Semi-quantitative characterisation of mixed pollen

samples using MinION sequencing and Reverse

Metagenomics (RevMet)

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Abstract

1. The ability to identify and quantify the constituent plant species that make up a mixed-

species sample of pollen has important applications in ecology, conservation, and

agriculture. Recently, metabarcoding protocols have been developed for pollen that can

identify constituent plant species, but there are strong reasons to doubt that metabarcoding

can accurately quantify their relative abundances. A PCR-free, shotgun metagenomics

approach has greater potential for accurately quantifying species relative abundances, but

applying metagenomics to eukaryotes is challenging due to low numbers of reference

genomes.

2. We have developed a pipeline, RevMet (Reverse Metagenomics), that allows reliable and

semi-quantitative characterization of the species composition of mixed-species eukaryote

samples, such as bee-collected pollen, without requiring reference genomes. Instead,

reference species are represented only by 'genome skims': low-cost, low-coverage, short-

read sequence datasets. The skims are mapped to individual long reads sequenced from

mixed-species samples using the MinION, a portable nanopore sequencing device, and

each long read is uniquely assigned to a plant species.

3. We genome-skimmed 49 wild UK plant species, validated our pipeline with mock DNA

mixtures of known composition, and then applied RevMet to pollen loads collected from wild

bees. We demonstrate that RevMet can identify plant species present in mixed-species

samples at proportions ≥1%, with few false positives and false negatives, and reliably

differentiate species represented by high versus low amounts of DNA in a sample.

4. The RevMet pipeline could readily be adapted to generate semi-quantitative datasets for a

wide range of mixed eukaryote samples, which could include characterising diets,

quantifying allergenic pollen from air samples, quantifying soil fauna, and identifying the

compositions of algal and diatom communities. Our per-sample costs were £90 per genome

skim and £60 per pollen sample, and new versions of sequencers available now will further

reduce these costs.

Introduction

Pollination is a key ecosystem service; almost 90% of all flowering plant species, including

75% of food crops (mainly fruits, nuts, and vegetables), rely on animal pollination (Ollerton,

Winfree, & Tarrant, 2011; Klein *et al.,* 2007). The benefits of pollinators, and pollinator-

dependent plants, also include the production of medicines, biofuels, fibres, and construction

materials (Potts *et al.,* 2016). There is growing concern over the decline of wild and

domesticated pollinators and the resulting decrease in pollination services and crop

production (Potts *et al.,* 2010; Burkle, Marlin, & Knight, 2013). These declines are thought to

be caused by multiple threats acting together, including habitat loss, climate change, and the

spread of diseases (Vanbergen *et al.,* 2013).

To mitigate drivers of pollinator decline, the Intergovernmental Science - Policy Platform for

Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) has suggested three complementary

strategies: (1) ecological intensification, which involves boosting agricultural production by

increasing the provision of supporting ecological processes such as biotic pest regulation,

nutrient cycling, and pollination (Bommarco, Kleijn, & Potts, 2013; Tittonell, 2014); (2)

strengthening existing diversified farming systems, including gardens and agroforestry, for

the generation of ecosystem functions; and (3) investment in ecological infrastructure, to

protect, restore, and connect natural and semi-natural habitats across agricultural

landscapes, so that pollinator species can more easily disperse and find nesting and floral

resources (IPBES 2016).

However, knowledge gaps limit the effectiveness of these strategies (Wood, Holland, &

Goulson*, 2015; Dicks *et al.,* 2013). For instance, it is still not clear which plant species are the most valuable food resources and how plant species vary in value across pollinator species, over time, and in different environmental conditions. It is also not well understood whether the addition of floral resources might draw pollinators away from pollinator-dependent crop plants (Morandin & Kremen, 2013), or whether floral enhancement will alter levels of plant-target specialism, at the levels of insect species and of individual insects, resulting in changes in pollination efficiency (Lucas *et al.*, 2018; Morales & Traveset, 2008).

Therefore, a crucial technical challenge for understanding plant-pollinator interactions is a method to identify *and* quantify the species of pollen that are consumed by pollinators. Identifying and quantifying pollen has traditionally been carried out by using light microscopy to distinguish plant species by grain morphology, a labour-intensive technique that requires expert knowledge and lacks discriminatory power at lower taxonomic levels (Long & Krupke, 2016; Khansari *et al.*, 2012). In contrast, high-throughput DNA sequencing now allows pollen identification without expert knowledge of pollen morphology and taxonomy.

The currently dominant sequence-based method is metabarcoding, which involves amplifying taxonomically informative marker genes from mixed samples via polymerase chain reaction (PCR) (Ji *et al.*, 2013). The resulting amplification products, known as amplicons, are sequenced, and the reads are assigned to taxonomies by matching against barcode databases, such as the Barcode of Life Data System (Ratnasingham & Hebert, 2007). Notably for plants, there is no single barcode gene that matches the resolving power and universality of 16S rRNA for prokaryotes and Cytochrome Oxidase (CO1) for animals (Hollingsworth, Li, Van Der Bank, & Twyford, 2016). Instead, plant-related barcoding studies rely on a combination of marker genes, which include plastid regions *rbcL* and *matK* and the internal transcribed spacer (ITS) regions of nuclear ribosomal DNA (Li *et al.,* 2015; Hollingsworth *et al.,* 2016). Metabarcoding of mixed-species pollen samples can reveal the presence and absence of constituent plant species (or genera), but there are strong reasons

to doubt that metabarcoding can accurately quantify their relative abundances, due to PCR

amplification biases and varying copy numbers of barcode loci (Keller *et al.,* 2015;

Richardson *et al.,* 2015; Sickel *et al.,* 2015; Bell *et al.,* 2017).

In contrast to the targeted sequencing approach of metabarcoding, 'shotgun metagenomics'

involves randomly sequencing short stretches of genomic DNA from mixed samples. In

standard metagenomics, these short reads ('queries') are mapped to either assembled

genomes or to collections of barcode genes ('references'), which creates a requirement for

large numbers of reference genomes (Sharpton, 2014) or barcodes, with the latter being

very inefficient. Species identification is obtained by first calculating a similarity metric

between each short read and each reference sequence (e.g. % identity) and then using an

algorithm to assign each short read to the most likely reference sequence (Quince, Walker,

Simpson, Loman, & Segata, 2017). The potential key advantages of shotgun metagenomics

are that it can avoid the PCR-induced biases seen with metabarcoding, especially if PCR-

free library preparation protocols are used (see Nayfach & Pollard, 2016; Jones *et al.,* 2015)

and that by sampling across the whole genome, variation in the copy numbers of a few loci

is rendered less important. However, the requirement for reference genomes means that

most shotgun metagenomics studies focus on prokaryotic organisms, since large numbers

of prokaryote reference genomes are available. In contrast, eukaryotes are not well

represented in sequence databases and as a result have mostly been neglected in

metagenomic studies (Escobar-Zepeda, De León, & Sanchez-Flores, 2015). The low

numbers of reference genomes for eukaryotic species is because they are more expensive

to sequence and assemble (Gilbert & Dupont, 2011).

Here we demonstrate a metagenomic pipeline for eukaryotes that avoids the need to

assemble reference genomes. Instead, each reference species is represented by a 'genome

skim,' which is a low-cost, low-coverage, shotgun dataset, i.e. simply a set of short reads.

These sets of short reads are used to identify individual *long reads* from pollen that have

been generated by sequencing mixed-species pollen loads with the Oxford Nanopore

Technologies' (ONT) MinION, a nanopore sequencing device (for a review of MinION

applications and performance, see Leggett & Clark, 2017). Here, we generate reference

genome skims for 49 wild UK plant species, and we use them to identify and quantify plant

species in two kinds of query samples: mock, mixed-plant-species DNA mixtures of known

composition and mixed-species pollen samples collected from wild bees. Since the long

reads in each query sample are individually identified, we show that the frequency of long

reads assigned to a plant species is a reasonably accurate estimate of that species' biomass

frequency in a mixed-species sample. We call this pipeline Reverse Metagenomics, or

RevMet, because we map reference sequences to query sequences, which is the reverse of

the normal metagenomic protocol.

Methods

Sampling of bees and plant tissue

Sample collection took place in the Pensthorpe Natural Park area (52°49'23''N, 0°53'14''E) of

Norfolk, UK, during June and July 2016. Leaf samples were collected from all plant species

with open flowers, including grasses and trees, within a 100 m radius of the collection site (n

= 49 species). Leaf tissue was preserved on dry ice in the field followed by storage at -80

°C. Foraging wild bees (n = 48: 9 *Apis mellifera*, 27 *Bombus terrestris/lucorum complex*, 12

Bombus lapidarius) were collected with hand nets or into falcon tubes directly from flowers

and euthanized in falcon tubes containing ethanol-soaked tissue paper. Pollen loads were

scraped from bee corbiculae using a mounted needle and stored in absolute ethanol. The

plant species on which each bee was foraging when collected was recorded.

Leaf tissue DNA extraction, library preparation, and Illumina sequencing

Leaf tissue from each of the 49 plant species was disrupted by bead-beating using a 4-mm

stainless steel bead with a Qiagen TissueLyser II running at 22.5 Hz for 4 min, rotating the

adapter sets after 2 min. DNA was extracted using the DNeasy Plant Kit (Qiagen, Hilden,

Germany) following manufacturer's instructions. DNA concentrations were measured on a

Qubit 2.0 fluorometer (ThermoFisher, Waltham, USA) using the dsDNA HS assay kit, and

fragment size distribution was checked with a Genomic DNA Analysis ScreenTape on the

TapeStation 2200 (Agilent, Santa Clara, USA).

The Earlham Institute (Norwich, UK) applied a modified version of Illumina's Nextera

protocol, known as Low Input Transposase Enabled (LITE) protocol (Beier *et al.,* 2017), to

generate a separate sequencing library for each leaf sample, targeting an average insert

size of 500 bp. The LITE libraries were then pooled based on estimated genome sizes

(Supplementary Table S1), obtained from the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew Plant DNA C-

values database (Bennett and Leitch, 2012), in order to achieve 0.5x coverage of each

species genome. The pooled libraries were sequenced on one lane of Illumina HiSeq 2500

in Rapid Run mode (250 bp PE).

Construction and sequencing of mock pollen samples

DNA from twelve of the 49 plant species were used to construct six mock communities.

Each mock was made using 200 ng DNA in total, with species added at different

proportions: 0.08% to 45.25% (Table 1). For each mock, technical-replicate pairs were

prepared using ONT's (Oxford, UK) Rapid Barcoding Sequencing Kit (SQK-RBK001),

following the RBK_9031_v2_revl_09Mar2017 version of the manufacturer's protocol. The 12

libraries (six mocks, duplicated) were sequenced on a single MinION R9.5 flow cell (FLO-

MIN107).

Bee-collected pollen DNA extraction, library preparation, and MinION sequencing

After removing storage ethanol from the 48 bee-collected pollen loads, the pollen was

disrupted with ca. five 1-mm stainless steel beads for 2 min at 22.5 Hz using a Qiagen

TissueLyser II, rotating the adapter sets after 1 min. The pollen samples were resuspended

in 600 µl CTAB extraction buffer (2% CTAB, 1.4 M NaCl, 20 mM EDTA, pH 8.0, 100 mM

Tris-HCl pH 8.0), 0.5 µl of β-Mercaptoethanol, 4 µl of proteinase K, and vortexed for 5 s.

Following a 1 hr incubation at 55 °C, the tubes were centrifuged for 6 min at 18,000 x g. The

≈500 µl of supernatant was extracted to a clean 1.5 ml tube before an equal volume of

chilled (2-8 °C) Phenol:Chloroform:Isoamyl Alcohol (25:24:1, v/v) was added to the lysate.

The samples were vortexed for 10 s (5 x 2 s bursts), centrifuged for 5 min at 14,000 x g, and

the upper aqueous phase (≈ 420 µl) was extracted by pipette and transferred into a clean

1.5 ml tube.

An equal volume of Agencourt AMPure XP beads was added to each sample, vortexed for

20 s (10 x 2 s bursts), and then incubated for 10 min at room temperature. By placing the

samples onto a magnetic tube rack for 5 min, the beads were separated from the solution,

and the cleared supernatant was removed by aspiration. The beads were washed twice

using the following protocol: 1 ml of 80% ethanol was added, incubated at room temperature

for 30 s, and then removed, followed by air drying for ≈ 3 min. The magnetic beads were

resuspended in 55 µl of EB (Elution Buffer: 10 mM Tris-HCl) and incubated at 37 °C for 10

min. The tubes were placed back onto the magnetic rack to bind the beads, and the eluted

DNA (≈ 50 µl) was transferred into fresh tubes. A 1 µl aliquot of 1-in-10 diluted Qiagen

RNase A was added to each DNA sample before being incubated for 30 min at 37 °C. The

concentration of the eluted DNA was assessed using the dsDNA HS assay on a Qubit 2.0

fluorometer. To check the DNA for degradation, fragment size distributions were checked

with a TapeStation 2200 using the Genomic DNA Analysis ScreenTape.

Finally, the extracted DNA was prepared and sequenced using the same protocol as used

for the DNA mocks above, except that only one library was prepared for each sample.

Twelve samples can be multiplexed using the Rapid Barcoding Sequencing Kit; we thus

required four flow cells. Due to continuous software upgrades by ONT, the specific software

versions of *MinKNOW* varied across runs and is recorded in the final sequence files (fast5

format), which are available from the EBI's European Nucleotide Archive (see Data

accessibility).

Illumina and MinION read pre-processing

Duplicate reads were removed from the 49 plant-reference Illumina datasets using *NextClip*

1.3.2 (Leggett, Clavijo, Clissold, Clark, & Caccamo, 2014), and then *cutadapt 1.10* (Martin,

2011) was used to trim Illumina adaptors and filter out reads shorter than 100 bp. The

resulting unmerged FASTQ files constitute our 49 *reference skims*.

The MinION datasets from the 12 mocks and the 48 pollen loads were basecalled and

demultiplexed with *albacore 2.1.10* (ONT). The resulting FASTQ files were converted to

FASTA format. We removed long reads deriving from plant organelles because they are

highly conserved across plant species and in pilot tests we observed that mapping to

organellar long reads resulted in a higher rate of incorrect assignments than mapping to

nuclear long reads (data not shown). NCBI Entrez

(https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/sites/batchentrez) was used to download 2,583 Land Plant

organelle genomes, including 1,852 chloroplast, 226 mitochondrial, and 505 plastid

genomes. Organelle reads were identified by aligning each of the MinION datasets to the

organellar genomes using *minimap2 2.7* (Li, 2018) and removed from the FASTA files. The

resulting 60 (= 12 + 48) organelle-filtered FASTA files constitute our mock and pollen *query*

datasets, and in the next step, we used the 49 plant reference skims to assign a taxonomy

to each long read in the mock and pollen query datasets (Fig. 1c).

Taxonomic assignment of mock-sample and bee-collected pollen MinION reads

We used *bwa mem 0.7.17* (Li, 2013) to map the Illumina reads from each of the 49

reference skims against every individual long read in each of the mock and bee-collected

pollen datasets. *SAMtools 1.7* (Li *et al.,* 2009) was used to remove unmapped reads and

secondary and supplementary alignments. After SAMtools indexing, the depth of mapping

coverage at each long-read position was calculated using the SAMtools *depth* function,

followed by the calculation of 'percent coverage' for each long read (using a custom python

script), defined as the fraction of nucleotide positions that were mapped to by one or more

reference-skim Illumina reads.

We assigned each long read to the plant species that mapped with the highest percentage

coverage, unless the highest percent coverage was <15%, in which case the long read's

identity was judged ambiguous and left unassigned. Additionally, for clarity of presentation,

we implemented a 1% minimum-abundance filter, removing plant species represented by

fewer than 1% of the total assigned long reads in each sample.

Reference-skim subsampling

To estimate a minimum recommended depth of coverage needed per reference skim, we

subsampled one of the genome skims, *Knautia arvensis*, which is a major constituent

species in mock mixes MM1 and MM2. We randomly subsampled this skim from its

maximum of 0.65x down to 0.05x, in steps of 0.05x using a custom script. For each

subsample, the whole pipeline was re-run along with the full reference skims of the other 48

plant species. The number of mock reads assigned to *Knautia arvensis*, and the number of

unassigned reads, at each level of coverage was recorded. This subsampling was repeated

three times (Supplementary Fig. S1).

Network construction

We constructed a pollinator-plant network diagram for the 48 wild-bee pollen samples, using

the *bipartite 2.11* package (Dormann, Frund, Bluthgen, & Gruber, 2009) for the *R* statistical

language (R Core Team, 2018). For presentational clarity and to avoid any pollen from

previous foraging trips, we only show plant species represented by more than 10% of the

assigned reads in each sample.

Results

A reference set of plant genome skims

Low genome-coverage, short-read, shotgun-sequencing datasets ('reference skims') were

successfully generated for all 49 plant species (Fig. 1a). After pre-processing, the mean

estimated coverage was 0.6x (0.1 to 1x, details in Supplementary Table S1).

Mock DNA mixes

The six mock communities, each with two technical replicates, were sequenced on a

MinION. These produced reads with mean length 1914 bp (longest 41,058 bp). After

demultiplexing, 88.8% of the reads could be assigned to one of the 12 mocks, with the

remaining reads left unclassified. Sequences originating from organellar genomes made up

between 5.1% (MM4.2) to 10.2% (MM3.2) of the reads in the mocks and were removed. The

remaining number of reads per mock ranged from 733 (MM2.1) to 2174 (MM4.1), mean

1347.

Taxonomic assignment of mock-sample MinION reads

The 49 reference skims were separately mapped to each long read in each of the 12 mocks,

and each long read was assigned to the plant species that mapped with the highest percent

coverage, or left unassigned if the highest coverage was <15%. In total, 65.5% of the mock

reads were assigned to a plant species, with 94.7% of those reads being assigned to a

species known to be present in that mock sample. Almost all (93.4%) of the 563 false-

positive read assignments were made to one species, *Ranunculus acris*, and all these

assignments occurred in the mock samples that contained the very closely related species

Ranunculus repens. We return to this in the Discussion. The few other false-positive

assignments all occurred at a rate of less than 1% of the assigned long reads in their mixes

and for presentational clarity are not shown in Fig. 2. The full results are in Table S2.

All of the plant species that had been added to the mock compositions at proportions ≥1%

were detected by our method in at least one of the two replicates, and in general, the

technical replicates showed a high level of repeatability (Fig. 2). In two of the mocks, there

was one species each (*Lotus corniculatus* in MM2 and *Digitalis purpurea* in MM3*)* that were

detected in only one of the two replicates. In these two replicates, *Lotus corniculatus* and

Digitalis purpurea were expected to be present at only 3.0% and 4.6%, respectively. Both of

these species were consistently underrepresented across our mock data sets.

Reference-skim subsampling

As expected, the larger the reference-skim dataset size for *Knautia arvensis*, the more reads

in the MM1 and MM2 mocks were assigned to this species and the fewer reads left

unassigned. Importantly, the rate of increase was decelerating (Supplementary Fig. S1);

over half of the MinION reads that were assigned to *Knautia arvensis* with a 0.65x genome

skim could also be assigned with just a 0.1x skim, even though all the other reference skims

in the mapping run were kept at their original sizes.

Taxonomic assignment of bee-collected pollen MinION reads

The 48 bee-collected pollen loads harvested from the corbiculae of three species, *Apis*

mellifera, *Bombus terrestris/lucorum* complex, and *Bombus lapidarius*, yielded DNA

quantities ranging from 191 to 3750 ng, and all successfully produced libraries,

demonstrating that pollen carried by individual bees can provide sufficient DNA for MinION

sequencing.

As with the 12 mocks, each of the reference skims was aligned to each long read in each of

the 48 pollen samples, the long reads were either assigned to the plant species achieving

the highest percent coverage or left unassigned, and any plant species assigned fewer than

1% of the long reads in each bee-collected pollen sample was filtered out (Supplementary

Table S3). In total, 49.7% of the long reads were assigned to one of the reference plant

species. In 38 of the 48 bees (79.2%), pollen from the plant species on which each bee was

captured was found to be present in that bee's pollen load (Supplementary Table S3).

Each of the 48 pollen loads was found to contain one or two major plant species (defined as

read frequency ≥10%) (Fig. 3a). All nine of the *Apis mellifera* pollen loads contained a single

major species, whereas 16 of 27 *Bombus terrestris/locorum complex* and 6 of 12 *Bombus*

lapidarius pollen loads were comprised of two major species (Fig. 3a). These differences in

mean number of major species were statistically significant (*Apis mellifera* versus *Bombus*

terrestris/locorum complex (Welch's t-test, t = -6.15, df = 26, p-value < 0.0001) and versus

Bombus lapidarius (t = -3.32, df = 11, p-value < 0.01)) (Fig. 3b). Another way of visualising

the wild-bee results is as a plant-pollinator network graph (Fig. 3c). Overall, 6 of the 49

reference plant species were identified as major components in the 48 pollen loads, and the

majority of bee-collected pollen samples were dominated by one plant species.

Discussion

Using light microscopy to identify plant species from pollen requires expert knowledge and is

costly when applied to many samples (Khansari *et al.,* 2012). There is a need for a quick

and low-cost method that can be scaled to large numbers of pollen samples. Metabarcoding

is the current leading candidate, but there are concerns over its discriminatory power at

lower taxonomic levels, and there is good reason to believe that metabarcoding does not

return reliable quantitative data (Keller *et al.,* 2015; Richardson *et al.,* 2015; Sickel *et al.,*

2015; Bell *et al.,* 2017). A PCR-free shotgun-metagenomics approach has greater potential

for providing reliable quantitative analysis with high power for resolving species. However,

applying shotgun metagenomics to eukaryotes is challenging due to the lack of reference

genomes (Gilbert & Dupont, 2011). We have developed a metagenomics method that avoids

the need for reference genomes. Instead, each reference species is represented by just a

low-cost genome skim, and we use a set of such skims to identify individual long reads from

pollen samples, produced by the MinION sequencer.

We evaluated our RevMet pipeline with mock DNA mixtures of known composition and then

applied the pipeline to pollen collected from wild bees. Our main findings are:

1) RevMet can identify plant species present in mixed-species samples at proportions

≥1%, with few false positives and false negatives, and can reliably differentiate

species represented by high versus low amounts of DNA in a sample (Fig. 2,

Supplementary Table S2).

2) Genome skims with sequence coverage as low as 0.05x can be used for detecting species presence and for estimating relative abundance in terms of DNA mass. Increasing skim coverage increases detection power, at a decelerating rate (Supplementary Fig. S1).

3) Individual pollen loads collected from wild *Apis* and *Bombus* bees yield enough DNA for MinION sequencing (Supplementary Table S3) and generate plausible plant-pollinator networks, as evidenced by the fact that (a) 56.3% of the plant species on which the bees were collected were also the dominant constituent of the corresponding pollen sample (and 79% of plant species on which the bees were collected were detected in the corresponding pollen sample) (Supplementary Table S3), and (b) pollen species richnesses and compositions were more similar within bee species than across bee species (Fig. 3).

4) Our per-plant-species cost of a reference skim was £90, and our per-pollen-sample cost was £61, including DNA extraction, library preparation, and sequencing. Sequencing costs will likely drop further, given the new Illumina NovaSeq and new MinION 'Flongle'.

Semi-quantitative species compositions. – We were able to assign roughly 65% of the mock-mix MinION reads and just under 50% of the pollen-load MinION reads to our reference plant species. Importantly, the frequencies of MinION reads that were assigned to each reference plant species were reliably *'semi-quantitative,'* that is, able to differentiate low- and high-frequency plant species (Fig. 2). Within low- and high-abundance categories, accuracy was lower. For example, in mock sample MM1, *Knautia arvensis*, *Galium verum*, and *Crepis capillaris* were the three high-abundance species (each representing 30.3% of total input DNA mass each), and *Papaver somniferum*, *Anagallis arvensis*, and *Sambucus nigra* were the three low-abundance species (each representing 3.0% of total input DNA mass each). The RevMet pipeline estimated the three high-abundance frequencies at means of 34.0%,

14.7%, and 44.0%, and the three low-abundance species at 1.4%, 3.0%, and 3.0%,

respectively (Supplementary Table S2).

There are at least three reasons for the remaining quantitative error. First, although we

targeted 0.5x per reference skim, coverage still varied across species (Table S1), resulting

in different powers of discrimination, as shown by the experiment with subsamples of

Knautia arvensis (Supplementary Fig. S1). Fortunately, we found that even very low-depth

skims of 0.05x are useful for species detection and are probably still useful for differentiating

rare from abundant species (albeit with more error) (Supplementary Fig. S1). Genome sizes

are also estimated with error, so it is also helpful that the subsampling experiment suggests

that detection power asymptotes with higher sequencing depth (Supplementary Fig. S1),

and as sequencing costs fall further, we expect that the most robust protocol will be to target

1x coverage.

Second, very closely related species can generate false positives. Our reference-skim

database included six congener pairs, and we included two of the pairs (*Papaver* and

Ranunculus) in the mock mixes. In the case of *Papaver*, there were no *P. rhoeas* false-

positives greater than the 1% minimum-abundance filter in the mocks that contained *P.*

somniferum (MM1 and MM6) (Supplementary Table S2). In contrast, *Ranunculus acris* was

regularly incorrectly assigned to reads in mock mixes that contained the closely related

congener *Ranunculus repens*. In fact, almost all the false-positive assignments (93.4%)

were to *R. acris*. In retrospect, this result is expected because these two species are not

easily differentiated by pollen morphology (Forup & Memmott, 2005), floral morphology, or

even DNA barcodes (*rbcL* (99.1% similarity), *matK* (96.9%), *ITS2* (95.5%)). In other words,

the RevMet results are correctly telling us that the two *Ranunculus* species are very closely

related.

Third, MinION reads have relatively high error rates of roughly 5 to 10% depending on the

flow cell and kit used (Leggett & Clark, 2017). Although this is dropping over time, this error

rate unavoidably obscures differences between species (although not enough to confound

the two *Papaver* species). We note that one of the advantages of the RevMet approach is

that we use both sequence similarity and percent coverage as predictors of species

presence (Fig. 1C) . Using sequence similarity alone, we observed several instances of low

numbers of mapped reads being given false-positive assignments (data not shown). The

percent-coverage filter requires many reference-skim reads to independently identify a

species before an assignment is made.

Reference-skim cost. – The RevMet pipeline is relatively low cost. In our study, we

generated skims for 49 plant species, with genome sizes ranging from roughly 290 Mb

(*Epilobium hirsutum*) to just under 15 Gb (*Sambucus nigra*), targeting 0.5x coverage. All

skims were produced on a single lane of Illumina HiSeq 2500 (250 PE) at a mean coverage

of 0.57x. The average cost per skim in this study was just under £90, which includes the

DNA extraction, LITE library preparation, sequencing, and data QC. The per skim cost will

be lower in studies with smaller eukaryotic genomes and should be lower with Illumina's new

sequencer, the NovaSeq 6000. Genome assembly projects are likely to produce many such

datasets for free download in the future.

Long-read MinION cost. – We used ONT's first iteration of the Rapid Barcoding Kit (RBK-

001), which relies on transposase to randomly fragment DNA and simultaneously add

barcoded adapters. Longer read lengths have an increased likelihood of accurate species

assignment because they carry more sequence information. The two main ways to obtain

longer reads with transposase-based preparations are to: (1) increase the ratio of DNA to

transposase e.g. by increasing the input material or by heat killing a proportion of the

transposase (which also lowers sequencing yields); and (2) use higher molecular weight

input DNA. Since the release of RBK-001, ONT's chemistry has evolved, and their Rapid-

based kits have seen greater sequencing yields. However, the recommended input for the

latest iteration of the Rapid Barcoding Kit (RBK-004) is now higher, 400 ng of DNA per

sample. That said, we anticipate that input biomasses similar to those used in this study, 200

ng, will still be adequate. Also, even 400 ng is achievable, as 36 of 48 of our wild-bee pollen

samples samples yielded >400 ng (Supplementary Table S3). ONT have also recently

released the Flongle (~$90), which is a disposable nanopore that allows prolonged reuse of

the MinION. Our results suggest that ONT's target yield of 1 Gb per Flongle will be more

than enough for multiplexing twelve bee-collected pollen loads, reducing per-sample costs

from the £61 in this study to just under £16.

Application to pollen collected from wild bees. – The RevMet pipeline detected consistent

differences in plant species preference (Fig. 3C) and in foraging behavior between

honeybees *Apis mellifera* and the two bumblebees *Bombus terrestris/lucorum* and *B.*

lapidarius (Fig. 3AB). Importantly, because our data are semi-quantitative, we are able to

conclude that even the bumblebees showed fidelity to one plant species (Fig. 3C), a result

that would be less reliably concluded from metabarcoding data.

The RevMet pipeline can readily be applied to a wide range of research questions. Most

obviously, ReMet could be used to compare pollination networks across large-scale spatial

and biogeographical gradients (Pornon *et al.,* 2016) and quantify pollen-carrying capacities

of insects (Escaravage & Wagner, 2004). RevMet could potentially also be used to quantify

the degree to which co-attraction of pollinators leads not to benefits of increased pollinator

numbers but to loss of pollination service via competition (Pornon *et al.,* 2016). Outside of

pollination ecology, there is potential for semi-quantitative assessments of many other

eukaryotic species mixtures, including herbivore diets (Bhattacharyya, Dawson, Hipperson,

& Ishtiaq, 2018; Kress, García-Robledo, Uriarte, & Erickson, 2015); plant-fungus interactions

(Schröter *et al.,* 2018); allergenic pollen species from air samples (Kraaijeveld *et al.,* 2015);

and algal and diatom communities (Keller *et al.,* 2015). Furthermore, due to the portability

and real-time nature of the MinION platform, the method could be optimised for analysis in

the field alongside sample collection.

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Authors' contributions

MDC, RML, DWY, LVD, and RGD conceived and designed the study. LVD, RGD, and CC

collected the samples. NP, DH, and LP performed the experiments. NP, RML, and DWY

analyzed the data. NP and DWY led the writing of the manuscript. All authors gave final

approval for publication.

Data accessibility

The Illumina and MinION datasets are available in the European Nucleotide Archive

(http://www.ebi.ac.uk/ena) under study accession PRJEB30946. RevMet scripts are

available from https://github.com/nedpeel/RevMet and a tutorial using an example dataset

can be found at https://revmet.readthedocs.io/en/latest/.

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Figure legends and table titles

Figure 1. RevMet pipeline overview. a) Low coverage, short-read, reference datasets were generated for 49 wild plant species. b) Bee-collected pollen loads were sequenced on a MinION, generating long read datasets. c) The 49 short-read reference datasets were separately mapped to the long-read pollen datasets, and each pollen read was assigned to the plant species that mapped with the highest percent coverage, or left unassigned if the highest coverage was <15%. d) Binned pollen reads were counted, noise was reduced by implementing a 1% minimum-abundance filter, and then the remaining bin counts were converted to percentages.

Figure 2. Expected vs observed mock mix compositions. Six mock plant DNA mixes, each with two technical replicates, were sequenced on a MinION and the RevMet method was applied. The first stacked bar of each triplet represents the expected proportions based on input DNA. The second and third bar of each triplet reflect the observed MinION read assignments resulting from this pipeline.

Figure 3. Bee-collected pollen compositions and plant-pollinator interactions. a) The number of individual pollen loads sequenced from three different species of bee. The proportion of pollen loads that contained a single major plant species are represented by green bars, while those with two major plant species are shown in blue. b) Mean number of plant species per pollen load for each of three different species of bee; ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$. c) Bipartite plant-pollinator network. The upper bars represent individual pollen loads from three different bee species, *Apis mellifera* (red), *Bombus terrestris/lucorum complex* (blue), and *Bombus lapidarius* (purple). The lower bars (grey) represent plant species. Link width indicates the MinION read proportion of each major plant species within each pollen load.

Table 1. DNA mock community compositions.

Figure S1. Numbers of mock-mix reads assigned to *Knautia arvensis*, and declines in the

number of unassigned reads, at different reference-skim coverage levels. The subsampling

was repeated three times.

Table S1. Estimated genome sizes, read counts and coverage for the genome skim

references.

Table S2. RevMet taxonomic assignments of mock-sample MinION reads.

Table S3. RevMet taxonomic assignments of bee-collected pollen MinION reads and pollen

sample information.

Figure 1. RevMet pipeline overview. a) Low coverage, short-read, reference datasets were
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a) No. of pollen loads sequenced for each bee species

b) Mean no. of plant species per pollen load

c) Plant-pollinator network

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Bipartite plant-pollinator network. The upper bars represent individual pollen loads from

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indicates the MinION read proportion of each major plant species within each pollen load.

774   Table 1. DNA mock community compositions.

	Knautia arvensis	Galium verum	Crepis capillaris	Papaver somniferum	Anagallis arvensis	Sambucus nigra	Bryonia dioica	Ranunculus repens	Lotus corniculatus	Digitalis purpurea	Leucanthemum vulgare	Stachys sylvatica
MM1.Ratios	100	100	100	10	10	10	1	1	1	0	0	0
MM2.Ratios	0	0	0	1	1	1	10	10	10	100	100	100
MM3.Ratios	0	0	0	0	0	0	10	100	0	0	0	0
MM4.Ratios	0	0	0	1	0	1000	0	0	100	0	0	100
MM5.Ratios	100	100	100	0	1	1	1	100	0	0	0	1
MM6.Ratios	1	1	1	100	100	100	100	0	0	0	0	1
MM1.DNA (ng)	60.1	60.1	60.1	6.0	6.0	6.0	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.0
MM2.DNA (ng)	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.6	0.6	0.6	6.0	6.0	6.0	60.1	60.1	60.1
MM3.DNA (ng)	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	9.1	90.5	0.0	9.1	90.5	0.9
MM4.DNA (ng)	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.0	166.5	0.0	0.0	16.7	0.0	0.0	16.7
MM5.DNA (ng)	49.5	49.5	49.5	0.0	0.5	0.5	0.5	49.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.5
MM6.DNA (ng)	0.5	0.5	0.5	49.5	49.5	49.5	49.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.5
MM1.Percentages	30.0%	30.0%	30.0%	3.0%	3.0%	3.0%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
MM2.Percentages	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	3.0%	3.0%	3.0%	30.0%	30.0%	30.0%
MM3.Percentages	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	4.5%	45.3%	0.0%	4.5%	45.3%	0.5%
MM4.Percentages	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	83.3%	0.0%	0.0%	8.3%	0.0%	0.0%	8.3%
MM5.Percentages	24.8%	24.8%	24.8%	0.0%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	24.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%
MM6.Percentages	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	24.8%	24.8%	24.8%	24.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%