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Naturalization of almond trees (*Prunus dulcis*) in semi-arid regions of the Western Mediterranean.

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Abstract

1 Agricultural land abandonment is rampant in present day Europe. A major consequence of this
2 phenomenon is the re-colonization of these areas by the original vegetation. However, some
3 **agricultural**, exotic species are able to naturalize and colonize these abandoned lands. In this
4 study we explore the ability of almonds (*Prunus dulcis* D.A. Webb.) to establish in abandoned
5 croplands in semi-arid areas of SE Iberian Peninsula. Domesticated during the early Holocene
6 in SW Asia and the Eastern Mediterranean, the almond has spread as a crop all over the world.
7 We established three plots adjacent to almond orchards on land that was abandoned and
8 reforested with Aleppo pine (*Pinus halepensis* Mill.) and Holm oak (*Quercus ilex* L.) about 20
9 years ago. We recorded the abundance of almond seeds, seedlings, juveniles, pre-
10 reproductives and adults in these plots, and determined their recruitment microhabitat. We
11 found natural regeneration in all three plots, with almond density higher than 150 individuals/ha
12 in each plot. About half of the almonds in the plots were juveniles, although 7% were one-year
13 seedlings and 3% were adult trees. This suggests that colonization of abandoned lands is an
14 ongoing gradual process. Most naturally established almonds were under tree cover, although
15 this was not the most abundant microhabitat, avoiding the negative impact of browsing by Red
16 Deer (*Cervus elaphus*) and domestic sheep and goats. In addition, the mean distance from the
17 nearest seed source was 77 m. These findings suggest the action of mobile almond dispersers.
18 Several Corvid species including the Carrion Crow (*Corvus corone*) and the Magpie (*Pica pica*)
19 have been observed consuming and moving almonds in the study area. Our study has
20 demonstrated that almonds are colonizing abandoned lands mostly **as a consequence of**
21 effective seed dispersal by some animals. We **show** that almonds have the **potential** to become
22 fully naturalized in the near future in many semi-arid areas of the Western Mediterranean.
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Keywords

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39 **Rosaceae, seed dispersal, dyplochory, diszoochory, crop, land abandonment.**
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Introduction

Abandonment of agricultural activities, mostly in marginal and less productive lands, is a widespread phenomenon in Europe (Verburg and Overmars, 2009; Renwick et al., 2013). Dramatic changes in plant communities and land cover happen after land abandonment (Poyatos et al., 2003; Gehrig-Fasel et al., 2007; Cramer et al., 2008; Stoate et al. 2009). Abandoned croplands are often recolonized by native species that were removed from those areas when humans started to cultivate them. Nevertheless, many crops become naturalized themselves. This naturalization process has happened since the beginning of agriculture, leading to the origin of many invasive species (Reichard and White, 2001). Arid environments can be especially sensitive to invasion by domestic species (Loope et al., 1988; Rejmanek and Randall, 1994). Although we generally think of herbaceous species, trees have also naturalized in exotic places after being introduced for horticulture or forestry (Richardson and Rejmánek, 2011). For example, the sweet chestnut *Castanea sativa* now occupies many areas in the Mediterranean Basin after being disseminated by Greek and Roman civilizations (Conedera et al., 2004). Similarly, most invasive *Pinus* species were introduced in novel areas for their use in commercial forestry and agroforestry (Richardson, 1998).

The almond, *Prunus dulcis* (Mill.) D.A. Webb (syn. *Amygdalus communis* L. and *Prunus communis* Archang) (Rosaceae), is an economically important nut tree crop. With an apparent origin as an edible crop in southwest Asia and the eastern Mediterranean (Browicz and Zohary, 1996; Delplancke et al., 2013; Ladizinsky, 1999; Roher, 2012) it has been spread all over the arid and semi-arid world by the actions of man. The almond tree is probably one of the earliest domesticated trees in the Old World, with archaeological evidence suggesting domestication about 6,300-5,300 yr. BP (Zohary et al., 2012). The annual world production of almonds exceeds 2 million tons (FAO, 2013). Spain is the second largest producer of almonds in the world with a production of approximately 69,636 tons (USDA, 2013). Presently, approximately 571,183 ha are under cultivation in Spain (Ministerio de Agricultura, Alimentacion y Medio Ambiente, 2012), although this area is continuing to decrease due to abandonment of groves.

The almond tree is a small deciduous tree reaching 5-8 m in height. The 25–40 mm fruit is ovoid-oblong and flattened. The pulp (mesocarp) is dry and leathery, splitting on maturity to reveal the stone (Rohrer, 2012). Although there are some anecdotal reports (Blanca and Díaz de la Guardia, 1998; Rohrer, 2012) no quantitative studies have been performed on the process of naturalization of almond populations. The main goal of our study is to demonstrate that almond trees can effectively colonize semi-arid regions of the Western Mediterranean. In this study, in three areas from SE Spain where almonds seem to be naturalized, we characterized 1) the density and life stage structure of naturalized almonds, 2) the microhabitat distribution of established almonds, and 3) the frequency and intensity of browsing by mammals.

Methods

Study site

1 Our study site is located in the Hoya de Guadix-Baza in the north of the Province of Granada
2 (37° 19' 42" N, 3° 2' 27" W). This is a zone that was intensively cultivated in the past but
3 presently is a mosaic of oak dehesas intermixed with afforestation patches and dryland
4 agriculture, especially almonds.
5

6 The study site has a continental Mediterranean climate with strong fluctuations in
7 temperature (mean = 14.4° C with maximum and minimum reaching 40° C and -14° C,
8 respectively). Summers are hot and dry while winters are cold. Precipitation is low (250-300
9 mm/yr) and concentrated in fall and winter.
10

11 In this zone we selected three afforestation plots that had been planted with Aleppo pine
12 (*Pinus halepensis* Mill.) and Holm oak (*Quercus ilex* L.) in approximately 1995 (Figure 1).
13 Although there has been recruitment of additional species, the vegetative cover of woody plants
14 is still almost exclusively of these two species; in addition, all three plots have extensive areas
15 of bare ground and herbaceous vegetation. Pines mostly range from about 2 – 6 and up to 8 m
16 in height with branches all the way to the ground creating protected shaded understories. Oak
17 trees vary mostly from approximately 0.5 to 3 m in height; they also have branches all the way
18 to the ground but the canopies are less dense and therefore provide less shade.
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Figure 1. Spatial distribution of the three study plots. Red lines indicate the transects and green dots show the locations of the tagged almond trees

50 Plots 1 (≈3.2 ha) and 2 (≈2.75 ha) are about 150 m apart and separated by a cultivated
51 grain field. This set of plots and the connecting agricultural field are nearly completely
52 surrounded with almond groves. Pines and oaks in these plots were skewed to the taller end of
53 the range of heights and there was minimal evidence of mortality of planted trees. Plot 3,
54 approximately 3.5 km away, forms part of a much more extensive afforestation plot (≈45.5 ha)
55 that connects upslope to the adjacent Sierra de Baza. Because of the extensive size we
56 selected four subplots (total ≈3.9 ha) to subsample. Almond cultivation, at least presently, is
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1 much less extensive in the vicinity of this plot, although there are reproductive almonds along
2 the roadside running past the plot. Pines and oaks in this plot were skewed to the lower end of
3 the range of heights and there was greater mortality of planted trees.
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5 6 **Study design**

7 *Vegetative cover and almond tree density*

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9 We surveyed 6 arbitrarily located transects in both Plot 1 and Plot 2 and 8 transects in Plot 3 (2
10 in each subplot). Transects were 50 m long x 2 m wide for a total area of 100 m². A 50-m tape
11 was stretched out and a 2-m long metal rod centered on the tape was used to delineate the
12 width of the transect. At each 1 m along the transect from 0 to 50 m we recorded the vegetative
13 cover at the tape and at 1 m to each side of the tape (ends of pole) for a total of 153 points per
14 transect. Of a total of 3060 microhabitat points, 10 were recorded as almond tree and 8 as
15 broom. Because of these very small sample sizes and the fact that no almond trees were found
16 beneath almonds and only one beneath broom, these two categories were excluded from
17 analyses.
18

19 We also counted the number of almond trees encountered in each transect,
20 independent of life stage. In addition, for each 2 m length of transect (2 x 2 m quadrat) we
21 recorded the presence/absence of ungulate and lagomorph feces as well as the number of
22 almond seeds, distinguishing undamaged from opened and consumed. Almonds are consumed
23 in the study site by corvids and rodents. Consumed almonds can be attributed to functional
24 group of predator based on the way the stone is opened: corvids open the stone along the
25 seam leaving it in two equal halves (clean cut), while rodents nibble the stone from the apex
26 leaving a hole.
27

28 *Microhabitat, plant size and life stage, and browsing*

29 We systematically searched each plot, intending to tag and georeference the first 100 individual
30 trees that we found in each plot. However, we went over the target sample size in Plots 1 (103
31 trees) and 2 (116 trees). Only a small portion of these individuals were in the aforementioned
32 transects, and consequently, we did not include transect as an identification variable for the
33 tagged trees. We took the following data for each individual almond tree: (1) Microhabitat: pine,
34 oak, or open interspace (bare ground and herbaceous cover combined). One almond tree found
35 beneath a broom (*Retama sphaerocarpa*) was excluded from subsequent analyses. (2) Height.
36 (3) Basal stem diameter (BSD): measured at 5 cm above the soil surface. (4) Reproductive
37 status: presence/absence of fruits. (5) Browsing: intensity of herbivory was measured as the %
38 of branch tips that had been browsed. We distinguished between browsing by lagomorphs
39 (Iberian hares, *Lepus granatensis*, and rabbits, *Oryctolagus cuniculus*) and ungulates (domestic
40 sheep and goats and red deer, *Cervus elaphus*). Whereas lagomorphs cut the stems by means
41 of clean and diagonal incisions, the ungulates rip them off.
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43 Based on the height, BSD, presence of fruits, stem lignification, and presence of
44 cotyledons, we categorized the plants into one of four life stage classes: (1) Seedling: ≤ 0.25 cm
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1 BSD with green stems. Seedlings were recognized because they always had the almond
2 attached. (2) Juvenile: 0.25 – 0.6 cm BSD and more extensive lignification of the stem. (3) Pre-
3 reproductive: ≥ 0.6 cm BSD with stems extensively lignified. (4) Reproductive: distinguished by
4 the presence of fruit. There was substantial overlap in the BSDs of pre-reproductive and
5 reproductive individuals.
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7 8 9 *Distance to nearest reproductive tree*

10 Because individual trees were georeferenced, we calculated their distance to the nearest
11 reproductive adult outside the plot using the geographic information system software QGIS
12 1.8.0 (QGIS Development Team). For Plots 1 and 2 and some subplots in Plot 3 this was the
13 distance to the edge of the nearest almond grove, but for some subplots of Plot 3 this was the
14 distance to the row of almonds along the roadside.
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19 **Data Analysis**

20 Between-plot differences in almond tree density were analyzed using a General Linear Model
21 (GLM), including transects as the independent variable and fitting the dependent variable
22 (number of almond trees per transect) to a Poisson distribution. Between-plot differences in
23 microhabitat structure and life stage classes were assessed by Contingency Analysis and
24 Likelihood Ratio Tests, including transect as an independent variable. The proportion of trees
25 browsed was compared among plots and among microhabitats by GLMs, fitting the dependent
26 variable (browsed trees vs. unbrowsed trees) to a binomial distribution. Browsing intensity was
27 compared among microhabitats with a GLM by fitting the dependent variable (percent of
28 consumed branches) to a normal distribution. All analyses were performed using R 3.0.0 (R
29 Development Core Team 2013).
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38 **RESULTS**

39 **Density and relationship to seed sources**

40 The density of established almond trees (almond trees/100 m² \pm 1 SD [Range]) was 1.50 \pm 0.84
41 [0-2] in plot 1, 1.83 \pm 0.98 [1-3] in plot 2, and 1.62 \pm 1.41 [0-4] in plot 3. Plots did not differ in the
42 densities of almond trees ($z = 1.22$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.225$, GLM poisson). The mean distance to the
43 nearest reproductive tree was 76.8 \pm 2.9 m, ranging from 4.8 up to 207.7 m. Furthermore, 90%
44 of the almond trees were farther than 20 m from the closest seed source.
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48 Overall, 12% of the 2 x 2 m quadrats had almond seeds. However, plots differed in
49 almond seed abundance ($\chi^2 = 20.8$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.0001$), with 20% of the quadrats in plot 2
50 having almond seeds, 13% in plot 1 and only 4% in plot 3. The presence of almond seeds
51 increased significantly with the cover of trees in the quadrats (slope= 0.03 \pm 0.005, $\chi^2 = 32.8$, df
52 = 1, $p < 0.0001$, logistic regression). This relationship was significant for Plots 1 and 2, but not
53 for Plot 3. In total, only 27% of the almond seeds were undamaged, the remaining being
54 consumed by animals (mostly corvids and rodents).
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Life stage structure of almond trees

Most of the censused almond trees were juveniles (53.6%; N=319 trees) and pre-reproductives (37.3%) (Table 1). Nevertheless, 6.6% of the established almond trees were one-year seedlings and 2.5% were reproductive trees (Table 1). There were significant among-plot differences in life stage structure (Table 1; Likelihood Ratio = 136.27, df = 6, p < 0.0001, N = 319 trees). Most trees in plot 1 were juveniles (89%). In plot 2, juveniles and pre-reproductive individuals were similarly abundant and together comprised 89% of the established almond trees. Finally, in plot 3 over half of the individuals were juveniles, although there were also large numbers of pre-reproductives. In addition, plot 3 was the only plot that had reproductive trees and the only plot without seedlings.

Vegetative cover and microhabitat occupancy of almond trees

Most of the surface of all three plots was open ground, ranging from 83% in plot 1 to 90% in plot 3 (Table 1). Nonetheless, plots differed significantly in microhabitat structure ($\chi^2 = 188.15$, df = 10, p < 0.0001); based on cover, oak was the predominant woody plant microhabitat in plot 1, pine was the predominant woody plant microhabitat in plot 2, and oak and pine were similarly important in plot 3.

There were differences between the observed and expected microhabitat distribution of almond trees in all plots (**Plot 1:** $\chi^2 = 304.545$, df = 2, p < 0.0001, N = 1021. **Plot 2:** $\chi^2 = 113.789$, df = 2, p < 0.0001, N = 1034. **Plot 3:** $\chi^2 = 35.502$, df = 4, p < 0.0001, N = 1324). In all plots the number of trees in open was lower than expected based on the cover of the open microhabitat, although the difference was smallest in plot 3 and largest in plot 1 (Table 1). Despite this similarity, plots differed in their patterns of microhabitat occupation across plots. In plot 3 most of the trees were in open ground, even though it was fewer than expected. In contrast, most trees in plot 1 were under oak and nearly half of the trees in plot 2 were under pine while a similar but lower number were in open ground. In plot 3 there were more trees under pines than expected, whereas in plots 1 and 2 there were more than expected underneath both pines and oaks.

	Plot 1				Plot 2				Plot 3				Total			
	Total	Open	Oak	Pine	Total	Open	Oak	Pine	Total	Open	Oak	Pine	Total	Open	Oak	Pine
Seedling	8	-	8	-	13	-	2	11	0	-	-	-	21	0	10	11
Juvenile	89	-	79	10	58	4	11	43	24	2	2	20	171	6	92	73
Pre-reproductive	6	2	3	1	45	43	-	2	67	63	1	3	118	108	4	6
Reproductive	0	-	-	-	0	-	-	-	8	8	-	-	8	8	-	-
Total Trees	103	2	90	11	116	47	13	56	99	73	3	23	318	122	106	90
Microhabitat points	918	759	114	45	918	795	16	107	1206	1103	36	67				
Expected Trees		85	13	5		100	2	14		90	3	6				

Table 2. Abundance of almond trees per microhabitat and life stage in each plot. Also shown are the expected number of almond trees per microhabitat according to a random distribution.

When pooling the three plots to reduce small cell values, there was a significant difference among stages in the pattern of microhabitat recruitment ($\chi^2 = 306.300$, $df = 9$, $p < 0.0001$, $N=319$). Whereas most seedlings and juveniles were found under the canopies of oaks or pines), most pre-reproductive and all reproductive trees were in open ground (Table 1).

Browsing damage

The abundance of herbivorous mammals, estimated as the proportion of quadrats with excrements, varied among plots both for ungulates ($\chi^2 = 42.77$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.0001$, binomial GLM) and lagomorphs ($\chi^2 = 8.84$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.01$). Whereas 38% of the quadrats in plot 2 had ungulate excrements, only 12% in each of the other two plots did. For lagomorphs we observed a similar pattern, with 5% of the quadrats in plot 2 but only 1% in the other two plots having excrements.

About 53% of the studied trees were browsed by mammals when pooling the three plots. However, the proportion of trees browsed differed among plots ($\chi^2 = 77.9$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.0001$), with 26% of the trees being browsed in plot 1, 54% in plot 2 and 86% in plot 3 (Table 2). Most herbivory was caused by **ungulates**, although damage by lagomorphs was also important, especially in plot 3 (Table 2). When a plant was browsed, mammals damaged on average 83.4% of the branches (pooling the three plots). However, there were among-plot differences in this measure of browsing intensity ($\chi^2 = 17.56$, $df = 2,165$, $p < 0.0001$, GLM). In plot 1, 65% of the branches on browsed trees were damaged, and this proportion increased to 82% in plot 3 and 94% in plot 2 (Table 2).

Plots	Almond trees	Browsed trees				Browsing Intensity \pm SD
		Total	By ungulates	By lagomorphs	By both	
1	103	27	11	16	0	65.3 \pm 32,0
2	116	54	42	11	2	94.5 \pm 14,3
3	100	86	56	12	18	82.1 \pm 20,6

Table 3. Browsing frequency (number of trees damaged) and intensity (proportion of stems damage per tree) in each studied plot. Ungulates are red deer, domestic sheep and goats, whereas lagomorphs are Iberian hare.

The proportion of trees browsed differed among microhabitats for the two demographic stages with sufficient individuals to analyze (juveniles: $\chi^2 = 17.6$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.0001$; pre-reproductive: $\chi^2 = 30.9$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.0001$). Whereas 96% of pre-reproductive and 100% of juveniles were browsed in open sites, only 0% and 25% were browsed under oaks and 3.6% and 21.9% under pines, respectively. Furthermore, 100% of the reproductive trees located in

1 open sites were also browsed, and 20% of the seedlings under oaks and 18% under pines were
2 browsed.

3 Browsing intensity also differed among microhabitats ($\chi^2 = 7.39$, $df = 2, 154$, $p < 0.0009$,
4 only considering browsed juveniles and pre-reproductives pooled). Whereas 88.4 ± 2.0 % of the
5 branches in trees located in open sites and 82.3 ± 4.8 of the branches from trees under pines
6 were browsed, only 69.6 ± 4.5 % of the branches were browsed when under oaks.
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10 DISCUSSION

11 Our study has shown that almonds are actively colonizing abandoned lands **that were**
12 **subsequently afforested in semi-arid areas of SE Spain. This finding adds an additional *Prunus***
13 **species to the seven species already included in the updated global list of invasive alien trees**
14 **(Rejmanek and Richardson, 2013).** The density of almonds was high in all three study plots,
15 with more than 150 individuals/ha. These values appear high when compared with other
16 **anecdotal** studies. For example, natural establishment of almonds is apparently only sporadic in
17 abandoned orchards from Southeastern France, where most colonization is by fleshy-fruited
18 bird-dispersed species (Debussche and Isenmann, 1994; Debussche et al., 1982). In addition,
19 all anecdotal observations on feral populations of almonds suggest that they colonize roadsides,
20 with little indication that they escape from this highly disturbed microhabitat (Blanca and Díaz de
21 la Guardia, 1998; Guix et al., 2001; Rohrer, 2012). Our study indicates that in semi-arid
22 environments of the **southeastern** Iberian Peninsula, almonds are able to establish not only in
23 highly disturbed areas but also in more natural settings. Although the three plots were actively
24 afforested, pine-oak woodlands are native and abundant in the study area. In fact, we have
25 found almond seedling and saplings in natural oak-pine woodlands adjacent to almond
26 orchards. **Furthermore, these seedlings and saplings were far enough from any seed source to**
27 **suggest the action of active mobile dispersers.**
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38 Our data indicate that the colonization of abandoned lands by almonds has occurred
39 gradually but consistently through time since afforestation was established twenty years ago.
40 About half of the almonds in the plots were juveniles, although 7% were one-year seedlings and
41 3% were adult trees. That is, almond incursion was not a single, event occurring shortly after
42 the planting of oaks and pines, when the plots were largely empty and disturbed. **We are also**
43 **confident that the reproductive trees colonized the plot after the afforestation was made, based**
44 **on their relatively small size and their apparent absence from the area in previous high**
45 **resolution aerial photographs (available in Rediam webpage at**
46 **[www.juntadeandalucia.es/medioambiente/ site/rediam](http://www.juntadeandalucia.es/medioambiente/site/rediam)).**
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52 In order to naturalize, seeds must be dispersed out of cultivated areas to sites suitable
53 for germination, growth, and survival. Effective propagule dispersal is essential for the
54 naturalization and regeneration of plant populations (Blackburn et al., 2011, Schupp et al.,
55 2010). In particular, seed dispersal by vertebrates is often implicated in the spread of alien plant
56 species (Rejmanek and Richardson, 1996; Richardson et al., 2000). Dispersal distances, timing
57 of the colonization process, and microhabitat distribution of recruits all suggest that biotic agents
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1 mediated the movement of almonds into the study plots. The dry seed without a fleshy pulp
2 combined with the relatively hard endocarp of almonds likely limits the potential disperser
3 assemblage to large seed-eating birds and rodents. In fact, sweet almonds are consumed and
4 dispersed by rodents, woodpeckers and corvids in Asia (Kester et al., 1991), North America
5 (Gebhardt et al., 2011; Hasey and Salmon, 1993; Robert, 1979) and Israel (Moran and Keidar,
6 1993), likely contributing to the establishment of feral populations. In our plots we have
7 observed almonds broken open by birds. At least four corvid species (raven, *Corvus corax*,
8 carrion crow, *Corvus corone*, magpie, *Pica pica*, and to a lesser extent chough, *Pyrrhocorax*
9 *pyrrhocorax*) consume almonds in the study area (Soler and Soler, 1991). In addition, green
10 woodpeckers (*Picus viridus*) have been observed consuming almonds in semi-arid habitats of
11 southeastern Spain (J.M. Avilés, pers. com.). Finally, we have also observed almonds
12 consumed by dormice (*Eliomys quercinus*).
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18 We believe that in our study site birds are the agents moving almonds out of orchards
19 into afforestations to consume them. There is abundant evidence showing that corvids prefer to
20 hoard seeds in afforestations (Purves et al., 2007; Gómez, 2003). In contrast to acorns and
21 some other nuts, sweet almonds are too big and hard to be easily eaten. Birds first must break
22 the stone in order to access the edible kernel. We observed many broken almonds on top of
23 small rocks usually located in open sites. We presume that corvids use those rocks as anvils,
24 since we have observed some carrion crows behaving in this way. However, many sweet
25 almonds are apparently too hard and remain unbroken, as indicated by the frequent presence of
26 almonds laying on the ground in the afforestations. Some of these almonds may be subsequently
27 found by rodents, which could secondarily disperse them to safe microsites, such as under pine
28 and oak canopies (Beck and Vander Wall, 2011; Gomez et al., 2008; Puerta-Piñero et al., 2010;
29 Vander Wall, 2001, 2002). In fact, we found most of the almonds that had been apparently
30 consumed by dormice in these covered microhabitats. It is important to note that, because oaks
31 and pines were planted twenty years ago, they still have a shrubby shape, with lower branches
32 lying on the ground. This overall shape likely provides rodents with good shelter from predation.
33 In addition, burial in the soil or beneath litter, either by birds as primary dispersers or by rodents
34 as secondary dispersers of seeds dropped or discarded by birds, likely benefits these large nuts
35 by reducing desiccation and increasing the ability to hydrate and germinate (Vander Wall,
36 2001).
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47 Such diplochory would explain why most naturally established almonds were under tree
48 cover, despite this not being the most abundant microhabitat. In fact, there is a relationship
49 between the presence of almond seeds and the tree cover in plots 1 and 2. An indirect positive
50 effect of dispersing almonds beneath pines and oaks is that emerging plants are protected from
51 mammalian herbivores (García et al., 2000; Gómez and Hódar 2008). Thus, whereas almost all
52 almond trees located in open sites were heavily browsed by ungulates and hares, less than
53 25% of them were browsed, and only relatively mildly, when located in covered microhabitats.
54 Facilitation of tree seedlings and saplings by nurse plants has been repeatedly demonstrated in
55 semi-arid environments (Flores and Jurado, 2003). In most occasions, facilitation apparently
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1 occurs because nurse plants protect seedlings and saplings from stressful environments
2 (Pugnaire and Luque, 2001; Lortie and Callaway, 2006). Nevertheless, protection against
3 herbivores is also an important benefit provided by nurses (García and Obeso, 2003; Gómez,
4 2005; Gomez-Aparicio et al., 2008). We believe that this is the main reason recruiting almond
5 trees are more abundant under oaks and pines. Ungulates have been demonstrated to shape
6 the spatial structure of recruitment in other Mediterranean trees (Gómez et al., 2001; Gómez-
7 Aparicio et al., 2005; Gómez and Hódar, 2008). In fact, the few individuals located in open sites
8 were completely browsed. However, our preliminary evidence is that more open conditions are
9 apparently necessary for reaching reproductive maturity; all 8 reproductive adults were found in
10 open interspaces. This suggests a potential life-stage conflict (Schupp, 2007). Summing up, as
11 occurs in many other plant species (Vander Wall and Longland, 2004), diplochory appears to be
12 advantageous for initial establishment of almond trees in our study site, though the longterm
13 consequences are less clear.

14
15 In summary, this study has demonstrated that *Prunus dulcis* is actively naturalizing in
16 semi-arid afforestations in the southeastern Iberian Peninsula. The process of naturalizing in
17 relatively natural environments, not just along roadsides, is likely more widespread than
18 previously appreciated. We suggest that this process is more evident and faster in abandoned
19 lands that have been subsequently afforested than in simply abandoned lands, because
20 corvids tend to move most seeds into forested areas (Gómez 2003). However, there is no
21 reason to believe this process only occurs in afforestations.

22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 **Acknowledgments**

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***Highlights (for review)**

- *Prunus dulcis* is colonizing abandoned agricultural lands in some semi-arid areas of SE Iberian Peninsula
- Differences in the distribution among life stages were found between the microhabitats and the plots studied.
- Minimal measured dispersal distances suggest the actions of highly mobile almond dispersers (zoochory)
- Tree cover reduced the impact of browsing mammals during the process of naturalization.
- However, the most suitable microhabitat changes through the lifecycle of almond trees.