

1 **Title:**

2 The Interaction Affinity Between Flowers and Their Pollinators

3

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13

14 **Abstract**

15 The probability of flower fertilization by its pollinator is widely recognized as being  
16 influenced by species abundances. However, this relationship has rarely been formalized for  
17 the analysis of pollination networks. In this study, I introduce a simple model, adapted from  
18 physical chemistry, to formalize this functional dependence. This approach draws upon the  
19 well-established biochemical concept of affinity, which quantifies the strength of the binding  
20 interaction between a protein and its ligand. Affinity, in this context, is explained as the  
21 "attraction" or "fit" between two molecules, stemming from their complementarity in shape,  
22 charge, and hydrophobic or hydrophilic properties. Analogously, pollinator-flower  
23 interactions can be conceptualized through the complementarity of their morphologies, as  
24 well as the pollinator's ability to locate and recognize the desired flower, often involving  
25 complex behaviors and memory utilization. Just as protein-ligand binding affinity is critical  
26 for metabolic efficiency, the affinity within pollination networks can determine the  
27 effectiveness of flower-pollinator interactions, offering novel insights into their functional  
28 mechanisms.

29

30 **Keywords:** Abundance, Affinity, Interaction, Pollination network

31

32 **Introduction**

33 Studies on pollination networks have advanced rapidly, particularly through the development  
34 of a wide range of quantitative analytical tools based on graph and network theory (Dale,  
35 2017). These tools have uncovered several key characteristics, most notably the low levels of  
36 connectance and the nested distribution of interactions, patterns that are consistently observed  
37 across diverse habitats and communities (Bascompte & Scheffer, 2023; Lanuza et al., 2025).  
38 However, concerns have been raised about the disconnect between these advancements and  
39 foundational concepts in community ecology (Blüthgen & Staab, 2024; Peralta et al., 2024).  
40 For instance, the primary structural features of pollination networks — such as low  
41 connectance, nestedness, modularity, and asymmetry — are often derived from binary  
42 matrices that disregard variability in interaction strength and species abundances for both  
43 flowers and pollinators (Staniczenko et al., 2013). Overlooking this variability may  
44 significantly hinder our ability to fully understand the role of ecological interactions in  
45 community processes (Blüthgen & Staab, 2024; Peralta et al., 2024). In fact, abundance  
46 distribution has profound effects on species interaction networks. For example, studies have  
47 demonstrated that the resilience of a pollination network depends on the presence of abundant  
48 and highly connected species (Winfrey et al., 2014). Since the probability of a pollinator  
49 visiting a flower is a function of their respective abundances (Vázquez et al., 2009), one

50 might also assume the reverse to be true: logically, frequent encounters require numerous  
51 individuals, and *vice versa*. However, this is not always the case, and models attempting to  
52 extrapolate species abundances from interaction frequencies have often proven inaccurate  
53 and unreliable (Vizentin-Bugoni et al., 2014; Gardner et al., 2020). The importance of  
54 incorporating abundance distribution data has recently been acknowledged in the guidelines  
55 of the European Database of Plant-Pollinator Networks (EuPPollNet, Lanuza et al., 2025),  
56 which now requires contributors to report flower counts. Unfortunately, this approach  
57 remains overly “phytcentric,” as it fails to mandate abundance distribution data for  
58 pollinators.

59

60 The frequency of pollinators visiting flowers is influenced not only by species abundances  
61 but also by additional factors such as weather, morphology (trait matching), and phenology  
62 (Peralta et al., 2024). While species abundance distribution patterns are remarkably consistent  
63 across ecosystems and communities (Ulrich et al., 2010), these additional factors are shaped  
64 by geographical, historical, and phylogenetic contexts. This highlights the importance of  
65 understanding abundance data. In this study, I propose that incorporating the abundances of  
66 both flowers and pollinators into the analysis of pollination networks could offer significant  
67 benefits. To demonstrate this, I introduce a simple model examining the dependence of  
68 interaction frequency on species abundance. The model is accompanied by an illustrative  
69 example and applied to a dataset that includes independently collected abundance data for  
70 both pollinators and flowers, along with interaction frequency data (Vizentin-Bugoni et al.,  
71 2016).

72

### 73 **The data and their analysis**

74 Before proceeding with the reanalysis, I introduce the model that links species abundances to  
75 interaction frequencies using an illustrative matrix. While smaller than the actual dataset, this  
76 matrix retains its essential properties (see the next section). After presenting the key concepts,  
77 I move on to the reanalysis of the real matrix.

78

79 The dataset reanalyzed in this study was contributed by Vizentin-Bugoni et al. (2016) and is  
80 available for download from the Interaction Web Database (IWB; see also Supplementary  
81 Material). The authors conducted intensive sampling in the Atlantic Rainforest of  
82 southeastern Brazil (23°S, 45°W) over a period of 4–10 days per month for two years. The  
83 network, or rather a subnetwork, comprises over 300 individuals of 9 hummingbird species

84 and 83,931 counted flowers of 55 plant species. Crucially, the distributions of both flowers  
 85 and hummingbirds were determined through independent sampling. A total of 2,793  
 86 interactions among 123 hummingbird-flower pairs were recorded. These data were organized  
 87 into a network matrix (Table S11 in the Supplementary Information), where abundances were  
 88 standardized as densities (number of individuals per unit area). Metrics derived from the  
 89 model (affinities) were standardized by dividing each by its maximum value and  
 90 subsequently presented graphically.

91

92 **An illustrative example**

93 The illustrative example consists of five pollinator species and five flower species,  
 94 demonstrating the same general characteristics as those observed in real network matrices  
 95 (Table 1A).

96

97 **Table 1.** Illustrative matrices of pollination network including pollinator and floral  
 98 abundances (highlighted in red font). A: raw data from the field; B: raw data in binary form

**A**

Species	Pollinators	Poll_1	Poll_2	Poll_3	Poll_4	Poll_5
Flowers	Abundances	160	80	40	20	10
Flor_1	1600		64	32		32
Flor_2	800	128			16	
Flor_3	400	300		64		
Flor_4	200		10			
Flor_5	100	128				

**B**

Species	Pollinators	Poll_1	Poll_2	Poll_3	Poll_4	Poll_5
Flowers	Abundances	160	80	40	20	10
Flor_1	1600	0	1	1	0	1
Flor_2	800	1	0	0	1	0
Flor_3	400	1	0	1	0	0
Flor_4	200	0	1	0	0	0
Flor_5	100	1	0	0	0	0

99

100 The matrix is considered “complete” as it includes abundance data for both pollinators and  
 101 flowers (highlighted in red font). The columns and rows represent pollinator and flower  
 102 species, respectively, while the cells indicate the frequency of interactions between  
 103 pollinator-flower pairs. Empty cells signify the absence of interactions. In the binary version  
 104 of this matrix (Table 1B), empty cells are represented by 0s, while cells with interactions are  
 105 represented by 1s, regardless of the recorded interaction frequency.

106

107 A commonly calculated metric from binary matrices is connectance. Although modern  
108 software computes connectance in a more sophisticated manner, the original, simpler  
109 equation conveys the concept effectively:

110

$$111 \quad C = L / (M * N),$$

112

113 where  $C$  represents connectance,  $L$  is the number of links (the sum of cells with a value of 1  
114 in the binary matrix),  $M$  and  $N$  are the numbers of flower and pollinator species, respectively.  
115 Connectance is simply the proportion of potential links between species that are realized. In  
116 the illustrative example,  $L = 9$ ,  $M = 5$  and  $N = 5$ , resulting in  $C = 9 / (5 * 5) = 0.36$ .

117

118 The binary matrix (Table 1B), however, fails to capture the strong differences in interaction  
119 frequencies. For instance, in the original matrix (Table 1A), the interaction frequency  
120 between Poll\_1 and Flor\_3 was recorded 300 times, whereas the minimum frequency,  
121 observed between Poll\_2 and Flor\_4, was only 10 — a 30-fold difference! In binary form,  
122 this critical information is lost, as all non-zero frequencies are reduced to a value of 1.

123

124 The majority of real network matrices available in open-access databases, unlike the  
125 illustrative example, lack species abundance data for both pollinators and plants. These  
126 matrices often only indicate which species are present within the network. However, the  
127 illustrative example highlights that the abundance of the most common species exceeds that  
128 of the least common species by a factor of 16 — a substantial difference. Matrices lacking  
129 abundance data, therefore, limit our ability to account for such variation in analyses.

130

131 In the real network matrix, differences in interaction frequencies and species abundances are  
132 equally, if not more, striking (Table S11). The most frequent interaction was recorded 198  
133 times, while the least frequent interaction occurred only once — a 198-fold difference.  
134 Similarly, the most abundant flower species was 5,191 times more abundant than the least  
135 abundant one. Though less extreme, the disparity among hummingbird species remains  
136 significant: the most abundant species was 113 times more numerous than the least abundant.  
137 These figures show the substantial loss of information when networks are presented without  
138 abundance data. However, when abundances are incorporated into the matrix, this

139 information can be utilized in various ways — one such approach is described in the next  
140 section.

141

### 142 **Linking species abundances to the connectance in pollination networks**

143 The model is introduced using the same illustrative example matrix as in the previous section  
144 (Table 1A). It is built on the widely accepted premise that interaction frequency is a function  
145 of the abundances of the participating species (Blüthgen & Staab, 2024; Vázquez et al.,  
146 2009). In its simplest form, this relationship can be expressed as:

147

$$148 \quad z = k * x * y,$$

149

150 where  $x$  and  $y$  represent the abundances of flower and pollinator species, respectively;  $z$   
151 denotes the interaction frequency (“link strength”); and  $k$  is the constant of proportionality.  
152 This constant, termed “affinity,” is adapted from biochemistry, where it describes the strength  
153 of the binding interaction between an enzyme and its substrate. Within this model, high  $k$   
154 values indicate a high likelihood of interaction between a flower-pollinator pair, while low  
155 values suggest weaker interactions. Consequently, interaction frequencies will be high when  
156 the abundances of the interacting species and their  $k$  values are also high. The model enables  
157 the calculation of interaction affinities for each species pair, as all other variables are  
158 provided in the matrix (Table 1A). This is achieved using the equation:

159

$$160 \quad k = z / (x * y),$$

161

162 which allows for the creation of a new matrix of affinities (Table 2). The  $k$  values are  
163 generally small but exhibit considerable variation.

164

165 **Table 2.** An affinity matrix resulted from the illustrative example (Table 1A) showing the  
166 interaction affinity values ( $k$ ). Pollinator and floral abundances are highlighted in red font)

Species	Pollinators	Poll_1	Poll_2	Poll_3	Poll_4	Poll_5
Flowers	<b>Abundances</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>10</b>
Flor_1	<b>1600</b>	0	0.0005	0.0005	0	<b>0.002</b>
Flor_2	<b>800</b>	0.0010	0	0	0.001	0
Flor_3	<b>400</b>	<b>0.0047</b>	0	<b>0.004</b>	0	0
Flor_4	<b>200</b>	0	0.0006	0	0	0
Flor_5	<b>100</b>	<b>0.0080</b>	0	0	0	0

167

168 How can “high” and “low” affinities be distinguished? A reference value of  $k$  can be  
169 introduced:

170

$$171 k_{\text{ref}} = \underline{Z}_{\text{tot}} / (X_{\text{tot}} * Y_{\text{tot}}),$$

172

173 where  $\underline{Z}_{\text{tot}}$ ,  $X_{\text{tot}}$  and  $Y_{\text{tot}}$  are the totals of interaction occurrences, floral abundances, and  
174 pollinator abundances, respectively. This reference value corresponds to a hypothetical  
175 network where all flowers and pollinators are represented by a single species each. For the  
176 illustrative example,  $k_{\text{ref}} = 0.0011$ . Naturally, some  $k$  values will exceed  $k_{\text{ref}}$ , while others will  
177 fall below it (values greater than  $k_{\text{ref}}$  are highlighted in bold in Table 2).

178

179 The reference constant  $k_{\text{ref}}$  can also serve as a network metric that is closely tied to  
180 connectance. Consider a network where connectance is varied, while  $k_{\text{ref}}$  remains constant.  
181 This would correspond to a redistribution of interactions, such that their total frequency of  
182 occurrence remains unchanged. A decrease in connectance would imply fewer species are  
183 interacting, but with increased interaction frequency, and *vice versa*. In essence, there exists a  
184 certain reciprocity between  $C$  (connectance) and  $k_{\text{ref}}$ . By using both indices, we gain insight  
185 not only into which species interact, but also into the strength (or frequency) of these  
186 interactions, as expressed by the interaction affinity values.

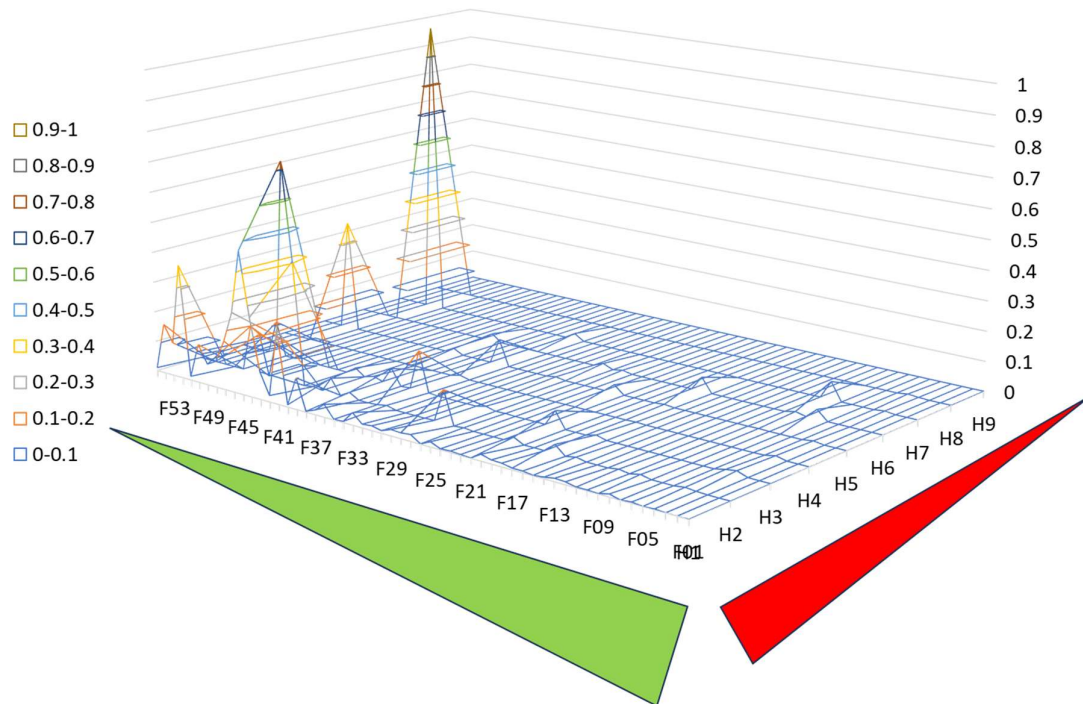
187

188 The reanalyzed matrix of the real network includes species abundance data (Table S11),  
189 enabling the application of all previously described procedures to construct an affinity matrix  
190 with  $k_{\text{ref}}$  values for each flower-pollinator species pair. Naturally, if no interaction is observed  
191 for a species pair, the affinity is equal to 0. In total, non-zero interaction affinities were  
192 calculated for 123 species pairs. The reference value  $k_{\text{ref}}$  for this matrix was determined to be  
193 0.0001. Of the 123 pairs, 19 showed interaction affinity values below this reference level,  
194 while the maximum affinity reached 0.1050 — more than 1,000 times higher than  $k_{\text{ref}}$ . The  
195 affinity matrix can be visualized as a corresponding 3D chart (Figure 1, next page), which  
196 reveals a trend: the highest affinities tend to occur at low species abundances. Conversely, at  
197 high abundances of both flower and pollinator species, interaction affinities are generally  
198 smaller.

199

200 This observed trend aligns with the findings of Simmons et al. (2019), who reported that  
201 hummingbird pollinators are generalized because they are abundant, but found little evidence

202 that they are abundant because they are generalized. However, that study employed a null  
 203 model assuming interaction neutrality, where interaction probabilities were defined solely by  
 204 species relative abundances. Incorporating interaction affinity into this model would  
 205 represent an intriguing future development.



206  
 207 **Figure 1.** Affinities of pollinator-flower species pairs; The vertical axis shows standardized values of  
 208  $k$  (interaction affinities). The abundances are ranked in descending order, as indicated by the  
 209 narrowing end of red (hummingbirds) and green (flowers) triangle arrows close to the horizontal axes.  
 210 The affinities appear to be higher in the pairs made of less abundant “subordinate” species.

211  
 212 The concept of interaction affinity introduced here can also enhance studies on the  
 213 asymmetry of interactions within pollination networks. For example, Vázquez et al. (2007)  
 214 developed a null model in which species interactions occurred randomly among individuals.  
 215 This model was used to test the hypothesis that the observed asymmetry arises from the  
 216 unequal abundances of species. Their findings revealed that asymmetry correlated with  
 217 abundance, with rare species contributing more to the asymmetry than abundant ones. They  
 218 concluded that while abundance provides a sufficient explanation for the asymmetry structure  
 219 in certain networks, additional factors likely play a role in others. One such “additional



220 factor” could be the affinities between flowers and pollinators, which may have evolved  
221 through coevolution.

222

### 223 **Discussion**

224 The presented model may appear simplistic, but I hope to have demonstrated its significant  
225 analytical potential. Undoubtedly, the model is open to adjustments, improvements, and  
226 further refinement. Crucially, it can be applied to individual species, small subnetworks, or  
227 large networks, depending on the design of data collection. As long as the densities or relative  
228 abundances of the target species or taxonomic groups are reliably known, interaction  
229 affinities can be calculated.

230

231 In biochemistry and physiology, binding affinity refers to the strength of the interaction  
232 between a protein (enzyme, receptor) and its binding ligand (substrate, ion, transmitter,  
233 hormone, or other biologically active compound). Textbooks often describe this affinity as  
234 the “attraction” or “fit” between the two molecules, attributed to complementarity — precise  
235 matching of the protein's active site and the ligand's shape, charge, and hydrophobic or  
236 hydrophilic properties. Similarly, pollination networks can be understood through the lens of  
237 complementarity between pollinator and flower morphologies, as well as the ability of  
238 pollinators to locate and recognize desirable flowers. This process may involve complex  
239 behaviors and the use of memory (Kandori & Ohsaki, 1996). Incorporating such details can  
240 deepen our understanding of pollination networks.

241

242 In metabolism, the binding affinity between a protein and its ligand is considered crucial, as it  
243 determines how effectively metabolic reactions are catalyzed or regulatory processes are  
244 performed. Similarly, in pollination networks, interaction affinity can define the effectiveness  
245 of flower-pollinator interactions, providing novel insights into their functional mechanisms.

246

247 A high interaction affinity among organisms is likely the result of long evolutionary  
248 processes. Consequently, the model presented here has the potential to facilitate the  
249 incorporation of phylogenetic history into the study of pollination networks. Similarly, high  
250 interaction affinity may signal specialized relationships among a limited number of species,  
251 thereby helping to define the breadth of ecological niches (Junker et al., 2013). The concept  
252 of ecological niches has been considered underutilized in the analysis of pollination networks

253 (Phillips et al., 2020). Metrics derived from interaction affinity could promote the integration  
254 of this concept into the theoretical framework of pollination networks.

255

256 Altogether, linking species abundance with interaction frequency has the potential to  
257 transform our understanding of network properties. The proposed reference constant, used  
258 alongside connectance, shifts the perspective from binary categorizations of “permitted” and  
259 “forbidden” links to a continuum of probabilities for specific interactions. This approach  
260 situates interactions in a three-dimensional framework encompassing species abundances,  
261 their interaction frequencies, and the affinities between interacting species.

262

263 Understanding interaction affinity between specific flower and pollinator species can yield  
264 valuable insights. For instance, high interaction affinity may reflect a long coevolutionary  
265 history between particular species or groups, helping to introduce evolutionary perspectives  
266 and advance “phylogenetically informed network ecology” (*sensu* Peralta, 2016).

267 Additionally, the model can explore whether a specialist species exhibits high interaction  
268 affinity with its target, whether a generalist species has moderate to low affinity across a  
269 broad range of interactions, or whether common pollinators become generalists as a result of  
270 their abundance (*sensu* Simmons et al., 2016).

271

## 272 **Conclusions**

273 The integration of species abundance data into pollination network analyses is achievable  
274 through the use of simple models, provided that all necessary data are available. The model  
275 presented here, despite its simplicity, effectively links species abundance distributions to the  
276 frequency of interactions. Moreover, it facilitates the calculation of interaction affinity for  
277 specific flower-pollinator pairs.

278

279 The independent and separate sampling of plants, pollinators, and their interactions requires  
280 close collaboration between botanists and zoologists. The additional effort necessary to  
281 achieve this coordination will undoubtedly be rewarded, as it opens new pathways for data  
282 analysis and ultimately deepens our understanding of the structure and functioning of  
283 pollination networks.

284

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286 Not applicable, ZK is a single author

287

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291 Web Database contributed by Vizentin-Bugoni et al., 2016.

292

293 **Conflict of interest statement**

294 No competing interests to declare.

295

296 **Data availability statement**

297 Not applicable, opinion paper.

298

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352

353 **Supplementary Material**

354

355 **Table S1.** A pollination network matrix from Brazilian Atlantic Forest including pollinator  
 356 and floral abundances (highlighted in red font). The matrix is derived from data of Vizentin-  
 357 Bugoni et al. (2016), downloadable from the website of IWB (Interaction Web DataBase,  
 358 [http://www.ecologia.ib.usp.br/iwdb/html/vizentin-bugoni\\_et\\_al\\_2016.html](http://www.ecologia.ib.usp.br/iwdb/html/vizentin-bugoni_et_al_2016.html)).

Species	Hummingbirds	Pe	Tg	Cr	Ff	La	Sl	Av	Lc	Em
Flowers	<b>Abundances</b>	<b>86.923</b>	<b>78.462</b>	<b>66.923</b>	<b>21.538</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>13.077</b>	<b>8.462</b>	<b>5.385</b>	<b>0.769</b>
Ery_spe	<b>57102</b>	107	137	95	0	0	0	1	5	1
Psy_lei	<b>8704</b>	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Fuc_reg	<b>5485</b>	6	5	15	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ing_ses	<b>2265</b>	44	32	198	41	23	0	8	2	0
Spi_riv	<b>1980</b>	0	74	102	4	0	0	0	5	0
Nid_ino	<b>1005</b>	36	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Lan_cam	<b>600</b>	1	0	0	0	0	26	0	0	0
Man_cor	<b>591</b>	50	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mac_rub	<b>568</b>	6	33	2	0	1	6	30	0	0
Nid_lon	<b>446</b>	11	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bes_lon	<b>445</b>	9	19	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Nid_pro	<b>378</b>	31	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Nem_flu	<b>373</b>	36	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Vri_car	<b>359</b>	16	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Nem_fri	<b>339</b>	4	18	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Nem_gre	<b>300</b>	15	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Can_pan	<b>289</b>	14	68	18	1	0	0	0	0	0
Als_ino	<b>280</b>	30	0	0	0	2	18	0	0	0
Sip_con	<b>189</b>	22	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sin_coo	<b>179</b>	35	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cal_ruf	<b>162</b>	1	22	60	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sip_lau	<b>159</b>	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sin_ela	<b>158</b>	7	0	0	0	9	0	0	0	0
Sin_gla	<b>146</b>	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Aph_col	<b>120</b>	18	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Til_str	<b>114</b>	1	3	1	0	0	1	0	0	0
Vri_inc	<b>110</b>	22	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Aec_dis	<b>106</b>	18	95	6	0	0	2	0	0	0
Pyr_ven	<b>91</b>	17	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Jus_sp2	<b>67</b>	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Vri_inf	<b>65</b>	9	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Jus_sp1	<b>64</b>	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cen_cor	<b>62</b>	23	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Til_sp	<b>60</b>	2	4	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Psi_dic	<b>56</b>	1	1	53	1	10	0	1	0	0
Nid_rut	<b>52</b>	20	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sip_lon	<b>49</b>	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

**Table S1 continued**

Species	Hummingbirds	Pe	Tg	Cr	Ff	La	Sl	Av	Lc	Em
Plants	<b>Abundances</b>	<b>86.923</b>	<b>78.462</b>	<b>66.923</b>	<b>21.538</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>13.077</b>	<b>8.462</b>	<b>5.385</b>	<b>0.769</b>
Aec_gam	41	1	6	15	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bil_amo	38	36	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Til_gem	30	2	12	2	0	1	1	0	0	0
Can_per	29	65	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Nem_ser	26	5	1	4	0	0	0	0	0	0
Vri_sp	24	20	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Wit_sup	23	55	77	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Aec_van	22	95	132	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Edm_lin	22	53	26	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Aph_lon	21	31	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Aec_org	19	15	21	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Aec_nud	19	12	24	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Nem_mac	19	22	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Men_sp	18	2	0	14	0	0	0	16	0	0
Mut_spe	18	62	0	0	0	14	0	0	0	0
Vri_ery	17	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Vri_sim	16	24	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Til_dur	11	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

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