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Author(s): Katherine J. Stewart, Darwyn Coxson, and Paul Grogan
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Nitrogen Inputs by Associative Cyanobacteria across a Low Arctic Tundra Landscape

Katherine J. Stewart*†‡
Darwyn Coxson* and
Paul Grogan†

*Natural Resources and Environmental Studies, University of Northern British Columbia, Prince George, British Columbia, V2N 4Z9, Canada
†Department of Biology, Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario, K7L 3N6, Canada
‡Corresponding author: kstewar@unbc.ca

Abstract
Available soil N is a key factor limiting plant productivity in most low arctic terrestrial ecosystems. Atmospheric N₂-fixation by cyanobacteria is often the primary source of newly fixed N in these nutrient-poor environments. We examined temporal and spatial variation in N₂-fixation by the principal cyanobacterial associations (biological soil crusts, Sphagnum spp. associations, and Stereocaulon paschale) in a wide range of ecosystems within a Canadian low arctic tundra landscape, and estimated N input via N₂-fixation over the growing season using a microclimatically driven model. Moisture and temperature were the main environmental factors influencing N₂-fixation. In general, N₂-fixation rates were largest at the height of the growing season, although each N₂-fixing association had distinct seasonal patterns due to ecosystem differences in microclimatic conditions. Ecosystem types differed strongly in N₂-fixation rates with the highest N input (10.89 kg ha⁻¹ yr⁻¹) occurring in low-lying Wet Sedge Meadow and the lowest N input (0.73 kg ha⁻¹ yr⁻¹) in Xerophytic Herb Tundra on upper esker slopes. Total growing season (3 June–13 September) N₂-fixation input from measured components across a carefully mapped landscape study area (26.7 km²) was estimated at 0.68 kg ha⁻¹ yr⁻¹, which is approximately twice the estimated average N input via wet deposition. Although biological N₂-fixation input rates were small compared to internal soil N cycling rates, our data suggest that cyanobacterial associations may play an important role in determining patterns of plant productivity across low arctic tundra landscapes.

Introduction
Plant productivity in many arctic regions is constrained both by low soil temperature and low soil moisture content, but during the growing season soil nitrogen (N) is believed to be the primary factor limiting plant growth (Shaver and Chapin, 1980; Nadelhoffer et al., 1992; Liengen and Olsen, 1997a; Zielke et al., 2005). Atmospheric N₂-fixation is considered the primary source of new N input to arctic terrestrial ecosystems; however, there are relatively few estimates of annual N inputs via N₂-fixation (Alexander and Schell, 1973; Schell and Alexander, 1973; Bazely and Jefferies, 1989; Gunther, 1989; Chapin and Bledsoe, 1992; Hobara et al., 2006). For example, most estimates have failed to simultaneously consider all N₂-fixing associations present, the representation of different N₂-fixers within vegetation types or ecosystem types and the extent of ecosystem types within a given landscape.

New N inputs in nutrient-poor arctic ecosystems are primarily due to atmospheric N₂-fixation by cyanobacteria (Alexander, 1974; Granhall and Lid-Torsvik, 1975; Chapin and Bledsoe, 1992; Liengen, 1999a; Solheim et al., 2006). Cyanobacteria occur in symbiotic associations with a wide variety of lichens, and as a free-living component of biological soil crusts (BSCs), which are communities composed of bacteria, cyanobacteria, algae, mosses, liverworts, fungi, and lichens. Facultative symbioses between cyanobacteria and mosses, liverworts, and hornworts are also common (Smith, 1984; Granhall and Selander, 1973; Rai et al., 2000; Turetsky, 2003).

Biological N₂-fixation inputs are determined by the abundance and diversity of these N₂-fixing associations as well as several environmental factors that control their activity. For example, seasonal variation in moisture, temperature, and light lead to large temporal variability in N₂-fixation rates (Basilier and Granhall, 1978; Chapin et al., 1991; Dickson, 2000; Solheim et al., 2006). Furthermore, biological N₂-fixation inputs may be expected to vary greatly among and within vegetation-types due to spatial heterogeneities in environmental and microclimatic conditions. Accordingly, landscape-level estimates of biological N₂-fixation inputs must account for topographical variation since it is the primary determinant of soil moisture patterns and therefore of the distribution of vegetation types (Walker, 2000) and their cyanobacterial associations.

A landscape-level understanding of the temporal and spatial variation in N₂-fixation inputs, as well as the environmental controls on N₂-fixation, has broad significance not just in understanding N cycling in low arctic ecosystems, but also in predicting the potential impacts of future climatic changes (Chapin and Bledsoe, 1992). Warmer temperatures and changes in moisture availability may directly affect N₂-fixation rates, but may also indirectly affect N inputs by altering the distribution of vegetation types and their particular cyanobacterial associations across the landscape. For example, enhanced shrub growth associated with climate warming trends in the low Arctic (Goetz et al., 2005; Sturm et al., 2001) may shade out lichens and possibly other N₂-fixing associations in mesic tundra. Evaluation of the
The principal topographic position, substrate, drainage, and characteristic plant species for each ecosystem type included in the landscape study at Daring Lake, Northwest Territories, Canada (follows Obst, 2008).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ecosystem type</th>
<th>Topographic position</th>
<th>Substrate/Drainage</th>
<th>Characteristic plant species</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Xerophytic Herb Tundra</td>
<td>Esker tops and plateaus</td>
<td>Sand, gravel, rocks and boulders/</td>
<td>Saxifraga tricuspidata Rothb., Empetrum nigrum Böcher., Arctostaphylos alpina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Well-drained</td>
<td>L. Vaccinium spp., Lichens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birch Hummock</td>
<td>Gentle lower slopes and hummock-hollow complexes</td>
<td>Silts, silt loam, fine sandy loam and organic /Moderately well-drained to poorly drained</td>
<td>B. glandulosa, Rubus chamaemorus L., Salix spp., L. decumbens, Eriophorum vaginatum L., Mosses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The objectives of this study were to: (a) evaluate temporal and spatial variation in N\textsubscript{2}-fixation by associative cyanobacteria in various ecosystem types within a typical low arctic tundra landscape; and (b) estimate N input via N\textsubscript{2}-fixation over the growing season using microclimatically driven models based on incubation studies of the ecophysiological responses of individual N\textsubscript{2}-fixing associations to moisture, temperature, and light conditions over the growing season.

Materials and Methods

STUDY SITE

The study area was located in a low arctic tundra region at the Tundra Ecosystem Research Station, Daring Lake, Northwest Territories (64°52'N, 111°35'W, 414-470 m a.s.l.) (Fig. 1), approximately 90 km northeast of the northern limit of continuous trees within the physiographic zone of the Bear–Slave Upland of the Canadian Shield (Obst, 2008). Landscape features include eskers, boulder fields, exposed bedrock, upland and lowland tundra, wetlands, and various sizes of lakes, ponds, and streams. Continuous permafrost is present at the site with a soil active layer ranging from 0.3 to 2 m (Obst, 2008).

Mean monthly air temperature is −30 °C in January and +13 °C in July (INAC, 2007; Obst, 2008). Mean monthly precipitation from May to October is 25 mm as rain. Snow accumulation is highly variable across the landscape, but usually ranges from 15 to 60 cm in low-lying heath vegetation by mid to late May (1996–2008; Bob Reid, INAC, unpublished data). Snowmelt usually starts after mid-May ending in early June, with some snow beds persisting on slopes until late June or early July. The plant growing season generally begins in late May or early June and ends by late August (Nobrega and Grogan, 2008; Lafleur and Humphreys, 2008).

The landscape study area encompasses the East Daring Lake Basin (26.7 km²). Ecosystem mapping and distribution of landscape units for the landscape study area follows Obst (2008). A 1-m resolution IKONOS image provided detailed information on 15 classes (plus unclassified areas) of land covers, vegetation communities, and ecosystem types present in the study area (Obst, 2008). We focused our study on the dominant ecosystem types that together occupy a total of 68% of the study area: Heath-Lichen/Heath-Mat Tundra (42%), Birch Hummock (13%), Wet Sedge Meadow (8%), and Xerophytic Herb Tundra (5%). The distribution of these four ecosystem types is largely driven by esker topography (Table 1).

N\textsubscript{2}-FIXING ASSOCIATIONS

Four predominant cyanobacterial associations were identified within the selected landscape study area at Daring Lake: Biological Soil Crusts (BSCs) in hollows, BSCs on mineral soil mounds, Sphagnum spp., and Stereocaulon paschale sensu lato. Each cyanobacterial association was found in all of the ecosystem types included in the landscape study; however, the abundance of each association varied between ecosystem types. Vascular plant species with N\textsubscript{2}-fixing associations, such as Oxytropis nigrescens (Pall.) Fisch. ex DC., and Alnus crispa (Aiton) Pursh., do occur in the area but are rare (Obst, 2008).
Two major BSC communities were found in association with hummock-hollow microtopography. Hollow BSCs were found mainly in the depressions between hummocks and were composed of liverworts growing in dense mats generally underlain by varying depths of organic matter. The main components of Hollow BSCs were *Anastrrophylum minutum* Schreb. and *Cephaloziella* spp. including *C. tabella* (Nees) Warnst. and *C. hameana* complex (O. Lee, unpublished data). Cyanobacteria on Hollow BSCs were mostly the filamentous and heterocystous cyanobacterium *Stigonema* cf. *turfacenum* (Berk.) Cooke (B. Büdel, unpublished data).

However, on some samples filamentous and heterocystous *Tolypothrix* sp. and the filamentous, non-heterocystous *Schizothrix* cf. *cuspidata* W. & E. S. West, were found growing in between the leafy liverworts and on the *Stigonema* filaments. *Stigonema minutum* (C. Agardh) Hass. and *Calothrix* sp. were also found on Hollow BSC samples. Hummock BSCs were cohesive, well-developed crusts (1–2 cm thick) found on cryoturbated mineral soil mounds. Small, less well-developed patches of Hummock BSCs also occurred in sandy well-drained areas on ridge tops. Hummock BSCs were complex communities made up of lichens, mosses, and liverworts. Lichen species included *Placynthiella alginosa* Schrad., *Bryocaulon divergens* Ach., *Bryoria tenax* (E. Dahl) Brodo & D. Hawksw., *Cladonia* spp., *Japevia tornowiensis* Nyl., *Ochrolechia frigida* Sw., and *Solorina crocea* L. (C. Bjork, unpublished data). Moss species (*Funaria* sp., *Pohlia* sp., *Ditrichum* sp., and *Polytricum piliferum* Hedw.) and liverwort species (*Cephaloziella* sp., *Cephaloziella* sp., *Anastrophylum* sp., *Anthelia* sp., *Lophozia* sp., and *Lophozia incise* Schrad.) were also key components of these diverse communities. *Stigonema turfacenum*, *S. minutum*, and *S. hormoides* (B.K. Buchholz, A. Braun., *Sphagnum* sp., *turfaceum* *S. balticum* W. et G.S. West, were found growing in the Wet Sedge Meadow ecosystem type only. Most uncommon species (*Pohlia* sp., *G. decorticans* *Stigonema* spp., *Placynthiella uliginosa* *Cladonia* spp., *Stereocaulon paschale* *Stigocaulon* spp., and *Hydrogen Generator* (SRI H2)) was generated on-site from CaC2. The gas chromatograph was calibrated for each incubation with ethylene (BOC Canada Ltd., Mississauga, Ontario, Canada; C2H4, 98%+) that was kept at the same temperature as incubation gas samples.

Cores of Hollow BSCs (*n* = 12), Hummock BSCs (*n* = 12), and *S. paschale* (*n* = 12) were randomly sampled for each incubation from an area of ~5 km² that was representative of the larger landscape study area. Samples were taken from multiple positions on both north- and south-facing slopes of the main east-west-oriented esker. BSC samples were trimmed to an area of 19 cm² and 0.75 cm depth such that each sample had a thin underlying soil substrate. *Stereocaulon paschale* was trimmed to an area of 19 cm² and 2 cm depth, but no underlying soil substrate was included. Samples were enclosed in 250 mL glass canning jars with modified lids containing a rubber septum. The mean headspace of ARA incubations was 235.75 mL (250 mL jar volume minus 14.25 mL sample) for Hollow and Hummock BSCs and 212 mL for *S. paschale* (250 mL jar volume minus 38 mL sample). *Sphagnum* spp. cores (*n* = 12) were sampled from an area of ~0.5 km² within the Wet Sedge Meadow ecosystem type only. Samples were trimmed to an area of 56 cm² and 6 cm depth and included both live (green) and underlying decaying stems. *Sphagnum* spp. samples were incubated in 1 L canning jars with modified lids containing rubber septa and had a mean headspace of 664 mL (1000 mL jar volume minus 336 mL sample). All *Sphagnum* jars, sars were incubated in situ in the Wet Sedge Meadow with the glass bottom facing up and the *Sphagnum* spp. sample level with the surrounding vegetation. For each set of incubations one sample for each *N2*-fixing association was used as a control, which served as both a temperature control and a blank not injected with acetylene. Control samples did not show any natural evolution of ethylene. Contamination of generated acetylene with ethylene was monitored and corrections were made for each set of incubations, as required.

Daytime ARA incubations occurred between 10:00 and 16:00 hr (6 hours) and nighttime ARA incubations between 21:00 and 07:00 hr (10 hours). A pilot study conducted in 2007 indicated net respiration in both Hollow BSCs (108 µL L⁻¹ CO2/hr) and Hummock BSCs (162 µL L⁻¹ CO2/hr) under average light conditions, suggesting that CO2 limitation was unlikely to limit *N2*-fixation despite longer incubation periods. However, we injected the *S. paschale* incubations with 1% (v/v) CO2 after 3 hours for daytime incubations and after 1 hour for night-time incubations because the lichen samples lacked an underlying soil substrate to provide a CO2 source.

Destructive sampling was used for each incubation, with new samples of each cyanobacterial association (*n* = 12) collected per incubation. Nine consecutive sets of in situ incubations under ambient field conditions were conducted over a 6 day period (5 nighttime and 4 daytime) in each growing season month for each *N2*-fixing association, with the exception of *Sphagnum* spp. in 2007. Incubations for Hollow BSCs and Hummock BSCs were conducted on 19–24 June, 6–11 July, and 9–13 August in 2007; and on 12–17 June, 1–6 July, and 5–10 August in 2008. *Sphagnum* spp. were incubated for a 24 hr period over 5 consecutive days on 25–29 June, 9–13 July, and 17–22 August in 2007 due to logistical constraints. In 2008, *Sphagnum* spp. were incubated in the same manner as other *N2*-fixing associations on 18–23 June, 7–12 July, and 17–22 August. *Sphagnum* spp. *N2*-fixation rates were not significantly different between 2007 and 2008; therefore, the difference in incubation length likely had little influence on the overall rate estimation. *Stereocaulon paschale* was incubated only in 2008 on 4–9 June, 7–12 July, and 11–16 August. Over the 2007–
2008 growing seasons a total of 571 (Hollow BSCs), 572 (Hummock BSCs), 794 (Sphagnum spp.), and 294 (S. paschale) individual samples were incubated in situ under ambient field conditions.

With the exception of Sphagnum spp., all in situ samples were incubated outdoors near the research station laboratory under ambient field conditions. Incubation chambers were placed in water baths and bath temperature was altered to ensure that incubation temperatures reflected ambient conditions. Photosynthetically Active Radiation (PAR), air temperature, incubation temperature, and ambient temperature of Hollow BSCs, Hummock BSCs, and S. paschale were monitored every 30 minutes during daytime ARA incubations. On average, the surface temperature of incubation samples were within 1.5 °C of the surface temperature of the respective N₂-fixing associations under ambient conditions. Heating of incubation chambers via solar radiation was not a concern for nighttime incubations where microclimate was monitored for the first and last hour only. Moisture of Hollow BSCs, Hummock BSCs, and S. paschale were determined both pre- and post-incubation to ensure that drying of specimens did not occur during the incubation period. Average loss of moisture during incubations was less than <1.8% for all N₂-fixing associations. Following incubation, all samples were weighed, air dried, and then re-weighed to determine moisture content. Moisture content of samples over the growing season was later used for modeling N₂-fixation potential.

In addition to in situ incubations under ambient field conditions, N₂-fixing associations were also incubated in situ under optimal environmental conditions (200 μmol PAR m⁻² s⁻¹, 20 °C) at the end of each set of incubations in June, July, and August 2007/2008. For each of our N₂-fixing associations we likely had several different cyanobacterial species present with varying optimal operating environments; however, an optimal temperature of ~20 °C has been demonstrated for several species/environments (Baslier and Granhall, 1978; Chapin et al., 1991; Liengen, 1999a), and light saturation was been demonstrated at 100 μmol PAR m⁻² s⁻¹ (Coxson and Kershaw, 1983a; Chapin et al., 1991). Samples (n = 12) were treated in the same way as field incubations, with the exception of a 24 hr wetting pretreatment at optimal hydration levels.

N₂-fixation rates for both in situ incubations under ambient and optimal conditions were calculated as micromoles of ethylene reduced per hour per m² based upon the length of incubation and area of each sample (19 cm² BSCs and S. paschale, 56 cm² Sphagnum spp.). Conversion ratios determined for each N₂-fixing association (see below) were used to convert ethylene reduced to N₂ reduced. ARA values were corrected for differences in incubation jar volume, mean sample volume, and area. Different N₂-fixing associations were allowed to vary in sample depth (i.e. 7.5 cm BSCs, 2 cm S. paschale, 6 cm Sphagnum spp.) to help ensure sampling units were kept intact and that N₂-fixing surfaces were representative of the different associations under natural conditions.

\[ \text{Y} = \frac{\text{atomic%}^{15}\text{N}_{\text{excess}}}{100} \times \frac{\text{total N}_{\text{sample}} \times 10^9}{t \times 28} \times \frac{100}{\%^{15}\text{N}_{\text{air}}} \]

where \( Y \) (nmol N·gdw⁻¹·h⁻¹) are the amounts of N₂ fixed during the experiment, \( \text{atomic%}^{15}\text{N}_{\text{excess}} \) is the difference between \( \text{atomic%} \) of the sample and \( \text{atomic%}^{15}\text{N}_{\text{air}} \), total N is the total amount of nitrogen in the sample (g·100 gdw⁻¹), \( t \) is the incubation time, 28 is the molecular weight of N₂ (g/mol), and \( \%^{15}\text{N}_{\text{air}} \) is the percentage of \(^{15}\text{N} \) out of the total amount of N gas in each incubation chamber. Conversion ratios varied among the different N₂-fixing associations (Table 2).

ESTIMATION OF LANDSCAPE LEVEL N INPUTS

Microclimatic Monitoring

Hollow and Hummock BSC microclimatic conditions were monitored in several different hollow-hummock complexes within the study landscape in 2007 (Julian days 169–257) and 2008 (Julian days 154–235). PAR was measured with quantum sensors (n = 2–3) (LI-190 Quantum Sensors, LI-COR, Lincoln, Nebraska, U.S.A.) installed at ground level in separate hummocks and hollows and connected to a multiplexer (AM416, Campbell Scientific Inc., Edmonton, Alberta, Canada). Soil surface temperature was monitored with fine-wire copper constantan thermocouples (n = 7–23) connected to a multiplexer (AM25T, Campbell Scientific Inc.). Impedance clips (n = 4–19) were inserted at the surface of Hollow and Hummock BSCs to monitor moisture conditions (after Coxson, 1991). All multiplexers and impedance clips were connected to a datalogger (CR23X, Campbell Scientific Inc.) and hourly means recorded. Impedance measurements were calibrated in the lab by simultaneously monitoring clip values and gravimetric moisture of Hollow BSC and Hummock BSC samples from a saturated to desiccated state. Both Hollow BSC and Hummock BSC %moisture were best explained by exponential relationships with impedance clip values (f = 25.55*exp (1.18*x), adjusted \( R^2 = 0.65 \); and \( f = 3.65 \times 0.75 \)).

Sphagnum spp. temperature was monitored with a pair of copper constantan thermocouples installed at a depth of 2 cm. One thermocouple was connected to a multiplexer (AM25T, Campbell Scientific Inc.) and datalogger (21X, Campbell Scientific Inc.) recording hourly means in 2007/2008. The other thermocouple was connected to an additional datalogger (CR10X, Campbell Scientific Inc.) recording 4 hour mean temperatures in 2007/2008.
TABLE 2
Mean monthly $\mathrm{N}_2$-fixation rates ($\mu\mathrm{mol \ N \ \mathrm{m}^{-2} \ \mathrm{hr}^{-1}}$) in incubations under field and optimized environmental conditions for each of the principal $\mathrm{N}_2$-fixing cyanobacterial associations in the low arctic tundra landscape near Daring Lake, Northwest Territories, Canada. Acetylene reduction conversion ratios based on optimal conditions are included for each $\mathrm{N}_2$-fixing association. Parentheses indicate standard errors. BSC = biological soil crust.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N$_2$-Fixing Association</th>
<th>Incubation condition</th>
<th>June</th>
<th>July</th>
<th>August</th>
<th>Conversion ratio $\mathrm{C}_2\mathrm{H}_2/\mathrm{N}_2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hollow BSC</td>
<td>Field</td>
<td>4.28 (0.47)</td>
<td>13.01 (1.30)</td>
<td>11.00 (1.23)</td>
<td>3.49 (0.85)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Optimal</td>
<td>11.40 (2.26)</td>
<td>25.87 (3.57)</td>
<td>25.05 (4.45)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hummock BSC</td>
<td>Field</td>
<td>11.69 (0.90)</td>
<td>13.70 (0.91)</td>
<td>10.70 (0.91)</td>
<td>1.33 (0.40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Optimal</td>
<td>28.12 (3.63)</td>
<td>37.08 (4.27)</td>
<td>19.34 (1.43)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sphagnum spp.</td>
<td>Field</td>
<td>31.05 (1.87)</td>
<td>33.11 (2.37)</td>
<td>20.69 (1.34)</td>
<td>0.85 (0.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Optimal</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stereocaulon paschale</td>
<td>Field</td>
<td>56.97 (7.08)</td>
<td>43.45 (8.89)</td>
<td>59.98 (7.24)</td>
<td>1.78 (0.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Optimal</td>
<td>192.10 (23.74)</td>
<td>303.06 (29.20)</td>
<td>217.38 (23.24)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Modeling $\mathrm{N}_2$-Fixation Potential**

Models of $\mathrm{N}_2$-fixation potential were determined for BSCs using $\mathrm{N}_2$-fixation rates and microclimatic data recorded in the *in situ* ambient incubations. The *Sphagnum* spp. $\mathrm{N}_2$-fixation model was based on $\mathrm{N}_2$-fixation rates under controlled laboratory conditions, and the *S. paschale* model was based on $\mathrm{N}_2$-fixation rates recorded during *in situ* ambient incubations and macroclimatic data recorded at a local Daring Lake weather station (−500 m from the research station) (2007–2008; Bob Reid, INAC, unpublished data). Spearman correlations were determined between mean $\mathrm{N}_2$-fixation rate, mean light (PAR), mean incubation temperature, and mean % moisture for each incubation across all *in situ* ambient incubations (2007 and 2008) for Hollow ($n = 54$) and Hummock BSCs ($n = 54$). Temperature had the highest correlation with $\mathrm{N}_2$-fixation for both Hollow ($r = 0.78$) and Hummock BSCs ($r = 0.64$). Light and temperature had a high covariance for Hollow BSCs ($r = 0.84$) and Hummock BSCs ($r = 0.81$); therefore, only temperature and moisture were used in the models. Separate models were determined for high and low moisture conditions. High and low moisture classes were based on percent moisture values above (>70%) and below (<70%) the median % moisture detected for Hollow or Hummock BSCs incubated in the field over the growing season in 2007 and 2008.

*Sphagnum* spp. were sampled from the field site in early August 2009, kept cool (~4 °C), and shipped to the lab at the University of Northern British Columbia. The samples were incubated under a range of laboratory conditions reflecting field conditions in 2007–2008 to determine the response of $\mathrm{N}_2$-fixation to temperature and light. Moisture was not included because >70% of *Sphagnum* spp. within the landscape occurred in Wet Sedge Meadows where moisture remains relatively high throughout the growing season and is likely not limiting. *Sphagnum* spp. $\mathrm{N}_2$-fixation rates were significantly correlated with temperature ($r = 0.62$). $\mathrm{N}_2$-fixation rates under light conditions ranging from 0 to 1000 $\mu\mathrm{mol \ PAR \ m}^{-2} \ \mathrm{sec}^{-1}$ were not significantly different (ANOVA, Tukey post hoc, $p = 0.09$); therefore, only temperature was included in the model.

Mean $\mathrm{N}_2$-fixation by *S. paschale* under *in situ* ambient incubations ($n = 27$) was highly correlated with mean % moisture ($r = 0.92$). Days since precipitation was used as the moisture variable for *S. paschale* since direct measurements of field moisture content were not possible. A considerable lag period often occurs following saturation of *Stereocaulon* mats from rainfall events before steady nitrogenase activity is recovered (Crittenden and Kershaw, 1978). Therefore, a 24 hour lag was incorporated into the days since precipitation variable. The 24 hours following a precipitation event (≥1 mm) was coded as 0 and every subsequent day without a precipitation event coded with an increasing value of 1. Days since precipitation was highly correlated with mean % moisture ($r = -0.76$) and with $\mathrm{N}_2$-fixation ($r = -0.84$).

The above models were used to estimate hourly $\mathrm{N}_2$-fixation rates for each association over a growing season based upon microclimatic and macroclimatic monitoring in the study landscape. Hourly $\mathrm{N}_2$-fixation rates were summed to provide daily (Fig. 2) and seasonal totals (Table 4). We defined the start of the growing season as the first set of three or more consecutive days with no snow cover and mean air temperature above 0 °C, and the end of the growing season as the first occurrence of three or more consecutive days with mean air and soil surface temperature <0 °C. In 2007 and 2008 these conditions occurred between Julian days 152 and 257 and 144 and 259, respectively. Estimates of $\mathrm{N}_2$-fixation for all of the above growing season days were not possible for every $\mathrm{N}_2$-fixing association due to unavailable microclimatic data. Therefore, the total mean $\mathrm{N}$ input for each association was based on the average of 2007 and 2008 estimates over a 103 day growing season from 154 to 257 in both years. Air temperature, snow depth, and precipitation were determined from macroclimatic data from the local Daring Lake weather station (2007–2008; Bob Reid, INAC, unpublished data).

**Quantification of $\mathrm{N}_2$-Fixing Associations in the Landscape**

The areal extents of each of the $\mathrm{N}_2$-fixing associations within each ecosystem type (Xerophytic Herb Tundra, Heath-Lichen/Heath-Mat Tundra, Birch Hummock, Wet Sedge Meadows) in the study area were determined using line transects in June 2007. Ten parallel transects (~50 m apart, and ~1 km in length) were run from an esker ridge down across a valley and up to an elevated boulder field plateau within the East Daring Lake drainage basin. The variation in topography and therefore of vegetation types within the transect area is typical of the Barrenlands region and representative of the landscape study area. Percent cover of each $\mathrm{N}_2$-fixing association was visually estimated within all 25 × 25 cm$^2$ subsections of 1 m$^2$ quadrats that were placed every 10 m along each line transect. The dominant ecosystem type in each quadrat was noted, and then the mean percent cover of each of the four principal $\mathrm{N}_2$-fixing associations was visually estimated by two independent observers. The total area of each $\mathrm{N}_2$-fixing association within the landscape was estimated based on its mean % cover.
within each ecosystem type (determined from transect data) and the total area occupied by each ecosystem type within the 26.7 km² landscape study area (determined from Obst, 2008).

The total mean growing season N input (kg ha⁻¹ yr⁻¹) for each N₂-fixing association was estimated by averaging the 2007 and 2008 model outputs for Julian days 154–257 in both years. The total N input by each N₂-fixing association within each ecosystem type was determined by multiplying the mean total growing season N input for each association (kg ha⁻¹ yr⁻¹) by the area (ha) occupied by each association. Total N input for each ecosystem type is the sum of N inputs from all N₂-fixing associations within a given ecosystem type. Total landscape N input over the growing season was determined by summing N input from all N₂-fixing associations in each of the ecosystem types over the growing season and dividing by the total landscape study area (26.7 km²).

STATISTICAL ANALYSES

Comparisons of mean N₂-fixation rates by the principal N₂-fixing associations over the growing season (June–August) under field and optimal conditions were analyzed using separate factorial analyses of variance (ANOVA) (N₂-fixing type, month, and their interaction). Logistic regressions were used to develop the models of N₂-fixation potential based on microclimate. Data from both 2007 and 2008 were used in comparisons of N₂-fixation rates by the principal N₂-fixing associations and in the models of N₂-fixation potential based on microclimate. N₂-fixation rates were log transformed prior to all statistical analyses (SYSTAT 8.0, Systat Software, Inc.).

Results

N₂-FIXATION RATES OF THE PRINCIPAL CYANOBACTERIAL ASSOCIATIONS

Mean monthly N₂-fixation rates under field conditions differed significantly among N₂-fixing associations (F(3,2232) = 156.51, P < 0.01) and were significantly different between months (F(2,2232) = 3.40, P = 0.03) (Table 2). The interaction of month and N₂-fixing association was also significant (F(6,2232) = 27.67, P < 0.01) with patterns of N₂-fixation over the growing season (June–August) varying among the different associations. The highest rates of N₂-fixation for all of the associations with the exception of S. paschale occurred in July; however, Hollow BSCs had lower rates in June compared with July and August, and Sphagnum spp. had low rates in August compared with June and July.

N₂-fixation rates under optimal conditions (200 μmol PAR m⁻² s⁻¹, 20 °C) differed among cyanobacterial associations (F(3,154) = 181.15, P < 0.01) and between months (F(2,154) = 8.17, P < 0.01), and there was a significant interaction between these two factors (F(4,154) = 2.70, P = 0.03). The highest N₂-fixation rates under optimal conditions for all associations were in July (Table 2). The lowest rates under optimal conditions occurred in June for both Hollow BSCs and S. paschale, while the lowest rates occurred in August for Hummock BSCs.

Comparison of N₂-fixation rates under field and optimal conditions clearly indicated that adverse in situ environmental factors severely curtailed N₂-fixation, and that the extent of this constraint varied substantially among cyanobacterial associations.

FIGURE 2. Seasonal trends in N₂-fixation rate (μmol N m⁻² day⁻¹) estimated from potential N₂-fixation rate models and field environmental data records for each N₂-fixing association for 2007 and 2008 at Daring Lake, NWT. See Table 3 for further model details. ARA to N₂-fixation conversion ratios (Table 2) were applied for each N₂-fixing association.
BSC associations had N₂-fixation rates under optimal conditions that were 2–3 times higher than those observed under field conditions, while rates in *S. paschale* were 4–7 times higher under optimal conditions (Table 2).

**LANDSCAPE-SCALE PATTERNS OF N INPUT**

**Microclimatic Models of Potential N₂-Fixation for Each Cyanobacterial Association**

Our simple models of N₂-fixation rates in relation to either temperature and/or moisture explained at least 50% of the variation in the field incubation data (Table 3). N₂-fixation rates were correlated with temperature in the high moisture and low moisture category samples (R² = 0.77; P < 0.001; R² = 0.78, P < 0.001, respectively) of Hollow BSC associations (Table 3). Similarly, N₂-fixation rates were correlated with temperature in the high moisture and low moisture category samples (R² = 0.56, P < 0.001; R² = 0.50, P < 0.001, respectively) of Hummock BSC associations (Table 3). N₂-fixation rates for the *Sphagnum* spp. cyanobacterial associations were also correlated with temperature (R² = 0.72, P < 0.001), while *S. paschale* rates were significantly correlated with days since precipitation (R² = 0.69, P < 0.001) (Table 3).

Seasonal trends of N₂-fixation estimated by using full growing season field microclimatic records in the models indicated that each N₂-fixing association had similar patterns of activity in 2007 and 2008 (Fig. 2). N₂-fixation inputs in Hollow BSC, Hummock BSC, and *Sphagnum* spp. associations fluctuated dynamically during the first half of the season but tended to generally increase toward peak values in mid to late July, and then to decline fairly steadily afterwards. No clear seasonal trend could be observed for *S. paschale* because estimates were based solely on days since precipitation. The model estimates of mean total N input across the growing season (3 June to 13 September) for each cyanobacterial association ranged from 3.4 kg N ha⁻¹ yr⁻¹ (Hollow BSCs) to 24.9 kg N ha⁻¹ yr⁻¹ (*S. paschale*) for a 103 day growing season (Table 4).

**N Input by N₂-Fixing Associations and by Ecosystem Types**

No single N₂-fixing association dominated N inputs across all of the ecosystem types. *Stereocaulon paschale* was the largest source of N input in both Xerophytic Herb Tundra and Heath-Lichen/Heath-Mat Tundra followed by Hummock BSC (Table 5). *Sphagnum* spp. was the largest source of N input in both Birch Hummock and Wet Sedge Meadow ecosystems followed by Hollow BSC. Despite having the highest mean N₂-fixation rate, *S. paschale* did not have the highest overall landscape N input (549.84 kg; Fig. 3). *Sphagnum* spp. had the highest N input (1030.72 kg) due to its relatively high mean N₂-fixation rate and greater area within the landscape (50.28 ha) compared with *S. paschale* (22.11 ha) (Fig. 3).

We used the model estimates of growing season N₂-fixation by each cyanobacterial association along with the mapping data of the distribution of ecosystem types in our landscape study area to estimate overall N inputs in each ecosystem type. Total N input per unit area was ~10 times higher in the Wet Sedge Meadow than in any other ecosystem type (Table 5). Our spatially explicit analyses indicate that this effect can be explained by particularly high inputs...
The contributions of individual N$_2$-fixing associations to total biological N input across the selected landscape study area and to N inputs per unit area for each of the major ecosystem types at Daring Lake, Northwest Territories, over the growing season (Julian days 154 to 257).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ecosystem type</th>
<th>Total area (and proportion) of each ecosystem type within the study landscape (ha)</th>
<th>N$_2$-fixing association</th>
<th>Mean cover of N$_2$-fixing association within each ecosystem type (%)</th>
<th>Area of each N$_2$-fixing association (ha)</th>
<th>N input by each N$_2$-fixing association within each ecosystem type (kg N yr$^{-1}$)</th>
<th>Total N input within each ecosystem type (kg N yr$^{-1}$)</th>
<th>Total N input per unit area for each ecosystem type (kg N ha$^{-1}$ yr$^{-1}$)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Xerophytic Herb Tundra</td>
<td>74.58 (5.5%)</td>
<td>Hollow BSC</td>
<td>0.02</td>
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<td>0.73</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>23.54</td>
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<td>Sphagnum spp.</td>
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<td>4.31</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stereocaulon paschale</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>26.61</td>
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<tr>
<td>Heath-Lichen/Heath-Mat</td>
<td>568.87 (42.0%)</td>
<td>Hollow BSC</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>7.07</td>
<td>777.19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tundra</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sphagnum spp.</td>
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<td>505.07</td>
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<tr>
<td>Birch Hummock</td>
<td>171.29 (12.6%)</td>
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<td>4.12</td>
<td>7.06</td>
<td>24.35</td>
<td>235.39</td>
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<td>9.13</td>
<td>187.16</td>
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<td>0.41</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wet Sedge Meadow</td>
<td>68.9 (5.1%)</td>
<td>Hollow BSC</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>5.69</td>
<td>750.24</td>
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</table>

Total N input for 68% the Daring Lake landscape study area over the 103 day growing season was 0.68 kg ha$^{-1}$ yr$^{-1}$. FIGURE 3. (a) Mean N$_2$-fixation rate measured over the growing seasons of 2007 and 2008 (see Table 2), (b) total area of N$_2$-fixing associations in landscape study area, and (c) total N input for Hollow biological soil crusts (BSCs), Hummock BSCs, Sphagnum spp., and Stereocaulon paschale determined by potential N$_2$-fixation models in the landscape study area at Daring Lake, NWT. Total area of N$_2$-fixing associations and total N input in landscape study area were calculated based on the contributions of individual N$_2$-fixing associations to total biological N input across the selected landscape study area and to N inputs per unit area for each of the major ecosystem types at Daring Lake, Northwest Territories, over the growing season. The mean N$_2$-fixation rate was calculated as the total N$_2$-fixation rate divided by the area of the study area. Error bars in (a) indicate standard error.
followed by the highest rates coinciding with the peak growing season and declining rates in late July to August depending on latitude. Our field measurements of N$_2$-fixation demonstrate that seasonal patterns vary among the vegetation communities, which may account for the lack of seasonal variation detected in studies that average across both topography and vegetation type (Hobara et al., 2006).

Moisture appears to be one of the most important environmental factors controlling N$_2$-fixation across various arctic environments (Chapin and Bledsoe, 1992; Nash and Olafsen, 1995; Zielke et al., 2002, 2005). Moisture can affect seasonal patterns of N$_2$-fixation within individual N$_2$-fixing communities, and spatial heterogeneity in N$_2$-fixation is often a reflection of differences in cyanobacterial biomass due to the long-term characteristics of the community moisture regime (Chapin et al., 1991). *Streptocaulon paschale*, which was primarily located on xeric esker tops and well-drained upper esker slopes, had the highest mean rate of N$_2$-fixation over the growing season, but demonstrated a strong sensitivity to desiccation. Lichens are often established on drier exposed habitats where nitrogenase activity may be reduced to a few comparatively short episodes when moisture conditions are suitable (Crittenden and Kershaw, 1979). Rainfall in July 2008 was 6.7 mm compared to 24.6 mm and 28.1 mm in June and August, respectively. Accordingly, the average percent moisture of *S. paschale* incubated in July was 26% as compared to June (56%) and August (45%), perhaps explaining the relatively low July N$_2$-fixation rates. The relatively high and consistent N$_2$-fixation rates associated with Sphagnum spp. over the growing season are likely due to the consistently high moisture conditions of the low-lying Wet Sedge Meadow where Sphagnum spp. are the dominant vegetation.

Temperature has also been significantly correlated with N$_2$-fixation rates in the Arctic (Smith, 1984; Lennihan et al., 1994; Liengen and Olsen, 1997b; Zielke et al., 2002). Our strong correlations between N$_2$-fixation and temperature for Hollow BSC, Hummock BSC, and Sphagnum spp. indicate that seasonal temperature fluctuations are important in determining seasonal rates of N$_2$-fixation. Like Zielke et al. (2005), we also found that temperature was a good predictor of N$_2$-fixation provided different models were used depending on moisture condition. Hollow BSC had lower field and optimal rates of N$_2$-fixation in June compared with other cyanobacterial associations (Table 2). Mean Hollow BSC temperature in June was 6.8 °C compared to 9.1 °C for Hummock BSC. Therefore, the lower rates of N$_2$-fixation for Hollow BSC are likely due to the persistence of snow in these depressions resulting in relatively low temperatures, as well as restricted light inputs that together may impede the recovery and development of cyanobacterial communities in the early growing season (Fig. 4).

Some studies have found N$_2$-fixation to be light dependent (Granhall and Lid-Torsvik, 1975; Alexander et al., 1978) while others have found little light dependence as photosynthetic rates tend to saturate at relatively low light levels (~500 µmol PAR m$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$) (Coxson and Kershaw, 1983b; Smith, 1984; Chapin and Bledsoe, 1992; Nash and Olafsen, 1995; Zielke et al., 2002). Varying light conditions (0 to 1000 µmol PAR m$^{-2}$ s$^{-1}$) did not affect Sphagnum spp. N$_2$-fixation rates in our study, supporting the concept that stored energy for N$_2$-fixation, combined with continuous or near continuous daylight and a limited plant canopy, reduce the potential for light to act as a controlling factor on N$_2$-fixation in the Arctic (Chapin and Bledsoe, 1992). Nevertheless, remote sensing, repeat photography, and experimental nutrient addition studies all suggest that current warming trends in the low Arctic may be promoting shrub growth and expansion within various topographic positions (Goetz et al., 2005; Sturm et al., 2001;
Chapin et al., 1995). Declining macrolichen abundance in warming sub- and mid-arctic environments may be a function of increased growth and abundance of deciduous shrubs, which may inhibit lichen performance and persistence through shading (Cornelissen et al., 2001). N₂-fixation rates and persistence of other N₂-fixing associations in these environments may also be similarly influenced by reduced light availability.

The higher N₂-fixation rates detected under optimal conditions for all N₂-fixing associations indicate that microclimatic conditions in the field are limiting N₂-fixation for all of the principal N₂-fixing associations. We conclude that climate change scenarios that result in warmer surface temperatures without increased surface desiccation are likely to lead to higher rates of N₂-fixation (Chapin and Bledsoe, 1992).

**THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BIOLOGICAL N₂-FIXATION TO N CYCLING IN A LOW ARCTIC LANDSCAPE**

Since N availability is commonly a major limitation on tundra plant growth, our results provide important insights to understanding the functioning of low arctic terrestrial ecosystems. Our estimate of mean seasonal N₂-fixation in Birch Hummock (Table 5; 1.4 kg N ha⁻¹ yr⁻¹ over 103 days) is ~1/300th the late summer rate of gross N mineralization by soil microbes in the same ecosystem type (Buckeridge et al., 2010). Therefore, internal recycling of N from soil organic matter is undoubtedly the critical N supply process within the Birch Hummock ecosystem type at least. Nevertheless our data suggest a significant influence of N₂-fixation on N cycling and carbon uptake at a larger scale. N₂-fixation during the growing season was highest in the Wet Sedge Meadow, which is also the ecosystem with the largest annual plant primary production in this landscape (Nobrega and Grogan, 2008). Nutrient inputs associated with run-off and leachates from higher elevation ecosystems toward the valley floor where wet sedge ecosystems predominate may facilitate the high rates of primary production there. Our data here suggest that in addition to that process, *in situ* N₂-fixation inputs may be an important pathway supplying N to support the high primary productivity of this ecosystem type.

Total biological N₂-fixation input across the study landscape area was estimated at 0.68 kg N ha⁻¹ yr⁻¹. Previous estimates of arctic N₂-fixation inputs range from 0.06 to 3 kg N ha⁻¹ yr⁻¹, with the majority of estimates ranging from 0.10 to 1.20 kg N ha⁻¹ yr⁻¹ (Alexander and Schell, 1973; Barsdate and Alexander, 1975; Chapin and Bledsoe, 1992; Hobara et al., 2006). Summertime mean atmospheric N inputs from wet deposition at the nearest monitoring station (63.52°N, 116.00°W) to Daring Lake (~240 km away) were 0.39 kg N ha⁻¹ yr⁻¹ (1991–2006; CAPMon, Environment Canada, unpublished data). Wintertime atmospheric N deposition inputs as total inorganic N accumulation in ambient snow packs (0.3 m) at Daring Lake in 2007 were 0.05 kg N ha⁻¹ (Buckeridge and Grogan, 2010). Together, these numbers suggest that total biological N₂-fixation input for the landscape study area at Daring Lake is approximately twice the amount of N deposited via atmospheric deposition. While some studies have found N₂-fixation contributed 80% or higher to total landscape N inputs (Hobara et al., 2006; Solheim et al., 2006), other studies, including ours, have found the contribution of N₂-fixation to ecosystem N inputs is approximately 50–70% (Chapin and Bledsoe, 1992; Henry and Svoboda, 1986).

We found N₂-fixation across a low arctic tundra landscape was concentrated in the Wet Sedge Meadow ecosystem type where N₂-fixation per unit area was ~10 times higher than in any of the other ecosystem types (Table 5). Of the four principal N₂-fixing associations, *Sphagnum* spp., which had the highest percent cover in Wet Sedge Meadows, made the largest contribution (55.2%) to total N input. Several other studies have also found the highest rates of N₂-fixation in arctic landscapes are associated with cyanobacteria moss associations (Alexander and Schell, 1973; Henry and Svoboda, 1986; Solheim et al., 1996).

Five methodological constraints may have affected our landscape estimates of biological N₂-fixation inputs. Firstly, conversion ratios can vary depending on the operating environment of a given N₂-fixing association (Millbank, 1981; Gunther, 1989), and seasonal variation in conversion ratios has been detected for free-living cyanobacteria from high arctic habitats (Lieneng, 1999b). Second, we used visual estimates of abundance for the N₂-fixing associations without accounting for variations in cyanobacterial biomass that can impact rates of N₂-fixation. Thirdly, the ecosystem types in our analysis account for only 68% of the Daring Lake study area. Some excluded ecosystem types (Exposed Sand and Gravel, and Rocky Outcrops) probably contribute little or nothing to landscape N input. However, other ecosystem types such as Dry Sedge Meadows (8.2%) may contain considerable *Sphagnum* spp. cyanobacterial associations and therefore may make significant contributions to landscape N input, albeit for a limited duration due to less favorable microclimatic conditions. Fourthly, our estimates of modeled N inputs would have been improved by more accurate quantification of spatial variability in soil surface microclimate by using a much larger number of climate sensors. This is a limitation that is common to many studies of arctic and subarctic ecosystems (Rouse, 1976; Young et al., 1997). Fortunately, the type of conditions that favor N₂-fixation by most cyanobacterial associations (i.e. during or immediately following growing season precipitation events) will tend to minimize between site variability in soil surface microclimate, reducing the impact of this factor on our estimates. Fifthly, we used a 103 day growing season as the basis for yearly N input. However, N₂-fixation likely occurs outside of this period whenever microclimatic conditions are favorable (Davey, 1983; Lieneng, 1999a; Zielke et al., 2002; Hobara et al., 2006). In summary we conclude that, provided our conversion ratios, percent cover of cyanobacterial associations, and models of potential N₂-fixation are sufficiently accurate, our estimates of ecosystem N₂-fixation inputs and of total landscape-level N input over the growing season are minimum values.

**Acknowledgments**

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