Catching Ariadne by her thread: how a parasitoid exploits the herbivore’s marking trails to locate its host

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Accepted: January 13, 2000

Key words: parasitoid host location, marking pheromone, contact kairomone, directed search, Rhagoletis basiola, Halticoptera rosae

Abstract

Chemical signals that can be associated with the presence of a host insect often work as arrestants in close range host location by parasitoids, leading to longer searching times on patches where such signals are present. Our current view of parasitoid host location is that by prolonging the search times in patches, randomly searching parasitoids enhance their chance of detecting host insects. However, prolonged search times are not necessarily the only modification in parasitoid behaviour. In this study, we examine the exploitation of host-fruit marking pheromone of rose-hip flies, Rhagoletis basiola Osten-Sacken (Diptera: Tephritidae) by the specialized egg-larval parasitoid Halticoptera rosae Burks (Hymenoptera: Pteromalidae). We provide evidence that the instantaneous probability that a host egg will be located by a searching parasitoid wasp differs markedly between pheromone-marked and unmarked fruits. The arresting response to the marking pheromone, i.e., the prolonged time a wasp is willing to search on marked fruits, can only account for a small fraction of the difference in successful host location on marked and unmarked fruits. We further demonstrate that the time wasps require to locate the host egg is independent of the size of the rose-hip harbouring the fly egg, and thus is independent of the area the wasp potentially has to search. A comparison of our findings with results of different search algorithms for parasitoid wasps suggests that wasps use the fly’s pheromone marking trail as a guide way to the fly’s oviposition site and thus the host egg.

Reproduction in insect parasitoids depends on the successful search for hosts, usually immature insects, into or onto which female parasitoids lay eggs. The parasitoid offspring subsequently kills these insect hosts and utilizes them for larval development. Consequently, successful host location is a major component of a parasitoid’s fitness. Usually, parasitoid foraging for hosts takes place in complex and structured environments, where the patchy distribution of hosts makes successful host location a major obstacle. Consequently, cues revealing the presence of hosts can act as strong selective forces in parasitoids. Cues which reliably indicate the presence of an insect host may emanate from damaged plant tissue and frass of the host and may serve as kairomones for parasitoid host location (Weseloh, 1981; Vet & Dicke, 1992; Agelopoulos & Keller, 1994; Potting et al., 1995; Suiter et al., 1996; Rose et al., 1997). However, when hosts are concealed or inactive, such cues may not be readily available. Under such conditions, parasitoids may use an infochemical detour and spy on the chemical communication of adult stages of the host species (Prokopy & Webster, 1978; Vinson, 1984; Noldus, 1989; Roitberg & Lalonde, 1991; Wiskerke et al., 1993; Aldrich, 1995; Hoffmeister & Gienapp, 1999). Often, such cues are exploited during short
range host location and act as arrestants, increasing the time a parasitoid female invests into searching the patch (e.g., Waage, 1978; Galis & van Alphen, 1981; Dicke et al., 1985; van Alphen & Vet, 1986; Noldus et al., 1988). This increase in residence time on the kairomone containing patch usually stems from an inverse orthokinetic response (i.e., a decrease in walking speed or actual stopping) on the area contaminated with kairomone and a klinotaxic response (i.e., a directed turn back to the area contaminated with kairomone) when contact with the kairomone is lost (Waage, 1978). Thus, the currently held view is that arrestant chemicals do not provide directional information, but reveal the possible presence of a host in the near vicinity and thus lead to localized and prolonged search (Lewis et al., 1976; Vinson, 1976; Godfray, 1994). Congruent with this view, theory for parasitoid foraging behaviour predominantly assumes random search for hosts in parasitoid wasps (see Godfray, 1994, for a recent review). If arrestant chemicals facilitate directed search for hosts, this would perhaps change our view of host-parasitoid interactions and require that we test the importance of non-random search to host-parasitoid theory (see, e.g., Green, 1987 for the effect of non-random search on optimal patch leaving rules).

In tephritid fruit flies, host eggs are laid into the larval feeding site and few, if any, direct cues may be available that parasitoids can associate with the presence of a host egg or young larva. Here, parasitoids evidently exploit the communication of adult fruit flies, wherein many of the fruit infesting species use contact pheromones to mark host oviposition sites (Roitberg & Prokopy, 1987). Such host marking pheromones (HMP) facilitate oviposition decisions in tephritid fruit flies, because they allow females to discriminate between unexploited and egg-infested fruits and thus avoid potentially lethal competition among fly offspring (Roitberg & Mangel, 1997). Upon maturity, larvae drop from the fruits and burrow into the soil, where they pupate and hibernate (Roitberg & Mangel, 1997). Although four species of parasitoids are reported as attacking R. basiola (Hoffmeister & Vidal, 1994), the specialized egg-larval parasitoid Halticoptera rosae was the only parasitoid species found in more than eight years of collections at natural stands of rose bushes in the lower Fraser Valley and on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada. Rhagoletis basiola is the only host for this parasitoid recorded so far (Herting, 1982). The wasp, like its host, is univoltine and the adult occurs simultaneously with host fly adults in the field, where it searches rose-hips for fly eggs and exploits the fly-host’s marking pheromone for host location (Roitberg & Lalonde, 1991). Halticoptera rosae is a koinobiotic parasitoid and thus parasitoid larvae kill and consume the host only after the formation of the fly puparium in the soil.
In this study, we re-analyse data from an earlier experiment (Roitberg & Lalonde, 1991) to elucidate how search time affects the probability of detecting a host’s oviposition site on unmarked vs. marked fruits. Furthermore, we test for the effect of fruit size on the time a wasp needs to locate the host’s oviposition site. Taken together, the evidence suggests that we should modify the way that we view parasitoid response towards contact kairomones. There may be more instances where such kairomones not only increase the time a wasp is willing to search in a patch, but allow directed search for the host (e.g., Doutt, 1964; Vinson & Lewis, 1965; Klomp, 1981).

Methods

Experimental procedure. To obtain flies and parasitoids, rose-hips infested with fully grown fly larvae were collected the year prior to the experiment. Fly puparia were overwintered at 3–4 °C and then incubated at 21 or 25 °C for the two experiments. Upon emergence, Rhagoletis basiola flies and Halticoptera rosae were transferred to separate cages. The flies were fed yeast hydrolysate, sugar, and water (Prokopy & Boller, 1970); parasitoid wasps were fed honey and water (Peterson, 1964). To obtain fruits for experiments, rose-hips of natural hybrids of Rosa nutkana and Rosa pisocarpa were collected from a natural stand on Barnston Island in the lower Fraser Valley (British Columbia, Canada). All fruits used in experiments were kept in gauze bags in the field from late June onwards to prevent infestation by local populations of R. basiola.

In the first experiment, individual wasps were presented with either an infested but unmarked fruit (flies were allowed to oviposit but were removed from the fruit before they could start marking) (N = 14), or an infested + marked fruit (flies were allowed to oviposit and mark the fruit with HMP until they stopped marking and either left the fruit or started preening) (N = 21). A test fruit was held over a vial containing a single wasp until the wasp hopped onto the fruit, after which the wasp was removed. If the wasp did not remain on the fruit for at least 10 s that trial was excluded from further analysis. Wasps were only used once and for each wasp, it was noted whether or not she located the host egg, and how long she needed to locate the host or, if she did not detect the fly’s oviposition site, how long she searched before she would give up searching and leave the fruit. Note that times given in this paper reflect search times (i.e., times parasitoids performed other kinds of behaviour like resting or preening) were excluded from analysis, because information about the presence and location of hosts can only be obtained while searching) and differences between treatments can only be attributed to different success rates per unit search time. A problem with estimating a host’s probability to be found as a function of a wasp’s search time accrues from the fact that some wasps give up searching before they detect the host. This leads to censored data (the event of host detection did not occur) that should not be excluded from analysis, because they contain the information that at least to the point where the wasp left the fruit, the search time was insufficient to detect a host. Consequently, the effect of fly-HMP on success in wasp host location was analyzed using Cox regression (SPSS 6.0) which allows one to analyze time series data with censored observations, i.e., where the host was not detected, and to compute a host’s propensity to be detected as a function of wasp searching time.

In the second experiment, individual wasps were presented with infested and HMP-marked rose-hips of different sizes. Fruits (and thus fruit sizes) used in the experiments represented a random sample from the bagged fruits brought into the laboratory. The rose-hips were presented to rose-hip flies in a population cage and a female that started probing into a fruit was transferred to a vial, where it could finish oviposition and mark the rose-hip with pheromone. The rationale underlying this experiment was to demonstrate that search success of wasps is not due to chance alone. If H. rosae wasps would search randomly for host eggs, we would expect that average search time required to detect a host on a given fruit should increase with increasing fruit size. Again, wasps were only used once, and the search time a wasp needed to locate the host’s oviposition site was recorded along with the diameter of the fruit (i.e., the maximum width of the fruit, measured by using a hand-held micrometer, as a proxy for searchable fruit surface, which is the variable of interest in this experiment). All experiments were run in a climatized room at 20 ± 2 °C, 50 to 60% r.h., and L16:D8 light regime.

Algorithms to generate expected values for search times needed for host location with different search mechanisms. In order to elucidate whether H. rosae wasps locate hosts through (1) random search on rose-hips, or (2) exploiting the fly’s HMP by directly following the trail, or (3) systematic search, algo-
rithms were developed that generate expected values for the time parasitoids need for host location on fruits of various sizes for each of the three search mechanisms. In all models the searchable fruit surface is represented by a two-dimensional grid, where the three-dimensionality of fruits was restored in that wasps which leave the grid at one side would re-enter the grid from the opposite side. Wasps produce search paths of 1.177 mm width (i.e., the average width of a wasp’s head which we assume to represent the lateral area she can cover with her antennae while searching) and thus search an area of 1.385 mm² per time instant, i.e., one cell of the grid.

Randomly searching wasps in models (1) and (2) perform a constrained random walk, i.e., the wasp has the choice to walk straight or to turn 45° or 90° to either side into a neighbouring cell at each time instant, and she does this with equal probabilities. However, she cannot walk backwards in a given time instant and thus is constrained from a true random walk. Grids searched by model-(2) wasps are marked with a HMP trail. This trail is of identical length on fruits of all sizes. (Note, however, that whether the trail is of constant length, increases in proportion to fruit circumference or to fruit surface does not alter the general findings of the model.) It originates at the fly’s oviposition site and leads in four circles around the fruit. As soon as a wasp walks onto the HMP-trail, she will follow this trail to the fly’s oviposition site.

Search times needed to locate the host were modelled for six different fruit sizes (with surface areas of 554, 670.34, 797.76, 936.26, 1085.84, and 1246.5 mm²). For models (1) and (2), 5000 replicates of simulations were run, where the location of the host and the starting point of the wasp, i.e., the cell on the grid, were randomly chosen.

Model-(3) wasps search systematically for the host. Thus, every cell of the grid is visited only once, and the probability $P$ to detect the host in one time instant is

$$P = N^{-1},$$  \hfill (1)

where $N$ is the number of cells on the grid, i.e., an area of $N$ times 1.385 mm². Every increase in fruit size, accompanied by an increase in the area $\Delta A$ of fruit surface a wasp might search, leads to an increase of cells which a wasps has to search

$$\Delta N = \Delta A / 1.385 \hfill (2)$$

and a decrease in the probability to find the host per time instant

$$\Delta P = 1/\Delta N. \hfill (3)$$

Consequently, there is a linear relationship between the average time $\bar{T}$ a wasp needs to locate the host and the surface area $A$ of the fruit

$$\bar{T} = 0.5A / 1.385 \hfill (4)$$

(Figure 3).

Results

Analysis of the search-time dependent hazard to a host egg on infested + marked vs. infested but unmarked fruits (Figure 1) indicates that search time alone cannot account for the difference in success in host location on infested + marked vs. infested but unmarked fruits. The presence of the HMP-trails on egg-infested fruits has a significant positive effect on the probability per unit of parasitoid search time that a host will be detected (Cox regression: coefficient $\beta = 1.4941$, Test statistic $= 5.6107$, df = 1, $P = 0.0179$, $N = 33$). Thus, host eggs on marked fruits faced a much higher probability of detection per unit search time of wasps than on unmarked fruits.
Figure 2. Cumulative success in host location as a function of search time (filled circles and solid line) (from the second experiment) superimposed on the search times before *Halictoptera rosae* wasps gave up searching on egg-infested, but unmarked rose-hips (dash-dotted line) and on egg-infested and HMP-marked rose-hips (dashed line) (data from the first experiment).

(Figure 1). Parasitoid wasps located the host’s oviposition site on HMP-marked fruits in 95% (N = 21) and 100% (N = 45) of trials in the first and second experiment, respectively. If success in host location is solely a function of the search time wasps are willing to invest before they give up the search, we could predict the proportion of hosts that wasps could detect on infested but unmarked fruits from the relation between search time and success in host location on HMP-marked fruits (Figure 2). If the time that wasps search on marked fruits before giving up (i.e., median $\pm SE = 166 \pm 12.29$ s) is sufficient to detect 93% of hosts (the intersection of the graph for the proportion of hosts found with the giving up time on infested and marked fruits, represented by the dashed line in Figure 2), then the search time wasps invest on infested but unmarked fruits (median $\pm SE = 105 \pm 16.74$ s) should allow the detection of 85% of hosts (the intersection of the graph for the proportion of hosts found on infested and marked fruits with the giving up time on infested but unmarked fruits, represented by the dash-dotted line in Figure 2). However, wasps actually found only 29% of hosts on infested but unmarked fruits (in N = 4 of N = 14 trials) in our first experiment.

In the second experiment, we tested what effect fruit size, and thus the area a parasitoid has to search to locate the host, has on the time the parasitoid needs for host location. To be able to relate observed search times needed for host location to a search mechanism of parasitoids, we generated expected values for the search time until host location using algorithms for parasitoids engaging in (1) random search, (2) random search until contact with the host’s HMP after which the parasitoid exploits the HMP directly by following the trail towards its origin, i.e., the fly’s oviposition site, and (3) systematic search on fruits. When parasitoids engage in random search for hosts the search time needed for host location is expected to increase linearly with the surface of the fruit (Figure 3A, $y = 0.446A - 39.835; r^2 = 0.091, F_{1,34998} = 3503.8, P < 0.001$; with $A =$ fruit surface [mm$^2$]). Similarly, when parasitoids search systematically and avoid repeated search of portions of the fruit surface, the search time needed for host location is expected to increase linearly with the surface of the fruit, although the increase in search time needed per unit increase in fruit surface is less than with random search (i.e., the slope of the function is shallower, with $y = 0.130A$, Figure 3A). When parasitoids engage in random search only until they contact the fly’s marking trail and engage in directed search by following the marking trail to the fly’s oviposition site, an extremely shallow increase in the search time needed for host location is expected as a function of increasing fruit surface (i.e. the slope is more than an order of magnitude shallower than in systematic search: $y = 0.008A + 49.189; r^2 = 0.105, F_{1,34998} = 4084.2, P < 0.001$, Figure 3A).

When *H. rosae* wasps searched for hosts on rose-hips of different size, no relationship between fruit size and the search time needed for locating the fly’s oviposition site was found (filled circles in Figure 3B; regression of search time vs. fruit diameter $y = 0.02A + 40.198, r^2 = 0.007, F_{1,42} = 0.281$, $P = 0.599$, one extreme value, $t > 300$ s, excluded from the analysis; however including this data point does not alter the insignificant pattern, $y = 0.004A + 60.86, r^2 < 0.001, F_{1,42} = 0.005$, $P = 0.945$).

Discussion

Chemical substances exploited for close range host location by parasitoid wasps are often contact kairomones that usually work as arrestants (van Alphen & V et, 1986). Such substances often elicit behavioural changes such as reduction in walking speed or an increase in the rate of turning (Waage, 1978; van Alphen & Vet, 1986) and thus reinforce
an intensified searching behaviour in areas where the kairomone is present rather than allowing a directed search for the host (Lewis et al., 1976; Vinson, 1976, but see Doutt, 1964; Vinson & Lewis, 1965 and Klomp, 1981 for exceptions). For the three parasitoid wasp species exploiting the HMP of their tephritid fruit fly hosts, prolonged search times have hitherto been reported (Prokopy & Webster, 1978; Roitberg & Lalonde, 1991; Hoffmeister & Gienapp, 1999). In contrast, there have been no reports of direct exploitation of marks that would facilitate directed search for the host’s oviposition site. For one of these species, search directed by the marking trail would be impossible, because the host stage attacked (the first instar larvae which feeds in the centre of the fruit) cannot be found through the fly’s oviposition site (Hoffmeister & Gienapp, 1999). In the remaining two species the host is attacked in the egg stage, and therefore marking trails could at least potentially guide a wasp to the oviposition site. However, Prokopy & Webster (1978) argued that apple maggot flies (Rhagoletis pomonella) lay down the marking trail in apparently random fashion, repeatedly crossing itself, and it would therefore be impossible that the parasitoid Opius lectus would follow such trails to the fly’s oviposition puncture.

Yet, our finding that R. basiola hosts face a much higher probability of detection per unit of parasitoid search time on HMP-marked than on infested but un-marked fruits strongly suggests that H. rosae wasps directly exploit the HMP of R. basiola flies for location of host eggs on rose-hips, despite of the fact that marking trails sometimes cross. The longer time that wasps are willing to search on marked vs. un-marked fruits can only account for a small fraction of the difference in successful host location on infested + marked vs. infested but unmarked fruits. Consequently, the presence of HMP leads to non-random search for host eggs, and other potential sources of information like, e.g., odour emanating from the fly’s oviposition puncture can be ruled out as cue exploited for non-random search. In another line of argument, our experiments with fruits of different sizes provide strong inference for the direct exploitation of the HMP. Search algorithms for wasps that do not exploit the HMP trail as a guide way to the fly’s oviposition site produce a linearly increasing relationship between the time needed to locate the host and host fruit surface, irrespective of whether they represent random search or systematic search (Figure 3A). The only algorithm that explains the pattern found in our experiments suggests that the parasitoid directly exploits the HMP trail upon encounter and follows the trail to the fly’s oviposition site (see Methods for details). Such an algorithm produces an extremely shallow elevation for the regression between the search time until host location and fruit surface that is comparable to the elevation which
gives the best fit with the experimental data. However, to obtain search times that are more or less independent of the fruit size requires the marking trail to be spread across a sufficient portion of the fruit surface in such a way that wasps commencing to search on a fruit will encounter the trail after spending only a short time on small as well as large fruits. As *R. basiola* flies mark the fruit while circling it for about 2 minutes (\( \bar{t} \pm SE = 123.94 \pm 15.37 \) s, \( N = 63; \) Hoffmeister unpublished) this condition should be met. Sensitivity analyses with trail length that are independent of fruit size or increase proportional to the circumference of the fruit (as suggested by Averill & Prokopy, 1987a for *Rhagoletis pomonella*) revealed that the extremely shallow increase of searching time needed for host location with increasing fruit size holds for a broad range of trail lengths that includes the range of values found so far for tephritid flies (Averill & Prokopy, 1989): when assuming trail length to be independent of fruit size, the slope of regressions for the time needed for host location as function of the fruit surface varied between \( b = 0.028 \) for short trails (where the trail circles medium sized fruits with 936 mm\(^2\) surface twice) and \( b = 0.002 \) for long trails (where the trail circles medium sized fruits with 936 mm\(^2\) surface eight times), respectively; when assuming trail length to increase with fruit circumference, the slope of regressions for the time needed for host location as function of the fruit surface varied between \( b = 0.031 \) for short trails (where the trail circles fruits of all sizes twice) and \( b = 0.057 \) for long trails (where the trail circles fruits of all sizes eight times), respectively. For comparison, the slope for a randomly searching wasp that does not exploit the marking trail is one order of magnitude higher with \( b = 0.446 \) (Figure 3A).

The suggestion that *H. rosae* wasps directly exploit the host’s HMP furthermore is in line with our observations that wasps approaching the fly’s oviposition puncture display a lower rate of turning (i.e., decreased klinotaxis) than observed on unmarked fruits and seldom miss the oviposition puncture, which is inconsistent with random search. Yet, since fly marking trails are invisible on the fruit and flies cannot be forced to lay down marking trails in a manipulated fashion, the best evidence we can obtain to date is the indirect evidence for the direct exploitation of HMP trails by *H. rosae* wasps presented here. Marking trails can be made visible with copy toner powder, but this method cannot be used in combination with searching wasps, since wasps stop searching and engage in preening upon getting in contact with powdery substances. Moreover, substances that adhere to marking trails might interfere with recognition of the marking pheromone. Nevertheless, our experiments provide clear evidence for non-random search for hosts in *H. rosae*.

In conclusion, our results suggest that parasitoids may engage in non-random, rather than localized random search whenever a contact kairomone, or any other host-induced change in the quality of the substrate provides a perceivable trail leading to the host. Best candidates for an exploitation of chemical cues for directed host location are parasitoids of immobile host stages like eggs that are laid into small resources which are subsequently marked by the ovipositing female (e.g., herbivores infesting and marking fruits, flower heads, seeds, cones, or producing leaf-mines and marking the leaves, Prokopy, 1981; Quiring & McNeil, 1987; Averill & Prokopy, 1989; Straw, 1989; Quiring et al., 1998). Alternatively, vibrotaxis may lead to directed search for hosts (e.g., Sugimoto et al., 1988a; van Dijken & van Alphen, 1998) or optical cues of leaf-mines (e.g., Sugimoto et al., 1988a, b). Additionally, as Klomp (1981) has demonstrated, exposed feeding larvae may also be found through chemical trails they leave behind. A relevant issue here is to what extent search on patches becomes non-random as a consequence of exploitation of host associated cues. If, for example, parasitoids recognize small resource items like fruits as patches and detect host kairomones that facilitate directed search shortly after arrival on a patch, search within patches will be non-random to a large extent. This, in turn, should affect other aspects of parasitoid foraging behaviour like patch leaving decisions and might even affect our theoretical concepts which are based on an assumption of random search in parasitoids (see Godfray, 1994, for a recent review). For example, non-random search by individual parasitoids may have profound negative effects on local persistence and density of host populations.

**Acknowledgements**

This research was supported by a DFG research grant to TSH and an NSERC operating grant to BDR. We are grateful for constructive criticism by Ron Prokopy and an anonymous reviewer on an earlier version of the manuscript.
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