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Estimating Relative Abundance of Young-of-Year American Eel, Anguilla rostrata, in the Virginia Tributaries of Chesapeake Bay (Spring 2023)

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Final Report for Project No. RF/CF 23-01

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Commercial Fishing Advisory Board.

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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. American Eel is also important to the recreational fishery as it is often used live as bait for Striped Bass (*Morone saxatilis*) and Cobia (*Rachycentron canadum*). In 2021, 87% of the U.S coastwide commercial landings came from Maryland, the Potomac River, and Virginia (personal communication from the National Marine Fisheries Service, Fisheries Statistics Division). Since the 1980s, harvest along the U.S. Atlantic Coast has declined, with similar patterns occurring in the Canadian Maritime Provinces (Meister and Flagg 1997). The American Eel Benchmark Stock Assessment report (ASMFC 2012) established that the American Eel is depleted in U.S. waters; the 2023 American Eel Benchmark Stock Assessment (ASMFC 2023) confirmed that this stock remains depleted and abundance is lower than what was reported in the 2017 stock assessment update (ASMFC 2017).

The decline in abundance of American Eel has been observed throughout its range, with conflicting evidence regarding spatial synchrony (Richkus and Whalen 1999; 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). However, limited knowledge about fundamental biological characteristics of glass eels has complicated interpretation of juvenile abundance trends (Sullivan et al. 2006).

The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) adopted the Interstate Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for the American Eel in November 1999. The FMP calls for efforts to collect American Eel data through both fishery-dependent and fishery-independent studies in coastal states. Consequently, member jurisdictions agreed to implement an annual survey for young-of-year (YOY or glass) 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 annual surveys began in 2000 with full implementation in 2001. Survey

results provide necessary data on coastal recruitment success and contribute to the understanding of American Eel population dynamics. The 2017 American Eel Stock Assessment Update emphasized the continued importance of the coast-wide survey as an index of recruitment over the historical coastal range in the U.S. and an early warning of potential range contraction of the species (ASMFC 2017). The 2023 American Eel Benchmark Assessment (ASMFC 2023) recommends continuation of glass eel surveys, but eliminates the need to measure length, weight, and pigment stage for glass eels as no discernable patterns were detected in these statistics after 20 years of sampling.

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 and 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 glass eels (also designated as young-of-the-year, or YOY stages) into Maryland and Virginia estuaries from February to June (Able and Fahay 1998), though glass eels have been captured in the York River estuary 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).

Glass eel migration into estuarine habitats exhibits a fortnightly periodicity related to tidal currents and stratification of the water column (Ciccotti et al. 1995). 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 eels may use freshwater "signals" to enhance recruitment to local estuaries (Sullivan et al. 2006), or may respond to conspecific cues (Schmucker et al. 2016).

Objectives

The objectives of this study were to:

1. Monitor the glass eel migration, or run, into Chesapeake Bay tributaries in Virginia and describe 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. These measurements were performed prior to the recommendation to eliminate such measurements from survey data collection protocols (ASMFC 2023).

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 coincides 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. In Virginia, the sampling season is typically 12 weeks or more. 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 to monitor glass eel recruitment must ensure proper temporal and spatial 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. One site was selected on each river. The James River site (Wareham's Pond) is in the Kingsmill area of James City County, VA. Wareham's Pond drains directly into the James River, which is about 100 m away, though high tides may affect water levels at the end of the spillway (Figure 1). The site on the York River (Wormley Pond; Figure 1) is on the Yorktown Battlefield and drains into Wormley Creek, which has a tidal range that routinely reaches 50 cm depth at the spillway. 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, VA.

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 continuous flow of water over the climbing substrate and the collection device; continuous flow was accomplished through a gravity feed. A hose attached the ramp to a collection bucket to allow for quick removal of eels for sampling. Enkamat™ erosion control material on the ramp floor provided a textured climbing surface. The ramp was placed on an incline (15 - 45°) with its 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 on the ramp 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 85 mm total length (TL) and smaller were classified as YOY, while those > 85 mm TL were considered elvers. These lengths correspond to the threshold between two distinct length-frequency modes observed in the 2000 survey, which likely reflects different year classes (Geer 2001; note: eels larger than 254 mm TL are not considered elvers, 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 for each site were calculated using the area-under-the-curve approach (Olney and Hoenig 2001).

Results

Collections of young-of-year American Eel began on 7 February 2023 at Wormley Pond, in the York River estuary, on 17 February 2023 at Wareham's Pond in the James River estuary, and on 24 February 2023 at Kamp's Millpond in the Rappahannock River estuary. Traps were removed on 17 May from Wormley Pond (99 days of sampling) and Wareham's Pond (89 days of sampling), and 23 June 2023 from Kamp's Millpond on the Rappahannock River (119 days of sampling). In all, we collected 47,313 glass eels at Wormley Pond (York River system), 1,711 glass eels at Wareham's Pond (James River system), and 8,700 glass eels at Kamp's Millpond (Rappahannock River system; Table 1). In 2023, the glass eel index was average for the time series at Wormley Pond (Figure 2), below average at Wareham's Pond (Figure 3), and above average at Kamp's Millpond (Figure 3).

Most glass eels recruited to Wormley Pond in mid- to late-February with the run completely finished by the end of April (Figure 4A). Most glass eels recruited to Wareham's Pond between late February and early March and the run extended into May (Figure 4B). In the Rappahannock River at Kamp's Millpond, glass eel recruitment occurred primarily in April with a few arriving in March and continuing into June (Figure 4C). As observed in previous years, peak counts of glass eels typically occur first in the York River estuary, followed by the James, Rappahannock, and Potomac river estuaries (Figure 5). In 2023, peak arrival of glass eels occurred during the weeks of 2/24-2/20 in the York River and 2/21 – 2/27 in the James River;

the earliest peak arrival ever observed in the time series.

Elver indices were average at Wormley Pond, but above-average at Wareham's Pond and Kamp's Millpond in 2023 (Table 2; Figure 6). We observed the second highest count of elvers at Kamp's Millpond in 2023. The highest catches of elver eels occurred in late-March/early-April at Wormley Pond and during early May at Wareham's Pond (Figure 7A & B). The catch rate of elvers at Kamp's Millpond was highest in March (Figure 7C).

We examined 488 glass eels from Wormley Pond for weight, length, and pigment stage determination in 2023. Total length (TL) of these glass eels ranged from 45.8 to 69.6 mm, with a mean length of 55.8 mm (0.16 standard error, SE). Mean TL of glass eels recruiting to Wormley Pond on the York River has remained consistent since 2002 (Figure 8). Weight of individual glass eels ranged from 0.058 to 0.313 g and averaged 0.127 g (0.002 SE; Figure 9). Glass eel pigment stages in the York River were primarily stages 1, 2, and 3, consistent with previous years (Figure 10).

Conclusions

In 2023, recruitment of glass American Eels in Virginia sampling areas exhibited average abundance at Wormley Pond, below-average at Wareham's Pond and above-average at Kamp's Millpond. Indices of abundance for elver eels at Wormley Pond was average in 2023, whereas above-average abundance of elvers was observed at Wareham's Pond and Kamp's Millpond. Elver eels continue to be captured earlier than glass eels at all sites indicating their propensity to move among habitats in late winter – early spring.

Earliest arrival of glass eels is typically observed at Wormley Pond in the York River estuary (55.7 km from the mouth of the Bay), followed by Wareham's Pond in the James River estuary (77.8 km), and finally Kamp's Millpond in the Rappahannock River estuary (101 km). Additionally, glass eels arrive at two sites located on the Virginia side of the Potomac River estuary (> 101 km from the mouth of the Bay) much later than at locations near the mouth of Chesapeake Bay. We note that relative abundance indices at sites closer to the mouth of Chesapeake Bay tend to exhibit greater variation than the Potomac River sites, which are farther from the mouth of the Bay (Tuckey and Fabrizio 2023).

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Table 1. Total number of glass American Eels captured and the index of abundance using the Area Under the Curve method (AUC). 'NA' indicates that data are not available due to construction at this site in 2013. Sampling at Bracken's Pond ended in 2017 after a change to the site that affected recruitment.

Site	Year	Total Caught	AUC index	Site	Year	Total Caught	AUC index
Wormley Pond	2001	82,267	83,492.5				
	2002	31,518	32,638.7				
	2003	14,385	13,725.6	Wareham's Pond	2003	2,230	2,350.6
	2004	78,258	79,293.5		2004	158	165.3
	2005	56,259	55,660.7		2005	225	224.1
	2006	61,211	59,855.0		2006	3,280	3,266.3
	2007	90,988	90,705.0		2007	953	959.3
	2008	9,012	9,220.6		2008	2,456	2,417.2
	2009	8,367	8,404.2		2009	5,322	5,192.3
	2010	139,391	149,154.2		2010	672	648.5
	2011	66,953	62,410.3		2011	12,871	14,318.0
	2012	65,312	65,271.7		2012	3,933	4,042.1
	2013	42,415	42,362.2		2013	NA	NA
	2014	36,894	38,447.9		2014	1,979	1,969.8
	2015	40,071	46,619.6		2015	5,218	5,737.6
	2016	40,154	44,829.6		2016	915	936.2
	2017	25,176	25,141.2		2017	3,352	3,384.7
	2018	19,330	19,886.0		2018	2,959	2,907.1
	2019	63,537	63,710.5		2019	2,909	2,850.5
	2020	2,772	2,738.0		2020	3,080	3,032.0
	2021	90,849	90,715.2		2021	432	437.2
	2022	48,099	48,750.6		2022	5,332	5,426.6
	2023	47,313	47,313.5		2023	1,711	1,743.5
Bracken's Pond	2000	61,228	62,884.7	Kamp's Millpond	2000	139	129.9
	2001	52,838	54,113.1		2001	3,956	4,030.2
	2002	7,413	7,590.8		2002	11,217	11,064.5
	2003	77,592	75,405.4		2003	2,387	2,377.5
	2004	29,914	30,281.7		2004	524	516.2
	2005	65,983	65,885.3		2005	2,084	2,145.0
	2006	45,738	47,093.6		2006	302	298.6
	2007	46,758	46,266.8		2007	313	311.5
	2008	1,165	1,150.3		2008	481	479.0
	2009	69	67.5		2009	179	179.0
	2010	23,044	30,087.8		2010	4,734	4,462.0
	2011	69,660	62,697.5		2011	1,860	1,980.4
	2012	62,738	85,747.3		2012	67,045	43,654.3
	2013	29,272	28,486.3		2013	2,426	2,457.2
	2014	3,376	3,863.9		2014	4,167	3,693.9
	2015	35,328	38,294.8		2015	508	485.1
	2016	358	399.5		2016	947	950.8
	2017	1,129	1,025.4		2017	1,088	1,145.9
					2018	870	871.6
					2019	120	156.3
					2020	538	679.1
					2021	55	70.9
					2022	21,487	21,020.8
					2023	8,700	8,700.0

Table 2. Total number of elver American Eels captured and the index of abundance using the Area Under the Curve method (AUC). 'NA' indicates that data are not available due to construction at this site in 2013. Sampling at Bracken's Pond ended in 2017 after a change to the site that affected recruitment.

Site	Year	Total Caught	AUC index	Site	Year	Total Caught	AUC index
Wormley Pond	2001	171	171.4				
	2002	315	314.6				
	2003	138	140.5	Wareham's Pond	2003	84	84.7
	2004	257	264.7		2004	260	256.4
	2005	105	108.6		2005	148	148.6
	2006	160	158.4		2006	469	471.2
	2007	619	612.8		2007	682	676.7
	2008	139	140.0		2008	511	512.8
	2009	31	32.0		2009	275	275.7
	2010	80	71.9		2010	306	323.4
	2011	79	104.9		2011	463	523.0
	2012	79	69.9		2012	496	516.0
	2013	99	112.1		2013	NA	NA
	2014	64	74.7		2014	1,368	1,399.9
	2015	107	103.1		2015	946	1,173.4
	2016	248	340.4		2016	2,061	1,976.5
	2017	100	133.5		2017	850	857.8
	2018	84	108.9		2018	616	646.3
	2019	75	73.9		2019	552	546.6
	2020	183	179.0		2020	529	526.7
	2021	189	196.1		2021	146	148.9
	2022	82	82.4		2022	401	420.9
	2023	114	156.8		2023	725	780.0
Bracken's Pond	2000	528	535.4	Kamp's Millpond	2000	5	4.9
	2001	334	341.1		2001	222	225.4
	2002	52	52.2		2002	224	222.9
	2003	411	416.7		2003	1,968	1,972.6
	2004	171	180.0		2004	250	246.1
	2005	231	229.9		2005	196	198.6
	2006	166	172.7		2006	312	310.0
	2007	723	717.8		2007	32	31.7
	2008	262	260.9		2008	37	45.1
	2009	3	3.0		2009	33	34.5
	2010	190	219.9		2010	132	125.9
	2011	525	644.2		2011	104	213.7
	2012	462	542.8		2012	891	730.7
	2013	354	398.4		2013	218	222.5
	2014	163	174.5		2014	259	246.5
	2015	358	548.0		2015	119	239.1
	2016	685	800.3		2016	364	452.8
	2017	116	125.1		2017	269	277.6
					2018	104	136.2
					2019	152	193.3
					2020	307	326.5
					2021	45	49.6
					2022	727	736.0
					2023	1172	1178.4

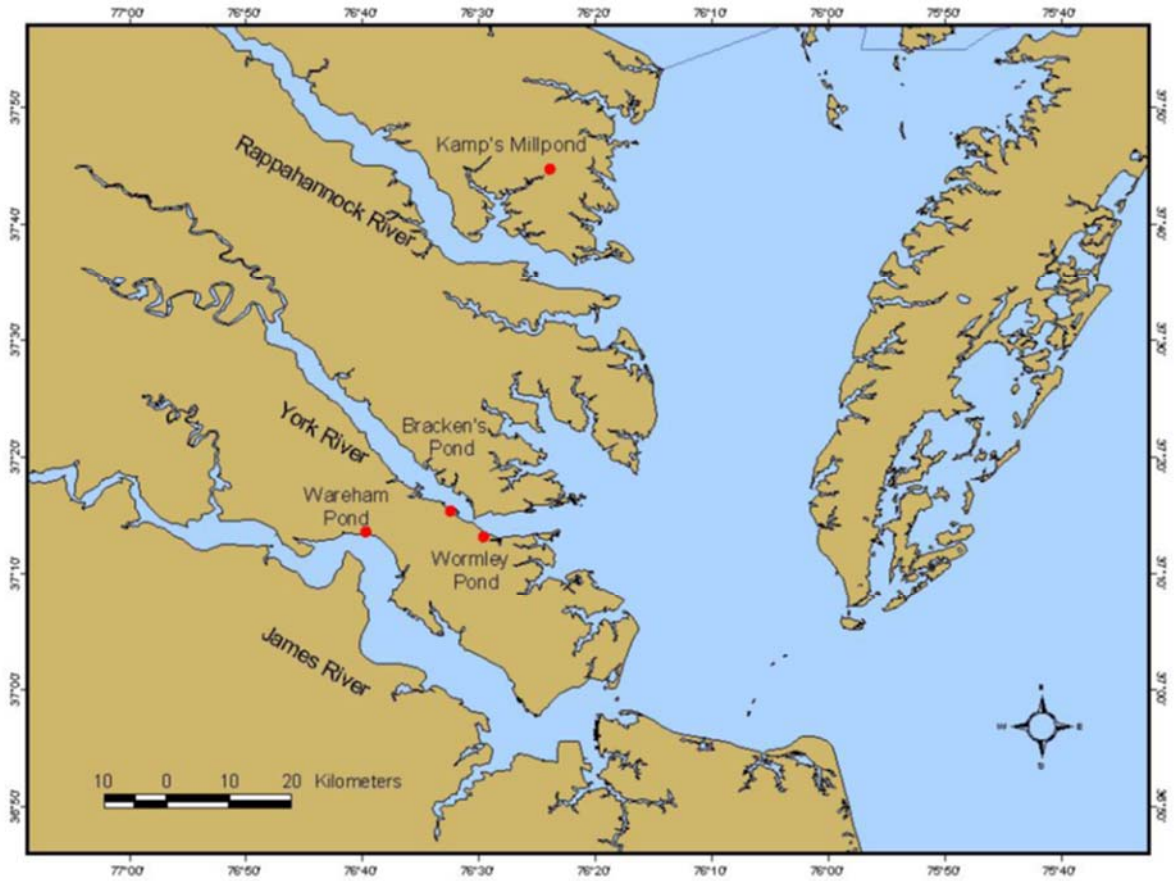

Figure 1. American Eel sampling sites in sub-estuaries of the Chesapeake Bay: the Rappahannock (Kamp's Millpond), York (Wormley Pond), and James (Wareham's Pond) estuaries, Virginia, 2023. Sampling at Bracken's Pond ended in 2017.

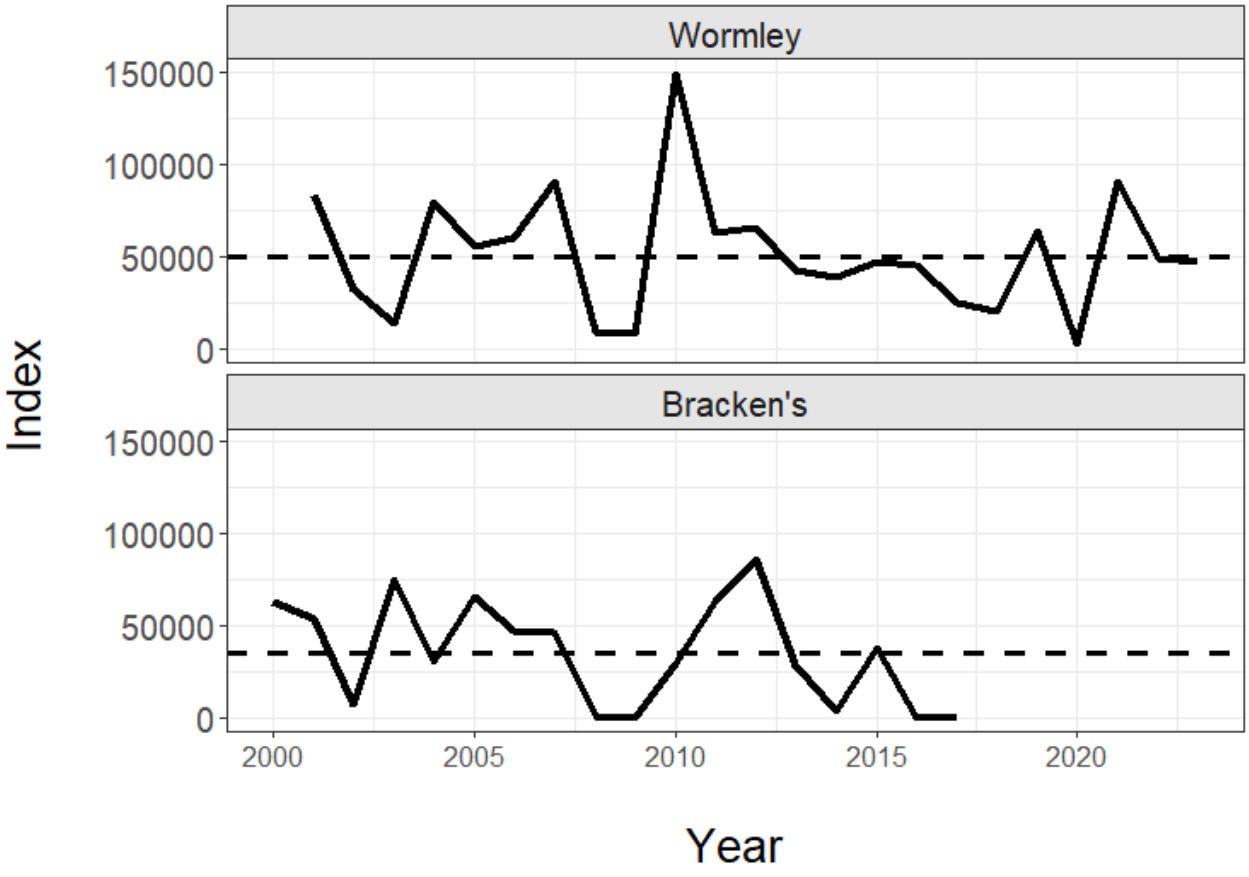

Figure 2. Abundance indices and time series average calculated by the area-under-the-curve method for glass American Eels from Wormley Pond (York River estuary). Time series averages are shown as dashed lines. Sampling at Bracken's Pond ended in 2017.

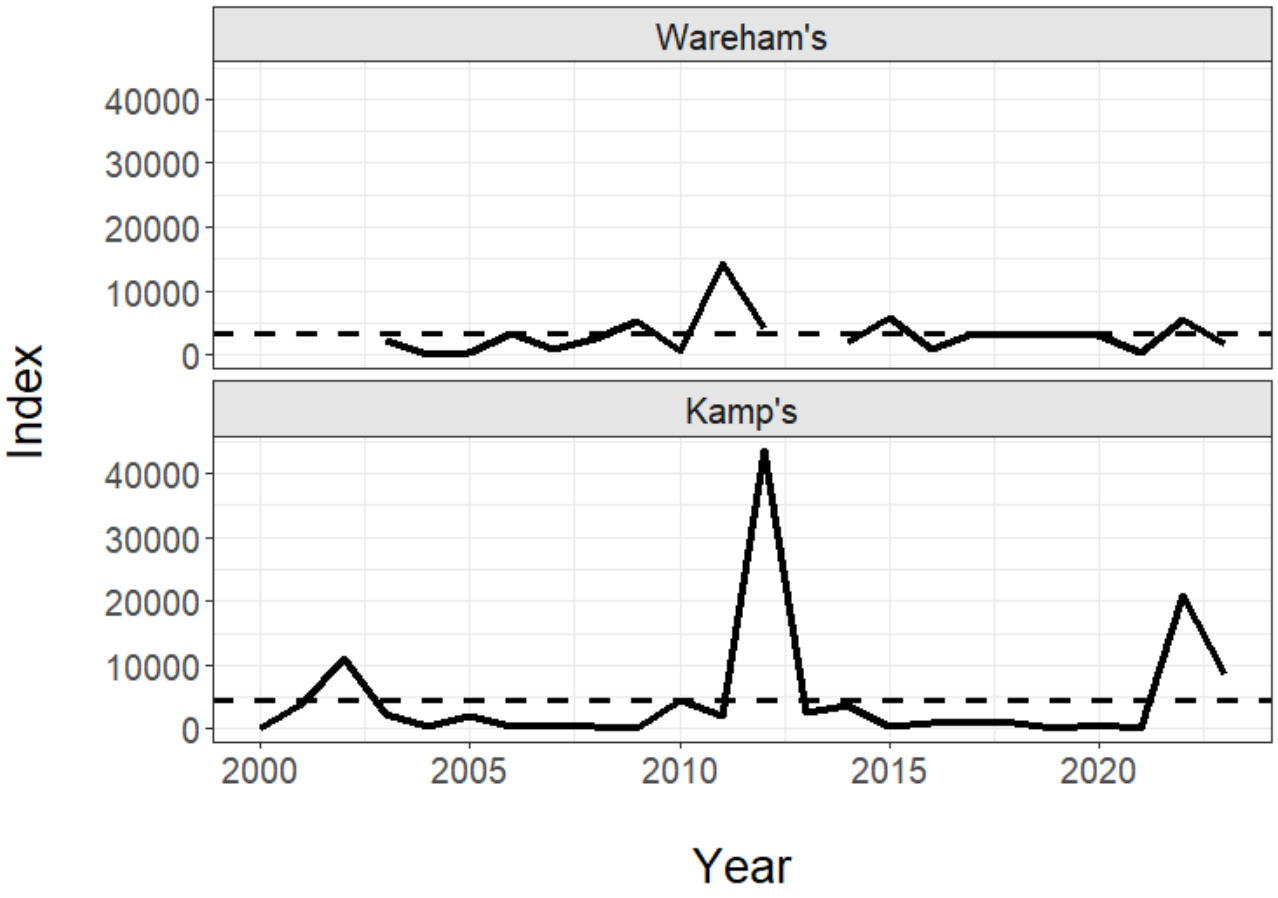

Figure 3. Abundance indices and time series average calculated by the area-under-the-curve method for glass American Eels from Wareham's Pond (James River estuary) and Kamp's Millpond (Rappahannock River estuary). Time series averages are shown as dashed lines. Wareham's Pond was not sampled in 2013 due to spillway construction at our sampling site.

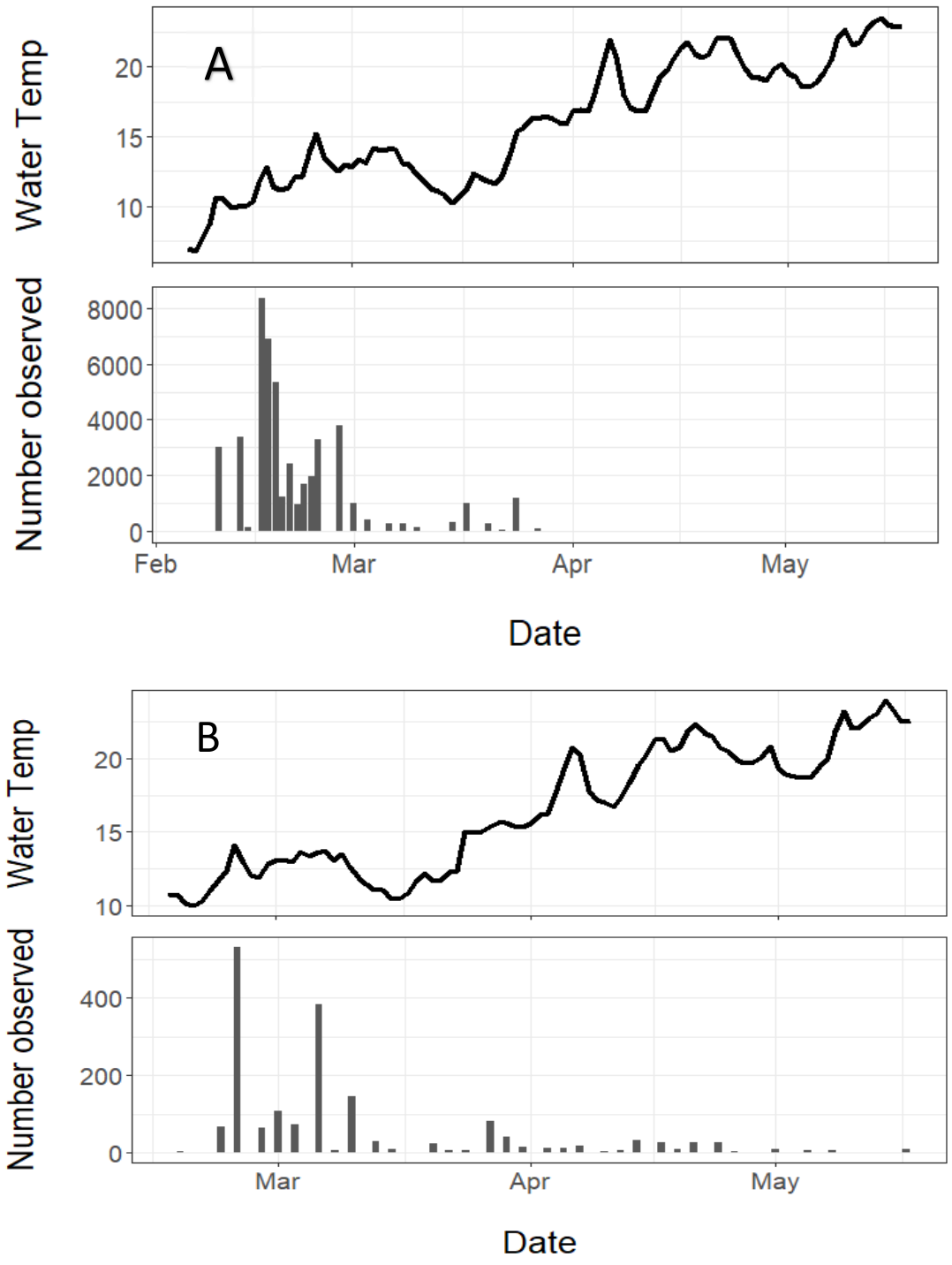

Figure 4. Water temperature (top panel) and glass American Eel catches (bottom panel) from (A) Wormley Pond, and (B) Wareham's Pond in 2023. Note axis scales are not uniform.

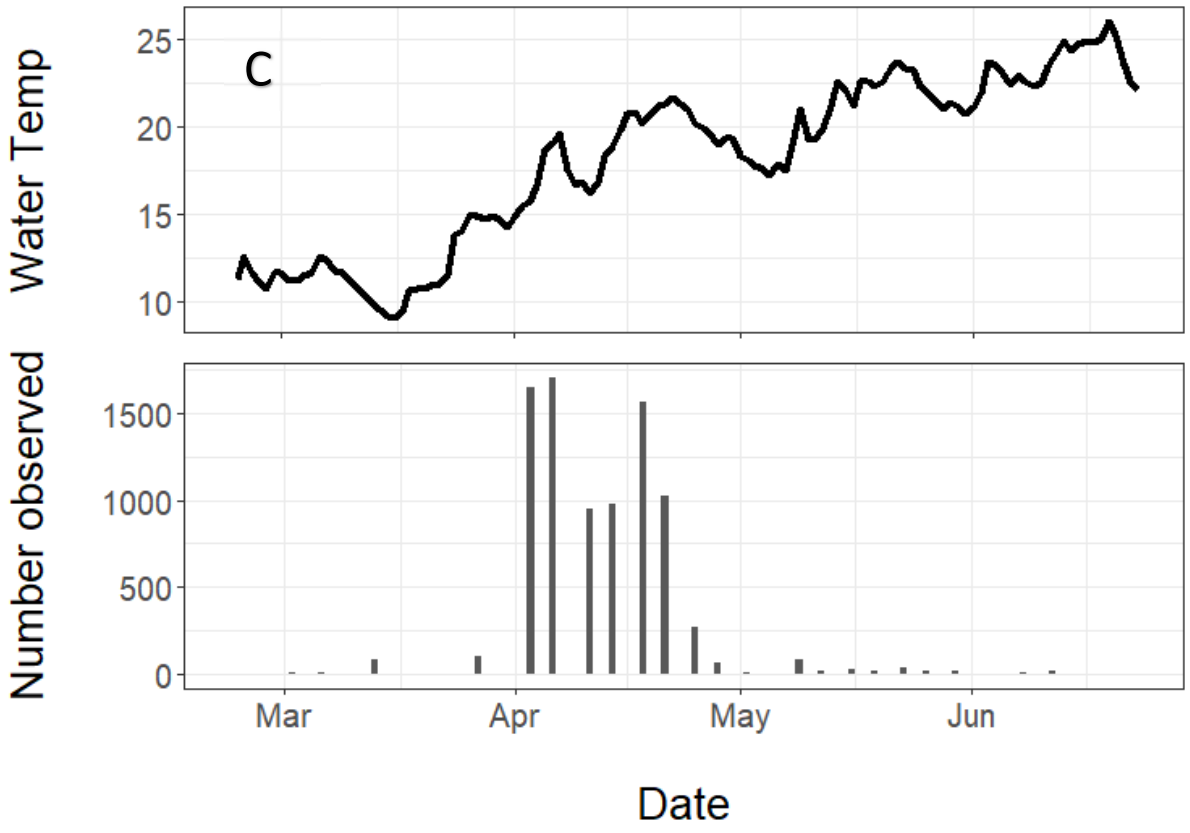

Figure 4 continued. Water temperature (top panel) and glass American Eel catches (bottom panel) from (C) Kamp's Millpond in 2023. Note axis scales are not uniform.

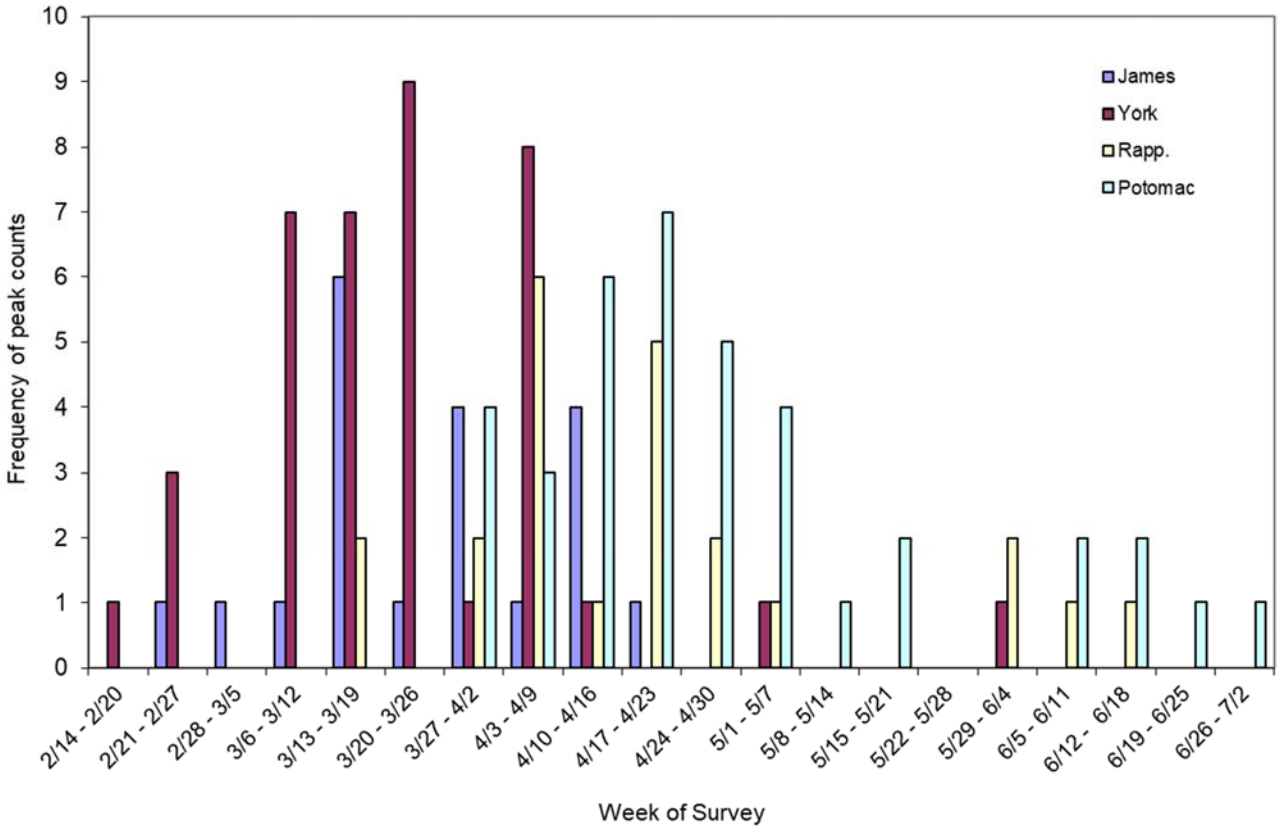

Figure 5. Survey week during which peak counts of glass eels were observed at each site from 2001 to 2023. Two sites were monitored in the York (n = 40 observations) and Potomac (n = 39 observations) estuaries each year from 2001 to 2017, and one site thereafter. In the James River estuary, one site was monitored continuously since 2003, though this site was not accessible in 2013 (n = 20 observations). In the Rappahannock River estuary, one site was monitored each year (n = 24 observations). Potomac River data are from Tuckey and Fabrizio (2023).

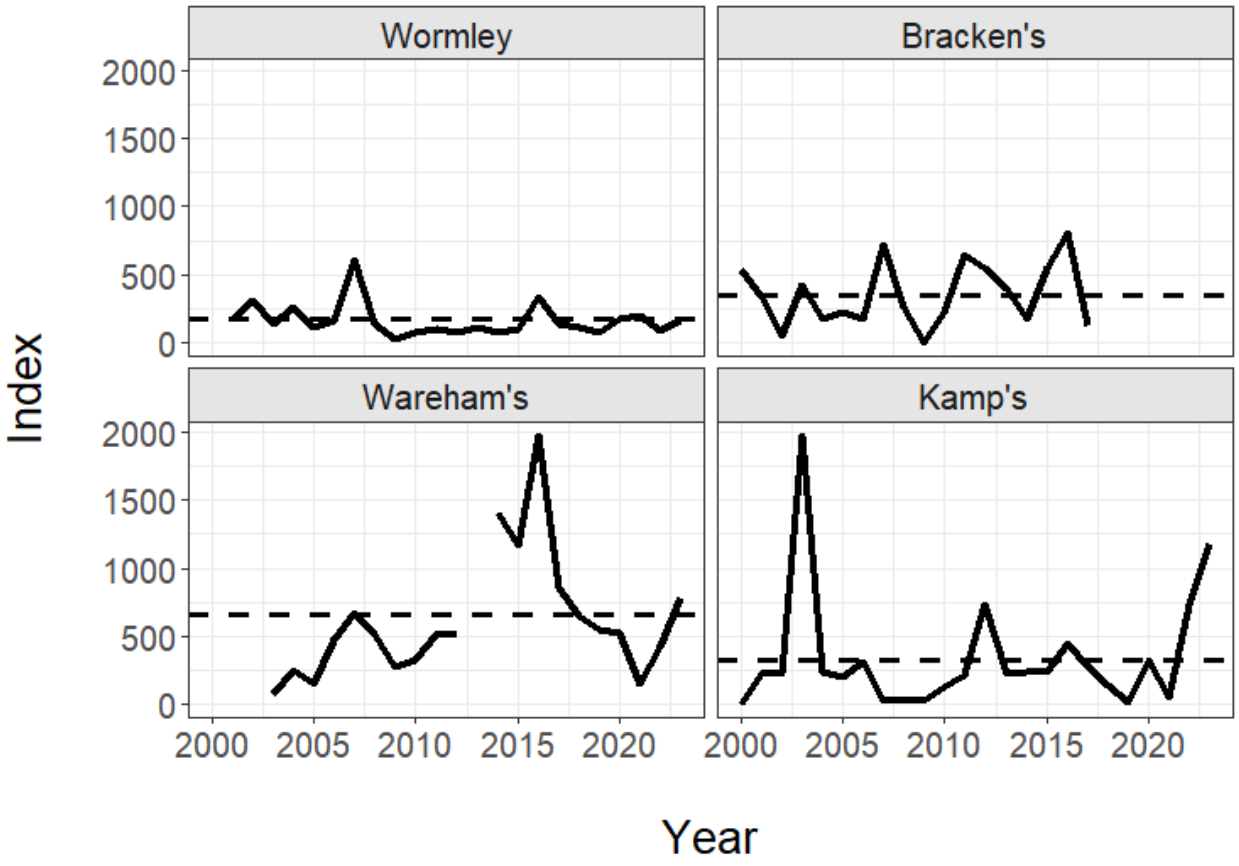

Figure 6. Abundance indices and time series average calculated by the area-under-the-curve method for elver American Eels from Wormley Pond, Bracken's Pond (York River estuary), Wareham's Pond (James River estuary) and Kamp's Millpond (Rappahannock River estuary). Time series averages are shown as dashed lines. Wareham's Pond was not sampled in 2013 due to spillway construction at our sampling site and sampling at Bracken's Pond ended in 2017.

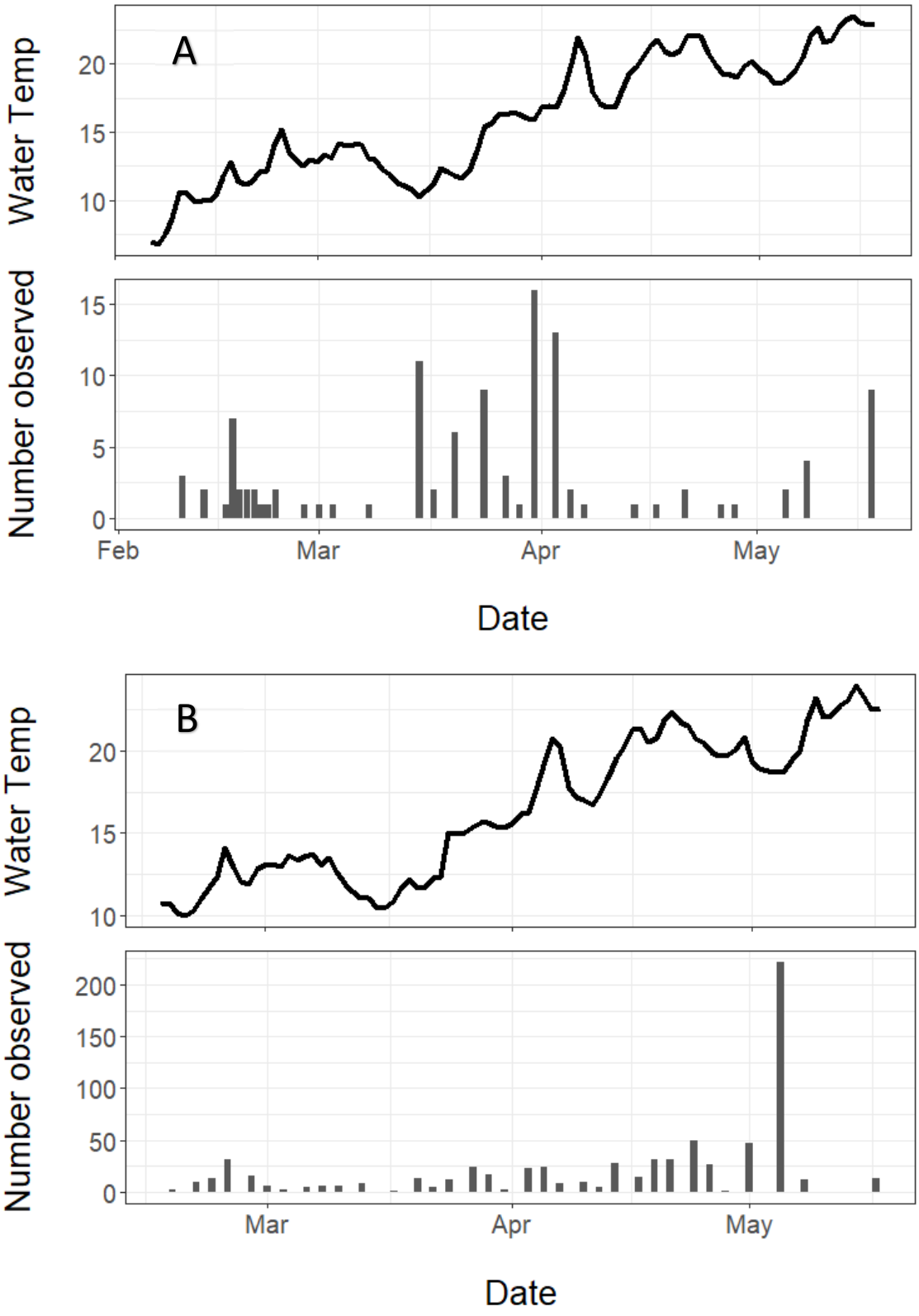

Figure 7. Water temperature (top panel) and elver American Eel catches (bottom panel) from (A) Wormley Pond, and (B) Wareham's Pond in 2023. Note axis scales are not uniform.

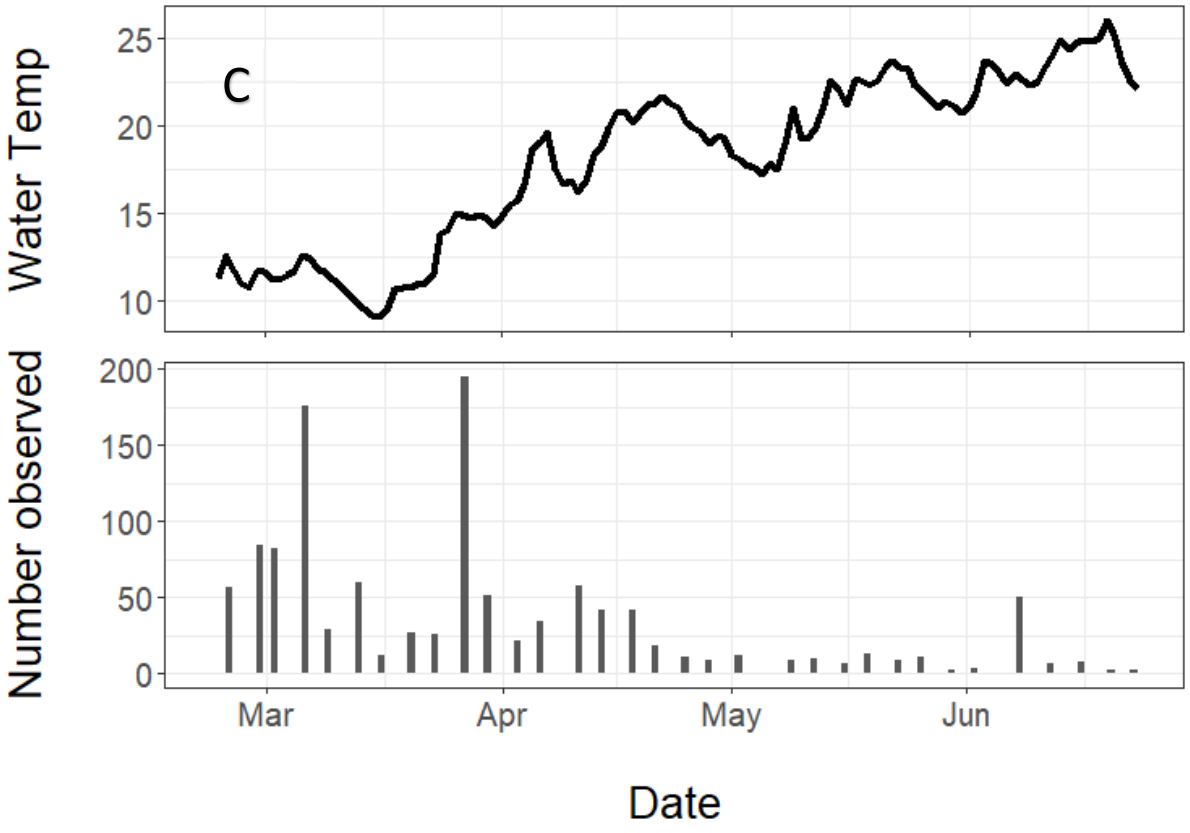

Figure 7 continued. Water temperature (top panel) and elver American Eel catches (bottom panel) from (C) Kamp's Millpond in 2023. Note axis scales are not uniform.

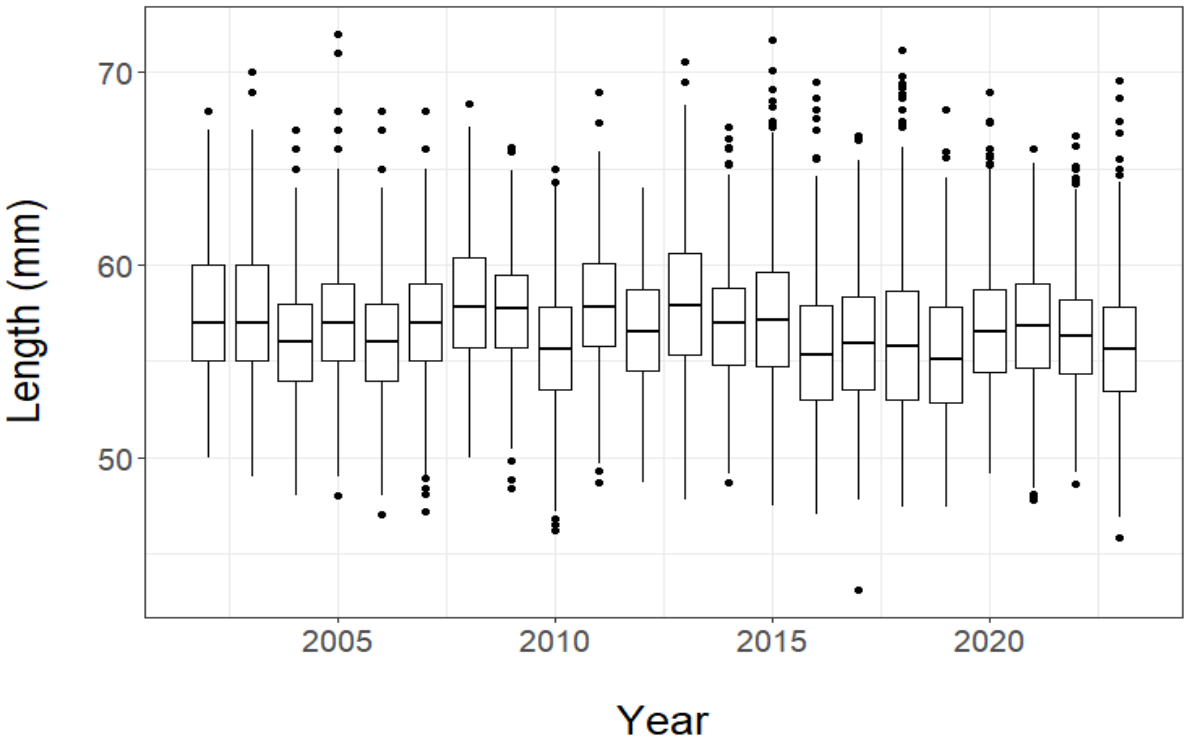

Figure 8. Total length (mm) of glass American Eels collected with Irish Eel ramps from 2002 to 2023 from Wormley Pond in the York River estuary, Virginia. The long-term mean was 56.7 mm (SE= 0.032; n = 22 years). The thick line in the center of the box indicates the median, the boxes indicate the 25th and 75th percentiles, the vertical lines indicate the 5th and 95th percentiles, and the dots indicate more extreme observations.

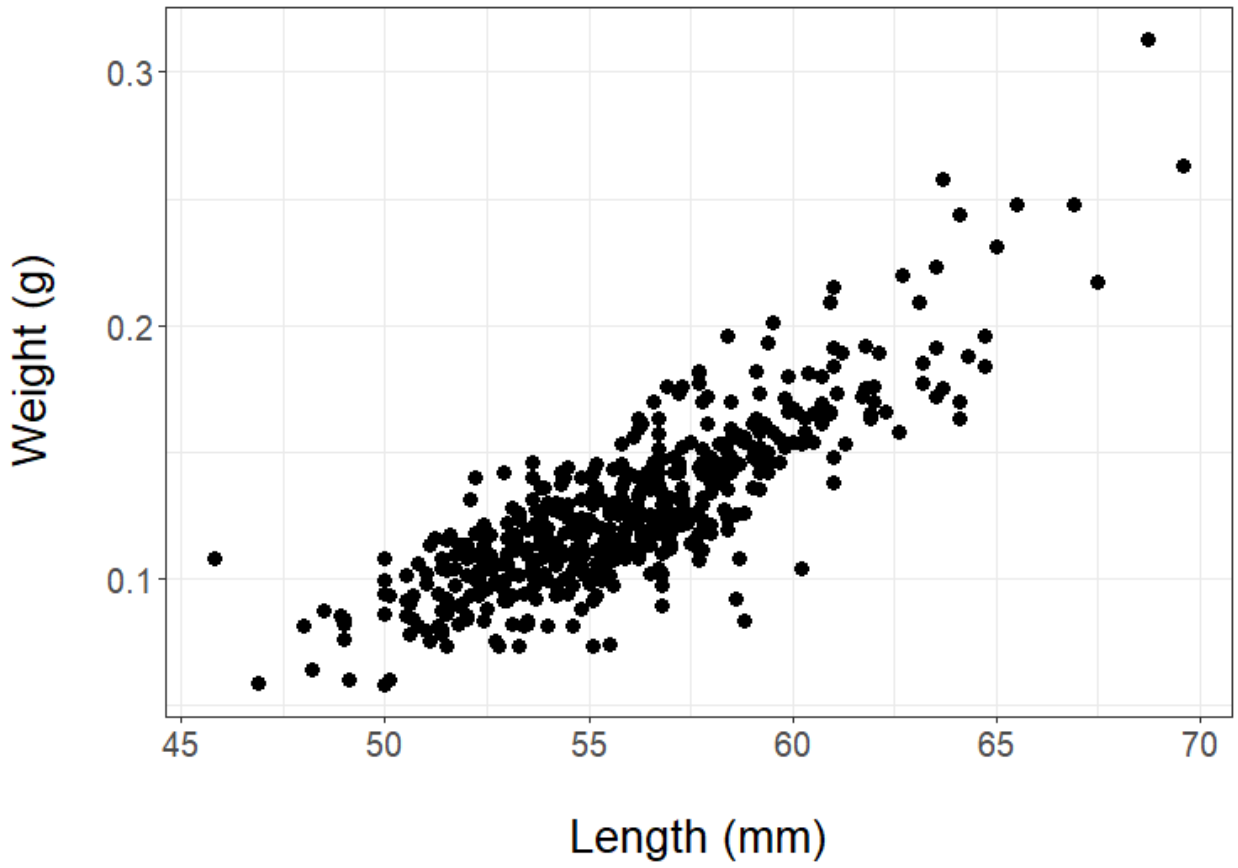

Figure 9. Length-weight relationship for glass American Eels from the York River estuary, 2023. Average TL = 55.8 mm (SE = 0.16), average weight = 0.127 g (SE = 0.002), N = 488 eels.

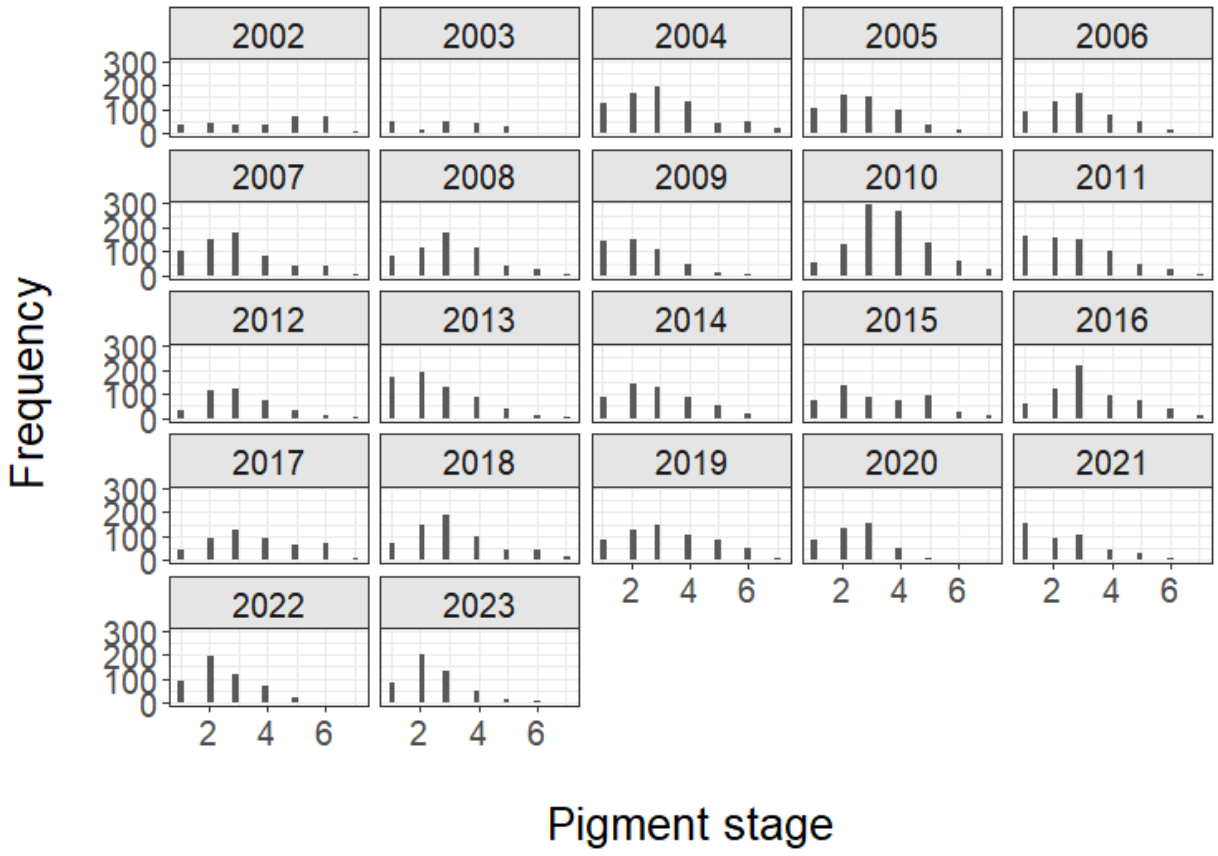

Figure 10. Frequency of pigment stages for glass eels by year for the York River estuary (Wormley Creek).