

This is a repository copy of *Temperate airborne grass pollen defined by spatio-temporal shifts in community composition*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/143020/>

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Brennan, Georgina, Potter, Caitlin, de Vere, Natasha et al. (25 more authors) (2019) Temperate airborne grass pollen defined by spatio-temporal shifts in community composition. *Nature Ecology and Evolution*. ISSN 2397-334X

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41559-019-0849-7>

Reuse

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

1 **Title: Temperate airborne grass pollen defined by spatio-temporal shifts in community**
2 **composition**

3 **Authors:** Georgina L. Brennan^{1*}, Caitlin Potter², Natasha de Vere^{2,3}, Gareth W. Griffith²,
4 Carsten A. Skjøth⁴, Nicholas J. Osborne^{5,6,7}, Benedict W. Wheeler⁵, Rachel N. McInnes⁸,
5 Yolanda Clewlow⁸, Adam Barber⁸, Helen M. Hanlon⁸, Matthew Hegarty², Laura
6 Jones^{1,3}, Alexander Kurganskiy⁴, Francis M. Rowney⁵, Charlotte Armitage⁹, Beverley Adams-
7 Groom⁴, Col R. Ford³, Geoff M. Petch⁴, The PollerGEN Consortium, and Simon Creer^{1*}.

8

9 **Consortium** Angela Elliot⁹, Carl A. Frisk⁴, Roy Neilson¹⁰, Stephen Potter¹¹, Abdullah M. Rafiq¹,
10 David, B. Roy¹², Katherine Selby¹³, Natascha Steinberg⁹

11

12 **Affiliations:**

13 ¹Molecular Ecology and Fisheries Genetics Laboratory, School of Natural Sciences, Bangor
14 University, Bangor, Gwynedd, Wales, UK

15 ²IBERS, Aberystwyth University, Aberystwyth, Ceredigion, Wales, UK

16 ³National Botanic Garden of Wales, Llanarthne, Carmarthenshire, Wales, UK

17 ⁴University of Worcester, Worcester, Worcestershire, UK

18 ⁵University of Exeter, Truro, Cornwall, UK

19 ⁶University of New South Wales, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

20 ⁷School of Public Health, Faculty of Medicine, The University of Queensland, Herston,

21 Brisbane, Australia

22 ⁸Met Office, Exeter, Devon, UK

23 ⁹The Woodland Trust, Kempton Way, Grantham, Lincolnshire, UK.

24 ¹⁰College of Life and Environmental Science, University of Exeter, Exeter, UK

25 ¹¹Ecological Sciences, The James Hutton Institute, Dundee, Scotland, UK

26 ¹²The David Hide Asthma & Allergy Research Centre, St Mary's Hospital, Newport, Isle of
27 Wight, UK

28 ¹³Centre for Ecology & Hydrology, Crowmarsh Gifford, Wallingford, Oxfordshire, UK.

29 ¹⁴Environment Department, University of York, Heslington, York, UK

30

31 **Corresponding authors:** Simon Creer (s.creer@bangor.ac.uk) and Georgina L. Brennan

32 (g.l.b.doonan@gmail.com)

33

34 Grass pollen is the world's most harmful outdoor aeroallergen, yet it is unknown how
35 airborne pollen assemblages change in time and space. Human sensitivity varies between
36 different species of grass that flower at different times, but it is not known if temporal
37 turnover in species composition match terrestrial flowering or if species richness steadily
38 accumulates over the grass pollen season. Here, using targeted, high-throughput sequencing,
39 we demonstrate that all grass genera display discrete, temporally restricted peaks of
40 incidence which varied with latitude and longitude throughout Great Britain, revealing that
41 the taxonomic composition of grass pollen exposure changes substantially across the grass
42 pollen season.

43

44 Allergens carried in airborne pollen are associated with both asthma¹ and allergic rhinitis (hay
45 fever), negatively affecting 400 million people worldwide². Pollen from the grass family
46 (Poaceae) constitutes the most significant outdoor aeroallergen^{3,4}, and more people are
47 sensitised to grass pollen than to any other pollen type⁵. However, despite the harmful
48 impact of grass pollen on human health, especially as reported in developed nations, current
49 studies and forecasts categorize grass pollen at the family level (Poaceae)^{6,7} due to difficulties
50 in differentiating species based on morphology⁸. Furthermore, while different species of
51 temperate grass flower at different timepoints^{9,10}, it is unknown if the disparate phenology of
52 local grass taxa at ground level are useful for making predictions on the seasonal variation in
53 airborne pollen. Airborne pollen is highly mobile^{11,12} and pollen concentrations often do not
54 directly correlate to local flowering times¹¹. Persistence and mobility of grass pollen could
55 result in steadily increasing species richness of airborne pollen over the grass pollen season.
56 Conversely, if grass pollen does not persist for an extended time in the air, pollen
57 assemblages should reflect temporal turnover in species composition over the summer

58 months. Understanding the taxon-specific phenology of airborne pollen would fill a
59 significant knowledge gap in our understanding of allergen triggers, with associated benefits
60 to healthcare providers, pharmaceutical industries and the public.

61

62 Many species within the subfamilies Pooideae, Chloridoideae, and Panicoideae release
63 allergenic pollen into the atmosphere⁵, including *Phleum* spp. (e.g. Timothy grasses), *Dactylis*
64 spp. (Cocksfoot/Orchard grasses), *Lolium* spp. (Ryegrasses), *Festuca* spp. (Fescues), *Poa* spp.
65 (Meadow-grasses and Bluegrasses), and *Anthoxanthum* spp. (Vernal grasses). Furthermore,
66 some grass taxa, notably diverse cultivars and hybrids of *Lolium* spp., are widely sown in
67 agricultural grasslands and are likely to contribute disproportionately to airborne pollen.

68 However, it is unknown whether particular grass species, or varieties/cultivars within species,
69 contribute more to the prevalence of allergic symptoms and related diseases than others¹³.

70 Whilst some grass species have been identified as more allergenic than others *in vitro*
71 (triggering higher levels of Immunoglobulin E (IgE) antibody production), there is a high
72 degree of cross-reactivity between grass species¹⁴⁻¹⁶. In addition, the allergen profiles (the
73 characterisation of the different allergens common to different grass), the degree of
74 sensitisation differ between grass species^{14,17}, and the overall allergenicity of grass pollen in
75 the air varies across seasons¹⁸. Family-level estimates of grass pollen concentrations cannot
76 therefore be considered a reliable proxy for either the concentration of pollen-derived
77 aeroallergens or pollen-induced public health outcomes.

78

79 The identification of biodiversity via the high-throughput analysis of taxonomic marker genes
80 (popularly termed metabarcoding) provides an emerging solution to semi-quantitatively
81 identify complex mixtures of airborne pollen grains¹⁹⁻²². Further, recent global DNA

82 barcoding initiatives and co-ordinated regional efforts have now resulted in near complete
83 genetic databases of national native plants, including grass species. In Great Britain, the vast
84 majority of angiosperms are included in mature DNA barcoding databases for multiple
85 markers²³, meaning that we are now in a position to investigate the aerial composition of
86 pollen over the grass pollen season, at a national scale.

87

88 Here, using two complementary DNA barcode marker genes (*rbcL* and ITS2), we characterise
89 the spatial and temporal distribution of airborne grass pollen throughout the temperate
90 summer grass pollen season (May-August) across the latitudinal and longitudinal range of
91 Great Britain (Fig. 1). We hypothesise that the composition of airborne grass pollen, from
92 different grass taxa will be (i) broadly homogenous across the grass pollen season, regardless
93 of terrestrial Poaceae phenology and (ii) homogenous across Great Britain due to the
94 potential for long distance transport of windborne pollen grains.

95

96 Airborne grass pollen from each genus occupied distinct temporal windows across the grass
97 pollen season in 2016 (May to August), thereby rejecting our hypothesis (i) (Fig. 2,
98 Supplementary Figure 1). Time, measured as number of days after the first sample was
99 collected, is a good predictor of airborne grass pollen taxon composition using both markers
100 (Fig. 2, Supplementary Figure 1; *ITS2*, $LR_{1,74} = 128.8$, $P = 0.001$; *rbcL*, $LR_{1,71} = 46.71$, $P =$
101 0.001). Community-level ordination reveals that the airborne grass pollen community as a
102 whole changed across the grass pollen season (Supplementary Figure 2, Supplementary
103 Figure 3), with similar overarching trends observed for the most abundant airborne pollen
104 families including, Poaceae, Pinaceae and Urticaceae (Supplementary Figure 4). In addition,
105 observations of first flowering dates from a citizen science project (UKPN;

106 www.naturescalendar.org.uk) and metabarcoding data show similar sequences of seasonal
107 progression with a lag time similar to that found in observational studies¹¹ (See
108 supplementary text; Supplementary Figure 5), suggesting that there is a link between local
109 phenology of Poaceae and composition of airborne grass pollen.

110

111 Focusing on the more taxonomically specific ITS2 marker dataset, *Alopecurus* and *Holcus*
112 typically dominated the early grass pollen season (Fig. 2), which coincides with typical peaks
113 in allergic rhinitis²⁴, but further research will be required to confirm this association. *Lolium*
114 featured prominently for the majority of the later grass season. The popularity of *Lolium*
115 species as a forage crop means that it is widely sown in agricultural grasslands²⁵, although the
116 majority of agricultural grasslands are managed by grazing silage-cutting or mowing which
117 prevents the growth of flowering heads²⁵. The length of time over which *Lolium* pollen
118 dominated may be because many varieties have been bred with the potential to mature at
119 different times throughout the year²⁶, although it should be noted that *Lolium* species
120 frequently hybridise with each other and therefore it is difficult to distinguish these genera
121 using genetic material alone. Additionally, while there is some evidence that some species of
122 grass appear to be more allergenic than others¹⁸, it is unknown how much they may differ
123 within a species (i.e. at the cultivar/hybrid level)¹⁶. Although *Lolium* was the dominant species
124 in airborne grass pollen from July to the end of the sampling period, the total grass pollen
125 concentration declined in August, indicating that the absolute number of *Lolium* pollen grains
126 at this time is low (Fig. 1, Supplementary Figure 6).

127

128 The top five genera contributing to airborne pollen, indicated by the relative abundance of
129 taxonomy marker genes, were *Alopecurus*, *Festuca*, *Holcus*, *Lolium* and *Poa* (Fig. 2;

130 Supplementary Figure 6). Each of these genera is widespread in the UK, although long-
131 distance pollen transport means they may also originate further afield²⁷. These dominant
132 genera have all been shown to provoke IgE-mediated responses in grass-sensitised patients¹⁴,
133 providing candidate species for links with hay fever and asthma exacerbation. Conversely,
134 less prevalent species in the dataset could contribute disproportionately to the allergenic
135 load. Species such as *Phleum pratense* have been identified to be a major allergen^{5,28}.
136 However, we found that *Phleum* made up a very small proportion of metabarcoding reads
137 (Supplementary Figure 1), corresponding with the results of an earlier phenological study⁹.
138 Most genera, such as *Phleum*, *Anthoxanthum* and *Dactylis*, show distinct and narrow
139 temporal incidence (Supplementary Figure 1), and could allow researchers to identify grass
140 species associated with allergenic windows with greater accuracy.

141

142 Changes in species composition over time were localised. We found that peaks in abundance
143 of airborne pollen occurred at different times at each location during the summer (Fig. 2,
144 Supplementary Figure 1). For example, the relative abundance of airborne grass pollen from
145 the genus *Poa* peaked in mid-June in Worcester and Bangor but 6-8 weeks later in
146 Invergowrie (Fig. 2), probably due to latitudinal effects on flowering time^{7,27}. This is
147 supported by a significant interaction between latitude and time of year for both markers
148 (Fig. 2, Supplementary Figure 1; *ITS2*, $LR_{68,1} = 34.2$, $P = 0.002$; *rbcl*, $LR_{68,1} = 47.36$, $P = 0.001$).

149 Differences in species composition of airborne grass pollen between the six sampling sites is
150 supported by a significant effect of latitude (Fig. 2, Supplementary Figure 1; *ITS2*, $LR_{1,73} =$
151 73.2 , $P = 0.001$; *rbcl*, $LR_{1,70} = 26.4$, $P = 0.025$) and longitude (Fig. 2, Supplementary Figure 1;
152 *ITS2*, $LR_{1,69} = 33$, $P = 0.003$; *rbcl*, $LR_{1,69} = 27.10$, $P = 0.010$), that are proxies for a broad range
153 of environmental variables. These results do not support our hypothesis (ii) that the

154 composition of airborne grass pollen will be homogenous across the UK, and instead suggest
155 that taxon-specific effects of regional geography, climate and environmental conditions
156 underpin distributions which have been demonstrated for Poaceae pollen as a whole⁷.
157 Further investigations into the mechanisms of pollen production and transport, interacting
158 with a range of climatic, seasonal and meteorological effects will therefore provide valuable
159 future research foci to elucidate our mechanistic knowledge of the deposition of grass pollen
160 in time and space.

161

162 Enabled by contemporary molecular biodiversity assessment and mature, curated DNA
163 barcoding databases, here we provide a comprehensive taxonomic overview of airborne
164 grass pollen distribution, throughout an entire grass pollen season and across large
165 geographic scales. The grass pollen season is defined by discrete temporal windows of
166 different grass species, with some species displaying geographical variation. Temporal pollen
167 distributions in metabarcoding data follow observed flowering times. The data provide an
168 important step towards developing genera-, and in certain cases, species-level grass pollen
169 forecasting. Additionally, the research presented here leads the way for future studies
170 facilitating understanding of the relationships between grass pollen and disease, which have
171 significant global public health relevance and socioeconomic importance.

172

173 **Figure 1 Location of pollen collection and temporal Poaceae concentrations and composition.**

174 Map showing location of the six sampling sites and daily Poaceae pollen concentrations
175 (grains/m³) throughout the grass pollen season (May to August, 2016). Yellow filled circles
176 indicate dates when pollen was collected for both observational concentrations and
177 molecular analysis, blue circles indicate days when pollen was collected for observational

178 concentrations only and green circles indicate when pollen was collected for molecular
179 analysis only at the Bangor site. Note that Bangor is not part of the UK pollen monitoring
180 network and observational concentrations were only performed alongside pollen collections
181 for molecular analysis between 24th June to 28th August 2016. Contains OS data Crown
182 copyright and database right (2018). Image Crown Copyright, 2018, The Met Office.

183

184 **Figure 2 Abundance of the most common airborne grass pollen taxa throughout the grass**
185 **pollen season.** The five most abundant grass taxa (expressed as proportion of total reads),
186 depicted alongside the total proportion of reads assigned to family Poaceae. Due to errors in
187 sampling equipment, only 4 alternate weeks (out of a possible 7 alternate weeks) of samples
188 were collected at the York sampling site. Markers used to identify grass pollen are stated in
189 the top panel label. Sampling sites are indicated in the right panel label abbreviated as
190 follows: BNG = Bangor; EXE = Exeter; ING = Invergowrie; IOW = Isle of Wight; WOR =
191 Worcester; YORK = York. A map of sampling locations and daily Poaceae pollen
192 concentrations can be found in Figure 1.

193

194 **Methods**

195

196 **Sampling and Experimental Design**

197 We collected aerial samples from six sites across Great Britain (Supplementary Table 3; Fig. 1)
198 using Burkard Automatic Multi-Vial Cyclone Samplers (V2; Burkard Manufacturing Co. Ltd.
199 Rickmansworth, UK) designed to simplify collection of pollen and spores by sampling directly
200 into a microcentrifuge tube (e.g.²⁹). The volumetric aerial sampler uses a turbine to draw in
201 air (16.5 litres/min) and aerial particles, using mini-cyclone technology. The aerial particles

202 are collected into 1.5 ml sterile microcentrifuge tubes located on a carousel, where the
203 carousel is programmed to sample into a new tube every 24 h, thereby providing daily
204 samples of airborne pollen (Supplementary Figure 7). Sample tubes were sent to Bangor, and
205 stored at -20°C before processing. Each sampling unit was mounted alongside a seven-day
206 volumetric trap of the Hirst design (1952) belonging to the Met Office UK Pollen Monitoring
207 Network, which provided daily pollen concentrations (Fig. 1; map produced using ArcGIS). In
208 the seven-day volumetric trap, a turbine draws air in (10 litres/min) and particles are
209 impacted upon an adhesive coated tape carried on a clockwork-driven drum. The tape is cut
210 into 24 h sections, and mounted on glass slides using a gelatine/glycerol mountant containing
211 basic fuchsin to stain the pollen grains. Pollen are identified and counted under a microscope
212 and converted to volumetric concentrations⁷. Although the high cost of the pollen samplers
213 preclude routine replicate sampling, our methodologies mirror methodologies that have
214 been used for several decades in the UK network^{30,31} and are in agreement with
215 recommended terminology described by Galan et al (2017)³². All pollen samplers were sited
216 in elevated positions on flat-roofed buildings between 4 to 6 floors in height in order to
217 sample from a mixed air flow. Fins on the samplers (both Burkard Multi-Vial Cyclone and
218 Hirst type seven-day volumetric samplers) direct the cyclone inlet port into the wind. Bangor
219 was the only sampling site which was not part of the pollen monitoring network, but we
220 deployed the same methodology at the Bangor site (which began on 24th June 2016 Fig. 1).
221
222 Sampling began in late May 2016 and during alternate weeks, aerial samples were collected
223 for seven days for a total of seven weeks between 25th May and 28th August. Exact sampling
224 dates varied slightly between sites and a total of 279 aerial samples were collected
225 (Supplementary Table 4).

226

227 **DNA Extraction, PCR and Sequencing**

228 From the 279 daily aerial samples, 231 were selected for downstream molecular analysis, as
229 described below. Within each sampling week, two series of three consecutive days were
230 pooled. Pooled samples were selected based on grass pollen concentrations based on
231 microscopy. The final, unselected day was not used in downstream molecular analysis. In
232 total, seventy-seven pools of DNA were created. In one instance, three consecutive days of
233 pollen samples were unavailable (Invergowrie, week 2, pool 2) due to trap errors. For this
234 sample, the next sampling day was selected for pooling (Supplementary Table 4). DNA was
235 extracted from daily samples using a DNeasy Plant Mini kits (Qiagen, Valencia, CA, USA), with
236 some modifications to the standard protocol as described by Hawkins *et al.*³³. DNA from daily
237 samples was pooled and eluted into 60 µl of elution buffer at the binding stage of the DNeasy
238 Plant Mini kit.

239

240 Illumina MiSeq paired end indexed amplicon libraries were prepared following a two-step
241 protocol. Two marker genes were amplified with universal primer pairs *rbcLaf* and
242 *rbcLr506*^{23,34}, and ITS2 and ITS3¹⁸ (Supplementary Table 5). A 5' universal tail was added to
243 the forward and reverse primers and a 6N sequence was added between the forward
244 universal tail and the template-specific primer, which is known to improve clustering and
245 cluster detection on MiSeq sequencing platforms³⁵ (Integrated DNA Technologies, Coralville,
246 USA). Round 1 PCR was carried out in a final volume of 25 µL, including forward and reverse
247 primers (0.2 µM), 1X Q5 HS High-Fidelity Master Mix (New England Biolabs) and 1 µL of
248 template DNA. Thermal cycling conditions were an initial denaturation step at 98 °C for 30s;
249 35 cycles of 98 °C for 10s, 50 °C for 30s, 72 °C for 30s; and a final annealing step of 72 °C for 5

250 minutes. Products from the first PCR were purified using Agencourt AMPure XP beads
251 (Beckman Coulter) with a 1:0.6 ratio of product to AMPure XP beads.
252
253 The second round PCR added the unique identical i5 and i7 indexes and the P5 and P7
254 Illumina adaptors, along with universal tails complementary to the universal tails used in
255 round 1 PCR (Supplementary Table 4, Supplementary Table 5) (Ultramer, by IDT, Integrated
256 DNA Technologies). Round 2 PCR was carried out in a final volume of 25 μ L, including forward
257 and reverse index primers (0.2 μ M), 1X Q5 HS High-Fidelity Master Mix (New England
258 Biolabs) and 5 μ L of purified PCR product. Thermal cycling conditions were: 98 $^{\circ}$ C for 3 min;
259 98 $^{\circ}$ C for 30 s, 55 $^{\circ}$ C for 30 s, 72 $^{\circ}$ C for 30 s (10 cycles); 72 $^{\circ}$ C for 5 min, 4 $^{\circ}$ C for 10 min. Both
260 PCRs were run in triplicate. The same set of unique indices were added to the triplicates
261 which were then pooled following visual inspection on an agarose gel (1.5%) to ensure that
262 indices were added successfully. Pooled metabarcoding libraries were cleaned a second time
263 using Agencourt AMPure magnetic bead purification, run on an agarose gel (1.5%) and
264 quantified using the Qubit high sensitivity kit (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Massachusetts, USA).
265 Positive and negative controls were amplified in triplicate with both primer pairs and
266 sequenced alongside airborne plant community DNA samples using the MiSeq. Sequence
267 data, including metadata, are available at the Sequence Read Archive (SRA) using the project
268 accession number SUB4136142.

269

270 **Bioinformatic Analysis**

271 Initial sequence processing was carried out following a modified version of the workflow
272 described by de Vere *et al.*³⁶. Briefly, raw sequences were trimmed using Trimmomatic
273 v0.33³⁷ to remove short reads (<200bp), adaptors and low quality regions. Reads were

274 merged using FLASH v 1.2.11^{36,38}, and merged reads shorter than 450bp were excluded.
275 Identical reads were merged using fastx-toolkit (v0.0.14), and reads were split into ITS2 and
276 *rbcL* based on primer sequences.

277

278 To prevent spurious BLAST hits, custom reference databases containing *rbcL* and ITS2
279 sequences from UK plant species were generated. While all native species of the UK have
280 been DNA barcoded²³, a list of all species found in the UK was generated in order to gain
281 coverage of non-native species. A list of UK plant species was generated by combining lists of
282 native and alien species³⁹ with a list of cultivated plants obtained from Botanic Gardens
283 Conservation International (BGCI) which represented horticultural species. All available *rbcL*
284 and ITS2 records were downloaded from NCBI GenBank, and sequences belonging to UK
285 species were extracted using the script '[creatingselectedfastadatabase.py](#)', archived on
286 GitHub.

287

288 Metabarcoding data was searched against the relevant sequence database using blastn⁴⁰, via
289 the script 'blast_with_ncbi.py'. The top twenty blast hits (identified using the highest bit-
290 score) were tabulated ('blast_summary.py'), then manually filtered to limit results to species
291 currently present in Great Britain. Reads occurring fewer than four times were excluded from
292 further analysis. All scripts used are archived on GitHub:

293 <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1305767>.

294

295 **Statistical Analysis**

296 To understand how the grass pollen composition changed with space and time, the effect of
297 time (measured as the number of days after the first sampling date), latitude and longitude

298 of sampling location were included in a two-tailed generalized linear model using the
299 'manyglm' function in the package 'mvabund'⁴¹. The proportion of sequences was set as the
300 response variable; proportion data was used as this has been shown to be an effective way of
301 controlling for differences in read numbers⁴². The effect of time, latitude, longitude and the
302 interaction between time and latitude were included as explanatory variables in the models
303 to test hypotheses (i and ii). The effect of longitude is also consistent when York, the most
304 easterly sampling site, with missing data from mid-July until the end of the sampling period,
305 is removed from the analysis (Supplementary Table 6).

306

307 The data best fit a negative binomial distribution, most likely due to the large number of
308 zeros (zeros indicate that a grass genus is absent from a sample), resulting in a strong mean-
309 variance relationship in the data (Supplementary Figure 8). The proportion of sequences was
310 scaled by 1000 and values were converted to integers so that a generalized linear model with
311 a negative binomial distribution could be used. Overfitting of the models was tested using
312 'dropterm' in R, and based on the lowest Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) score, no terms
313 were removed from the models. In addition, the appropriateness of the models was checked
314 by visual inspection of the residuals against predicted values from the models
315 (Supplementary Figure 9).

316

317 In order to compare the metabarcoding data with flowering time data, we used phenological
318 records of first flowering collected in 2016 by citizen scientists from the UK's Nature's
319 Calendar (www.naturescalendar.org.uk). First flowering time was compared to genus-level
320 ITS2 metabarcoding data for three species: *Alopecurus pratensis*, *Dactylis glomerata* and
321 *Holcus lanatus*. As grass pollen could only be reliably identified to genus level in the

322 metabarcoding data, the taxa compared may not have been exactly equivalent since both
323 *Alopecurus* and *Holcus* contain other widespread species within the UK. However, *Alopecurus*
324 *pratensis* and *Holcus lanatus* are the most abundant species within their respective genera.
325 The comparison was only carried out for ITS2 data because two of the three genera were not
326 identified by the *rbcl* marker.

327

328 NMDS ordination was carried out using package 'VEGAN' in R⁴³, based on the proportion of
329 total high-quality reads contributed by each grass genus, using Bray-Curtis dissimilarity
330 (Supplementary Figure 2 and Supplementary Figure 3). Ordination is used to reduce
331 multivariate datasets (e.g. abundances of many species) into fewer variables that reflect
332 overall similarities between samples. A linear model was carried out using the 'lm' function
333 within the 'stats' package in R, in order to investigate the relationship between the number
334 of reads obtained for each genus using the *rbcl* and ITS2 marker.

335

336 **Data and materials availability:** All sequence data are available at the Sequence Read Archive
337 (SRA) using the project accession number SUB4136142. Archived sequence data was used to
338 generate Figure 2 Supplementary Figures 1-S6 and 8-S10). First flowering data used in
339 Supplementary Figure 5 was obtained from Nature's Calendar, Woodland Trust and is
340 available upon request. The sequence analysis pipeline is available at
341 <https://github.com/colford/nbgw-plant-illumina-pipeline>.

342

343 **References**

- 344 1. Blackley, C.H. (London: Bailliere: London, 1873).
- 345 2. Marks, G., Pearce, N., Strachan, D. & Asher, I. *The Global Asthma Report 2014* 16–21

- 346 (2014).
- 347 3. Bauchau, V. *The European Respiratory Journal* **24**, 758–764 (2004).
- 348 4. Bousquet, P.-J. et al. *Allergy* **62**, 301–309 (2007).
- 349 5. García-Mozo, H. *Allergy* **72**, 1849–1858 (2017).
- 350 6. Emberlin, J. et al. *Aerobiologia* **16**, 373–379 (2000).
- 351 7. Emberlin, J. et al. *Grana* **33**, 94–99 (1994).
- 352 8. Mander, L., Li, M., Mio, W., Fowlkes, C.C. & Punyasena, S.W. *Proceedings of The Royal*
353 *Society B* **280**, 20131905 (2013).
- 354 9. Kmenta, M. et al. *World Allergy Organ. J.* **10**, 31 (2017).
- 355 10. Cope, C. & Gray, A. (Botanical Society of the British Isles: London, UK, 2009).
- 356 11. Estrella, N., Menzel, A., Krämer, U. & Behrendt, H. *International Journal of*
357 *Biometeorology* **51**, 49–59 (2006).
- 358 12. Skjøth, C.A., Sommer, J., Stach, A., Smith, M. & Brandt, J. *Clinical & Experimental*
359 *Allergy* **37**, 1204–1212 (2008).
- 360 13. McInnes, R.N. et al. *Science of the Total Environment* **599–600**, 483–499 (2017).
- 361 14. van Ree, R., van Leeuwen, W.A. & Aalberse, R.C. *Journal of Allergy and Clinical*
362 *Immunology* **102**, 184–190 (1998).
- 363 15. Petersen, A. et al. *Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology* **107**, 856–862 (2001).
- 364 16. Jung, S. et al. *PLoS ONE* **13**, 1–12 (2018).
- 365 17. Moingeon, P., Peltre, G. & Bergmann, K.-C. *Clinical and Experimental Allergy Reviews*
366 **8**, 12–14 (2008).
- 367 18. de Weger, L.A. et al. *Clinical and Translational Allergy* **1**, 18 (2011).
- 368 19. Kraaijeveld, K. et al. *Molecular Ecology Resources* **15**, 8–16 (2015).
- 369 20. Korpelainen, H. & Pietiläinen, M. *Nordic Journal of Botany* **35**, 602–608 (2017).
- 370 21. Deiner, K. et al. *Molecular Ecology* **26**, 5872–5895 (2017).
- 371 22. Creer, S. et al. *Methods in Ecology and Evolution* **7**, 1008–1018 (2016).
- 372 23. de Vere, N. et al. *PLoS ONE* **7**, 1–12 (2012).
- 373 24. England, P.H. (PHE Real-time Syndromic Surveillance Team: Birmingham, UK, 2016).

- 374 25. Frame, J. & Laidlaw, A.S. (The Crowood Press: Marlborough, Wiltshire, UK, 2011).
- 375 26. RGCL (British Grassland Society: Cheshire, UK, 2017).
- 376 27. Rousseau, D.-D. et al. *Geophysical Research Letters* **30**, (2003).
- 377 28. D'Amato, G. et al. *Allergy and Allergen Immunotherapy* **62**, 261–279 (2017).
- 378 29. West, J.S. & Kimber, R.B.E. *Annals of Applied Biology* **166**, 4–17 (2015).
- 379 30. Adams-Groom, B., Emberlin, J., Corden, J., Millington, W. & Mullins, J. *Aerobiologia*
380 **18**, 117–123 (2002).
- 381 31. Skjøth, C.A., Baker, P., Sadyś, M. & Adams-Groom, B. *Urban Climate* **14**, 414–428
382 (2015).
- 383 32. Galán, C. et al. *Aerobiologia* **33**, 293–295 (2017).
- 384 33. Hawkins, J. et al. *PLoS ONE* **10**, 1–20 (2015).
- 385 34. Kress, W.J. & Erickson, D.L. *PLoS One* **2**, e508 (2007).
- 386 35. Miya, M. et al. *Royal Society open science* **2**, 150088 (2015).
- 387 36. de Vere, N. et al. *Scientific Reports* **7**, 42838 (2017).
- 388 37. Bolger, A.M., Lohse, M. & Usadel, B. *Bioinformatics* **30**, 2114–2120 (2014).
- 389 38. Magoc, T. & Salzberg, S.L. *Bioinformatics* **27**, 2957–2963 (2011).
- 390 39. Stace, C. (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 2010).
- 391 40. Camacho, C. et al. *BMC Bioinformatics* **10**, 421 (2008).
- 392 41. Wang, Y., Naumann, U., Wright, S.T. & Warton, D.I. *Methods in Ecology and Evolution*
393 **3**, 471–474 (2012).
- 394 42. McMurdie, P.J. & Holmes, S. *PLoS Computational Biology* **10**, e1003531 (2014).
- 395 43. Dixon, P. *Journal of Vegetation Science* **14**, 927–930 (2003).

396

397 Acknowledgements

398

399 We thank John Kenny, Pia Koldkjær, Richard Gregory, and Anita Lucaci of the Liverpool
400 Centre for Genomic Research for sequencing support. We acknowledge the computational
401 services & support of the Supercomputing Wales project, which is part-funded by the

402 European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) via Welsh Government. We thank the Botanic
403 Gardens Conservation International (BGCI) for access to the list of plant collections in the
404 National Gardens in the UK and Ireland. We thank the Met Office network for providing
405 additional observational grass pollen count data and Jonathan Winn, UK Met Office for
406 ArcGIS assistance on Figure 1. We are grateful to the Woodland Trust and Centre for Ecology
407 & Hydrology for supplying the UK Phenology Network data and to the citizen scientists who
408 have contributed to the latter scheme. Final thanks to Wendy Grail and technical support
409 staff at Bangor University.

410

411 **Author Contributions:** S.C., N.dV., G.W.G., R.N.M., N.J.O., C.A.S., Y.C., B.W.W. and G.L.B.
412 conceived and designed the study; B.A-G., G.L.B., G.P., A.E., R.N., S.P., K.S., and N.S. collected
413 samples and counted pollen; G.L.B. performed laboratory work, supported by S.C.; N.dV.,
414 C.P., C.R.F., L.J., S.C. contributed methods, and C.A. and D.B.R. contributed materials. C.P. and
415 G.L.B. analysed the data and G.L.B., C.P. and S.C. produced the first draft of the manuscript.
416 All authors contributed substantially to the final submitted manuscript.

417

418 **Funding:** This work was supported by the Natural Environment Research Council
419 (<https://nerc.ukri.org/>), awarded to SC (NE/N003756/1), CS (NE/N002431/1), NO
420 (NE/N002105/1) and GWG/NdV/MH (NE/N001710/1). IBERS Aberystwyth receives strategic
421 funding from the BBSRC. The funders had no role in study design, data collection and
422 analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript.

423

424 **Competing interests:** The authors are not aware of any competing interests.

425



