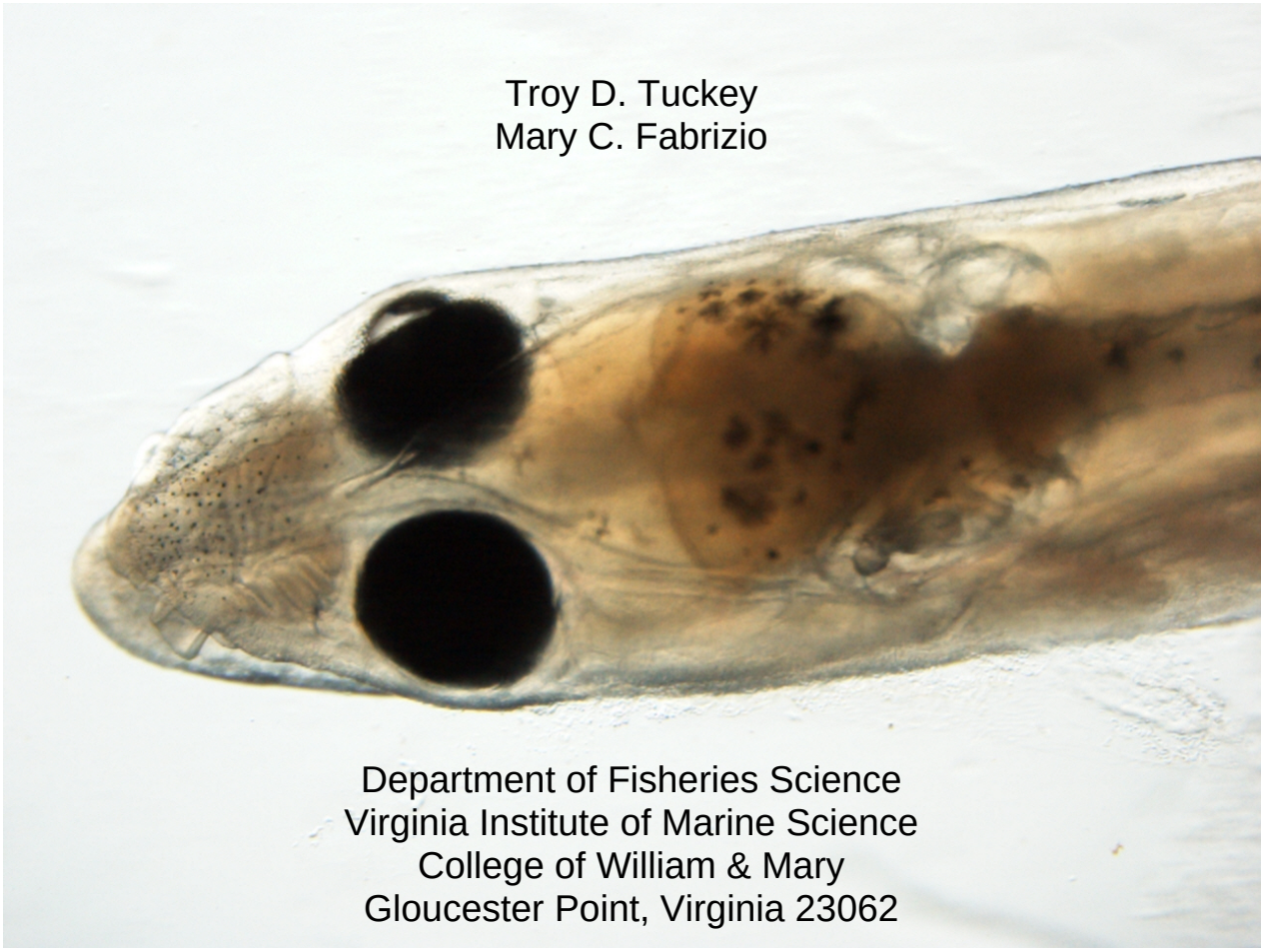
Estimating Relative Abundance of Young-of-Year American Eel, *Anguilla rostrata,* in the Virginia Tributaries of Chesapeake Bay (Spring 2012)

Final Report for Project No. RF/CF 12-01



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Acknowledgments

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Introduction

American Eel (*Anguilla rostrata*) is a valuable commercial species along the Atlantic coast of North America from New Brunswick to Florida. In the U.S., harvests have declined, with similar patterns occurring in the Canadian Maritime Provinces (Meister and Flagg 1997). Annual landings from Chesapeake Bay represent an average of 61% of the U.S. commercial harvest since 1993 (Personal communication from the National Marine Fisheries Service, Fisheries Statistics Division, 19 February 2013). In 2011, Virginia commercial landings were approximately 108,000 lbs; since mandatory reporting began in 1993, average annual landings in Virginia have been 202,000 lbs or 20% of the U.S. American Eel harvest (Personal communication from the National Marine Fisheries Service, Fisheries Statistics Division, 19 February 2013).

A decline in abundance of American Eel has been observed in recent years with conflicting evidence regarding spatial synchrony throughout their range (Richkus and Whalen 1999; Sullivan et al. 2006). Limited knowledge about fundamental biological characteristics of glass eels has complicated interpretation of juvenile abundance trends (Sullivan et al. 2006). Hypotheses for the decline in abundance include shifts in location of the Gulf Stream, pollution, overfishing, parasites, altered oceanic conditions, and barriers to fish passage (Castonguay et al. 1994; Haro et al. 2000; Knights 2003). Additionally, factors such as unfavorable wind-driven currents may affect glass eel recruitment on the continental shelf and may have a greater impact than fishing mortality or continental climate change (Knights 2003).

The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) adopted the Interstate Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for the American Eel in November 1999. The FMP focuses on increasing coastal states' efforts to collect American Eel data through both fishery-dependent and fishery-independent studies. Consequently, member jurisdictions agreed to implement an annual survey for young-of-year (YOY) American Eels. The survey is intended to "…characterize trends in annual recruitment of the YOY eels over time [to produce a] qualitative appraisal of the annual recruitment of American Eel to the U.S. Atlantic Coast" (ASMFC 2000). The development of these

surveys began in 2000 with full implementation by 2001. Survey results provide necessary data on coastal recruitment success and further understanding of American Eel population dynamics. A recent American Eel benchmark stock assessment report found that the American Eel stock status is depleted and emphasized the importance of the coast-wide survey as an index of sustained recruitment over the historical coastal range and an early warning of potential range contraction of the species (ASMFC 2012). In 2012, the Virginia Institute of Marine Science continued its spring sampling to estimate relative abundance of YOY American Eels in Virginia tributaries of Chesapeake Bay.

Life History

The American Eel is a catadromous species that occurs along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts of North America and inland in the St. Lawrence Seaway and Great Lakes (Murdy et al. 1997). The species is panmictic and supported throughout its range by a single spawning population (Haro et al. 2000; Meister and Flagg 1997). Spawning takes place during winter to early spring in the Sargasso Sea. Eggs hatch into leaf-shaped transparent ribbon-like larvae called leptocephali, which are transported by ocean currents (over 9-12 months) in a generally northwesterly direction and can grow to 85 mm TL (Jenkins and Burkhead 1993). Within a year, metamorphosis into the next life stage (glass eel) occurs in the Western Atlantic near the east coast of North America. A reduction in length to about 50 mm TL occurs prior to reaching the continental shelf (Jenkins and Burkhead 1993). Coastal currents and active migration transport the glass eels (= YOY) into Maryland and Virginia estuaries from February to June (Able and Fahay 1998), though glass eels have been captured as early as December (VIMS, unpublished data). As growth continues, the glass eel becomes pigmented (elver stage) and within 12 to 14 months acquires a dark color with an underlying yellow hue (yellow eel stage). Many eels migrate upriver into freshwater rivers, streams, lakes, and ponds, while others remain in estuaries. Most of the eel's life is spent in these habitats as a yellow eel. Metamorphosis into the silver eel stage occurs during the seaward migration

that takes place from late summer through autumn. Age at maturity varies greatly with location and latitude and in Chesapeake Bay may range from 2 to 18 years, but most eels reach maturity between age 2 and 6 (Owens and Geer 2003). American Eels from Chesapeake Bay mature and migrate at an earlier age than eels from northern areas (Hedgepeth 1983). Upon maturity, eels migrate back to the Sargasso Sea to spawn and die (Haro et al. 2000).

It has been suggested that glass eel migration has a fortnightly periodicity related to tidal currents and stratification of the water column (Ciccotti et al. 1995). Additionally, alterations in freshwater flow (timing and magnitude) to bays and estuaries may affect the size, timing, and spatial patterns of upstream migration of glass eels and elvers (Facey and Van Den Avyle 1987). YOY eel may use freshwater "signals" to enhance recruitment to local estuaries, thereby influencing year-class strength (Sullivan et al. 2006).

Objectives

1. Monitor the glass eel migration, or run, into the Virginia Chesapeake Bay tributaries to determine the spatial and temporal components of recruitment.
2. Examine environmental factors, which may influence young-of-year eel recruitment.
3. Collect basic biological information on recruiting eels, including length, weight, and pigment stage.

Methods

Field Methods

Minimum criteria for YOY American Eel sampling were established in the ASMFC American Eel FMP, with the Technical Committee approving sampling gear and methods. The timing and placement of gear must coincide with periods of peak YOY shoreward migration. At a minimum, the gear must fish during flood tides during nighttime hours. The sampling season is designated as a minimum of four days per

week for at least six weeks or for the duration of the run. At least one site must be sampled in each jurisdiction. The entire catch of YOY eels must be counted from each sampling event and a minimum of 60 glass eels (if present per jurisdiction) must be examined for length, weight, and pigmentation stage weekly.

Due to the importance of the eel fishery in Virginia, the methods used must ensure proper temporal and spatial sampling coverage, and provide reliable recruitment estimates. To provide the necessary spatial coverage and to assess suitable locations, numerous sites were evaluated previously (Geer 2001). Final site selection was based on known areas of glass eel concentrations, accessibility, and specific physical criteria (e.g., proper habitat) suitable for glass eel recruitment to the sampling gear. Four sites were selected: two on the York River and one each on the Rappahannock and James rivers. The James River site (Wareham's Pond) is located in the Kingsmill area of James City County. Wareham's Pond drains directly into the James River, which is about 100 m away, though high tides may reach the end of the spillway (Figure 1). The two sites on the York River are Bracken's Pond and Wormley Pond (Figure 1). Bracken's Pond is located along the Colonial Parkway at the base of the Yorktown Naval Weapons Station Pier and is less than 100 m from the York River; the tide often reaches the spillway. This site was chosen as a primary site in 2000 with gear comparisons performed throughout the sampling season. Wormley Pond, located on the Yorktown Battlefield, drains into Wormley Creek, which has a tidal range that routinely reaches 50 cm depth at the spillway. This site was not sampled in spring 2000. The final collection site is Kamp's Millpond, which drains into the eastern branch of the Corrotoman River, a tributary to the Rappahannock River (Figure 1). Kamp's Millpond covers approximately 80 acres and is located upstream of Route 790, north of Kilmarnock.

Irish eel ramps were used to collect eels at all sites. The ramp configuration successfully attracts and captures small eels in tidal waters of Chesapeake Bay. Ramp operation requires a continuous flow of water over the climbing substrate and the collection device; continuous flow was accomplished through a gravity feed. Hoses were attached to the ramp and collection buckets to allow for quick removal of eels for

sampling. Enkamat™ erosion control material on the ramp floor provided a textured climbing surface. The ramps were placed on an incline (15 - 45°) with the ramp entrance and textured mat extending into the water. The ramp entrance was placed in shallow water (< 25 cm) to prevent submersion of the entire ramp. The inclined ramp and an additional 4° incline of the substrate inside the ramp provided sufficient slope to create attractant flow. A hinged lid provided access for cleaning and flow adjustments.

Only eels in the ramp's collection bucket (not on the climbing surface) were recorded. Trap performance was rated on a scale of 0 to 3 (0 = new set; 1 = gear fishing; 2 = gear fishing, but not efficiently; 3 = gear not fishing). Water temperature, air temperature, and precipitation were recorded during most site visits. All eels were enumerated and placed above the impediment, with any subsample information recorded, if applicable. Specimens less than or equal to ~ 85 mm total length (TL) were classified as YOY, while those > 85 mm TL were considered elvers. These lengths correspond to the two distinct length-frequency modes observed in the 2000 survey, which likely reflects differing year classes (Geer 2001; note: eels longer than 254 mm TL are considered yellow phase eels, although this is not explicitly stated in Geer 2001). Length, weight, and pigmentation stage (see Haro and Krueger 1988) were recorded from 60 eels weekly. Indices of abundance were calculated using the area-under-the-curve approach (Olney and Hoenig 2001).

Results

Recruitment of glass eels was average or above average at all monitoring sites in 2012 (Figures 2 and 3). Collections of young-of-year American Eel began on 4 February 2012 at Wormley Pond and Brackens Pond on the York River, and on 8 February 2012 at Wareham's Pond on the James River. The trap at Kamp's Millpond on the Rappahannock River was deployed on 23 March 2012. Traps were removed on 11 May 2012 at the York and James River sites, and the Rappahannock River trap was removed on 7 June 2012. A total of 3,933 glass eels was collected at Wareham's Pond on the James River, 62,741 glass eels were collected at Brackens Pond and 65,312 at

Wormley Pond on the York River, and a record 67,045 glass eels were collected at Kamp's Millpond on the Rappahannock River in 2012 (Table 1).

Water temperature increased throughout the study period in 2012 and we observed glass eels as soon as traps were set in early February at Wormley, Brackens, and in Wareham's Ponds and early- March at Kamp's Millpond (Figure 9). Glass eels likely arrived earlier at Kamp's Millpond as we collected a record 27,869 glass eels in the first sampling event at this site. Peak catches of glass eels occurred between 22 February and 27 February at Wormley and Bracken's Ponds. Similar to years past, catches of elver eels occurred throughout the monitoring period (Figure 10). Peak counts of glass eels tend to occur first in the York River, followed by the James, Rappahannock, and Potomac rivers (Figure 11).

On 14 March 2012 we observed that one of our traps was missing and reported the incident to the Colonial National Park Service. The intake hose had been cut and the trap and bucket assembly had been removed. A replacement trap was reset on 15 March 2012; we did not observe additional tampering events in 2012.

Elver indices were above average at all sites except for Wormley Pond, with near record highs observed at Bracken's Pond (Table 2; Figures 4 and 5). Catch rates of elvers from Wormley Pond continue to be below average for the fifth year in a row (Figure 4). Numbers of elvers collected at the James River site remain stable, but an increasing trend has been observed in the Rappahannock River since 2009 (Figure 5).

A total of 382 glass American Eels from Wormley Pond was returned to the lab for weight, length, and pigment stage determination. Total length (TL) of these glass eels ranged from 48.7 to 64.0 mm, with a mean length of 56.6 mm (2.96 standard deviation, SD). Weights of individual glass eels ranged from 0.056 to 0.239 g and averaged 0.136 g (0.030 SD; Figure 6). Mean TL of glass eels recruiting to Wormley Pond and Bracken's Pond on the York River has remained consistent since 2001 (Figure 7). Glass eel pigmentation stages typically increased monthly between February and March, however in April there was an increase in the number of stage 2 glass eels (Figure 8).

Conclusions

Glass American Eel indices observed at all Virginia sites showed average or above average recruitment in 2012. Although recruitment of glass eels at any one site can vary from year to year, increases in recruitment at all sites is a positive sign of a potentially strong year class; furthermore 2012 was the second consecutive year with an average or above average index. Whether high recruitment of glass eels translates into increases in juvenile eel production and subsequent increases in spawning stock biomass remains unknown.

The timing of recruitment of glass eels to monitoring sites in Virginia supports the hypothesis of a single recruitment pulse of glass eels entering and dispersing throughout Chesapeake Bay. Earliest recruitment of glass eels is observed at Wormley Pond on the York River (55.7 km from the mouth of the Bay), followed by Bracken's Pond (59.4 km), Wareham's Pond on the James River (77.8 km), and finally Kamp's Millpond on the Rappahannock River (101 km). Additionally, glass eels arrive at two sites located on the Virginia side of the Potomac River (> 101 km from the mouth of the Bay) much later than locations nearer the mouth. It is interesting to note that relative abundance indices at sites closer to the mouth of Chesapeake Bay tend to show greater variation than those further from the mouth of the Bay (Potomac River sites; Tuckey and Fabrizio 2012).

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Table 1. Total number of glass American Eels captured and the index of abundance using Area Under the Curve method (AUC).

Site	Year	Total Caught	AUC index
Wormley Pond	2001	82,267	83,492.52
	2002	31,518	32,638.74
	2003	14,385	13,725.63
	2004	78,258	79,293.45
	2005	56,259	55,660.70
	2006	61,211	59,854.95
	2007	90,988	90,705.01
	2008	9,012	9,220.64
	2009	8,367	8,404.22
	2010	139,391	149,154.20
	2011	66,953	62,410.25
	2012	65,312	65,271.71
Bracken's Pond	2000	61,228	62,884.68
	2001	52,838	54,113.09
	2002	7,413	7,590.79
	2003	77,592	75,405.36
	2004	29,914	30,281.74
	2005	65,983	65,885.25
	2006	45,738	47,093.62
	2007	46,758	46,266.78
	2008	1,165	1,150.34
	2009	69	67.53
	2010	23,044	30,087.78
	2011	69,660	62,697.45
	2012	62,738	85,747.30
Wareham's Pond	2003	2,230	2,350.62
	2004	158	165.29
	2005	225	224.05
	2006	3,280	3,266.29
	2007	953	959.29
	2008	2,456	2,417.16
	2009	5,322	5,192.30
	2010	672	648.46
	2011	12,871	14,318.00
	2012	3,933	4,042.09
Kamp's Millpond	2000	139	129.91
	2001	3,956	4,030.22
	2002	11,217	11,064.48
	2003	2,387	2,377.49
	2004	524	516.16
	2005	2,084	2,144.97
	2006	302	298.58
	2007	313	311.48
	2008	481	478.99
	2009	179	179.03
	2010	4,734	4,461.99
	2011	1,860	1,980.40
	2012	67,045	43,654.26

Table 2. Total number of elver American Eels captured and the index of abundance using Area Under the Curve method (AUC).

Site	Year	Total Caught	AUC index
Wormley Pond	2001	171	171.39
	2002	315	314.56
	2003	138	140.51
	2004	257	264.70
	2005	105	108.61
	2006	160	158.44
	2007	619	612.77
	2008	139	139.97
	2009	31	32.01
	2010	80	71.92
	2011	79	104.85
	2012	79	69.85
Bracken's Pond	2000	528	535.38
	2001	334	341.14
	2002	52	52.22
	2003	411	416.74
	2004	171	179.96
	2005	231	229.92
	2006	166	172.72
	2007	723	717.81
	2008	262	260.92
	2009	3	3.02
	2010	190	219.88
	2011	525	644.22
	2012	462	542.80
Wareham's Pond	2003	84	84.72
	2004	260	256.44
	2005	148	148.61
	2006	469	471.24
	2007	682	676.74
	2008	511	512.75
	2009	275	275.74
	2010	306	323.43
	2011	463	523.00
	2012	496	515.97
Kamp's Millpond	2000	5	4.89
	2001	222	225.36
	2002	224	222.92
	2003	1,968	1,972.62
	2004	250	246.06
	2005	196	198.55
	2006	312	310.03
	2007	32	31.66
	2008	37	45.09
	2009	33	34.49
	2010	132	125.89
	2011	104	213.72
	2012	891	730.70

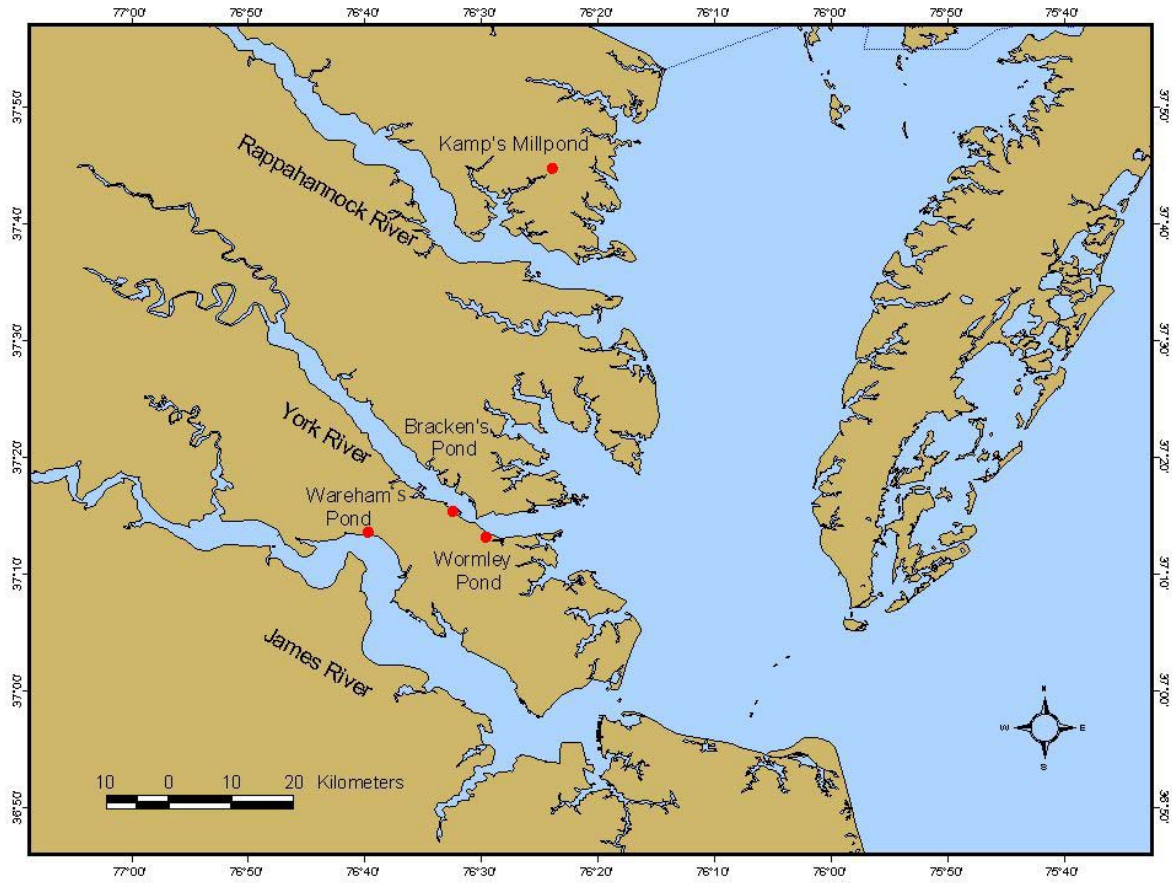


Figure 1. American Eel sampling sites on the Rappahannock (Kamp's Millpond), York (Wormley Pond and Bracken's Pond), and James (Wareham's Pond) rivers, Virginia, 2012.

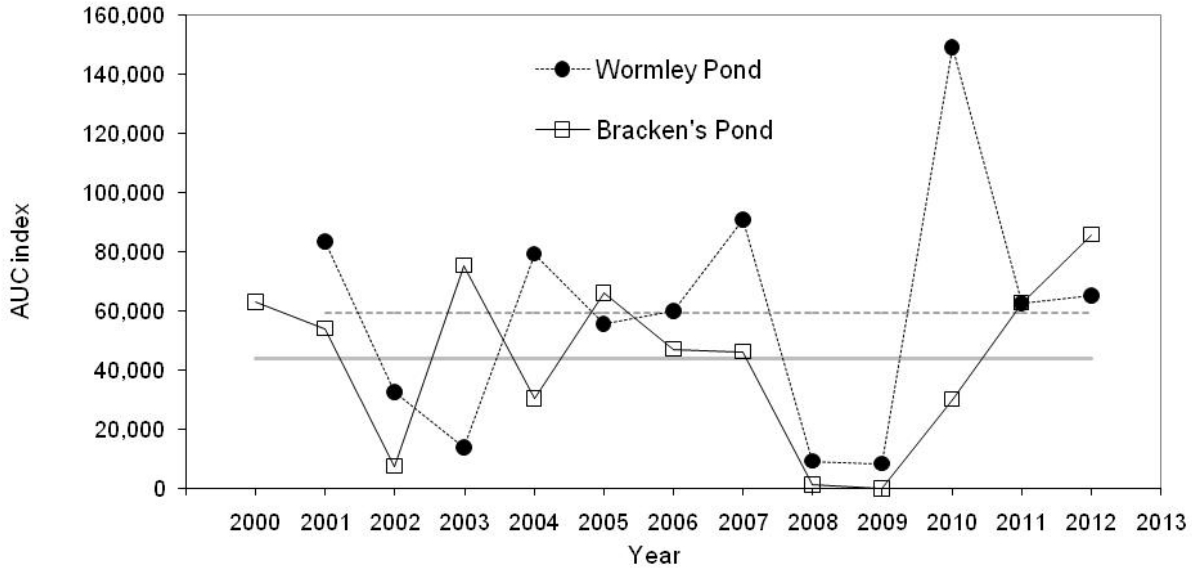


Figure 2. Abundance indices and time series average calculated by the area-under-the-curve method for glass American Eels from Wormley Pond and Bracken's Pond (York River system). Time series averages are shown as solid (Bracken's Pond) and dotted (Wormley Pond) lines.

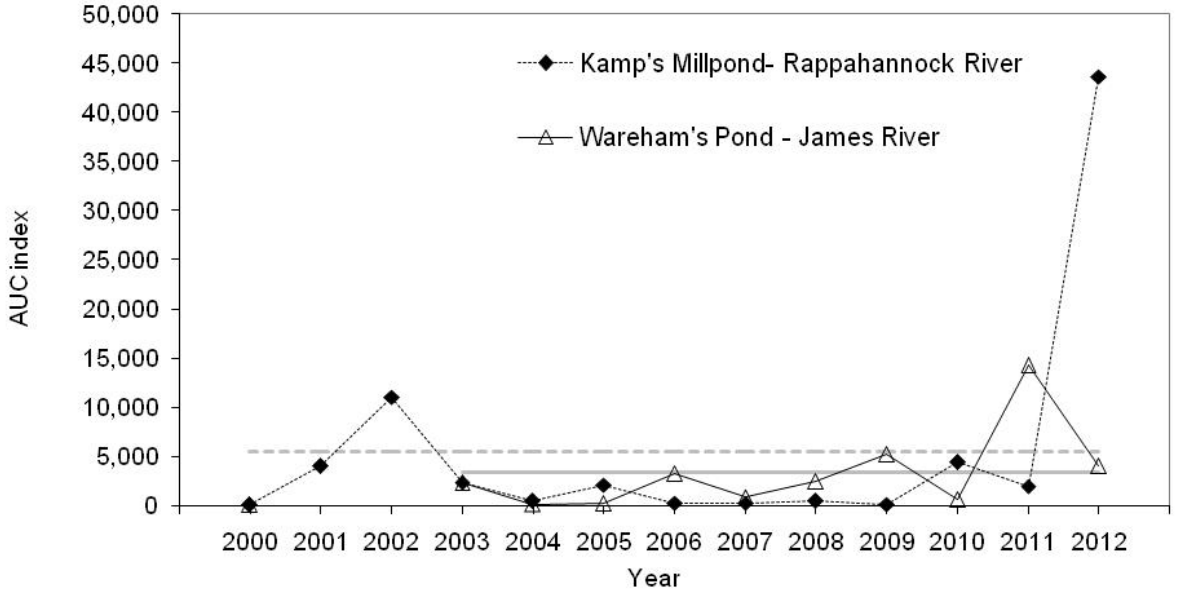


Figure 3. Abundance indices and time series average calculated by the area-under-the-curve method for glass American Eels from Wareham's Pond (James River system) and Kamp's Millpond (Rappahannock River system). Time series averages are shown as solid (Wareham's Pond) and dotted (Kamp's Millpond) lines.

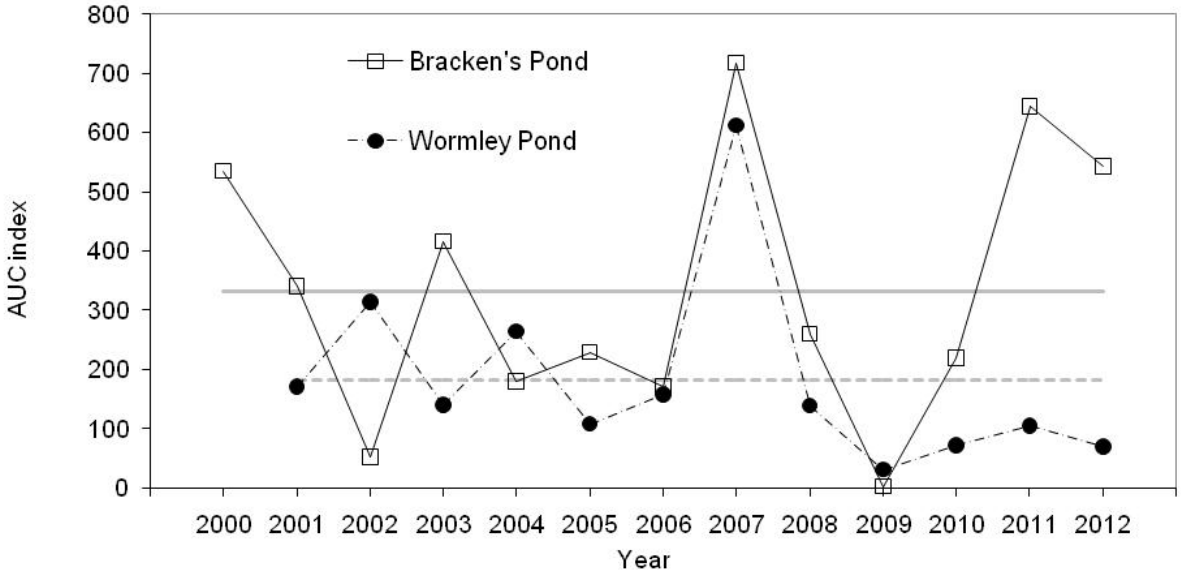


Figure 4. Abundance indices and time series average calculated by the area-under-the-curve method for elver American Eels from Wormley Pond and Bracken's Pond (York River System). Time series averages are shown as solid (Bracken's Pond) and dotted (Wormley Pond) lines.

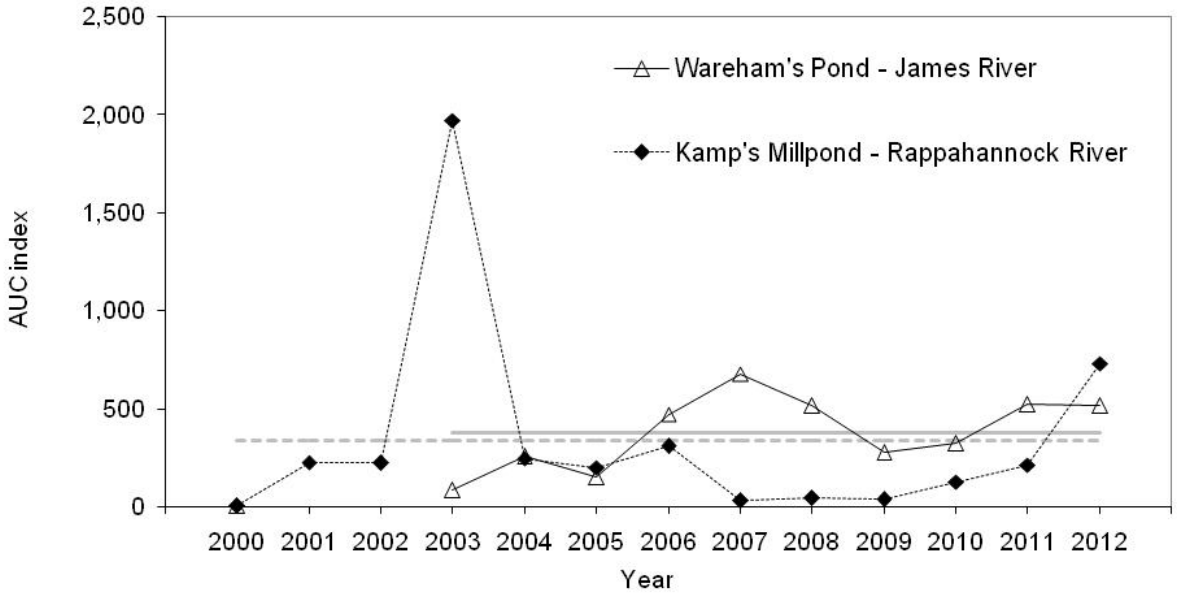


Figure 5. Abundance indices and time series average calculated by the area-under-the-curve method for elver American Eels from Wareham's Pond (James River system) and Kamp's Millpond (Rappahannock River system). Time series averages are shown as solid (Wareham's Pond) and dotted (Kamp's Millpond) lines.

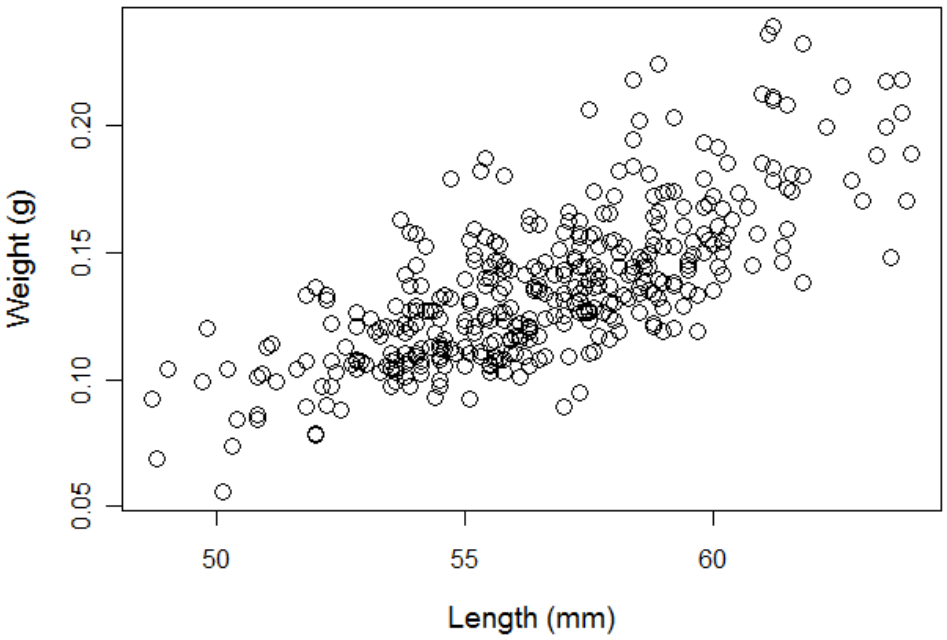


Figure 6. Length-weight relationship for glass American Eels from the York River, 2012. Average TL = 56.6 mm, average weight = 0.136 g, N = 382 eels.

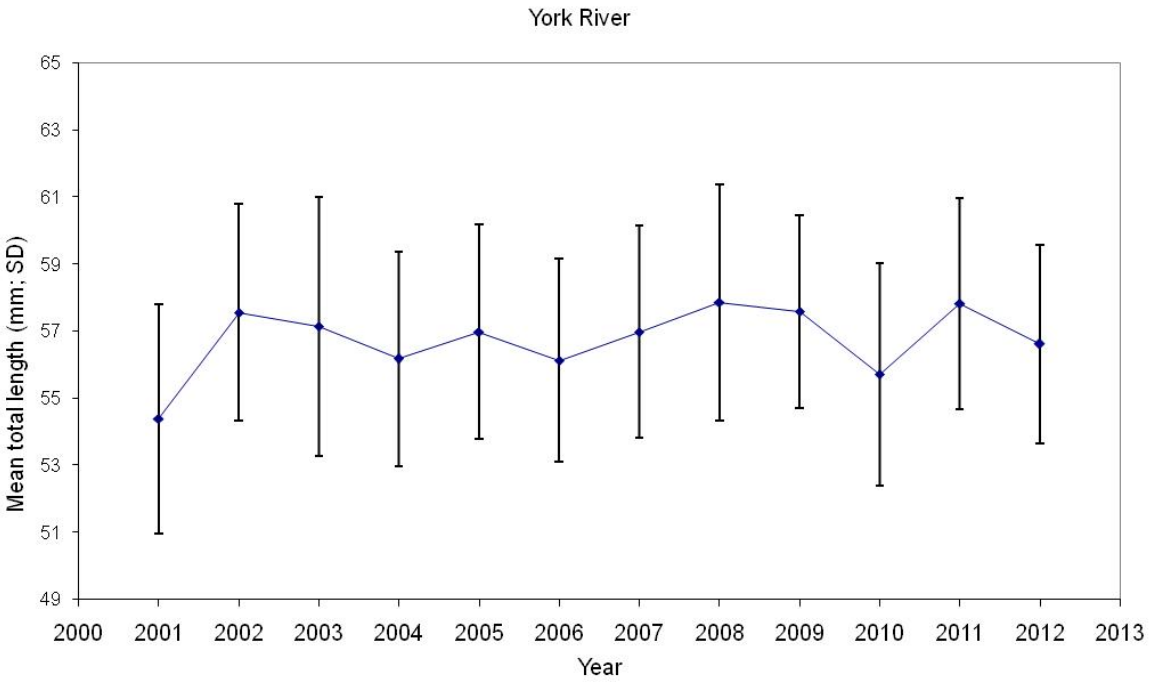


Figure 7. Mean total length (mm; SD) of glass American Eels collected with Irish Eel ramps from 2001 to 2012 from two sites combined (Wormley and Bracken's Ponds) on the York River, Virginia.

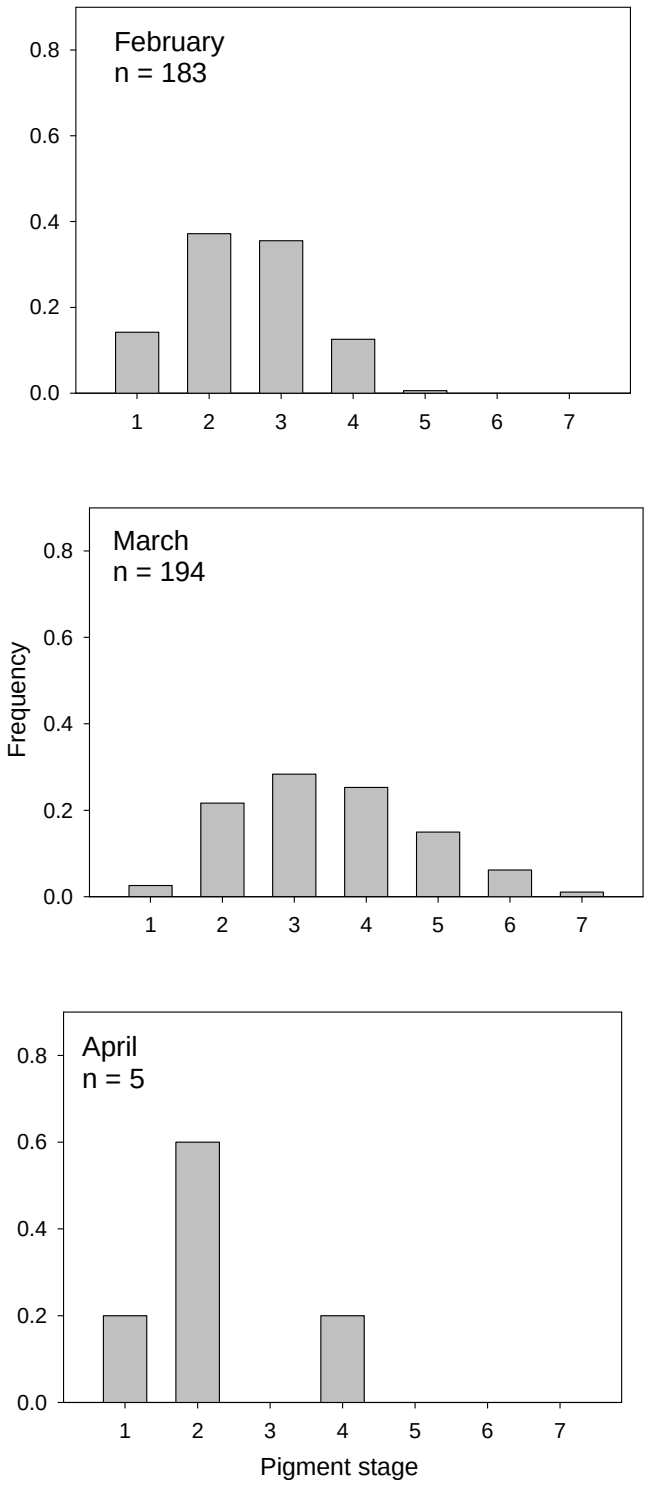


Figure 8. Frequency of glass American Eel pigment stages by month for the York River system, 2012.

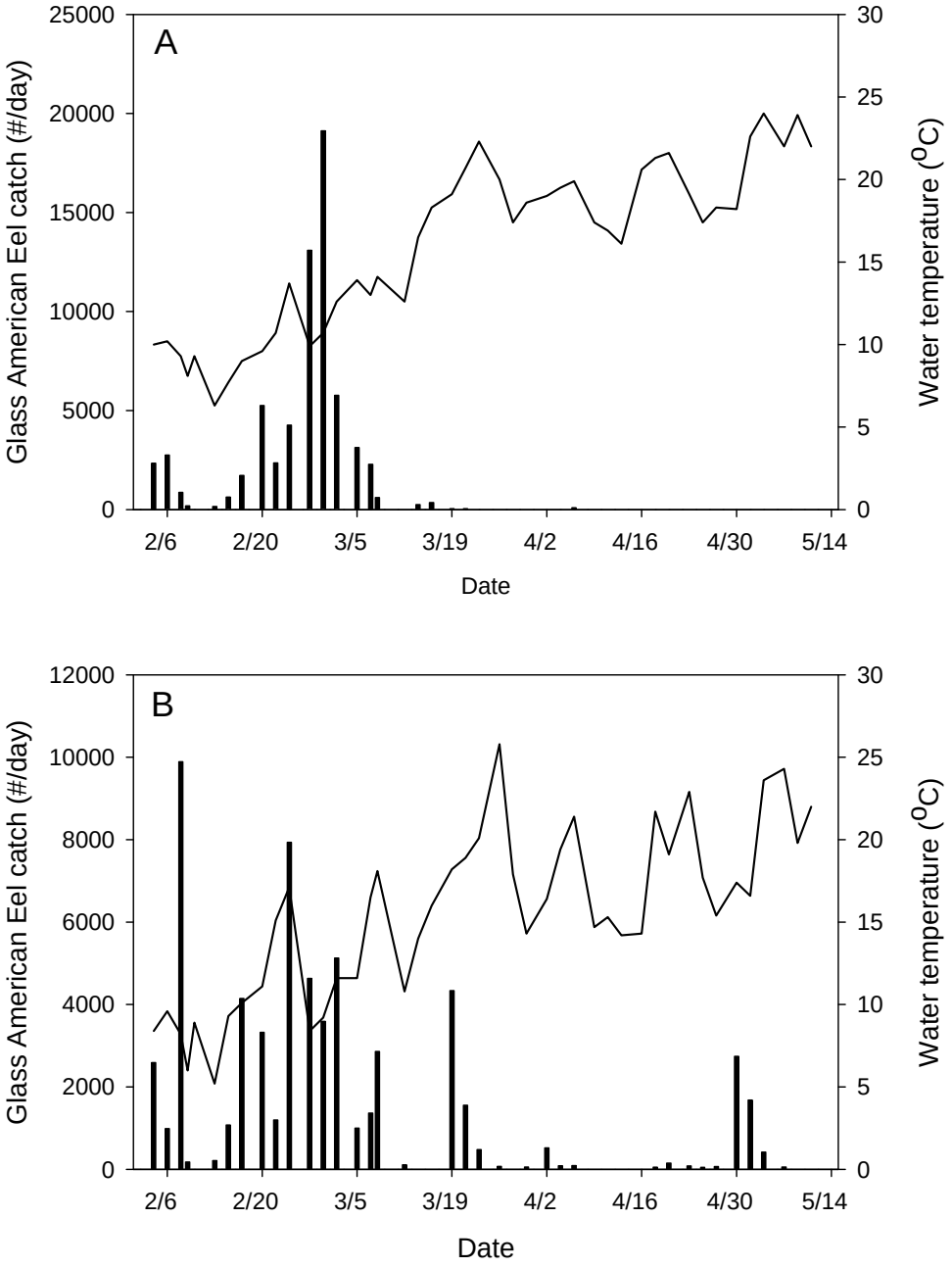
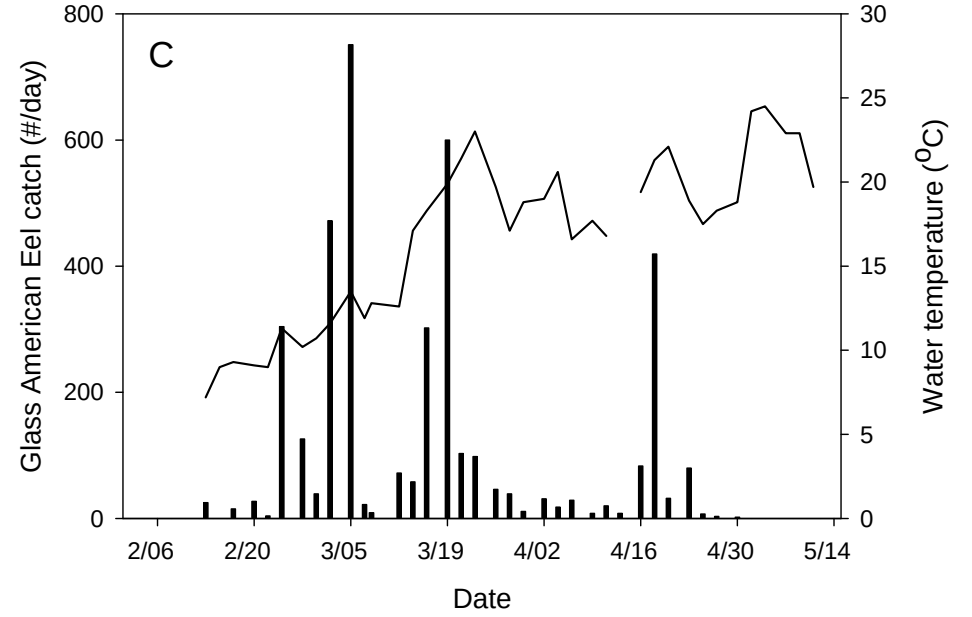


Figure 9. Glass American Eel catches (bars) and water temperature (line) in 2012 from (A) Wormley Pond, and (B) Bracken's Pond. Note axis scales are not uniform.



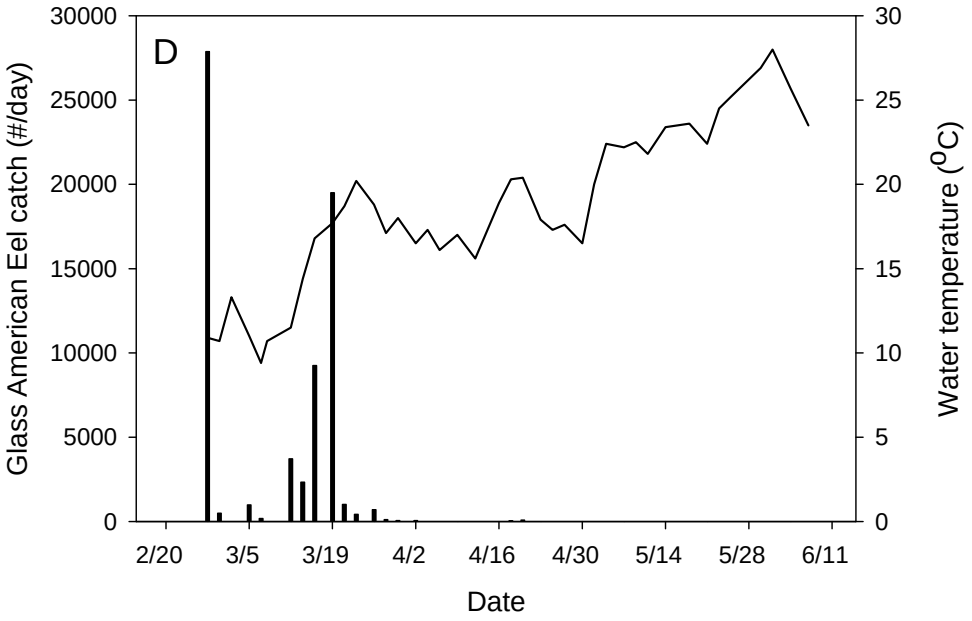
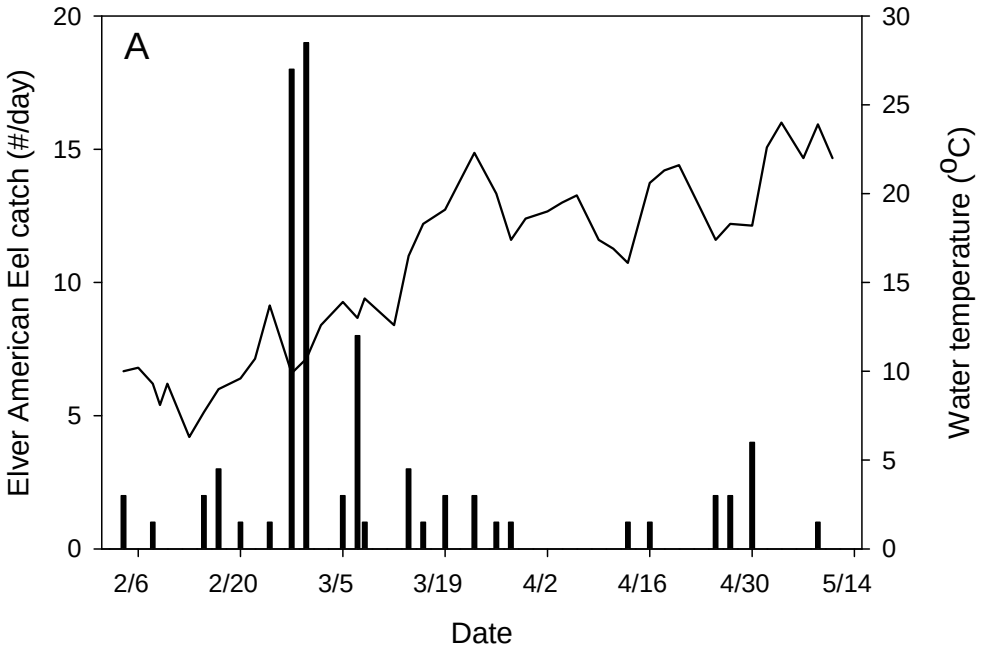


Figure 9 continued. Glass American Eel catches (bars) and water temperature (line) in 2012 from (C) Wareham's Pond, and (D) Kamp's Millpond. Note axis scales are not uniform.



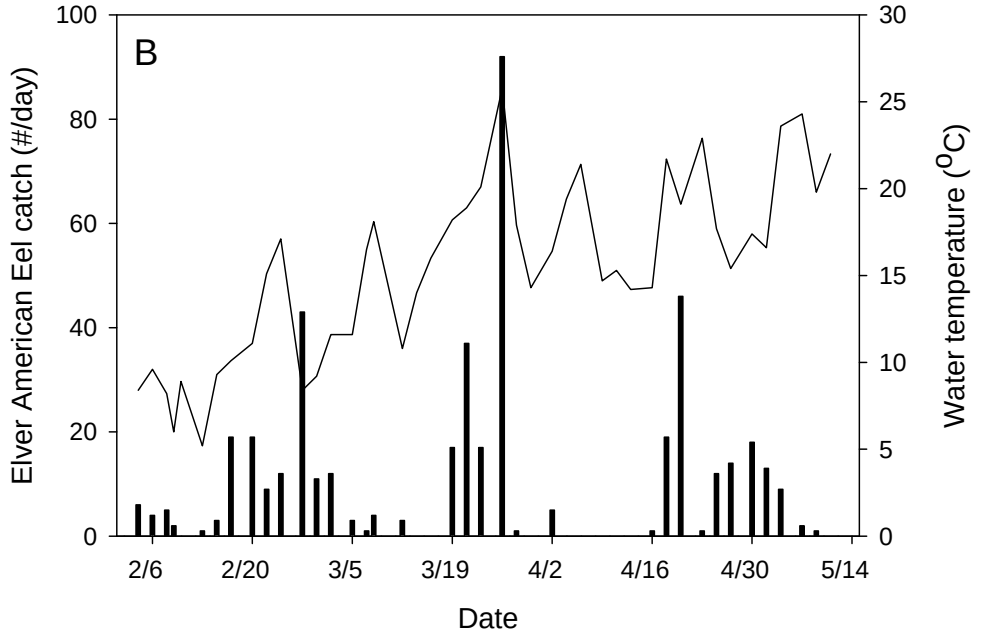
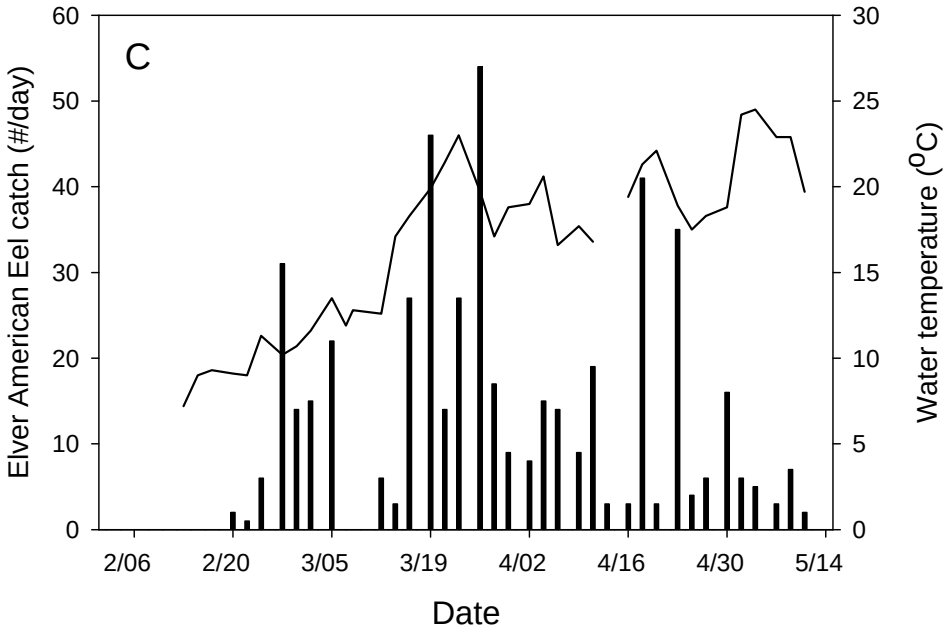


Figure 10. Elver American Eel catches (bars) and water temperature (line) in 2012 from (A) Wormley pond, and (B) Bracken's Pond. Note axis scales are not uniform.



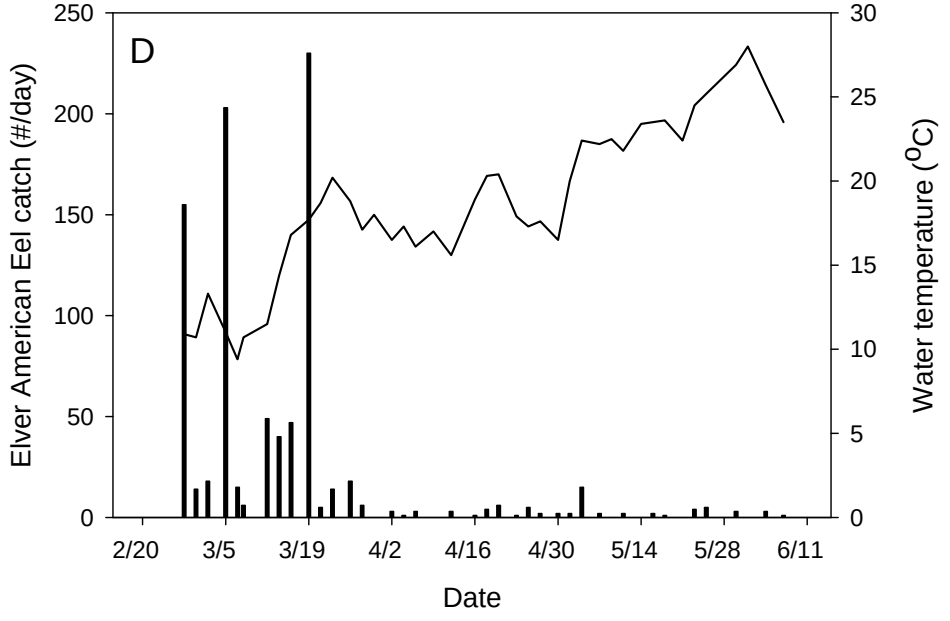


Figure 10 continued. Elver catches (bars) and water temperature (line) in 2012 from (C) Wareham's Pond, and (D) Kamp's Millpond. Note axis scales are not uniform.

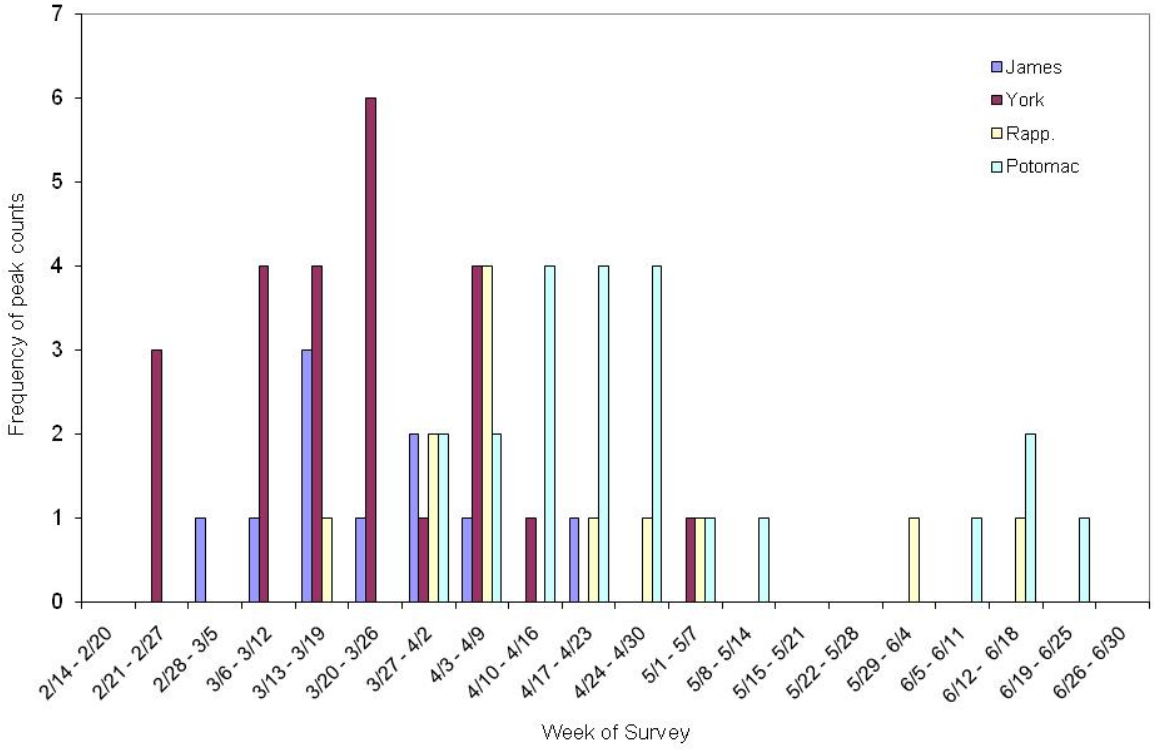


Figure 11. Survey week during which peak counts of glass eels were observed for each river from 2001 to 2012. Two sites are monitored on the York and Potomac rivers each year (n = 24 observations per river). On the James River, one site was monitored beginning in 2003 (n = 10 observations). On the Rappahannock River, one site was monitored each year (n = 12 observations). Potomac River data are from Tuckey and Fabrizio (2012).