**WOODPECKERS AS POTENTIAL DISPERSAL VECTORS FOR LICHENS**

Niko Johansson1\*; Ulla Kaasalainen2; Jouko Rikkinen1

1 Finnish Museum of National History (LUOMUS), Helsinki; 2 Department of Geobiology, University of Göttingen, Göttingen; \* E-mail: niko.johansson@helsinki.fi

Animal-mediated dispersal has often been discussed in the context of biogeography and dispersal of lichens and fungi, but experimental evidence remains scarce. Tree-dwelling birds, such as woodpeckers, would seem to represent ideal dispersal vectors for organisms growing on standing tree trunks, such as epiphytic lichens and fungi. We have utilized bird natural history collections as a novel source of data for studying dispersal ecology of lichens. We screened freshly preserved specimens of three Finnish woodpecker species for microscopic propagules. Samples were taken from bird feet as well as chest and tail feathers. Propagules were extracted using a sonication-centrifugation protocol and the material obtained was identified using light microscopy. Diverse biological material was recovered from all specimens of all bird species, from all positions sampled. Most abundant categories of discovered biological material included lichen soredia, fungal spores and bryophyte fragments. Additionally, freshwater diatoms, bryophyte spores, algal cells, testate amoebae, rotifers, nematodes, pollen, and arthropod appendages were identified. We discuss the relevance of our findings in the context of dispersal ecology of lichens and discuss the next steps of our research: using molecular approaches to identify dispersing taxa in bird plumage.