PROGRESS IN DEVELOPING A BARK BEETRLE IDENTIFICATION TOOL

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Abstract

This study presents a tool for the identification of bark beetles. These pests are

known for their potential to cause extensive damage to forests globally, as well as for

uniform and homoplastic morphology which poses identification challenges. Utilizing a

MaxViT-based deep learning model is an innovative approach to classify bark beetles

down to the species level from images containing multiple beetles. The methodology

involves a comprehensive process of data collection, preparation, and model training,

leveraging pre-classified beetle species to ensure accuracy and reliability. The model's

high F1 score estimates of 0.99 indicates its exceptional performance, demonstrating a

strong ability to accurately classify species, including those previously unknown to the

model. This makes it a valuable tool for applications in forest management and ecological

research. Despite the controlled conditions of image collection and potential challenges

in real-world application, this study provides the first model capable of identifying the bark

beetle species, and by far the largest training set of images for any comparable insect

group. We also designed a function that reports if a species appears to be unknown.

Further research is suggested to enhance the model's generalization capabilities and

scalability, emphasizing the integration of advanced machine learning techniques for

improved species classification and the detection of invasive or undescribed species.

Introduction

Computer vision technologies for the purposes of classification and identification

are becoming progressively more prevalent in ecological research, biological

systematics, and biosecurity. This is mainly attributable to the application of deep learning

techniques, with convolutional neural networks (CNNs) and transformer networks being

particularly influential (1,2). These methodologies have facilitated the emergence of

hybrid architectures like MaxViT, which integrates the strengths of both CNNs and

transformers to improve performance and efficiency, especially in contexts characterized

by constrained data resources (3).

In ecological studies, deep learning models have demonstrated potential by

accurately identifying species that are visually similar. These models excel in consistent,

reliable, and accurate classifications even among closely resembling species. This

capability underscores the technology's potential in ecology, biosystematics, and invasive

species detection where precise species identification is crucial (4–9).

Bark beetles, an abundant and widespread group of wood boring insects, are

notable for their potential to cause significant tree mortality. Their outbreaks are

increasing particularly in scenarios where non-native species invade a region with naive

hosts, or when the tree hosts are stressed and lessen their defense abilities, often

because of climate change (10) The importance of detecting and accurately identifying

these beetles cannot be overstated for forestry industries; however, existing identification

methods fall short in efficiency and scale, posing challenges in safeguarding forests

worldwide against infestations.

Bark and ambrosia beetles, encompassing the subfamilies Scolytinae and

Platypodinae within the Curculionidae family, represent a diverse group with over 6000

species spanning approximately 250 genera across 26 different tribes (11). Although

most bark beetle species are not typically categorized as pests, certain species can cause

significant forest damage (12). This uneven degree of damage makes species-level

critical: some species can trigger a region-wide regulatory action, while others with a very

similar morphology are entirely harmless.

Global trade and travel have facilitated the spread of invasive species, enhancing

the risk posed by these beetles (13).

The ecological impact of bark beetles is significant, as they alter habitats and affect

numerous organisms (14). Damage caused to forests also have a notable economic

impact on the pulp, paper, and timber industries (15). Economically, the damage inflicted

on forests impacts industries like pulp, paper, and timber, with the southern pine beetle

alone causing an estimated annual loss of around $43 million in the U.S. South (16). The

increasing prevalence of bark and ambrosia beetles, exacerbated by climate change and

international trade, highlights the urgent need for effective management strategies.

The monitoring, detection and identification of current and future bark beetle pests

poses a significant challenge due to their small size, morphological homogeneity, and

high variability within species (17–19). Traditional methods of identification, such as visual

classification, require considerable expertise and are time-consuming. Molecular

methods, like DNA sequencing, are impractical for large-scale pest detection efforts due

to their slow processing and high costs (20).

Currently, federal, and state-level programs like the Cooperative Agricultural Pest

Survey (About the CAPS Program | CAPS, 2023) and the USDA Forest Service's Early

Detection and Rapid Response program (22) are dedicated to monitoring and identifying

invasive pests. However, these methods are hindered by lengthy delays in identification

and are prone to human error. Additionally, the conventional practice of discarding

samples post-identification results in significant data loss, impeding the development of

comprehensive reference collections.

The integration of artificial intelligence into identification workflows presents a

promising solution to expedite and enhance the accuracy of bark beetles and many other

important organismal groups (23). This study tests a deep learning model capable of

classifying bark beetles down to the species level from images of multiple beetles at a

time. We specifically focused on the development of model that could be used in practical,

existing identification applications which typically deal with multi-species and multi-

specimen samples. We tested a model structure that first disaggregates compound

photographs, and then identifies individual beetle specimens. To train the model, we also

devised a method for efficiently generating aggregate photos of multiple individuals,

yielding the largest bark beetle photo collection ever assembled. In addition, we also

devised a method for determining a probability that a species is "unknown" (absent in the

training set), which is important in detecting novel species.

95   **Methods**

Images were collected by photographing physical bark beetle samples that have

previously been classified according to species by bark beetle taxonomists using current

classification strategies (24). The selection of the beetle species for the model training

was based on three factors. Firstly, their economic importance was a key consideration,

ensuring inclusion of beetles with significant impact across various industries and

ecosystems. Secondly, accessibility of physical samples was ensured. Lastly,

consideration was given to the prevalence of these species in traps of the national pest

monitoring networks, where the model may be helpful in the future.

Training set generation

The 12 selected species of pre-classified bark beetles were stored in 70% ethanol

at -80°C before and after photography. During image collection the samples were placed

in petri dish on a white background and submerged in 70% ethanol. Multiple bark beetles

were included in a single image using a macro photography technique designed to

optimize reproducibility of the image capturing process and image quality (Bark and

Ambrosia Beetle Macro Photography for an AI Training Dataset, 2024). This approach to

capturing images of multiple beetles at once sped up image collection compared to

capturing one image of a beetle at a time. Each batch of beetle samples was of the same

species to ease digital labelling. Each batch of beetle samples were also photographed

10 times over after agitating the peri dish between photographs. This was to increase the

number of visual angles for each individual beetle photographed.

Pictures were taken with a Canon EOS REBEL with a 60mm lens. We kept the

ISO at 100 and used a ring flash to reduce the shadows around each beetle. Each image

taken in this way resulted in an image of multiple beetles at a resolution of 3456 x 5184

with 72 dpi at 24-bit color depth. The images with multiple beetles in it will be referred to

as a composite image. The intention was to keep the photography setup relatively

straightforward to enhance reproducibility in the future. All images were taken from the

top down onto the beetles on a rig that held the camera. The white background was

selected to control the background with a high contrast between the beetles to aid in data

preparation and identifying individual beetles.

Data Preparation

The composite images of multiple beetle samples were split into multiple images.

Resulting in multiple images one beetle sample in each image. This was done using the

Scikit-Image python package. This task was not a part of the deep learning model

because our focus remained on solving the bark and ambrosia beetle classification

problem and not general object detection.

The first step in data preparation was to confirm that all images were in focus and

had enough lighting. The composite images were split into test validation and training

datasets. The test set was 20% of all the composite images, maintaining the ratio of

species in the training data to avoid skewing the testing or training sample in that way

(Figure 1). Thereafter the remaining 80% of the training data were split using 5-fold cross

validation (26). This results in five replicates of the data to monitor for sampling biases.

The image data was split along the composite images and replicates of each composite

image to avoid cases where the same individual may be in both the testing (or validation)

and training dataset.

Fig 1: Example of 5-fold Cross-validation.

Once the image data were split, the composite images were broken down into

smaller images each containing a single beetle (Figure 2). This was done using the Scikit-

Image package in python using the following steps (27).

1. Import color composite image.

2. Convert image to black and white.

3. Binarize the image with beetles as black and the background as white using

149   the Otsu thresholding algorithm (28).

150   4. Remove any black objects that are in contact with the image edge.

151   5. Detect all black blobs in the image and draw rectangle boxes around each of

152   them using the built-in label function from Scikit-Image.

153   6. Use K-means with 2 clusters separating objects by size

154   7. Keep only the larger objects.

155   8. Use the rectangle coordinates of kept objects and extract those sections from

156   the original color image.

Fig 1: Splitting of Composite Image to Individual bark Beetle Images

Images that contained multiple beetles or contained only partial segments of

beetles were manually removed from the data through visual inspection of all files. Images

that contained any foreign bodies or organisms were also removed.

Model Training

We adopted a transfer learning approach for model training to reduce computation

time and amount of data required to train the model effectively (29). We utilized a MaxViT

architecture that has 116.1 million parameters and 92.6 million activations, previously

trained on a subset of the ImageNet-22K dataset, comprising over 14 million annotated

images and 22 thousand labels (3,30). The pre-trained model was obtained through the

Pytorch Image Models (timm) package on Hugging Face (31). Specifically, it was trained

on the ImageNet-12K subset, consisting of 1.2 million images across 11,821 classes, and

thereafter it was further fine-tuned on the ImageNet-1K subset, containing 1.2 million

images with 1000 classes.

We opted for the MaxViT model architecture to leverage its blend of global and

local attention mechanisms (3), predominantly employing the Adam optimizer (32). The

model utilizes various activation functions like ReLU, SiLU, and GELU (3,33), with Tanh

being crucial in the linear classification head. In the classification layer, the model

processes the feature map into a vector of 75,264 values, which is then reduced to a

vector of length corresponding to the number of classes (12 in our case, corresponding

to the number of beetle species). The Tanh function produces values between -1 and 1,

which are converted into prediction probabilities using SoftMax (34). This ensures that

the output probabilities sum up to 1 for all classes. The consistent label smoothing cross-

entropy loss function was applied to estimate the error (loss) for all models (35), this

specific objective function was chosen for its suitability in multi-class classification tasks

like ours. This loss function also serves as a regularization method, mitigating overfitting

and enhancing model performance and generalization by introducing slight label noise to

the training data (36).

The pretrained and fine-tuned MaxViT model was further trained on our images

that had dimensions of 224 x 224 pixels to suit the resolution that the model was pre-

trained on. The conversion was carried out using the Pytorch and FastAI packages in

python (37,38).

To artificially increase the size and diversity within the training data and to prevent

overfitting to our data and improve generalization of the model we used image

augmentations (Shorten & Khoshgoftaar, 2019). Each of these augmentations were

applied to a random degree during the training process with a probability of 0.8 to be

applied to any image in each batch. The augmentations we made included gaussian blur

and random patches of noise. Additionally, we performed changes to the rotation, flip,

brightness, contrast, zoom, scaling, warping, and cropping of images as augmentations.

During training we replaced the existing classification head of the model with our

own classification head with one node for each class (12 nodes in total). The model then

went through a warm-up phase of one epoch of training where the layers of the model

were all kept frozen excluding the classification head (40). Thereafter the model was

trained for several additional epochs where no layers were frozen until validation loss of

the model plateaued and converged with the training loss (Figure 3).

The next step was to identify the ideal set of hyperparameters to train our model

with. To do this we made use of the Hipergator supercomputer at the University of Florida.

During hyperparameter tuning, we utilized PyTorch and FastAI for GPU-accelerated

model training, employing the Weights and Biases (WandB) package for overseeing

parameter optimization (41). Bayesian search was employed to expedite parameter

optimization instead of exhaustive grid search. The Hyperparameters investigated

included batch size, epochs (excluding the warm-up phase epoch), and learning rate.

These were selected based on their impact on the validation loss. After evaluating various

models, a batch size of 64, trained for 5 epochs with a learning rate of 0.003, was chosen.

These hyperparameters were subsequently utilized for all experiments and training of the

parameters for the final model.

       Fig 3: Training Loss (blue) and Validation Loss (orange) Across Epochs for
       Best Model During Parameter Tuning. The x-axis represents the number of
       epochs, and the y-axis represents the calculated loss.
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For each evaluated image, the model generates probabilities for each of the 12

classes, corresponding to specific beetle species. However, it lacks the ability to classify

unknown species. Training a class of entities unknown to the model would require

impractical amounts of training data. A common alternative for detecting unknown classes

is to apply a decision threshold on the existing probabilities which determines whether an

output is classified as unknown or known. However, this approach does not produce a

probability of how confident the model is that the class is unknown (42).

To address this limitation, we propose a formula to estimate the probability of the

unknown class based on the distribution of probabilities of trained classes, aiming to

provide users with additional information for decision-making during deployment.

Let P be a vector of length n representing the probabilities of n classes. Let t be a

scalar representing the value of the threshold we use in our algorithm to represent the

decision boundary. We define the probability P_u as the unknown class or out-of-class

probability (Equation 1). Where d is a vector of length n representing each probability P

to the power of the compliment of the absolute difference between each of the

probabilities P and the threshold t (Equation 2).

234
$$P_u = 1 - \frac{\sum_{j=1}^{n} \sum_{l=1}^{n} |d_i - d_j|}{2(n-1) \sum_{j=1}^{n} d_i} \#(1)$$

235
$$d = P_i^{(1-|P_i-t|)} \#(2)$$

This formula generates an estimate probability that an image belongs to the

unknown class as a function of how much higher a single probability in the vector is than

the other probabilities and whether it is above the threshold parameter. The ideal vector

has one high probability, above the threshold, and the rest of the probabilities are very

low. This will produce a low P_u close to 0 unknown class probability estimate because the

classifier seems to be certain that one class is the true class. However, if a vector is

produced with multiple probabilities that are all very similar the unknown class probability

will be closer to 1. This makes it possible to produce an estimate of the unknown

probability and represent it in an output alongside the class probabilities as a measure of

certainty of the classifier without sacrificing the ability to use a threshold on the original

output of the model for out-of-class classification.

The code to this model and a demonstrative version of the bark beetle image

classifier are available for public access on GitHub (https://github.com/UF-Forest-

Entomology-Lab/Bark_Beetle_Classification)   and   Hugging   Face   Spaces

(https://huggingface.co/spaces/ChristopherMarais/Andrew_Alpha), respectively.

251   **Results**

The model demonstrated near perfect accuracy in identifying bark beetle species,

achieving F1-scores of 0.99 on our validation dataset and a perfect 1.0 on our testing

dataset.

We accumulated 2 290 composite images of 12 species (Figure 4). We were able

to obtain an average of 12.9 single beetle images from each composite image (Figure 6).

The average number of single beetle images per composite image differed markedly

between species (range: 1248-4968, Figure 5). This was because the beetles were all

different sizes, and it wasn't possible to fit the same number of beetles in each composite

image.

Fig 4: Number of Composite Images Collected per Species

Fig 5: Number of Single Beetle Images Generated per Species

Fig 6: Average Number of Single Beetle Images per Composite Image by Species

After settling on a batch size of 64 images with a pre-trained model, and 5 epochs

with a learning rate of 0.003, these parameters were used for further training, evaluation,

and testing. To evaluate the model thoroughly we used 5-fold cross validation. This meant

that for every fold we evaluated the model a different subset of the data covering all the

training data across all folds. For each fold the model was also evaluated on the holdout

testing data. To evaluate the model, we made use of F1-score instead of a general

accuracy score. The F1 score is more suited to multi-class classification as it is more

sensitive to data distribution (43). An F1-score ranges between 0 and 1 with higher values

indicating better classification. The F1-score obtained for the model averaged over all the

folds for the validation data was 0.99 and for the testing data was 1.0.

To estimate our model's performance on out-of-class classification with our

unknown class probability formula we chose to test it on images that are closely related

to the training data, but not included in the training data. This was done by training multiple

models each with one class of beetles excluded from the training data. Thus 12 different

models, each of which has been trained only on data of 11 classes and excluding one

class. The excluded class was still used to evaluate and test the model as and

represented a true label of "unknown". This was repeated for each of the 5 folds to get a

robust estimate of performance. Therefore, a total of 60 models were all trained using the

originally optimized set of parameters. For each model we then applied the standard

threshold decision boundary method of out of class classification to test the ability of the

model to identify an unknown class. The same was repeated using our own unknown

class probability formula to estimate the probability that an image belonged to an

unknown class. Thereafter the class with the highest probability was selected as the

classified class.

Both the conventional decision boundary approach and our unknown class formula

approach add an additional threshold parameter to the inference process. This threshold

parameter can be optimized by using the Receiver Operating Characteristic (ROC) curve.

A ROC curve is a plot that shows the performance of a model at various threshold values.

This plot compares the True Positive Rate (TPR) to the False Positive Rate (FPR). The

TPR is a synonym for recall and is the ratio of true positives to the sum of true positives

and false negatives. The FPR is the ratio of the false positives to the sum of false positives

and true negatives. We calculated the FPR and TPR for the unseen testing data and the

validation data for each model. We took the average of the ROC curves for each fold and

compared them. We decided to take a One-vs-Rest approach on the ROC curve with the

unknown class as the positive class and all other classes as the negative class(44).

The ROC and the conventional thresholding approach perform similarly both close

to the ideal curve and far from the random curve (Figure 7). The ideal curve is in the top

left corner with a TPR of 1 and a FPR of 0. The ideal area under the curve (AUC) is

therefore 1. The conventional threshold decision boundary approach comes close with

an AUC of 0.981 and our own formula approach is very similar with an AUC of 0.982. This

means that both methods work well at classifying an unknown class. The optimal

threshold can be obtained as the point on the plot that is closest to the 1 TPR and 0 FPR

point. Both methods suggest an optimal threshold of 0.8 (Figure 7).

To get an estimate of how well the model performs in general when using this

threshold, we calculated the weighted F1-score using the threshold. This gave us an F1-

score of 0.97 for our formula and an F1-score of 0.98 for the conventional decision

thresholding approach when applied to the unseen testing data.

Fig 7: ROC curves of our out-of-class algorithm (blue) and a threshold decision
boundary (red) representing the true positive rates (TPR) compared to the false positive
rates (FPR) for test data classification results across all folds. The Diagonal (black) line
represents the performance of a random binary classifier.

Discussion

In this study, we developed an advanced tool for identifying bark beetles, a

significant threat to forestry due to their potential for extensive tree mortality. The need

for efficient and accurate identification methods is underscored by the limitations of

current approach, which relies almost entirely on trained personnel, which is difficult to

scale globally to the level of need. By leveraging a deep learning model, specifically a

MaxViT architecture capable of classifying bark beetles down to the species level from

images, the study represents a significant leap forward. The methodology involved

collecting images of pre-classified beetle species, which were then used to train the model

through a rigorous data preparation and model training process. This approach not only

promises to enhance identification accuracy but also addresses the challenges posed by

traditional identification methods. The model was evaluated using F1 scores and showed

notable accuracy. In addition, its ability to classify unknown species makes this approach

even more promising for bark beetle detection and research.

These high identification scores reflect the model's precision and reliability in

species classification across varied datasets. Additionally, the model's performance in

out-of-class classification shows its potential to diagnose unforeseen beetle infestations.

The high accuracies could be attributed to the model's advanced machine learning

architecture and the comprehensive dataset on which it was trained, allowing for nuanced

differentiation between species.

Several features of the model requires further testing before deployment in real-

world scenarios with higher noise levels and greater variability in image data. Our training

set collection and preparation involved the photography of beetle samples within a

controlled environment, which may not faithfully replicate the diverse conditions

encountered in natural settings. Moreover, the process of obtaining single beetle images

from composite images, integral to preprocessing, was based on a rudimentary algorithm,

therefore the model's use in scenarios with complex or varied backgrounds will require

further development of the disaggregation step.

Our study also contended with data imbalance issues, characterized by unequal

image distribution among various beetle species. In theory such imbalance could lead to

a model bias, favoring more frequently represented species, over lesser-represented

species. However, this does not seem to have affected accuracy with our initial set of 12

species. The high F1-scores, while indicative of the model's performance, also raise the

possibility of overfitting, particularly given the homogeneity of the training dataset. The

methodology employed for out-of-class classification, focusing on unknown species

identification, was based on a custom formula that relied on the distribution probabilities

of known classes.

Concerns regarding scalability and data efficiency of the model were also noted,

particularly in relation to incorporating new species into the dataset. For a model intended

to identify a broad array of species in diverse environments, efficient data collection and

processing capabilities are imperative.

Additionally, reliance on pre-trained models, while beneficial in some respects,

introduces the risk of inheriting biases from the source datasets.

Considering these limitations, we propose several directions for future research to

enhance the model's practicality and scientific utility. Expanding the number of species

the model is trained on and improving data efficiency are crucial steps. A significant focus

should be placed on refining the object detection algorithm to improve accuracy,

particularly for images with higher noise levels.

To enhance the model's capabilities further, a multifaceted approach involving the

integration of advanced machine learning techniques can be considered. A pivotal

enhancement would be the integration of out-of-class classification directly into the

network's classification head. This integration is crucial as it would enable the model to

identify and categorize species that were not part of the original training set, effectively

recognizing 'unknown' or novel classes. By doing so, the model would not only classify

known species with high accuracy but also flag species that are beyond its current

knowledge base. This feature is important since in practice, encountering unclassified or

new species is common.

In addressing the challenges posed by data gaps and underrepresented species,

the incorporation of generative components into the model could be transformative. This

approach would involve using techniques like Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs)

or Variational Autoencoders (VAEs) to synthesize training data for species that are not

sufficiently represented in the existing dataset. This method could significantly enhance

the model's training process (45).

Another significant enhancement could be realized by adopting a self-supervised

contrastive learning approach (46). By applying this approach, the model can learn from

unlabeled data, which is a common challenge in ecological datasets where labeling can

be resource-intensive and time-consuming. This approach enables the model to develop

a more nuanced understanding of the features that distinguish one species from another,

even in the absence of explicit labels. Finally, field deployment of the model warrants

investigation, ensuring that it is non-disruptive and user-friendly. Such deployment is

essential for evaluating the model's real-world applicability and effectiveness.

In summary, while our model demonstrates significant promise in beetle species

classification, addressing these noted limitations and pursuing the suggested avenues for

future research are pivotal for enhancing the model's scientific robustness and

applicability in diverse ecological settings.

Conclusion

A dual-pronged approach, combining advanced machine learning techniques with

a comprehensive data management strategy, enabled us to classifying morphologically

cryptic and mutually similar bark and ambrosia beetle species. Central to our

methodology was the deployment of a MaxViT-based machine learning model, optimized

for beetle image analysis.

To augment the model's utility and scientific contribution, future research should

focus on diversifying the training dataset, refining the object detection algorithm,

incorporating additional advanced machine learning techniques and generative

components, and exploring self-supervised contrastive learning approaches.

In summary, while our model and data management solutions were not without

limitations, they offer a path forward in the development of fast and accurate identification

of cryptic biological objects in high-throughput settings.

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