



Insect Biodiversity in Forest and Urban Ecosystems: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

Insects are vital to ecosystem functioning, acting as pollinators, decomposers, and a crucial part of food webs. However, rapid urbanization and habitat transformation are dramatically altering patterns of insect biodiversity. This article provides a comparative analysis of insect diversity in forest and urban ecosystems, synthesizing recent research and case studies. We examine the drivers shaping insect communities in both environments, the ecological roles insects play, and the implications of biodiversity loss for ecosystem health. The analysis highlights the complexity of urban ecosystems, the importance of local and landscape factors, and the potential for urban green spaces to support rich insect assemblages. The article concludes with recommendations for biodiversity conservation in the face of ongoing urban expansion.

Keywords: Urban Insect Biodiversity, Forest Ecosystem Insects, Urbanization and Ecology, Pollinators in Urban Areas, Green Space Conservation

1. Introduction

Insects, with millions of described and undescribed species, represent the most diverse group of animals on Earth. Their ecological significance is immense: they pollinate plants, recycle nutrients, aerate soils, and serve as food for countless other organisms. Forests, with their structural complexity and plant diversity, have traditionally been considered hotspots of insect biodiversity. In contrast, urban ecosystems—characterized by habitat fragmentation, pollution, and human disturbance—are often viewed as biodiversity-poor landscapes.

Yet, as cities expand and natural habitats shrink, understanding how insect biodiversity responds to urbanization is critical. Recent research suggests that urban areas, especially those with diverse vegetation and green spaces, can support surprisingly rich insect communities, though often with altered species composition compared to forests⁵⁶. This comparative analysis explores the patterns, drivers, and implications of insect biodiversity in forest and urban ecosystems.

2. Insect Biodiversity in Forest Ecosystems

2.1. Forests as Biodiversity Reservoirs

Forests are among the most biodiverse terrestrial habitats. The structural complexity of forests—ranging from the forest floor to the canopy—creates numerous microhabitats for insects. High plant diversity provides a variety of food sources and niches, supporting specialized herbivores, predators, parasitoids, and decomposers.

2.2. Drivers of Diversity

Key factors influencing insect diversity in forests include:

- **Plant species richness:** Greater plant diversity supports more insect species, especially herbivores and pollinators.
- **Habitat heterogeneity:** Variation in light, moisture, and substrate creates diverse niches.
- **Microclimate stability:** Forests buffer temperature and humidity fluctuations, benefiting sensitive insect taxa.
- **Limited disturbance:** Intact forests experience less anthropogenic disturbance, allowing for stable insect communities.

2.3. Ecological Roles

In forest ecosystems, insects play critical roles:

- **Pollination:** Many forest plants depend on insects for reproduction.
- **Decomposition:** Beetles, ants, termites, and flies break down organic matter, recycling nutrients.
- **Food webs:** Insects are prey for birds, mammals, reptiles, and amphibians, maintaining ecosystem balance.

3. Insect Biodiversity in Urban Ecosystems

3.1. Urbanization and Its Impacts

Urbanization is a major driver of biodiversity change, transforming landscapes through habitat loss, fragmentation, pollution, and the introduction of non-native species. Urban environments are characterized by a mosaic of built structures, roads, gardens, parks, and remnant patches of natural vegetation.

3.2. Patterns of Insect Diversity

Research shows that urbanization generally reduces insect species richness and evenness, though the extent depends on the taxonomic group, degree of urbanization, and spatial scale⁶. For example, studies in Kerala and other regions indicate that butterflies and ground arthropods decline in highly urbanized areas, while some generalist and invasive species may increase⁶.

However, urban green spaces—such as parks, gardens, and even small patches like tree pits—can support diverse insect assemblages, sometimes rivaling those of natural habitats³⁵. The presence of native or climate-appropriate plants, habitat heterogeneity, and reduced pesticide use are key factors promoting urban insect diversity⁵.

3.3. Ecological Functions in Urban Areas

Insects in urban ecosystems continue to provide essential services:

- **Pollination:** Urban gardens and parks can support pollinator communities, benefiting both wild and cultivated plants.
- **Decomposition:** Insects process organic waste, contributing to soil health.
- **Pest control:** Predatory insects help regulate pest populations.

However, urban insects may differ in function and efficiency compared to their forest counterparts. For example, urban ants often have reduced heat tolerance and may be less effective at certain ecological functions⁴.

4. Comparative Analysis: Forest vs. Urban Insect Biodiversity

4.1. Species Richness and Composition

- **Forests:** Typically have higher overall species richness, including many specialists adapted to stable, complex habitats.
- **Urban Areas:** Often show reduced richness, with a shift toward generalist, cosmopolitan, and sometimes invasive species. However, urban areas with diverse and native vegetation can support surprisingly high insect diversity⁵⁷.

4.2. Community Structure and Function

- **Forests:** Insect communities are shaped by plant diversity, microclimate, and minimal disturbance, leading to stable, functionally diverse assemblages.
- **Urban Areas:** Community structure is influenced by both broad-scale urbanization and fine-scale habitat features. Urban insect communities may be more variable and less functionally diverse, but targeted habitat management can enhance both richness and ecological function⁵.

4.3. Environmental Drivers

- **Forests:** Key drivers include plant diversity, habitat complexity, and microclimate stability.
- **Urban Areas:** Drivers operate at multiple scales—local (e.g., plant composition, microclimate), landscape (e.g., connectivity, green space size), and regional (e.g., urbanization gradient)⁵. The presence of native or drought-tolerant plants is consistently associated with higher insect diversity, regardless of the degree of urbanization⁵.

4.4. Seasonal and Spatial Variation

Urbanization can dampen seasonal variation in insect communities due to more stable temperatures and water availability⁵. In forests, insect populations often show pronounced seasonal dynamics linked to climate and plant phenology.

5. Case Studies and Recent Research

5.1. Los Angeles Urban Insect Study

A major study in Los Angeles found that insect species richness and abundance were highest in drier and hotter sites, but the magnitude of these effects varied with the degree of urbanization⁵. Species composition was best predicted by broad-scale urbanization trends: less urbanized sites hosted more native species, while highly urbanized sites were dominated by cosmopolitan insects. Importantly, sites with native or drought-tolerant plants had over 30% higher insect richness and abundance, regardless of urbanization⁵.

5.2. Urban Tree Pits as Insect Habitats

Research in the Colombian Caribbean and other cities has shown that urban tree pits can provide habitat for a wide range of insect orders and families, especially herbivores and their predators³⁸. These microhabitats can support local biodiversity even in densely built environments.

5.3. Kerala Comparative Study

A comparative study in Kerala assessed insect species composition in rural and urban areas. It found that urbanization generally reduced species richness and evenness, but small, scattered habitats like domestic gardens could support rich insect assemblages⁶. Factors such as plant diversity, habitat quality, and management practices were key determinants of urban insect diversity.

5.4. Urban Tree Diversity and Insect Communities

Surprisingly, some studies have found that tree species richness can be higher in cities than in surrounding forests, partly due to the introduction of exotic species⁷. While this can provide hosts for more insect species, it also increases the

risk of invasive pests and may alter community composition.

6. Conservation Implications and Recommendations

6.1. Importance of Urban Green Spaces

Urban green spaces—parks, gardens, green roofs, and remnant forest patches—are critical for conserving insect biodiversity in cities. Their design, management, and plant composition greatly influence their ecological value.

- **Native and climate-appropriate plants:** Planting native species supports native insect assemblages and helps maintain ecosystem functions⁵.
- **Habitat heterogeneity:** Diverse vegetation structure and microhabitats (e.g., logs, leaf litter, water features) enhance insect diversity.
- **Connectivity:** Linking green spaces through corridors or stepping stones facilitates insect dispersal and gene flow.

6.2. Landscape and Local-Scale Management

Effective conservation requires attention to both broad-scale urban planning and fine-scale habitat management⁵. Local interventions—such as reducing pesticide use, providing nesting sites, and maintaining flowering plants—can have significant positive impacts.

6.3. Public Engagement and Citizen Science

Citizen science initiatives, such as community-based insect monitoring, raise awareness and contribute valuable data for research and conservation⁵. Engaging urban residents in biodiversity-friendly gardening and habitat creation can foster stewardship and enhance urban ecosystem health.

6.4. Research and Monitoring

Continued research is needed to understand the complex interactions between urbanization, habitat features, and insect communities. Long-term monitoring and comparative studies across different cities and forest types will inform better management practices.

7. Challenges and Future Directions

7.1. Urbanization and Biotic Homogenization

Urbanization often leads to biotic homogenization—the replacement of diverse native communities with a few widespread, generalist species. This can reduce ecosystem resilience and function⁵.

7.2. Climate Change

Urban heat islands and climate change interact to affect insect phenology, distribution, and community dynamics. Adaptive management and climate-resilient urban design are needed.

7.3. Invasive Species

The introduction of non-native plants and insects in urban areas can disrupt native communities and facilitate the spread of invasive species⁷. Vigilant monitoring and management are essential.

7.4. Data Gaps

Many urban habitats, such as small gardens and tree pits, remain under-studied^{6,8}. More research is needed on the drivers of insect diversity in these microhabitats and their role in urban ecosystem functioning.

8. Conclusion

Insect biodiversity is shaped by a complex interplay of environmental, biological, and anthropogenic factors. While forests remain vital reservoirs of insect diversity, urban ecosystems—when thoughtfully managed—can also support rich and functionally important insect communities. The comparative analysis underscores the need for integrated conservation strategies that address both landscape and local scales, promote native vegetation, and engage the public in stewardship. As urbanization accelerates, preserving and enhancing insect biodiversity in both forests and cities will be crucial for sustaining ecosystem services and human well-being.

9. References

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