

Evaluating Recruitment of American Eel, *Anguilla rostrata*, in the Potomac River (Spring 2022)



Submitted to:

Potomac River Fisheries Commission

January 2022 – September 2022



Troy D. Tuckey & Mary C. Fabrizio

Virginia Institute of Marine Science, William & Mary
Gloucester Point, Virginia 23062



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& MARY

VIRGINIA INSTITUTE OF MARINE SCIENCE

doi: 10.25773/D629-K774

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Acknowledgments

We thank the individuals that participated in field sampling including Wendy Lowery, Jack Buchanan, Katie Nickerson, Daniel Royster, Samantha Dowiarz, and PJ LeBel. We also thank Virginia Marine Resources Commission (VMRC) law enforcement officers for monitoring the survey gear during the study. A special thanks to Ms. Joanne Northern and family (Gardy’s Millpond), who granted permission to sample on their property. This project was funded by the Potomac River Fisheries Commission.

Introduction

American Eel (*Anguilla rostrata*) is a valuable commercial species along the Atlantic coast of North America from New Brunswick to Florida. Landings from Chesapeake Bay typically represent 60% of the annual United States commercial harvest (ASMFC 2012). 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, Chesapeake Bay commercial landings of American Eel (284,297 lbs) were 87% of the U.S. landings of yellow eel (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 2017 stock assessment update (ASMFC 2017) confirmed that this population remains depleted.

Hypotheses for the decline in abundance of American Eel in recent years include locational shifts in the Gulf Stream, pollution, overfishing, parasites, and barriers to fish passage (Castonguay et al. 1994; Haro et al. 2000). The decline in abundance may or may not exhibit spatial synchrony (Richkus and Whalen 1999; Sullivan et al. 2006); 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). Limited knowledge about fundamental biological characteristics of juvenile American Eel 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 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 should provide necessary data on coastal recruitment success and further understanding of American Eel population dynamics. The American Eel Benchmark Stock Assessment report (ASMFC 2012) emphasized the importance of the coast-wide survey for providing data useful in calculating an index of recruitment over the historical coastal range and for serving as an early warning of potential range contraction of the species. Funding for the Virginia Institute of Marine Science’s spring survey in the Potomac River was provided by the Potomac River Fisheries Commission, thereby ensuring compliance with the 1999 ASMFC Interstate Fishery Management Plan for American Eels.

Life History

The American Eel is a facultative 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 (for 9-12 months) in a generally northwesterly direction and can grow to 85 mm total length (TL; Jenkins and Burkhead 1993). Within one 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 (= young of the year, or YOY) into Maryland and Virginia estuaries from February to June (Able and Fahay 1998). Ciccotti et al. (1995) suggested that glass eel migration occurs as waves of invasion with perhaps a fortnightly periodicity related to tidal currents and stratification of the water column. Alterations in the timing and magnitude of freshwater flow to bays and estuaries may affect the magnitude, timing, and spatial patterns of upstream migration of glass eels (Facey and Van Den Avyle 1987). Young-of-year eels may use freshwater “signals” to enhance

recruitment to local estuaries, thereby influencing year-class strength in a particular estuary (Sullivan et al. 2006).

As glass eels grow, they become pigmented (elver stage), and within 12 to 14 months eels acquire a dark color with underlying yellow (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 occurs from late summer through autumn. Age at maturity varies greatly with location and latitude, and in Chesapeake Bay, mature eels range from 8 to 24 years, with most being less than 10 years old (Owens and Geer 2003). American Eel from Chesapeake Bay mature and migrate at an earlier age than eels from northern areas (Hedgepeth 1983). Upon maturity, eels migrate to the Sargasso Sea to spawn and die (Haro et al. 2000).

Objectives

The objectives of our study in the Potomac River were to:

1. monitor the young-of-year (glass eel) migration into the Potomac River watershed to determine spatial and temporal components of American Eel recruitment; and
2. collect basic biological information on recruiting glass eels, including length, weight, and pigment stage.

Methods

Minimum criteria for YOY American Eel sampling used in our survey were established in the ASMFC American Eel FMP and used in our survey. Specifically, the timing and placement of gear must coincide with periods of peak YOY onshore migration. At a minimum, the gear must be deployed during nighttime flood tides. 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 at least 60

glass eels (if present per system) must be examined for length, weight, and pigmentation stage weekly.

Due to the importance of the eel fishery in Virginia and the Potomac River, 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 in both Virginia and Maryland were evaluated previously (Geer 2001). Final site selection was based on known areas of glass eel concentrations, accessibility, and specific physical criteria (e.g., appropriate habitat) suitable for glass eel recruitment to the sampling gear. The Maryland sampling of the Potomac River (northern shore site) was discontinued in 2001, due in part to the low catch rates in 2000 (Geer 2001). At the request of PRFC, the Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS) began sampling two sites on the southern shore of the Potomac River (Gardy's Millpond and Clark's Millpond; Figure 1) in 2000.

One site (Gardy's Millpond, Northumberland County) was sampled on the Potomac River in 2021. Gardy's Millpond contains a spillway that drains through four box culverts, across a riffle constructed of riprap and into a lotic area of the Yeocomico River. Clark's Millpond had also been sampled in previous years, however, conditions at the site have changed and there have been few glass eels and elvers in recent years (Tables 1 and 2). Furthermore, the conditions on the millpond spillway, where the trap was deployed, have deteriorated and are no longer safe. Thus, sampling was terminated at Clark's Millpond in 2016.

An Irish eel ramp was used to collect eels. 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, and was accomplished through gravity feed. A hose was attached to the ramp and to the collection bucket with adapters to allow for quick removal for sampling. Enkamat™ erosion control material on the ramp floor provided a textured climbing surface and extended into the water below the trap. The ramp was 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. 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 site visits. All eels were counted and placed above the impediment, with any subsample information recorded, if applicable. Specimens less than or equal to ~ 85 mm TL were classified as YOY, while those greater than 85 mm TL were considered elvers. These lengths correspond to the two distinct length-frequency modes observed in the 2000 survey, which likely reflects two year classes (Geer 2001). Individual length, weight, and pigmentation stage information (see Haro and Krueger 1988) were collected weekly. Daily catch (raw number of eels captured per day) and annual area-under-the-curve (AUC; Olney and Hoenig 2001) indices are presented. Annual AUC indices were standardized to a 24-hour sampling time.

Results and Discussion

Glass eels were sampled at Gardy's Millpond between 28 February and 10 June 2022; the study period encompassed 102 days. Glass eel recruitment at Gardy's Millpond resulted in the collection of 712 glass eels in 2022 (Table 1). Glass eels were first captured in late March (Figure 2). Relative abundance of glass eels was the highest ever observed at Gardy's Millpond in 2022 and nearly four-times the time-series average ($\text{index}_{2022} = 826.79$; mean long-term index = 209.2; Figure 4).

Elvers were first captured on 7 March 2022 at Gardy's Millpond and continued throughout the sampling period with multiple peaks throughout the survey (Figure 3). We observed above-average catch of elvers in 2022 (index = 1019.97; Table 2; Figure 5). Initial arrival and migration of elvers may be correlated with increases in water temperature, however, elver migration may be delayed at freshwater interfaces until

certain behavioral and physiological changes have occurred (Sorensen and Bianchini 1986).

Pigmentation stages of Potomac River glass eels consisted of mostly stage 5 (41% of the number examined) and stage 6 (30%; Figure 6). Glass eels captured in the Potomac River exhibit late-stage pigmentation patterns typically beginning with stage 3 and darker individuals (Figure 7). Lengths of glass eels captured in 2022 ranged from 49.0 to 66.8 mm TL (average length = 56.4 mm TL, SD = 3.00) and weights ranged from 0.08 to 0.30 g (mean = 0.14 g, SD = 0.03; Figure 8). Lengths of glass eels captured in 2022 were similar to previous years (Figure 9).

Glass eels from the Potomac River are more developed and are likely older than those at sites closer to the mouth of Chesapeake Bay. Total catch of glass eels at sites on the Potomac River are typically below those in other VA tributaries, which may be due to natural mortality or a dilution effect as glass eels migrate into a variety of habitats available in lower Chesapeake Bay. Although recruitment of glass eels is low at Potomac River sites, variation in recruitment levels is also lower than that found at other sites in lower Chesapeake Bay (Tuckey and Fabrizio 2021). Reduced variation in recruitment indices in the Potomac River may allow for the earlier detection of change because there is less noise in the signal compared with widely varying recruitment pulses observed in other lower Chesapeake Bay systems. Additionally, the relatively stable abundance of elvers observed at sites on the Potomac River are consistent with the abundance of elvers found in other sites in VA and suggest that the carrying capacity of small, impounded water bodies appears relatively stable across years. This hypothesis relies on the similar abundance of elvers found in the James, York, and Rappahannock rivers despite orders of magnitude greater abundances of glass eels at these sites (Tuckey and Fabrizio 2021).

Conclusions

1. Recruitment of glass eels in 2022 was the highest ever observed at Gardy's Millpond.
2. The length of glass eels captured at Gardy's Millpond remains relatively consistent across years.
3. We found a relatively greater proportion of late-pigment stage eels in 2022 compared with previous years.
4. The index for elvers was above average in 2022.

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Table 1. Summary of glass eel collections in the Potomac River at Clark’s Millpond (2000 – 2016) and Gardy’s Millpond (2000 – 2022). Sampling at Clark’s Millpond was discontinued after 2016 due to a change at that site that no longer attracted glass eels. Catch per unit effort is calculated as the Area Under the Curve (AUC).

| Source | Year | Start Date | End Date | Total Catch | AUC |
|---------|--------|------------|----------|-------------|--------|
| Clark's | 2000 | 1-Apr | 16-May | 15 | 23.74 |
| | 2001 | 16-Mar | 12-May | 4 | 4.05 |
| | 2002 | 8-Mar | 2-May | 115 | 115.79 |
| | 2003 | 11-Mar | 16-May | 24 | 40.21 |
| | 2004 | 8-Mar | 30-May | 447 | 468.93 |
| | 2005 | 10-Mar | 27-May | 223 | 295.78 |
| | 2006 | 28-Feb | 25-May | 80 | 90.53 |
| | 2007 | 27-Feb | 5-Jul | 435 | 470.33 |
| | 2008 | 19-Mar | 20-Jun | 22 | 31.98 |
| | 2009 | 25-Mar | 18-Jun | 42 | 42.68 |
| | 2010 | 19-Mar | 21-Jul | 421 | 389.06 |
| | 2011 | 16-Mar | 28-Jun | 46 | 104.51 |
| | 2012 | 23-Feb | 16-Jul | 419 | 495.38 |
| | 2013 | 21-Feb | 7-Jun | 196 | 208.07 |
| | 2014 | 10-Mar | 13-Jun | 1 | 1.00 |
| | 2015 | 25-Mar | 30-Jun | 1 | 1.00 |
| 2016 | 28-Mar | 29-Jun | 3 | 3.00 | |
| Gardy's | 2000 | 12-Apr | 16-May | 291 | 286.85 |
| | 2001 | 12-Mar | 12-May | 729 | 730.25 |
| | 2002 | 8-Mar | 2-May | 129 | 129.50 |
| | 2003 | 11-Mar | 16-May | 71 | 70.01 |
| | 2004 | 8-Mar | 24-May | 39 | 38.86 |
| | 2005 | 10-Mar | 27-May | 94 | 102.68 |
| | 2006 | 28-Feb | 25-May | 46 | 45.39 |
| | 2007 | 27-Feb | 5-Jul | 248 | 260.09 |
| | 2008 | 19-Mar | 20-Jun | 187 | 178.94 |
| | 2009 | 25-Mar | 18-Jun | 231 | 229.92 |
| | 2010 | 19-Mar | 21-Jul | 90 | 80.25 |
| | 2011 | 16-Mar | 28-Jun | 35 | 36.78 |
| | 2012 | 23-Feb | 16-Jul | 261 | 259.83 |
| | 2013 | 21-Feb | 13-Jun | 333 | 383.86 |
| | 2014 | 10-Mar | 13-Jun | 243 | 253.10 |
| | 2015 | 25-Mar | 30-Jun | 113 | 118.42 |
| | 2016 | 25-Mar | 29-Jun | 42 | 42.12 |
| | 2017 | 21-Mar | 28-Jul | 402 | 544.16 |
| | 2018 | 27-Feb | 1-Jun | 101 | 98.79 |
| | 2019 | 19-Mar | 18-Jul | 130 | 173.30 |
| 2020 | 6-Mar | 29-Jun | 185 | 227.66 | |
| 2021 | 17-Mar | 14-Jun | 369 | 388.85 | |
| 2022 | 28-Feb | 10-Jun | 712 | 826.79 | |

Table 2. Summary of elver collections in the Potomac River at Clark’s Millpond (2000 – 2016) and Gardy’s Millpond (2000 – 2022). Sampling at Clark’s Millpond was discontinued after 2016 due to a change at that site that no longer attracted eels. Catch per unit effort is calculated as the Area Under the Curve (AUC).

| Source | Year | Start Date | End Date | Total Catch | AUC |
|---------|--------|------------|----------|-------------|---------|
| Clark's | 2000 | 1-Apr | 16-May | 5 | 10.69 |
| | 2001 | 16-Mar | 12-May | 205 | 253.67 |
| | 2002 | 8-Mar | 2-May | 90 | 90.95 |
| | 2003 | 11-Mar | 16-May | 225 | 237.72 |
| | 2004 | 8-Mar | 30-May | 314 | 316.36 |
| | 2005 | 10-Mar | 27-May | 62 | 62.33 |
| | 2006 | 28-Feb | 25-May | 153 | 195.68 |
| | 2007 | 27-Feb | 5-Jul | 90 | 90.31 |
| | 2008 | 19-Mar | 20-Jun | 276 | 289.16 |
| | 2009 | 25-Mar | 18-Jun | 90 | 90.46 |
| | 2010 | 19-Mar | 21-Jul | 208 | 209.59 |
| | 2011 | 16-Mar | 28-Jun | 84 | 114.09 |
| | 2012 | 23-Feb | 16-Jul | 268 | 256.69 |
| | 2013 | 21-Feb | 7-Jun | 148 | 158.23 |
| | 2014 | 10-Mar | 13-Jun | 13 | 14.63 |
| | 2015 | 25-Mar | 30-Jun | 11 | 11.09 |
| 2016 | 28-Mar | 29-Jun | 18 | 18.08 | |
| Gardy's | 2000 | 12-Apr | 16-May | 15 | 16.46 |
| | 2001 | 12-Mar | 12-May | 624 | 660.76 |
| | 2002 | 8-Mar | 2-May | 273 | 277.15 |
| | 2003 | 11-Mar | 16-May | 300 | 300.78 |
| | 2004 | 8-Mar | 24-May | 483 | 476.76 |
| | 2005 | 10-Mar | 27-May | 313 | 330.15 |
| | 2006 | 28-Feb | 25-May | 692 | 827.71 |
| | 2007 | 27-Feb | 5-Jul | 198 | 198.23 |
| | 2008 | 19-Mar | 20-Jun | 393 | 385.88 |
| | 2009 | 25-Mar | 18-Jun | 360 | 358.27 |
| | 2010 | 19-Mar | 21-Jul | 375 | 317.53 |
| | 2011 | 16-Mar | 28-Jun | 507 | 527.09 |
| | 2012 | 23-Feb | 16-Jul | 411 | 406.59 |
| | 2013 | 21-Feb | 13-Jun | 664 | 1564.73 |
| | 2014 | 10-Mar | 13-Jun | 967 | 982.11 |
| | 2015 | 25-Mar | 30-Jun | 591 | 656.03 |
| | 2016 | 25-Mar | 29-Jun | 124 | 208.23 |
| | 2017 | 21-Mar | 28-Jul | 546 | 655.35 |
| | 2018 | 27-Feb | 1-Jun | 396 | 450.10 |
| | 2019 | 19-Mar | 18-Jul | 1684 | 3554.12 |
| 2020 | 6-Mar | 29-Jun | 1044 | 2428.21 | |
| 2021 | 17-Mar | 14-Jun | 489 | 480.54 | |
| 2022 | 28-Feb | 10-Jun | 913 | 1019.97 | |

Figure 1. Sampling sites in the Potomac River. Sampling at Clark's Millpond was discontinued after 2016.

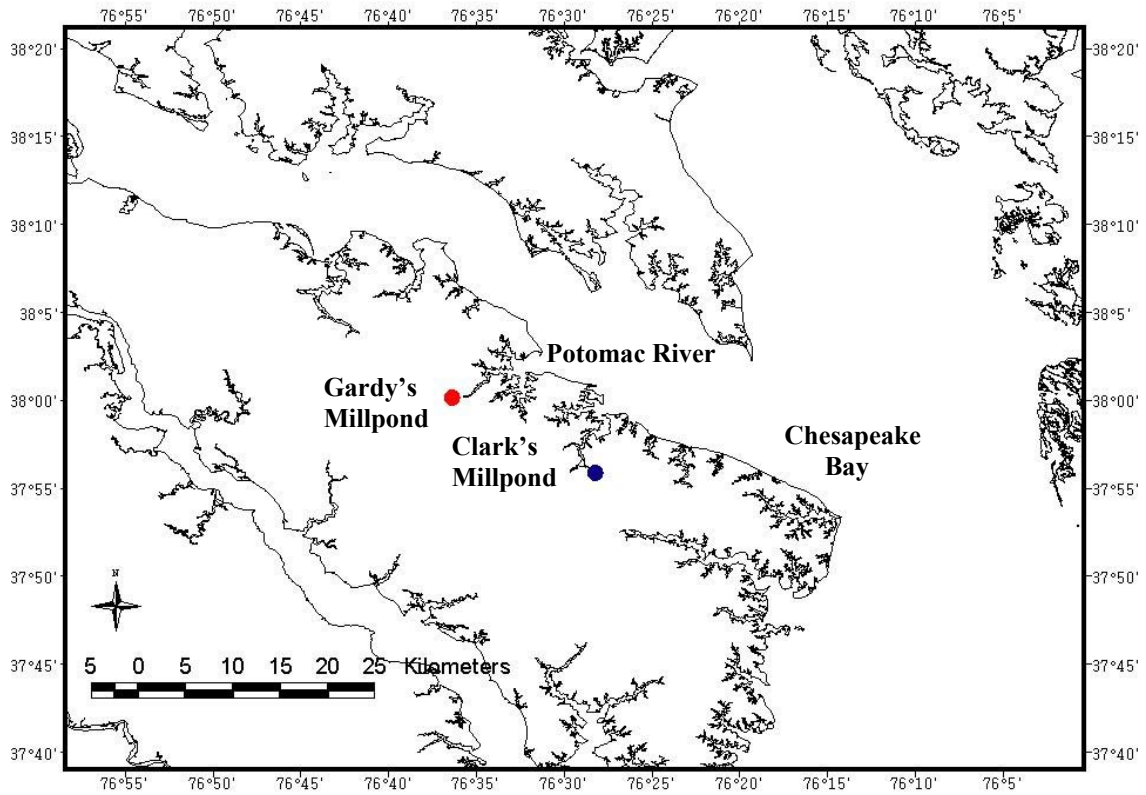


Figure 2. Number of glass eels captured during each sampling event and water temperature ($^{\circ}\text{C}$) at Gardy's Millpond, 2022.

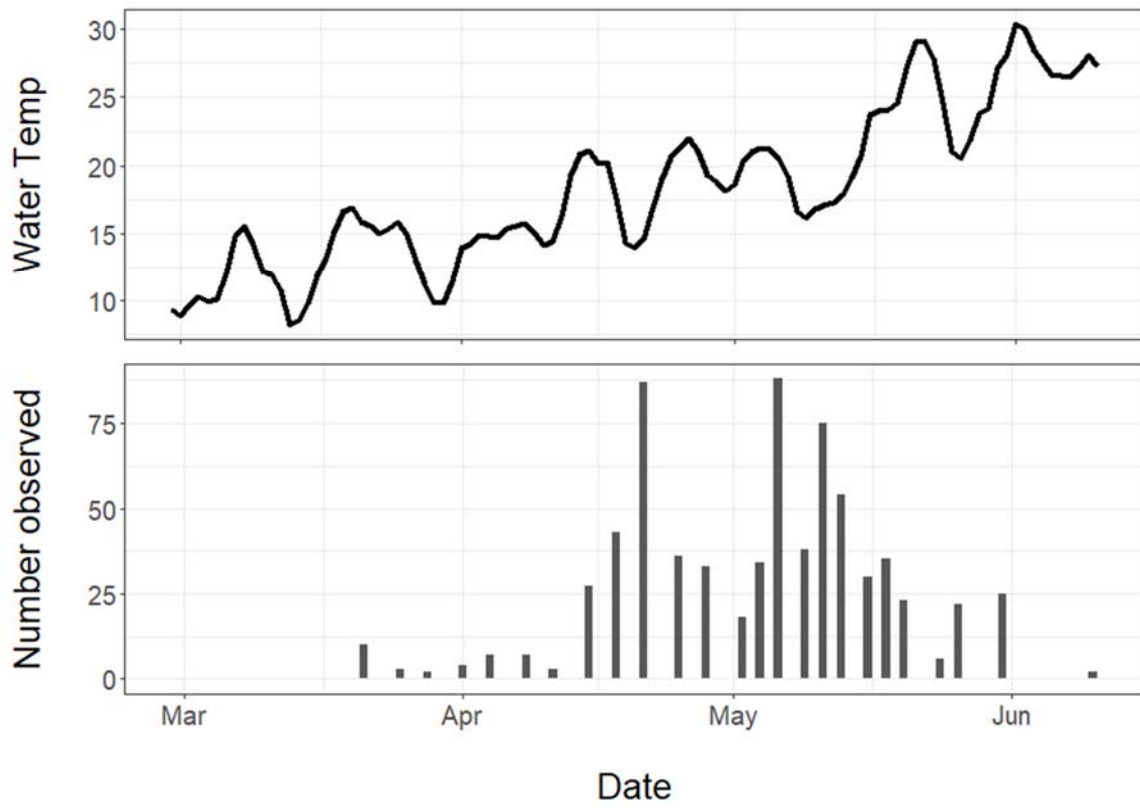


Figure 3. Number of elvers captured during each sampling event and water temperature ($^{\circ}\text{C}$) at Gardy's Millpond, 2022.

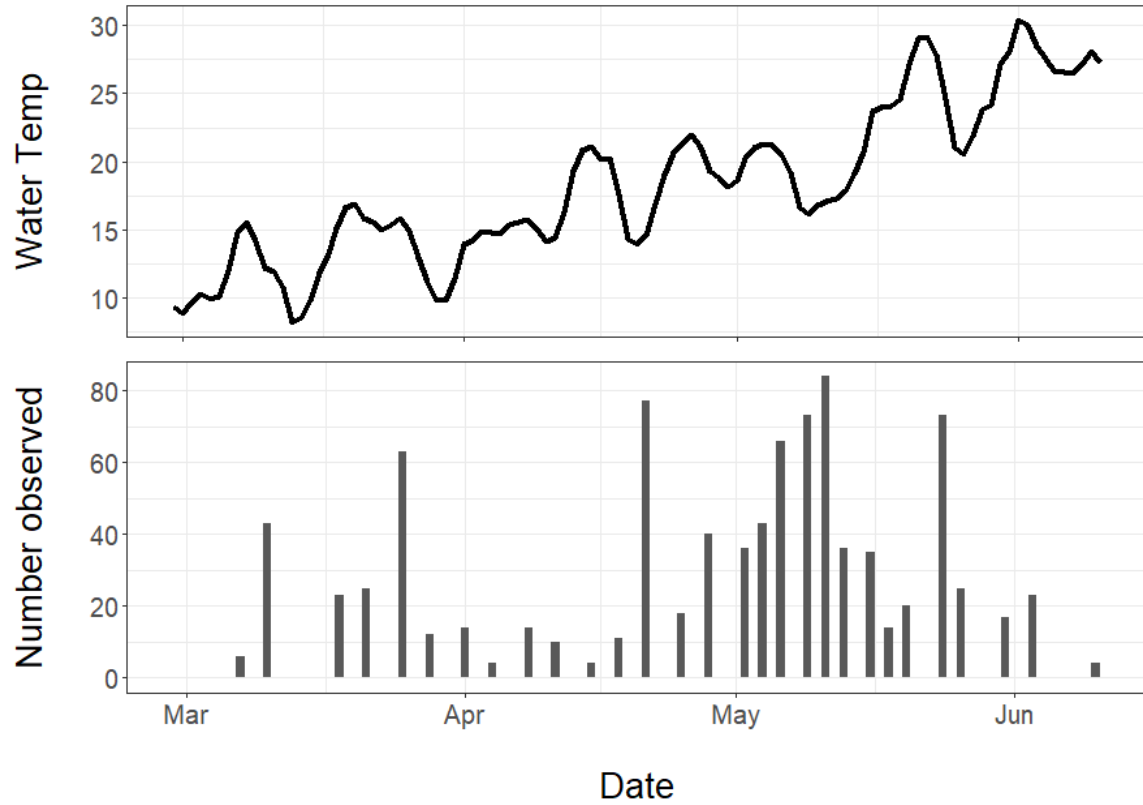


Figure 4. Glass eel index (area-under-the-curve method) from 2000 to 2022. Collections in 2000 followed different protocols and are not directly comparable to collections in later years. Time-series average for 2022 consists of data from 2001 to 2021. Sampling at Clark's Millpond was discontinued after 2016.

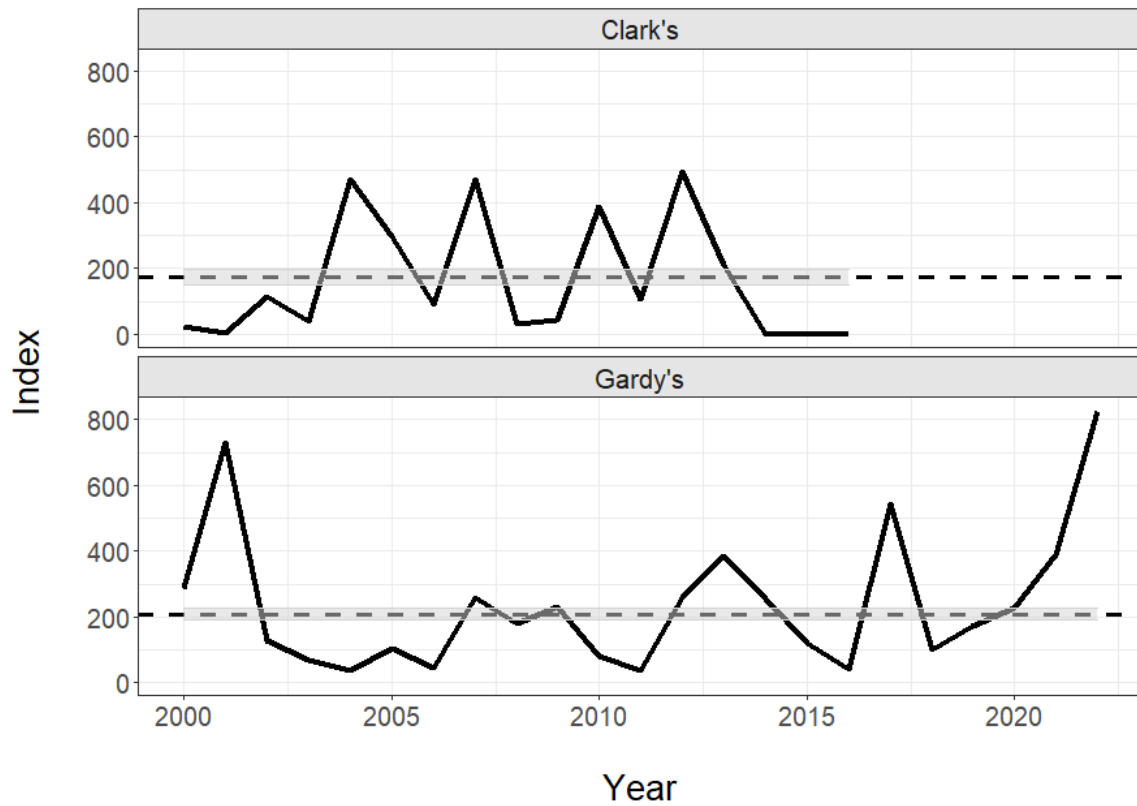


Figure 5. Elver eel index (area-under-the-curve method) from 2000 to 2022. Collections in 2000 followed different protocols and are not directly comparable to collections in later years. Time-series average for 2022 consists of data from 2001 to 2021. Sampling at Clark's Millpond was discontinued after 2016.

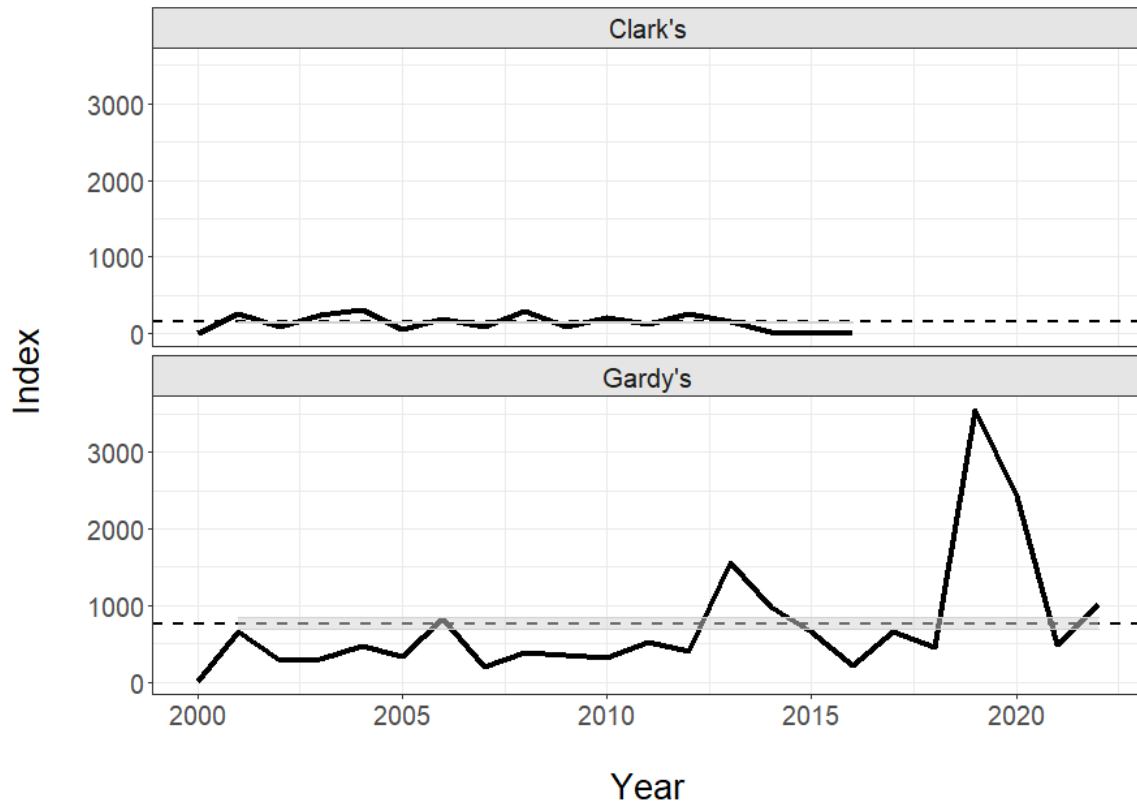


Figure 6. Glass eel pigment stage frequency distribution for the Potomac River, 2022 (N = 415).

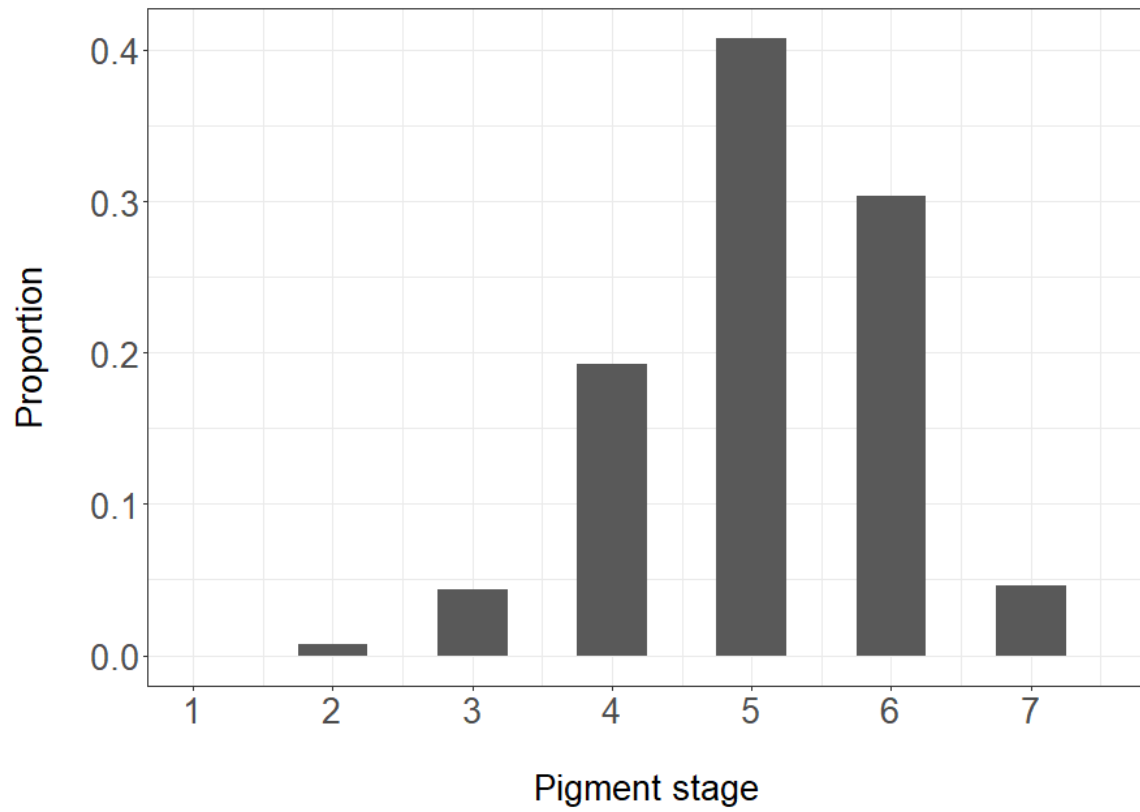


Figure 7. Glass eel pigment stage frequency distribution for the Potomac River, 2002 – 2022 (except 2003, which was not assessed that year).

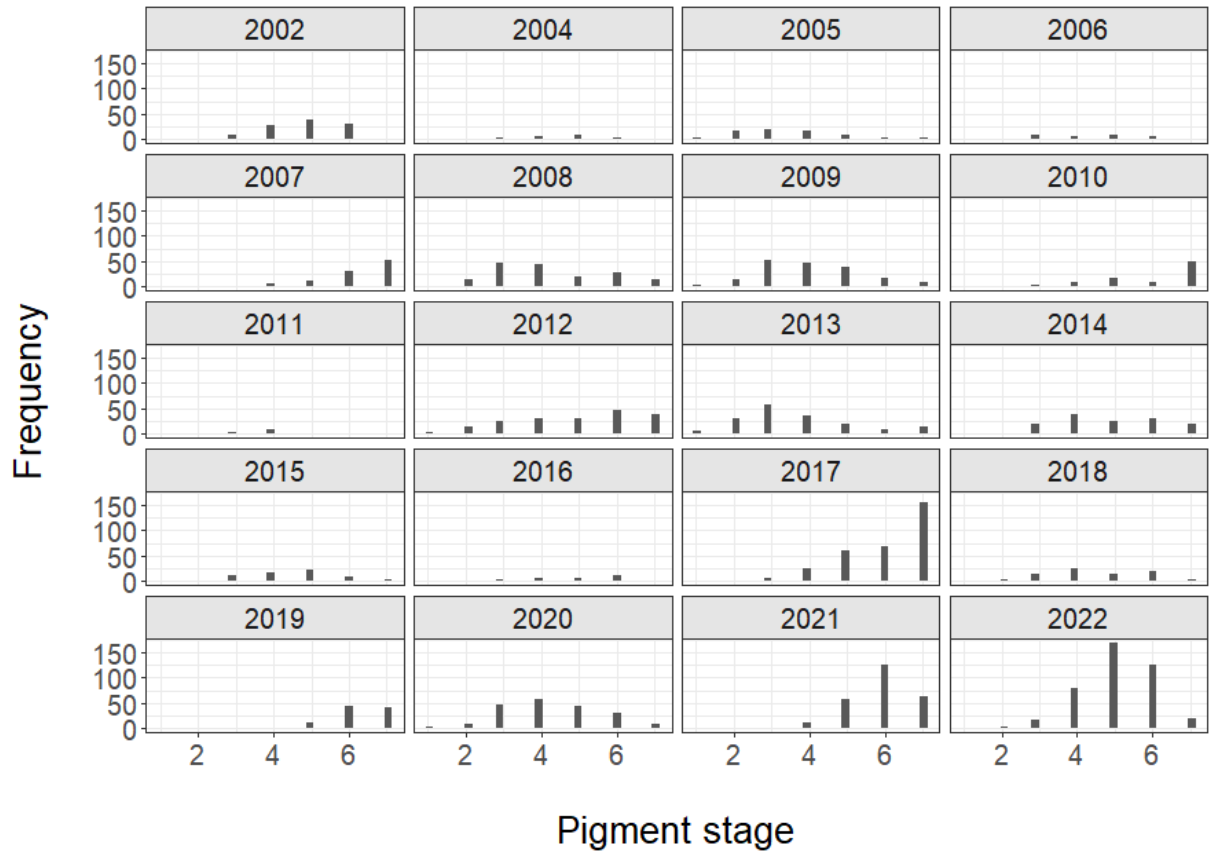


Figure 8. Total length and wet weight of glass eels captured at Gardy's Millpond, 2022. Average TL = 56.4 mm, average weight = 0.14 g, N = 415 eels.

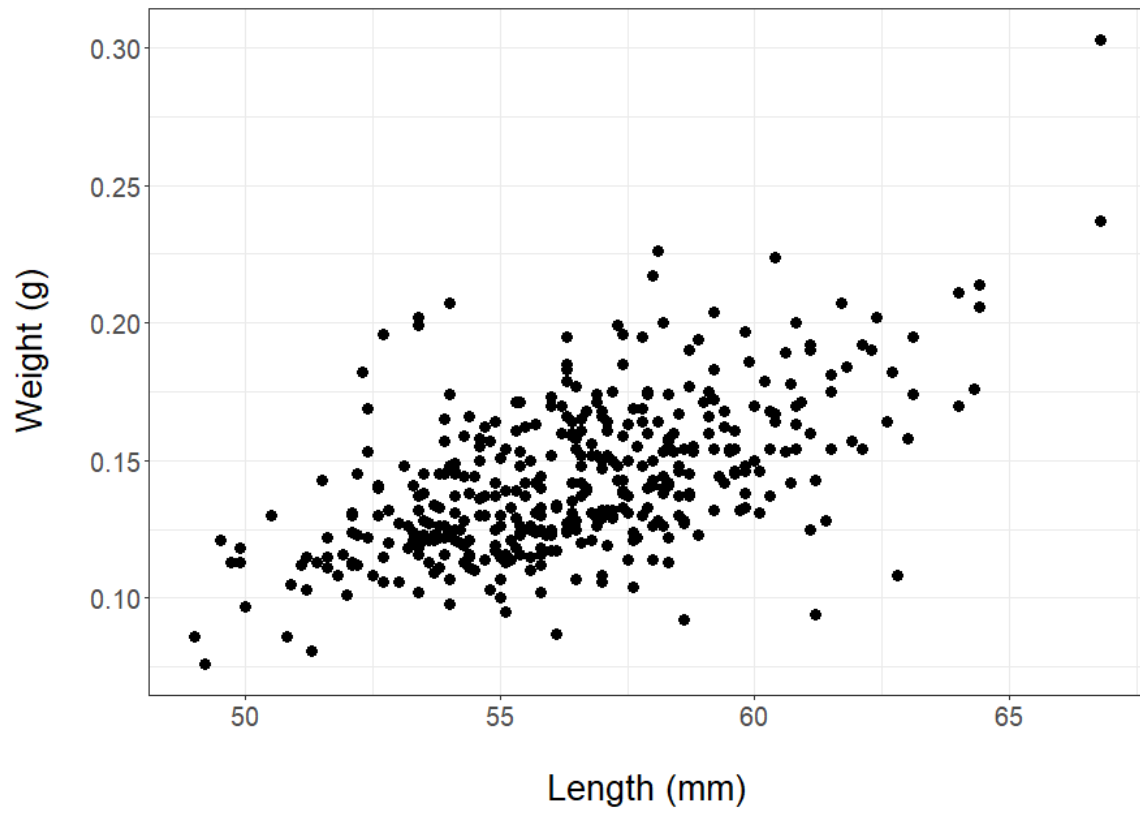


Figure 9. Annual length distribution of glass eels captured at Gardy’s Millpond from 2002 to 2023 (excluding 2003).

