

1 Aphid-ant mutualism: How honeydew sugars influence the behaviour of ant scouts?

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18 Running headline: Honeydew sugars regulate ant foraging

19

20 **Summary**

21 Honeydew is the keystone on which ant-aphid mutualism is built. This paper investigates  
22 how each sugar identified in *Aphis fabae* Scopoli honeydew acts upon the feeding and the  
23 laying of a recruitment trail by scouts of the aphid-tending ant, *Lasius niger* Linnaeus and  
24 thus may enhance collective exploitation by their ant mutualists. *Lasius niger* shows the  
25 following feeding preferences for honeydew sugars: melezitose = sucrose = raffinose >  
26 glucose = fructose > maltose = trehalose = melibiose = xylose. While feeding is a  
27 prerequisite to the launching of trail recruitment, the reverse is not necessarily true: not all  
28 ingested sugar solutions elicit a trail-laying behaviour among fed scouts. Trail mark laying  
29 is only triggered by raffinose, sucrose or melezitose, the latter sugar being specific to  
30 honeydew. By comparing gustatory and recruitment responses of ant foragers to sugar  
31 food sources, this study clarifies the role of honeydew composition both as a source of  
32 energy and as a mediator in ant-aphid interactions. *Lasius niger* feeding preferences can  
33 be related to the physiological suitability of each sugar –i.e. their detection by gustatory  
34 receptors as well as their ability to be digested and converted into energy. Regarding  
35 recruitment, the aphid-synthesized oligosaccharide –melezitose- could be used by ant  
36 scouts as a cue indicative of a long-lasting productive resource which is worthy of  
37 collective exploitation and defence against competitors or predators.

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39 **Key words** – Ant, aphids, *Aphis fabae*, decision-making, feeding preference, honeydew  
40 sugars, *Lasius niger*, trail recruitment

41

42 **Introduction**

43 Aphids and ants are the protagonists of one of the most studied models of mutualistic  
44 relationships in the animal kingdom. Aphids “defecate” honeydew, the sweet waste product of  
45 their sugar-rich but amino-acid-poor diet of plant sap. Following palpation by ant antennae,  
46 aphids extrude honeydew droplets without ejecting them to facilitate their collection and  
47 ingestion by ants. In return of this sugar supply, ants defend sap feeders against natural  
48 enemies and parasitoids but also provide them with hygiene by cleaning the colony from  
49 aphid exuviae and reducing risks of fungal infection (Pontin, 1959; El Ziady & Kennedy,  
50 1956; El-Ziady, 1960; Way, 1963; Samways, 1983; Buckley, 1987; Hölldobler & Wilson,  
51 1990; Yao *et al.*, 2000; Van Emden & Harrington, 2007).

52

53 The role of honeydew in interactions between sap feeders and ants has been long recognized.  
54 Once an aphid colony is located, a mutualistic relationship can be initiated and maintained by  
55 ants as long as the costs of aphids’ protection are negligible compared to the energy provided  
56 by honeydew of adequate quality and quantity (Way, 1963; Bristow, 1991; Yao *et al.*, 2000;  
57 Woodring, 2004). Likewise, when ant colonies are faced with several aphid colonies growing  
58 concurrently in their nest surroundings, foragers will focus their tending activity and will  
59 monopolise groups of aphids which produce the most profitable honeydew, either in terms of  
60 higher volumes/number of droplets or of higher sugar content (e.g. Detrain *et al.*, 1999;  
61 Hölldobler & Wilson, 1990; Mailleux *et al.*, 2000, 2003). Honeydew composition is actually  
62 variable depending on the tended aphid species (Völkl *et al.*, 1999), on the aphid instars  
63 (Fischer *et al.*, 2002) or on the host plants inhabited by sap feeders (Völk *et al.*, 1999; Fischer  
64 & Shingleton, 2001; Fischer *et al.*, 2005). The relative amounts of some sugars such as  
65 melezitose may even change in response to interactions with ants (Fischer & Shingleton,  
66 2001; Yao & Akimoto, 2001). In most cases, honeydew mainly contains monosaccharides

67 (glucose and fructose) and disaccharides (maltose, sucrose) but also trisaccharides  
68 (melezitose, raffinose, erlose) as well as small amounts of amino-acids, proteins and lipids  
69 (Völkl *et al.*, 1999; Wäckers, 2000, 2001).

70

71 Since ant guarding usually increases the reproductive success of the tended sap feeders (El-  
72 Ziady & Kennedy, 1956; Flatt & Weiser, 2000; Verheggen *et al.*, 2009), evolution may have  
73 tailored honeydew composition to suit their ant mutualists. Physiological parameters such as  
74 the palatability, the fluid intake rate, the digestibility of sugar molecules as well as their  
75 suitability for the ants' survival have been studied in ants feeding on nectar and/or aphid  
76 honeydew (e.g. Josens *et al.*, 1998; Josens, 2002; Boevé & Wäckers, 2003; Roces, 2003; Heil  
77 *et al.*, 2005). Research on aphid tending ants have investigated how those physiological  
78 features can be related to feeding preferences and food amount ingested by foragers (Vander  
79 Meer *et al.*, 1995; Völkl *et al.*, 1999; Tinti & Nofre, 2001). These studies on feeding  
80 preferences have however to be completed to get an accurate overview of aphid-ant  
81 interactions since the latter are influenced by ants' sociality and colony-level responses to  
82 honeydew composition. Indeed, ant workers collect honeydew not only to sustain themselves  
83 but also to deliver collected food to a central location, the nest in which a recruitment of  
84 nestmates can be launched. Since collected honeydew represents a food source not only for  
85 the individual but also for the colony as a whole, foraging responses of ants should be  
86 designed to ingest the most suitable food for the individual but also to focus cooperation and  
87 nestmate recruitment towards the sugar resources that are worth being monopolized and  
88 defended against predators and parasitoids. Although there is a general agreement about the  
89 impact of honeydew composition on ants' foraging strategies, there is still a need to precisely  
90 quantify in controlled conditions the social response of ants facing resources differing in  
91 sugar composition. In particular, the recruitment behaviour of individual scouts feeding on

92 different sugar molecules has never been investigated. These scouts however play a key role  
93 in the exploitation dynamics as well as in the selection of one aphid colony among several  
94 available resources: foraging patterns are shaped by the first steps of food exploitation –that is  
95 the way scouts will forage and decide to recruit nestmates depending on food profitability  
96 (Hölldobler & Wilson, 1990; Detrain *et al.*, 1999; Portha *et al.*, 2004; Detrain & Deneubourg,  
97 2008).

98 In this paper, sugars present in the honeydew of *Aphis fabae* Scopoli (Stenorrhyncha,  
99 Aphidoidea), a common aphid partner of the aphid-tending ant *Lasius niger* Linnaeus  
100 (Hymenoptera, Formicidae) are identified. The feeding and recruiting responses of *L. niger*  
101 scouts to different sugar solutions are quantified in order to understand how individuals assess  
102 sugar profitability and, in some cases, organize social foraging by the laying of a recruitment  
103 trail. Ant preferences for each tested sugar will then be scaled with respect to individual  
104 gustatory responses – i.e. longer drinking times - and social responses – i.e. more intense  
105 laying of a recruitment trail. Further, what extent individual and social foraging decisions of  
106 scouts are related to chemosensory abilities of aphid-tending ants, to their digestive  
107 physiology and to the ecology of sugar producers is discussed.

108

109

## 110 **Materials and methods**

111 *Ants and aphids* – The common black ant, *Lasius niger* is a well-known aphid-tending species  
112 widespread in European temperate regions. Colonies were collected in Brussels and placed in  
113 plastic containers whose edges were covered with polytetrafluoroethylene (Fluon ®) to  
114 prevent them from escaping. Test tubes covered with a red transparent foil were used as  
115 laboratory rearing nests. Aqueous sucrose solution (1 M) and water filled test tubes were  
116 provided. Twice a week, dead insects (cockroaches or fruit flies) were added as protein

117 sources. The colonies were kept in an environmentally controlled room (LD 16:8, relative  
118 humidity  $65 \pm 5$  %, and  $23 \pm 2$  °C). The black bean aphids, *Aphis fabae*, were mass reared on  
119 broad beans (*Vicia faba* L.) grown in 10 cm<sup>3</sup> plastic pots filled with a mix of perlite and  
120 vermiculite (1:1) and placed in the same conditions as above.

121 *Honeydew sugar composition* – Using 0.5 µl microcapillaries, honeydew was collected from a  
122 colony of around 50 *A. fabae* unattended by *L. niger* ants. The filled capillary was  
123 immediately transferred before sugar crystallisation into a microtube containing 50 µL of  
124 milli-Q water in which honeydew was extracted. Samples were kept at -18 °C until chemical  
125 analysis. The sugar composition of *A. fabae* honeydew was measured by high performance  
126 anion exchange chromatography coupled with pulsed amperometric detection (HPAEC-PAD)  
127 using a Carbopac<sup>TM</sup> PA-100 column (4x250 mm) and a ED40 amperometric detector  
128 (Dionex, Sunnyvale, California). This setup is adequate for mono- and polysaccharide  
129 analyses (Yao & Akimoto, 2001; Ronkart *et al.*, 2007). The elution was conducted by mixing  
130 a 0.5M NaOH solution with milli-Q water. Equilibration was conducted for 10 min with 3%  
131 NaOH solution before injection. After injection of 25 µL of sample, the concentration of the  
132 NaOH solution was increased from 3 - 59% over 25 min. Detection was operated for 25 min  
133 starting at the injection time. A control sample comprising a mix of 14 sugars of known  
134 concentration was injected prior to the analysis of the samples, and was used for sugar  
135 identification and quantification.

136 *Sugar preferences and recruiting behaviour of Lasius niger scouts* - Behaviour of *L. niger*  
137 scouts was compared when faced with equimolar water solutions (0.5 M) of the sugars that  
138 were previously identified in *A. fabae* honeydew. A single scout was allowed to reach a  
139 foraging arena on which we placed the sugar under investigation. The setup was aluminium-  
140 made and consisted in different parts (Fig. 1). (1) The access ramp (15 cm long and 1 cm  
141 wide) was placed near the nest entrance with a 45° incline and allowed scouts to reach the

142 bridge. (2) The bridge (20 cm long and 1 cm wide) connected the ramp to the foraging arena  
143 and was covered with filter paper. (3) A 3 cm section of the bridge – located close to the ramp  
144 – could be manually removed in order to allow only a single scout to access the bridge and the  
145 foraging area. (4) The foraging arena (5X5 cm) over which we placed a bowl-shaped  
146 aluminium piece filled in with 0.4 mL of the tested sugar solution. As with the bridge, the  
147 foraging arena was entirely covered with filter paper. These papers were renewed before each  
148 test in order to remove spots of trail pheromone that could have been laid by the tested scout  
149 and that may influence feeding behaviour of subsequent ants. The following nine sugar  
150 solutions were tested: fructose, glucose, maltose, melezitose, melibiose, raffinose, sucrose,  
151 trehalose and xylose (Sigma-Aldrich, Chemie GmbH, Steinheim, Germany). Sugar solutions  
152 were made with distilled water, which was therefore used as control. Water control and sugar  
153 solutions were tested once per experimental series in a random order.

154 Test ant colonies were deprived of food but allowed water for 4 days. Before the start of the  
155 experiment, colonies were connected to the bridge-arena setup for 1h and sugar solutions,  
156 stored at +5 °C, were left at ambient temperature. After 1h, exploring ants, if any, were  
157 removed from the setup, filter papers were renewed and a sugar solution was placed in the  
158 middle of the foraging arena. Once a scout reached the mid-part of the bridge, the movable  
159 section of the bridge was taken away. The foraging behaviour of this scout was then recorded  
160 using the Observer® software (Noldus information Technology, version 5.0, Wageningen,  
161 The Netherlands) until it left the foraging arena and the bridge to go back to its nest. Three  
162 behavioural sequences were recorded:

- 163 1). the time spent walking on the bridge and the arena before drinking the sugar solution,
- 164 2) the time spent at the food source, touching and drinking the sugar solution, this measure  
165 being highly correlated to the amount of ingested food (Portha *et al.*, 2004),
- 166 3) the time spent walking on the bridge and the arena after having drunk the sugar solution.

167 With regard to recruitment, the number of trail spots laid on the bridge was assessed by  
168 observing how many times a scout bent its gaster downwards and contacted the substrate over  
169 a 6 cm bridge section on its way back to the colony. This trail-laying behaviour was used as  
170 an estimate of the ant's readiness to engage the whole colony into the exploitation of a  
171 profitable food source. Each scout having contacted the sugar solution with its mandibles or  
172 its antennae was followed until it reached the end of the bridge. Sixteen different scouts from  
173 four different colonies were tested for each sugar solution.

174

## 175 **Results**

176

### 177 *Honeydew sugar composition*

178

179 Nine sugars were identified in aphid honeydew by comparing their retention times with those  
180 of known standards: trehalose, glucose, xylose, fructose, melibiose, sucrose, melezitose,  
181 raffinose and maltose (Table 1). Eight additional peaks were also detected but could not be  
182 identified. Sucrose and fructose were the main sugars present in *A. fabae* honeydew and  
183 showed the highest concentrations ( $14.3 \text{ gL}^{-1}$  and  $8.1 \text{ gL}^{-1}$ ) as well as the highest molarities  
184 (around 0.04 M) among all the identified sugars. The monosaccharide glucose was also quite  
185 abundant both in terms of mass concentration ( $3.9 \text{ gL}^{-1}$  respectively) and molarity (0.02 M).  
186 Only small amounts of melezitose ( $2.2 \text{ gL}^{-1}$ ) were found in *A. fabae* honeydew and accounted  
187 for less than 0.005 M. The remaining five sugars were present at low levels of less than  $1 \text{ gL}^{-1}$ .

188

### 189 *Sugar preferences of Lasius .niger scouts*

190

191 For each tested sugar, the time spent by scouts exploring the foraging area before  
192 reaching the sugar source was not statistically different from the water control (Dunnett's  
193 comparison with control,  $P>0.05$ ). This indicates that ants were unable to detect sugar  
194 solutions from a distance and that they discover them by chance. Five sugar solutions induced  
195 a significantly longer lasting feeding behaviour than water control: fructose, glucose,  
196 melezitose, raffinose and sucrose (fig. 2A; Dunnett's comparison with control,  $P<0.05$ ). The  
197 time spent on the foraging area after having drunk at the sugar solution was significantly  
198 lower than with water for glucose, melezitose, raffinose and sucrose (Fig. 2B: Dunnett's  
199 comparison with control,  $P<0.05$ ). By contrast, for the other tested sugars, ants hardly drunk  
200 at the food source and walked for a long time on the foraging area. With regard to nestmate  
201 recruitment, scouts deposited significantly more trail spots on their way back to the colony  
202 after having ingested melezitose, sucrose or raffinose (Fig. 3 Dunnett's comparison with  
203 control,  $P<0.05$ ). Trail-laying behaviour was occasionally observed towards fructose and  
204 glucose but levels were not statistically different from that of the water control (Fig. 3  
205 Dunnett's comparison,  $P>0.05$ ).

206

207 Based on these results, one can separate honeydew sugars into three groups (Figs 2 ,  
208 3). The first group consists of those sugars that were less ingested by scouts and that did not  
209 trigger laying a recruitment trail—i.e. melibiose, xylose, trehalose and maltose.

210 Glucose and fructose both belong to a second group of sugars that were ingested longer than  
211 water but that did not induce a significant amount of trail-laying behaviour. Finally, in the  
212 third group are the oligosaccharides - sucrose, raffinose and melezitose - that elicit prolonged  
213 drinking behaviour as well as a pronounced trail-laying behaviour among individual scouts.

214

215 **Discussion**

216

217           Workers of several ant species are ubiquitous visitors to liquid carbohydrate sources,  
218 which are usually plant nectar, extrafloral nectaries or honeydew produced by aphid colonies  
219 (Hölldobler & Wilson, 1990; Engel *et al.*, 2001). The intensity as well as the persistence of  
220 interactions between ant and aphid partners are positively related with honeydew quantity and  
221 quality (Bristow, 1991; Bonser *et al.*, 1998; Völkl *et al.*, 1999; Detrain *et al.*, 1999; Maillieux  
222 *et al.*, 2000; 2003). Honeydew composition is therefore the keystone on which ant–aphid  
223 mutualism is built on. The occurrence and relative abundance of honeydew sugars are  
224 specific to the honeydew-producing species (Hendrix *et al.*, 1992), and can be used by ants to  
225 differentiate between honeydew from different phloem feeders. In the present study, sucrose,  
226 fructose and glucose make up the bulk of *A. fabae* honeydew by accounting for nearly 90% of  
227 identified sugar content. *Aphis fabae* also contains small amounts (less than 2%) of  
228 carbohydrates such as xylose and the disaccharides trehalose, melibiose, maltose. A similar  
229 composition of honeydew has been previously reported in several ant-attended aphid species  
230 (Völkl *et al.*, 1999; Fischer *et al.*, 2002, 2005). *Aphis fabae* excreta in the present study  
231 however contains smaller amounts of melezitose than usually produced by ant -attended  
232 aphids (Fischer *et al.*, 2005). It may be assumed that this low concentration of melezitose  
233 (<0.005 M) characterizes aphids unattended by ants, the production of this trisaccharide being  
234 induced only after prolonged interactions with tending ant workers (Fischer & Shingleton,  
235 2001).

236

237 By comparing gustatory and trail-laying responses by ants tasting different sugar solutions,  
238 the present study contributes to clarify the role of honeydew sugars both as a food and as a  
239 mediator in ant-aphid interactions. To successfully use aphid honeydew as a source of energy,  
240 ants must first exhibit a positive gustatory response to its component sugars and consequently

241 be capable of digesting and metabolizing the sugars. In addition, ant foragers must tune the  
242 level of ant-aphid interactions: scouts should increase recruitment intensity towards sugar  
243 molecules of intrinsic value or when they detect sugars that characterize food sources worth  
244 of being monopolized and defended by the ant colony.

245

246 In this study, sugars can be broadly classified into:

247 a) Sugars that elicit no feeding response and no recruitment

248 b) Sugars that are ingested by ants but that fail to elicit a recruitment

249 c) Sugars that are ingested and that trigger the laying of a recruitment trail

250

251 The gustatory detection and feeding behaviour of ants are likely to be correlated with the  
252 profitability of sugars in further metabolic processes, e.g. sugars being less digestible or  
253 providing less gain than the energy needed to digest them could be less preferred (Boevé &  
254 Wäckers 2003). Sugars from the first group- i.e. xylose, melibiose, trehalose and maltose- are  
255 less ingested than the others by scouts which subsequently spend more time before returning  
256 to the nest without laying a recruitment trail. Likewise, unsatiated ants provided with a too  
257 tiny sucrose droplet usually spend a longer time on the foraging area in comparison with  
258 satiated ants having fed on a very large food source (Mailleux *et al.*, 2000). This strongly  
259 suggests that workers faced with those poorly exploited sugars are unsatiated and are  
260 searching for additional resources. Xylose is hardly metabolized by animal cells (Terra &  
261 Ferreira, 1994) and xylanase enzymatic activity has not been detected in ant species (Ertha *et*  
262 *al.*, 2004). The disaccharide melibiose has to be hydrolyzed by a  $\beta$ -galactosidase in order to  
263 cross gut walls but the activity of this enzyme is usually weaker or even absent in ant  
264 digestive tract (Ferreira *et al.*, 1998; Boevé & Wäckers, 2003). Trehalose and maltose  
265 disaccharides are both composed of two alpha-linked glucose molecules that should be broken

266 down by glucosidase enzymes – trehalase and maltase, respectively- to become available as  
267 energy source for insect cells (Wyatt, 1967). The occurrence, as well as the activity levels, of  
268 those two enzymes in insect digestive tracts are highly variable and remain to be investigated  
269 in aphid-tending ants (Febvay & Kermarrec, 1986; Jabbar & Mohammed, 1990; D’Ettore *et*  
270 *al.*, 2002; Erthal *et al.*, 2004). Here, it is assumed that the activity of gut trehalases and  
271 hence trehalose digestibility could be far lower in aphid tending ants such as *L. niger* as  
272 compared with ants feeding on insects containing high amounts of this disaccharide (e.g.  
273 *Myrmica rubra* studied by Boeve & Wäckers 2003).

274

275 The ants spent a longer time drinking at the food droplets containing sugars in groups 2 and 3.  
276 When fed, they returned quickly to the nest what strongly suggests that the nutritive needs of  
277 individual workers were met by those sugars (Mailleux *et al.*, 2000). The ingested  
278 monosaccharides, fructose and glucose are the most common sugars present not only in  
279 excreta of sap-feeders but also in floral nectars (Baker & Baker, 1982). Since these  
280 monosaccharides can cross the intestinal barrier of insects, they are readily available for  
281 metabolic processes and can be used as energy (Wyatt, 1967; Boevé & Wäckers, 2003).  
282 Glucose molecules circulating in haemolymph can also be stored as trehalose, this storage  
283 molecule providing twice the energy for respiratory needs than glucose, without altering the  
284 osmolarity (Turunen, 1985, for review and other functions of trehalose see Thompson, 2003).  
285 The ingested oligosaccharides, sucrose, melezitose and raffinose stimulate a strong feeding  
286 response similar to that induced by monosaccharides, even though these sugars have to be  
287 metabolized to hexose units by digestive enzymes before passing through the gut wall. In  
288 these three oligosaccharides, the presence of a fructose unit seems to play a key role in the  
289 acceptance and feeding response of ants. The link between a fructose and a glucose unit can  
290 be broken down by invertases which are commonly present in the lumen of ant gut (Heil *et*

291 *al.*, 2005). In addition, these three sugars initiate a long-lasting feeding behaviour because  
292 gustatory taste receptors in aphid-tending ants express *Gr64a* genes, a family of genes  
293 involved in sensitivity of sucrose taste receptors in fruit flies (Dahanukar *et al.*, 2007). In *L.*  
294 *niger* too, gustatory receptors would be particularly sensitive to sugars containing a sucrose  
295 unit, whereas the nature of a sugar as mono- versus oligosaccharide would be of minor  
296 importance.

297

298 While the feeding responses of ant workers can be confidently related to the chemical sensory  
299 abilities and metabolic processes, it is more difficult to relate the level of food acceptance by  
300 one individual scout to its further recruitment of nestmates. Indeed, while feeding is a  
301 prerequisite to the initiation of trail recruitment by scouts, the reverse is not necessarily true:  
302 not all ingested sugar solutions elicit a trail-laying behaviour among fed individuals. In  
303 particular, despite their well-known energetic benefit for attending ants, monosaccharides  
304 such as glucose and fructose do not induce the laying of a recruitment trail. By contrast,  
305 oligosaccharides from the third group – i.e. melezitose, sucrose and raffinose - lead to high  
306 frequencies of trail-laying behaviour among fed scouts. For these sugars that are accepted and  
307 easily metabolized by ants, the number of hexose units seems to enhance social transmission  
308 of food location to nestmates and hence favours collective exploitation of oligosaccharides  
309 with a higher energetic content. However, recruiting behaviour of *L.niger* scouts towards  
310 sugars should also find its roots in the ecology of ant-plant mutualism. In order to link the  
311 supply by producers and the demand by consumers, one should compare the sugar  
312 composition of available resources -i.e. of plant nectar vs aphid honeydew (Percival, 1961;  
313 Baker & Baker, 1982; Völkl *et al.*, 1999). Sucrose, fructose and glucose are the only sugars  
314 found in most nectar and wound sap sources. Sucrose-dominated nectars appear to be  
315 associated with long-tubed flowers protecting the nectar against most ant species while

316 fructose- and glucose-dominated nectars are related to 'open' flowers having unprotected  
317 nectars that can be collected by ants (Percival, 1961). Hence, once ants discover  
318 monosaccharide solutions of glucose and/or fructose, they are likely to originate from nectar.  
319 Since such a food source may be highly variable in space, temporally restricted to the  
320 flowering season and overall produced in far less quantities than aphid honeydew, it seems  
321 useless for the ants to concentrate on these resources and to mobilize large numbers of  
322 nestmates by the laying of a recruitment trail. Actually, in the field, ant–nectar interactions are  
323 usually more opportunistic and different ant species regularly share the same sources  
324 (Bluthgen *et al.*, 2000; Bluthgen & Fiedler, 2004). By contrast, honeydew contains a broader  
325 spectrum of sugars including melezitose, sucrose and raffinose that trigger intense trail  
326 recruitment among foraging ants. Melezitose and raffinose are trisaccharide sugars which are  
327 synthesized by aphids through the action of gut enzymes on plant-derived sucrose (Rhodes *et*  
328 *al.*, 1997; Woodring *et al.*, 2006 ) and which are believed to be honeydew-specific as they are  
329 scarcely described in nectar or other sugar sources (Percival 1961, Baker & Baker, 1982).  
330 Honeydew oligosaccharides have a triple function in many aphids. First, they have a  
331 physiological function which is to reduce gut osmolarity and to counteract loss of water  
332 through the gut walls (Rhodes *et al.*, 1997; Woodring *et al.*, 2006). Second, in addition to a  
333 repellent action, they may reduce the longevity of aphid parasitoids feeding on a melezitose-  
334 rich honeydew namely due to its higher viscosity (Wäckers, 2000). Finally, oligosaccharides  
335 could have an ecological function which is to aggregate ants that in turn protect the aphid  
336 colony against natural enemies. In this respect ant scouts are able to detect melezitose at very  
337 low concentrations on contact (Schmidt, 1938) and respond intensively to honeydew or water  
338 solution containing this trisaccharide (Schmidt, 1938; Kiss, 1981; Völkl *et al.*, 1999;  
339 Woodring *et al.*, 2004). From the ant perspective, aphid-synthesized oligosaccharides such as  
340 melezitose or raffinose - act as signal sugars for the workers: their detection indicates the

341 presence of aphid colonies. Due to the generally large size of aphid colonies, to their  
342 gregarious lifestyle and their often restricted mobility, those sugar producers deserve  
343 collective exploitation and monopolization by ants. The ecological meaning of those  
344 “signal” oligosaccharides may explain why they trigger an intense trail-recruitment among  
345 aphid-tending scouts.

346 It still remains unclear to what extent feeding preferences of ants have shaped honeydew  
347 composition, or whether ants have adjusted their feeding and recruiting behaviour to optimize  
348 the utilization of honeydew as a sugar source. Further studies comparing the gustatory and  
349 foraging responses of other ant species faced with sugar solutions as well as honeydew of ant-  
350 tended aphid species should greatly contribute to clarify the evolutionary aspects of ant -aphid  
351 mutualism.

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359 This work conforms to the legal requirements of Belgium in which it was carried out.

360

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551  
552

553 Figure Legends

554

555 Figure 1. Experimental setup used to study feeding and recruiting behaviour of individual  
556 scouts. (1) access ramp, (2) movable section of the bridge, (3) 20 cm-long bridge, (4)  
557 foraging arena in which tested sugar solution was placed, (5) plastic box containing the  
558 colony.

559

560 Figure 2. Relative duration (mean + SE) spent by scouts drinking sugar solution (A) and spent  
561 walking on the foraging area after feeding at the food source(B). \* indicates significant  
562 differences with water control (Dunnett's test,  $P < 0.05$ ).

563

564 Figure 3. Mean number of trail marks (+ SE) laid by *Lasius niger* scouts having tasted a sugar  
565 solution.

566

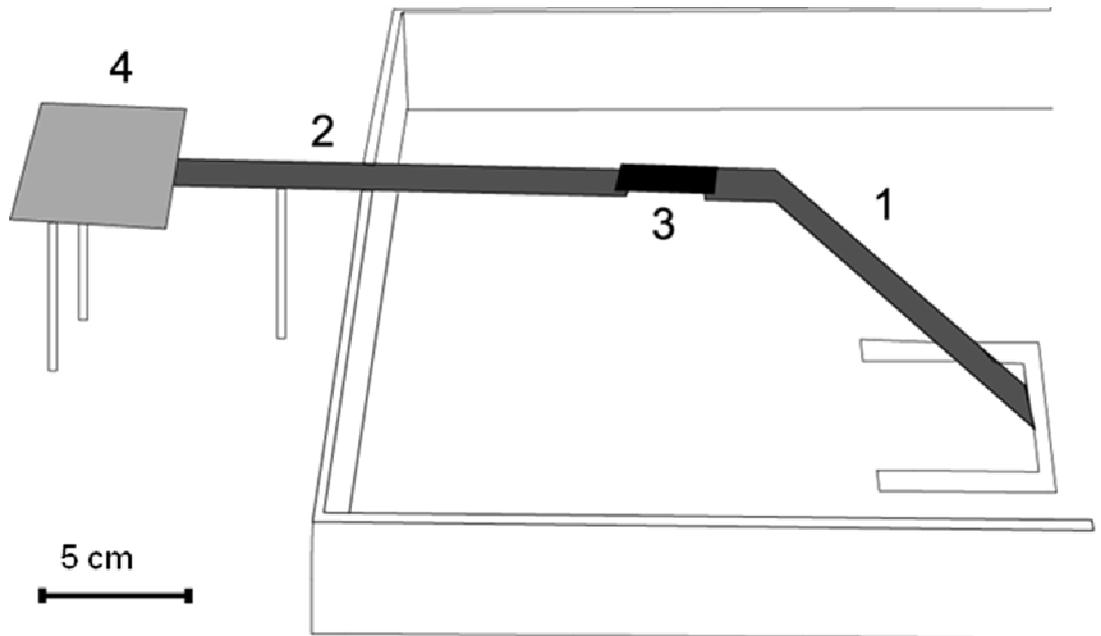
567 Table 1: Concentration, molarity (Means  $\pm$  SE,  $n=6$ ) and relative abundance of identified  
 568 sugars in honeydew of 50 unattended *A. fabae* individuals  
 569

Sugars	Concentrations (gL <sup>-1</sup> )		Molarity (X 10 <sup>-2</sup> )		% Identified Sugar amounts
	Mean	( $\pm$ SE)	Mean	( $\pm$ SE)	
Sucrose	14.29	( $\pm$ 1.14)	4.18	( $\pm$ 0.33)	47.5%
Fructose	8.07	( $\pm$ 1.85)	4.48	( $\pm$ 1.03)	26.8%
Glucose	3.92	( $\pm$ 1.38)	2.17	( $\pm$ 0.7)	13.0%
Melezitose	2.24	( $\pm$ 1.26)	0.44	( $\pm$ 0.25)	7.4%
Melibiose	0.51	( $\pm$ 0.10)	0.15	( $\pm$ 0.03)	1.7%
Xylose	0.35	( $\pm$ 0.06)	0.24	( $\pm$ 0.04)	1.2%
Raffinose	0.32	( $\pm$ 0.18)	0.07	( $\pm$ 0.04)	1.1%
Trehalose	0.28	( $\pm$ 0.11)	0.07	( $\pm$ 0.03)	0.9%
Maltose	0.11	( $\pm$ 0.08)	0.03	( $\pm$ 0.02)	0.4%

570

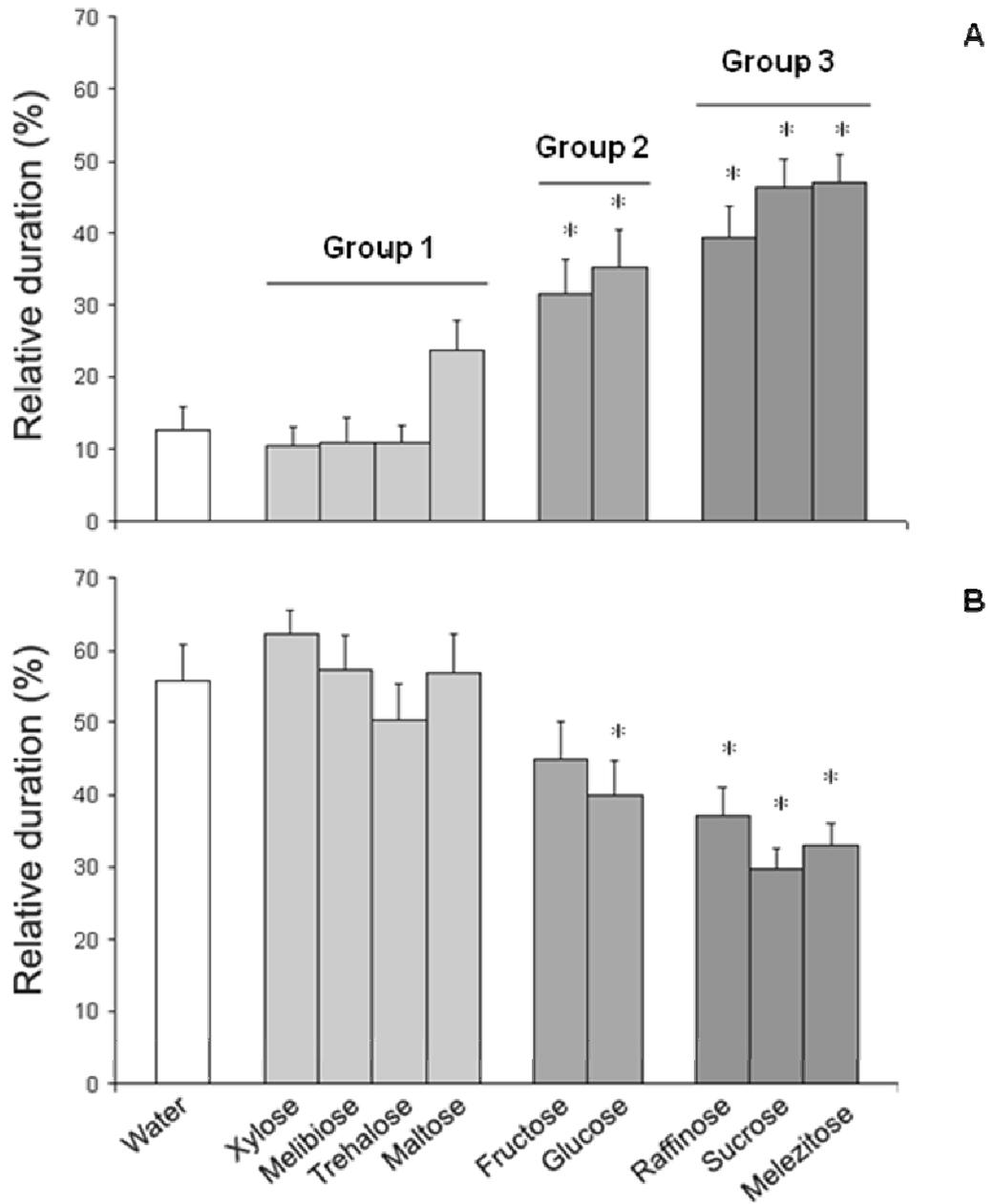
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572 Figure 1



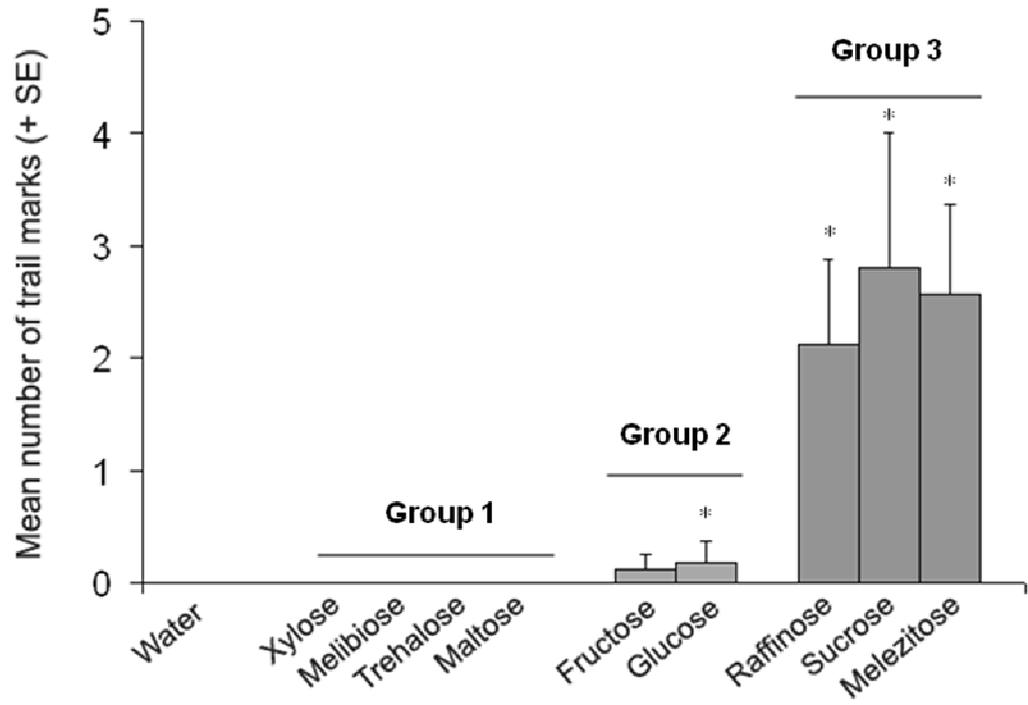
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