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Origin of the dust bunny distribution in ecological community data

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1 **Abstract** The distribution of sample units in multivariate species space typically departs strongly from the
2 multivariate normal distribution. Instead of forming a hyperellipse in species space, the sample points
3 tend to lie along high-dimensional edges of the space. This *dust bunny distribution* is seen in most
4 ecological community data sets. The practical consequences of the distribution to the analysis of
5 community data are well known and severe, but no one has demonstrated how population processes
6 generate these problems. We evaluate potential causes of dust bunny distributions by simulating a large
7 number of non-equilibrial communities under varying conditions, verifying that they resemble real data,
8 then analyzing the relationship between the intensity of the dust bunny distribution in these data sets and
9 the population and environmental parameters that gave rise to them. All community data sets, both
10 simulated and real, departed strongly from multivariate normal and lognormal distributions. Four
11 parameters influenced intensity of dust bunnies: time since community-replacing disturbance, number of
12 environmental factors, dispersal limitation, and niche width. Samples measured soon after community-
13 replacing disturbance had strong dust bunny distributions. Near-equilibrial communities sampled from a
14 narrow range in environments lead to only weak dust bunnies. Community samples taken across multiple
15 simultaneous strong environmental gradients are likely to show strong dust bunnies, regardless of the
16 successional state, niche width of the component species, and degree of dispersal limitation. Dust bunny
17 intensity depends not only on population processes and disturbance, but also on the properties of the
18 sample, such as sample unit area or volume.

19

20 **Keywords** Community analysis, disturbance, environment, niche width, simulation model

21

22

23 **Introduction**

24 Ecological community data commonly consist of species abundance or presence recorded in a set of
25 sample units. With such data, sample units can be conceptualized as points in a coordinate system defined
26 by species abundance (species space; Goodall 1963). The distribution of sample units in multivariate
27 species space typically departs strongly from a multivariate normal distribution. Instead of forming a
28 hyperellipse in species space, the sample points instead tend to lie along high-dimensional edges of the
29 space. This *dust bunny distribution* (McCune and Grace 2002) is so called because it resembles a “dust
30 bunny,” the collection of lint and dust that tends to accumulate along the edges of our living spaces (Fig.
31 1). The analogy is imperfect, for reasons discussed below, but our teaching has shown this to be a useful
32 and memorable way of conveying a fundamental difference between ecological community data and the
33 multivariate normal distribution assumed by traditional multivariate statistics. The dust bunny distribution
34 can be considered a particular kind of zero-inflated multivariate distribution that is characteristic of
35 ecological community data. Naming and understanding this common empirical phenomenon in
36 community ecology can improve expectations for analyzing community datasets and inform the
37 development of appropriate statistical models. The dust bunny is observed even for simple data sets
38 involving a few species along a single environmental gradient. Although the dust bunny distribution is
39 one of the most consistent statistical properties of ecological community data, the biological mechanisms
40 producing this pattern have never been explained. Our focus here is not on how to analyze such data, but
41 rather contributing toward the theory of its genesis.

42 Dust bunny distributions occur when each sample unit has only a small subset of the available
43 species pool, leading to a large number of zeros in the community matrix. The presence of only a small
44 number of species in each sample unit may occur because of stochastic dispersal limitations, competition
45 among species, recent community-replacing disturbance, or environmental conditions in the sample unit
46 being unsuitable for many of the species in the regional species pool.

47 Our goals diverge from studies on frequency distributions within species (e.g., Bliss and Fisher
48 1953; Cassie 1962) in that our concerns are multivariate and apply to both continuous data (e.g. biomass,
49 density, cover) and discrete data (e.g., counts or cover classes). We focus on the distributional properties
50 of sample units in species space, a high-dimensional coordinate system where each dimension of the
51 space is an axis defined by the abundance of a single species, and each sample unit therefore occupies a
52 point in that space (Goodall 1963). Despite the common use of non-Euclidean (city-block) distance
53 measures in community ecology, most statistical tools taught to biologists operate in Euclidean space.
54 Regardless of what methods we choose for analysis, community ecologists still need to be able to explain
55 to a broader audience how the properties of their data in Euclidean space differ from a multivariate
56 normal distribution.

57 The practical consequences of the dust bunny distribution to data analysis are well known and
58 severe. Analytical tools such as principal components analysis that seek linear relationships among
59 variables perform poorly with ecological community data; this has been known for over 40 years (e.g.
60 Beals 1973; Whittaker and Gauch 1973). Even a simple noiseless data set of three species with Gaussian
61 responses to a single environmental gradient shows strong nonlinearity of that gradient when sample units
62 are plotted in species space. Remedies exist, such as nonmetric multidimensional scaling (Kruskal 1964),
63 that can recover environmental gradients that are expressed nonlinearly in species space (Clarke 1993;
64 McCune and Grace 2002) and using proportional city-block distance measures.

65 Apparently no one has specifically focused on revealing the population processes that give rise to
66 the dust bunny distribution. Although McCune and Grace (2002) suggested the dust bunny distribution as
67 an empirical fact for most community data sets, they did not attempt to quantify the problem nor to
68 explain why community data are so distributed, instead focusing on the characteristics of the data and its
69 consequences for analysis. Similarly, other authors have written at length on related issues, such as the
70 tendency for abundance data to be strongly right skewed and zero rich (Gaston and McArdle 1994;
71 Anderson 2001; Peck 2010), the “zero truncation problem” (Beals 1984), and the double zero or joint

72 absence problem (Legendre and Legendre 1998). None of these, however, directly address the processes
73 that generate dust bunny distributions. It is important to evaluate potential causes of the dust bunny
74 distribution, so that we can better anticipate the effect of study design on the intensity of dust bunnies in
75 our data, promoting more effective analyses. For example, we can select sample unit sizes that are
76 appropriate at the scale of the organisms and environmental factors of interest, such that they have enough
77 in common and low enough dust bunny intensity to analyze them usefully. When dust bunnies are very
78 severe, it becomes difficult to extract gradients of interest even with the most effective analytical
79 techniques. Furthermore, because the dust bunny distribution is intimately related to beta diversity,
80 understanding what factors affect the strength of dust bunny distributions also contributes to our
81 understanding of what controls beta diversity in community samples.

82 Here we first define measures of the strength of the dust bunny distribution. These are simple,
83 model-free descriptors of the tendency of species abundance data to lie along the high-dimensional edges
84 of the underlying space. We then demonstrate that this pattern could result from any of four well-known
85 ecological processes and examine the impact of each on the severity of the pattern. We do this with a
86 simple population process model simultaneously applied to many species. Because we expect that a given
87 statistical distribution can arise from very different processes, we anticipate that processes other than
88 those that we examine could also create dust bunny distributions.

89 Our simulation model starts with unoccupied space, then builds populations for 30 species taking
90 into account stochastic immigration, community-limited population growth, species-specific competitive
91 ability, and variable species performance along multiple environmental gradients. We aim not for hyper-
92 realism, but rather to expose simple mechanisms that may produce dust bunnies.

93 We evaluate possible causes of dust bunny distributions by generating a large number of non-
94 equilibrium communities under varying conditions, then analyzing the relationship between the intensity of
95 the dust bunny distribution in these data sets and the population and environmental drivers. We use our
96 simulations of ecological community development to answer the following questions:

- 97 1. How does dust bunny intensity vary with time since disturbance? We hypothesize that stochastic
98 initial colonization renders communities with strong dust bunny distributions, while competitive
99 and environmental effects gradually sort communities into relatively consistent species
100 composition, weakening the dust bunny distribution. The longer the time between disturbances,
101 the more a community approaches equilibrium, assuming a stable environment. The less stable
102 the environment, the less opportunity a community has to approach an equilibrial state.
- 103 2. How does dust bunny intensity vary with average niche width (and thus beta diversity) along
104 environmental gradients? We anticipate that narrower niches create stronger dust bunnies,
105 because a larger proportion of each environmental gradient will lie outside a species tolerances,
106 producing more zeros and small values in the matrix.
- 107 3. How does dust bunny intensity vary with the degree of community-wide dispersal limitation? We
108 hypothesize that dust bunny distributions can be created by dispersal limitations, with or without
109 the influence of one or more environmental gradients. We anticipate that the stronger the
110 dispersal limitation, the stronger the dust bunnies, because dispersal limitations heighten the
111 relative importance of the stochasticity of immigration, producing many zeros in the data matrix,
112 even in optimum habitats for a given species.
- 113 4. How does dust bunny intensity vary with number of influential environmental gradients? We
114 anticipate that increasing the number of environmental controls on species increases the
115 proportion of uninhabitable space for a given species, and thus increases the number of zeros in a
116 data set.

117 **Methods**

118 Community Development Model

119 We model multiple population dynamics simultaneously and as simply as possible to produce
120 dust bunny distributions (Online Resource 1; briefly summarized here). We develop communities in
121 unoccupied space, simulating response to a community-replacing disturbance. Populations are described

122 by the density or counts of a given species. The model is discrete with respect to time. One time step can
123 be considered either a single generation (in which case we assume that all species in the community have
124 the same generation time), or a specific time interval (e.g. 1 year).

125 Species have Gaussian responses on one or more environmental gradients. Recognizing the
126 inherent tradeoffs between competitive ability and reproductive effort, both immigration rates and the
127 intrinsic rate of population growth are set to vary negatively with competitive ability. This "competitive
128 ability" incorporates both a competitive effect on other species (via its relationship to immigration and
129 growth rates) and a competitive response to other species (via its effective carrying capacity).

130 Immigration is treated as a species-specific stochastic Poisson process, with immigration pressure
131 varying linearly and negatively with competitive ability. To control the system-wide balance between
132 growth rates and dispersal limitations, we introduce a dispersal limitation factor. This parameter is held
133 constant for a given simulation, but can be varied to increase or decrease the dispersal limitation built into
134 the whole community.

135 *Community matrices.*— Each community matrix (\mathbf{A} , n sample units \times p species), was assembled
136 by running the model once for each sample unit, choosing the following parameters (Online Resource 1):
137 degree of dispersal limitation, niche width, number of environmental gradients, and number of time steps
138 (or generations). Sample units in a given matrix vary in position on one or more environmental gradients.
139 Species in a given matrix vary in position of optima on those gradients, degree of dispersal limitation,
140 competitive abilities, and intrinsic growth rates. Abundances need not apply to species per se; they can
141 also be higher taxa (genera, families) or frequencies of various genetic markers that are presumed to be
142 shared by closely related organisms. The sample unit is normally a fixed area, fixed volume, or some
143 other standardization of effort; the sample is taken from a variety of locations and/or dates.

144 *Data adjustments.*—Most analysts faced with real data sets similar to those analyzed here would
145 transform the data before analysis. Because we visualize the data as counts, and the counts span several
146 orders of magnitude, we transformed by $\log_{10}(a + 1)$ before calculating statistics that describe dust bunny

147 strength. This transformation also preceded our beta diversity calculation that is based on the average
148 Sørensen distance among sample units. Because transformations affect distributional properties, we
149 expect that choosing other transformations could affect measures of dust bunny intensity.

150 *Dust bunnies in High-Dimensional Spaces.*— Assume an n -dimensional (n D) Cartesian
151 coordinate system (i.e. of mutually perpendicular axes, with each axis intersecting the origin). Each pair
152 of axes defines a plane. We define a corner as the intersection of two or more of these planes. For species
153 data we need to consider only the non-negative part of this space (points with all coordinates ≥ 0).

154 A 2D corner is the intersection of two planes. The points $(0,0,z)$ lie on a 2D corner in a 3D space.
155 Similarly, the points $(0,0,y,z)$ form a plane that is a 2D corner in a 4D space. Similarly, a 3D corner is the
156 intersection of three planes. The point $(0,0,0)$ lies on a 3D corner in a 3D space and the points $(0,0,0,z)$ lie
157 on a 3D corner in a 4D space.

158 Generalizing, a point in an n -dimensional space that has k coordinates with a value of zero lies on
159 a k D corner of the n D space. Applying this to community data, a sample unit with s of p species lie on a
160 $(p-s)$ -dimensional corner of the p -dimensional species space. For example, a sample unit with 10 species
161 in a data set with 50 species lies on a 40D corner of the 50D species space. In a typical data set, most
162 sample units will be missing many of the species, most sample units lie on high-dimensional corners of
163 the space. Like dust bunnies in a 3D room, dust tends to accumulate not just in the 3D corners of the
164 space, but also in the lower dimensional (2D) corners.

165 *Evaluation of Dust Bunny Intensity.*— The intensity of multivariate dust bunny distributions in
166 community data sets can be expressed by various statistics. Dust bunny distributions have high positive
167 skew and kurtosis, but those statistics can also be high for non-dust bunnies. We used the following two
168 simple measures of degree of match with a multivariate dust bunny, as defined qualitatively above.

- 169 1. Percentage of the community matrix that is zero. All species with no occurrences have been
170 removed, such that the matrix has at least one nonzero value for each species. The maximum
171 percentage of zeros is obtained with only one nonzero value for each of p species, which yields

172 $100(1 - p/(np)) = 100-100/n\%$ for a perfect dust bunny and 0% for the strongest anti-dust bunny,
173 where n is the number of sample units. This measure ignores quantitative values in the matrix, in
174 that the proportion of zeros is the same whether species are represented by presence-absence (1 or
175 0) or quantitative values. The expected value for the percentage of zeros approaches zero for a
176 multivariate normal distribution.

177 2. We define a quantitative dust bunny intensity (DBI) as one minus the matrix mean when each
178 species is relativized to (0-1) by the maximum ($amax_j$) value observed for that species, assuming
179 that the smallest possible $a_{ij} = 0$ for each species:

$$180 \quad DBI = 1 - \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n \sum_{j=1}^p a_{ij} / amax_j}{n \cdot p} \quad (1)$$

181 We calculated DBI based on raw numbers as well as their logarithms, applied before
182 relativization.

183 Empty species (all zeros) are removed before these calculations, because analysts would typically
184 not include species that did not occur in the data set. Empty sample units are, however, retained, because
185 they could be encountered in sampling and might be considered informative (e.g. recent disturbance or
186 harsh environment). Because the standard proportional distance measures cannot be applied to this kind
187 of problem (e.g. Bray-Curtis and chi-square distance require division by sample unit totals), one approach
188 is to remove empty sample units. But analysts may wish to retain empty sample units as carrying part of
189 the signal of interest, choosing a distance measure that accommodates them; therefore, we retain empty
190 sample units here.

191 Empty sample units tend not to remain empty (McCune and Grace 2002, p. 38) because nature
192 abhors a vacuum ("there does not exist a vacuum in nature"; Spinoza 1677). The multivariate origin is
193 commonly vacant in community data sets while the extreme corner of a physical space usually has the
194 highest concentration of dust. The dust bunny analogy is thus imperfect (McCune and Grace 2002).
195 Nevertheless, after a sample unit is cleared of all species, it will begin to reaccumulate species, migrating

196 out along the corners of the high dimensional space. For example, colonization of an empty sample unit
197 by 3 of 50 species would push that point from the origin to a 47D corner of the 50D space.

198 The minimum DBI is zero for a perfect anti-dust bunny, where every species occurs at its
199 maximum abundance in every sample unit. The maximum DBI is obtained with only one nonzero value
200 for each species, which yields $1 - (p*1)/(n*p) = 1 - (1/n) \approx 1$ for large n . The expected value of DBI is 0.5
201 for a multivariate normal distribution. Because the normal distribution is symmetric about the mean, if
202 each species is relativized from 0 to 1, the expected value of the mean is 0.5 for each species. Similarly,
203 the expected value of DBI based on the log abundances is 0.5 for a multivariate lognormal distribution
204 (log transformed, then relativized by $amax_j$)

205 An advantage of the percentage of zeros as a measure of dust bunny intensity is that it does not
206 vary with most of the usual data transformations applied to species data, including $\log(a + 1)$, \sqrt{a} ,
207 relativization by species maximum, and relativization by sample unit totals. Conversely, the DBI
208 responds to abundance patterns, which can contribute greatly to the apparent heterogeneity of a data set
209 and influence the performance of ordination, clustering, and group comparison methods.

210 *Real data sets for comparison.*—To evaluate the similarity of distributional properties of
211 simulated data sets to real data sets, we selected ten real data sets for comparison (Online Resource 2).
212 These data sets were chosen arbitrarily, subject to the following constraints: (1) include abundances that
213 are quantitative, rather than binary or with abundance classes, (2) represent a variety of taxa, (3) represent
214 a variety of abundance measures, including counts, densities, areal cover, peak heights for molecular
215 markers, and frequencies of DNA sequences detected.

216 Model Applications

217 *Overall sensitivity to population processes.*—We generated 19,200 data sets of 200 sample units
218 \times 30 species with 3 replicates per combination of level of dispersal limitation, niche widths, number of
219 environmental gradients, and maximum number of time steps (Table 1; details of model inputs, outputs,

220 and parameters in Online Resource 1). The model was implemented in the program DustBunny.dll (free
221 add-in to PC-ORD 6; McCune and Mefford 2011; Fortran 90 source code available from McCune).

222 Community-level descriptors were calculated for each data set both before and after $\log_{10}(x+1)$
223 transformation. Those descriptors included our two dust bunny indices (percent of zeros and DBI), as well
224 as Whittaker's beta diversity (β_w) and beta diversity in half changes (β_d), calculated by exponential
225 transformation of the average Sørensen distances (D , Bray and Curtis 1957, Legendre and Legendre 1998,
226 eqn. 7.57) among sample units within a data set:

$$227 \quad \beta_d = \log(1 - D) / \log(0.5) \quad (2)$$

228 Sensitivity analysis measured the importance of factors that we varied as model inputs (method in
229 Online Resource 1). Sensitivities were analyzed by first fitting a multidimensional response surface for
230 the $DBI = f(\text{inputs})$, where f is an unspecified smooth function derived with a kernel smoother, and each
231 data point is one of the 19,200 simulated data sets. We modeled response surfaces with nonparametric
232 multiplicative regression (NPMR; McCune 2006) using a multiplicative Gaussian kernel with a local
233 linear model.

234

235 **Results and Discussion**

236 **Dust bunny intensity in real and simulated data**

237 All community data sets, both simulated and real, departed strongly from multivariate normal and
238 multivariate lognormal distributions. The two measures of dust bunny intensity, DBI and percent zeros in
239 the community matrix, had a strong positive relationship (Fig. 2). That relationship was stronger in the
240 case of log transformed data, because log transformation diminishes the effect of large abundance values,
241 shifting the data toward presence-absence, the basis of the percent zeros metric.

242 Simulated data sets had dust bunny statistics similar to those in real data sets, whether analyzed as
243 raw data or their logarithms (Fig. 2). For log-transformed data, four of ten real data sets fell below the
244 cloud of simulated data sets, having lower DBI for a given percentage of zeros in the community matrix.

245 In all four cases, sample units in the community matrix were averages of a large number of spatial or
246 temporal subsamples rather than individual sample units. While averaging tends to reduce both the
247 percentage of zeros and DBI, it apparently has a larger effect on the DBI based on log-transformed data,
248 such that DBI is lower than expected for a given percentage of zeros. Three of these four data sets had the
249 lowest average species maximum, when expressed as standard deviations from the species mean. Thus
250 relativizations by species maximum tend to yield relatively high matrix means when the original data
251 consist of averages of many sample units. Log transformation exaggerates this effect, which, for
252 positively skewed data, brings the species mean much closer to the maximum than in the untransformed
253 data.

254 For 19,200 simulated data sets, the percentage of zeros and DBI ranged from 20.3–99.5% and
255 0.775–0.995 respectively. Average species richness ranged from near zero to 24. Beta diversity (β_d)
256 ranged from 0.0–12.5 half changes.

257 Effect of log transformation on DBI

258 Log transformation of the abundance data diminished the intensity of the dust bunny distribution,
259 for both real and simulated data (Fig. 2). In both cases, however, log transformed data still departed
260 strongly from multivariate normality (Fig. 2). Although log transformation will often improve the ability
261 of analytical techniques to extract pattern by deemphasizing very large values in the data matrix and
262 providing more sensitivity at low abundances, log transformation is typically insufficient to achieve a
263 distribution approaching multivariate normality.

264

265 Controls over intensity of dust bunny distributions

266 All four factors examined influenced intensity of dust bunnies, but varied greatly in effect size, in
267 order of decreasing effect: number of environmental factors, dispersal limitation, time since community-
268 replacing disturbance, and niche width. Each of these is addressed below.

269 *Number of environmental gradients.*— The strongest of the four factors examined was the number of
270 influential environmental gradients. Sensitivity analysis showed that dust bunny intensity was over ten
271 times as sensitive to the number of environmental gradients as to the next most important factor (Table 1).
272 Simulated data sets with three strong environmental gradients always had $DBI > 0.9$, regardless of the
273 settings of the other factors (Fig. 3).

274 Determining how many environmental gradients have affected the species in a real data set is
275 difficult, if not impossible. Data reduction methods such as ordination commonly find 2-3 statistically
276 supported dimensions, but these methods are designed to filter out the influence of weak gradients as
277 noise (Gauch 1982). So although our multivariate analytical methods can reliably detect only a few
278 underlying dimensions, surely there are many, in a declining series of importance, tapering down to
279 obscure historical factors that left a slowly fading mark.

280 On the other hand, species distribution or habitat models provide good evidence of the underlying
281 complexity of community data. One can slice a community data set into its component species, then
282 individually fit models that relate those species to a common pool of predictors. Typically, many species
283 will express a dominant environmental or disturbance gradient, but individual species will express habitat
284 relationships that are ignored by other species, such that the list of predictors related to one or more
285 species is long. Because the best models for different species models incorporate different predictors,
286 even when they are made orthogonal as in principal components of climate variables, the communities
287 must be influenced by numerous environmental gradients.

288 *Dispersal limitation.*— Dust bunny distributions were readily produced by dispersal limitations, even in
289 the absence of environmental gradients. The intensity of dust bunny distribution rapidly increased with
290 increasing dispersal limitation (Fig. 3). The relationship was nonlinear with a diminishing rate of increase
291 as dispersal limitation increased.

292 Sensitivity analysis of the simulation model revealed that, apart from the number of influential
293 environmental gradients, the degree of dispersal limitations most strongly controlled the departure from
294 multivariate normality toward the dust bunny distribution (Table 1). This was true whether the intensity

295 of the dust bunny distribution was measured as the proportion of zeros in the community matrix or as the
296 dust bunny intensity metric (DBI).

297 Dispersal limitation, as defined here, tunes the balance between immigration pressure on the one
298 hand, and competitive effects and intrinsic growth rates on the other. A high dispersal limitation means
299 that the stochastic effects of immigration are large, relative to the intrinsic rates of increase in populations
300 and the rate at which competition is expressed. If dispersal limitations are pervasive in natural
301 populations, as suggested by many authors (e.g. Freestone and Inouye 2006; Ricklefs 1987), then this
302 alone is sufficient to produce the dust bunny distributions typically seen in community data sets.

303 *Time since disturbance.*— Dust bunny intensity diminished with number of generations elapsed since
304 disturbance (Fig. 3). This effect was most apparent with lower dispersal limitations and fewer influential
305 environmental gradients. This means that strong dust bunny distributions are more likely when sampling
306 communities soon after disturbance, relative to the generation time of the organisms. In other words,
307 sampling early successional communities is more likely to yield strong dust bunny distributions than
308 sampling old communities, where competition and immigration has have had a longer time to be
309 expressed, yielding relatively deterministic and stable communities.

310 Note that "stability" and "time since disturbance" are both relative terms, an appropriate standard
311 being the turnover rates of the organisms that comprise the communities. For example, a forest 300 years
312 after stand-replacing fire may still be dominated by long-lived trees that first colonized after the fire
313 (McCune and Allen 1985).

314 Number of generations elapsed was third in relative importance of the four factors examined, as
315 shown by sensitivity analysis (Table 1). Dust bunny intensity, as measured by proportion of zeros in the
316 community matrix, was about one-third as responsive to number of generations, as compared to dispersal
317 limitation. Similarly, dust bunny intensity as measured by DBI was between one third and one half as
318 responsive to number of generations as to dispersal limitation.

319 *Niche width.*— Narrower niches tended to result in stronger dust bunnies. This effect was similar in
320 intensity for any number of environmental gradients, other than zero where niche width had no effect on

321 dust bunny intensity (Fig. 4). Although niche width was the weakest of the four factors examined, its
322 effect could be observed by holding both dispersal limitation and number of generations constant at
323 moderate values, while allowing number of environmental gradients and niche width to vary (Fig. 4).
324 Sensitivity analysis showed dust bunny intensity as measured by DBI to be about half as sensitive to
325 niche width as to number of generations since disturbance, and only about a fourth as sensitive to niche
326 width as to dispersal limitation (Table 1).

327

328 Relationships among dust bunny measures and beta diversity

329 The term beta diversity has taken on various meanings since Whittaker (1972); see reviews by
330 Anderson et al. (2011) and Tuomisto (2010). In its most general sense, beta diversity measures
331 heterogeneity of a community sample. Naturally, measures of beta diversity will tend to be correlated
332 with the proportion of zeros in a community matrix. In fact, Whittaker's simplest beta diversity measure
333 (β_w) that is applicable to any community sample can be considered a hyperbolic rescaling of the
334 proportion of zeros in a matrix (PctZeros, Online Resource 3, Fig. 3-1). Specifically, start with
335 Whittaker's $\beta_w = (S_c/S) - 1$, where S_c is the total number of species in the sample and S is the average
336 number of species per sample unit. If q is the number of nonzero elements in the matrix of sample units \times
337 species, then $q = \sum S_i$ across the i sample units and $S = q/n$. Then by algebra $\beta_w = n \cdot S_c / q - 1$, PctZeros = 1
338 $- q / (n \cdot S_c)$, and $\beta_w = 100 / (100 - \text{PctZeros}) - 1$. Similarly, $S = p(1 - \text{PctZeros}/100)$, where p is the number of
339 species in the data set.

340

341 Where to find dust bunnies

342 Sousa (1984) wrote "The differential expression of life history attributes under different regimes
343 of disturbance produces much of the spatial and temporal heterogeneity one observes in natural
344 assemblages." Our models demonstrate that point, and suggest that the differential expression of life
345 history attributes along environmental gradients provides a fundamental mechanism for producing the

346 statistical properties of ecological community data. In other words, dust bunnies can be produced simply
347 by interspecific variation in optima on environmental gradients combined with tradeoffs in life history
348 characters (dispersal ability, competitive ability, and intrinsic population growth rates). It is likely,
349 however, that dust bunnies can be observed even without tradeoffs in life history characters. For example,
350 even under the assumption of ecological equivalence of all species, neutral theory holds that stronger
351 dispersal limitation increases species turnover (Hubbell 2001) and thus results in more zeros in the data.

352 Dust bunny distributions were found in all real and simulated data sets examined, but these
353 distributions varied greatly in their degree of departure from multivariate normality. Our model results
354 lead to predictions about what kinds of community samples are likely to have weak or strong dust bunny
355 distributions, and thus how seriously they will depart from multivariate normality. We list several
356 examples below.

357 Sample units measured soon after community-replacing disturbance but within a narrow range of
358 environments lead to strong dust bunnies. Even with little environmental variation, stochastic
359 colonization by pioneer species and slow colonization of better competitors lead to a zero-rich data
360 matrix.

361 Sampling near-equilibrial communities many generations after disturbance and from a narrow
362 range in environments should lead to only weak dust bunnies. This would be the closest approximation to
363 multivariate normal distributions that community ecologists are likely to find with data sets on natural (as
364 opposed to experimental) communities. Experimentally-constructed communities are likely to have
365 unnaturally few zeros, because experimenters typically introduce fewer species than encountered in
366 nature.

367 Intensity of dust bunny distributions is driven both by population processes and properties of a
368 sample. For example, when sampling within a given ecological domain, dust bunny intensity will depend
369 on sample unit size (e.g. area or volume). Consider two extremes: infinitesimally small (point) sample
370 units, and very large sample units that span multiple environments. If sample units are literally points in
371 space, then only one species can occupy a point at a given time, and each sample unit will contain at most

372 one species. Geometrically, this means that in a p -dimensional species space, the point lies on a $p-1$
373 dimensional edge of that space. After removing empty sample units, the DBI, percentage of zeros and
374 beta diversity will be maximal.

375 On the contrary, if sample units are large, spanning substantial portions of major environmental
376 gradients, then the length and steepness of the gradients are effectively diminished, beta diversity will
377 decrease, and apparent niches will be broader. We have seen that reducing the environmental gradients in
378 a data set will decrease the intensity of dust bunnies.

379 Community samples taken across multiple simultaneous strong environmental gradients are likely
380 to show strong dust bunnies, regardless of the successional state, niche width of the component species,
381 and degree of dispersal limitation. In our experience, most community data sets have multiple strong
382 abiotic or biotic environmental influences, therefore strong dust bunnies are the norm in community
383 ecology.

384 In conclusion, departure from multivariate normality toward the dust bunny distribution,
385 characterized by community sample points lying along high-dimensional edges of multidimensional
386 species space, can be predicted by population processes. Mechanisms that create this distribution include
387 species' differential responses along multiple environmental gradients, stochasticity of dispersal
388 limitation, time since disturbance, and ecological niche width of species. As usual it is difficult to infer
389 process from pattern because often a pattern can be produced by more than one process. Because of this,
390 observing a strong dust bunny does not allow us to infer which processes are acting on the community.
391 We can, however, infer in the opposite direction: knowledge of population processes and sample
392 characteristics allow us to anticipate the intensity of dust bunnies in our data. Furthermore, broader
393 recognition of the dust bunny distribution should help us to choose analytical methods.

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Table 1 Sensitivity of strength of dust bunny distributions to variation in dispersal limitation, niche width, number of environmental gradients, and number of generations since community-replacing disturbance. All combinations of levels of the model inputs were applied; "Incr" is the increment between levels. Sensitivities, Q , of the dust bunny indices were calculated by nudging the model variables for each data point, one variable at a time, then expressing the range in response relative to the amount nudged (Online Resource 1). $Q=1$ means that response variable (strength of dust bunny distribution) changes by an amount equal to the amount that the input variable was nudged. $Q=0$ means no response of DBI to the input variable. Dust bunny intensity (DBI) is based on the matrix mean of log-transformed abundances relativized by species maximum.

Model inputs	Units	Symbol	Min	Max	Incr.	Sensitivity, Q	
						% zeros	DBI
Dispersal limitation, slope of Poisson parameter vs. competitive ability	unitless	d	1	20	1	0.324	0.324
Niche width, environmental gradients	standard deviates	s	15	50	5	0.080	0.080
Number of environmental gradients	count	q	0	3	1	6.720	5.872
Number of generations	count	t_{max}	1	10	1	0.183	0.136

FIGURE LEGENDS – MCCUNE AND ROOT

Fig 1. The dust bunny distribution in ecological community data, illustrated with a simple hypothetical data set where abundances of three species form a series of unimodal distributions along a single environmental gradient (upper left). In species space (lower right), where each species' abundance defines an axis, the data form a dust bunny distribution, shown here with three levels of abstraction. Background: a dust bunny in the vernacular, an accumulation of lint and dirt particles in the corner of a room. Middle: sample units (dots) in 3D species space. Abundances of species 1 and 3 peak on the extremes of the gradient. Species 2 peaks in the middle of the gradient. Foreground: The underlying environmental gradient forms a strongly nonlinear shape in species space (adapted from McCune and Grace 2002).

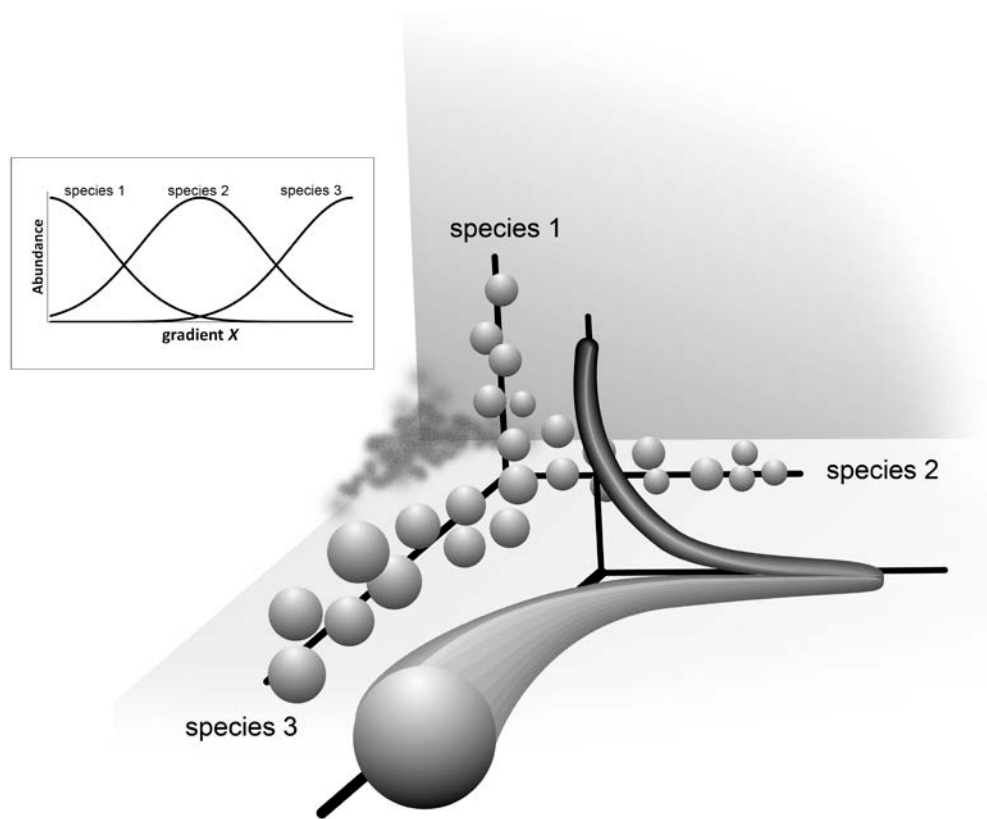


Fig 2 Comparison of ten real data sets (black dots; sources and characteristics: see Online Resource 2) with 19,200 simulated data sets (gray circles) for two measures of the departure of a dust bunny distribution from multivariate normality. Percent zeros in the species matrix vs. dust bunny intensity (DBI) based on raw data values (left panel) and log transformed species abundances (right panel). Expected values for multivariate normal and lognormal distributions are shown by +. Real data sets falling below the cloud of simulated data sets had raw data values consisting of averages rather than individual observations.

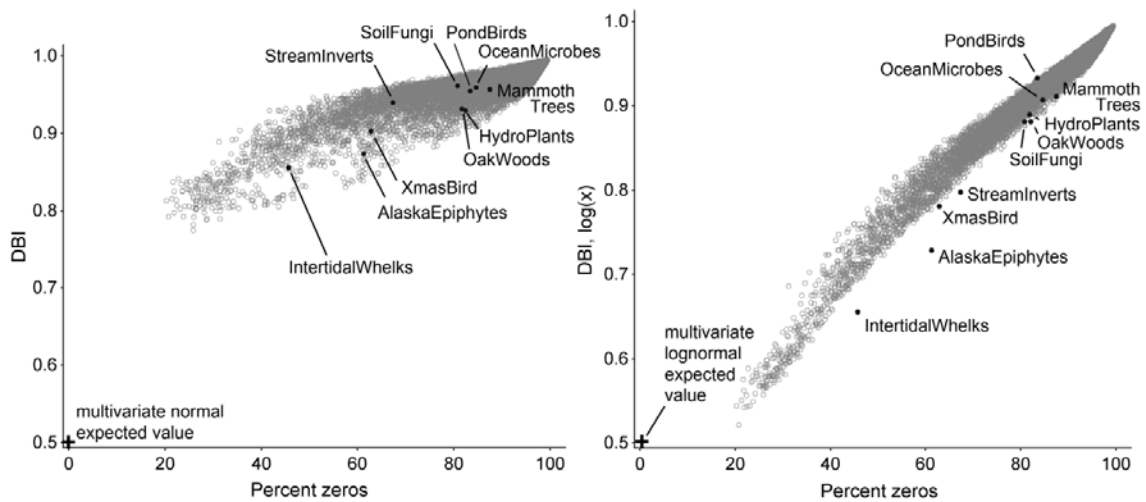


Fig. 3. Response surfaces from simulated data sets showing the dependence of dust bunny strength (DBI) on the three strongest controlling factors, number of environmental gradients dispersal limitation, d , and number of generations (or time steps). A. zero environmental gradients. B. one gradient. C. Two gradients. D Three gradients. These factors push community samples from multivariate normal distribution toward a dust bunny distribution. All response surfaces are for a constant niche width, $s = 25$.

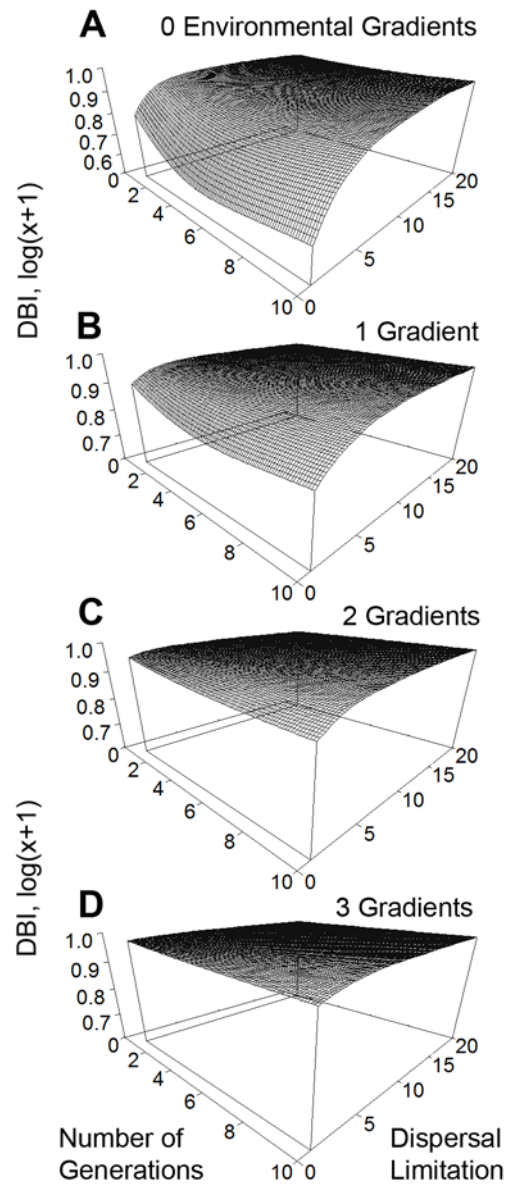


Fig 4 Dependence of dust bunny intensity (DBI) on the weakest controlling factor, niche width, for each number of environmental gradients. The other important variables were held constant at moderate values (number of generations = 3, dispersal limitation = 3).

