

# The value of plantation forests for plant, invertebrate and bird diversity and the potential for cross-taxon surrogacy

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**Abstract** As the area of plantation forest expands worldwide and natural, unmanaged forests decline there is much interest in the potential for planted forests to provide habitat for biodiversity. In regions where little semi-natural woodland remains, the biodiversity supported by forest plantations, typically non-native conifers, may be particularly important. Few studies provide detailed comparisons between the species diversity of native woodlands which are being depleted and non-native plantation forests, which are now expanding, based on data collected from multiple taxa in the same study sites. Here we compare the species diversity and community composition of plants, invertebrates and birds in Sitka spruce- (*Picea sitchensis*-) dominated and Norway spruce- (*Picea abies*-) dominated plantations, which have expanded significantly in recent decades in the study area in Ireland, with that of oak- and ash-dominated semi-natural woodlands in the same area. The results show that species richness in spruce plantations can be as high as semi-natural woodlands, but that the two forest types support different assemblages of species. In areas where non-native conifer plantations are the principle forest type, their role in the provision of habitat for biodiversity conservation should not be overlooked. Appropriate management should target the introduction of semi-natural woodland characteristics, and on the extension of existing semi-natural woodlands to maintain and enhance forest species diversity. Our data show that although some relatively easily surveyed groups, such as vascular plants and birds, were congruent with many of the other taxa when looking across all study sites, the similarities in response were not strong enough to warrant use of these

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taxa as surrogates of the others. In order to capture a wide range of biotic variation, assessments of forest biodiversity should either encompass several taxonomic groups, or rely on the use of indicators of diversity that are not species based.

**Keywords** Beetles · Birds · Biodiversity · Forest · Management · Spiders · Vegetation

## Introduction

While global natural forest area continues to decline by *circa* 13 million hectares per annum, the area of plantation forest is increasing by approximately 5 million hectares per annum (FAO 2010), and plantation forests are now the dominant forest type in many countries (European Commission 2011). They make up an estimated 264 million hectares (7 %) of the global forest area and are forecast to further increase to approximately 345 million hectares by 2030 (Carle and Holmgren 2008). Although deforestation removes native species of tree from an area, many plantation forests, which are now increasing, use non-native tree species, particularly conifer species (FAO 2012), whose value for biodiversity conservation is not fully understood (Oxbrough et al. 2013).

The biodiversity of these plantation forests can be influenced by management practices at both local and landscape scales (Kuuluvainen 2009; Klenner et al. 2009; Fabbio et al. 2003; Brukas et al. 2013). The prevalent model of forest management in the twentieth century focused almost entirely on wood production, but pressures from international agreements and societal demands are acting to make modern forest management more multifunctional. The potential for these plantation forests to provide habitat for plant and animal species is a key component of sustainable forest management (SFM) (MCPFE 2011; Lindenmayer et al. 2000). SFM one of the foremost tools for achieving compatibility between forest industries and the provision of ecosystem services, including the conservation of forest biodiversity (Paritsis and Aizen 2008; Hartmann et al. 2010). The objectives of SFM in a landscape can only be realised when its objectives are based on an understanding of the ecology of existing woodlands. This relies on a detailed knowledge of their flora and fauna, and the factors influencing species diversity in forests.

While natural forests represent some of the most biologically diverse ecosystems in the world, including more than half of all terrestrial species (MEA 2005; FAO 2012), the highly managed nature of plantation forests means they may support less native biodiversity than naturally occurring forests (Hunter 1999; Lindenmayer and Hobbs 2004; Stephens and Wagner 2007; Paritsis and Aizen 2008). However, in countries where the extent of naturally occurring forests is limited, plantation forests may provide habitat for forest associated species and enhance overall landscape biodiversity, (Stephens and Wagner 2007; Brockerhoff et al. 2008; Pawson et al. 2008; Sweeney et al. 2010; Coote et al. 2012). Several studies have also suggested that plantation forests have the potential to benefit native diversity even where the planted tree species are non-native conifer species (Bremer and Farley 2010; O’Hanlon and Harrington 2012; Humphrey 2005). Although the island of Ireland was once extensively forested, today forest cover accounts for less than 11 % of its surface area. Eighty-seven per cent of this forest cover is comprised of plantations, the majority of which (97 %) are dominated by non-native conifer tree species (MCPFE et al. 2007). The remainder of Ireland’s forest cover comprises semi-natural woodlands of native broadleaved tree species (Forest Service 2007). This means that

plantation forests in Ireland are particularly important to forest biodiversity compared with regions where forest cover is dominated by semi-natural woodland (Bremer and Farley 2010; Berndt et al. 2008). Although Ireland's native woodlands are limited in their spatial extent, the value of their biodiversity is disproportionately high, providing a reference point against which more recently established forests can be compared.

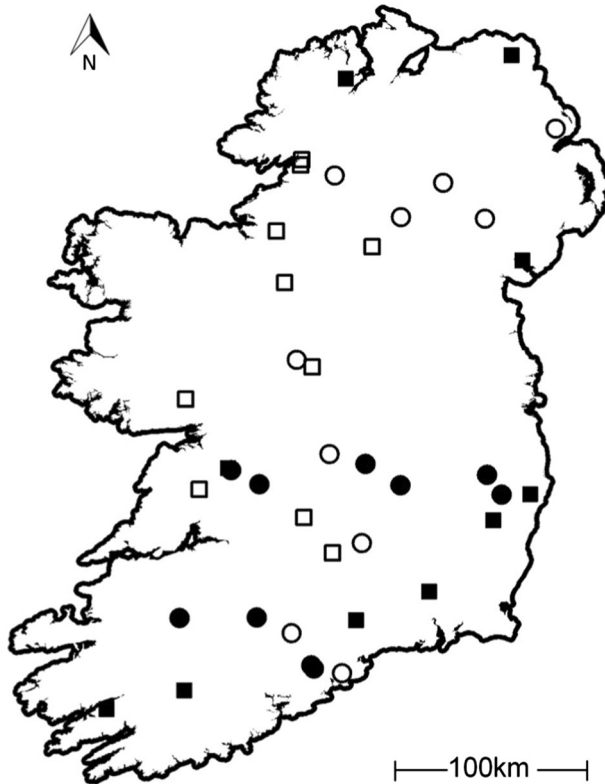
Assessments of species diversity are commonly used to gauge the environmental impact of different forest management practices. In such cases, information about unsurveyed taxa may be inferred from known relationships with either environmental variables or other taxonomic groups (surrogate taxa) (Wolters et al. 2006; Gardner 2010; Lewandowski et al. 2010). This approach is most beneficial when the diversity of one or more relatively cryptic, inaccessible or hard-to-identify groups can be effectively estimated using data from a more easily surveyed group (Gioria et al. 2010; Rodrigues and Brooks 2007). Previous studies of the usefulness of surrogacy have differing conclusions, with some considering surrogate taxa to be a useful tool (Gioria et al. 2010; Rodrigues and Brooks 2007), and others cautioning that relationships between taxa are often too weak or too variable to be useful in this way (Carmel and Stoller-Cavari 2006; Andelman and Fagan 2000; Wolters et al. 2006).

The response of species diversity to commercial plantation forests varies across taxonomic groups, and much of the evidence for this variation comes from meta-analyses of independent studies which consider individual taxa separately (Paillet et al. 2010; Paritsis and Aizen 2008). Very few studies have used empirical data to investigate the importance of plantation forests for more than one taxon simultaneously. We conducted a survey of species diversity in multiple taxonomic groups (plants, invertebrates and birds) across the island of Ireland where commercial plantations are the dominant forest type. The objective of this study was to compare the species diversity of semi-natural woodlands, which are being widely deforested, with that of plantation forests, which are now expanding globally. We also investigated associations between species richness of the different taxonomic groups in order to assess the predictive ability of each group as a biodiversity surrogate for other groups. The aims of this study were to assess the potential of plantation forests to provide habitat for plant, invertebrate and bird species in an area where little native woodland remains, to identify ways of improving plantation forest management for biodiversity, and to test the validity of using cross-taxon surrogacy in the species diversity assessment of plantation forests and native woodland.

## Methods

### Study sites

Twenty closed-canopy spruce- (*Picea*-) dominated plantation forest and 20 semi-natural woodlands were selected for study. All study sites were larger than 4 ha. These included ten Sitka spruce- (*Picea sitchensis*-) dominated plantation forests in their second rotation (hereafter referred to as Sitka spruce plantations), ten Norway spruce- (*Picea abies*-) dominated plantation forests (hereafter referred to as Norway spruce plantations), ten oak- (*Quercus petraea*-) dominated semi-natural woodlands (hereafter referred to as oak woodlands) and ten ash- (*Fraxinus excelsior*-) dominated semi-natural woodlands (hereafter referred to as ash woodlands). Sites were widely distributed across the island of Ireland (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1** Map of Ireland showing plantation and semi-natural forest study sites. *Filled circle* sitka spruce-dominated plantations, *open circle* Norway spruce-dominated plantations, *filled square* oak-dominated semi-natural woodlands and *open square* ash-dominated semi-natural woodlands

Ten semi-natural woodlands were dominated by oak with birch and/or holly in the understory and other ten semi-natural woodland study sites were dominated by ash with oak and/or hazel in the understory. Oak and ash woodlands in the Republic of Ireland were selected on the basis of their presence on 1st edition (c.1840s) Ordnance Survey maps, while those in Northern Ireland were selected from a database of ancient and long-established woodland (The Woodland Trust 2007). However, due to a lack of suitable sites, we included two woodlands that were not present on the 1st edition maps or in the database. Following analysis we found that these woodlands did not differ significantly from the others and so results are presented for all woodlands. During the study, the native woodlands were all subject to little or no management.

#### Data collection

Surveys of ground vegetation (bryophytes and vascular plants), invertebrates (canopy spiders and beetles and active ground-dwelling spiders and Carabid beetles) and birds were conducted at the study sites during the summers of 2007 and 2008. Standard survey methodologies for recording species were used for plants (Kent 2012), ground-dwelling invertebrates (Curtis 1980), canopy invertebrates (Erwin 1991) and birds (Bibby et al. 2000).

At each study site three 10 m × 10 m plots were selected for survey of ground vegetation. Plots were located at least 50 m from the edge and at least 50 m apart. Within each plot, the percentage cover of each terrestrial plant species was estimated to the nearest 5 %. Below 5 % two different cover-abundance units were distinguished: 3 % (indicating cover of 1–5 %) and 0.5 % (indicating cover <1 %). For bryophytes only those species forming patches more than 10 cm<sup>2</sup> were recorded. Species not forming patches of this size but which occurred frequently were also recorded. Nomenclature follows Stace (2010) for vascular plants and Paton (1999) for liverworts.

Pitfall traps were used to collect ground-dwelling spiders and Carabid beetles at all study sites. Although this method is widely used and is an efficient method, it should be noted that pitfall catches are a function of the activity, density and behaviour of each species rather than a measure of absolute abundance.

Up to three sampling plots were located at each study site within 10 m of the ground vegetation survey plots. Each sampling plot comprised five pitfall traps spaced (pooled for analyses) approximately 2 m apart and consisted of a plastic cup, 7 cm in diameter and 9 cm in depth. A bulb corer of similar dimensions to the cup was used to make a hole in the ground in which to sink the cup so that it was flush with the soil surface and soil disturbance around the trap was minimized. Two drainage holes were cut horizontally, 1 cm from the top of the cup, and traps were filled with ethylene glycol to a depth of 1 cm to act as a killing and preserving agent. There was considerable animal disturbance (>80 % trap loss) at two of the Sitka spruce study sites sampled during 2007 and so these sites were re-sampled during the same period in 2008. To reduce the impact of animal disturbance during the 2008 sampling period a combination of protective wire mesh boxes (mesh size was approximately 3 cm to allow ground-dwelling invertebrates to pass through) and wire mesh lids held 5 cm above the ground by plastic pegs and attached to electric fence units were used. We tested for an effect of these protective devices and for an effect of sampling year by conducting additional pitfall trapping. No effect of either protective devices or sampling year was found. All traps were set in mid-May of 2007 or 2008 and left in situ for nine weeks during which time the contents of all traps were collected approximately every three weeks. Catches were pooled across the nine weeks for analyses. Spiders and Carabid beetles were sorted from the pitfall samples and adults were identified to species level using Roberts (1993) and Luff (2007).

Spiders and beetles were sampled from forest canopies at 24 of the study sites (6 of each site type) using a canopy fogging technique that targeted one tree, located at least 50 m from the edge, at each study site. Canopy fogging is frequently used by researchers working on canopy invertebrates, as it provides access to invertebrate populations in forest canopies while minimising access-related disturbance. It is, however, limited by weather conditions and may overlook attached or sessile animals and does not sample groups that live within the tree itself (Stork and Hammond 1997). Using a petrol-driven fogging machine (SwingFog SN50-PE, SwingTec Ltd., Germany) a natural pyrethroid (Pybuthrin 33, Spray-Chem Ltd., Dublin) was dispersed in ultra-low volume droplets into the tree canopy for between 6 and 9 min. This insecticide is non-persistent in the environment, has no phytotoxic effects (at the levels used), and is not harmful to mammals or birds (Straw et al. 1996). Fallen invertebrates were then collected using an arrangement of 16 plastic sheets with a combined area of 24 m<sup>2</sup> suspended 1 m from the ground under the fogged canopy. Plastic sheets were arranged around the target tree on the eight cardinal and ordinal compass bearings. These sheets were left in place for 3 h after fogging and the catches from all sheets at each site were pooled. Samples were collected in situ using soft paintbrushes to brush invertebrates into bottles containing 70 % alcohol before the insects could recover from the effects of the insecticide.

Birds were surveyed at all study sites during the breeding season using point counts (Bibby et al. 2000). Six (or, where forests were too small at one Norway spruce site and one ash woodland, 4 and 5 respectively) points were randomly placed a minimum of 100 m apart in edge and interior forest habitat. Point counts of birds were conducted on days without strong wind (less than Beaufort scale 4) or persistent rain and lasted for 10 min, during which time all birds seen and heard within 50 m of the observer were recorded and their distances from the observer noted. Each site was surveyed twice with one of the visits carried out between 800 and 1,100 h, and the other between 1,400 and 1,700 h and species richness was calculated as the cumulative number of species recorded over the two visits.

### Data analysis

Abundance measures for the community analysis comprised species cover of plants and relative abundance [individual species abundance (number of individuals collected from a particular species) divided by total site abundance (combined abundance of all species collected at each site)] of invertebrate groups. *Distance* (DISTANCE 6.0 Release 2) software was used to derive bird densities from field observations. Both the identity of a species and the habitat in which it is observed may affect the detectability of birds and so each species was assigned to one of four detection groups, depending on the habitat type, method of detection, the distribution of detections in five 10 m distance bands and knowledge of the species' ecology. Akaike's information criteria (AIC) was used to select between four models for fitting of the detection function: Uniform + Cosine, Uniform + Polynomial, Half normal + Hermite and Hazard-rate + Cosine (Buckland et al. 2001). For each site, the bird population densities of all species for both the early and late counts were calculated, and the density of a species taken as the maximum of these two values. Species richness was adjusted to the lowest sampling effort for ground invertebrates and birds (2 sample plots and 4 point counts respectively) using species accumulation curves and to the lowest total number of individuals caught ( $n = 15$ ) for canopy invertebrates using individual based rarefaction curves to account for possible differences in vertical canopy structure. Analyses were carried out in R using the *vegan* package (Oksanen et al. 2010).

Species richness of all species and of forest-associated species (FAS) was calculated for each of the groups sampled in each forest type. For forest-associated species richness we identified ground vegetation species typical of woodland/forests, forest-associated ground-dwelling spider and Carabid beetle species, canopy-dwelling spider and beetle conifer, broadleaved and deadwood specialist species and bird species with strong associations with all forest habitats in Ireland, or specialising in one type of forest habitat (e.g. coniferous or broadleaved) to the exclusion of the other.

Species richness was compared among forest types using generalised linear models (GLMs) using the statistical software package R (R Development Core Team 2012). The appropriate error term (normal, Poisson, negative binomial) for each analysis was selected by comparing Akaike's Information Criterion (AIC) and examining the ratio of deviance/residual degrees of freedom. Tukey pairwise comparisons were used to examine differences among forest types. Spatial autocorrelation of GLM residuals was examined by Moran's  $I$  in the *ape* package v.3.0–6 (Paradis et al. 2004) in R. In all instances Moran's  $I$  was not significant ( $P > 0.05$ ).

Species richness and forest-associated species richness values for each group were correlated with values for every other group separately. Since some of the datasets did not conform to parametric assumptions, non-parametric Spearman's rank correlations were used throughout. Significance values were not adjusted with e.g. the Bonferroni method

after conducting multiple comparisons on the same data sets, because there are some mathematical and practical objections in the application of such corrections (Moran 2003). Correlations were not only evaluated with regard to their significance, but also their strength. Where  $r > 0.7$ , such strong correlations in species richness between taxonomic groups may be considered as evidence that variation in the diversity of one group is mirrored strongly enough by the other to be useful for predictive purposes in biodiversity surveys (Sauberer et al. 2004; Heino 2010).

For each taxonomic group, assemblage composition across forest types was examined using non-metric multidimensional scaling (NMS) performed on a matrix of Bray-Curtis dissimilarities of abundance data (square root transformed and Wisconsin double standardization) using the *vegan* package (Oksanen et al. 2010) in R. Centroids for forest types were plotted to visualise assemblage differences. Stress values were examined to assess the accuracy in representation:  $<0.05$  excellent;  $<0.1$  good;  $<0.2$  potentially useful;  $>0.3$  close to arbitrary (Clarke and Warwick 1994). Differences between forest types in each ordination were tested by analysis of variance with the function *adonis* in *vegan* package which partitions sums of squares of a multivariate data set, directly analogous to MANOVA (multivariate analysis of variance) type analyses.

To explore the similarities in community composition among different taxonomic groups and to identify surrogate taxa, the Procrustes rotation method was used (Peres-Neto and Jackson 2001; Jackson 1995). The NMS scores of each taxonomic group were separately best fitted with the scores of all other taxonomic groups using rotation, reflection and dilation to find an optimal superimposition. Such a Procrustes rotation process minimises the residual sum-of-squares ( $m_{12}$ ) between the two matrix configurations (Peres-Neto and Jackson 2001). The value of the sum-of-squared residuals between corresponding coordinates in both configurations can be used as a metric of correlation (Gower 1971); the lower the value, the greater the degree of association between the ordinations, i.e. the concordance between datasets. Using the *protest* function in *vegan* the best fit of two ordinations can be tested against a relationship occurring by chance (Jackson 1995). *Protest* uses a correlation-like statistic which can be interpreted similarly to the Pearson correlation index  $r^2$  (Peres-Neto and Jackson 2001): larger-values of  $r$  indicate a better concordance between two matrices and both matrices are identical if  $r = 1$ .

## Results

### Species richness

A total of 574 species of plants and animals were recorded in the forest study sites, 206 of which were forest-associated species (FAS). These species included 158 species of vascular plant (50 FAS), 93 bryophytes (26 FAS), 107 ground-dwelling spiders (28 FAS), 42 canopy-dwelling spiders (14 FAS), 54 ground-dwelling beetles (12 FAS), 92 canopy-dwelling beetles (60 FAS) and 28 bird species (16 FAS).

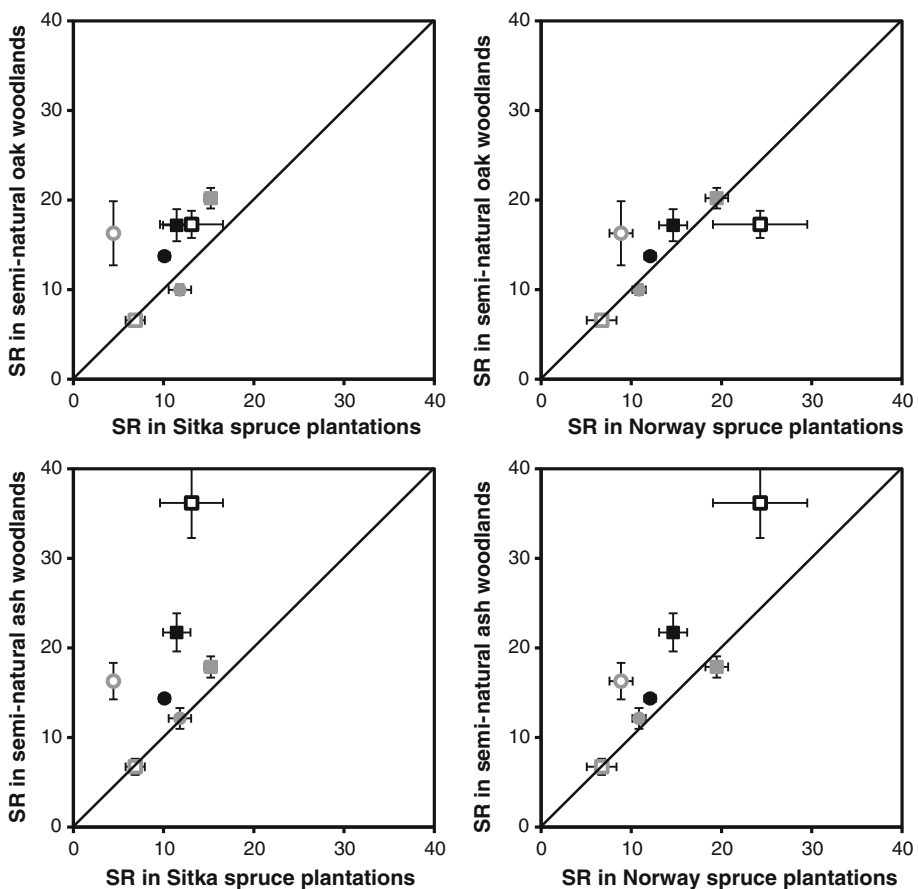
Canopy-dwelling beetles showed significantly higher species richness in oak and ash semi-natural woodlands than in spruce plantations. Bryophytes and birds also showed higher species richness in semi-natural woodlands than in plantations but, though species richness was significantly higher in ash than both plantation forest types, species richness in oak was only significantly higher than Sitka spruce plantations (Fig. 2; Table 1). Vascular plants had significantly higher species richness in ash woodlands than in Sitka spruce plantations. Ground-dwelling spiders also had significantly higher species richness in both

oak and ash semi-natural woodlands than in Sitka spruce plantations. The remaining invertebrate groups showed similar species richness across semi-natural woodlands and plantations (Fig. 2; Table 2).

Similar patterns of species richness of forest-associated species were seen as for total species richness. Again, invertebrates were more closely matched in semi-natural woodlands and plantation forests than other groups, with the exception of beetles which showed significantly higher species richness in semi-natural woodlands (Fig. 3; Table 3).

### Community composition

Species composition differed significantly between forest habitats for all groups (Fig. 4). The ordination of sites according to vascular plant species composition shows that the plant



**Fig. 2** Mean species richness ( $\pm$ SE) of the seven groups in spruce-dominated plantations in relation to mean species richness of these groups in semi-natural woodlands. *Filled black square* bryophytes, *open black square* vascular plants, *filled gray square* ground-dwelling spiders, *open gray square* canopy-dwelling spiders, *filled gray circle* ground-dwelling beetles, *open gray circle* canopy-dwelling beetles, *filled black circle* birds. In these graphs the *diagonal line* indicates equal species richness in both forest types and the position of a group above this line suggests a positive influence on species richness of one of the forest types in comparison with the other



**Table 1** Results of generalised linear models (test statistic ( $\chi^2$  or  $F$ ) and  $P$  value) comparing species richness of ‘all species’ and ‘forest-associated species’ among forest types (SS Sitka spruce-dominated plantations, NS Norway spruce-dominated plantations, Oak oak-dominated semi-natural woodlands, Ash ash-dominated semi-natural woodlands)

Taxa	Variable	SS	NS	Oak	Ash	Test	Statistic	$P$ value
Bryophytes	All species <sup>1</sup>	a	ab	bc	c	$F$	7.20	<0.001
	Forest species <sup>1</sup>	a	b	b	b	$F$	11.35	<0.001
Vascular plants	All species <sup>1</sup>	a	ab	a	b	$F$	7.88	<0.001
	Forest species <sup>1</sup>	a	b	ab	c	$F$	18.00	<0.001
Ground spiders	All species <sup>1</sup>	a	b	b	ab	$F$	5.10	0.005
	Forest species <sup>1</sup>	a	a	a	a	$F$	3.46	0.026
Canopy spiders	All species <sup>3</sup>	a	a	a	a	$\chi^2$	0.05	0.997
	Forest species <sup>1</sup>	a	a	a	a	$F$	0.79	0.512
Ground beetles	All species <sup>2</sup>	a	a	a	a	$F$	1.21	0.320
	Forest species <sup>2</sup>	a	ab	b	a	$F$	4.64	0.008
Canopy beetles	All species <sup>4</sup>	a	b	c	c	$\chi^2$	51.66	<0.001
	Forest species <sup>1</sup>	a	a	b	b	$F$	15.26	<0.001
Birds	All species <sup>2</sup>	a	b	bc	c	$F$	14.21	<0.001
	Forest species <sup>2</sup>	a	ab	bc	c	$F$	11.56	<0.001

Tukey pairwise comparisons were used to define homogenous sub-sets (a–c ranked highest to lowest); forest types? That share a lowercase letter do not differ significantly ( $P > 0.05$ )

Variable superscript indicates which model type used: 1, square root; 2, linear; 3, poisson; 4, negative binomial

communities of spruce plantations were more variable than those of native woodlands. Sitka spruce sites were particularly distinct, with the communities for both ash and oak woodlands overlapping with those of Norway spruce plantations. Bryophyte communities in ash woodlands were separated from those in other woodland types, with the communities of both oak and Sitka spruce sites overlapping with those in Norway spruce. Ground beetles communities in the different forest sites were poorly distinguished from one another, but ground spiders in native woodland sites were broadly distinct from those in plantations, with communities in oak and Sitka spruce being more similar to one another than those in ash and Norway spruce. Canopy beetles and spiders in ash were distinct from those in spruce plantations, with canopy beetles in ash being distinct from those in oak. Birds in native woodlands were clearly distinct from communities in spruce sites.

### Cross-taxon surrogacy

Following rotation of NMDS ordinations of any two taxonomic groups, Procrustes randomisation tests in PROTEST indicated significant concordances between assemblage ordinations of just fewer than half of the groups under investigation (Table 4). Although a number of the Procrustes concordances were highly significant, none were sufficiently strong ( $r > 0.7$ ) to regard any taxonomic groups as surrogate taxa (Heino 2010; Sauberer et al. 2004) and birds did not show significant concordance with any other group tested.

**Table 2** Correlations between species richness of each group

	Vascular plants	Ground spiders	Canopy spiders	Ground beetles	Canopy beetles	Birds
Bryophytes						
<i>r</i>	<b>0.546</b>	0.286	−0.178	0.231	<b>0.641</b>	<b>0.506</b>
<i>P</i>	<b>0.000</b>	0.074	0.406	0.152	<b>0.001</b>	<b>0.001</b>
Vascular plants						
<i>r</i>		0.228	−0.065	0.276	<b>0.516</b>	<b>0.372</b>
<i>P</i>		0.157	0.764	0.085	<b>0.010</b>	<b>0.018</b>
Ground spiders						
<i>r</i>				0.178	0.338	<b>0.454</b>
<i>P</i>				−0.217	0.106	<b>0.003</b>
Canopy spiders						
<i>r</i>				−0.148	−0.028	−0.193
<i>P</i>				0.489	0.895	0.367
Ground beetles						
<i>r</i>					−0.056	−0.088
<i>P</i>					0.794	0.590
Canopy beetles						
<i>r</i>						<b>0.629</b>
<i>P</i>						<b>0.001</b>

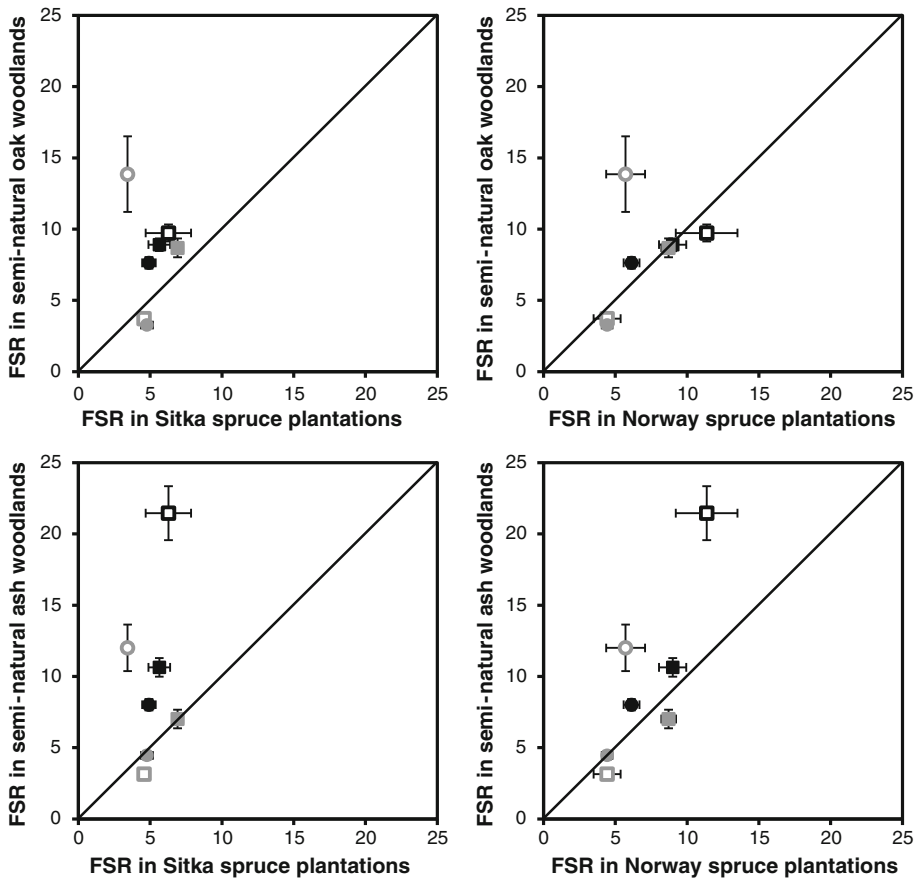
Significant correlations are highlighted in bold text

## Discussion

### Species diversity

The potential for plantation forests to support plant and animal species is influenced by a number of factors including preceding land use, planted tree species and management practices (Bremer and Farley 2010; Brockerhoff et al. 2008). This study documents the ground vegetation, ground- and canopy-dwelling spider and beetle, and bird species diversity of Sitka spruce plantations and Norway spruce plantations during the closed canopy stage of the forest cycle, and of unmanaged oak and ash semi-natural woodlands in Ireland. The North American conifer Sitka spruce is the most commonly planted exotic conifer tree species in Ireland, and Norway spruce, the most commonly planted conifer in northern Europe (MCPFE 2011), is outside of its natural range in Ireland. Although no truly undisturbed natural woodland remains in Ireland, the oak and ash broadleaved woodlands included in this study were unmanaged forest sites that had, for the most part, been established for at least 150 years. By comparison the plantation forests were highly managed commercial production forests of non-native conifer tree species.

Each of the taxon groups included in this study responded to forest type in slightly different ways and it is likely that the lack of a consistent effect across taxonomic groups in the present study is related to the rarity of forest specialist species in Ireland. Here there are relatively few forest specialists compared with other parts of Europe, and forests are inhabited mainly by generalist species adapted to living in a range of habitat types (Mitchell 2006; Fuller et al. 2007; Kelly 2008). Previous studies that used meta-analysis, which rely on data collected during separate studies, to investigate species richness across a



**Fig. 3** Mean total species richness ( $\pm$ SE) of forest-associated species (FSR) for each of the 7 groups in spruce-dominated plantations in relation to mean species richness of these groups in semi-natural woodlands. *Filled black square* bryophytes, *open black square* vascular plants, *filled gray square* ground-dwelling spiders, *open gray square* canopy-dwelling spiders, *filled gray circle* ground-dwelling beetles, *open gray circle* canopy-dwelling beetles, *filled black circle* birds. In these graphs the diagonal line indicates equal species richness in both forest types and the position of a group above this line suggests a positive influence on species richness of one of the forest types in comparison with the other

number of taxonomic groups have found that species dependent on forests, such as bryophytes and saproxylic beetles are more negatively affected by forest management practices than more generalist species (Paillet et al. 2010; Stephens and Wagner 2007; Paritsis and Aizen 2008).

Both of the spruce-dominated forest plantation types in the current study supported ground-dwelling beetle and canopy-dwelling spider species richness similar to native woodlands, but the same was not true for other groups investigated, where significant differences in species richness were found between forest types. The similarity in ground-dwelling beetles and canopy-dwelling spiders between native woodlands and spruce plantations in this study may reflect the absence of forest specialist species in Ireland (i.e. species that are specifically adapted for living in forest habitats). Spiders are generalist predators and are more dependent on habitat structure and prey availability than the actual

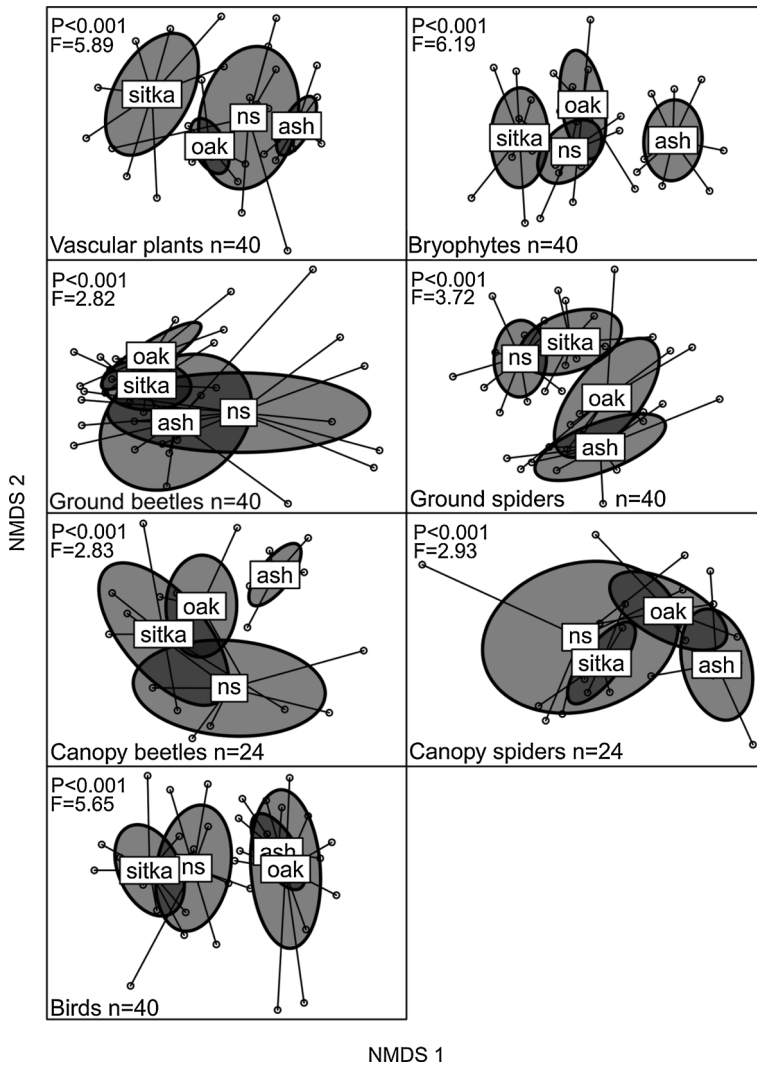
**Table 3** Correlations between species richness of forest-associated species for each group

	Vascular plants	Ground spiders	Canopy spiders	Ground beetles	Canopy beetles	Birds
Bryophytes						
<i>r</i>	<b>0.653</b>	0.214	−0.267	0.173	<b>0.561</b>	<b>0.515</b>
<i>P</i>	<b>0.000</b>	0.186	0.208	0.286	<b>0.004</b>	<b>0.001</b>
Vascular plants						
<i>r</i>		0.088	−0.287	0.047	<b>0.633</b>	<b>0.583</b>
<i>P</i>		0.589	0.175	0.775	<b>0.001</b>	<b>0.000</b>
Ground spiders						
<i>r</i>			0.302	<b>−0.342</b>	0.169	0.218
<i>P</i>			0.152	<b>0.031</b>	0.431	0.177
Canopy spiders						
<i>r</i>				−0.346	−0.401	−0.401
<i>P</i>				0.098	0.052	0.052
Ground beetles						
<i>r</i>					−0.173	−0.209
<i>P</i>					0.419	0.197
Canopy beetles						
<i>r</i>						<b>0.740</b>
<i>P</i>						<b>0.000</b>

Significant correlations are highlighted in bold text

species of tree which they inhabit (Halaj et al. 1998, 2000; Purchart et al. 2013). By contrast the species richness of canopy-dwelling beetles was consistently higher in oak and ash woodlands than in forest plantations. Beetles, as a group, are more diverse than spiders in their foraging strategies and previous studies have shown that the negative impacts of forest plantations particularly impact beetles (Wiezik et al. 2007). The species richness of vascular plants was higher in ash woodlands than in Sitka spruce plantation forests, but similar to Norway spruce plantations. Understory and physical attributes of plantation forests do differ from those of natural woodlands (Aubin et al. 2008) and greater habitat complexity in natural woodlands has been shown to provide more suitable habitat than managed forests for some groups (Wiezik et al. 2007; Stephens and Wagner 2007; Veinotte et al. 2003).

Species richness of forest-associated bryophytes, vascular plants, canopy-dwelling beetles and birds was higher in oak and ash woodlands than in Sitka spruce dominated plantations. These patterns are most likely related to the lower light levels in spruce-dominated plantations. The understory of conifer plantations is typically less structurally complex than in natural woodlands (Aubin et al. 2008) where higher light levels can contribute to increased plant diversity and understory structure (Riegel et al. 1995). This, in turn, is important for the diversity of many species, particularly invertebrates and birds (Hardtle et al. 2003; Messier et al. 1998; Sweeney et al. 2010; Purchart et al. 2013). For many taxa in the current study species richness values in Norway spruce-dominated commercial plantations showed greater similarities to those of native woodlands than those in Sitka spruce-dominated forest plantations. This finding suggests that plantations of this tree species, which is present in Ireland beyond its natural European range, confer more



**Fig. 4** Non-metric multidimensional scaling (NMDS) ordinations of assemblage composition of vascular plants (stress = 0.19), bryophytes (stress = 0.18), ground beetles (stress = 0.14), ground spiders (stress = 0.23), canopy beetles (stress = 0.21), canopy spiders (stress = 0.13) and birds (stress = 0.22) in sites of four forest types (*Ash* ash-dominated semi-natural woodlands, *Oak* oak-dominated semi-natural woodlands, *NS* Norway spruce dominated plantations, *Sitka* Sitka spruce dominated plantations). Points are sampled sites with lines connecting to habitat centroids. Shaded ellipses represent standard deviation-based confidence intervals from the centroid of each habitat

advantages on species diversity than plantations of Sitka spruce, an introduced, North American conifer species.

Community composition differed significantly between forest plantations and native woodlands for all groups with the exception of ground-dwelling beetles. Previous work has also shown this group not to be greatly influenced by forest type (Oxbrough et al. 2010). Compared to the trends in species richness, the trends in community composition between

**Table 4** Correlation coefficient of a symmetric Procrustes rotation ( $r$ ) and level of significance ( $P$ ) evaluating the concordance between the NMDS scores (calculated for each investigated taxonomic group sampled on a site level in all forest types combined) after Procrustes rotation

	Vascular plants	Ground spiders	Canopy spiders	Ground beetles	Canopy beetles	Birds
Bryophytes						
$r$	<b>0.533</b>	<b>0.447</b>	<b>0.429</b>	0.221	<b>0.475</b>	0.140
$P$	<b>0.001</b>	<b>0.001</b>	<b>0.026</b>	0.246	<b>0.007</b>	0.703
Vascular plants						
$r$		<b>0.444</b>	<b>0.446</b>	0.265	<b>0.519</b>	0.144
$P$		<b>0.001</b>	<b>0.006</b>	0.119	<b>0.004</b>	0.717
Ground spiders						
$r$			0.365	0.230	<b>0.435</b>	0.188
$P$			0.086	0.226	<b>0.023</b>	0.470
Canopy spiders						
$r$				<b>0.474</b>	<b>0.440</b>	0.398
$P$				<b>0.022</b>	<b>0.013</b>	0.060
Ground beetles						
$r$					0.271	0.178
$P$					0.300	0.473
Canopy beetles						
$r$						0.375
$P$						0.067

Correlations with canopy spiders and canopy beetles comprise 24 sites, all other correlations comprise 40 sites. Significant results ( $P \leq 0.05$ ) are indicated in black text. Significant correlations are highlighted in bold text

native oak and ash woodlands and plantations were more similar among the taxonomic groups with the majority having discrete communities in native woodlands and plantation forests. For the canopy-dwelling spiders, native woodlands had different communities to spruce plantations while canopy-dwelling beetles were significantly different between native woodlands and spruce plantations. For the canopy-dwelling spiders, differences in habitat structure and prey availability between coniferous and broadleaved trees are likely to be the reason for the patterns observed. The differences for canopy-dwelling beetles may be related to the abundance of prey for predators in spruce, combined with the lack of beetle guilds which specifically feed on conifer tissues, resulting in different suites of species. Ground-dwelling beetles were the only group that did not show any clear separation between native woodlands and plantations. The lack of forest specialist beetles in Ireland may be the reason for this lack of distinction. For birds there was clear separation between native woodlands and spruce plantations, which was probably related to the lower structural diversity of plantations, as well as differences in the diet preferences of certain species (Sweeney et al. 2010).

#### Cross-taxon surrogacy

Ground-dwelling beetles stood out during the investigation of species richness cross-taxon surrogacy, having the fewest correlations with any other group for either total species richness or forest-associated species richness. While almost half of the combinations of the

other groups were significantly correlated, indicating a broad similarity in their responses in terms of species richness at the coarse scale of all forest types combined. While a correlation between two taxa might be due to the species richness and assemblage of the taxa responding to some of the same, broad differences in habitat between the forest types, none of the groups had correlation coefficients greater than 0.7. This is the level above which one taxonomic group may be considered a potential surrogate for another (Sauberer et al. 2004). This is most likely due to the different levels of specialisation and mobility among the different taxonomic groups under investigation.

When the data for forest-associated species only was interrogated, broadly similar patterns were found, however in this case forest-associated species richness of both birds and canopy-dwelling beetles were highly significantly correlated and had a correlation coefficient  $r = 0.740$ , suggesting that the use of forest-associated birds as a surrogate for forest-associated canopy-dwelling beetles may be appropriate in species diversity monitoring.

Previous work has shown that cross-taxon surrogacy is most appropriate across large geographic scales, where the range of environmental variation is likely to be greater (Lewandowski et al. 2010). At small scales, animal and plant distributions are influenced by unmeasurable (stochastic) as well as measurable factors. Predicting the status or distribution of one taxon using another as a surrogate introduces the potential for twice as much stochastically-derived error in resulting estimates as would relying on a suite of environmental variables that have a direct effect on the taxon under investigation.

## Conclusions

The species richness of non-native spruce-dominated plantations can be as high as that found in semi-natural woodlands, which suggests that temperate plantation forests, with appropriate management, can provide habitat for plant and animal species. However this study shows that, despite having similar species richness, oak and ash woodlands support different communities than plantations, which must be considered in forest management for environmental objectives.

Since forest plantations are the predominant forest cover throughout much of the world, these results indicate that the species composition of forests is being altered through the use of exotic conifer species. Our findings demonstrate that careful management of non-native conifer plantations is required to enhance species diversity and optimise their contribution to landscape scale biodiversity while preventing negative biodiversity impacts. Although not statistically significant, some differences were found between the two conifer forest types tested in this study. Plantations dominated by Norway spruce, which is of European provenance, though not native to the study area, supported slightly higher species richness across many of the taxa than plantations of the introduced North American Sitka spruce. This is of particular importance where forest management seeks to include consideration of the conservation of species diversity. Where similar numbers of species were supported in plantation forests, the communities differed from those in native woodlands. Ground-dwelling beetles did not follow this pattern, having similar numbers of species in spruce plantations and native woodlands, more forest-associated species in spruce than in oak woodlands, and a lack of distinct communities in plantations and native woodlands.

The overall patterns observed across the range of taxa included in this study, which possess a variety of lifestyles, mobility and habitat requirements suggests that while plantation forests can host species richness similar to semi-natural woodlands targeted

management is required to ensure that they provide habitat for native woodland flora and fauna. In areas where spruce plantations are the main forest type, both the preservation or extension of existing semi-natural woodlands and the management of spruce plantations to encourage semi-natural woodland characteristics are needed to support and enhance forest biodiversity.

Investigation of cross-taxon surrogacy revealed that ground-dwelling beetles also had the fewest significant correlations with the other groups, most of which were significantly correlated, indicating a broad similarity in the responses of these other groups. Our data show that, although some relatively easily surveyed groups, such as vascular plants and birds, are congruent with a number of the other taxa that the similarities in response are not strong enough to warrant use of these taxa as surrogates. Taxon surrogacy is most useful where it predicts diversity and assemblage of hard-to-survey taxa with groupings of sites of a similar habitat. However, congruence within site-types, as measured by inter-taxon species richness correlations, was low in the current study. This suggests that the taxa we studied cannot be used as surrogates of one another at the scales we studied. In order to capture a wide range of biotic variation, assessments of species diversity in Irish forests conducted in the name of forest management, monitoring or for research purposes, must encompass several taxonomic groups, and/or rely on the use of non-biotic (structural or functional) indicators of diversity.

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