How Far Can the Palm Weevil, *Rhynchophorus vulneratus* (Coleoptera: Curculionidae), Fly?

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Abstract

The palm weevil, *Rhynchophorus vulneratus* (Panzer) (Coleoptera: Curculionidae), is a pest of coconut palms, *Cocos nucifera* (Arecales: Arecaceae) (Wattanapongsiri 1966, Rugman-Jones et al. 2013). In August 2010, inspection of a damaged Canary Islands date palm, *Phoenix canariensis* Chabaud (Arecales: Arecaceae), by a professional arborist in Laguna Beach, Orange County, California, USA, resulted in the unexpected recovery of adult and larval weevils, a pest not previously associated with palms in California. The adult weevils were black with a red stripe on the dorsal surface of the thorax. These specimens were identified by the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) as *Rhynchophorus ferrugineus* (Olivier) (Coleoptera: Curculionidae), the red palm weevil (Hoddle 2010). This insect is a highly invasive and notoriously destructive palm pest and internal feeding by larvae kills palms (Murphy and Briscoe 1999, Falero 2006, Giblin-Davis et al. 2013). In non-native areas, the invasive color morph of *R. ferrugineus* is orange with black maculation on the thorax and dark striations on the elytra (see Rugman-Jones et al. 2013 for color plates of these weevils).

Work by Hallett et al (2004) with different weevil populations in western Java Indonesia resulted in the synonymization of *R. vulneratus* with *R. ferrugineus* because they were unable to detect significant morphological and molecular differences between these two presumptive species that they separated by color (i.e., black with a red stripe [the color morph detected in Laguna Beach] and orange with black markings [the invasive color morph]). Further, the two color morphs were capable of interbreeding and producing offspring, and male weevils produced the same aggregation pheromones (Hallett et al. 1993, 2004). Rugman-Jones et al. (2013) used DNA-based analyses to determine the identity and origin of the palm weevil population in Laguna Beach. These molecular-based analyses of weevils collected throughout the putative native and invaded ranges of *R. vulneratus* and *R. ferrugineus* concluded that two distinct weevil species existed, *R. vulneratus* and *R. ferrugineus*, they are separable molecularly and have distinct geographic distributions, and the species collected in Laguna Beach was *R. vulneratus* (Rugman-Jones et al. 2013).

The results of these molecular analyses supported previous work by Wattanapongsiri (1966) and confirmed that *R. vulneratus* has a native geographic range confined largely to southern Thailand–northern Malaysia on the Thai-Malay Peninsula, Singapore, and Indonesia, and in this native range, *R. vulneratus* has a range of color forms, including that which is typical of the invasive
R. ferrugineus color morph (Rugman-Jones et al. 2013). Rhynchophorus ferrugineus has a more northern native distribution including the Philippines, northern Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, and India, and it is this species that has demonstrated high invasion capabilities (Rugman-Jones et al. 2013). The only find of R. vulnérat-us outside of its native range was in Laguna Beach, and the closest molecular match to California’s population was Bali, Indonesia (Rugman-Jones et al. 2013).

Rugman-Jones et al. (2013) concluded that Hallett et al. (2004) had been working in west Java with different color morphs of the same species, R. vulnerat-us, not R. ferrugineus, and reinstatement of R. vulnérat-us as a legitimate species is recommended. Despite findings by Rugman-Jones et al. (2013), USDA-APHIS considers R. vulnérat-us a synonym of R. ferrugineus until there is a combined data set of morphological and DNA information, as well as discrete species diagnoses, to resolve remaining taxonomic uncertainty (Eileen Smith USDA-APHIS, pers. comm. 31 Mar. 2015). Regardless of the USDA-APHIS interpretation Rugman-Jones et al. (2013), the weevil species discovered in Laguna Beach will be referred to here as R. vulnérat-us.

It is unknown how R. vulnérat-us arrived in Laguna Beach, a small relatively isolated city that lacks an airport, seaport, and interstate border crossings, features that are normally associated with invasion vulnerability. Hoddle (2015) speculated that R. vulnérat-us may have been deliberately introduced from Indonesia into Laguna Beach to supply local demand for palm weevil larvae used in the preparation of traditional Asian dishes.

The detection of R. vulnérat-us in California was considered a significant threat to ornamental (e.g., P. canariensis), agricultural (e.g., dates [P. dactylifera L.]), and native (e.g., Washingtonia filifera [Lindl.] H. Wend.) palms. In response to this pest detection, a delin-

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rates of spread (Leibhold and Tobin 2008). However, gathering the

data needed to parameterize long-distance dispersal kernels is diffi-

cult, and this, in part, affects the accuracy of models because it limits

the ability to reliably forecast the speed of long-distance range ex-

pansion (Clark et al. 2003). Flight mill studies have the potential
to detect and quantify long-distance flight by insects (Hoddle et al. 2015)
and these data provide not only basic information on flight dis-
tances, but have the potential to detect “super-diffuse” individuals
that cause heavy tail dispersal distributions (Reynolds and Rhodes
2009).

In an attempt to answer the question, “how far can R. vulnérat-us
fly?” and to determine whether some weevils exhibit “super-diffuse”
flight activity, flight parameters of field-captured weevils in North
Sumatra, Indonesia, were quantified using computerized flight mill
studies. The results of these studies are presented here.

Materials and Methods

Source and Preparation of R. vulnérat-us for Flight Mill Studies

Flight mill studies were conducted at a commercial oil palm planta-
tion in Bandar, Simalungun Regency, North Sumatra, Indonesia
over 16–23 February 2012. Rhynchophorus vulneratus is native to
this region, and the black and red stripe morph is almost exclusively
the only color form in this area. Adult R. vulnérat-us were collected
daily from decomposing trunks of oil palms or from 12 pheromone
bucket traps loaded with aggregation pheromone (Ferrolure TM
700 mg) and baited with pieces of meristematic tissue from coconut
or oil palms. Traps were deployed in three different sectors of the
plantation. Field-captured weevils of unknown age were placed in
large ventilated plastic containers, and provisioned with sugarcane
that was split longitudinally. This food was readily consumed by
R. vulnérat-us. Weevils were allowed to feed for a minimum of 24 h

example, tethered insects are forced to fly because of lack of tarsal contact with substrate and they don’t have to support their own weight (Hollick 1940, Weis-Fogh 1956, Wilson 1961). Further, experimental insects tethered to flight mills in a laboratory are not exposed to daily fluctuations in wind, humidity, or heat; abiotic factors that could either promote or suppress flight (Weissling and Giblin-Davis 1993, Weissling et al. 1994).

Flight distance data collected from flight mill studies can be used to parameterize dispersion equations (Hoddle et al. 2013). These types of data can be used to model rates of spread that could help in the development of management options such as eradication programs (Lockwood et al. 2013). Determining which model to use to describe dispersal depends on model assumptions, and in the case of invasive species, rates of spread may be influenced by relatively few individuals whose travel distances are greater than those predicted by a normal distribution (Lockwood et al. 2013).

Leptokurtic dispersal, for example, is described by a dispersal kernel, the portion of an equation that describes the distribution of dispersal distances, which when leptokurtic, is characterized by having “fat tails.” Heavy or fat tails contain more long distance dispersal events in the tail of the distribution than expected when compared with a normal distribution (Lockwood et al. 2013). Fat tailed distributions with more individuals than expected dispersing over long distances may typify the spread of some invasive species (Kot et al. 1996, Leibhold and Tobin 2008). This behavior can result in the establishment of isolated populations in advance of the invasion front that expand and merge, which subsequently increases rates of spread (Leibhold and Tobin 2008). However, gathering the data needed to parameterize long-distance dispersal kernels is difficult, and this, in part, affects the accuracy of models because it limits the ability to reliably forecast the speed of long-distance range expansion (Clark et al. 2003). Flight mill studies have the potential to detect and quantify long-distance flight by insects (Hoddle et al. 2015) and these data provide not only basic information on flight distances, but have the potential to detect “super-diffuse” individuals that cause heavy tail dispersal distributions (Reynolds and Rhodes 2009).

In an attempt to answer the question, “how far can R. vulnérat-us fly?” and to determine whether some weevils exhibit “super-diffuse” flight activity, flight parameters of field-captured weevils in North Sumatra, Indonesia, were quantified using computerized flight mill studies. The results of these studies are presented here.

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on sugarcane before being used for experiments. For each flight mill trial, eight weevils were used for flight experiments, and for each trial, weevils not attached to flight mills acted as controls and provided estimates of weight loss and naturally occurring mortality in the absence of food and flight activity over a 24-h period. The number of each sex flown for each trial and used for control treatments was dependent on availability, but priority was given to flying female weevils, as it was assumed this gender presented a greater dispersion risk than males. All females used in trials were assumed to be mated, as copulation was observed frequently in containers with sugarcane. Prior to tethering on the flight mill, individual experimental and control weevils were weighed on an electronic balance (A & D GF2000, Elk Grove, IL) and again post-flight to determine percentage weight change. The size of experimental and control weevils was determined by taking measurements of thorax width and length, and body length was measured from the center-anterior margin of the thorax to the center-posterior margin of the abdomen. Measurements (mm) were made with a stainless-steel electronic caliper (KTools 70186 Electronic Caliper, KTool Int., Wixom, MI).

Experimental Set Up and Brief Description of Flight Mills

Eight flight mills were set up on a table (3 m by 1.1 m by 0.75 m) inside a 12-m by 6-m outdoor shed with a roof constructed of corrugated iron, a concrete floor, and walls constructed of metal mesh screen to exclude insects. All experiments were conducted under ambient light, and naturally occurring temperatures and humidities. A hobo data logger (H8-007-02, Onset Corp., Bourne, MA) made hourly recordings of temperature and humidity for the duration of trials. Weevils were randomly assigned to flight mills that were evenly distributed on the table. Experimental weevils were set up on flight mills by 9:00 am each morning that experiments were run and trials lasted 24 h. Control weevils were maintained inside ventilated metal mesh containers (10 cm by 10 cm by 16 cm) without access to food or water. These containers were placed on shelves immediately adjacent the flight mills for the duration of each experiment. At the end of the 24-h study period, weevil survivorship by treatment and sex was recorded, weevils were removed from flight mills, and experimental and control weevils were weighed to assess weight loss in relation to treatment and sex.

Lopez et al. (2014) and Hoddle et al. (2015) provide details on procedures used to attach weevils to flight rotors, flight mill manufacture and calibration, data recording, and data file management. Briefly, weevils were attached dorsally by their thorax to an “L”-shaped metal plate (0.59-mm-diameter by 28-mm-long) using high-strength glue. Once the glue was dry, the metal plate with the weevil was connected to an arm of the flight mill rotor. Following attachment to the flight mill arm, tethered weevils were examined to make sure they could open their wings and freely move their legs. A modeling clay counterbalance of similar weight to the experimental weevil was determined by taking measurements of thorax width and length, and body length was measured from the center-anterior margin of the thorax to the center-posterior margin of the abdomen. Measurements (mm) were made with a stainless-steel electronic caliper (KTools 70186 Electronic Caliper, KTool Int., Wixom, MI).

Statistical Analyses

Prior to statistical analyses, data were checked for normality and, if necessary, research variables were subjected to Box–Cox procedures to determine power transformations to satisfy model assumptions. The following transformations (where y = research variable) were made (if not indicated, the variable was not transformed before analysis): weight loss: log(y); body length: y2; total distance flown: log(y); maximum distance flown: y0.5; total flying time: log(y); total number of flight bouts: log(y); time elapsed until first flight bout: log(y); flight bout length: log(y); maximum bout length: y0.5. Analysis of covariance was used to determine if significant differences in measurement variables (e.g., body size and flight measurements) existed for male and female weevils. Tukey tests at the 0.05 level of significance were conducted when significant effects were detected. All statistical analyses were performed using SAS 9.2 (SAS Institute Inc. 2008) and only significant results are presented.

Quantification of a Dispersal and Redistribution Kernel for R. vulneratus Using Flight Mill Data

Flight distance data for all 46 experimental weevils that flew >1 km (see Results) were divided across nine bins (distance interval = 14.11 km with the maximum flight distance recorded acting as the upper bin limit [100.1 km], and the lower bin limit being set at the minimum recorded flight distance [1.34 km]) according to Sturges’ formula, where the number of bins = 1 + log(n) (Sturges 1926). Binned flight data were used to generate a frequency histogram and the mid-point in each bin was identified. To these mid-points, five different dispersal curves (see Kot et al. 1996 for equations for model curves 1, 2, 3, 4, and 7) with finite integrals were examined for goodness of fit to binned data using sums of squares error (SSE) and coefficient of determination (R2 = SSE/total sums of squares). Curve equation parameters were determined using the function nls() in R (R Core Team 2013) and the best (determined by size of SSE) parameterized curve was determined by multiplying by bin width (2), number of weevils used (46), and a normalizing constant (1421.43) was fitted to binned flight data. This dispersal curve equation was parameterized and normalized to provide an area under the curve of 1 when reflected about the origin, which generated the redistribution kernel for the distances flown by experimental weevils (Kot et al. 1996). The fitted model was tested for kurtosis using the equation:

\[
\text{Excess Kurtosis} = \frac{\int x^4 f(x) dx}{\left(\int x^2 f(x) dx\right)^2} - 3
\]

Leptokurtosis is detected if k > 0; k = 0 and k < 0 indicate mesokurtosis and platykurtosis, respectively.

Results

In total, 63 tethered (44 females and 19 males) and 27 control (15 females and 12 males) R. vulneratus were used in flight mill studies. Of the weevils tethered to flight mills, 9 females (20% of tethered females) and 8 males (42% of tethered males) failed to fly >1 km and were therefore considered non-fliers (i.e., 27% [n = 17] of experimental weevils) and were excluded from analyses. Consequently, 46 weevils (35 females and 11 males [i.e., 73% of tethered weevils])
flew >1 km in 24 h and were classified as flyers and used for statistical analyses of measured flight variables (Table 1).

A significant difference in pre-trial weevil weights was detected; male weevils that flew >1 km were, on average, significantly heavier than control females (F = 4.51, df = 1, P = 0.03; Table 1). Average weight lost measured post-trial was significant with control females weighing less than other experimental weevils (F = 4.92, df = 1, P < 0.03; Table 1). Average percentage weight loss was significantly different (F = 5.10, df = 1, P < 0.02) and greatest for female weevils that flew, which, on average, lost ~17% of their body weight (Table 1). No significant differences in average body size measurements (i.e., thorax width and length and body length) were observed for experimental weevils (Table 1).

The total average distance flown by female and male weevils was significantly different (F = 7.58, df = 1, P = 0.009), with female *R. vulneratus* flying approximately twice as far as male weevils in 24 h (Table 1). The average maximum distance flown in a single flight bout was significantly longer for females (F = 9.72, df = 1, P = 0.003), being approximately twice that recorded for males (Table 1). Female weevils exhibited significantly longer average flight bouts (F = 5.40, df = 1, P = 0.03), and the average maximum flight bout length was significantly longer for females (F = 11.51, df = 1, P = 0.002), being ~49% greater than males (Table 1).

Of females flying >1 km, approximately 43% flew between 1 and 30 km (Fig. 1A). A small proportion of females (~16%) exhibited high flight capacity, flying 50–80 km (Fig. 1A), and one individual (2%) exhibited "super-dispersive" flight by flying >100 km in 24 h (Fig. 1A). Of the male weevils that flew >1 km, 53% (n = 10) flew less than 30 km, and one male (5%) flew greater than 30 km (Fig. 1A). Weevil flight activity (data for both sexes combined) was observed consistently over a 24-h period. The highest percentage of weevils flying was observed between 9:00 and 11:00 am and cumulative total distance flown was also greatest over this period, before tapering off over 11:00 am to 11:00 pm (Fig. 1B). Flight activity (cumulative distance flown and percentage of weevils flying) increased steadily after 3:00 am until 11:00 am (Fig. 1B). Average flight bout time and distance flown per bout (data for both sexes combined) were highest between 9 and 11:00 am at 21 min and 2.63 km, respectively. For the remaining time, average flight bout times and distance flown per bout were reasonably constant, ranging between 5 and 15 min and 0.54 and 1.78 km, respectively (Fig. 1C).

### Dispersal and Redistribution Kernel for *R. vulneratus*

The best fitting of the five curves analyzed from *Kot et al. (1996)* was Curve 7:

\[ f(x) = e^{-bx} \]

where \( a = 3.17 \), \( b = 0.034 \), and \( x = \) midpoint of the distance bin (km) \( (R^2 = 0.79; \text{Fig. 2A}) \). This function was used to generate the corresponding redistribution kernel, described by a Laplace distribution:

\[ f(x) = \begin{cases} \frac{1}{2b} e^{-x/b} & x < 0 \\ \frac{1}{2b} e^{-x/b} & x \geq 0 \end{cases} \]

where \( b = 29.75 \), and \( x = \) distance flown (km) (Fig. 2B). The excess kurtosis measure was 3, indicating that the equation describing the curve that was produced is leptokurtic (Fig. 2B).

### Discussion

In an outdoor screen house lacking climate control, male and female *R. vulneratus* were capable of flying considerable distances on flight mills; 42 and 66% of male and female weevils, respectively, that exhibited >1 km of flight on flight mills, flew >10 km, and of these, 18% of females flew >50 km, and one female flew 100.1 km in a 24-h period. Flight distances exceeding 50 km were not observed for male weevils, but this may have been an artifact of the low number of males used for experiments. In contrast, 20% of females and 42% of males (i.e., 27% of experimental weevils) flew <1 km in
Fig. 1. Summary data for male and female Rhynchophorus vulneratus flown on flight mills for 24 h in an outdoor screen house. (A) Percentage of male and female *R. vulneratus* binned by total distance (km) flown. (B) Total cumulative distance (km) flown and percentage of weevils that flew binned by 2-h time intervals. (C) Average distance flown (km) per flight bout and average flight bout time (h:mins:sec) binned by 2-h time intervals.
24 h. These weevils were considered non-fliers, but likely capable of short-distance dispersal between palm trees. Hoddle et al. (2015) reported that ~30% of field-captured _R. ferrugineus_ tethered to flight mills failed to fly >1 km in 24 h, and Avalos et al. (2014) also reported a 30% failure rate for flight by _R. ferrugineus_ over a 12-h period.

*Rhynchophorus vulneratus* flight activity was greatest between 9 and 11:00 am in terms of cumulative distance flown, average flight bout times, average total distance flown per bout, and percentage of weevils flying. A similar result was reported for flight mills studies with _R. ferrugineus_ (Hoddle et al. 2015). This periodicity should be interpreted with some caution, as it may be an experimental artifact as weevil tethering in both studies was completed by 9:00 am and experimental weevils, like other insects (Hollick 1940, Weis-Fogh 1956, Wilson 1961), tend to fly once tarsal contact with substrate was lost.

Captures of _R. ferrugineus_ in “smart traps” loaded with aggregation pheromone and baited with date fruit deployed in a date palm plantation in Saudi Arabia resulted in the majority of weevils being trapped during the day, with relatively few captures occurring at night (Aldryhim and Al Ayedh 2015). Fanini et al. (2014) report a similar result for _R. ferrugineus_ captured in traps in Italy and Greece, which, as with Saudi Arabia, are part of the non-native range of this palm pest. For invasive populations of _R. ferrugineus_, diurnal trap captures and activity on flight mills suggest a tendency for flight during daylight hours (Aldryhim and Al Ayedh 2015, Fanini et al. 2014, Hoddle et al. 2015). Conversely, in the oil palm orchard where _R. vulneratus_ used for flight mill studies were collected, baited pheromone traps captured 61% of weevils between 3:00 pm and 7:30 am, suggesting that the majority of captures may have occurred after dark (Hoddle and Hoddle 2015). Flight mill data indicated that 11–20% of tethered _R. vulneratus_ flew between 7:00 pm and 7:00 am, demonstrating that weevils fly at night. However, interpreting the significance of the timing of weevil captures in field-deployed traps with respect to flight behavior recorded on flight mills is difficult, as dispersal activity and attraction to pheromone traps may be independent of each other.

Humidity and temperature affect flight activity and mortality rates in _Rhynchophorus cruentatus_ (F.) (Weissling and Giblin-Davis 1993; Weissling et al. 1994) and _R. ferrugineus_ (Hoddle et al. 2015). Under low humidity conditions (<30%) and high temperatures (~27°C), about 80% of _R. ferrugineus_ that exhibit >1 km of flight die over a 24-h period when tethered to a flight mill (Hoddle et al. 2015). In this study, survivorship of tethered _R. vulneratus_ that flew >1 km was high, with 100% of experimental adults surviving under ambient conditions of ~27°C and ~80% RH. The strong effects of humidity and temperature on _Rhynchophorus_ spp. flight and survival may result from these weevils being hygric-adapted, which results in adults favoring moist concealed harborage sites (Weissling and Giblin-Davis 1993). It is unknown how _R. vulneratus_ flight activity and survivorship rates would be affected under varying temperature and humidity regimens, as weevils were not flown under conditions where these two variables were manipulated to determine their potential effects. These abiotic factors, temperature and humidity, could strongly influence flight and survival for _R. vulneratus_, especially in non-native ranges that lack a year-round tropical climate (e.g., Laguna Beach in California).

*Rhynchophorus vulneratus* exhibited leptokurtic dispersal and significant sex-biased differences in flight distances were observed, with female weevils flying significantly further than males. Sex-biased dispersal could affect reproductive success and subsequent establishment in non-native areas because of an inability to locate mates following long-distance flight (Miller et al. 2011). Ironically, it is possible that long-distance flight driven by environmental factors (e.g., low humidity) and sex of dispersing weevils could have contributed, in part, to the successful eradication of _R. vulneratus_ in Laguna Beach, as it could have resulted in potential long-distance colonizers arriving in inhospitable habitat (e.g., the Pacific Ocean or the xeric San Joaquin Hills).

There are significant challenges to executing field studies designed to investigate the short- and long-distance dispersal of _Rhynchophorus_ spp. weevils. Flight mill studies (Taylor et al. 2010) and mark–recapture studies (Yamamura et al. 2003) have well-recognized shortcomings. An improvement over these two methods of assessing dispersal capability could be through the use of very small electronic devices attached to free-ranging insects that record and transmit locality data for over time. Space-based tracking technologies (e.g., GPS satellite monitoring or near-earth orbit receivers) may be one way to measure long-distance insect movement in
environments of interest (Kissling et al. 2014). However, energy supply, signal broadcast range, and equipment costs are significant obstacles that need to be overcome before the use of this technology will be possible for monitoring insect movement (Kissling et al. 2014).

In conclusion, flight mill generated data indicated that ~80 and ~58% of field-captured female and male R. vulneratus, respectively, flew >1 km in a 24-h period, and the average total distance flown was significantly greater for female weevils (~32 km [females] vs. ~15 km [males]). Of those female weevils flying >1 km, ~83% flew >10 km in a 24-h period, and flight distance data for female and male weevils combined exhibited a leptokurtic distribution, which can potentially result in faster than expected spread during the initial stages of an invasion into new areas (Kot et al. 1996). Incursion management plans for R. vulneratus, especially at the early stages of colonization, may need to consider the possibility for rapid long-distance flight from infestation foci because the likelihood of successful detection in new areas and subsequent containment and eradication is greatest when populations are small and localized (Tobin et al. 2014).

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