

# ECOLOGY OF PLANT HUMMINGBIRD INTERACTIONS IN ALASPUNGO, ECUADOR

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Alaspungo



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# 1. Introduction and project overview

One of the main hypotheses for how so many related species can co-occur is resource-partitioning where species use different resources, which limits competition among species and allows them to co-exist. In the case of hummingbirds and plants, each hummingbird species forages on a distinct set of flowers and each flowering plant species is visited by a subset of hummingbirds. Interactions between plants and hummingbirds are mutually beneficial. These mutualistic hummingbird-plant interactions are important from a hummingbird perspective because hummingbirds require nectar to fuel their high-energy lifestyles where they often hover – an energetically costly behavior – to take nectar. From a plant perspective most hummingbirds pollinate flowers as they forage on nectar, though some hummingbirds take nectar from the base of the flower, cheating the flower from this service of pollination. The intricate web of interactions between hummingbirds and their food plants evolved over millennia as a result of diffuse co-evolution which yielded a remarkable array of morphological forms and functions. On-going human activities, such as deforestation and climate change threaten these interaction webs, yet little is known as to how hummingbirds and their food plants will respond. To understand the influence of humans on this complex relationship, accurate, high quality data on hummingbird and flowering plant occurrence and hummingbird-plant interactions are required across broad regions and over an elevation range.

The Northwest slope of the Andes of Ecuador is an ideal place to study plant-hummingbird interactions because it is among the most biodiverse places on earth where multiple co-occurring species rely on each other for survival. There are ~360 species of hummingbirds on earth with the highest diversity in the Andes where up to 30 species can be found at a single site and ~1600 vascular plant species have been recorded in the region. Our study region was in the Pichincha Province (latitude 0°12' N to 0°10' S, longitude 78°59' W to 78°27' W) and covers 107 square kilometers with an elevation range from 800 to 3500 meters. Our sampling location in Alaspungo reserve lies between 2676 and 3100 meters along this gradient.

The goal of the project was to determine the abiotic and biotic factors driving variation in hummingbird-plant interaction networks across elevation and land-use gradients. By evaluating these mutualistic interactions we are able to predict how diversity of both hummingbirds and plants will be influenced by elevation and anthropogenic activities. The project is led by Dr. Catherine Graham from the Swiss Federal Research Institute and executed by Aves y Conservación/BirdLife in Ecuador, Santa Lucía, Maquipucuna, and Un Poco del Chocó with collaboration of several reserves including Mashpi, Las Grallarias, Amagusa, Sachatamia, Yanacocha (Fundación Jocotoco), Verdecocha, Puyucunapi (Mindó Cloud Forest), Rumisitana, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador, and Alaspungo community. In Alaspungo in particular we collaborated with the community and Roberto Paillacho as his president and our field assistant.

## 2. Methodological Approach

To monitor abundance patterns, flowering phenology and hummingbird flower visitation we used a combination of field transects and time-lapse cameras. These transects were 1.5 km in length and were spread across the elevation and land-use gradient with 1 to 2 transects per site. We visited each of the 18 transects (11 in forest and 7 in disturbed sites) one time per month during a two year period. In Alaspungo we sampled the transects from January 2018 to December 2019.

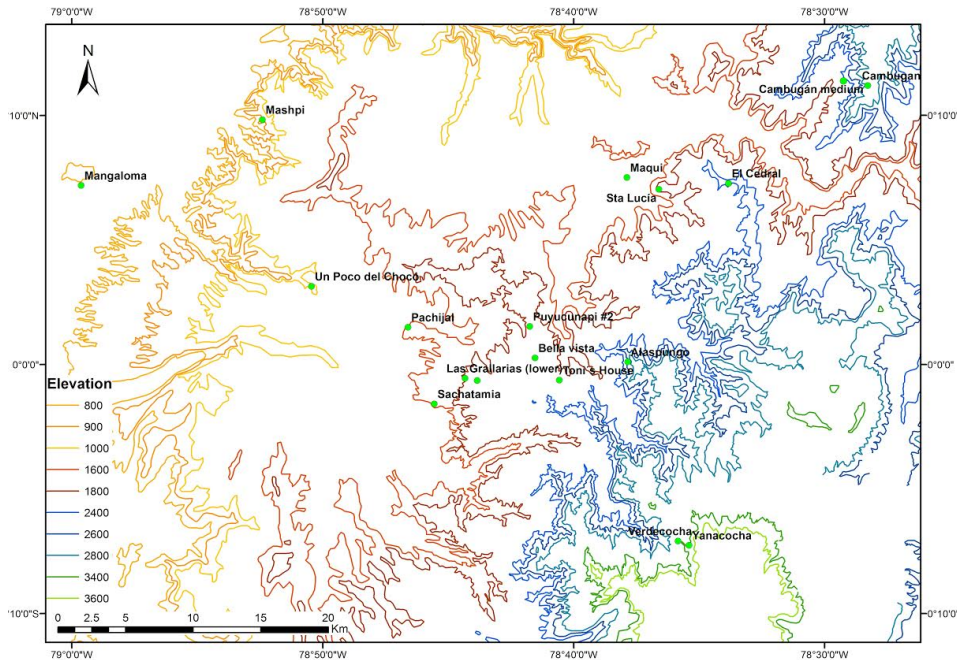


Figure 1: Location of the site in the elevation gradient.

### Field transects

In Alaspungo we have 1 transect of 1.5 km. The start of the transect is located a few meters from the forest border, reaching the transect requires a walk of about 1h15 from the Alaspungo community. The transect crosses several culuncos (ancestral roads that have remained below ground level due to people and animal traffic, they have the appearance of open tunnels) and it is not clearly marked. The end of the transect is on the border of the Pacaya Reserve where there is a sign. In case you wish to walk the transect, we suggest you contact Mr. Roberto Paillacho from the community of Alaspungo who was the assistant in this place (Figure 2).

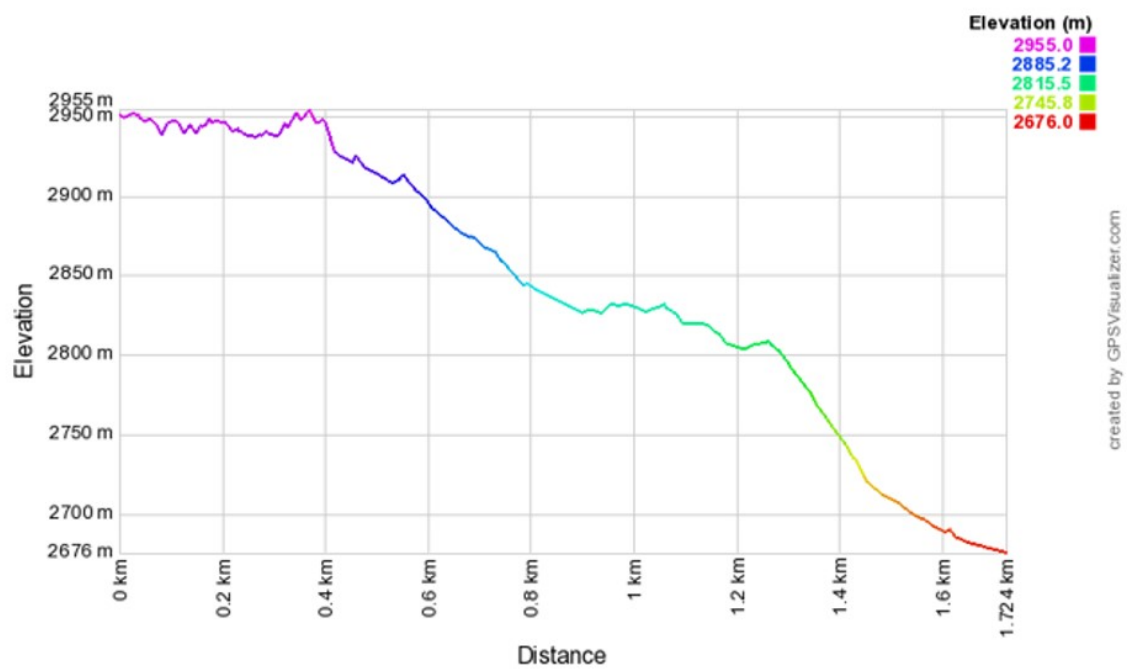


Figure 2: Elevation gradient of the transect.

**Along each transect, four to five kinds of data were taken:**

- **Flower counts:** Any plant with hummingbird syndrome flowers within a distance of ~5 meters of the transect was counted and identified to species. Characteristics of a flower with the hummingbird syndrome include brightly colored flowers (purple, red, orange or yellow) with medium to long corollas. While most species hummingbirds use have these characteristics we were conservative and monitored any questionable species or plants we have seen hummingbirds feeding. For each plant either all flowers were counted or in the case of bushes with more than ~100 flowers, total flowers on 5 representative branches were counted and used to extrapolate the number of flowers on the plant. Each species was collected once and pressed in order to archive our work and/or verify identification with an expert. Plant specimens were deposited at the Herbarium of Catholic University in Quito and Ibarra.
- **Interaction observations:** During the flower census, any interaction of a hummingbird with a flower was noted.
- **Hummingbird counts:** Any hummingbird heard or seen at a distance of 20 meters was also noted.
- **Flower morphology:** Several flower morphological features were measured on at least three individuals per species wherever possible. The Flower traits included were: a) flower corolla length, the distance from the flower opening to the back of corolla, b) effective corolla distance by cutting open flowers and measuring the corolla length extending back to the flower nectarines, c) corolla opening, d) stigma and anther length.
- **Nectar concentration:** This data was taken only at three sites corresponding to low, medium and high transects. Sugar concentration was collected at flowering species for up to 12 flowers per species using a refractometer (a capillary tube is used to extract nectar).



Figure 3: Team researcher, Andreas Nieto, counts flowers along a transect.

## Time-lapse cameras

We used time-lapse cameras to monitor hummingbird-plant interactions. Time-lapse cameras, which take a picture every second, were placed at individual flowers along the above described transects to capture visitation by hummingbird species. We placed cameras on all flowering plants along the transect roughly proportional to their abundance. The cameras turn on at dawn and record an image every second for several days, resulting in a dataset of millions of images. These images are efficiently processed using Motion Meerkat or Deep Meerkat which can be used to sort out images with hummingbirds which can be manually identified (in the past we have been able to identify 95% of birds in images). This approach minimizes reliance on time-consuming human flower observations, greatly increasing data collection in time and space permitting a rigorous test of network theory.



Figure 4: Team researcher Holger Beck shows how a camera is set up in order to film a flower.

## 3. Resulting patterns

### Plant-hummingbird interactions

Alaspungo community forest preserves 79 plant species used by hummingbirds according to our project results (Annex 1). However, in our cameras we recorded 117 different interactions between 7 hummingbirds and 41 plants (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Examples of some of the hummingbirds and plants we caught in cameras.

Table 1: List of hummingbirds and number of interactions.

<b><i>Hummingbird</i></b>	<b>No of interactions</b>	<b>No plants interacting</b>
<i>Heliangelus strophianus</i>	1016	36
<i>Adelomyia melanogenys</i>	777	26
<i>Coeligena torquata</i>	685	25
<i>Metallura tyrianthina</i>	309	19
<i>Coeligena lutetiae</i>	114	7
<i>Lafresnaya lafresnayi</i>	33	3
<i>Eriocnemis nigrivestis</i>	1	1

The most common hummingbird recorded was *Heliangelus strophianus* and the most common plant was *Psammisia oreogenes*. Although they are the most common species, they are not necessarily the species that interact with more species. The hummingbird that interacts more is *Heliangelus strophianus* and the plant that has more interactions is *Columnea strigosa*. In table 1 and 2 we can observe the number of interaction for each species.

Table 2: List of plants and number of interactions.

<b><i>Plant</i></b>	<b>No of interactions</b>	<b>No hummingbirds interacting</b>
<i>Columnea strigosa</i>	117	6
<i>Psammisia oreogenes</i>	348	5



<i>Besleria solanoides</i>	24	4
<i>Blakea</i> sp1	137	4
<i>Centropogon</i> sp.	57	4
<i>Glossoloma ichthyoderma</i>	47	4
<i>Heppiella repens</i>	28	4
<i>Macleania loeseneriana</i>	167	4
<i>Psammisia sodiroi</i>	451	4
<i>Psammisia ulbrichiana</i>	280	4
<i>Tillandsia complanata</i>	52	4
<i>Aphelandra acanthus</i>	93	3
<i>Bomarea multiflora</i>	44	3
<i>Burmeistera succulenta</i>	14	3
<i>Centropogon calycinus</i>	5	3
<i>Drymonia</i> sp.	117	3
<i>Fuchsia sylvatica</i>	17	3
<i>Glossoloma herthae</i>	5	3
<i>Kohleria affinis</i>	148	3
<i>Macleania macrantha</i>	94	3
<i>Miconia hymenantha</i>	153	3
<i>Palicourea amethystina</i>	175	3
<i>Racinaea tetrantha</i>	38	3
<i>Salvia</i> aff. <i>sigchosica</i>	7	3
<i>Sphyrospermum grandifolium</i>	20	3
<i>Tillandsia polyantha</i>	26	3
<i>Bomarea patacocensis</i>	61	2
<i>Burmeistera glabrata</i>	27	2
<i>Epidendrum mesogastropodium</i>	2	2
<i>Gasteranthus pansamalanus</i>	13	2
<i>Glossoloma</i> sp.	9	2
<i>Guzmania squarrosa</i>	39	2
<i>Heppiella ulmifolia</i>	9	2
<i>Macrocarpaea gattaca</i>	38	2
<i>Palicourea calothyrsus</i>	37	2
<i>Tropaeolum adpressum</i>	5	2
<i>Centropogon nigricans</i>	5	1
<i>Manettia trianae</i>	2	1
<i>Pitcairnia fusca</i>	4	1
<i>Salvia pauciserrata</i>	2	1
<i>Thibaudia floribunda</i>	18	1

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## Plants information and phenology

We recorded the abundance of flowers from January 2018 to December 2019. The months with higher abundance of flowers are February and December (Figure 6).

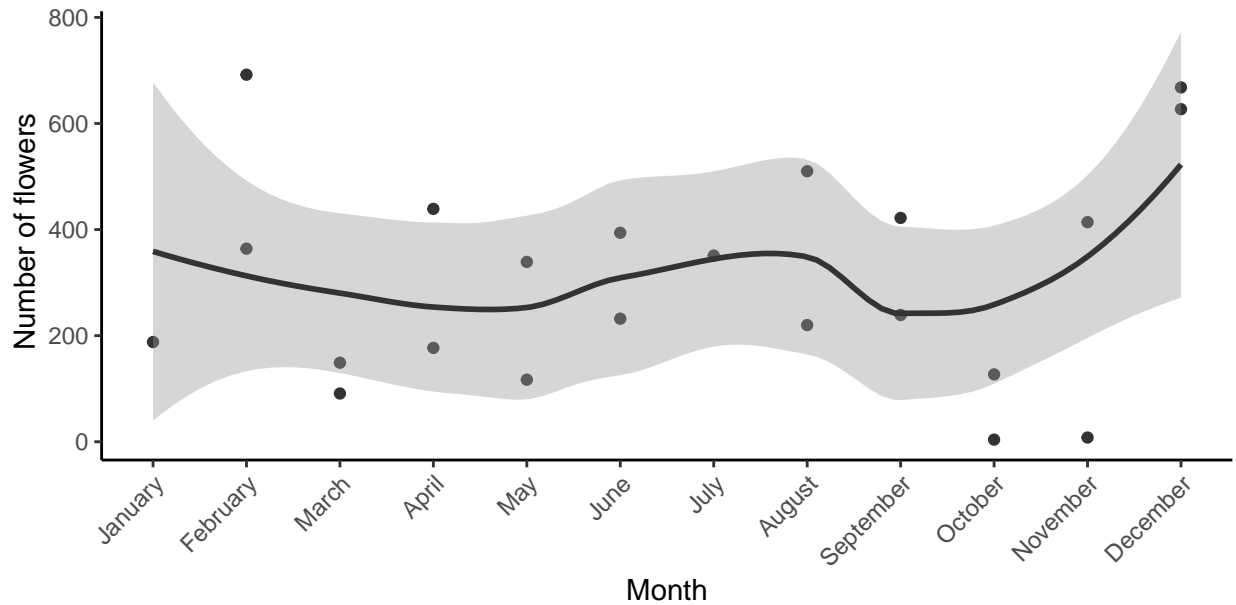


Figure 6: Abundance of flowers by month. Points represent the sum of flowers at each month and the black line represents the mean trend.

However, not all plant produces flowers at the same time. In figure 7 we can observe the phenology of the four most common plant species.

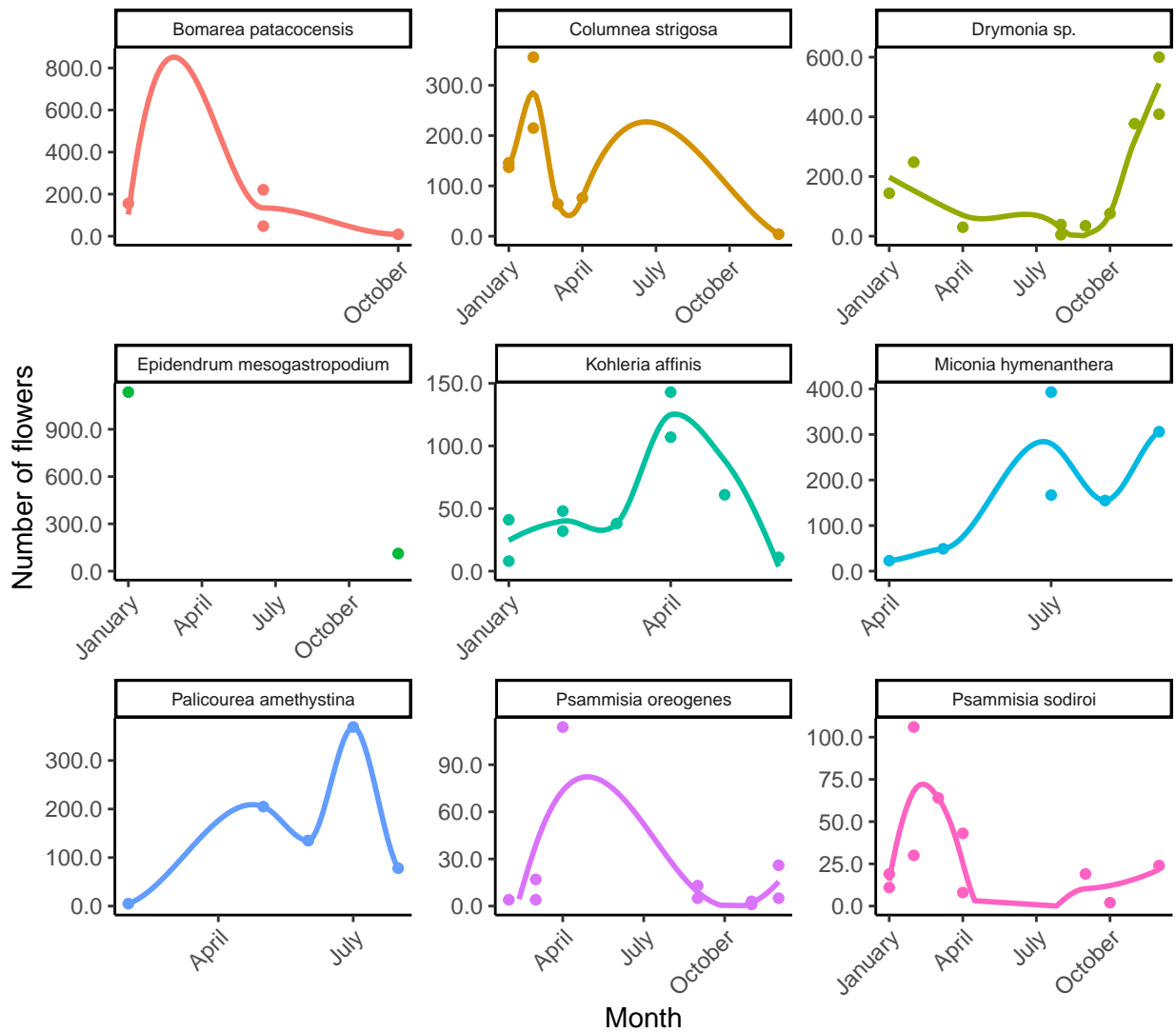


Figure 7: Phenology of most common flowers by month. Points represent the number of flowers counted in each month and the line represents the mean trend. Each color represents a different plant species.

Below we describe the most representative plant families present in Alaspungo.

### **GESNERIACEAE**

Gesneriaceae, the African violet family has around 3000 species, distributed mainly in Central and South America, East and South Asia, Europe and Oceania. In Ecuador there are 200 species grouped in 25 genera. They could be herbs (*Kohleria*, *Diastema*), shrubs (*Glossoloma*, *Columnea*) or very rarely small trees (*Shuaria*, *Besleria*). Gesneriaceae usually have opposite leaves, axillary or terminal inflorescence (cyme, raceme or fascicles), flowers with five petals joined to form a colorful tube with 4 or 5 lobes. Four didynamous stamens (two longer and two shorter) generally fused together and located at the dorsal part of the flower, a simple elongated style with the stigma usually bilobed. In the Pichincha province 15 genera and 89 species have been reported. In our study 64 species were registered, 12 are endemic, 6 are endangered (EN), and 6 are vulnerable (VU). Additionally, we found 3 species that were not previously reported for Pichincha, 2 new records for Ecuador, and 5 new species. Ten species have been recorded in Alaspungo, *Glossoloma* and *Heppiella* are the most diverse genus with 3 and 2 species respectively. There are two species confirmed as new (*Glossoloma sp. nov.* and *Drymonia sp. nov.*).

### **ERICACEAE**

Ericaceae also known as the blueberry family as “mortiño” is represented by 125 genera and 4000 species, widely distributed in temperate, subarctic, and also at high elevations in tropical regions. In Ecuador 21 genus and 240 species have been reported. Life forms include woody shrubs (*Cavendishia*, *Macleania*), trees (*Bejaria*, *Thibaudia*), or suffrutex (small plants with woody stems and soft branch as *Gaultheria*, *Disterigma*). Plants could be erect, prostrate or climbers with coriaceous leaves. Flowers are perfect (containing anther and stigma), mostly tubular with 4 to 7 lobes, anthers in twice number than the petals, often enlarger in one or two terminal tubes. Fruit usually is a capsule, berry or drupe. In Pichincha province there are 13 genus and 73 species. During EPHI project 45 species were registered and 18 are endemic: one is critically endangered (CR), four are endangered (EN), and 10 species are vulnerable (VU). *Macleania tropica* is the first record for Pichincha area, it was only known from Esmeraldas and Colombia. *Antoptherus ecuadorensis*, and *Macleania alata* are the first records made since the type collection in 1979 and 1986 respectively (these two species were collected nearby the study transects). Alaspungo has 10 species and the genus with most species are *Psamissia* with 5 and *Macleania* with 2 species. Three species are endemic *Disterigma noyesiae* and *Psammisia aurantiaca* also vulnerable (VU), and *Macleania loeseneriana*.

### **CAMPANULACEAE**

Campanulaceae includes lobelias and “pucunero” plants. It is represented by 70 genera and near 2000 species, it is considered as a cosmopolitan (spread around the world) family. Ten genus and 148 species have been reported from Ecuador. Campanulaceae are mainly terrestrial plants, rarely epiphytic, there are shrubs (*Centropogon*, *Siphocampylus*), vines (*Siphocampylus*, *Burmeistera*) or herbs (*Lobelia*) with latex. Flowers are perfect (anthers and stigma are present), petals fused forming a tubular bilabiate corolla (base and top petals are larger than the laterals). Filaments and anthers joined forming a slightly

curved tube generally longer than the corolla, stigma emerging between the anthers. In the Pichincha province 6 genus and 39 species have been reported, and in the scope of this project 23 species were registered. There are 11 endemic species, one is critically endangered (CR), five are endangered (EN), and three species are vulnerable (VU). Two species of *Burmeistera* are new and restricted to Mashpi area. Eight species have been recorded in Alaspungo area including *Burmeistera* and *Centropogon* each one with 4 species. *Centropogon brachysiphoniatus* is critically endangered (CR), and *Centropogon calycinus* is endangered (EN). There is also a *Centropogon* species not yet identified and potentially a new species.

## The Network of Interactions

The interaction data we collected can be used to explore how the interactions network is organized at Alaspungo. In figure 8 we show the structure of the network.

By analyzing the network structure, we found that the plant *Columnnea strigosa* and the hummingbird *Coeligena torquata* are the key species that holds the network together. If they are lost, the network will become less stable. By contrast, *Salvia pauciserrata* and *Eriocnemis nigrivestis* are very specialized species which means they interact with a small group of specialized species. In table 3 we can observe the plants interacting with each hummingbird.

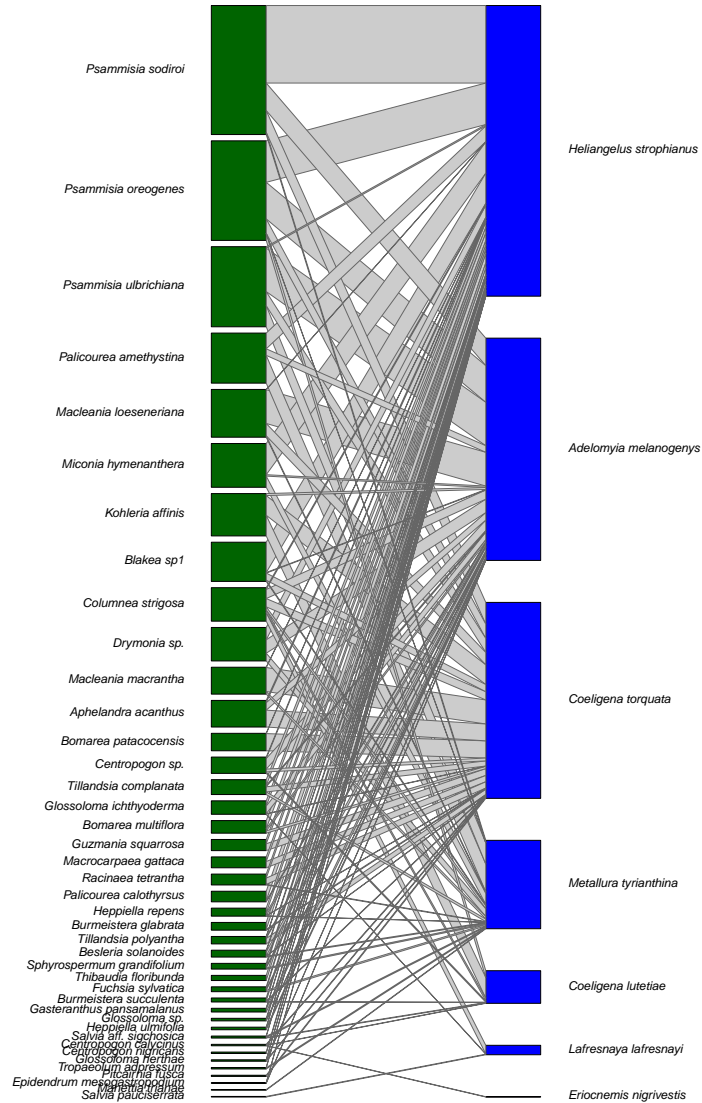


Figure 8: Network of interactions. Blue represents hummingbirds and green plants. Each line represents an interaction between a hummingbird and a plant obtained from our camera observations. Thicker lines indicate that the interaction was common while very thin lines indicate that the interaction occurred rarely. The size of the colored bar shows the number of interactions of a hummingbird or plant participated in an interaction.

Table 3: List of Hummingbirds with the plant species they visited.

<b><i>Hummingbird Species</i></b>	<b><i>Visited plant species</i></b>
	<i>Aphelandra acanthus</i>
	<i>Besleria solanoides</i>
	<i>Blakea sp1</i>
	<i>Bomarea multiflora</i>
	<i>Bomarea patacocensis</i>
	<i>Burmeistera glabrata</i>
	<i>Burmeistera succulenta</i>
	<i>Centropogon nigricans</i>
	<i>Centropogon sp.</i>
	<i>Columnea strigosa</i>
	<i>Drymonia sp.</i>
	<i>Epidendrum mesogastropodium</i>
	<i>Fuchsia sylvatica</i>
	<i>Gasteranthus pansamalanus</i>
	<i>Glossoloma herthae</i>
	<i>Glossoloma ichthyoderma</i>
	<i>Glossoloma sp.</i>
	<i>Guzmania squarrosa</i>
	<i>Heppiella repens</i>
	<i>Heppiella ulmifolia</i>
	<i>Macleania loeseneriana</i>
	<i>Macleania macrantha</i>
	<i>Macrocarpaea gattaca</i>
	<i>Miconia hymenantha</i>
	<i>Palicourea amethystina</i>
	<i>Palicourea calothyrsus</i>
	<i>Psammisia oreogenes</i>
	<i>Psammisia sodiroi</i>



	<i>Psammisia ulbrichiana</i>
	<i>Racinaea tetrantha</i>
	<i>Salvia aff. sigchosica</i>
	<i>Sphyraspermum grandifolium</i>
	<i>Thibaudia floribunda</i>
	<i>Tillandsia complanata</i>
	<i>Tillandsia polyantha</i>
<i>Heliangelus strophianus</i>	<i>Tropaeolum adpressum</i>
	<i>Aphelandra acanthus</i>
	<i>Besleria solanoides</i>
	<i>Blakea sp1</i>
	<i>Bomarea multiflora</i>
	<i>Centropogon sp.</i>
	<i>Columnea strigosa</i>
	<i>Drymonia sp.</i>
	<i>Epidendrum mesogastropodium</i>
	<i>Fuchsia sylvatica</i>
	<i>Gasteranthus pansamalanus</i>
	<i>Glossoloma herthae</i>
	<i>Glossoloma ichthyoderma</i>
	<i>Glossoloma sp.</i>
	<i>Heppiella repens</i>
	<i>Heppiella ulmifolia</i>
	<i>Kohleria affinis</i>
	<i>Macleania loeseneriana</i>
	<i>Miconia hymenantha</i>
	<i>Palicourea amethystina</i>
	<i>Palicourea calothyrsus</i>
	<i>Psammisia oreogenes</i>
	<i>Psammisia sodiroi</i>

	<i>Psammisia ulbrichiana</i>
	<i>Sphyrospermum grandifolium</i>
	<i>Tillandsia complanata</i>
<i>Adelomyia melanogenys</i>	<i>Tillandsia polyantha</i>
	<i>Aphelandra acanthus</i>
	<i>Besleria solanoides</i>
	<i>Blakea sp1</i>
	<i>Bomarea multiflora</i>
	<i>Bomarea patacocensis</i>
	<i>Burmeistera glabrata</i>
	<i>Burmeistera succulenta</i>
	<i>Centropogon calycinus</i>
	<i>Centropogon sp.</i>
	<i>Columnnea strigosa</i>
	<i>Glossoloma herthae</i>
	<i>Glossoloma ichthyoderma</i>
	<i>Guzmania squarrosa</i>
	<i>Heppiella repens</i>
	<i>Kohleria affinis</i>
	<i>Macleania loeseneriana</i>
	<i>Macleania macrantha</i>
	<i>Macrocarpaea gattaca</i>
	<i>Pitcairnia fusca</i>
	<i>Psammisia oreogenes</i>
	<i>Psammisia sodiroi</i>
	<i>Psammisia ulbrichiana</i>
	<i>Racinaea tetrantha</i>
	<i>Tillandsia complanata</i>
<i>Coeligena torquata</i>	<i>Tillandsia polyantha</i>
	<i>Besleria solanoides</i>

	<i>Blakea sp1</i>
	<i>Columnnea strigosa</i>
	<i>Drymonia sp.</i>
	<i>Fuchsia sylvatica</i>
	<i>Heppiella repens</i>
	<i>Macleania loeseneriana</i>
	<i>Macleania macrantha</i>
	<i>Manettia trianae</i>
	<i>Miconia hymenanthera</i>
	<i>Palicourea amethystina</i>
	<i>Psammisia oreogenes</i>
	<i>Psammisia sodiroi</i>
	<i>Psammisia ulbrichiana</i>
	<i>Racinaea tetrantha</i>
	<i>Salvia aff. sigchosica</i>
	<i>Sphyrospermum grandifolium</i>
	<i>Tillandsia complanata</i>
<i>Metallura tyrianthina</i>	<i>Tropaeolum adpressum</i>
	<i>Burmeistera succulenta</i>
	<i>Centropogon calycinus</i>
	<i>Centropogon sp.</i>
	<i>Columnnea strigosa</i>
	<i>Kohleria affinis</i>
	<i>Psammisia oreogenes</i>
<i>Coeligena lutetiae</i>	<i>Salvia aff. sigchosica</i>
	<i>Columnnea strigosa</i>
	<i>Glossoloma ichthyoderma</i>
<i>Lafresnaya lafresnayi</i>	<i>Salvia pauciserrata</i>
<i>Eriocnemis nigrivestis</i>	<i>Centropogon calycinus</i>

## 4. Conclusions:

- Many similar species can occur in the same place because they use different resources.
- Conservation efforts should consider not only species but interactions among species.
- Key hummingbird plants such as *Columnea strigosa* and *Psammisia oreogenes* can be used in restoration in Alaspungo. These species offer resources to more hummingbirds than the other plants where we recorded hummingbirds foraging (6 species).
- *Eriocnemis nigrivestis* is the most specialized hummingbird. Species such as *Centropogon calycinus* is key to maintaining this hummingbird in Alaspungo.
- Alaspungo is very important for the conservation of endangered plants and the Black-breasted Puffleg.
- Alaspungo has a large diversity of Campanulaceae (eight species), as compared to other sites where we worked.
- In Alaspungo, two species were confirmed as new species (*Glossoloma sp. nov.* and *Drymonia sp. nov.*), and it likely has additional undescribed species.

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