

## Germination ecology of the perennial *Centaurium somedanum*, a specialist species of mountain springs

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### Abstract

To improve understanding of how a rare endemic species of *Centaurium* adapts to a specialized ecological niche, we studied the germination ecology of the mountain spring specialist, *C. somedanum*, a perennial species restricted to an unusual habitat for this genus. We conducted laboratory experiments with fresh seeds collected from two populations for three consecutive years, to investigate: (1) the effect of temperature and light on germination; (2) the existence of seed dormancy; and (3) inter-population and inter-annual variation in germinability. Germination occurred only in the light and at relatively low temperatures (15–22°C) with no differences between constant and alternating regimes, and a significant decrease at high temperatures (25°C and 30°C). We found non-deep simple morphophysiological dormancy and variation in seed germinability depending on the year of seed collection. *C. somedanum* diverged from the common germination characteristics of the genus in: (1) its germination at lower temperatures, which contrasts with what is generally expected in wetland species but could be adaptive in the spring habitat; and (2) its morphophysiological dormancy, which we report here for the first time in the genus and which could be an adaptation to its mountain habitat.

**Keywords:** *Centaurium*, dormancy, endemic, Gentianaceae, germination, springs, wetlands

### Introduction

*Centaurium* Hill (Gentianaceae), as defined by Mansion (2004), includes c. 27 species of Mediterranean origin

and Old World distribution. It is comprised of annual, biennial and, rarely, perennial herbs occurring in different habitats of the Mediterranean basin and surrounding areas (Mansion *et al.*, 2005). Because of its wide distribution and pharmacological importance (Jensen and Schripsema, 2002; Sefi *et al.*, 2011), certain aspects of *Centaurium* germination ecology have been studied in detail. The comparative germination study of Grime *et al.* (1981) reported germination of the biennial *C. erythraea* Rafn. over a wide range of temperatures (13–29°C) and only in light. Thompson and Grime (1983) confirmed the light requirement for the same species and reported that germination was insensitive to temperature fluctuations, while Schat (1983) found very similar germination characteristics in another biennial, *C. littorale* (D. Turner) Gilmour. More recently, a series of studies focusing on the effects of salinity, manganese and plant growth regulators reported successful germination at 24–25°C in light (Mijajlovic *et al.*, 2005; Zivkovic *et al.*, 2007; Todorovic *et al.*, 2008, 2009; Mistic *et al.*, 2009) for the same two species as well as for *C. maritimum* (L.) Fritsch, *C. pulchellum* (Swartz) Druce, *C. spicatum* (L.) Fritsch and *C. tenuiflorum* (Hoffmanns. & Link) Fritsch, all of them annual or biennial. All these reports also indicated that germination takes place without previous dormancy-breaking treatments, in contrast with the requirement for cold stratification found in other genera of Gentianaceae (Favarger, 1953) and the morphophysiological dormancy reported in *Frasera caroliniensis* Walt. (Threadgill *et al.*, 1981) and *Sabatia angularis* (L.) Pursh (Baskin and Baskin, 2005). However, investigating dormancy was not the aim of any of the aforementioned *Centaurium* references, and they only studied lowland annual/biennial generalist species of broad geographical distribution. It remains to be seen if the same germination patterns apply in perennial *Centaurium* species, especially in those living in particular habitats departing from those commonly inhabited by the genus.

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The rare *C. somedanum* M. Laínz shows several divergences from the general *Centaureum* traits, as it is a perennial chamaephyte and a specialist species of mountain calcareous springs (Jiménez-Alfaro *et al.*, 2005). It is also a narrow endemic species, confined to a small geographical area (210 km<sup>2</sup>) located in a transitional region between Mediterranean and Oceanic climatic zones in the Cantabrian Mountain Range of north-west Spain (Jiménez-Alfaro *et al.*, 2010). Because of the ecological and geographical uniqueness of *C. somedanum*, we may expect divergences from the general germination patterns of the annual/biennial, generalist and widely distributed *Centaureum* species. For example, temperate wetland species show a preference for relatively high (*c.* 30°C) or alternating germination temperatures (Grime *et al.*, 1981; Thompson and Grime, 1983; Schütz, 2000). Another possible adaptation of *C. somedanum* could be seed dormancy to avoid the risks of winter germination in a mountain environment (Baskin and Baskin, 1998), although this dormancy could vary among years and populations, as is usually the case in wild species (Andersson and Milberg, 1998; Giménez-Benavides *et al.*, 2005).

In the present study, we investigated the germination ecology of *C. somedanum* as a contribution to understanding germination in *Centaureum* and the adaptation of rare endemic species to an ecological niche unusual in this genus. Specifically, we wanted to determine: (1) the temperature and light requirements for its germination; (2) the possible existence of physiological and/or morphological dormancy; and (3) the existence of inter-population and inter-annual variation in seed germinability.

## Materials and methods

### Plant material

Discrete populations of *C. somedanum* occur from 600 to 1700 m above sea level (asl) at the edges of calcareous mountain springs. In these habitats, alkaline spring waters (pH > 7.7) flow from aquifers continuously through the year and are relatively

cold even in summer (mean day temperature in late summer = 14.1 ± 0.2°C; data from 160 measurements covering the entire altitudinal gradient of the species). Depending on the slope and species composition of the spring edges, two habitat types harbour the populations of *C. somedanum*: vertical travertines and flat calcareous fens (Jiménez-Alfaro *et al.*, 2005).

Although little information is available regarding its reproductive biology, *C. somedanum* is assumed to be a facultative outcrosser, like other species in the genus (Brys and Jacquemyn, 2011). Flowering begins in early July, proceeds during summer and ripe seeds are dispersed in September and October (Jiménez-Alfaro *et al.*, 2010). We observed abundant seedlings in the field in August, so we assume that emergence occurs in summer (mean summer temperature = 15°C, min. = 10°C, max. = 22°C), after the cold season has ended (mean winter temperature = 4°C, min. = 0°C, max. = 8°C) (data extrapolated from neighbouring climate stations, Spanish National Meteorological Agency). Seed set is relatively high in wild populations, with *c.* 140 seeds per fruit. The seeds are roughly spherical, extremely small (*c.* 390 µm wide) and show a reticulate pattern which is common in the *Centaureum* genus (Bouman *et al.*, 2002). Seed mass (*c.* 20 µg) is also similar to that of other *Centaureum* species (Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, 2008). The embryo belongs to Martin's dwarf category (Martin, 1946).

For three consecutive years, we harvested fruits from the two largest populations of *C. somedanum*, which are representative of the two associated habitat types and the altitude gradient of the species (Table 1). In both sites, we sampled all individuals bearing ripe fruits (dry and brownish). The fruits spent a 3-week period in our laboratory (*c.* 22°C, 50% relative humidity) to ensure homogeneous after-ripening. Afterwards, we removed the seeds from the fruits; cleaned them using sieves and by hand sorting, and used them immediately in the experiments.

### Embryo measurements

We sowed seeds from 2009, from both populations, on 1% distilled water agar in Petri dishes (diameter 6 cm) sealed with Parafilm to prevent desiccation (four

**Table 1.** Description of the two populations included in this study

Collection site	Altitude (m asl)	Habitat, mean annual temperature	Coordinates	Collection dates
La Malva	600	Travertine, 10.4°C	43°07'05"N 06°15'05"W	17.09.2008
				24.09.2009
				02.09.2010
El Valle	1280	Flat fen, 8.3°C	43°04'19"N 06°11'49"W	17.09.2008
				09.10.2009
				02.09.2010

dishes with 25 seeds each per population) and kept them in continuous darkness for 24 h at 20°C. Afterwards, we excised and measured embryos from 15 seeds per population using a dissecting microscope (MZ6, Leica Microsystems GmbH, Wetzlar, Germany) equipped with a micrometer. The remaining seeds were cold stratified for 12 weeks (3°C, darkness) and then 15 embryos per population were measured. After cold stratification, seeds were incubated in a growth chamber (Grow-S 360, Ing. Climas, Barcelona, Spain) with a 12/12 h photoperiod ( $c. 20 \mu\text{mol m}^{-2} \text{s}^{-1}$  provided by six Philips TLD30W/54-765 cool fluorescent tubes) at 22/12°C, the summer temperature expected to be optimal. We examined them daily and when the seed coat began to split, i.e. when the embryo had reached its critical length for radicle emergence, we measured another 15 embryos per population. To analyse the embryo measurements, we performed a main effects analysis of variance (ANOVA) with stratification/incubation stage and population as fixed effects using SPSS for Windows 15.0.1 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, Illinois, USA).

### Germination experiments

We carried out laboratory germination experiments on 1% distilled water agar in Petri dishes sealed with Parafilm. For each treatment, we sowed four dishes with 25 seeds each. To assess the effect of incubation temperature on germination, we incubated seeds from 2009, from both populations, in growth chambers under a 12/12 h photoperiod at 22/12, 15, 20, 25 and 30°C. To take into account the inter-annual variation on seed germinability, we also incubated seeds from 2008 and 2010 at 22/12°C. Finally, to assess the effect of light on germination, we incubated seeds from 2008 at 22/12°C in continuous darkness (achieved by wrapping the dishes in two layers of aluminium foil). In all cases, we incubated seeds both after 0 (= fresh, i.e. after 3 weeks of after-ripening in the laboratory) and 12 (= stratified) weeks of cold stratification in 1% agar at 3°C in darkness, to check for the existence of physiological dormancy. We did not consider warm stratification as it would be ecologically meaningless according to available knowledge on the habitat and dispersion timing of the species.

We counted and discarded germinated seeds three times a week (with the exception of the dark-incubated seeds, which we only checked at the end of the experiment). Radicle emergence was the criterion for germination. After 4 weeks, we terminated all germination tests and opened the non-germinated seeds with a scalpel, classifying them as normal, empty or fungus infected. We excluded the empty and infected seeds from the statistical analyses and the calculation of germination percentages (pooling

all the dishes, empty seeds =  $3 \pm 1\%$ ; infected seeds =  $3 \pm 1\%$ ). We analysed the results by fitting main effects Generalized Linear Models (GLM, binomial error distribution, logit link function) with the test conditions as fixed factors, using SPSS.

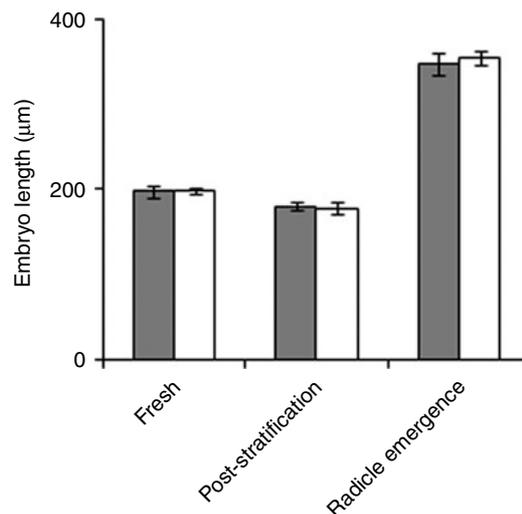
## Results

### Embryo growth

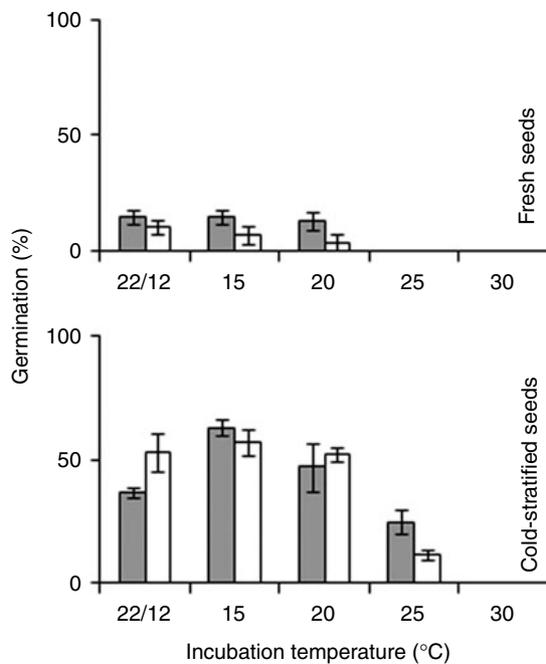
We found significant differences in embryo length depending on the stage of the stratification/incubation process ( $F = 279.592$ ;  $P < 0.001$ ). While after cold stratification embryo length was similar to that of fresh embryos, at the point of radicle emergence embryos had undergone an increase of 86% in their length (Fig. 1). We did not detect significant differences in embryo growth between the populations ( $F = 0.029$ ;  $P = 0.866$ ).

### Germination temperature

Higher seed germination occurred at lower temperatures (15–22°C) with a marked decrease at warmer temperatures (Fig. 2). No seeds germinated at 30°C and only cold-stratified seeds germinated to a low percentage at 25°C. These two temperature regimes were qualitatively different and thus we did not include them in the statistical analysis, as their lack of variance would alter the GLM procedure. Analysing the results for the other three temperatures, we detected a significant positive effect of cold stratification on germination (Wald's  $\chi^2 = 186.720$ ;  $P < 0.001$ ) but neither an effect of incubation temperature



**Figure 1.** Embryo length ( $\pm$  SE) in two populations (La Malva, grey bars; El Valle, white bars) at three different stages of the seed stratification–incubation process.



**Figure 2.** Final germination percentages of fresh (top panel) and stratified (bottom panel) seeds from two populations (La Malva, grey bars; El Valle, white bars) after 4 weeks of incubation at different temperatures. Percentages are the mean  $\pm$  SE of four dishes.

(Wald's  $\chi^2 = 5.195$ ;  $P = 0.074$ ) nor of population (Wald's  $\chi^2 = 0.352$ ;  $P = 0.553$ ). Thus, in the range most favourable for seed germination, we did not find differences between constant (15, 20°C) and alternating (22/12°C) regimes and no differences between the germination temperature range of seeds from the two populations.

### Germinability variation

We found differences in seed germinability among our collections (Fig. 3). Cold stratification produced a significant germination increase (Wald's  $\chi^2 = 222.293$ ;  $P < 0.001$ ) across years and populations, but we only obtained almost complete germination in 2008. In the other 2 years, a percentage (47–80%) of the seeds did not germinate after 12 weeks of cold stratification. Analysing together all years and populations, we found a significant effect of year (Wald's  $\chi^2 = 173.515$ ;  $P < 0.001$ ) but not of population (Wald's  $\chi^2 = 0.647$ ;  $P = 0.421$ ).

### Effect of light

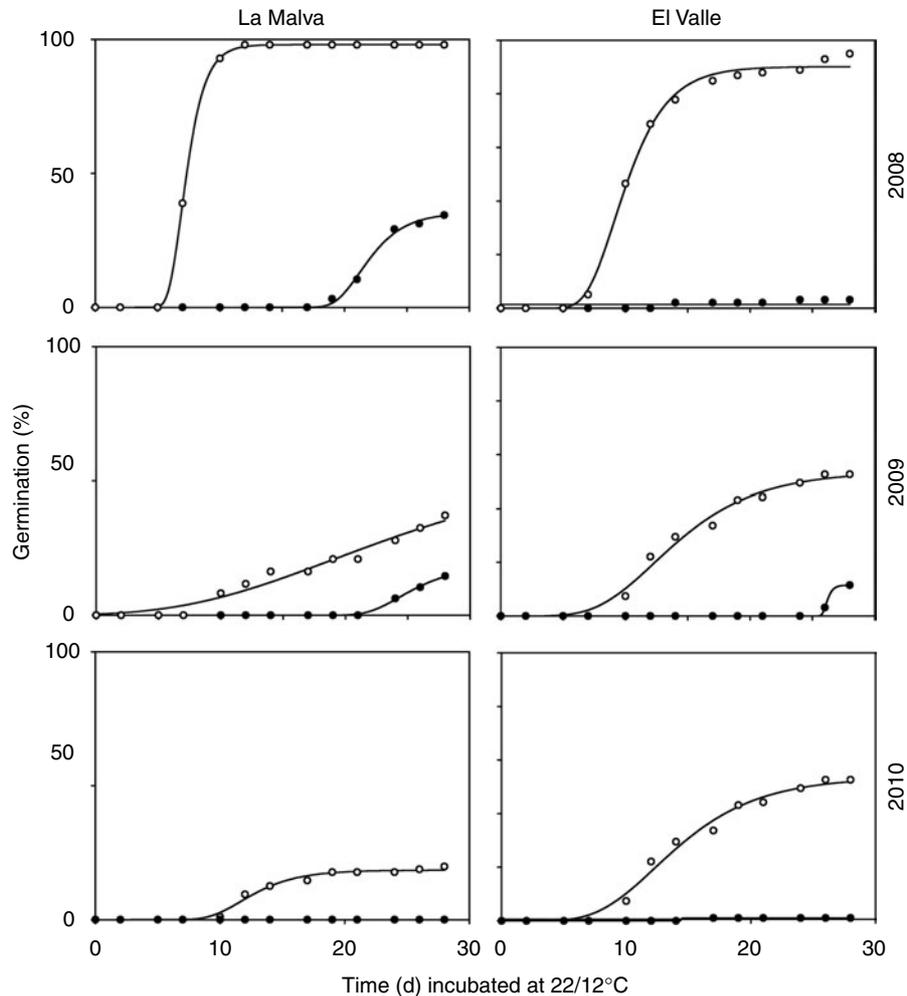
Darkness had a clear negative effect on germination. When incubated in darkness, the fresh seeds did not germinate at all, and only  $1 \pm 1\%$  cold-stratified seeds from one population (La Malva) did germinate.

This clear-cut effect of darkness made it impossible, as well as unnecessary, to apply any statistical test.

### Discussion

*C. somedanum* shows two significant divergences from the previously reported *Centaurium* germination patterns: (1) a lower germination temperature range; and (2) seed dormancy. Furthermore, its germination requirements are in contrast to the typical responses of wetland species (Grime *et al.*, 1981; Thompson and Grime, 1983; Schütz, 2000) as germination not only occurred at low temperatures, but also showed no increase in response to alternating temperatures. Among the tested conditions, highest germination occurred between 15 and 22°C. As we did not test colder temperatures, it is not possible to establish the lower temperature limit of the species. In addition, the low germination percentages achieved at 22/12°C in 2009 and 2010 could indicate that these are suboptimal conditions and that the optimal germination temperature is even lower. However, since the germination of the 2008 stratified seeds was almost complete at 22/12°C, the lower germination found in the following years seems more related to a deeper dormancy in those years, suggesting that the optimal germination temperature should not be too far from the 15–22°C range.

In any case, the upper germination temperature limit of *C. somedanum* is below what was expected. Germination at low temperatures is a common trait of lowland Mediterranean species (Escudero *et al.*, 1997; Doussi and Thanos, 2002), and consequently the temperature requirement for *C. somedanum* germination would seem to be related to the Mediterranean origin of the genus. However, lower germination temperature ranges are usually interpreted as an adaptation to the seasonality of Mediterranean climates that prevents germination during the dry season (Doussi and Thanos, 2002), and this is obviously not the case in the extremely wet environment of *C. somedanum*. The traditional understanding of germination in wetland habitats, as proposed by Thompson and Grime (1983), indicates that the fall of the water table during the spring season produces rising soil temperatures and an increase in diurnal temperature fluctuations. Wetland seeds perceive these signals as marking the optimal season for germination, but the conditions may be very different in mountain spring habitats where water flow is continuous, and even more intense during the spring season when snowmelt recharges aquifers. In our study, seed germination and seedling establishment in *C. somedanum* take place in the soil of spring edges, where the constantly cold running waters heavily influence the temperature. According to data obtained



**Figure 3.** Cumulative germination of fresh (black circles) and stratified (open circles) seeds from each population and year of collection after 4 weeks of incubation at 22/12°C. The lines represent the Gompertz function fitted to the germination data using SigmaPlot 11.0 (Systat Software Inc., San José, California, USA).

by a soil data-logger in La Malva population (M-Log5W, GeoPrecision GmbH, Ettlingen, Germany; data from September 2010 to September 2011), the diurnal thermal amplitude in the soil of the spring edges is relatively low throughout the year (winter =  $1.9 \pm 0.1^\circ\text{C}$ , summer =  $3.0 \pm 0.1^\circ\text{C}$ ) and the summer temperature is considerably less variable than expected (mean =  $16.9^\circ\text{C}$ , min. =  $15.7^\circ\text{C}$ , max. =  $18.8^\circ\text{C}$ ). In this environment, germination at low and constant temperatures is probably the only option for the species. However, since we could not establish the lower germination temperature limit, it cannot be excluded that seed germination begins earlier in the year, as from April onwards the soil mean temperature exceeds  $10^\circ\text{C}$ .

The inability of *C. somedanum* to germinate at  $25^\circ\text{C}$  and above also differs from the successful germination achieved at  $25^\circ\text{C}$  (Mijajlovic *et al.*, 2005; Zivkovic *et al.*, 2007; Todorovic *et al.*, 2008, 2009) and the  $29^\circ\text{C}$  upper germination limit found by Grime *et al.* (1981)

in generalist *Centaureum* species of broad European distribution. It is still necessary to determine whether the lower range in *C. somedanum* is an ancestral Mediterranean character of the genus, which was conserved in this rare endemic and allowed it to colonize the spring habitat; or if it is rather a recent adaptation acquired in the course of such colonization. Although the phylogenetic origin of *C. somedanum* is unclear, the molecular study of Mansion *et al.* (2005) suggests an allopolyploid origin from the perennial *C. scilloides* (L. fil.) Samp and the biennial Spanish endemic *C. gypsicola* (Boiss & Reut.) Ronniger. *C. scilloides* is a generalist species widely distributed over the Atlantic coasts of Europe, while *C. gypsicola* is a specialist species of Mediterranean semi-arid gypsum communities of the central Iberian Peninsula. Thus, investigating the germination response of these species would shed some light on whether the low germination temperature trait of *C. somedanum* has a phylogenetic origin or is a new trait.

The second divergence from the *Centaureum* germination pattern regards the seed dormancy we found in the 3 years analysed, contrasting with the non-dormant behaviour reported in the literature for other *Centaureum* species. Our results show that *C. somedanum* seeds have non-deep simple morphophysiological dormancy (MPD) according to the classification system of Baskin and Baskin (2004) and that the embryo belongs to the underdeveloped linear embryo category proposed by Baskin and Baskin (2007). Fresh seeds have a non-deep physiological dormancy (PD) which prevents embryo growth and which is overcome by a period of cold stratification. As we did not test warm stratification, it is not possible to determine if cold is a requirement *per se*, but in nature this dormancy release takes place during the cold winter season. Once the PD is broken, embryo growth must take place before the seed germinates (morphological dormancy, MD). Since embryo growth did not occur during cold stratification, but did occur at warmer temperatures after the seeds were moved to 22/12°C, they have non-deep simple MPD. To our knowledge, this is the first time that MPD has been found in the *Centaureum* genus, although it has been reported in New World Gentianaceae genera (Threadgill *et al.*, 1981; Baskin and Baskin, 2005). As we have already explained, the thermal regime in the spring habitat is stable during the year in comparison to other, more seasonal, wetland environments. In this context, seed dormancy becomes of foremost importance to ensure that germination takes place in the correct period of the year, i.e. after the colder months of winter.

It is interesting to note that, contrary to what happened with the temperature and light requirements, we found a relatively large variation among seed collections in their germinability. Such variation, depending on year and population, is a well-known phenomenon (Andersson and Milberg, 1998; Giménez-Benavides *et al.*, 2005), which has been usually related to genetic adaptation to local conditions or to the parental environment effect on seed maturation (Fenner, 1991; Baskin and Baskin, 1998). In our case study, the significant effect of year rather than location suggests that it is the environment in each maturation season that determines seed germinability. Nevertheless, further studies controlling either the seed maturation environment (common garden studies) or the genetic background of the populations are necessary to elucidate the relative contribution of the genotype versus the environment.

Besides the divergences commented on above, *C. somedanum* germination agrees with previous *Centaureum* studies regarding the lack of response to alternating temperatures (Thompson and Grime, 1983) and the light requirement for germination (Grime *et al.*, 1981; Schat, 1983). The incapacity to germinate in darkness is a trait generally associated with the ability

to form a soil seed bank (Pons, 1991; Milberg, 1994) especially in small seeds (Milberg *et al.*, 2000). Other traits of *C. somedanum* seeds tend to be related to persistence in the soil bank, namely their small size and rounded shape (Thompson *et al.*, 1993; Cerabolini *et al.*, 2003). Thus, it is possible that *C. somedanum* forms a persistent soil seed bank, as has been reported for other *Centaureum* species (Thompson *et al.*, 1997).

In conclusion, our study shows that a rare perennial species of *Centaureum* living in an unusual habitat presents divergences from the general germination patterns of the genus. The lower germination temperature range in *C. somedanum* could be of adaptive significance in the very particular conditions of mountain springs, where water flow is continuous and relatively cold throughout the year. It would be of great interest to study the germination temperature ranges of those species phylogenetically linked to *C. somedanum*, i.e. *C. scilloides* and *C. gypsicola*, to improve understanding of the evolutionary history of this trait in the genus. Additionally, it remains to be seen if MPD, a possible adaptation to mountain spring habitats, is shared by more *Centaureum* species, especially those with a similar ecology, such as *C. littorale* subsp. *uliginosum* (Waldst. & Kit.) Melderis, which lives in travertines and calcareous fens of central Europe. Our findings also suggest that the germination traits of species living in temperate mountain springs could differ from those living in other wetland types, although more studies focused on spring specialists are needed to clarify germination ecology in these habitats.

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