

# Observation of Four-Fold Boron–Metal Bonds in RhB(BO<sup>-</sup>) and RhB

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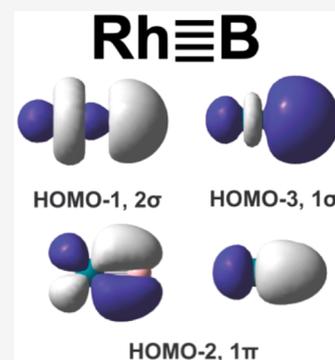
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**ABSTRACT:** The maximum bond order between two main-group atoms was known to be three. However, it has been suggested recently that there is quadruple bonding in C<sub>2</sub> and analogous eight-valence electron species. While the quadruple bond in C<sub>2</sub> has aroused some debates, an interesting question is: are main-group elements capable of forming quadruple bonds? Here we use photoelectron spectroscopy and computational chemistry to probe the electronic structure and chemical bonding in RhB<sub>2</sub>O<sup>-</sup> and RhB<sup>-</sup> and show that the boron atom engages in quadruple bonding with rhodium in RhB(BO<sup>-</sup>) and neutral RhB. The quadruple bonds consist of two π-bonds formed between the Rh 4d<sub>xz</sub>/4d<sub>yz</sub> and B 2p<sub>x</sub>/2p<sub>y</sub> orbitals and two σ-bonds between the Rh 4d<sub>z<sup>2</sup></sub> and B 2s/2p<sub>z</sub> orbitals. To confirm the quadruple bond in RhB, we also investigate the linear Rh≡B–H<sup>+</sup> species and find a triple bond between Rh and B, which has a longer bond length, lower stretching frequency, and smaller bond dissociation energy in comparison with that of the Rh≡B quadruple bond in RhB.



Ever since Lewis's epochal work on chemical bonds,<sup>1</sup> the maximum bond order between two main-group atoms has been known to be three. A quadruple bond between two Re atoms was first discovered in [Re<sub>2</sub>X<sub>8</sub>]<sup>2-</sup> type compounds,<sup>2</sup> while five-fold bonding was realized between two Cr(I) centers.<sup>3</sup> The maximum bond order between two atoms is now known to be six between two group-VIB atoms (Cr<sub>2</sub>, Mo<sub>2</sub>, W<sub>2</sub>) based on theoretical analyses.<sup>4</sup> Recently, the idea of quadruple bonding between two main-group atoms has been suggested in C<sub>2</sub> and analogous eight-valence electron species on the basis of high-level theoretical analyses.<sup>5</sup> Further theoretical studies also indicated that carbon is involved in quadruple bonding with uranium in the linear triatomic CUO molecule,<sup>6</sup> as well as in terminal transition metal carbides.<sup>7</sup> However, the quadruple bond in C<sub>2</sub> has aroused some debates,<sup>8–13</sup> primarily due to the fact that the putative CC quadruple bond strength in C<sub>2</sub> is weaker than that in the classical HC≡CH triple bond in terms of bond lengths and force constants. Boron is electron-deficient and favors delocalized bonding in boranes and finite-sized clusters.<sup>14–18</sup> Localized boron–boron triple bonds are possible if electron-donor ligands are used. Boron–boron triple bonds were first observed in isolated molecules with CO and BO<sup>-</sup> ligands<sup>19,20</sup> and synthesized with bulky carbene ligands.<sup>21,22</sup> Although many compounds containing metal–boron double bonds (borylenes) were known,<sup>23</sup> a metal–boron triple bond was found only recently in the Bi≡B–BO<sup>-</sup> molecule both experimentally and theoretically.<sup>24</sup> In searching for similar triple-bonded M≡B–BO<sup>-</sup> molecules with transition metal elements, we have examined RhB<sub>2</sub>O<sup>-</sup>. Surprisingly, we found that it does not have the expected linear Rh≡B–BO<sup>-</sup> structure. Rather, its most stable structure is found to be

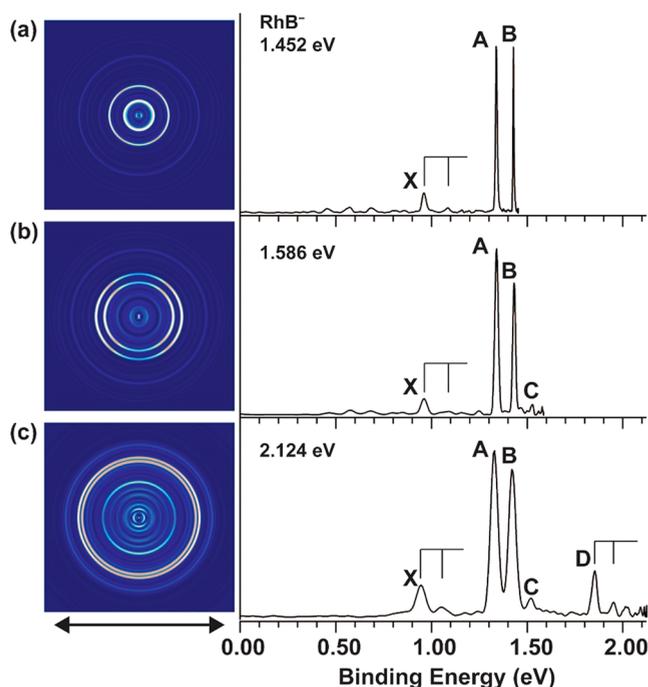
bent with the BO<sup>-</sup> ligand coordinated to the Rh atom and a very short terminal Rh–B bond. Subsequently, we have investigated the diatomic RhB<sup>-</sup> molecule and found that it has an even shorter Rh–B bond. Both experimental and theoretical analyses reveal that the B atom engages in quadruple bonding with Rh in RhB and RhB(BO<sup>-</sup>).

We did the experiments using two separate photoelectron spectroscopy (PES) apparatuses (see the SI for more experimental details). Briefly, the RhB<sup>-</sup> and RhB<sub>2</sub>O<sup>-</sup> species were produced by laser vaporization of a Rh/<sup>11</sup>B/Bi mixed target. The RhB<sub>2</sub>O<sup>-</sup> cluster was formed from the trace amount of oxide impurity on the target surface. The anionic clusters were extracted and analyzed using a time-of-flight mass spectrometer. The cluster of interest was mass-selected before being photodetached by a second laser. The photoelectron kinetic energies were measured with either a magnetic bottle time-of-flight analyzer<sup>18,25</sup> or a photoelectron imaging (PEI) system.<sup>26</sup> Figure 1 shows the photoelectron images and spectra of RhB<sup>-</sup> at three photon energies using the PEI apparatus. Peak X represents the transition from the ground state of RhB<sup>-</sup> to that of RhB, yielding the electron affinity (EA) of neutral RhB to be 0.961 eV. Short vibrational progression was observed for the ground-state transition with a vibrational frequency of 994 cm<sup>-1</sup>. Peaks A at 1.339 eV and B at 1.428 eV are intense transitions, followed by a weak peak C at 1.525 eV. Although the separations between peaks A, B, and C are

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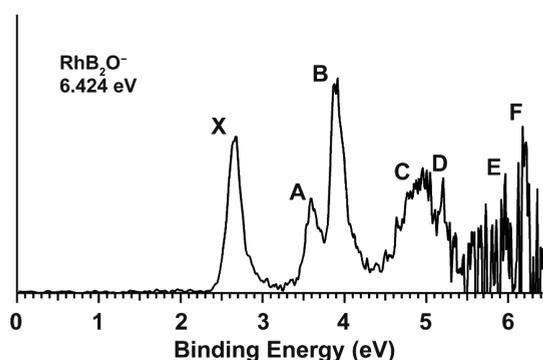
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**Figure 1.** Photoelectron images and spectra for  $\text{RhB}^-$  at three photon energies, (a) 1.452, (b) 1.586, and (c) 2.124 eV. The vertical lines represent vibrational structures, and the double arrow below the images indicates the laser polarization.

roughly even, their relative intensities suggest that they do not represent a vibrational progression. Peak D has a binding energy of 1.852 eV with a short vibrational progression and a vibrational frequency of  $789\text{ cm}^{-1}$ .

The photoelectron spectrum of  $\text{RhB}_2\text{O}^-$  displayed in Figure 2 was taken on the magnetic bottle PES apparatus at 193

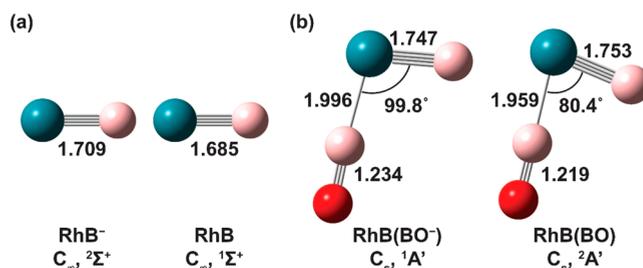


**Figure 2.** Photoelectron spectrum of  $\text{RhB}_2\text{O}^-$  at 193 nm (6.424 eV).

nm.<sup>18,25</sup> The lowest binding energy band X corresponds to the detachment transition from the ground state of  $\text{RhB}_2\text{O}^-$  to that of neutral  $\text{RhB}_2\text{O}$ , whereas the higher binding energy bands (A–F) indicate detachment transitions to excited states of neutral  $\text{RhB}_2\text{O}$ . Band X yielded the first vertical detachment energy (VDE) of 2.66 eV and an adiabatic detachment energy (ADE) of 2.53 eV evaluated from its onset, which also represents the EA of neutral  $\text{RhB}_2\text{O}$ . A weaker band A was observed at a VDE of 3.59 eV, followed by a more intense band B at 3.91 eV. A broad band C was observed at around 4.95 eV, closely followed by a sharp feature D at 5.20 eV. The signal-to-noise ratios were poor above 5.5 eV, beyond which

band E at  $\sim 6.0$  eV and band F at  $\sim 6.2$  eV were tentatively identified. The photoelectron spectra of  $\text{RhB}^-$  and  $\text{RhB}_2\text{O}^-$  serve as electronic fingerprints to allow analyses of their structures and bonding by comparison with theoretical calculations. The observed PES features and their binding energies are compared with the theoretical results in Tables S1 and S2 for  $\text{RhB}^-$  and  $\text{RhB}_2\text{O}^-$ , respectively.

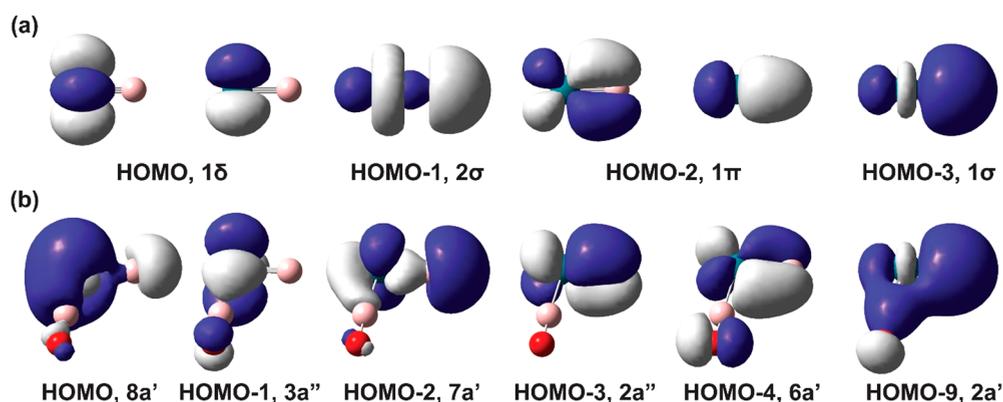
The calculated structures for  $\text{RhB}^-$  and  $\text{RhB}_2\text{O}^-$  and their corresponding neutrals are shown in Figure 3 (see the SI for



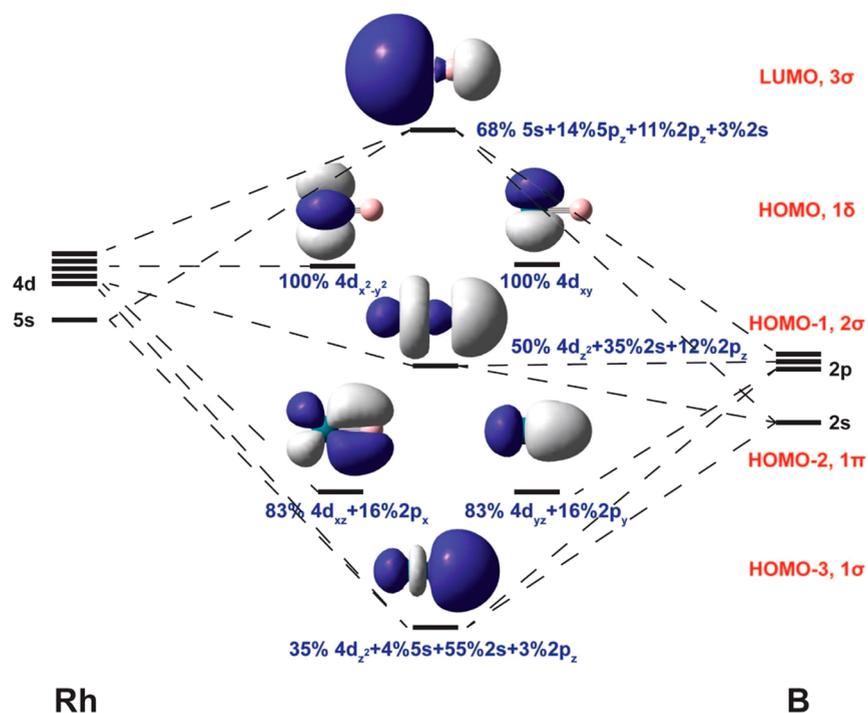
**Figure 3.** Calculated geometries and their ground electronic states, (a)  $\text{RhB}^-$  and  $\text{RhB}$  and (b)  $\text{RhB}(\text{BO}^-)$  and  $\text{RhB}(\text{BO})$ .

the theoretical details). The bond lengths of  $\text{RhB}$  and  $\text{RhB}^-$  were calculated at various levels of theory, which all predicted similar values between Rh and B, 1.703–1.712 Å for  $\text{RhB}^-$  and 1.685–1.689 Å for  $\text{RhB}$  (Table S3). The neutral Rh–B bond length agrees well with a previous experimental value (1.692 Å) obtained from optical spectroscopy,<sup>27</sup> as well as a previous theoretical calculation (1.698 Å).<sup>28</sup> Different structures were computed for  $\text{RhB}_2\text{O}^-$ . Surprisingly, the global minimum of  $\text{RhB}_2\text{O}^-$  was found to be bent ( $C_s$ ,  $^1A'$ ), consisting of a  $\text{BO}^-$  unit coordinated to the Rh atom (Figure 3b). The expected linear structure was found to be higher in energy by 0.60 eV (Figure S1a). The calculated Rh–B bond length between Rh and the BO unit was 1.996 Å, while that between Rh and the terminal B was 1.747 Å in the bent global minimum. There was a huge bond angle change between the BO unit and the RhB unit upon electron detachment, reducing from  $99.8^\circ$  in the anion to  $80.4^\circ$  in the neutral (Figure 3b). The Rh–BO bond length was also slightly shortened, and that between Rh and the terminal B was slightly lengthened in the neutral.

The Kohn–Sham molecular orbitals (MOs) for  $\text{RhB}$  and the global minimum  $\text{RhB}(\text{BO}^-)$  bent structure are given in Figure S2. There is similarity between the MOs related to the terminal RhB unit in  $\text{RhB}(\text{BO}^-)$  and the bare  $\text{RhB}$ , as shown in Figure 4. A MO diagram for  $\text{RhB}$ , along with the atomic orbital compositions, is shown in Figure 5. The LUMO ( $3\sigma$ ) of  $\text{RhB}$ , where the extra electron in the  $\text{RhB}^-$  anion resides, is a weakly antibonding orbital between the Rh 5s5p and the B 2s2p orbitals. The increased bond length and reduced vibrational frequency in the anion compared to those of the neutral are consistent with the weak antibonding character of the LUMO (Figure 3 and Table S1). The calculated electron detachment energy from the LUMO is 0.968 eV, in excellent agreement with the experimental value of 0.961 eV. The HOMO ( $1\delta$ ) of  $\text{RhB}$  consists of two degenerate nonbonding Rh  $4d_{x^2-y^2}$  and  $4d_{xy}$  orbitals. Electron detachment from the fully occupied  $1\delta$  MO can produce a triplet ( $^3\Delta$ ) and singlet ( $^1\Delta$ ) final state. Spin–orbit coupling will split the  $^3\Delta$  state into three closely spaced states,  $^3\Delta_{3,2,1}$ , consistent with the observed peaks A, B, C (Table S1). The computed VDE of 1.445 eV for the  $^3\Delta$  state is in excellent agreement with the average of the three spin–



**Figure 4.** Valence MOs of RhB and the corresponding RhB-related orbitals in RhB(BO<sup>-</sup>). (a) Valence MOs of RhB. (b) Corresponding MOs in RhB(BO<sup>-</sup>).



**Figure 5.** MO diagram and MO atomic compositions for RhB.

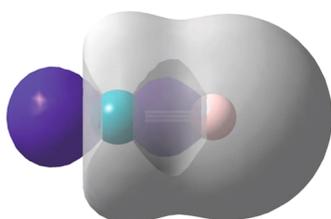
orbit components (Table S1). Furthermore, no vibrational progression is observed, consistent with the nonbonding nature of the  $1\delta$  MO. The computed VDE for the corresponding  $^1\Delta$  final state is 2.140 eV, which is somewhat higher than the observed value. In addition, a short vibrational progression is observed for the  $^1\Delta$  state, suggesting possible vibronic coupling of the  $^1\Delta$  state with other nearby electronic states. The remaining four valence MOs are bonding orbitals between the Rh  $4d_z^2/4d_{xz}/4d_{yz}$  and B  $2s/2p_x/2p_y/2p_z$  orbitals.

The structure of RhB(BO<sup>-</sup>) is basically a BO<sup>-</sup> ligand coordinated to the RhB unit, as revealed in the MOs (Figure S2b). The HOMO, HOMO-1 to HOMO-4, and HOMO-9 correspond to the RhB unit, as compared with those of the bare RhB in Figure 4. The remaining five valence MOs (HOMO-5 to HOMO-8 and HOMO-10) belong to the BO<sup>-</sup> ligand. The HOMO of RhB(BO<sup>-</sup>), corresponding to one of the  $1\delta$  MOs in RhB, is involved in bonding interactions with the BO<sup>-</sup> ligand. The calculated VDEs are in good agreement with the experimental data, as shown in Table S2 and Figure

S3a. The calculated VDEs for the linear RhB-BO<sup>-</sup> structure completely disagree with the observed spectrum (Figure S3b). A high-resolution PEI experiment was done for the X band, but a very congested spectrum was obtained (Figure S4a). This confirms the large geometry change between the RhB(BO<sup>-</sup>) anion and its corresponding neutral, as borne out in the Franck-Condon simulation (Figure S4b).

The unusual bent structure of RhB(BO<sup>-</sup>) with a short Rh-B bond prompted us to investigate the bonding in RhB. The computed Rh-B bond length of 1.685 Å is much shorter than the Rh≡B triple bond length using Pyykko's self-consistent Rh and B atomic covalent radii,<sup>29</sup> which give a triple bond length of 1.79 Å. Our computed Rh-B bond length agrees well with the previous experimental value of 1.692 Å and the previous theoretical value of 1.698 Å.<sup>27,28</sup> The MOs of Rh-B reveal four bonding orbitals ( $1\sigma$ ,  $1\pi$ , and  $2\sigma$ ) and two nonbonding orbitals (Figure 5). The extremely short Rh-B bond length is consistent with a quadruple bond between Rh and B (Rh≡B). The RhB bonding was considered to be a triple

bond previously because the  $1\sigma$  MO was classified essentially as a  $2s$  lone pair.<sup>27,28,30</sup> However, the bonding nature of the  $1\sigma$  MO can be glimpsed by the fact that the bent  $\text{Rh}\equiv\text{B}(\text{BO}^-)$  structure is more stable than the linear  $\text{Rh}\equiv\text{B}-\text{BO}^-$  isomer, in which the B atom can form only a triple bond with Rh. The bonding of the two structures is compared in Figure S5 using the Adaptive Natural Density Partitioning (AdNDP) analyses.<sup>31</sup> It can be seen readily that four Rh–B bonds exist in the bent  $\text{Rh}\equiv\text{B}(\text{BO}^-)$  global minimum with two  $4d$  lone pairs, whereas there are three Rh–B bonds and three  $4d$  lone pairs in the linear  $\text{Rh}\equiv\text{B}-\text{BO}^-$  higher-energy isomer. The  $1\pi$  MOs comprise the two  $\pi$  bonds. The  $2\sigma$  MO consists of significant bonding interactions between the  $4d_z^2$  orbital of Rh and the  $sp_z$  hybridized orbital of B, as shown more clearly in Figure 6 at a smaller isovalue. This bonding orbital was called a “doughnut”  $\sigma$  bond previously.<sup>32,33</sup>



HOMO-1,  $2\sigma$

Figure 6. HOMO-1 ( $2\sigma$ ) of RhB at isovalue = 0.020 e/bohr<sup>3</sup>.

While this manuscript was being prepared, a similar quadruple bonding pattern between boron and iron was suggested in the  $\text{BFe}(\text{CO})_3^-$  complex.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, it is noteworthy that the diatomic FeB was reported to have a quartet ground state and its bond length was calculated to be 1.73–1.77 Å,<sup>35,36</sup> which is significantly longer than the quadruple bond length reported in the  $\text{BFe}(\text{CO})_3^-$  complex (1.61 Å).<sup>34</sup> The carbonyl groups coordinating to the Fe atom are responsible for the short B–Fe bond. The current study reports the observation of quadruple bonding solely between a Rh atom and a B atom, the first diatomic molecule with a quadruple bond involving a boron atom.

To further confirm the bonding nature of the  $1\sigma$  MO in RhB, we investigated the closed-shell  $\text{RhBH}^+$  species, which can have only a  $\text{Rh}\equiv\text{B}$  triple bond (Figure S6). The computed Rh–B bond length is increased from 1.685 to 1.747 Å, whereas the computed Rh–B stretching frequency is reduced from 956 to 826  $\text{cm}^{-1}$  in comparison to those in the  $\text{Rh}\equiv\text{B}$  quadruple bond. We also computed the bond dissociation energies of  $\text{Rh}\equiv\text{B}$  [ $\text{RhB} (^1\Sigma^+) \rightarrow \text{Rh} + \text{B}$ ] and  $\text{Rh}\equiv\text{B}-\text{H}^+$  [ $\text{RhBH}^+ (^1\Sigma^+) \rightarrow \text{Rh}^+ + \text{BH}$ ], as shown in Table 1. For each species, two

Table 1. Comparison of the Quadruple Bond Energy in  $\text{Rh}\equiv\text{B}$  and the Triple  $\text{Rh}\equiv\text{B}$  Bond Energy in  $\text{RhBH}^+$ <sup>a</sup>

species	reference states	$\Delta E$ (kJ/mol)
$\text{Rh}\equiv\text{B} (^1\Sigma^+)$	$\rightarrow \text{Rh} (5s^1 4d^8, ^4F) + \text{B} (2s^2 2p^1, ^2P)$	508
	$\rightarrow \text{Rh} (5s^0 4d^9, ^2D) + \text{B} (2s^2 2p^1, ^2P)$	543
$\text{Rh}\equiv\text{BH}^+ (^1\Sigma^+)$	$\rightarrow \text{Rh}^+ (5s^0 4d^8, ^3F) + \text{BH} (^1\Sigma^+)$	402
	$\rightarrow \text{Rh}^+ (5s^0 4d^8, ^3F) + \text{BH} (^3\Pi)$	529

<sup>a</sup>The calculations were done at the CCSD(T)/B/aug-cc-pVQZ/Rh/aug-cc-pVQZ-pp level of theory.

reference states were used. The first entry in Table 1 for each species describes dissociation to the two products in their ground electronic states. Our computed value of 508 kJ/mol for RhB is in excellent agreement with a recent experimental measurement of 506.7 kJ/mol.<sup>30</sup> The second entry for each species in Table 1 describe dissociation to the products in their states that are ready to form the respective multiple bonds, i.e., Rh in its  $4d^9 (^2D)$  configuration for  $\text{Rh}\equiv\text{B}$  and BH in its  $\sigma_{sp}^1 \pi^1 (^3\Pi)$  configuration for  $\text{Rh}\equiv\text{BH}^+$ . The latter should be more relevant to the intrinsic bond strength. In either case, the  $\text{Rh}\equiv\text{B}$  quadruple bond is significantly stronger than the  $\text{Rh}\equiv\text{BH}^+$  triple bond. Therefore, unlike the putative quadruple bond in  $\text{C}_2$ , which has a longer bond distance and smaller stretching frequency than those in the  $\text{C}\equiv\text{C}$  triple bond in  $\text{HC}\equiv\text{CH}$ ,<sup>12</sup> the  $\text{Rh}\equiv\text{B}$  quadruple bond is found to be significantly stronger than the  $\text{Rh}\equiv\text{B}$  triple bond in terms of a shorter bond length, higher vibrational frequency, and a larger bond energy. We also performed an energy decomposition analysis for RhB to understand the contributions of different orbitals to the bonding. The results shown in Table S4 reveal similar bonding contributions from the  $\sigma$  and  $\pi$  orbitals. Hence, we have both experimental and theoretical evidence for the existence of a  $\text{Rh}\equiv\text{B}$  quadruple bond in both the diatomic RhB and the  $\text{RhB}(\text{BO}^-)$  complex.

## ■ ASSOCIATED CONTENT

### Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge at <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acs.jpcllett.9b03484>.

Detailed descriptions of the experimental and theoretical methods; experimental VDEs and their assignments by comparison with theoretical data; calculated Rh–B bond lengths at different levels of theory; energy decomposition analysis for RhB; structure and bonding of the linear  $\text{RhB}-\text{BO}^-$  isomer; MO analyses for RhB and  $\text{RhB}(\text{BO}^-)$ ; comparison between experimental and theoretical data for the two isomers of  $\text{RhB}_2\text{O}^-$ ; Franck–Condon simulation for  $\text{RhB}(\text{BO}^-)$ ; AdNDP bonding analyses for the two isomers of  $\text{RhB}_2\text{O}^-$ ; and structure and bonding of  $\text{Rh}-\text{BH}^+$  (PDF)

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## Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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