Title: Temperate grass allergy season defined by spatio-temporal shifts in airborne pollen communities

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Abstract

Grass pollen is the world's most harmful outdoor aeroallergen and sensitivity varies between species. Different species of grass flower at different times, but it is not known how airborne communities of grass pollen change in time and space. Persistence and high mobility of grass pollen could result in increasingly diverse seasonal pollen communities. Conversely, if grass pollen does not persist for an extended time in the air, shifting pollen communities would be predicted throughout the summer months. Here, using targeted high throughput sequencing, we tracked the seasonal progression of airborne Poaceae pollen biodiversity across Britain, throughout the grass allergy season. All grass genera displayed discrete, temporally restricted peaks of pollen incidence which varied with latitude, revealing that the taxonomic composition of grass pollen exposure changes substantially across the allergy season. By developing more refined aeroallergen profiling, we predict that our findings will facilitate the exploration of links between taxon-specific exposure of harmful grass pollen and disease, with concomitant socio-economic benefits.

Introduction

Allergens carried in airborne pollen are associated with both asthma [1] and allergic rhinitis (hay fever), negatively affecting 400 million people worldwide [2]. Pollen from the grass family (Poaceae) constitutes the most significant outdoor aeroallergen [3, 4], and more people are sensitised to grass pollen than to any other pollen type [5]. However, despite the harmful impact of grass pollen on human health, current observational studies and forecasts categorize grass pollen at the family level [Poaceae; 6, 7] due to difficulties in differentiating species and genera of grass pollen based on morphology [8]. Furthermore, we cannot predict seasonal variation in airborne grass pollen from the phenology of local grasses at ground level, since airborne pollen can be highly mobile [9, 10] and often does not directly correlate to local flowering times [9]. Understanding the taxon-specific phenology of airborne pollen would fill a significant knowledge gap in our understanding of allergen triggers, with associated benefits to healthcare providers, pharmaceutical industries and the public.

Many species within the subfamilies Pooideae, Chloridoideae, and Panicoideae release allergenic pollen into the atmosphere [5], including *Phleum* spp. (e.g. Timothy grasses), *Dactylis* spp. (Cocksfoot grasses), *Lolium* spp. (Ryegrasses), *Trisetum* spp. (Oatgrasses), *Festuca* spp. (Fescues), *Poa* spp. (Meadow-grasses and Bluegrasses), and *Anthoxanthum* spp. (Vernal grasses). However, it is unknown whether particular grass species contribute more to the prevalence of allergic symptoms and related diseases than others [11]. Whilst some grasses have been identified as more allergenic than others *in vitro* (triggering higher levels of Immunoglobulin E (IgE) antibody production), there is a high degree of cross-reactivity between grass species [12]. In addition, the allergen profiles and the degree of sensitisation

71 differ between grass species [12, 13] and the allergenicity of grass pollen varies across
72 seasons [14]. Family-level estimates of grass pollen concentrations cannot therefore be
73 considered a reliable proxy for either the concentration of pollen-derived aeroallergens or
74 pollen-induced public health outcomes.
75
76 The identification of biodiversity via the high-throughput analysis of taxonomy marker genes
77 (popularly termed metabarcoding) provides an emerging solution to semi-quantitatively
78 identify complex mixtures of airborne pollen grains [15-18]. Previous metabarcoding studies
79 of airborne pollen have been performed at very limited spatial and temporal scales [e.g. 15,
80 16]. Recent global DNA barcoding initiatives and co-ordinated regional efforts have now
81 resulted in near complete genetic databases of national native plants, including grasses in
82 Great Britain [19].
83
84 Here, using two complementary DNA barcode marker genes (*rbcL* and ITS2), we characterise
85 the spatial and temporal distribution of airborne grass pollen throughout the temperate
86 summer grass pollen season (May-August) across the latitudinal and longitudinal range of
87 Great Britain (S1 Fig). We hypothesise that (i) there will be discrete temporal incidences of
88 pollen from different grasses, linked to Poaceae terrestrial phenology, and (ii) the
89 composition of grass pollen will be homogenous across the UK due to the potential for long
90 distance transport of windborne pollen grains.
91

92 ## Results and Discussion

93 Grass pollen occupied distinct temporal windows across the grass allergy season in 2016
94 (May to August), thereby supporting our hypothesis (i) that species composition of airborne
95 grass pollen will change throughout the grass allergy season (Fig 1, Fig 2). Time, measured as
96 number of days after the first sample was collected, is a good predictor of airborne grass
97 pollen taxon composition using both markers (Fig 1-2; *ITS2*, $LR_{1, 74}$ = 128.8, *P* = 0.001; *rbcL*,
98 $LR_{1, 71}$ = 46.71, *P* = 0.001). We found that month (coded as a factor in the models) improves
99 our ability to predict taxonomic composition across the pollen season (Fig 1-2; *ITS2*, $LR_{1, 70}$ =
100 319.7, *P* = 0.001; *rbcL*, $LR_{1, 67}$ = 217.25, *P* = 0.001). In addition, community-level ordination
101 reveals that the community as a whole changed across the allergy season (S2 Fig).
102
103 Focusing on the more taxonomically specific ITS2 marker dataset, *Alopecurus* and *Holcus*
104 typically dominated the early grass pollen season (Fig 1), which coincides with typical peaks in
105 allergic rhinitis [20], but further research will be required to confirm this association. *Lolium*
106 featured prominently for the majority of the later grass season. The popularity of *Lolium*
107 species as forage crop means that many varieties have been bred with the potential to
108 mature at different times throughout the year [21]. While *Lolium* was the dominant species
109 in airborne grass pollen from July to the end of the sampling period, the total grass pollen
110 concentration declined in August, indicating that the absolute number of *Lolium* pollen grains
111 at this time is low (S3 Fig).
112
113 The top five genera contributing to airborne pollen, indicated by the relative abundance of
114 taxonomy marker genes, were *Alopecurus*, *Festuca*, *Lolium*, *Holcus* and *Poa* (Fig 1; S3 Fig).
115 Each of these genera are widespread in the UK and have been shown to provoke IgE-

116 mediated responses in grass-sensitised patients [12], providing candidate species for links
117 with hay fever and asthma exacerbation. Conversely, less prevalent species in the dataset
118 could contribute disproportionately to the allergenic load. Species such as *Phleum pratense*
119 have been identified to be a major source of allergenic pollen [5, 22]. However, we found
120 that *Phleum* made up a very small proportion of metabarcoding reads (Fig 2), corresponding
121 with the results of an earlier phenological study [23]. Most genera, such as *Phleum*,
122 *Anthoxanthum* and *Dactylis*, show distinct and narrow temporal incidence (Fig 2), and could
123 allow researchers to identify grass species associated with allergenic windows with greater
124 accuracy.

125

126 Changes in species composition over time were localised. We found that peaks in abundance
127 of airborne pollen occurred at different times at each location during the summer (Fig 1-2).
128 For example, the relative abundance of airborne grass pollen from the genus *Poa* peaked in
129 mid-June in Worcester and Bangor but 6-8 weeks later in Invergowrie (Fig 1), probably due to
130 latitudinal effects on flowering time [7, 24]. This is supported by a significant interaction
131 between latitude and time of year for both markers (Fig 1-2; *ITS2*, $LR_{68, 1}$= 46.4, P = 0.001;
132 *rbcL*,$LR_{66, 1}$= 59.08, P = 0.001), and between longitude and time of year for the ITS2 dataset
133 (Fig 1-2; $LR_{67, 1}$= 37.5, P = 0.001). Differences in species composition of airborne grass pollen
134 between the six sampling sites is supported by a significant effect of latitude (Fig 1-2; *ITS2*,
135 $LR_{1, 73}$ = 73.2, P = 0.001; *rbcL*, $LR_{1, 70}$ = 26.4, P = 0.025) and longitude (Fig 1-2; *ITS2*, $LR_{1, 69}$ =
136 36.5, P = 0.005; *rbcL*, $LR_{1, 69}$ = 27.10 P = 0.018). These results do not support our hypothesis
137 (ii) that the composition of grass pollen will be homogenous across the UK, and instead

138 suggest taxon-specific effects of regional geography and climate which have been
139 demonstrated for Poaceae pollen as a whole [7].
140
141 Observations of first flowering dates from a citizen science project (UKPN;
142 www.naturescalendar.org.uk) and metabarcoding data show similar sequences of seasonal
143 progression (Fig 3). First flowering dates of each genus started almost 3-4 weeks prior to the
144 observation of peaks of grass pollen in the metabarcoding data (Fig 3). Pollen release
145 (anthesis) occurs approximately 2-3 weeks after the production of flowering heads (heading)
146 [25], and this is reflected in the metabarcoding data suggesting that local flowering data are
147 informative for predicting the composition of airborne pollen. Continuing this study over
148 multiple years would allow us to track long-term, phenological changes in airborne pollen
149 communities and improve our ability to forecast the seasonal progression of airborne pollen
150 [26].
151
152 Enabled by contemporary molecular biodiversity analytical approaches and mature, curated
153 DNA barcoding databases, here we provide a comprehensive taxonomic overview of airborne
154 grass pollen distribution, throughout an entire allergy season and across large geographic
155 scales. The grass pollen season is defined by discrete temporal windows of different grass
156 species, with some grass species displaying geographical variation. Temporal pollen
157 distributions in metabarcoding data follow observed flowering times. The data provide an
158 important step towards developing species-level grass pollen forecasting. Additionally, the
159 research presented here leads the way for future studies facilitating understanding of the
160 relationships between grass pollen and disease, which have significant global public health
161 relevance and socioeconomic importance.

Methods

Sampling and Experimental Design

We collected aerial samples from six sites across the UK (S3 Table; S1 Fig) using Burkard Automatic Multi-Vial Cyclone Samplers (Burkard Manufacturing Co. Ltd. Rickmansworth, UK). The volumetric aerial sampler uses a turbine to draw in air (16.5 litres/min) and aerial particles are collected, using mini-cyclone technology into 1.5 ml sterile microcentrifuge tubes located on a carousel (S5 Fig). Each sampling unit was mounted alongside a seven-day volumetric trap (Burkard Manufacturing Co. Ltd. Rickmansworth, UK) belonging to the Met Office UK Pollen Monitoring Network, which provided daily pollen count data. In the seven-day volumetric trap, aerial particles are collected onto an adhesive coated tape supported on a clockwork-driven drum. The tape is cut into 24 h sections and pollen are identified and counted under a microscope [7]. Bangor was the only sampling site which was not part of the pollen monitoring network, but we deployed the same methodology at the Bangor site.

Sampling began in late May 2016 (S4 Table) and during alternate weeks, aerial samples were collected for seven days for a total of seven weeks between 25th May and 28th August. Exact sampling dates varied slightly between sites (S4 Table) and a total of 279 aerial samples were collected.

DNA Extraction, PCR and Sequencing

From the 279 daily aerial samples, 231 were selected for downstream molecular analysis, as described below. Within each sampling week, two series of three consecutive days were pooled. Pooled samples were selected based on grass pollen counts obtained by microscopy.

186 The final, unselected, day was not used in downstream molecular analysis. In total, seventy-
187 seven pools of DNA were created. In one instance, three consecutive days of pollen samples
188 were unavailable (Invergowrie, week 2, pool 2) due to trap errors. For this sample, the next
189 sampling day was selected for pooling (S4 Table). DNA was extracted from daily samples
190 using a DNeasy Plant Mini kits (Qiagen, Valencia, CA, USA), with some modifications to the
191 standard protocol as described by [27]. DNA from daily samples was pooled and eluted into
192 60 µl of elution buffer at the binding stage of the DNeasy Plant Mini kit.
193
194 Illumina MiSeq paired end indexed amplicon libraries were prepared following a two-step
195 protocol as recommended by the manufacturer [28]. Two marker genes were amplified with
196 universal primer pairs *rbcL*af and *rbcL*r506 [19, 29], and ITS2 and ITS3 [14] (S6 Table). A 5'
197 universal tail was added to the forward and reverse primers and a 6N sequence was added
198 between the forward universal tail and the template-specific primer, which is known to
199 improve clustering and cluster detection on MiSeq sequencing platforms [30] (Integrated
200 DNA Technologies, Coralville, USA). Round 1 PCR was carried out in a final volume of 25 µL,
201 including forward and reverse primers (0.2 µM), 1X Q5 HS High-Fidelity Master Mix (New
202 England Biolabs) and 1 µL of template DNA. Thermal cycling conditions were an initial
203 denaturation step at 98 °C for 30s; 35 cycles of 98 °C for 10s, 50 °C for 30s, 72 °C for 30s; and
204 a final annealing step of 72 °C for 5 minutes. Products from the first PCR were purified using
205 Agencourt AMPure XP beads (Beckman Coulter) with a 1:0.6 ratio of product to AMPure XP
206 beads.
207
208 The second round PCR added the unique identical i5 and i7 indexes and the P5 and P7
209 Illumina adaptors, along with universal tails complementary to the universal tails used in

round 1 PCR (S4 Table, S5 Table) (Ultramer, by IDT, Integrated DNA Technologies). Round 2 PCR was carried out in a final volume of 25 µL, including forward and reverse index primers (0.2 µM), 1X Q5 HS High-Fidelity Master Mix (New England Biolabs) and 5 µL of purified PCR product. Thermal cycling conditions were: 98 °C for 3 min; 98 °C for 30 s, 55 °C for 30 s, 72 °C for 30 s (10 cycles); 72 °C for 5 min, 4 °C for 10 min. Both PCRs were run in triplicate. The same set of unique indices were added to the triplicates which were then pooled following visual inspection on an agarose gel (1.5%) to ensure that indices were added successfully. Pooled metabarcoding libraries were cleaned a second time using Agencourt AMPure magnetic bead purification, run on an agarose gel (1.5%) and quantified using the Qubit high sensitivity kit (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Massachusetts, USA). Positive and negative controls were amplified in triplicate with both primer pairs and sequenced alongside airborne plant community DNA samples using the MiSeq. Sequence data, including metadata, are available at the Sequence Read Archive (SRA) using the project accession number SUB4136142.

Bioinformatic Analysis

Initial sequence processing was carried out following a modified version of the workflow described by de Vere *et al.* [27]. Briefly, raw sequences were trimmed using Trimmomatic v0.33 (*42*) to remove short reads (<200bp), adaptors and low quality regions. Reads were merged using FLASH v 1.2.11 [27, 31], and merged reads shorter than 450bp were excluded. Identical reads were merged using fastx-toolkit (v0.0.14), and reads were split into ITS2 and *rbcL* based on primer sequences.

To prevent spurious BLAST hits, custom reference databases containing *rbcL* and ITS2 sequences from UK plant species were generated. While all native species of the UK have

been DNA barcoded [19], a list of all species found in the UK was generated in order to gain coverage of non-native species. A list of UK plant species was generated by combining lists of native and alien species [32] with a list of cultivated plants obtained from Botanic Gardens Conservation International (BGCI) which represented horticultural species. All available *rbcL* and ITS2 records were downloaded from NCBI Genbank, and sequences belonging to UK species were extracted using the script 'creatingselectedfastadatabase.py', archived on GitHub.

Metabarcoding data was searched against the relevant sequence database using blastn [33], via the script 'blast_with_ncbi.py'. The top twenty blast hits were tabulated ('blast_summary.py'), then manually filtered to limit results to species currently present in Great Britain. Reads occurring fewer than four times were excluded from further analysis. All scripts used are archived on GitHub: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1305767.

Statistical Analysis

To understand how the grass pollen composition changed with space and time, the effect of time (measured as the number of days after the first sampling date), latitude and longitude of sampling location were included in a two-tailed generalized linear model using the 'manyglm' function in the package 'mvabund' [34]. The proportion of sequences was set as the response variable; proportion data was used as this has been shown to be an effective way of controlling for differences in read numbers [35]. The effect of time, latitude, longitude, month (coded as a factor), and the interaction between time and latitude were included as explanatory variables in the models. In addition to these explanatory variables,

257 the interaction between time and longitude was included in a model to analyse the ITS2 data
258 (S6 Table).
259
260 The data best fit a negative binomial distribution, most likely due to the large number of
261 zeros (zeros indicate that a grass genus is absent from a sampling location), resulting in a
262 strong mean-variance relationship in the data (S6 Fig). The proportion of sequences was
263 scaled by 1000 and values were converted to integers so that a generalized linear model with
264 a negative binomial distribution could be used. Model selection was based by Akaike
265 Information Criterion (AIC) (S6 Table) and visual inspection of the residuals against predicted
266 values from the models (S7 Fig).
267
268 In order to compare the metabarcoding data with flowering time data, we used phenological
269 records of first flowering collected in 2016 by citizen scientists from the UK's Nature's
270 Calendar (www.naturescalendar.org.uk). First flowering time was compared to genus-level
271 ITS2 metabarcoding data for three species: *Alopecurus pratensis*, *Dactylis glomerata* and
272 *Holcus lanatus*. As grass pollen could only be reliably identified to genus level in the
273 metabarcoding data, the taxa compared may not have been exactly equivalent since both
274 *Alopecurus* and *Holcus* contain other widespread species within the UK. However, *Alopecurus*
275 *pratensis* and *Holcus lanatus* are the most abundant species within their respective genera.
276 The comparison was only carried out for ITS2 data because two of the three genera were not
277 identified by the *rbcL* marker.
278
279 NMDS ordination was carried out using package 'VEGAN' in R [36], based on the proportion
280 of total high-quality reads contributed by each grass genus, using Bray-Curtis dissimilarity (S2

Fig). Ordination is used to reduce multivariate datasets (e.g. abundances of many species) into fewer variables that reflect overall similarities between samples. A linear model was carried out using the 'lm' function within the 'stats' package in R, in order to investigate the relationship between the number of reads obtained for each genus using the rbcL and ITS2 marker.

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List of Supplementary Materials

Supplementary text
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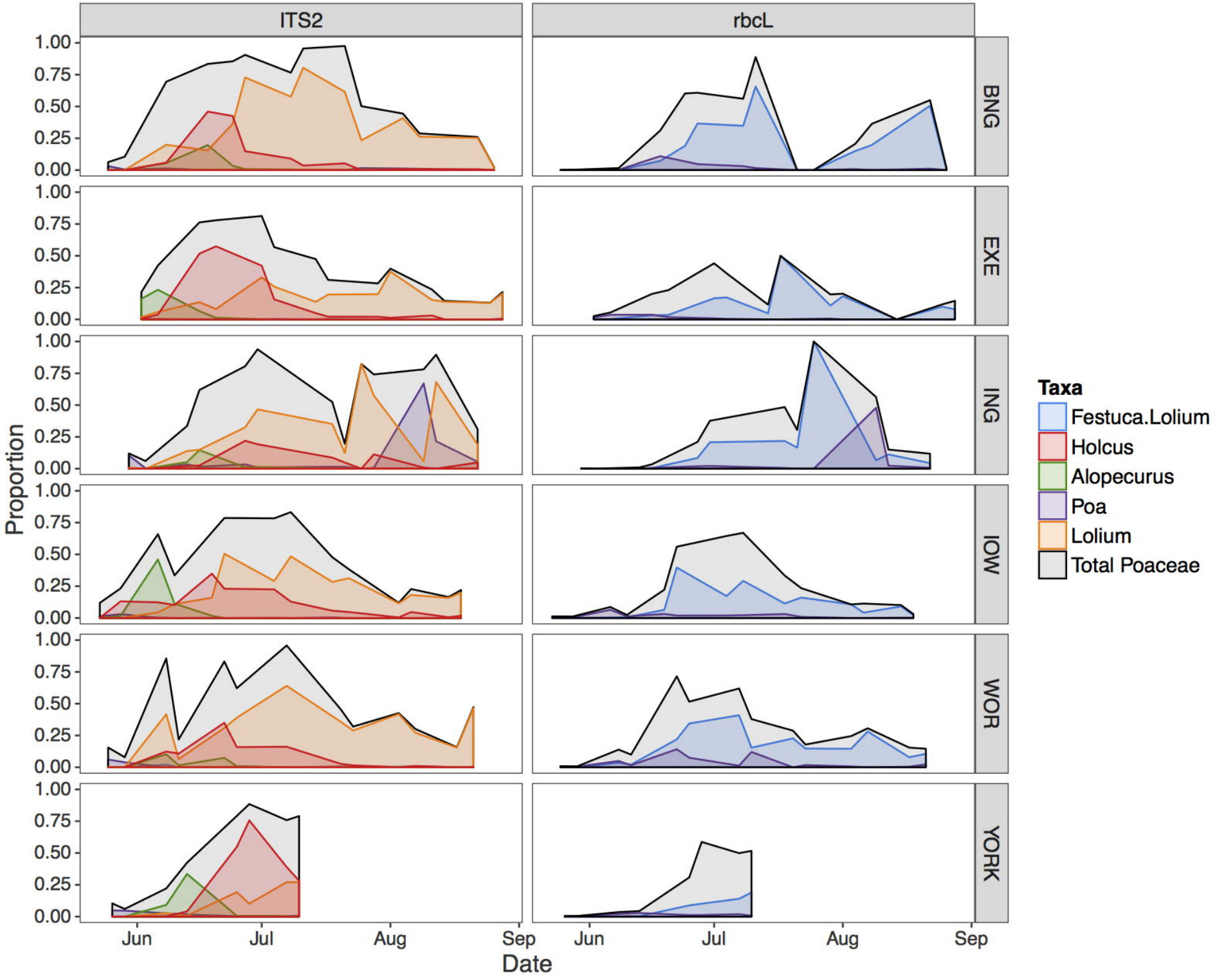
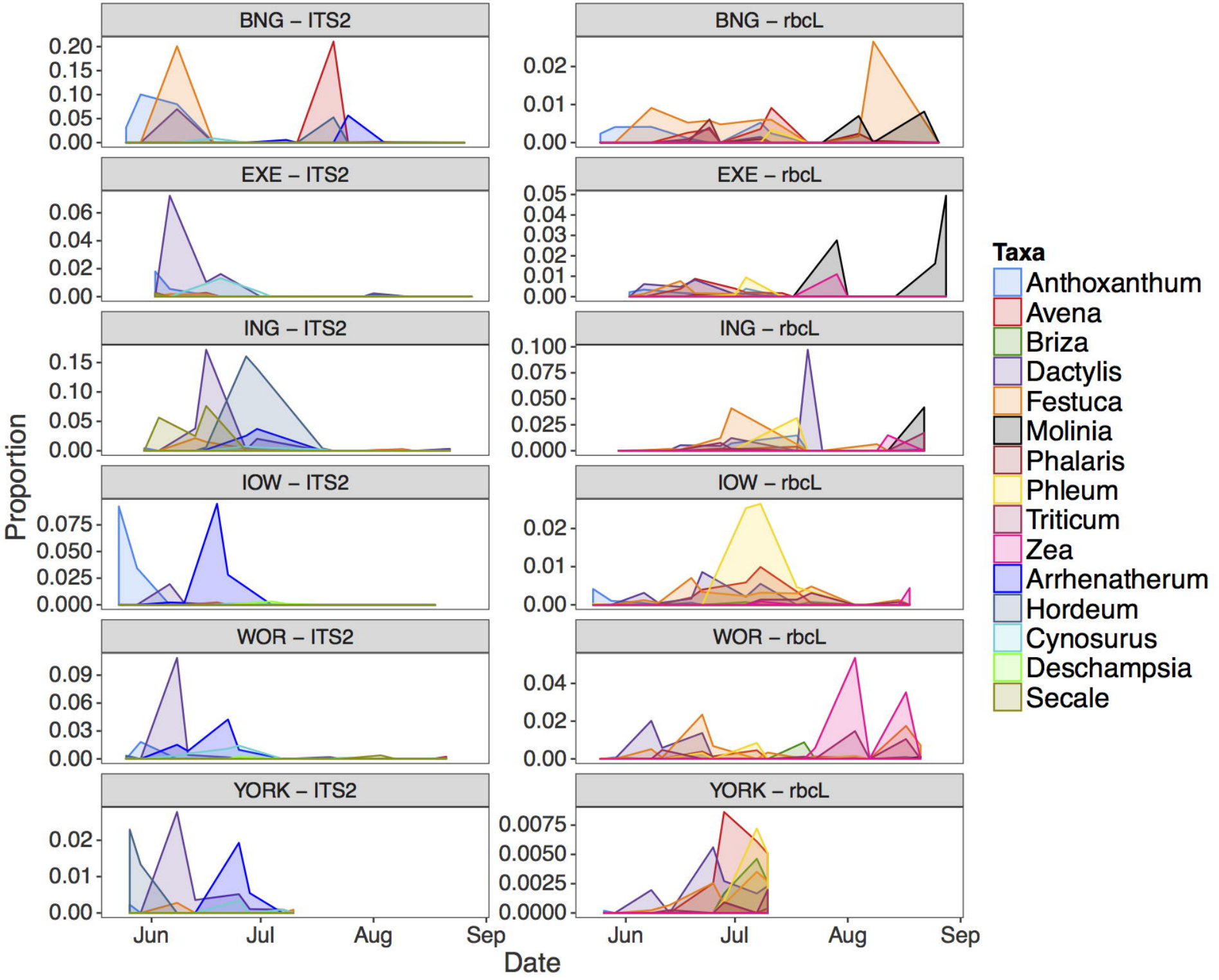
423

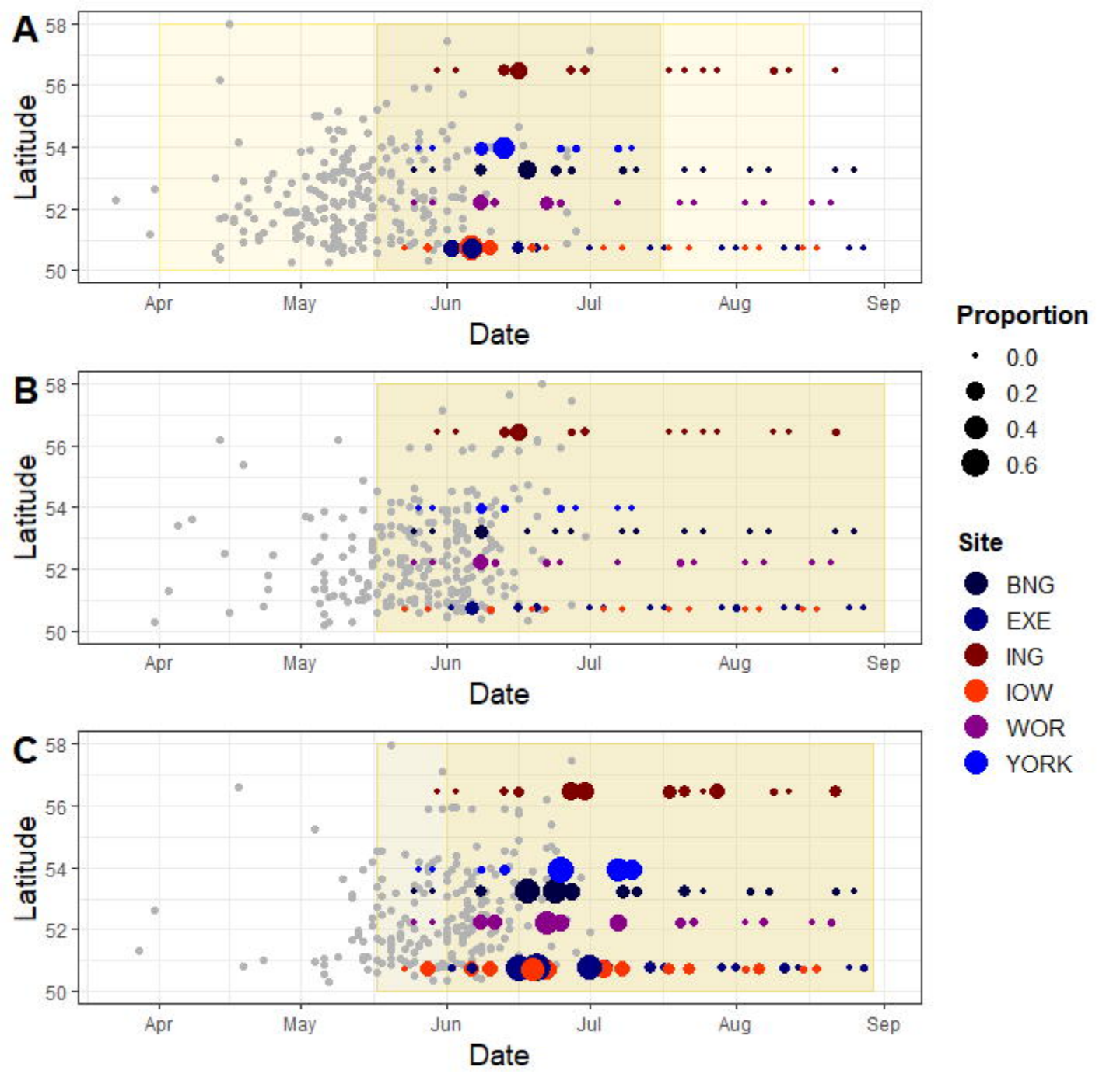
424 **Data and materials availability:** All sequence data (including metadata) are available at the
425 Sequence Read Archive (SRA) using the project accession number SUB4136142. Archived
426 sequence data was used to generate Fig 1 to 3 (including S2-S4 and S6-S7 Figs). First
427 flowering data used in Fig 3 was obtained from Nature's Calendar, Woodland Trust and is

428 available upon request. The sequence analysis pipeline is available at
429 https://github.com/colford/nbgw-plant-illumina-pipeline.
430
431 **Figure Legends**
432
433 **Fig 1. Abundance of the most common airborne grass pollen taxa throughout the grass allergy**
434 **season.** The five most abundant grasses (expressed as proportion of total reads), depicted
435 alongside the total proportion of reads assigned to family Poaceae. Markers used to identify
436 grass pollen are stated in the top panel label. Due to errors in sampling equipment, only 4
437 weeks of samples were collected at the York sampling site. Sampling sites are indicated in the
438 right panel label abbreviated as follows: BNG = Bangor; EXE = Exeter; ING = Invergowrie; IOW
439 = Isle of Wight; WOR = Worcester; YORK = York. A map of sampling locations can be found in
440 S1 Fig.
441
442 **Fig 2. Abundance of airborne grass pollen taxa throughout the grass allergy season.**
443 Abundance of rare grasses (expressed as proportion of total reads). Sampling sites are
444 indicated in the top panel, followed by the marker used to identify grass pollen. Due to errors
445 in sampling equipment, only 4 weeks of samples were collected at the York sampling site.
446 Note that the y axes differ between panels. Refer to Fig 1 for site name abbreviations.
447
448 **Fig 3. Airborne grass pollen observed 3-4 weeks after first flowering dates.** Comparison of
449 genus incidence in metabarcoding data with records of first flowering dates in 2016 from the
450 citizen science project Nature's Calendar (www.naturescalendar.org.uk) for (A) *Alopecurus*
451 *pratensis*, (B) *Dactylis glomerata* and (C) *Holcus lanatus*. Each grey point represents the

452 earliest time of flower heading as observed by a participant in the project. Coloured points
453 represent metabarcoding samples, with the size of the point representing the proportion of
454 total reads assigned to the relevant genus. Yellow shaded areas represent the expected
455 flowering period as described in [37], with darker shades showing the 'main' flowering
456 period.
457


ITS2
rbcL
BNG
EXE
ING
IOW
WOR
YORK
Proportion
1.00
0.75
0.50
0.25
0.00
Jun
Jul
Aug
Sep
Date
Taxa
Festuca.Lolium
Holcus
Alopecurus
Poa
Lolium
Total Poaceae


BNG – ITS2
BNG – rbcL
EXE – ITS2
EXE – rbcL
ING – ITS2
ING – rbcL
IOW – ITS2
IOW – rbcL
WOR – ITS2
WOR – rbcL
YORK – ITS2
YORK – rbcL
Proportion
Date
Jun
Jul
Aug
Sep
Taxa
Anthoxanthum
Avena
Briza
Dactylis
Festuca
Molinia
Phalaris
Phleum
Triticum
Zea
Arrhenatherum
Hordeum
Cynosurus
Deschampsia
Secale


A
B
C
Latitude
58
56
54
52
50
Apr
May
Jun
Jul
Aug
Sep
Date
Proportion
0.0
0.2
0.4
0.6
Site
BNG
EXE
ING
IOW
WOR
YORK