

**Estimating Relative Abundance of Young-of-Year American
Eel, *Anguilla rostrata*, in the Virginia Tributaries of
Chesapeake Bay (Spring 2014)**

Final Report for Project No. RF/CF 14-01



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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). An average of 62% of the annual landings of U.S. commercial harvest since 1993 have come from the Chesapeake Bay (personal communication from the National Marine Fisheries Service, Fisheries Statistics Division, 9 February 2015). In 2013, Virginia commercial landings were approximately 100,298 lbs; since mandatory reporting began in 1993, average annual landings in Virginia have been 193,200 lbs or 19% of the U.S. American Eel harvest (personal communication from the National Marine Fisheries Service, Fisheries Statistics Division, 9 February 2015).

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). 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) 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 recruitment over the historical coastal range in the U.S. and an early warning of potential range contraction of the species (ASMFC 2012). In 2014, 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 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).

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 to monitor glass eel recruitment 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 estuary and one each on the Rappahannock and James river estuaries. 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 affect water levels at 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. 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. 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. EnkamatTM 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 different year classes (Geer 2001; note: eels longer than 254 mm TL are not considered glass 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 for each site were calculated using the area-under-the-curve approach (Olney and Hoenig 2001).

Results

Recruitment of glass eels was below average at all monitoring sites in 2014 (Figures 2 and 3). Collections of young-of-year American Eel began on 27 February 2014 at Wormley and Bracken's ponds in the York River estuary, on 28 February 2014 at Wareham's Pond in the James River estuary, and on 14 March 2014 at Kamp's Millpond in the Rappahannock River estuary.

Traps were removed on 23 May 2014 from sites on the York River (86 days of continuous sampling) and James River sites (85 days of sampling). The Rappahannock River estuary trap was removed on 13 June 2014 after 95 days of sampling. In all, we collected 3,376 glass eels at Bracken's Pond, 36,894 glass eels at Wormley Pond (York River system), 1,979 glass eels at Wareham's Pond (James River system), and 4,167

glass eels at Kamp's Millpond (Rappahannock River System; Table 1).

We observed small numbers of glass eels as soon as traps were set in late February at Wormley ($n = 24$ glass eels) and Bracken's ponds ($n = 1$ glass eel), whereas glass eels arrived in early March at Wareham's Pond and mid-March at Kamp's Millpond (Figure 9). The majority of glass eels recruiting to Wormley Pond occurred in one 8-day period from 10 to 17 March and a similar recruitment pulse lasting approximately 11 days occurred at Kamp's Millpond nearly a month later. However, glass eels arrived throughout several weeks at Bracken's and Wareham's ponds. As we observed in previous years, peak counts of glass eels occur first in the York River estuary, followed by the James, Rappahannock, and Potomac river estuaries (Figure 11).

Elver indices were below average at Wormley and Bracken's ponds and also at Kamp's Millpond, however above-average abundance of elvers was observed at Wareham's Pond (Table 2; Figures 4 and 5). Catches of elver eels occurred throughout the monitoring period with no consistent pattern among locations (Figure 10). The number of elvers observed at Wareham's Pond was the highest observed since 2000 and follows a year of construction when the area below the spillway was redesigned. However, it is unknown if changes to the site influenced the catch of elvers. Catch rates of elvers from Wormley Pond continue to be below average for the seventh consecutive year (Figure 4).

We examined 511 glass eels from Wormley Pond for weight, length, and pigment stage determination in 2014. Total length (TL) of these glass eels ranged from 48.7 to 67.2 mm, with a mean length of 56.9 mm (3.15 standard deviation, SD). Weights of individual glass eels ranged from 0.056 to 0.221 g and averaged 0.126 g (0.028 SD; Figure 6). Mean TL of glass eels recruiting to Wormley Pond on the York River has remained consistent since 2001 (Figure 7). As expected, glass eel pigment stages increased monthly from March to May, 2014 (Figure 8).

Conclusions

Glass eel indices observed at all Virginia sites showed below-average recruitment in 2014. Recruitment of glass eels at any one site can vary from year to year, however below-average recruitment was also observed in 2013 at these sites. Decreased recruitment at all sites for two consecutive years is an indication of potentially weak year-classes in Virginia.

The timing of recruitment of glass eels to monitoring sites in Virginia supports the hypothesis of several pulses of glass eels entering and dispersing throughout Chesapeake Bay. 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 Bracken's Pond in the York system (59.4 km), 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. 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 2014).

How recruitment of glass eels translates into yellow-phase eel production and subsequent changes in spawning stock biomass remains unknown. However, we are collecting American Eel sub-adults from the VIMS Juvenile Fish Trawl Survey and also obtaining eel samples from the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries in a cooperative effort to compare the age distribution of sub-adult American Eels with the recruitment indices of glass eels. This unfunded project is underway and will be completed as time and personnel resources permit.

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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). 'NA' indicates that data are not available due to construction at this site in 2013.

Site	Year	Total Caught	AUC index	Site	Year	Total Caught	AUC index	
Wormley Pond	2001	82,267	83,492.5	Wareham's Pond	2003	2,230	2,350.6	
	2002	31,518	32,638.7		2004	158	165.3	
	2003	14,385	13,725.6		2005	225	224.1	
	2004	78,258	79,293.5		2006	3,280	3,266.3	
	2005	56,259	55,660.7		2007	953	959.3	
	2006	61,211	59,855.0		2008	2,456	2,417.2	
	2007	90,988	90,705.0		2009	5,322	5,192.3	
	2008	9,012	9,220.6		2010	672	648.5	
	2009	8,367	8,404.2		2011	12,871	14,318.0	
	2010	139,391	149,154.2		2012	3,933	4,042.1	
	2011	66,953	62,410.3		2013	NA	NA	
	2012	65,312	65,271.7		2014	1,979	1,969.8	
	2013	42,415	42,362.2					
	2014	36,894	38,447.9					
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			

Table 2. Total number of elver American Eels captured and the index of abundance using Area Under the Curve method (AUC). 'NA' indicates that data are not available due to construction at this site in 2013.

Site	Year	Total Caught	AUC index	Site	Year	Total Caught	AUC index	
Wormley Pond	2001	171	171.4	Wareham's Pond	2003	84	84.7	
	2002	315	314.6		2004	260	256.4	
	2003	138	140.5		2005	148	148.6	
	2004	257	264.7		2006	469	471.2	
	2005	105	108.6		2007	682	676.7	
	2006	160	158.4		2008	511	512.8	
	2007	619	612.8		2009	275	275.7	
	2008	139	140.0		2010	306	323.4	
	2009	31	32.0		2011	463	523.0	
	2010	80	71.9		2012	496	516.0	
	2011	79	104.9		2013	NA	NA	
	2012	79	69.9		2014	1,368	1,399.9	
	2013	99	112.1					
	2014	64	74.7					
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			

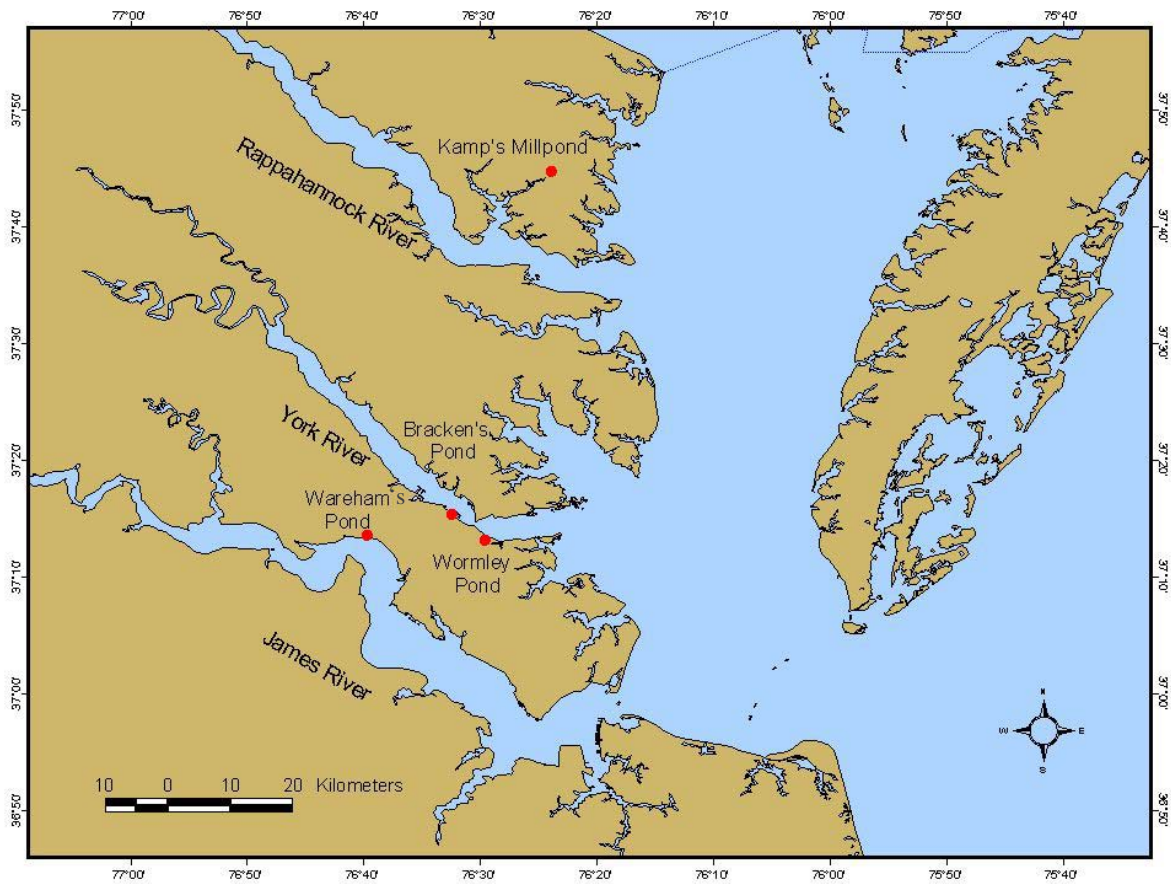


Figure 1. American Eel sampling sites in sub-estuaries of the Chesapeake Bay: the Rappahannock (Kamp's Millpond), York (Wormley Pond and Bracken's Pond), and James (Wareham's Pond) estuaries, Virginia, 2014.

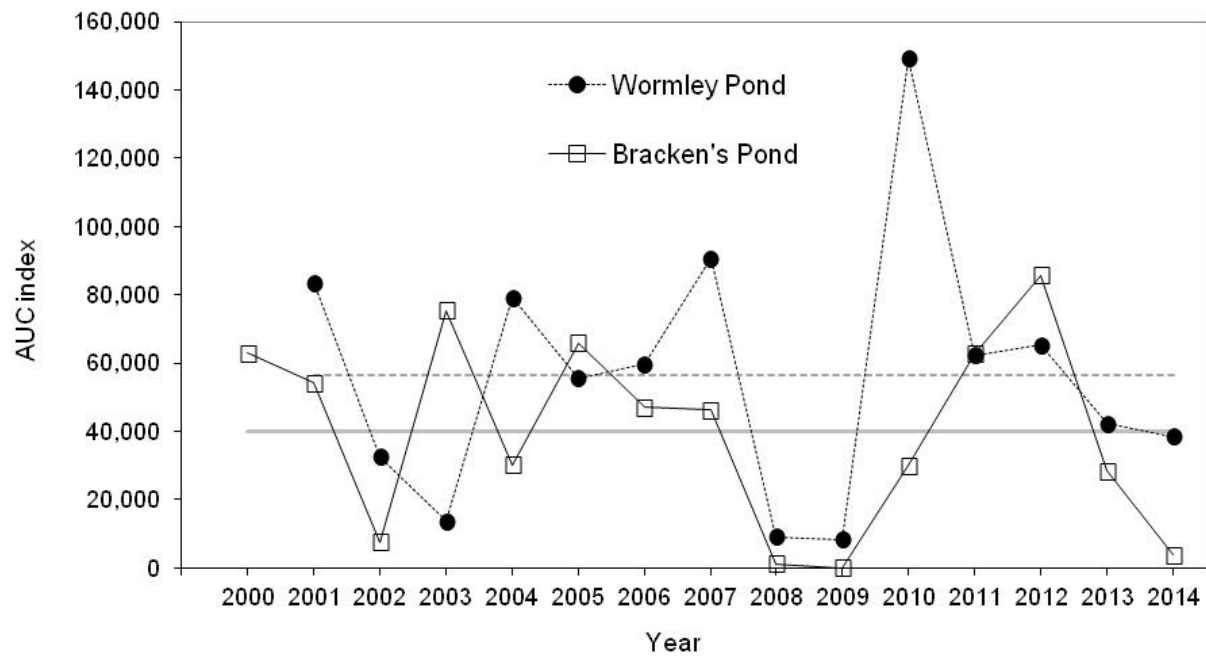


Figure 2. Abundance indices and time series average calculated by the area-under-the-curve method for glass American Eels from Wormley Pond and Bracken's Pond (York River estuary). Time series averages are shown as solid (Bracken's Pond) and dotted (Wormley Pond) lines.

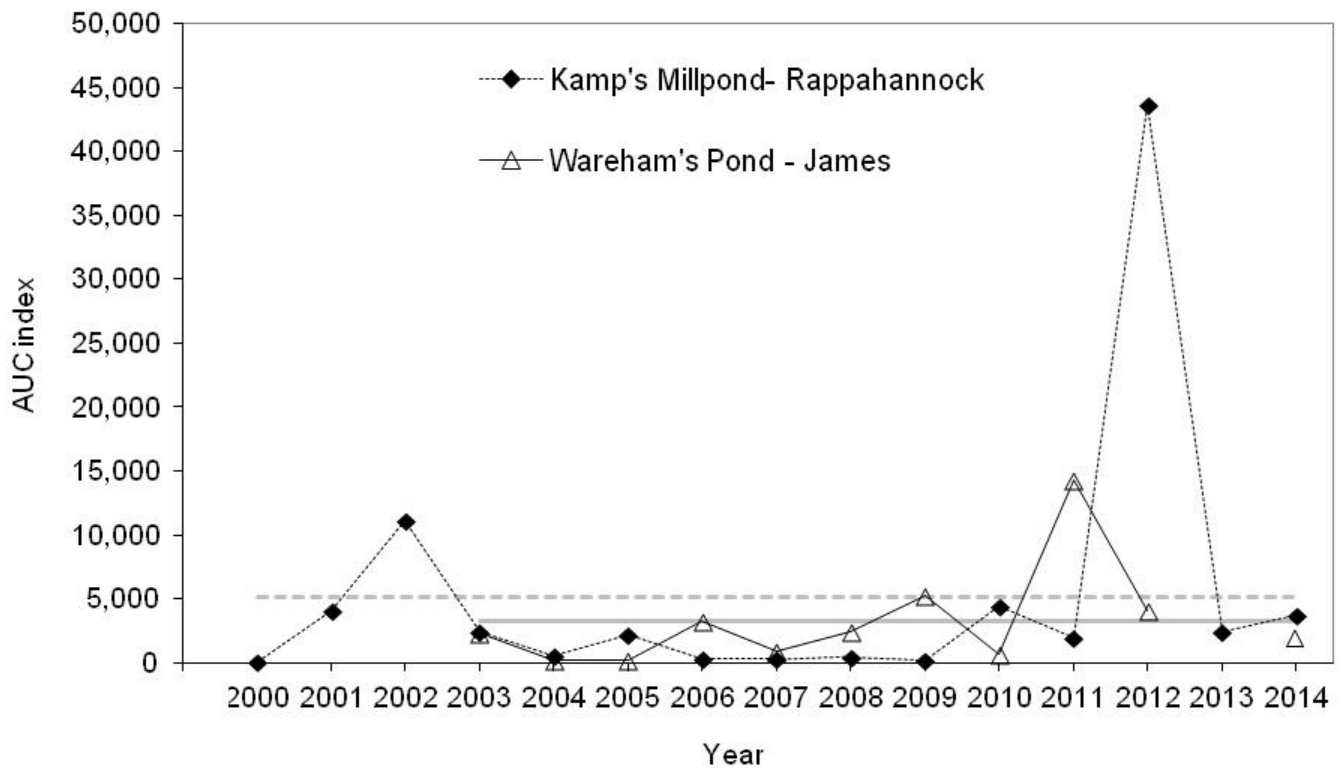


Figure 3. Abundance indices and time series average calculated by the area-under-the-curve method for glass American Eels from Wareham's Pond (James River estuary) and Kamp's Millpond (Rappahannock River estuary). Time series averages are shown as solid (Wareham's Pond) and dotted (Kamp's Millpond) lines.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

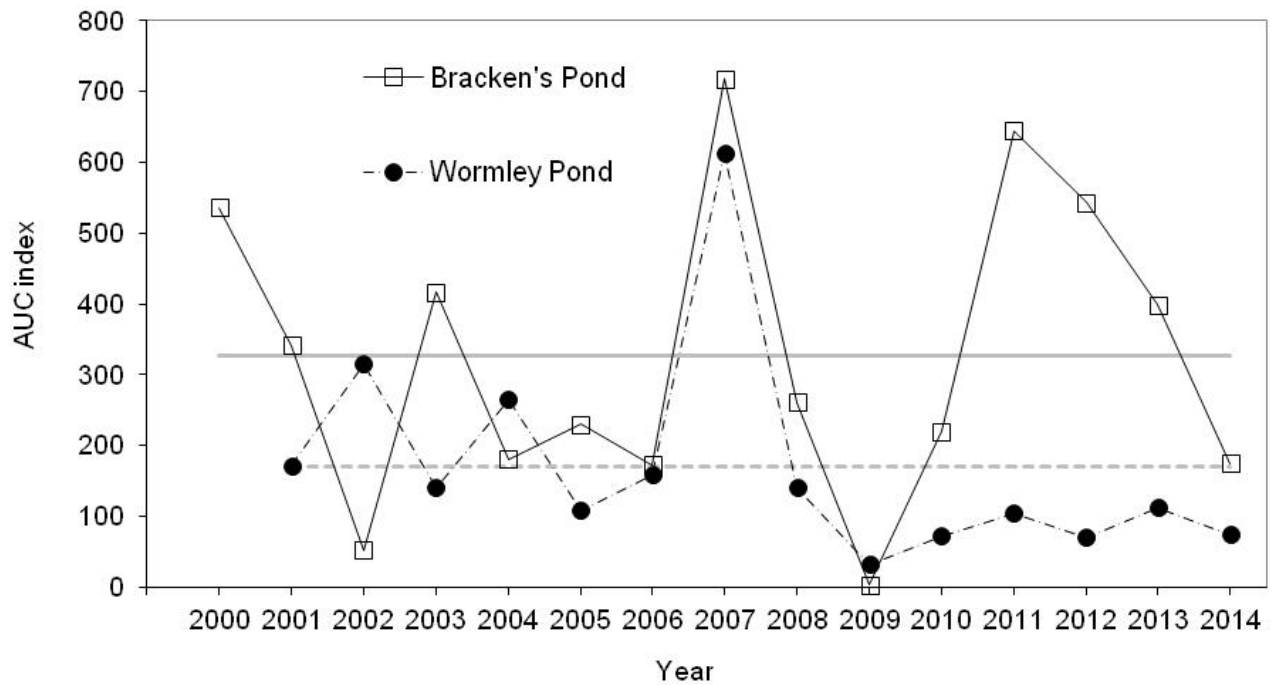


Figure 4. Abundance indices and time series average calculated by the area-under-the-curve method for elver American Eels from Wormley Pond and Bracken's Pond (York River estuary). Time series averages are shown as solid (Bracken's Pond) and dotted (Wormley Pond) lines.

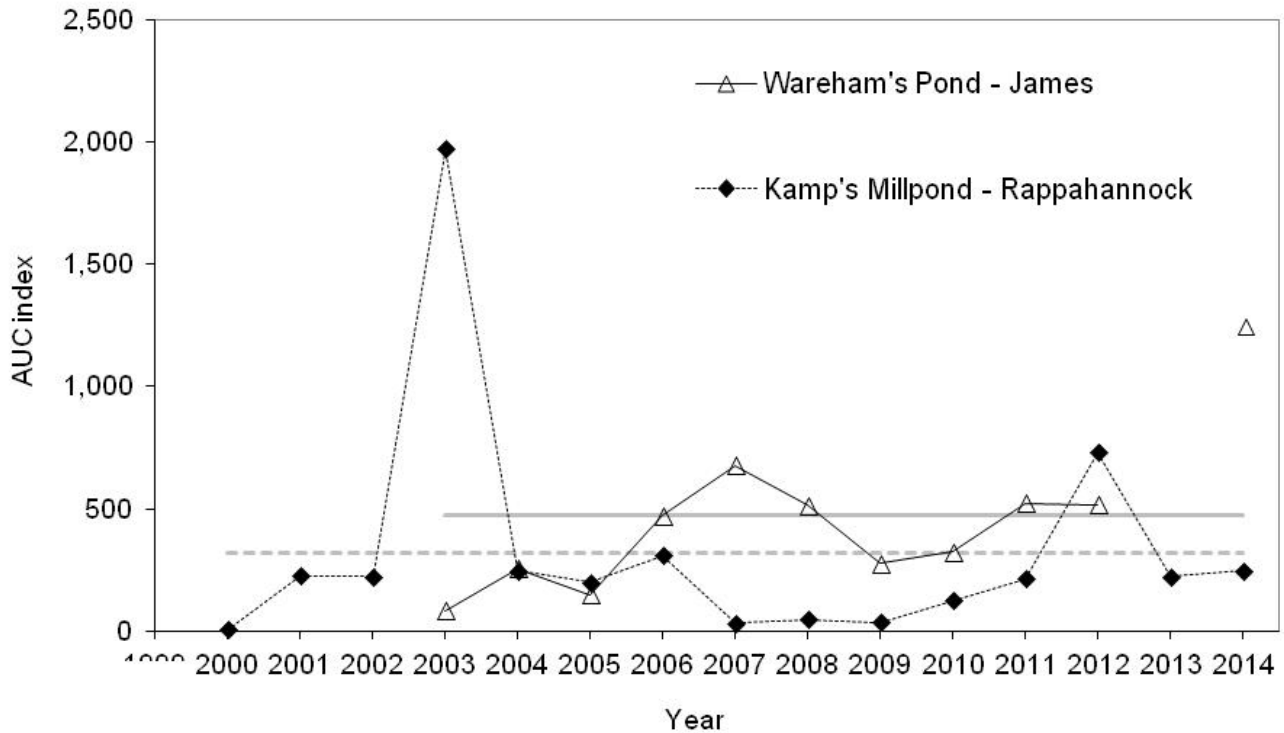


Figure 5. Abundance indices and time series average calculated by the area-under-the-curve method for elver American Eels from Wareham's Pond (James River estuary) and Kamp's Millpond (Rappahannock River estuary). Time series averages are shown as solid (Wareham's Pond) and dotted (Kamp's Millpond) lines. Wareham's Pond was not sampled in 2013 due to dam construction at our sampling site.

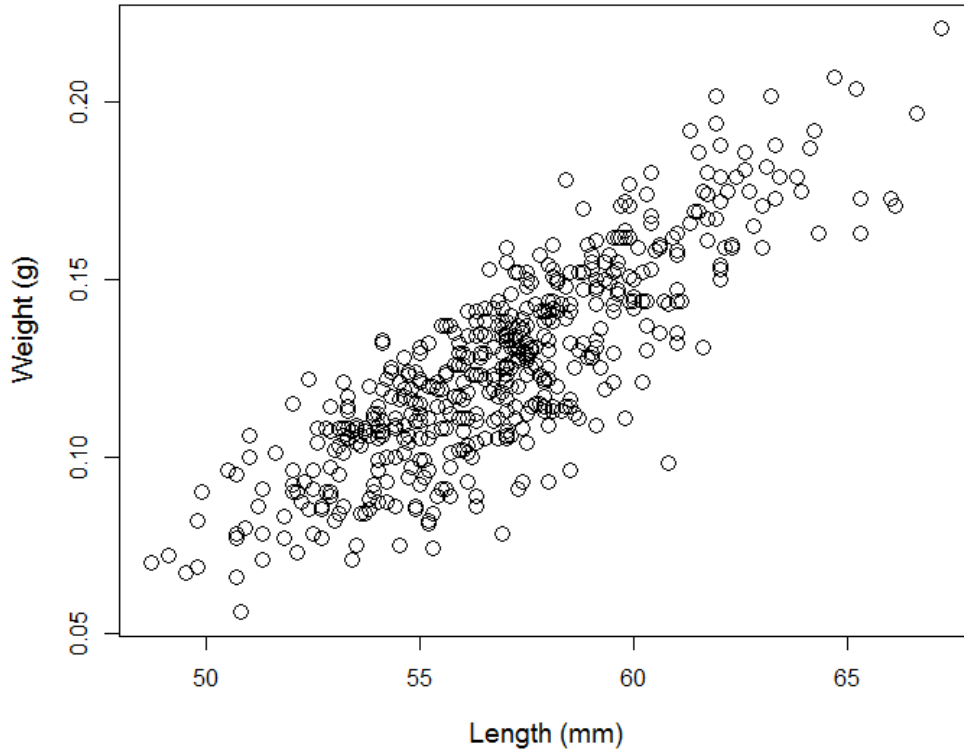


Figure 6. Length-weight relationship for glass American Eels from the York River estuary, 2014. Average TL = 56.9 mm, average weight = 0.126 g, N = 511 eels.

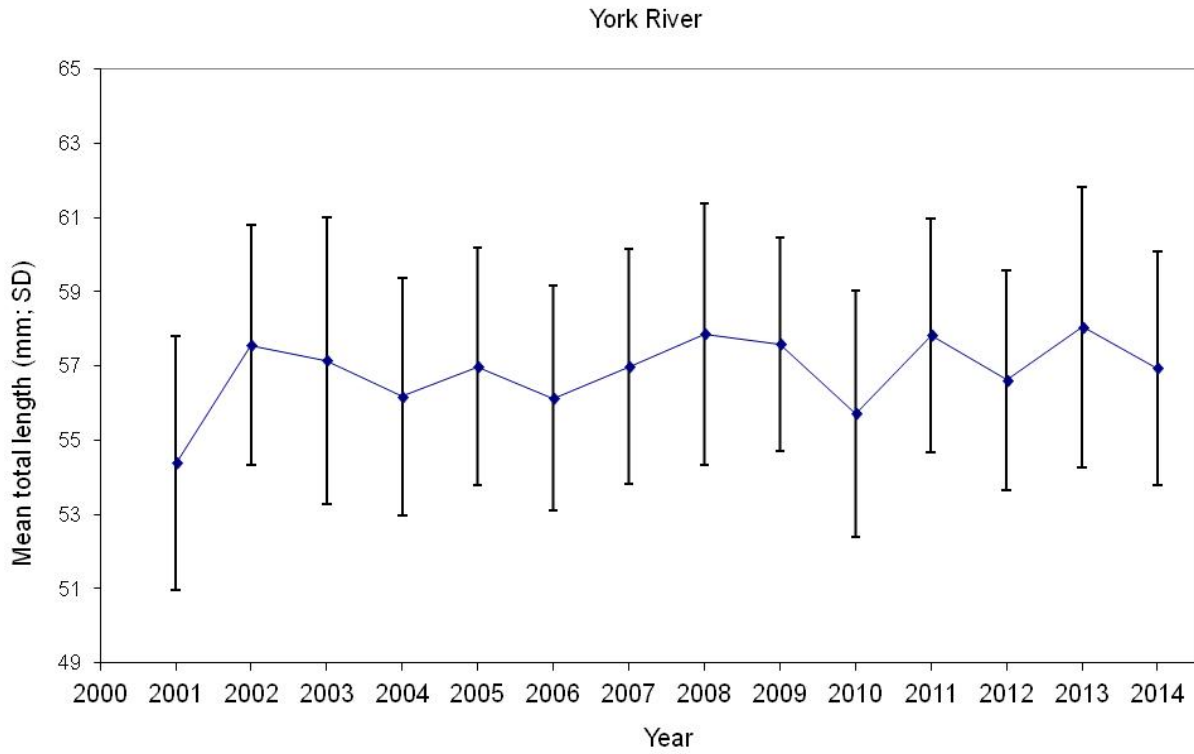


Figure 7. Mean total length (mm; SD) of glass American Eels collected with Irish Eel ramps from 2001 to 2014 from two sites combined (Wormley and Bracken's Ponds) in the York River estuary, Virginia. Long-term mean 56.9 mm (n = 14 years).

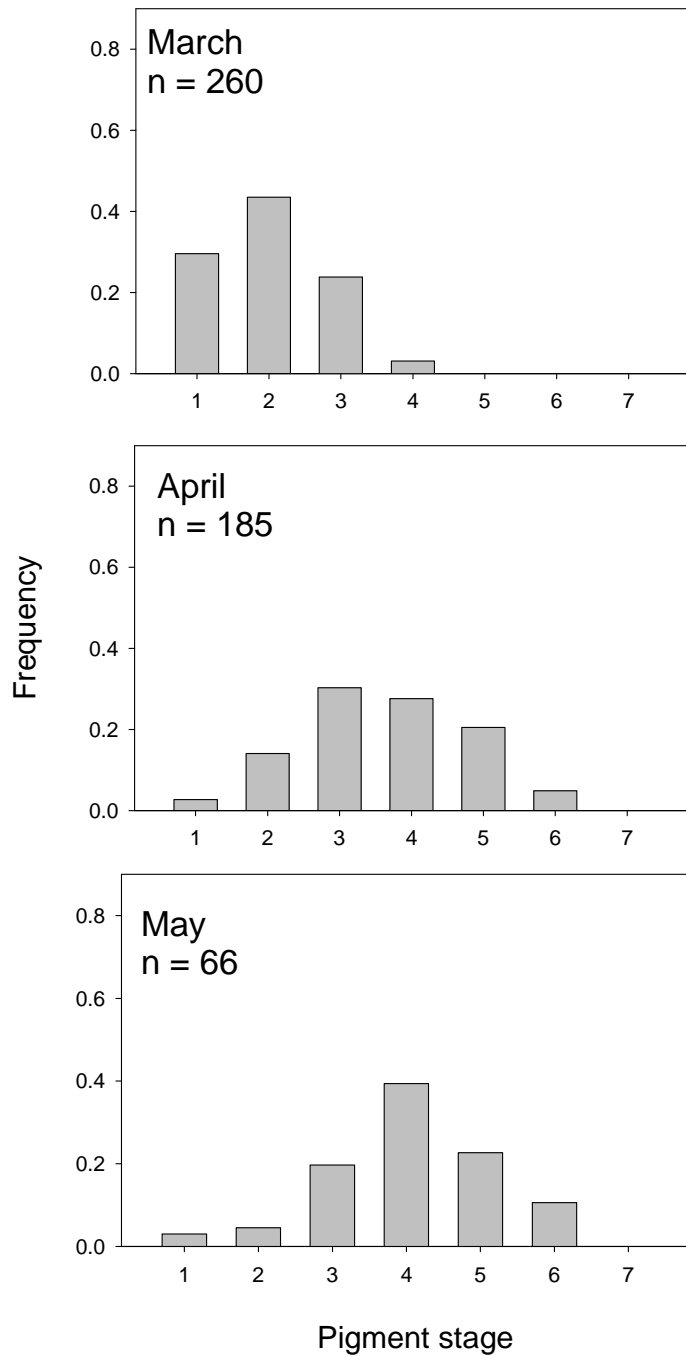


Figure 8. Frequency of pigment stages for glass eels by month for the York River estuary, 2014.

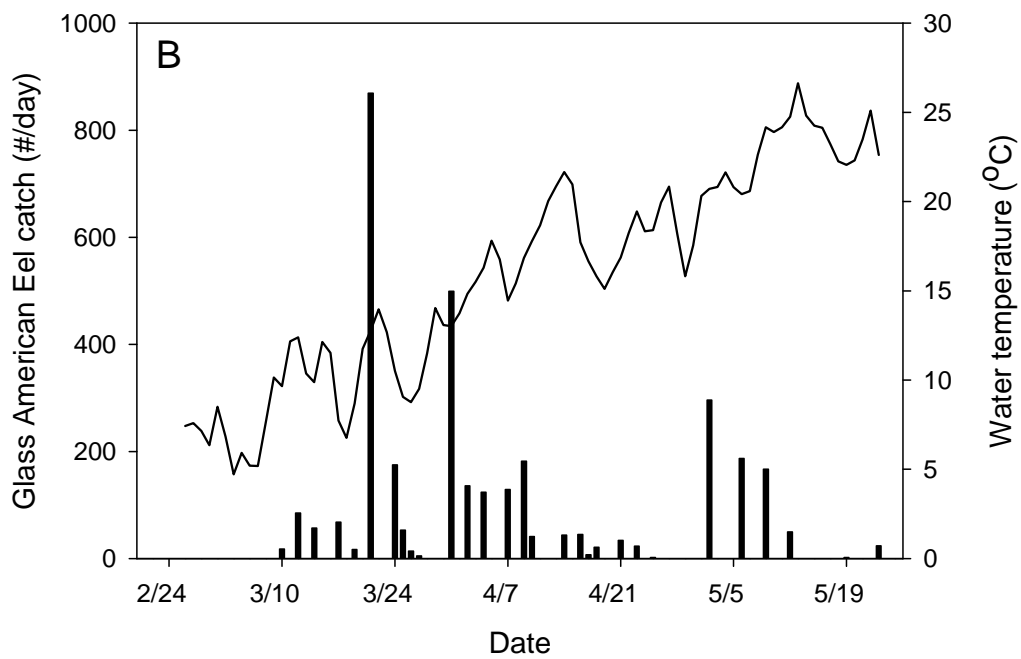
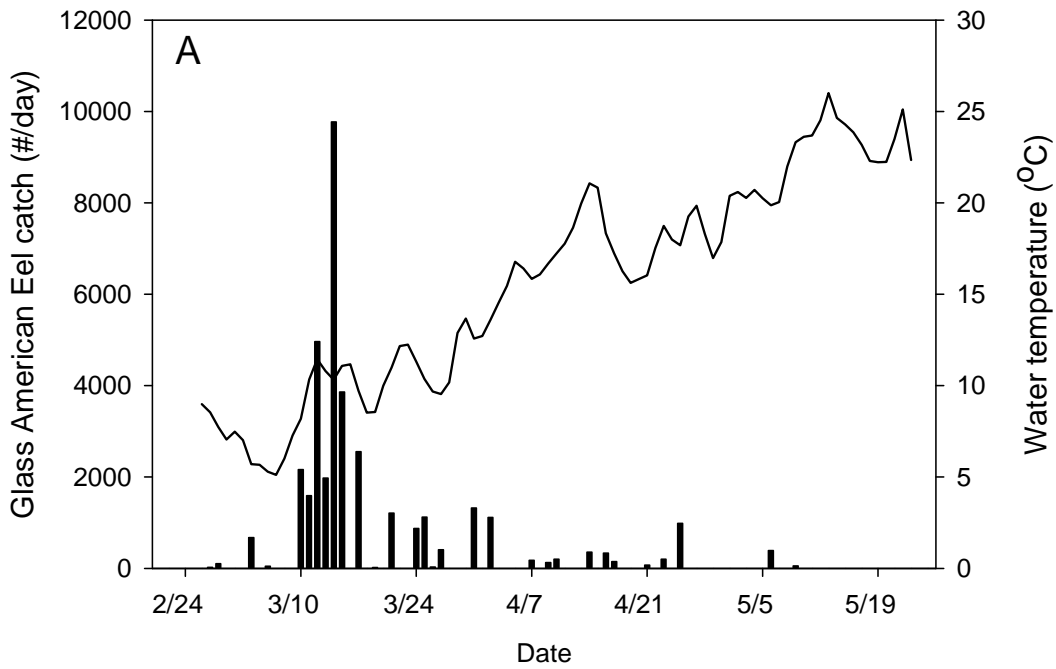


Figure 9. Glass American Eel catches (bars) and water temperature (line) in 2014 from (A) Wormley Pond, and (B) Bracken's Pond. Note axis scales are not uniform.

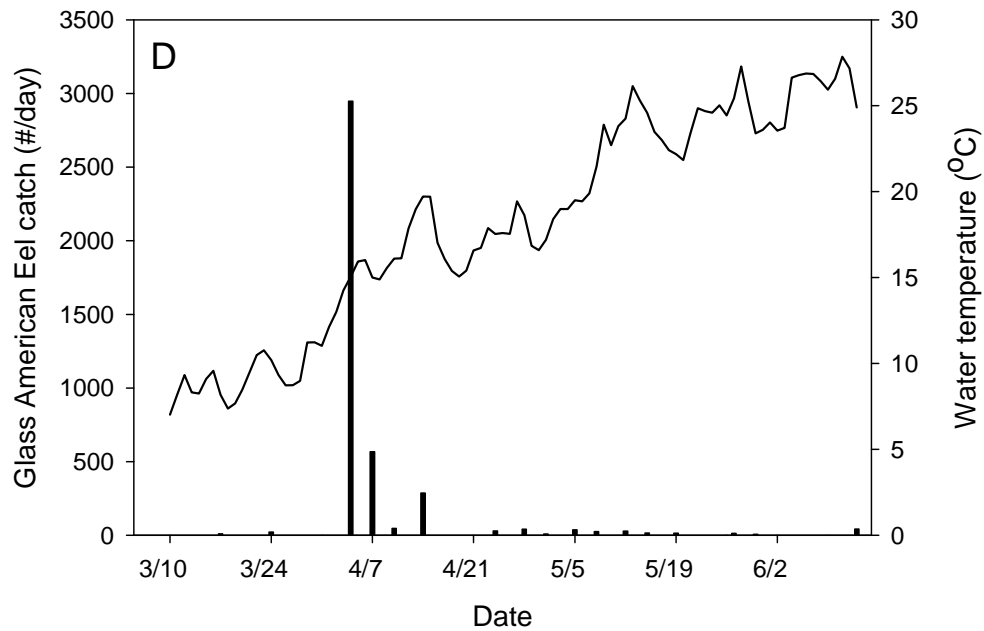
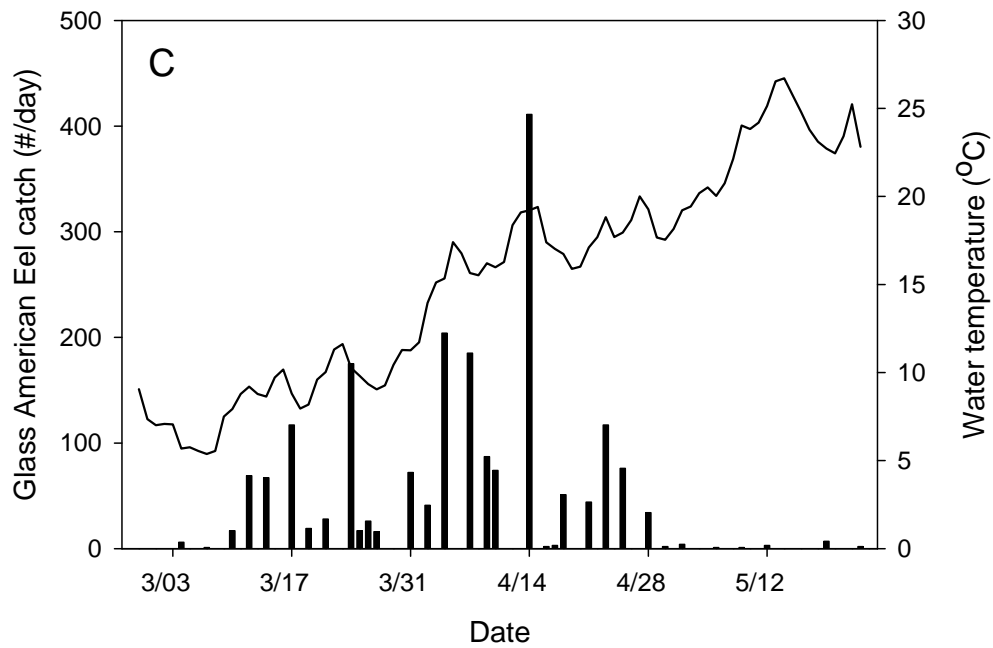


Figure 9 continued. Glass American Eel catches (bars) and water temperature (line) in 2014 from (C) Wareham's Pond, and (D) Kamp's Millpond. Note axis scales are not uniform.

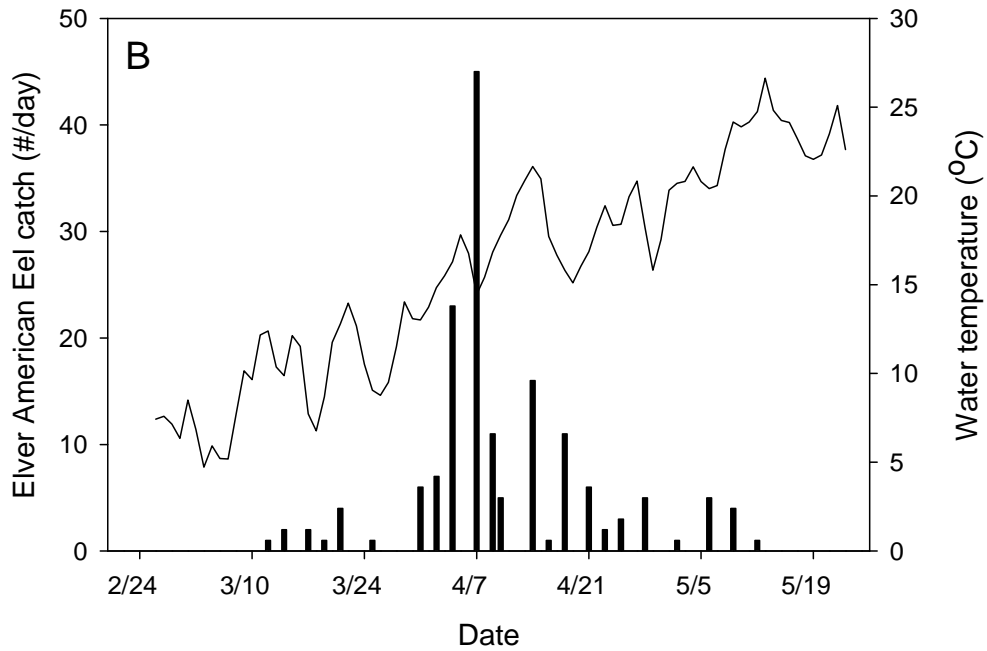
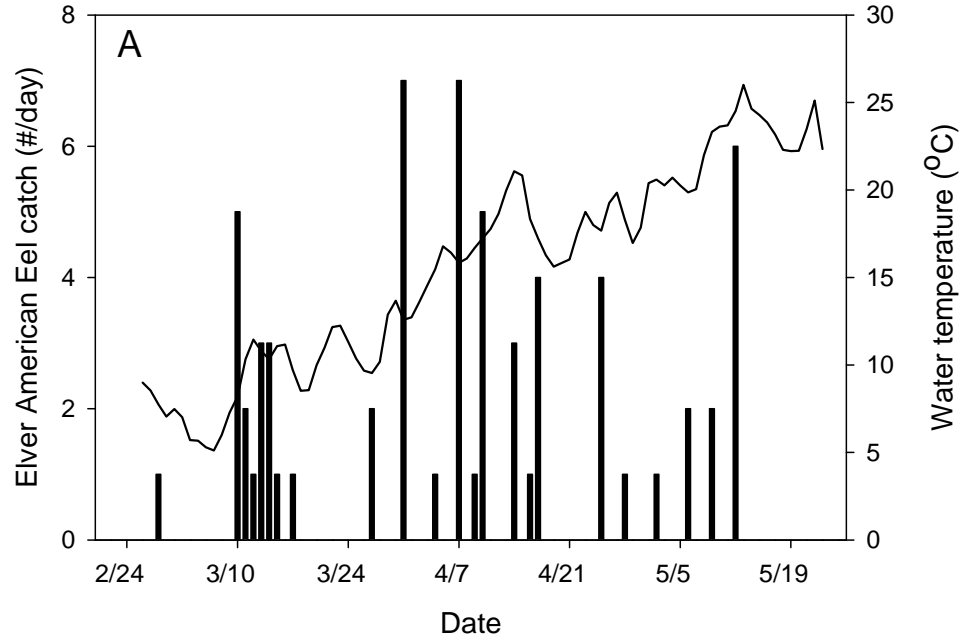


Figure 10. Elver American Eel catches (bars) and water temperature (line) in 2014 from (A) Wormley pond, and (B) Bracken's Pond. Note axis scales are not uniform.

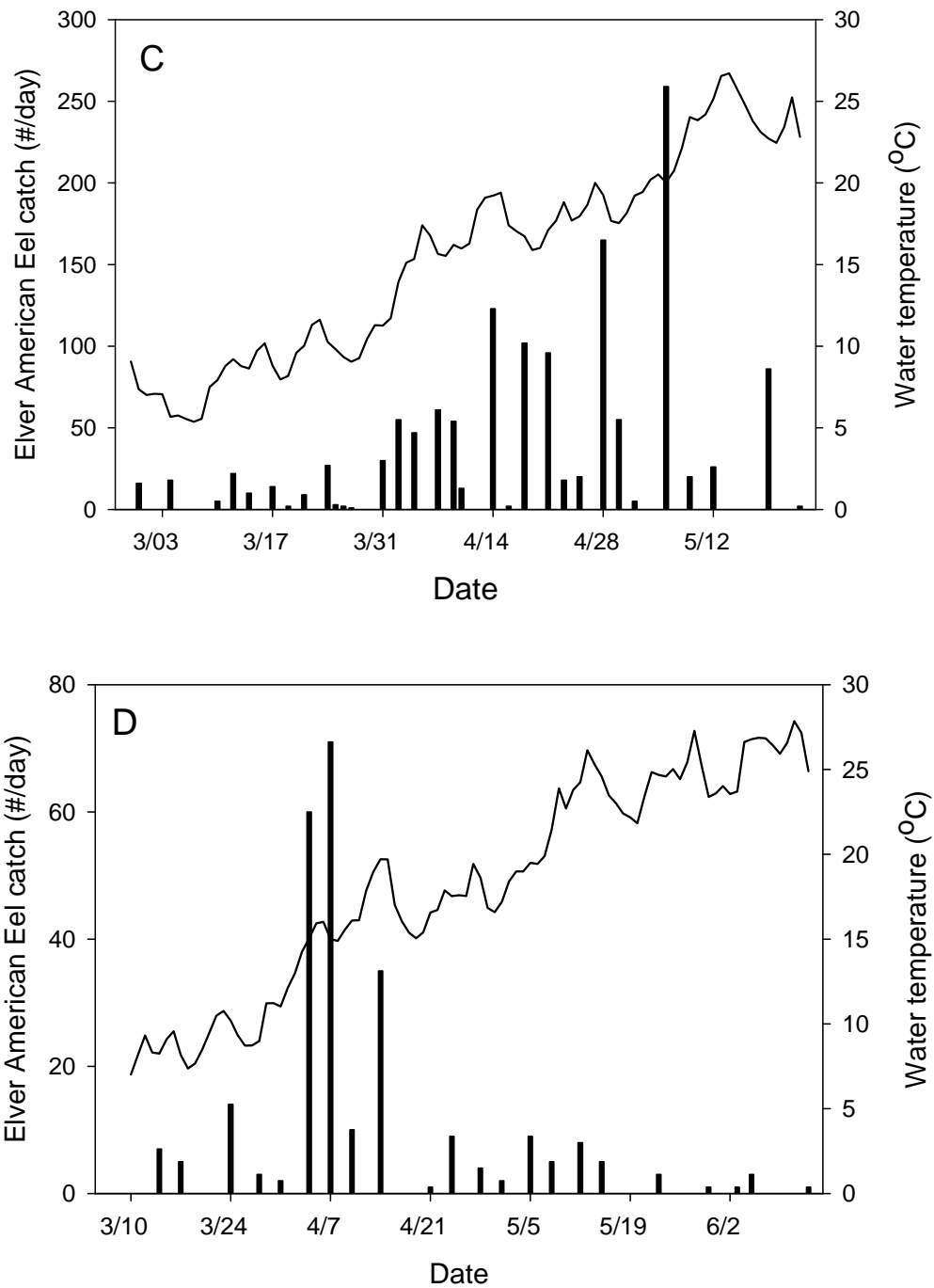


Figure 10 continued. Elver catches (bars) and water temperature (line) in 2014 from (C) Wareham's Pond, and (D) Kamp's Millpond. Note axis scales are not uniform.

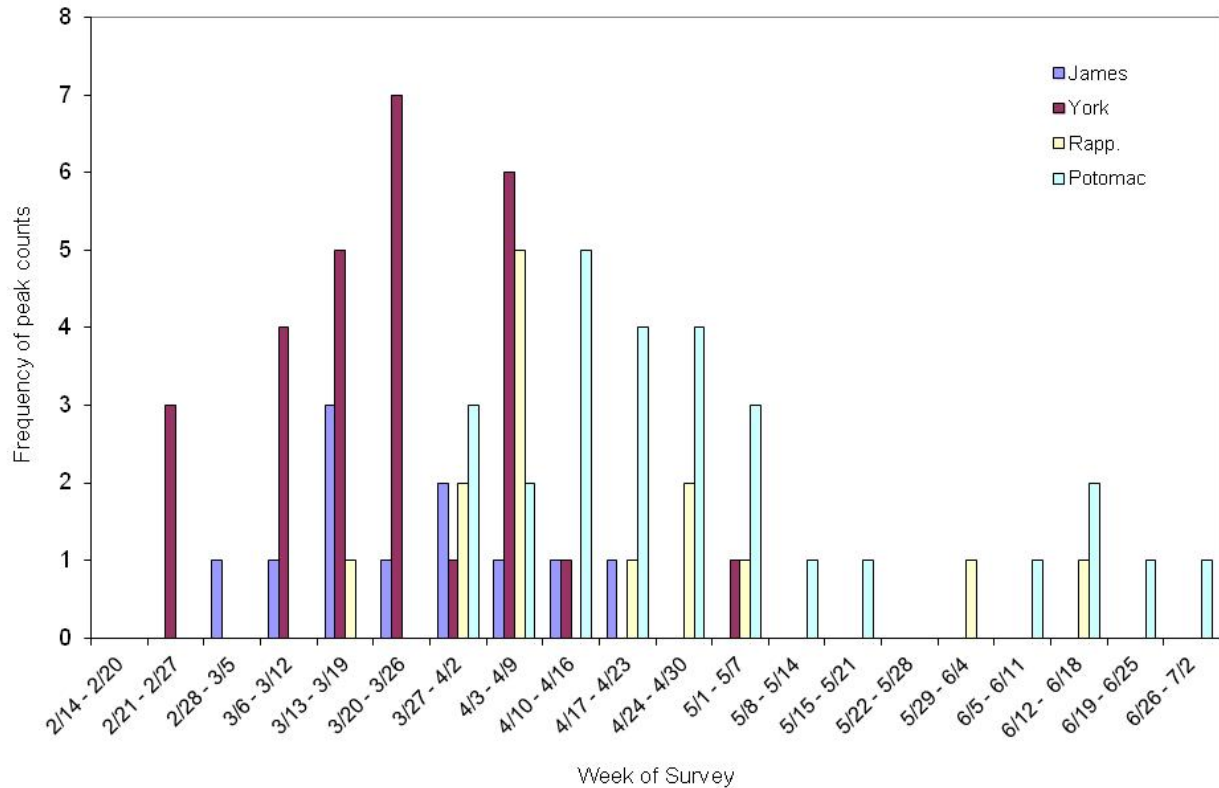


Figure 11. Survey week during which peak counts of glass eels were observed at each site from 2001 to 2014. Two sites are monitored in the York and Potomac estuaries each year (n = 28 observations per river). In the James River estuary, one site was monitored continuously since 2003, though this site was not accessible in 2013 (n = 11 observations). In the Rappahannock River estuary, one site was monitored each year (n = 14 observations). Potomac River data are from Tuckey and Fabrizio (2014).