fungus
258 *Laboulbeniaslackensis* ectoparasite of ground beetles (De Kesel, 1996). Tragust et al. (2015) also
259 demonstrated that, despite its rather strict host specificity manifested in the field, the
260 myrmecoparasitic *Laboulbeniaformicarum* can infect other closely-related ant species under
261 appropriate laboratory conditions. According to the study of De Kesel (1996), suitable soil type is
262 one of the major underlying factors that ensures successful transmission of and infection with *L.*
263 *slackensis*. Structural properties of the soil, its composition, and probably its interaction with
264 humidity, along with the appropriate physiological and anatomical features of the host, determine
265 the persistence of this species (De Kesel, 1996). A close relationship between a parasite and its host
266 should not tempt us to forget that a parasite may still display its own environmental preferences (De
267 Kesel, 1996). The moist habitat type studied here, which is also suitable for *M. scabrinodis*, appears
268 to match the habitat conditions needed by the fungus. Most probably, the interaction of soil
269 properties with microclimatic conditions is the key to success for *R. wasmannii* in our case as well.
270 Quite a number of closely related entomoparasitic laboulbenian fungi tend to be restricted to
271 insects living in wet habitats (e.g. De Kesel, 1993; 1996; Sugiura et al., 2010), and in the wider study
272 region all known 11 *R. wasmannii* populations were found in wet meadows as well (e.g. Csata et al.,
273 2013; pers. obs.). The fact that *M. gallienii* was not infected in our samples despite its known host
274 status (Csata et al., 2013), while Haelewaters et al. (2015) found in the Netherlands that
275 *Myrmicasabuleti*, which displays a preference for drier conditions, can be more infected by this

276 fungus than *M. scabrinodis*, all likely indicate that *R. wasmannii* has regional variations in host
277 specificity that are likely mediated by both host and environmental conditions.

278 Other Laboulbeniales fungi are also known for high prevalence on their
279 hosts. *Hesperomyces virescens* can infect up to 95% of adult *Harmonia axyridis* (Kamburov et al.,
280 1967; Riddick et al., 2005; Harwood et al., 2006; Nalepa and Weir, 2007), and the
281 myrmecoparasitic *Laboulbenia formicarum* can infect >80% of ants in the colony (Konrad et al.,
282 2015; Tragust et al., 2015). Nevertheless, data on the prevalence of *R. wasmannii* (see e.g. García et
283 al., 2010) was scarce, and there has been no information on the intensity of infection until now.

284 Data on the epidemiology of *R. wasmannii* bears a conservation relevance as well, since its host
285 ant *M. scabrinodis* also nurses caterpillars of the socially parasitic *Maculinea* butterflies that are
286 strictly protected all over Europe (see Witek et al., 2014). The reduced lifespan of infected host
287 ants (Csata et al., 2013) might be relevant for the protection of *Maculinea*, since it could negatively
288 influence the survival rate of parasitic *Maculinea* caterpillars as well.

289 The high prevalence and infection intensity of *R. wasmannii* within infected colonies documented
290 by us could be a consequence of the fungus' low virulence combined with an efficient transmission
291 strategy. The same strategy appears to characterize *Laboulbenia formicarum*, which obtained a high
292 prevalence and infection intensity in *Lasius neglectus* supercolonies within a decade (Tragust et al.,
293 2015). Direct contact between hosts has already been demonstrated to be a major route of
294 transmission for the related *Laboulbenia slackensis* parasitizing carabid beetles (De Kesel, 1993;
295 1996), and for the myrmecoparasitic *L. formicarum* (Tragust et al., 2015) as well. Consequently, we
296 presume that *R. wasmannii* may also rely on bodily contacts for transmission primarily among
297 nestmates, but the importance of non-nestmate or even allospecific encounters cannot be ruled out,
298 from this perspective (e.g. De Kesel, 1993; 1996; Tragust et al., 2015).

299 In ants, the secretion of several exocrine glands (e.g. metapleural gland, venom gland) is a highly
300 efficient weapon in the fight against fungal infections (Poulsen et al., 2002; Fernández-Marín et al.,
301 2006; Reber et al., 2011; Otti et al., 2014). Therefore, we hypothesize that *R. wasmannii*, like other
302 myrmecoparasitic Laboulbeniales fungi, must be capable somehow of breaking this defensive line to
303 obtain high infection intensity.

304 Within the ant nests, a spatial bias in the distribution of a Laboulbeniales fungi was documented for
305 the first time in *R. wasmannii*. In ants, young workers are known to occur more often in the central
306 part of nests around larval chambers (in our case, the belowground portion of the nest), while older
307 and thus more experienced workers that act mostly as foragers are restricted to the outer perimeters

308 (the aboveground level in our case) (Hölldobler and Wilson, 1990). Perhaps this difference is
309 mirrored in our finding that the latter part of the colony is characterized by heavier (more
310 advanced?) levels of infection. Lapeva-Gjonova and Santamaria (2011) showed that *R.*
311 *wasmannii* was absent on lightly pigmented workers which were probably recently eclosed, but
312 young carabids also show lower levels of infection with *Laboulbeniaslackensis* (De Kesel, 1993).
313 As in *Myrmica* ants the young gynes spend several days in this aboveground part of the colony
314 (among the more infected workers) before the nuptial flight (Radchenko and Elmes, 2010;
315 pers.obs.) and queens often carry infection as well (Tartally et al., 2007; pers. obs.), it is fair to
316 assume that perhaps they can acquire infective spores here before their mating flight, thus enhancing
317 the transmission of the parasite either into a newly founded colony or to a preexisting colony that is
318 adopting a new queen.

319 Several entomoparasitic laboulbenian fungi have been shown to be more or less specific to certain
320 body parts of the hosts (Benjamin and Shanor, 1952; Scheloske, 1976; Arndt and Desender, 2002;
321 Garcés and Williams, 2004; Riddick and Schaefer, 2005; Harwood et al., 2006). In
322 contrast, *Rickia wasmannii* appear to invade the host body surface as a whole, although some body
323 parts may be affected more frequently and more dramatically than others. Indeed, rough data
324 indicate that the head and abdomen are by far the most infected. This pattern, however, might have
325 been the result of several different factors. First, these are the body parts (in addition to the
326 thorax) with the largest surface areas, thus a random distribution of thalli would most probably yield
327 the same result. Having no reliable information on the surface areas of each body part, we do not
328 claim that this in itself proves a deviation from an expected random pattern. Therefore, we also
329 showed that the proportion (thalli on the head / thalli on the abdomen) exhibits a highly significant
330 dependence on intensity. In cases of light infections, the head is proportionally more infected than
331 the abdomen, while in cases of heavier infections the dominance of infection of the head
332 diminishes. This is the first evidence so far that *Rickia wasmannii* exhibits some kind of non-random
333 distribution pattern among body parts.

334 This pattern may arise due to several different factors. First, the low-intensity infections may be
335 relatively new, and presuming that frequent head-to-head contacts (e.g. due to trophallaxis) are a
336 major route of within-colony infections, one can expect that these infections would be more focused
337 on the head. Second, spore attachment success may differ across body parts and also depend on
338 infection intensity. Finally, differences in ant grooming and allogrooming activities across body
339 parts and intensity levels may also cause deviation from random distribution across the host body
340 surface, since the head is less accessible for autogrooming.

341 Overall, *Myrmicascabrinodis* is an ant species abundant in a large proportion of humid grasslands all
342 over Europe. We hope that the hierarchically structured epidemiological information outlined above
343 may serve as a baseline for future comparative or monitoring studies, and we hope our inquiry will
344 contribute to a better understanding of the ecology of *Rickiawasmannii* and laboulbenian fungi as a
345 whole.

346

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364

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Figure captions

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Fig. 1. The distribution of ant individuals among infection classes based on the number of fungal thalli counted on the right side of each individual.

Fig. 2. Differences in the intensity of infection between ant workers from below-, and above-ground parts of the ant nests (median, quartiles, min-max values).

Fig. 3. Infection intensity on different body parts of ant workers (median, quartiles, min-max values) (GLMM, $\chi^2 = 7538.3$, $p < 0.0001$). Different letters indicate significant differences among groups ($t \geq 3.72$, $p < 0.001$).

Fig. 4. Relationship between the proportion of thalli on the head / thalli on the abdomen and the total number of thalli based on the number of fungal thalli counted on the right side of each individual.

Table 1. A list of ant species and the number of their colonies occurring at the two study sites in wet versus dry habitats. The number of *Rickia wasmannii*-infected colonies (if any) are given in brackets.

Species and sites	Fânașele Clujului		Luna de Jos	
	wet	dry	wet	dry
<i>Formica rufibarbis</i> Fabricius, 1793	0	0	0	2
<i>Lasius alienus</i> (Förster, 1850)	7	0	1	5
<i>Lasius flavus</i> (Fabricius, 1782)	4	1	5	7
<i>Lasius niger</i> (Linnaeus, 1758)	5	20	0	2
<i>Lasius paralienus</i> Seifert, 1992	0	0	2	3
<i>Myrmica gallienii</i> Bondroit, 1920	15	0	0	0
<i>Myrmica scabrinodis</i> Nylander, 1846	11 (5)	0	49 (35)	16 (2)
<i>Myrmica schencki</i> Viereck, 1903	1	0	0	0
<i>Solenopsis fugax</i> (Latreille, 1798)	0	2	0	3
<i>Tapinoma subboreale</i> Seifert, 2012	0	0	0	2
<i>Tetramorium cf. caespitum</i>	1	0	0	0

Figure 1.

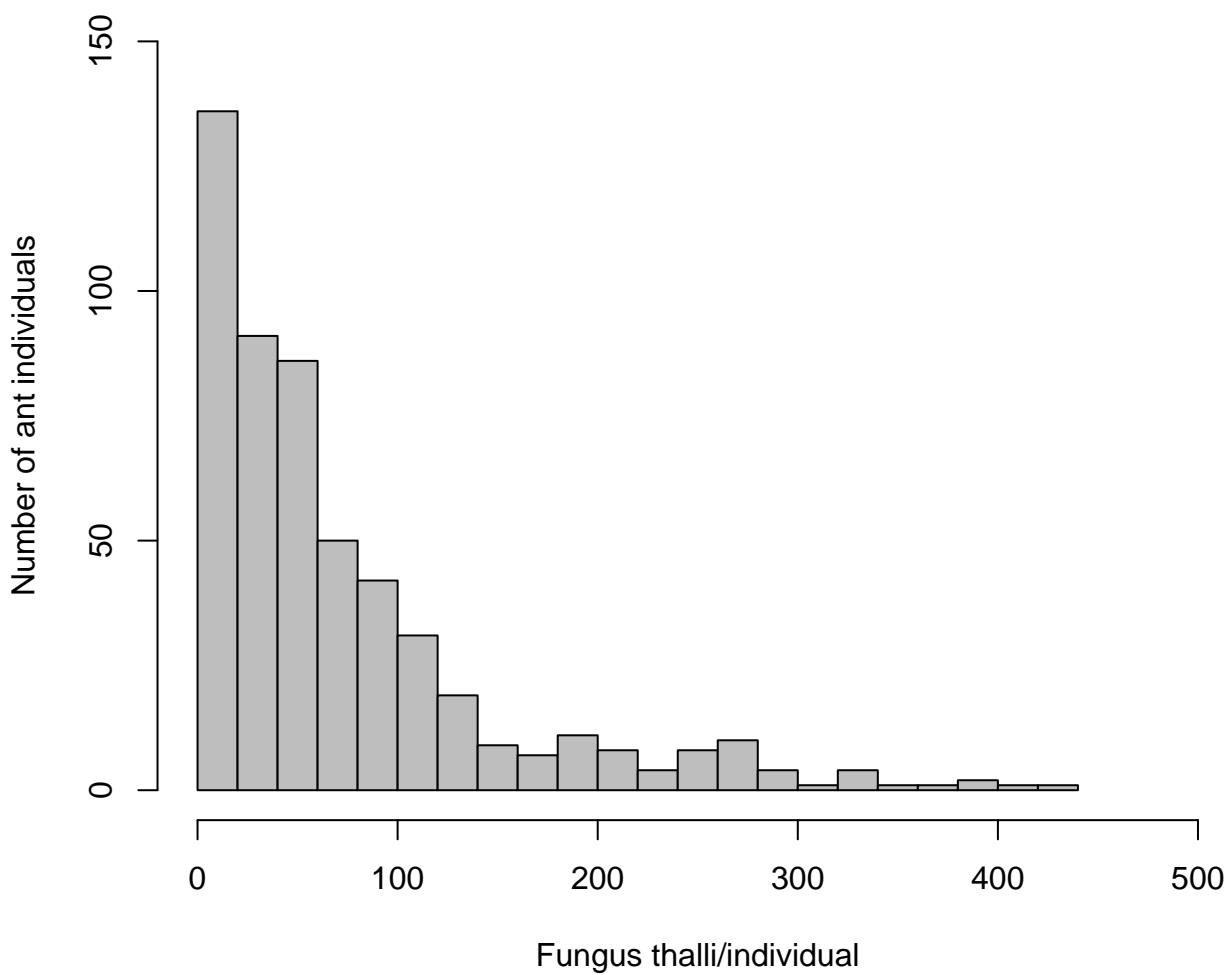


Figure 2.

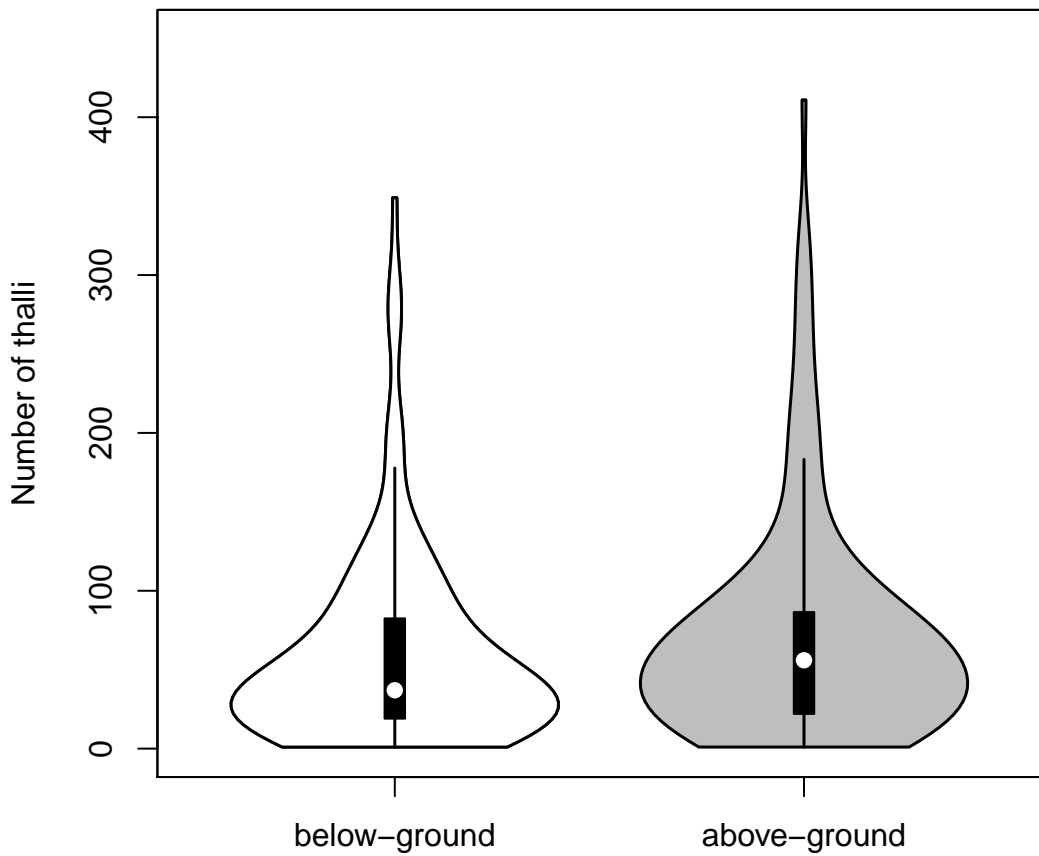


Figure 3.

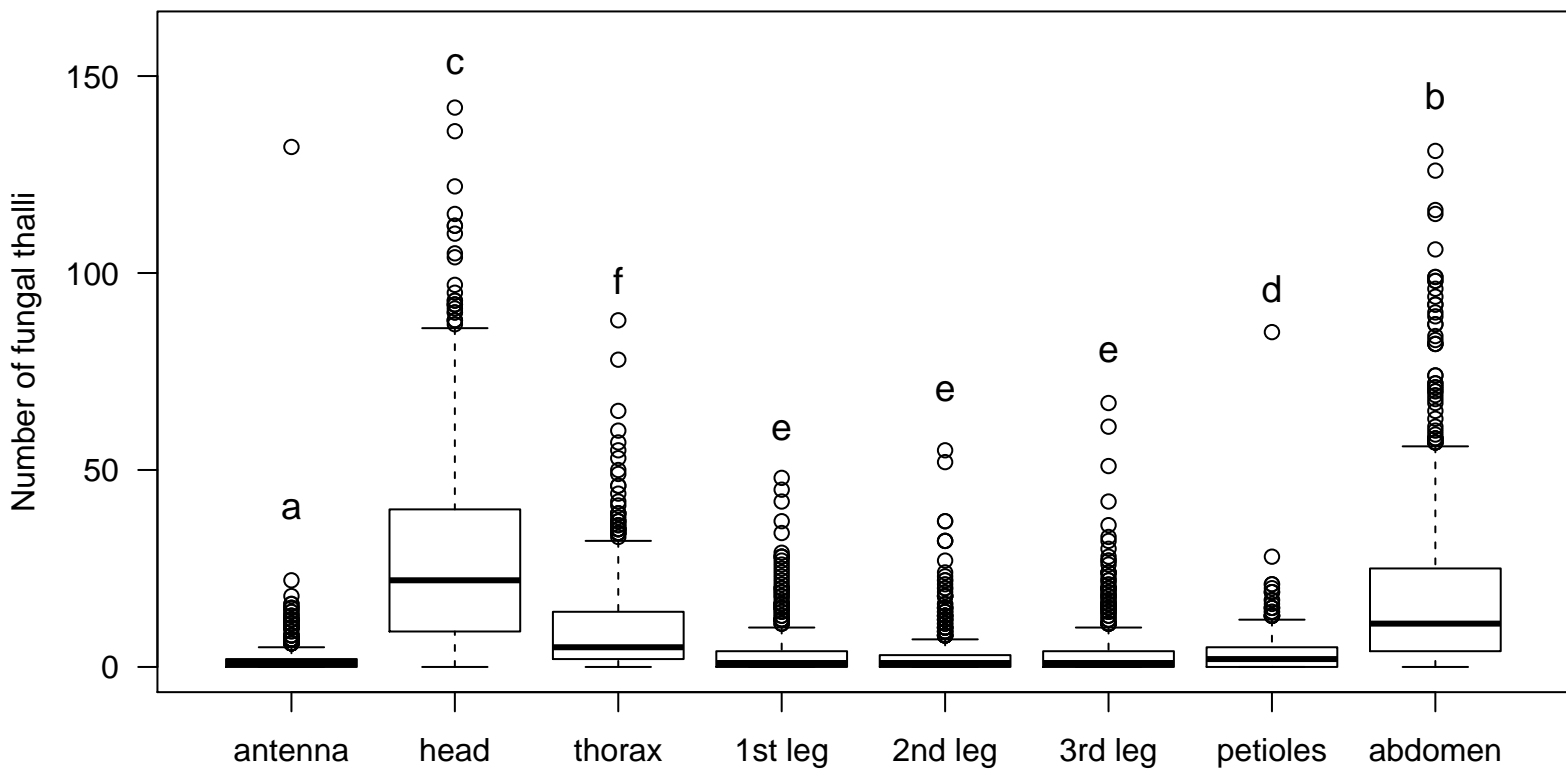


Figure 4.

