Preferences for different substrates in *Phalangium opilio* (Opiliones: Phalangiidae) in natural environment

Preference navadnega matije, *Phalangium opilio* (Opiliones: Phalangiidae) do različnih substratov v naravnem okolju

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Abstract. *Phalangium opilio* is the most widespread and one of the most common harvestman species in anthropogenic environments. A preliminary field experiment was carried out in Slovenia testing its preferences for different substrates. A two metres high rectangular tower with walls constituted of vertical bands of concrete, twice fired tile, wood and styrofoam was placed in a meadow. The wood proved to be the most suitable substrate, providing the most stable temperatures and moisture levels in comparison with the other experimental materials. In anthropogenic environment, various available substrates in microhabitats of *Ph. opilio* considerably contribute to a fine regulation of searching relatively thermally and moist-stable resting sites.

Key words: harvestman, arachnids, Arachnida, Slovenia, substrate preference, synanthropy


Ključne besede: pajkovci, preferenca do substrata, sinanthropija, Slovenija, suhe južine

Introduction

*Phalangium opilio* Linnaeus, 1758 is the most widespread opilionid species in the World, living in Europe, North and Central Asia and Asia Minor; it was also introduced from Europe to North America, North Africa and New Zealand (Martens 1978, Edgar 1980, Blick & Komposch 2004). It inhabits open habitats, as meadows and mires/bogs, open/lightful forests, and various types of anthropogenic habitats, as gardens, agroecosystems, forest edges, hedgerows, lawns, quarries, and in urban centres green habitats, walls and bridges made of various materials (Todd 1949, Edgar & Yuan 1965, 1968, Clingenpeel & Edgar 1966, Martens 1978, Edgar 1980, Komposch 1993, Newton & Yeargan 2002, Novak & al. 2002, Hillyard 2005). It has been often discussed...

In Central Europe, Ph. opilio matures stenochronously once a year in late summer and early autumn (Kaestner 1926, Rüffer 1966, Martens 1978), while there are more generations in North America (Edgar & Yuan 1968). The eggs and juveniles develop most rapidly at temperatures between 20–30°C, whereas their embryonic development is completely retarded at temperatures below about 10°C (Juberthie 1964, Rüffer 1966, Bachmann & Schäfer 1983). Ph. opilio is predominantly nocturnal, executing ca. 90% of its activity between 6 p.m. and 6 a.m. (Edgar & Yuan 1965, 1968). In natural habitats it is exposed to sun and wind, thus hardy in tolerance of desiccation and adapted to relatively high illumination levels (Edgar & Yuan 1968, Edgar 1980, Clingenpeel & Edgar 1966). In urban areas in Slovenia, petrophily has been found to be predominant in synanthropic harvestmen, including Ph. opilio (Novak & al. 2002).

Experimentally gathered data about the thermo- and hygropreference of Ph. opilio in the USA (Edgar & Yuan 1965, 1968, Clingenpeel & Edgar 1966) differ a lot from the field data recorded in the UK (Todd 1949). In Europe, these preferences have not been studied experimentally. Since the 1990s, the traditional areas for behavioural study have largely been abandoned, but many long-standing challenges remain (Owens 2006). The scope of this study was preliminary testing preferences of Ph. opilio for different substrates, and to find reasons for unequal affinities for different commercial, especially building substrates in human settlements. We also tried to contribute to an ecophysiological explanation for why Ph. opilio is a common species in human habitats.

**Material and Methods**

Phalangium opilio specimens: 37 ♂, 31 ♀ and three subadults used in the experiment were collected in Žavcarjev vrh in north-eastern Slovenia (46°36’ N, 15°32’ E, alt. 800 m). The experiment was arranged in a plane meadow near Slovenske Konjice in north-eastern Slovenia (46°21’ N, 15°27’ E, alt. 360 m) and carried out from August 10th till September 18th 2005 when it was ended entirely because of cold, rainy weather.

In order to test preferences for different substrates, a square experimental tower was constructed with walls measuring 44 x 200 cm (Fig. 1). Each wall consisted of vertical belts – 1 cm thick and 11 cm wide – of the following four experimental surfaces, affixed to a wooden plate. Their thermal conductivity coefficient, λ, in W/mK, according to Engineering Toolbox (2006), is in parentheses: concrete (1.16), twice fired tile (1.05), pinewood (0.14) and styrofoam (0.04). The concrete and the wood were porous, while the tile, and the styrofoam due to its waterproof surface nonporous materials. These materials served as the arbitrary resting substrates for the specimens. The top of the tower was covered with a translucent plastic plate extending 10 cm over the edges, to avoid concealment of individuals inside. A 50 cm high plastic fence was erected 1 m from the tower to prevent escapes, and to provide a grassy habitat for hiding and hunting. Twice a week, meadow insects were caught and released inside the fence to provide the prey species availability by chance and choice. The experimental individuals were placed into the arena 10 days before starting the experiment to acclimate. The records were kept exclusively in nice days, and at least two days after a rainfall.

The measurements started at 1:00 p.m. to guarantee data from the hottest period of the day when Ph. opilio does not move (Edgar 1980). At the resting site of each specimen on the tower, the compass direction of the chosen wall, the height, the selected substrate, the air temperature (T) and the relative humidity (RH) 1 cm from the specimen’s body, using a handheld aspiration psychrometer (Ahorn FN 864, Germany), were...
recorded. The only records kept were of those specimens with the whole body and more than half of the legs positioned on a selected substrate. It was hypothesized, that during hot days 1) hotter the day, higher the settled site on the tower, and 2) stony surfaces (concrete, tile) are preferable to *Ph. opilio*.

For statistical purposes one way ANOVA was used in testing the differences between substrate in means for height, T and RH of the resting specimens. For testing differences in preferences, the Chi-square test was used. To provide the F test for RH, the data were arcsin-transformed. SPSS 12.01 for Windows was used in the procedures.

**Results**

During the experiment, the weather was good with two rainy intervals – each in a few days in duration. The number of specimens settled on the tower decreased logarithmically from the first to the 37th experimental day (Fig. 2). Cumulatively, 90 measurements were provided, thus some records referred to the same specimens. During the time of the experiment, the subadults moulted. In their resting sites, there were no statistical differences between sexes and between adults and subadults in height, temperature (T) and relative humidity (RH) (One way ANOVA, *P > 0.05*); therefore the data for further statistical analyses were pooled. Individuals usually terminated their activity period by performing an exploratory movement for a few seconds within a radius of 10 to 25 cm before settling. On rainy days, they took shelter in the grass.

Near the surface of the experimental substrates, concrete was found to provide the least thermal stability (CV=18.4 %), and styrofoam the least humidity stability (CV=18.7 %), while wood was generally the most stable material with respect to both measurements (Table 1).
During their daytime rest, the specimens positioned themselves irregularly according to substrates (Table 1). The concrete, tile and styrofoam were comparable, while the wood was significantly more frequently occupied. Most specimens placed themselves on the wood, while the tile was the least preferred substrate ($\chi^2 = 11.96$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.008$).

The specimens spread over the whole range of the tower’s height, in the range of mean heights between 43 and 160 cm, both extremes on the tile. Regardless of the compass direction, the $T$ means for different substrates were between 20.9 and 24.9°C, both extremes on the concrete, and the RH mean between 58.1 and 79.0%, both on the styrofoam.

$T$ and RH were in a moderate negative correlation with each other ($r = -0.73$, $P < 0.001$). On the one hand, the concrete, tile and styrofoam, which differ in their thermal conductivity 29-times (Engineering Toolbox 2006) were comparably frequently settled, while wood and styrofoam, on the other hand, which differ only 3.5-times, were not.

**Discussion**

Although harvestmen behave quite similarly in the laboratory as in natural habitats (Edgar & Yuan 1968), various unnatural circumstances in the laboratory, such as inappropriate experimental containers, light conditions, food etc., can influence the experimental results. In experiments with predators, the use of factitious prey can hardly be avoided, which cannot be favourable to the experimental specimens (Merfield et al., 2004). On the other hand, in nature, a range of instabilities often renders the interpretation of results difficult. The experimental tower in the meadow enabled...
Table 1: Mean, standard deviation, minimum, maximum and coefficient of variation, CV, of the height, temperature, T, and relative air humidity, RH, at the sites of *Phalangium opilio* with respect to the substrates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Substrate</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Height (cm)</th>
<th>T (°C)</th>
<th>RH (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mean ± SD</td>
<td>Min – Max</td>
<td>CV (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concrete</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>55.0 ± 49.6</td>
<td>10 – 200</td>
<td>90.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>21.5 ± 4.0</td>
<td>16.1 – 27.1</td>
<td>18.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>73.6 ± 12.9</td>
<td>54.1 – 91.2</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tile</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>80.8 ± 60.8</td>
<td>10 – 200</td>
<td>56.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>23.0 ± 4.0</td>
<td>15.5 – 28.4</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>65.4 ± 10.4</td>
<td>47.4 – 88.1</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wood</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>80.8 ± 63.0</td>
<td>2 – 195</td>
<td>77.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>22.6 ± 3.2</td>
<td>15.7 – 29.1</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>66.2 ± 10.4</td>
<td>50.9 – 86.1</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Styrofoam</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>81.9 ± 62.3</td>
<td>5 – 200</td>
<td>76.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>21.8 ± 3.1</td>
<td>13.9 – 26.8</td>
<td>14.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>67.0 ± 12.5</td>
<td>53.1 – 98.3</td>
<td>18.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

accurate measurements and optimally reflected responses of *Ph. opilio* within mixed artificial-natural habitats in the temperate zone.

In comparison with the T of 15.5°C found to be the thermopreference in field populations in Great Britain (Todd, 1949), and 27.6°C in an experimental one in the USA (Edgar, 1980), the mean preferred T of 17.8–23.2°C in our experimental population indicates that the preferences depend on thermal acclimatization in concrete habitats.

In hot days, in *Ph. opilio*, adapted to habitats that are well sun-radiated (Edgar, 1980), the substrate selection among others helps in maintaining their thermal stability at relatively high levels in avoiding of hyperthermy at the same time.

The micrometeorological conditions for different substrates were strongly influenced by their properties. The existence of comparably frequently settled substrates that differ greatly in their thermal conductivity, on the one hand, together with unequally settled substrates that differ less, on the other hand, indicates that the thermal conductivity of a substrate does not by itself have an impact on the substrate selection. The concrete was thermally the least stable substrate because of its porosity, and different intensities of evaporation and desiccation during the day. The properties of tile were comparable. In spite of its low thermal conductivity, and although kept moist in the laboratory (Klee & Butcher 1968, Edgar 1980), in the field styrofoam displayed low moisture capacity. The preference for wood in *Ph. opilio* can be understood by its thermal stability as the consequence of its low thermal conductivity and the steady moderate release of moisture, both providing comparatively the most stable microclimate at a site. This is in agreement with the statements of Kuschka (1991), that *Ph. opilio* is a thermophilous and moderately hygrophilous species.

The persistence of *Ph. opilio* in the human settlements is the consequence of a combination of facts. In this opportunistic feeder (Martens 1978, Morse 2001), its thermophily and hardiness against desiccation and drought (Edgar & Yuan 1968, Edgar 1980) assure relatively fast metabolism and development. Individual selection of various substrates proved to be one of the T and RH regulation mechanisms, while the selection of compass direction, the height of climbing tall objects, as well as a cryptic behaviour during unpleasant weather should be tested with this respect in avoiding auto-replicates as further means of assuring relatively fine regulation of the optimal metabolism and development. In anthropogenic environment, various substrates available in microhabitats of *Ph. opilio* considerably contribute to a fine regulation of searching relatively thermally and moist-stable resting sites.
Conclusions

In conclusion,
• among commercial, especially building substrates, a wood is the preferable substrate to Ph. opilio,
• the apparent preference for concrete substrate in human settlements is the consequence of an irregular distribution of different substrates within the settlements.

Povzetek

Phalangium opilio je najbolj razširjena vrsta suhih južin in obenem najbolj običajna v antropogenem okolju. Pogosto jo obravnavajo kot sinantropno vrsto v širšem smislu. Preliminarno smo ugotavljali preference vrste do različnih podlag, na katerih osebki mirujejo v antropogenem okolju, ker takšni poskusi niso bili opravljeni. Stranice 2 m visokega preizkuševalnega stolpa so bile iz navpičnih pasov betona, dvakrat žgane opeke (klinkerja), smrekovega lesa in stiropora. Stolp je bil ograjen z 0,5 m visoko plastično ogražo, da poskusne živali niso ušle. Meritve temperature in vlage smo opravili tik ob osebkih po njihovi umiritvi od 13\textsuperscript{b} naprej, ko je bila temperatura najvišja. Les se je med preskusnimi materiali izkazal za preferenčen substrat, ker zagotavlja najbolj stabilno temperaturo in vlago. Poleg ostalih dejavnikov, kot so stran neba, višina namestitve nad tlemi in drugi, omogočajo različni materiali v antropogenem okolju osebkom suhih južin izbor toplotno in vlažnostno najugodnejše podlage za mirovanje.

Acknowledgements

We thank Jože KLOKOČOVNIK who built the experimental tower. We are indebted to Michelle GADPAILLE, Christian KOMPOSCH, Blake NEWTON and Andrej ŠORGO for critical comments on the manuscript. The study was partly supported by the Slovene Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology within the Biodiversity research program (Grant P1-0078).

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