

## Research



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**Author for correspondence:**

Trevor J. Willis  
e-mail: [trevor.willis@port.ac.uk](mailto:trevor.willis@port.ac.uk)

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## Marine biology

## Kleptopredation: a mechanism to facilitate planktivory in a benthic mollusc

Trevor J. Willis<sup>1</sup>, Kimberly T. L. Berglöff<sup>1</sup>, Rona A. R. McGill<sup>2</sup>, Luigi Musco<sup>3,4</sup>, Stefano Piraino<sup>5,6</sup>, Claire M. Rumsey<sup>1</sup>, Tomás Vega Fernández<sup>3,4</sup> and Fabio Badalamenti<sup>3,4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Institute of Marine Sciences, School of Biological Sciences, University of Portsmouth, Ferry Road, Portsmouth PO4 9LY, UK

<sup>2</sup>NERC Life Sciences Mass Spectrometry Facility, Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre, Rankine Avenue, East Kilbride G75 0QF, UK

<sup>3</sup>Stazione Zoologica Anton Dohrn, Villa Comunale, 80121 Naples, Italy

<sup>4</sup>CNR-IAMC, Via G. Da Verrazzano 17, 91014 Castellammare del Golfo (TP), Italy

<sup>5</sup>Dipartimento di Scienze e Tecnologie Biologiche ed Ambientali, Università del Salento, 73100 Lecce, Italy

<sup>6</sup>CoNISMa, Consorzio Nazionale Interuniversitario per le Scienze del Mare, 00196 Roma, Italy

**id** TJW, 0000-0002-0357-1189; RARM, 0000-0003-0400-7288; LM, 0000-0003-4750-4129; SP, 0000-0002-8752-9390; TVF, 0000-0002-8788-4253; FB, 0000-0002-2395-454X

Predation occurs when an organism completely or partially consumes its prey. Partial consumption is typical of herbivores but is also common in some marine microbenthic carnivores that feed on colonial organisms. Associations between nudibranch molluscs and colonial hydroids have long been assumed to be simple predator–prey relationships. Here we show that while the aeolid nudibranch *Cratena peregrina* does prey directly on the hydranths of *Eudendrium racemosum*, it is stimulated to feed when hydranths have captured and are handling prey, thus ingesting recently captured plankton along with the hydroid polyp such that plankton form at least half of the nudibranch diet. The nudibranch is thus largely planktivorous, facilitated by use of the hydroid for prey capture. At the scale of the colony this combines predation with kleptoparasitism, a type of competition that involves the theft of already-procured items to form a feeding mode that does not fit into existing classifications, which we term kleptopredation. This strategy of subsidized predation helps explain how obligate-feeding nudibranchs obtain sufficient energy for reproduction from an ephemeral food source.

## 1. Introduction

The understanding of trophic strategies and the resultant linkages among species is critical to any description of community dynamics and energy flow [1]. Ecological specialization is ubiquitous in the animal kingdom [2] and particularly well-examined in the area of insect–plant relationships in terrestrial ecosystems [3,4], but believed to be less common in the marine realm [5]. Many marine herbivores and predators are generalists, but recent literature reveals increasing numbers of marine taxa with distinct habitat and/or dietary specialization [6] comparable to terrestrial insect–plant associations [7,8]. Opisthobranch molluscs are one marine taxon that commonly exhibits specialist behaviour, including both herbivorous and carnivorous species that feed either on particular species of algae, sponges, or colonial cnidarians [7,9]. The association between nudibranchs and cnidarian colonies has hitherto been regarded as a simple predator–prey relationship, albeit one where the cnidarian host may provide both shelter and food supply, as well as defensive capability in some cases [10]. Where host species are seasonally abundant, the temporal window within which predators must exploit resources and successfully

reproduce is limited. Local extirpation of ephemeral hosts, which nudibranchs are capable of doing in part or entirely [7,9,11,12], may risk the local reproductive capacity of the predator. Abundances of hosts such as the Mediterranean hydrozoan *Eudendrium racemosum* vary seasonally [11,13–15] and are exploited by summer increases in the density of the aeolid nudibranchs, such as *Flabellina affinis* and *Cratena peregrina* [11]. Here, we investigate the feeding ecology of *C. peregrina* to establish mechanisms by which the nudibranch balances energy intake with preservation of its habitat.

## 2. Methods

### (a) Sample collection and preparation

Nudibranchs, hydroids and plankton samples were collected from Scopello, northwestern Sicily, Italy (38.073° N, 12.823° E) for all analyses. Individual *C. peregrina* and colonies of *E. racemosum* were hand collected as required by scuba diving or snorkelling at 2–5 m depth. Nudibranchs and hydroid colonies were transported to the laboratory and maintained in 60 l aquaria for behavioural experiments.

### (b) Behavioural assays

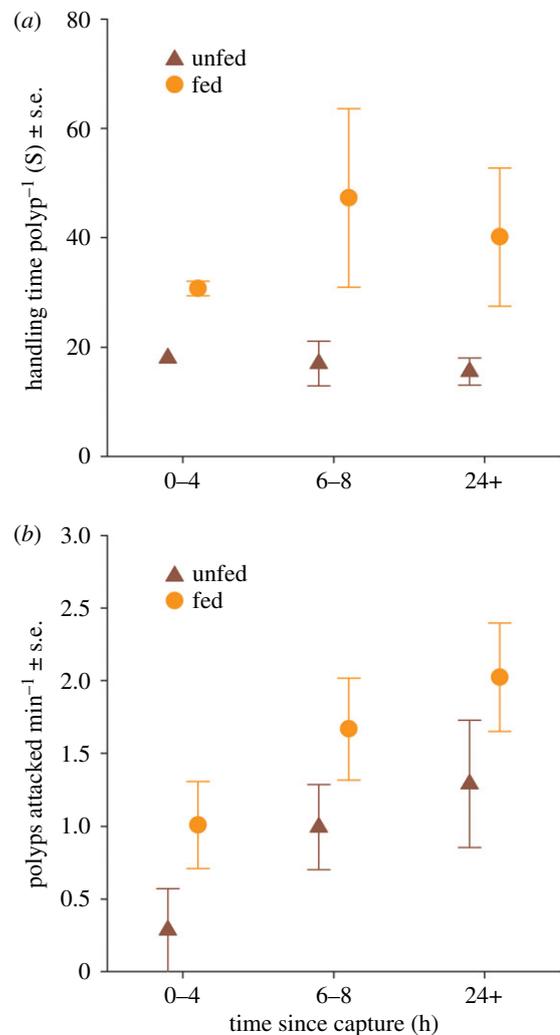
The behavioural response of *C. peregrina* to feeding stimuli was tested using a simple choice experiment, where the nudibranch was presented with starved hydroid colonies, hydroids that were fed with *Artemia salina* nauplii, nauplii alone, or a blank control. Nudibranch attack rates on fed or unfed polyps and prey handling times were measured using behavioural assays of 10 min duration (see electronic supplementary material for details).

### (c) Stable isotope analysis

Stable isotopes of C and N were analysed for *C. peregrina*, *E. racemosum*, two size classes of plankton and suspended particulate organic material, and the relative importance of potential dietary sources for *C. peregrina* assessed using a series of stable isotope mixing models (see electronic supplementary material for details).

## 3. Results

In the simple choice experiment, a null response from random movement would result in expected frequencies of five for each of the possible outcomes. Nudibranchs moved to the fed hydroids in 14 of the 25 trials (electronic supplementary material, figure S1), which differed significantly from random ( $\chi^2 = 22.0$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). To determine if this response was a stimulatory cue that manifested as increased feeding rate, we measured the rate of consumption by *C. peregrina* of *E. racemosum* hydranths that were starved or fed, and under varying levels of nudibranch hunger. The time taken for consumption of a single hydranth when fed was approximately twice that taken to consume an empty hydranth, and this was consistent regardless of the hunger level of the nudibranch (figure 1a, table 1a). We therefore excluded handling time from the attack rate calculations. Nudibranch attack rate on hydranths increased with the degree of nudibranch hunger, and they consistently consumed approximately double the number of fed hydranths compared to unfed hydranths (figure 1b, table 1b).



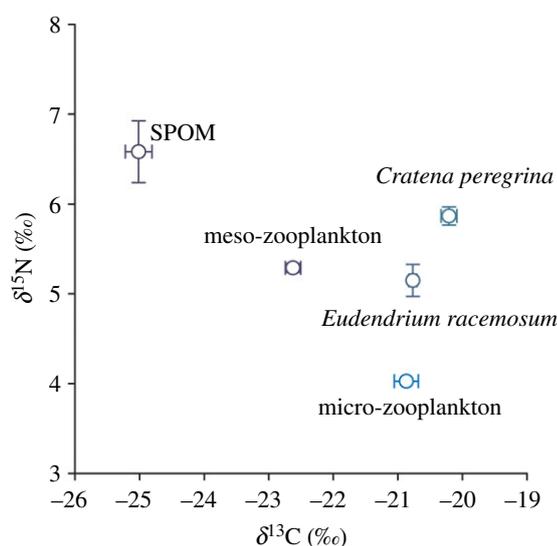
**Figure 1.** Feeding rate responses of *Cratena peregrina* at varying rates of starvation on *Eudendrium racemosum* colonies that are either fed with brine shrimp (*Artemia* sp.) or not fed. (a) Mean time to consume a hydranth, (b) attack rate, taking into account variation in handling time. (Online version in colour.)

The mean value of isotopic enrichment of *C. peregrina* relative to *E. racemosum* was  $<1\%$  for both  $\delta^{15}\text{N}$  and  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  (figure 2), indicating that the hydroid is not the sole prey of the nudibranch. A simple predator–prey relationship would result in predator  $\delta^{15}\text{N}$  values 2.5–3.5‰ higher than the prey [16,17]. We hypothesize that this discrepancy comes about because the hydroid provides a relatively low percentage of the total prey ingested by volume. Similarly, although micro-zooplankton (64–200  $\mu\text{m}$ ) are of an appropriate size for consumption by *E. racemosum* [18], the difference in  $\delta^{15}\text{N}$  was only ca. 1.1‰ (figure 2). This latter result is probably due to the non-selective nature of feeding in *E. racemosum*, which while considered to be primarily carnivorous [11,19] is known to be capable of ingesting and assimilating diatoms [20].

Posterior probabilities from Bayesian stable isotope mixing models estimated that small zooplankton contribute a greater or equivalent proportion of *C. peregrina*'s diet than *E. racemosum* (electronic supplementary material, figure S2a–c). Only the model run specifying a low nitrogen trophic discrimination value of 1.9‰ resulted in micro-zooplankton forming a lower proportion of the diet, with a mean of 23% (electronic supplementary material, figure S2d).

**Table 1.** (a) Analysis of variance testing the effects of whether hydroids were fed with brine shrimp, and hunger level (time since capture) of nudibranchs, on the time taken for *Cratena peregrina* to consume hydroid polyps (data plotted in figure 1a); and (b) analysis of variance testing the effects of whether hydroids were fed with brine shrimp, and hunger level (time since capture) of nudibranchs, on the attack rate on hydroid polyps by *Cratena peregrina* (data plotted in figure 1b).

source	d.f.	SS	MS	F	p
(a)					
fed	1	2233.4	2233.4	4.79	0.04
time	2	172.2	86.1	0.18	0.83
time × fed	2	186.8	93.4	0.20	0.82
residual	19	8862.8	466.4		
total	24				
(b)					
fed	1	3.78	3.78	6.41	0.02
time	2	5.31	2.65	4.50	0.02
time × fed	2	0.005	0.003	0.004	0.99
residual	24	14.15	0.59		
total	30				



**Figure 2.** Biplot of the mean ( $\pm$  standard error) isotope values for *Cratena peregrina* and its putative prey. SPOM, suspended particulate organic material. (Online version in colour.)

## 4. Discussion

Our results indicate that the diet of the nudibranch *C. peregrina* is formed largely of small (less than 200  $\mu\text{m}$ ) plankton captured by its host hydroid. The stimulus of a fed hydroid colony resulted in elevated feeding rates in nudibranchs. This response might be adaptive if prey capture by hydroids is sporadic and the nudibranch seeks to profit energetically by consuming occupied polyps. It is unknown what cues stimulate the nudibranch's response to prey capture by hydranths. Species-specific substances released from different hydroids are known to be responsible for selective chemotactic behaviour of nudibranch molluscs [21]. While it is possible that olfactory cues play a part, in our preference experiment the nudibranchs distinguished between *A. salina* nauplii that were swimming freely and those captured by the hydroid. In the hydrozoan *Halocordyle disticha*, nematocyst discharge and polyp killing ability is reduced by heavy feeding upon

*Artemia* nauplii due to accumulation of discharged nematocyst venom constituents (polypeptides and enzymatic proteins) [22]. These molecules may play a role in stimulating chemoreceptors in the nudibranch's rhinophores. Also, if the hydroid itself does not release olfactory stimulants, it is possible that the *C. peregrina* feeding response is activated by mechanical cues derived from captured *Artemia* nauplii.

The strong behavioural response of the nudibranch to fed hydroid colonies in the prey choice experiment suggests that nudibranchs will, by preference, consume hydranths that have captured and are handling prey. This supports the explanation that *C. peregrina* is an opportunistic predator that uses the hydroid as a means of obtaining prey from the water column, and ingestion of the hydranth provides just a fraction of the diet by volume.

A feeding hydranth, having just captured or engulfed fresh prey, would constitute a more rewarding prey type—in terms of increased energy content—for the nudibranch. Its 'selective' behaviour would represent an adaptive mechanism governing resource acquisition and consumption towards optimization of survival and reproductive success. If energy values for *Tubularia* polyps [23] are an appropriate proxy for Mediterranean hydroids such as *Eudendrium* spp., consumption of feeding hydranths provides an important nutritional subsidy [24], satiating the nudibranch with consumption of fewer hydranths and perhaps extending the life of the hydroid colony.

Our ability to understand food webs and produce useful predictive models of ecosystems in the face of environmental change is impeded by a lack of understanding of the nature and strength of trophic linkages [25]. Food stealing from *Eudendrium* spp. by caprellids has been described as klept-commensalism [26] because no damage is incurred by the hydroid, although this is a condition of kleptoparasitism [27]. This previously unknown case of kleptopredation combines both kleptoparasitic competition and direct predation. This may be widespread among other invertebrate specialists, altering our understanding of the functional roles of suspension feeders [28], and cautions against over-simplistic interpretation of predator–prey interactions.

**Ethics.** This work was conducted in accordance with the EU Directive 2010/63 and Italian DL 2014/26, and was approved by the University of Portsmouth Animal Welfare and Ethical Review Body, approval 917A.

**Data accessibility.** Datasets supporting this article have been uploaded as part of the electronic supplementary material.

**Authors' contributions.** F.B. and T.J.W. conceived the study and designed the experiments with L.M. and T.V.F. Experiments were performed by K.T.L.B., C.M.R., L.M., T.V.F., S.P. and R.A.R.M., and T.J.W. analysed the data. T.J.W. and F.B. wrote the paper with input from all

other authors. All authors approve the final version of the manuscript and agree to be held accountable for the content therein.

**Competing interests.** We have no competing interests.

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