Drivers of larval gregariousness in Lepidoptera

Supervisory team:
Main supervisor: Dr Stephen Montgomery (University of Bristol)
Second supervisor: Prof Innes Cuthill (University of Bristol)
Dr Christos Ioannou (University of Bristol)

Collaborators: Dr Owen McMillan (Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute)

Host institution: University of Bristol

Project description:
Gregarious behaviour has evolved many times in a wide range of animals. The prevalence of gregariousness poses many interesting evolutionary questions; for example, how is the conflict between competition and cooperation balanced? What are the advantages of social behaviour? And what are the costs? But it also leads to many mechanistic questions; how do animals sense each other? How do they track each other’s behaviour?

This project aims to tackle these questions using Heliconiini, a diverse tribe of Neotropical butterflies, as a study system. Gregarious larval behaviour has evolved in multiple independent lineages, and in some cases closely related species differ dramatically in egg laying and larval behaviour. The primary goals of the project are to:

i) Develop protocols to accurately quantify gregarious behaviour across species and larval stages.

ii) Conduct comparative analyses to explore the interactions between gregarious behaviour, colouration, predator avoidance, and host plant morphology.

iii) Perform experiments to establish what sensory cues gregarious species use to maintain group cohesion.

iv) Use available comparative genomics and new neurotranscriptomic data to identify candidate genes that may contribute to larval behaviour.

The project will suit a highly motivated student interested in integrating different approaches to understanding behavioural variation. In addition to core DTP training they will receive guidance in experimental design, comparative methods, image processing and genomics. The project will involve periods of fieldwork in the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute’s insectaries in Gamboa, Panama, which is the center of a large international community working on Heliconius butterflies.

Background reading

