Supporting information

Metal Boride Better Than Pt: HCP Pd<sub>2</sub>B as Superactive Hydrogen Evolution Reaction Catalyst

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Contents

1. Experimental methods and calculation details .................................................. 3
2. The SEM, TEM images of Pd NS/C ..................................................................... 8
3. TEM and HER test of Pd$_3$B NC@PVP ............................................................ 9
4. The SEM, TEM and EDX spectrum of the Pd$_3$B/C ........................................... 10
5. Table S1. EDX and ICP-MS results of Pd$_3$B NS/C .............................................. 11
6. The magnetic susceptibility of Pd and Pd$_3$B composites .................................. 12
7. DOS and UPS spectra of Pd and Pd$_3$B composites ........................................... 13
8. XPS spectra of Pd and Pd$_3$B composites .......................................................... 14
9. Reference electrode calibration .......................................................................... 15
10. Electrochemical surface area test. ................................................................. 16
11. Table S2. Summary of some recently reported representative HER electrocatalysts in acidic electrolytes (0.5 M H$_2$SO$_4$). ......................................................... 17
12. The overpotentials of Pd$_3$B and Pt/C ............................................................... 18
13. The exchange current densities of Pd$_3$B and Pt/C ........................................... 19
14. XRD patterns of Pd$_3$B NS/C after stability test ............................................. 20
15. Durability measurements of the Pd$_3$B NS/C ................................................... 21
16. Pd–H underpotential absorption ..................................................................... 22
17. DFT structures of further B diffusion without the fcc-to-hcp transition .......... 23
18. H adsorption on different surface sites of Pd$_3$B(001). ...................................... 24
19. XRD patterns of Pd$_3$B NS synthesized without adding amorphous Carbon ...... 25
1. Experimental methods and calculation details

**Materials used:** Palladium(II) 2,4-pentanedionate ((Pd(acac))$_2$, Pd 34.7%), Sodium palladium(II) chloride (Na$_2$PdCl$_4$, Pd 36.1%), L-ascorbic acid (AA, 99.0%), Polyvinylpyrrolidone (PVP, 41631), Borane-tetrahydrofuran complex, (BH$_3$–THF, 1 M solution in THF), dimethylamine borane (DMAB, Me$_2$NH·BH$_3$), and Nafion (D-520 dispersion, 5% w/w in water and 1-propanol) were obtained from Alfa Aesar. Commercial Pt/C(20%), PVP (MW ≈ 30 000), KBr (99%), Cetyltrimethylammonium bromide (CTAB, >99.0%), 2-phenylethanol (>98.0%) were purchased from Sigma Aldrich., Ethanol (99.7%), Tetrahydrofuran (99.9%, anhydrous), Acetone (99.5%), Nitric acid (65 ~ 68%) and Sulfuric acid (95–98%) were purchased from Sinopharm Chemical Reagent Co., Ltd. Vulcan XC-72R carbon (C) was purchased from Cabot Corporation (USA). All the chemicals were used directly without further purification. N$_2$ (oxygen free compressed nitrogen), H$_2$ (99.99%) and CO (Carbon monoxide CP grade 99.9%) was supplied by Shanghai Tomoe gases Co., Ltd. All aqueous solutions were prepared using deionized (DI) water with a resistivity of 18.2 MΩ cm.

**Characterization methods:** The morphologies of the samples were characterized by field emission scanning electron microscopy (FESEM, Hitachi, S-4800, Japan). Transmission electron microscopy (TEM) images were taken using a Tecnai G2 F20 S-Twin (FEI, USA). X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) was conducted on Perkin-Elmer PHI 5000C ESCA system using a Mg Ka (hν =1253.6 eV) radiation source. Ultraviolet photoelectron spectroscopy (UPS) was performed using a He I (21.22 eV) UV source (AXIS Ultra DLD, Kratos, Japan). The X-ray diffraction (XRD) study was carried out using Bruker D8 Advance (Cu Kα radiation, Bruker AXS, Germany). Magnetic susceptibility was measured using a SQUID–VSM (SVSM, Quantum Design, USA).

**Synthesis of Pd nanosheets supported on Vulcan XC-72R carbon (Pd NS/C):** Briefly, 50 mL of 2-phenylethanol containing PVP (MW ≈ 30 000, 960 mg), CTAB (185 mg) and Vulcan XC-72R carbon (104.1 mg) were placed in a 100 mL round-bottomed flask under an atmosphere of CO (100 mL/min) at 100 ºC for 10 min with magnetic stirring. Then, 10 mL of 2-phenylethanol containing Pd(acac)$_2$ (300 mg) was added rapidly. The reaction was allowed
to proceed at 100 °C for 3 h under an atmosphere of CO. The products were precipitated by acetone, separated via centrifugation and further purified by an ethanol-acetone mixture. It is also possible to synthesize Pd NS if Vulcan XC-72R carbon is not added in the above synthesis, which has been utilized to understand the role of C in the B insertion process (also see SI Fig. 16)

**Synthesis of Pd$_2$B and Pd$_3$B NS/C:** 30 mg Pd NS/C and excessive amount of dimethylamine borane (DMAB, Me$_2$NH·BH$_3$, 295 mg) and 5 mL THF into a sealed 10 ml Teflon-lined stainless autoclave, continuous stirring and reaction 2 h for various temperatures (70, 90 and 120 °C). After cooled down naturally to room temperature, the product should be filtered, subsequently washed by THF and ethanol several times, and then dried at 30 °C in vacuum-dried for 12 h. It should be mentioned that we can also successfully obtain the hcp Pd$_3$B nanosheets without adding Vulcan XC-72R carbon. This is evident by the XRD results for the sample prepared without carbon, as shown in Fig. S16.

**Synthesis of PVP coated Pd nanocubes (Pd NC@PVP):** Here the Pd NC@PVP were synthesized as the precursor of previously reported Pd$_2$B NC@PVP. In a typical synthesis of Pd nanocubes, 80 mL of an aqueous solution containing PVP (Alfa, 1.05 g), AA (600 mg), and KBr (300 mg) were placed in a 150 mL round-bottomed flask, and pre-heated in air under magnetic stirring at 80 °C for 10 min. Then, 30 mL of an aqueous solution containing Na$_2$PdCl$_4$ (570 mg) was added rapidly. The reaction was allowed to proceed at 80 °C for 3 h. The product was collected by centrifugation and washed 3 times with water to remove excess PVP.

**Synthesis of Pd$_2$B NC@PVP:** 30 mg Pd NC@PVP and 10 mL BH$_3$·THF into a sealed 15 ml Teflon-lined stainless autoclave, heated up to 150 °C and continuous stirring for 72 h. The product was collected by centrifugation and washed 3 times with THF and ethanol.

**Preparation of the working electrodes:** A catalyst slurry was first prepared by mixing 95 μL DI water, 95 μL ethanol and 10 μL nafion (5 wt %), 1.0 mg of catalyst ultrasonically for 40 min. A glassy-carbon electrode (GCE) was polished with 0.05 mm alumina slurry on a Buehler micro polishing cloth. The catalyst ink modified GCE was prepared by drop-casting 5 μL of
the solution on a GCE of diameter 3 mm and drying at ambient temperature in air.

**Electrochemical Measurement:** All the electrochemical measurements were carried out by using a CHI 660E electrochemical workstation (CH Instruments, Inc). In the conventional three-electrode system, glass carbon electrode (GCE) was used as the working electrode (the diameter of GCE: 3 mm). A saturated calomel electrode (SCE, saturated KCl) and a carbon rod were applied as the reference electrode and the counter electrode, respectively. The electrocatalytic activity of catalyst towards HER was examined by obtaining polarization curves using linear sweep voltammetry (LSV) at a scan rate of 1 mV s^{-1} at room temperature in N₂-saturated 0.5 M H₂SO₄ solutions. Unless special mention, all data were reported with iR compensation.

**CO stripping:** Electrochemically active surface area (ECSA) was calculated by CO stripping experiment, first the CV was carried out in 0.5 M H₂SO₄ solution saturated with N₂ at a scan rate of 100 mV s⁻¹ within the potential range from 0.05 to 1.35 V ten cycles. And by bubbling CO at 0.25 V for 15 min, then by removing the dissolved CO by bubbling N₂ for 30 min while holding at 0.25 V. At last, the CO stripping was carried out in the potential range from 0.05 to 1.35 V at a scan rate of 10 mV s⁻¹. The ECSA of Pd and Pt/C catalysts were calculated from the following equation:

$$\text{ECSA} = \frac{Q}{(m \cdot C)}$$

where Q was the charge in the CO adsorption oxidation region, m was the loading amount of Pt and Pd metal, and C (420 μC cm⁻²) was the charge required for monolayer adsorption of CO on Pt and Pd surface.

**Accelerated degradation tests:** To evaluate the durability of the PdₓB NS/C catalysts for the HER activity, accelerated degradation tests is done by measuring the HER after repeated cycling in the range from 50 mV to -65 mV vs. the RHE for 1000 cycles in 0.5 M H₂SO₄ at a scan rate of 100 mV s⁻¹.

**Accelerated Life Test:** For a good electrode, it can work effectively for several years under normal conditions, thus it would be time-consuming to test electrode stability. To reduce the
test time, the accelerated life test described below was used to assess electrode stability. A rough evaluation could be made using the method proposed by Hine and co-workers\(^2\), where a simple relationship between the electrode service life (SL) and the current density \((i)\) could be obtained:

\[
\text{SL} \sim 1/i^n
\]

where \(n\) ranges from 1.4 to 2.0. It is noted that the real lifetime of the electrode would rely on the test conditions, including current density, pH and temperature of the electrolyte. The tests were carried out in 0.5 M H\(_2\)SO\(_4\), at 500 mA cm\(^{-2}\); in these experiments, cathode were considered as passivated upon a 2.2 V increase of their potential under the applied current density. The test was conducted at a constant anodic current density.

**Calculation Details:** All DFT calculations were performed using VASP packages\(^3\) with projected augmented wave (PAW) pseudo-potentials\(^4,5\). The exchange–correlation energy was treated based on the generalized gradient approximation (GGA) by using Perdew–Burke–Ernzerhof (PBE) functional\(^6\). The plane-wave cutoff energy was set to 400 eV. The Monkhorst-Pack scheme with a k-point separation length 0.04 Å\(^{-1}\) was utilized for sampling the first Brillion zone. The crystal structures of Pd borides were obtained via the large scale global structure search, which have been introduced in our recent work\(^7\). Transition states (TSs) of the B transition were searched using the Constrained-Broyden-based TS-searching methods\(^8,9\) and the Double-Ended Surface Walking (DESW) method\(^10\). Liu group has implemented these TS searching methods and the global optimization methods in a neural-network computing program (LASP [www.lasphub.com](http://www.lasphub.com)). LASP can interface with VASP for all the functionalities. For the investigation of B diffusion, we mainly utilized \((2 \times 2\sqrt{3})\) (8 Pd atoms per layer) six-layer slabs with adsorbates on one sides of the (111) surfaces. The bottom two layers in the six-layer slab were held at the bulk truncated position and the other layers were fully relaxed. The same sized Pd(111) and Pd\(_2\)B(001) slabs were utilized during the investigation of HER kinetics. The Quasi-Newton I-BFGS method is used for geometry relaxation until the maximal force on each degree of freedom is less than 0.05 eV/Å.

To derive the energy reaction profile, we first obtain the reaction energy of each step
(strictly speaking, Helmholtz free energy change (ΔF) at 0 K, 0 bar) that is directly available from DFT total energy (ΔE) after the ZPE correction. For elementary surface reactions without involving the adsorption/desorption of gaseous molecules, ΔF at 0 K, 0 bar is a good approximation to the Gibbs free energy (ΔG) as the temperature T and pressure p contributions at the solid phase are small. To compute the free energy change ΔG of elementary reactions involving gaseous hydrogen, the large entropy term at 298 K is essential to take into account. We utilize the standard thermodynamic data\textsuperscript{11} to obtain the temperature and pressure contributions for the G of the gaseous H\textsubscript{2}, which is -0.31 eV compared to the total energy of the corresponding free molecule (E, 0 K), respectively.\textsuperscript{12} For reactions involving the proton and electron, the reaction energy can be computed by referencing to the normal hydrogen electrode (NHE) in a manner proposed by the Bockris\textsuperscript{13} and Nørskov group\textsuperscript{14}. This is governed by G\textsubscript{proton+electron} = G(½H\textsubscript{2}) - neU where e presents the transfer electron, n means the number of electrons, and U is the electrochemical potential vs NHE.
2. The SEM, TEM images of Pd NS/C

Figure S1. (a) Scanning electron microscopy (SEM), (b) TEM, (c) HR-TEM and (d) electron diffraction pattern images for Pd NS/C.

Figure S1a-b shows a SEM and TEM image of Pd NS/C, which Pd NS on C are not uniform and range from tens of nanometers to one hundred nanometers. And Figure S1c shows a HR-TEM image of an individual Pd NS that lays flat. The fringes with a lattice spacing of 0.232 nm can be indexed to the (111) planes of Pd with a fcc structure. The electron diffraction pattern corresponds to the (111), (200), (220) and (311) planes of the expected fcc Pd (Figure S1d).
3. TEM and HER test of Pd$_2$B NC@PVP

**Fig. S2.** TEM of Pd NC@PVP (a) and Pd$_2$B NC@PVP (b). (c) XRD patterns of Pd NC@PVP and Pd$_2$B NC@PVP. (d) Polarization curves of Pd NC@PVP, Pd$_2$B NC@PVP and commercial Pt/C in 0.5 M H$_2$SO$_4$ at a scan rate of 1 mV s$^{-1}$. 
4. The SEM, TEM and EDX spectrum of the Pd$_2$B/C

Fig. S3. (a)SEM, (b) TEM, (c) electron diffraction pattern images and (d) EDX patterns of the Pd$_2$B/C. The Part of C and all of O and Cu are from the carbon-coated copper grids used for TEM characterization. Insets show the atomic and weight ratios of Pd to B.
5. **Table S1.** EDX and ICP-MS results of Pd₃B NS/C

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Catalysts</th>
<th>ICP-MS</th>
<th>EDX</th>
<th>Pd:B</th>
<th>Pd Loading on GCE /μg</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pd (Wt%)</td>
<td>Pd (Atomic %)</td>
<td>B (Atomic %)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pd NS/C</td>
<td>42.7</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pd₃B NS/C(70 °C)</td>
<td>40.5</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>5.6</td>
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<td>Pd₃B NS/C(90 °C)</td>
<td>39.5</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>3.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pd₃B NS/C(120 °C)</td>
<td>34.1</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>1.7</td>
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</table>
6. The magnetic susceptibility of Pd and Pd₆B composites

**Fig. S4.** Temperature dependence of the magnetic susceptibility of Pd NS and different Pd₆B NS/C samples synthesized at 70 °C, 90 °C and 120 °C, respectively.

The electronic structure of the Pd₆B samples have also been characterized by using magnetic susceptibility. The magnetic susceptibility of all Pd₆B samples are measured in the temperature interval between 300 and 2 K in a magnetic field of 1 T, as displayed in Figure S4. We found that with the increase of B content, the susceptibility drops sharply. While pure Pd metal has a large magnetic susceptibility due to free d electrons, the Pd₂B (120 °C sample) transforms largely to a diamagnetic magnetization material. This suggests that Pd forms strong covalent bonding with B that leads to the low susceptibility of d magnetism under magnetic field. Our DFT calculations also confirm that with the increase of B, the d states of Pd shifts down in energy and the density of d states at the Fermi level reduces gradually.
7. DOS and UPS spectra of Pd and Pd$_2$B composites

Fig. S5. (a) Density of states (DOS) of Pd and Pd$_2$B. (b) UPS spectra of Pd NS/C and Pd$_2$B NS/C.
8. XPS spectra of Pd and Pd$_x$B composites

Fig. S6. (a) The survey XPS spectra of Pd and Pd$_x$B composites. (b) High-resolution Pd 3d of Pd and Pd$_x$B composites. (c) Pd 3d and (d) B 1s of Pd$_x$B NS/C XPS spectra. Dotted line is the experimental data, and solid lines represent fitted curve.
9. Reference electrode calibration

SCE was used as the reference electrode in all measurements and all potentials were calibrated vs reversible hydrogen electrode (RHE). The calibration was performed in 0.5 M \( \text{H}_2\text{SO}_4 \) bubbled with \( \text{H}_2 \) for at least 30 min. where Pt grid and carbon rod were separately used as the working and the counter electrode. SCE to be calibrated is used as a reference electrode. The potential was scanned from -0.28 to -0.2 V vs SCE at a scan rate of 1 mV s\(^{-1}\) and the LSV was recorded as Figure S6. The current value of 0 mA was found at -0.255 V vs. SCE for the hydrogen evolution (\( \text{H}^+ / \text{H}_2 \)).

The RHE potential was calculated as: \( E (\text{V vs. RHE}) = E (\text{V vs. SCE}) + 0.255 \text{V} \).

Fig. S7. Calibration of SCE in \( \text{H}_2 \) saturated 0.5 M \( \text{H}_2\text{SO}_4 \).
10. Electrochemical surface area test.

Fig. S8. CO stripping measurements of (a) Pd NS/C, (b) Pd$_3$B NS/C, (c) Pt/C in 0.5 M H$_2$SO$_4$ at a scan rate of 10 mV s$^{-1}$, (d) the corresponding ECSA.
11. Table S2. Summary of some recently reported representative HER electrocatalysts in acidic electrolytes (0.5 M H₂SO₄).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Catalysts</th>
<th>Overpotential at ( j = 1 \text{ mA cm}^{-2} ) (mV)</th>
<th>Overpotential at ( j = 10 \text{ mA cm}^{-2} ) (mV)</th>
<th>Tafel slope (mV dec(^{-1}))</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pd₃B/C (this work)</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>22.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ru/CN(^{15})</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Au@PdAg/NRB(^{16})</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PtRu@RFCS(^{17})</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>27.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pd/Cu-Pt/NRs(^{18})</td>
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<td>22.8</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>400-SWNT/Pt(^{19})</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>27.0</td>
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</tr>
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</table>
12. The overpotentials of Pd₃B and Pt/C

![Graph comparing HER on Pd NS/C, Pd₃B NS/C (70 °C), Pd₃B NS/C (90 °C), Pd₃B NS/C (120 °C) and Pt/C (20%) in acidic solutions for the overpotentials.]

**Fig. S9.** Comparison of HER on Pd NS/C, Pd₃B NS/C (70 °C), Pd₃B NS/C (90 °C), Pd₃B NS/C (120 °C) and Pt/C (20%) in acidic solutions for the overpotentials.
13. The exchange current densities of PdₓB and Pt/C

![Bar chart](image)

**Fig. S10.** Comparison of HER on Pd NS/C, PdₓB NS/C (70 °C), PdₓB NS/C (90 °C), PdₓB NS/C (120 °C) and (e) Pt/C (20%) in acidic solutions for the exchange current density $j_0$ obtained from the Butler–Volmer fitting.

Fig. S11. XRD pattern of Pd$_2$B NS/C, before and after i-t test.
**15. Durability measurements of the Pd$_2$B NS/C**

![Fig. S12](image)

**Fig. S12.** Durability measurement of the Pd$_2$B NS/C. (a) The polarization curves were recorded initially and after 1,000 cyclic in 0.5 M H$_2$SO$_4$ at a scan rate of 1 mV s$^{-1}$. (b) Accelerated life test in 0.5 M H$_2$SO$_4$ solution.

The above results show that the polarization curve for Pd$_2$B NS/C (Figure S12a) only shifts negligibly, implying that the catalyst is stable in the typical HER working conditions. The Accelerated life test results (Figure S12b) showed that the Pd$_2$B NS/C is stable for about 33 h under the accelerated conditions. According to the simple relationship between the electrode service life (SL) and the current density ($i$) (SL $\sim 1/i^n$), given that $n$ is equal to 1.7 (a typical value), the service life for Pd$_2$B NS/C with a current density of 10 mA cm$^{-2}$ was estimated to be approximately 2.9 years.
16. Pd–H underpotential absorption

![Polarization curves of Pd NS and Pd$_x$B NS in 0.5 M $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$ at a scan rate of 1 mV s$^{-1}$](image)

Fig. S13. Polarization curves of Pd NS and Pd$_x$B NS in 0.5 M $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$ at a scan rate of 1 mV s$^{-1}$.
17. DFT structures of further B diffusion without the fcc-to-hcp transition

![Diagram showing DFT structures of B diffusion into deeper bulk layers of Pd.](image)

**Fig. S14.** The key structures of the B diffusion into the deeper bulk layers of Pd (the energetic profile is shown in Figure 3b). The initial state is the Pd (111) surface with 0.5 ML sublayer B atoms (state 3). The energies refer to state 3 were also indicated at right bottom corners.

As shown in Fig. 3b, the B diffusion from subsurface to the third sublayer is energetically exothermic by 0.38 eV. However, the reaction is highly kinetically hindered. At the transition state (TS3), the surface Pd atoms must undergo a significant reconstruction to allow the B atom to pass through the narrow Td interstitial site, which results in a high barrier (1.56 eV).
18. H adsorption on different surface sites of Pd$_2$B(001).

![Diagram of Pd$_2$B(001) surface with H adsorption sites labeled](image)

**Fig. S15** The H adsorption on different surface sites of Pd$_2$B(001). The adsorption energies and the closest distances between adsorbed H and subsurface B are also labeled.

The adsorption energies of the H on most surface sites of Pd$_2$B(001) is thermodynamically exothermic (negative adsorption energy). However, the adsorption energy for the H being too close to the subsurface B (H$_{fcc1}$, sitting just above a subsurface B, with H-B distance is ~ 2.2 Å) is positive (0.21 eV). Similar trends can be found on all Pd$_x$B surfaces, which shows that a too-close contact (<2 Å) between H and B is thermodynamically prohibited.
19. XRD patterns of Pd$_2$B NS synthesized without adding amorphous Carbon.

Fig. S16. XRD patterns for Pd NS and Pd$_2$B NS synthesized without adding amorphous Carbon.
References


