



**Using acoustic imaging to observe potential predator-prey interactions between Bull Trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*) and migrating Sockeye Salmon (*Oncorhynchus nerka*) smolts**

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**TITLE:** Using acoustic imaging to observe potential predator-prey interactions between Bull Trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*) and migrating Sockeye Salmon (*Oncorhynchus nerka*) smolts

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## Abstract:

Annual migrations by juvenile Pacific Salmon (*Oncorhynchus spp.*) smolts are predictable and present opportunities for predators to aggregate and exploit these seasonal prey pulses. Within Chilko Lake, British Columbia, Canada, large-scale telemetry and stomach content analyses suggest the outmigration of Sockeye Salmon (*Oncorhynchus nerka*) smolts influences the movements and aggregations of Bull Trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*) that feed extensively on smolts during their outmigration. It is uncertain if these predator-prey patterns exist at finer spatial scales. We used Dual-frequency Identification Sonar (DIDSON) acoustic imaging to assess fine-scale predator-prey interactions between Sockeye Salmon smolts and Bull Trout over 10 days during the 2016 smolt outmigration. We found that smolt densities were correlated with feeding activity of Bull Trout upstream of a government installed fence used to estimate smolt numbers, consistent with observations at broader scales. Predator-prey interactions were also closely coupled with nocturnal migratory behaviors of Sockeye Salmon smolts, presumably to minimize predation risk. These results provide further evidence that the migrations of Sockeye Salmon smolts affect the behavior of Bull Trout and are important to this predator's ecology and provides insight on the role of anthropogenic structures (e.g., counting fences) in mediating predator-prey interactions.

49 Introduction:

50  
51 Pacific Salmon (*Oncorhynchus spp.*) are integral to the culture, livelihoods, and identity of First  
52 Nations and represent valuable recreational and commercial fisheries (Gislason et al. 2017).  
53 Ecologically, Pacific salmon mediate trophic relationships, where adult carcasses contribute  
54 significant nutrients to both stream and riparian ecosystems (Naiman et al. 2002). However,  
55 many species of Pacific Salmon, including Sockeye Salmon (*O. nerka*) of the Fraser River basin  
56 in British Columbia, have experienced substantial population-level declines (Peterman and  
57 Dorner 2012), resulting in threatened or endangered populations (COSEWIC 2017).

58 Sockeye Salmon juveniles typically rear in freshwater lakes for 1-3 years before they  
59 begin their seaward migration as smolts, a migration that requires a suite of behavioral and  
60 physiological changes (i.e., smoltification; Young et al. 1989) to cope with saltwater. While  
61 migrating, smolts also face predation from piscivorous fishes, birds, and mammals  
62 (Beamesderfer et al. 1996; Blackwell and Juanes 1998; Osterback et al. 2013; Furey et al. 2015;  
63 Flávio et al. 2021). As such, smolts exhibit a variety of behaviors to reduce their predation risk.  
64 For instance, both Sockeye Salmon and Atlantic Salmon (*Salmo salar*, which also undertake  
65 seaward migrations) smolts can migrate nocturnally (Ibbotson et al. 2006, 2011; Clark et al.  
66 2016; Furey et al. 2016a), presumably to minimize detection by visual predators. Furthermore,  
67 smolts can synchronize their migrations to find safety in numbers or “swamp” predators with  
68 large pulses of conspecific migrants (Furey et al. 2016a, 2021b). However, how densities of  
69 migrating smolts could impact the foraging behavior of predators is less well studied.

70 Chilko Lake (or T̓silhqox Biny), British Columbia, is home to one of the largest  
71 populations of Sockeye Salmon in Canada, and consequently this population is intensively  
72 studied (Bradford et al. 2000; Irvine and Akenhead 2013). Each spring, 10 - >40 million Sockeye

Salmon smolts (~96% age-1 smolts, ~4% age-2 smolts; Irvine and Akenhead 2013) emigrate from the lake towards the ocean. Acoustic telemetry revealed that the initial migratory corridor in the Chilko River (clear and slow-moving water) is high-risk relative to the turbid waters of the Chilcotin and Fraser Rivers downstream (Clark et al. 2016; Rechisky et al. 2019). Bull Trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*) feed extensively on migrating Sockeye Salmon smolts (Furey et al. 2015) near the Chilko Lake outlet (Furey et al. 2016b) and appear to synchronize their movements with the timing of the Sockeye Salmon smolt out-migration period (Furey and Hinch 2017; Kanigan 2019). Furthermore, Bull Trout in Chilko also appear to selectively feed on small smolts or those with specific infections (Furey et al. 2015, 2021a). In response, smolts migrate nocturnally and synchronize their movements to numerically overwhelm or swamp predators in the clear upper-river reaches of Chilko Lake (Clark et al. 2016; Furey et al. 2016a). Thus, this system is ideal for investigating fine-scale predator-prey interactions.

One method to passively observe predator-prey interactions is Dual-Frequency Identification Sonar (DIDSON). The DIDSON system uses acoustic imaging to allow for passive observations of fish behaviors, size distributions, and relative abundances, including in turbid water and at night (Burwen et al. 2010; Crossman et al. 2011; Martignac et al. 2015; Moursund et al. 2003; Maxwell and Gove 2007; Nichols et al. 2014). This technology can also be used to assess fish size distributions and relative abundances (Burwen et al. 2010; Crossman et al. 2011; Martignac et al. 2015). The present study uses DIDSON at the Chilko Lake-River outlet during the smolt outmigration to: 1) investigate both spatial and temporal differences in potential Bull Trout feeding activity and 2) determine if Bull Trout activity is synchronized with Sockeye Salmon migrations.

## Methods:

### *Study area.*—

This study was conducted at the outlet of Chilko Lake, British Columbia, Canada (51.294, -124.077; Fig. 1). Chilko Lake is a 180 km<sup>2</sup>, high elevation (~1100 m.a.s.l) lake that has a north-south orientation and is approximately 65 km long. Each spring, Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) installs a counting fence to estimate the numbers of outmigrant smolts. The DFO counting fence is located approximately 1.3-km downstream from Chilko Lake (Fig. 1) and has been deployed annually since the early 1950s, with the exception of 2017 and 2020 (Irvine and Akenhead 2013). Smolts are funneled through a constriction and pass over a white background where digital photographs are taken at regular time intervals to estimate hourly densities.

### *DIDSON deployment.*—

The DIDSON system (Sound Metrics, Bellevue, Washington) was deployed at five different locations (Fig. 1) from April 20 - April 29 in 2016 during the Sockeye Salmon smolt outmigration (Table 1). We deployed the DIDSON upstream of the counting fence (site UF; 51.625, -124.142; Fig. 1) from April 20 – 21 2016 and April 27 – 29 2016. We also stationed the DIDSON downstream of Chilko River (site DR; 51.626, -124.142; Fig. 1) from April 21 – 22 2016 and downstream of the counting fence (site DF; 51.625, -124.141; Fig. 1) from April 23 – 24 2016. Finally, the DIDSON was positioned at the outflow of Chilko Lake (site N; 51.615, -124.152; Fig. 1) from April 25 – 26 2016 and April 29, 2016 (site N; 51.615, -124.151; Fig. 1). The DIDSON was deployed on a custom-built metal tripod. This frame allowed the DIDSON to be placed ~0.5-m above the riverbed and kept the sensor between level to the water's surface and -15° and perpendicular to the flow. We used two different configurations of the DIDSON: the

first constrained the detection range to ~5 meters and the second to 10 meters into the river channel (Table 1), with the outlet or river width 70-100 m depending upon the site.

*DIDSON data collection and video processing.*—

Approximately 100 hours of DIDSON acoustic sonar videos were recorded and evaluated across the deployments. Video files from the DIDSON were analyzed in 30-minute intervals and viewed using the DIDSON Control and Display software (Sound Metrics, Bellevue, Washington). In each video, interactions between Bull Trout and out-migrating Sockeye Salmon smolts were recorded. For the purposes of this study, we defined interactions as any instance when it appeared that either Bull Trout or Sockeye Salmon smolts (or both) reacted to the presence or proximity of the other within the video. Bull Trout are the dominant piscivore present during the migration to feed on smolts (Furey et al. 2015, 2016b) and are generally much larger in body size (we measured at ~25-85 cm in length) than other fishes present at lower abundances (mountain whitefish and rainbow trout primarily) and thus generally identifiable on the DIDSON. Sockeye Salmon smolts present as “clouds” of small fish on the DIDSON and are easily identifiable.

Videos were processed at frame rates of ~25 - 50 frames·s<sup>-1</sup> and were played back, slowed down, and/or paused when interactions were detected. This was done to verify interactions between Bull Trout and Sockeye Salmon smolts. Further, these videos were viewed using the “Background Subtraction” tool to remove potential static background and to better visualize fish passing through the video. Recorded observations of interactions between Bull Trout and smolts were standardized to per m<sup>2</sup> (counts of interactions per m<sup>2</sup>) because the window length of the DIDSON (~5 m vs 10 m) and thus area observed, differed among deployments (Table 1). To

estimate the window area observed by the DIDSON ( $\sim 9.87 \text{ m}^2$  for the 5-m window length and  $\sim 29.27 \text{ m}^2$  for the 10-m window length), images of the DIDSON were imported and window area calculated using ImageJ (Schneider et al. 2012).

#### *Data analysis.—*

For the following analyses, non-parametric tests were used due to violations of model assumptions (i.e., homogeneity of variance, normally distributed residuals, etc.). Kruskal-Wallis rank sum tests were used to test for differences in the number of interactions per 30-minute interval, standardized to per  $\text{m}^2$  across all deployments; note that intervals containing zero interactions were included in this analysis. Non-parametric Wilcoxon rank sum tests were performed to test for differences in the number of standardized interactions ( $\text{m}^{-2}$  in each 30-minute interval) between daylight and nighttime hours (sunrise and sunset determined via <https://www.timeanddate.com/>) both collectively among all deployments, and with a separate test for each of the five individual deployments. Finally, correlations between migrating smolt densities (collected from the DFO counting fence) and standardized interactions (per hour, instead of every 30 minutes, to match the resolution of smolt density data from the counting fence) between Bull Trout and smolts were tested both collectively among all deployments and individually for each of the five different deployments using Spearman's rank order correlation coefficient. Furthermore, because we were only focused on predator-prey interactions during times of active smolt migrations, we removed any time period when smolts were not migrating due to fence closure (mostly during daylight hours), to better capture potential correlations between Bull Trout and smolt densities for these specific analyses. All statistical analyses were conducted using R v3.6.3 (R Core Team 2021).



<A>Results:

Interactions between smolts and Bull Trout throughout all deployments ranged from 0 - 4.86 interactions per  $\text{m}^2$  among 30-minute intervals (mean =  $0.63 \text{ m}^{-2}$ ; SD =  $0.99 \text{ m}^{-2}$ ). The number of standardized interactions observed between smolts and Bull Trout varied among deployments significantly (Kruskal-Wallis rank sum test,  $\chi^2 = 105$ ; df = 5;  $P < 0.001$ ). The highest number of interactions per  $\text{m}^2$  was observed during the Upstream Fence April 27 - 29 deployment (mean =  $1.37 \text{ m}^{-2}$ ; SD =  $1.18 \text{ m}^{-2}$ ; range = 0 -  $4.86 \text{ m}^{-2}$ ) and the lowest was observed during the Narrows April 29 deployment (mean =  $0.014 \text{ m}^{-2}$ ; SD =  $0.038 \text{ m}^{-2}$ ; range = 0 -  $0.10 \text{ m}^{-2}$ ; Table 1). Furthermore, the number of standardized interactions among 30-minute intervals varied with the diel cycle when aggregated across all deployments ( $W = 2693.5$ ;  $P < 0.01$ ; Fig. 2); Interactions were highest during night-time hours and ranged from 0 to 4.86 interactions per  $\text{m}^2$  (mean =  $1.19$ ; SD =  $1.24$ ) relative to during the day (mean =  $0.225 \text{ m}^{-2}$ , SD =  $0.44 \text{ m}^{-2}$ ). Among individual deployments, nighttime interactions (per  $\text{m}^2$ ) were significantly higher than daytime interactions during the Upstream Fence April 20 - 21 deployment (daytime mean =  $0.05 \text{ m}^{-2}$ ; SD =  $0.11 \text{ m}^{-2}$ , nighttime mean =  $0.78 \text{ m}^{-2}$ ; SD =  $0.42 \text{ m}^{-2}$ ;  $W = 11$ ;  $P < 0.01$ ; Fig. 3A) and the Upstream Fence April 27 - 29 deployment (daytime: mean =  $0.54 \text{ m}^{-2}$ ; SD =  $0.57 \text{ m}^{-2}$ , nighttime: mean =  $2.35 \text{ m}^{-2}$ ; SD =  $0.93 \text{ m}^{-2}$ ;  $W = 79.5$ ;  $P < 0.01$ ; Fig. 3E), but other deployments did not demonstrate such a diel relationship ( $P > 0.05$ ).

Smolt density estimates obtained from the DFO counting fence ranged from 200 - 882,717 smolts per hour when smolts were actively migrating. The number of hourly interactions and smolt densities were not correlated when these data were aggregated across all deployments (Spearman's correlation,  $\rho = -0.20$ ;  $P = 0.11$ ). However, a significant and strong positive correlation did exist between the number of hourly interactions and smolt densities for the

Upstream Fence April 27 - 29 deployment (Spearman's correlation,  $\rho = 0.68$ ;  $P < 0.001$ ; Fig. 3E). A similar positive correlation also existed for the Upstream Fence April 20 - 21 deployment, but was not significant (Spearman's correlation,  $\rho = 0.52$ ;  $P = 0.19$ ; Fig. 3A).

#### Discussion:

Interactions between Bull Trout and migrating Sockeye Salmon smolts appeared to increase during nighttime hours, particularly upstream of the counting fence (Fig. 3A; Fig. 3E). Given that the smolt migration is largely nocturnal (Clark et al. 2016; Furey et al. 2016a), it is intuitive that nighttime hours would provide the most opportunities for predator-prey interactions. Smolts likely exhibit nocturnal migrations to mitigate foraging efficiency from visual predators, as seen in other salmonid migrations in fresh water (Ibbotson et al. 2006; 2011; Haraldstad et al. 2017). We also observed that Bull Trout respond by actively interacting with smolts during nighttime (when smolt migration is densest), demonstrating that Bull Trout likely synchronize their movements and behaviors in response to outmigrant smolts at fine spatial and temporal scales, as they do at broader scales (Furey and Hinch 2017; Kanigan 2019). Due to the resolution of the DIDSON system, we were unable to confirm actual predation events, estimate the number of smolts consumed, or quantify the effectiveness of synchronized nocturnal movements of smolts (i.e., predator swamping; Furey et al. 2016a; Furey et al. 2021b). Future studies could couple the use of acoustic imaging, which is consistently improving, and other methods (e.g., diet studies or high-resolution telemetry) to quantify Bull Trout predation rates on smolts.

Activity of Bull Trout was most tightly linked with smolt migration densities for deployments when the DIDSON was deployed just upstream of the counting fence (Fig. 3E). Potential feeding activity of Bull Trout was most positively correlated with smolt densities upstream of the fence, but not elsewhere in the system. Thus, it appears smolt-Bull Trout

interactions are most tightly coupled just upstream of this anthropogenic structure. In fact, Bull Trout feed at higher rates (e.g., at *ad libitum*) at the counting fence relative to other locales (Furey et al. 2016b), and it appears that fine-scale behaviors (i.e., actively pursuing smolts as they appear as observed by the DIDSON) likely reflect these observations of feeding intensity. As a result, the counting fence may create a spatial bottleneck for migrant smolts to pass. It is possible that the constriction of the counting fence, and potentially the presence of Bull Trout, may concentrate smolts within a small area, slowing the movement speeds of smolts, and thus, increasing the foraging efficiency of Bull Trout. However, further research could better quantify how smolts behave as they pass through the counting fence relative to other landscapes, and if mortality is higher at the fence, potentially via telemetry tracking upstream of the fence. Given the short duration of our study (10 days), which was due to opportunistic use of the DIDSON during other field programs, we believe our conclusions could be better supported by monitoring the upstream fence site more intensively (i.e., additional days), with concurrent comparisons of other sites. We also acknowledge that with only one DIDSON unit, we were unable to compare differences in predator-prey interactions between or among sites simultaneously.

Although beyond the scope of our study, a variety of factors could affect the predator-prey interactions between Sockeye Salmon smolts and Bull Trout. Several studies have found that smaller smolts tend to have lower survival rates, likely due to size-dependent predation (West and Larkin 1987; Saloniemi et al. 2004; Duffy and Beauchamp 2008; Tucker et al. 2016). Similarly, smolts in poor body condition (Tucker et al. 2016) or experiencing specific infections (Miller et al. 2014; Jeffries et al. 2014; Furey et al. 2021a) can experience increased predation or mortality. Further research could attempt to quantify behavioral mechanisms of predation-based selection processes and how such selection might be affected by anthropogenic structures.

Human-altered landscapes can influence the risk landscape for migratory animals (Sabal et al. 2021). Dams and other barriers are well known to constrict and even at times, obstruct fish movement, and can aggregate predators, increasing mortality of migrant fishes (Blackwell and Juanes 1998; Davis et al. 2012; Keefer et al. 2012; Sabal et al. 2016). However, temporary structures such as counting fences or weirs are commonly used, but generally less studied than permanent structures, even though they can affect predator-prey interactions (Furey et al. 2016b). Our study suggests that a temporary counting fence, even one that has been relied on for management (Irvine and Akenhead 2013), can mediate predator-prey interactions and pose a potential challenge to migrants by affecting predator or prey behavior. Thus, the impacts of temporary structures on fish behavior and predator-prey interactions likely deserve more attention given that they are often used during times of important life history events such as migrations.

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401 Tables:

402

403 Table 1. Summary data for DIDSON deployments in Chilko Lake, British Columbia, Canada,

404 from April 20 – 29, 2016 during a Sockeye Salmon smolt outmigration period. The detection

405 window area (m<sup>2</sup>) represents the approximate area observed by the DIDSON. The total number

406 of interactions are the sum of all interactions detected for a given deployment. The total number

407 of smolts per deployment are the sum of smolt densities (estimated hourly) for a given night

408 from the counting fence.

DIDSON deployment (Site and date)	Hours of video footage	Detection window area (m <sup>2</sup> )	Average number of interactions $\pm$ SD (m <sup>2</sup> per 30 minutes)	Minimum number of interactions (m <sup>2</sup> per 30 minutes)	Maximum number of interactions (m <sup>2</sup> per 30 minutes)	Total number of interactions	Total number of smolts per deployment
Upstream Fence (UF) April 20 – 21 2016	14	29.27	0.444 $\pm$ 0.484	0	1.61	364	1,054,978
Downstream River (DR) April 21 – 22 2016	14.5	29.27	0.062 $\pm$ 0.924	0	0.376	52	1,082,198
Downstream Fence (DF) April 23 – 24 2016	22	29.27	0.008 $\pm$ 0.018	0	0.068	23	5,339,320
Narrows (N) April 25 -26 2016	5.5	29.27	0.016 $\pm$ 0.023	0	0.068	5	26,000
Upstream Fence (UF) April 27 – 29 2016	41.5	9.87	1.37 $\pm$ 1.18	0	4.86	1032	2,041,534
Narrows (N) April 29 2016	3.5	29.27	0.015 $\pm$ 0.039	0	0.102	3	NA

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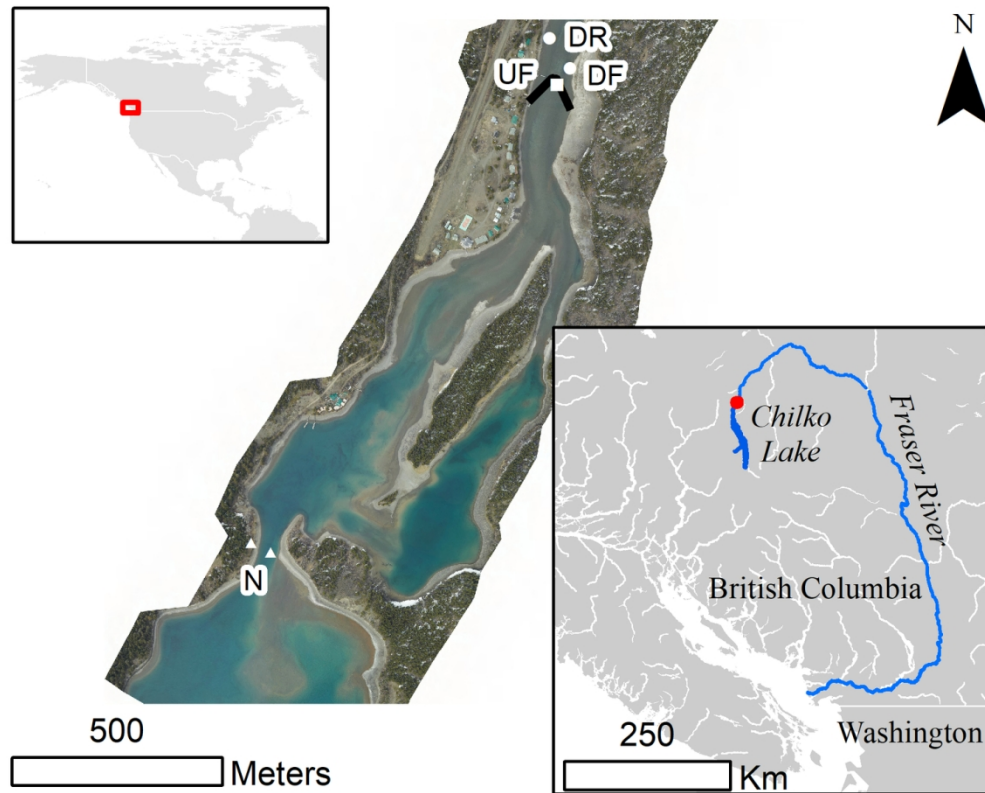
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Figures:

Figure 1. Map of Chilko Lake, British Columbia, Canada (51.294, -124.077). Aerial image of the upper reaches of Chilko Lake shows the positions (white shapes) of where the DIDSON system was deployed from April 20 - 29th, 2016, during the smolt outmigration period. The white square indicates DIDSON deployments upstream of the government operated counting fence (UF), white circles denote deployments downstream from Chilko River (DR) and downstream from the counting fence (DF), and white triangles indicate deployments at the narrow river segments (N). See Table 1 for more information on deployments. The government operated counting fence is denoted in black. The red dot in the lower right inset represents the approximate position of where the study was conducted. The red square on the upper left inset denotes the location of Chilko Lake in North America.

Figure 2. Total interactions ( $m^{-2}$ ) among 30-minute intervals detected between Bull Trout and smolts throughout all DIDSON deployments. Observations were made across diel cycles (Daytime:  $n = 116$ ; Nighttime:  $n = 86$ ). Daylight and nighttime hours were determined via <https://www.timeanddate.com/>. Results from the Wilcoxon rank sum test are displayed on the left upper corner. Points are jittered horizontally for visibility. The lines in the middle of the boxplots indicate the median, and the left and right edges represent the 25<sup>th</sup> and 75<sup>th</sup> percentiles respectively. Whiskers represent 1.5-times the interquartile range.

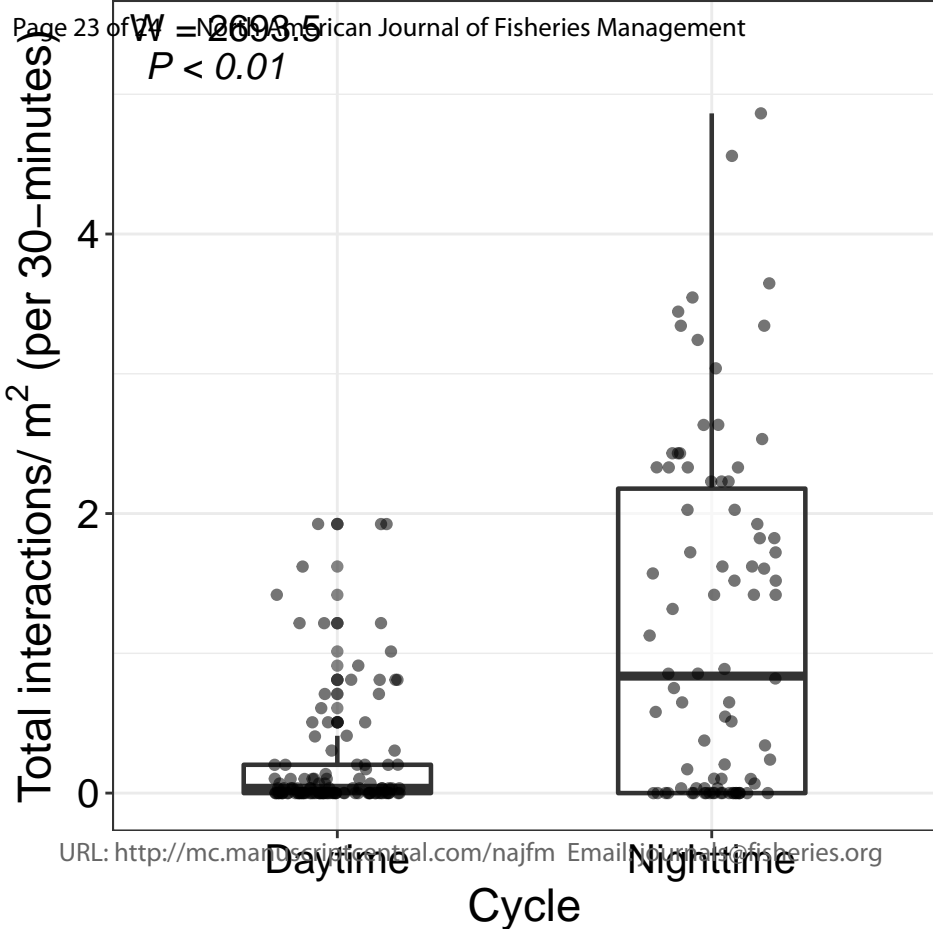
Figure 3. The number of interactions per m<sup>2</sup> and per unit time (1 hour) detected between Bull Trout and smolts (blue, left y-axis) plotted alongside hourly smolt density estimates (orange, right y-axis) across time. Grey shading indicates nighttime hours. Plots A - F display interactions and smolt density estimates across different deployment-night combinations (refer to Table 1 for additional information on deployments). Smolt densities were not observed for plot F due to fence closures during the daytime.



Map of Chilko Lake, British Columbia, Canada (51.294, -124.077). Aerial image of the upper reaches of Chilko Lake shows the positions (white shapes) of where the DIDSON system was deployed from April 20 - 29th, 2016, during the smolt outmigration period. The white square indicates DIDSON deployments upstream of the government operated counting fence (UF), white circles denote deployments downstream from Chilko River (DR) and downstream from the counting fence (DF), and white triangles indicate deployments at the narrow river segments (N). See Table 1 for more information on deployments. The government operated counting fence is denoted in black. The red dot in the lower right inset represents the approximate position of where the study was conducted. The red square on the upper left inset denotes the location of Chilko Lake in North America.

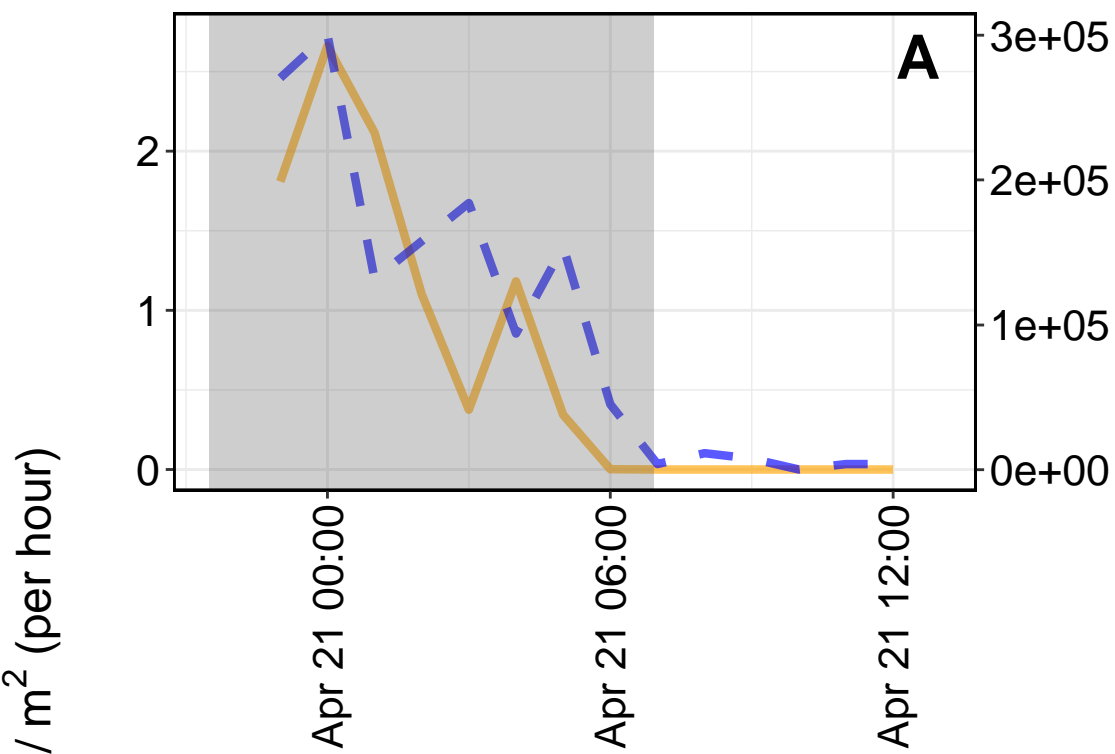
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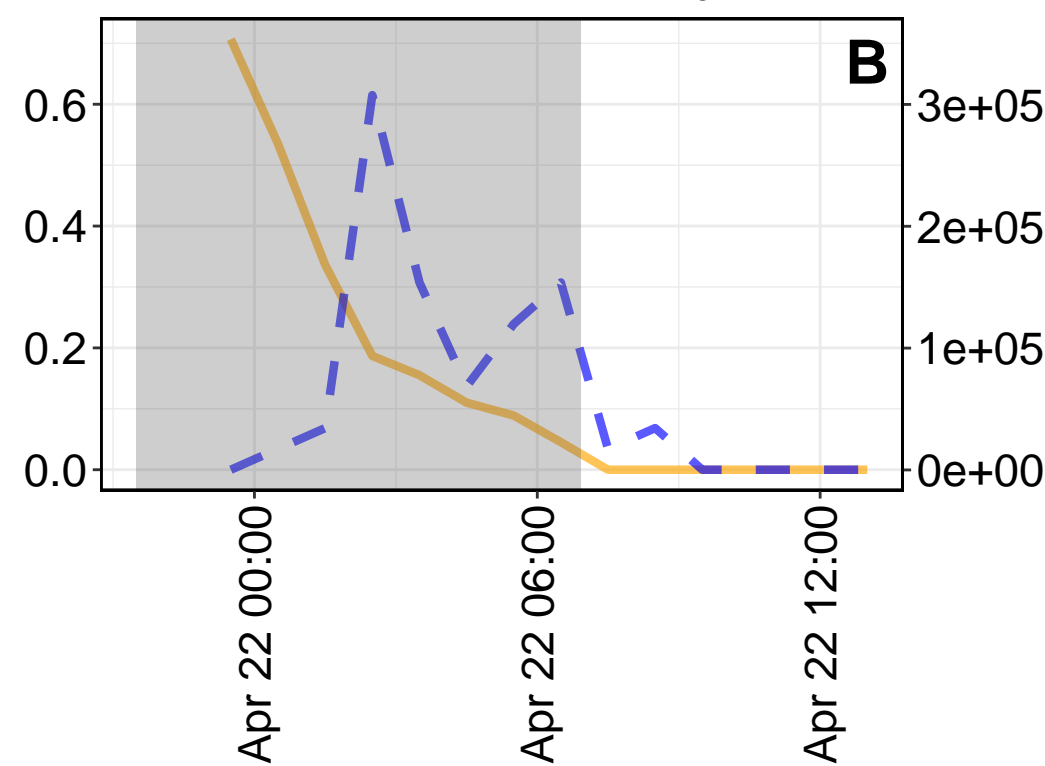


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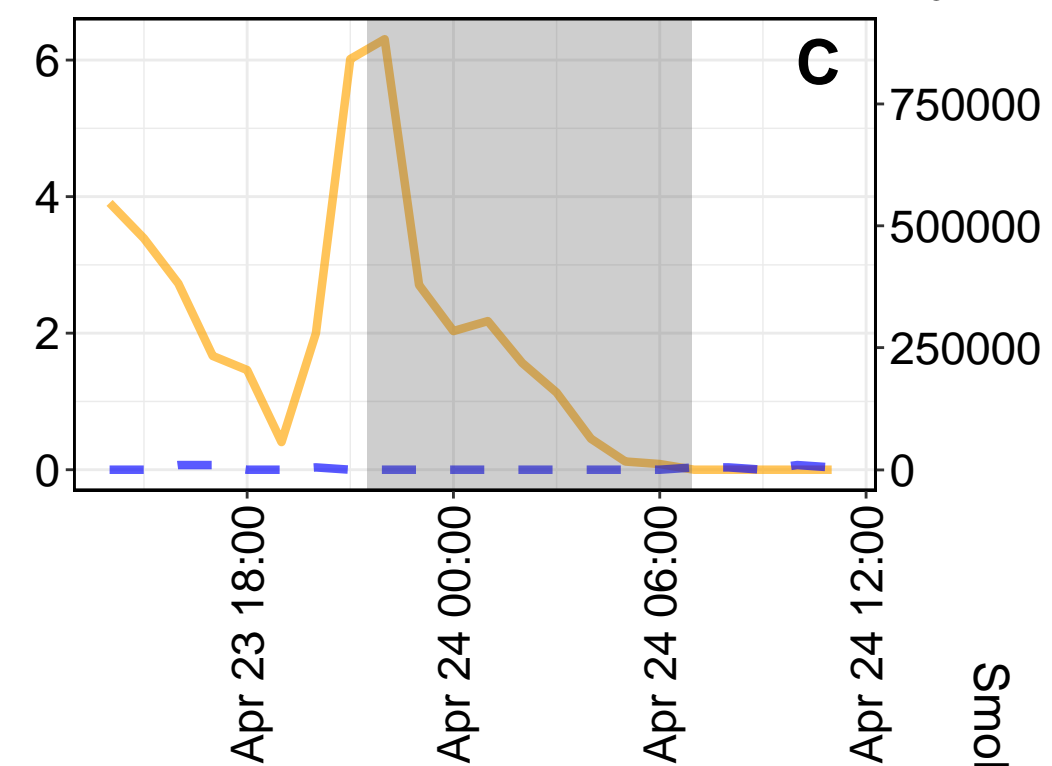
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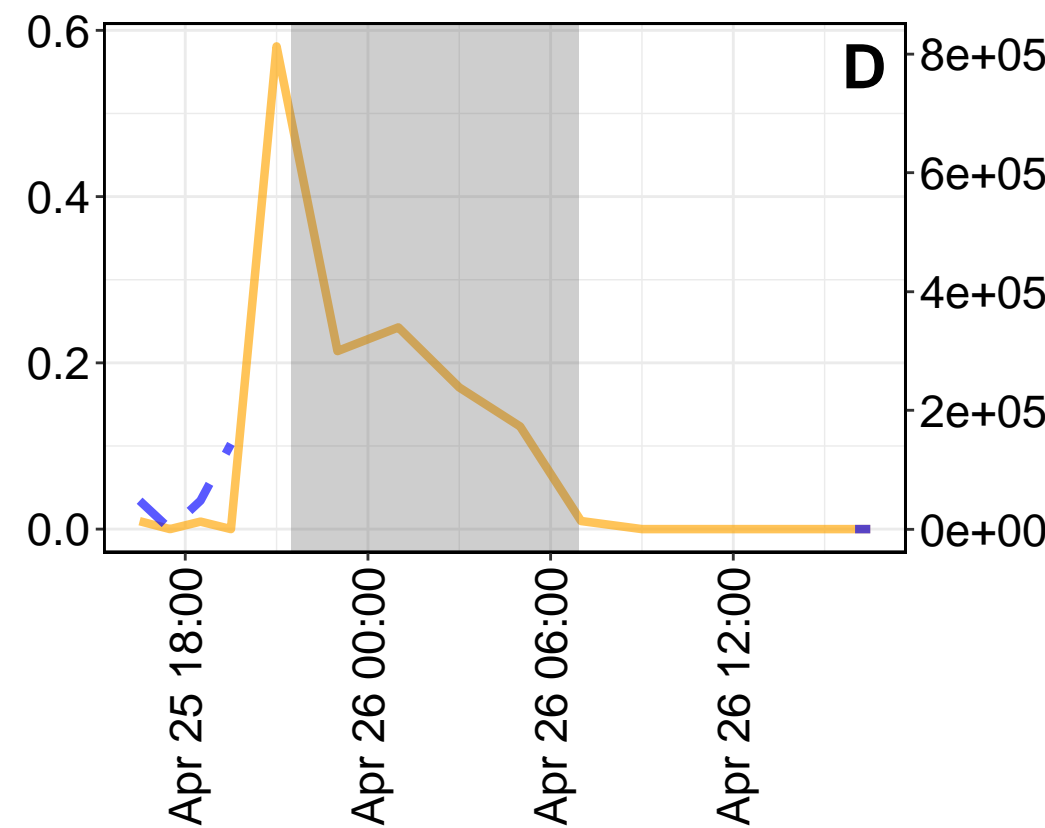


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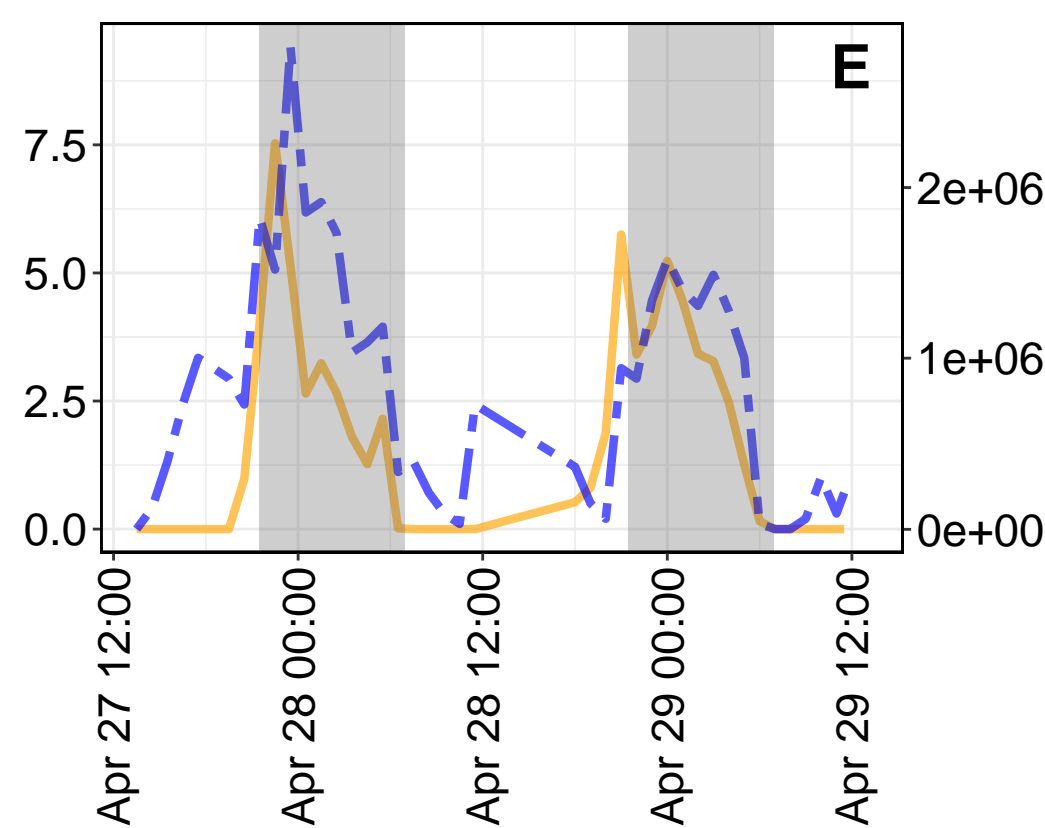
Page 24 of 24



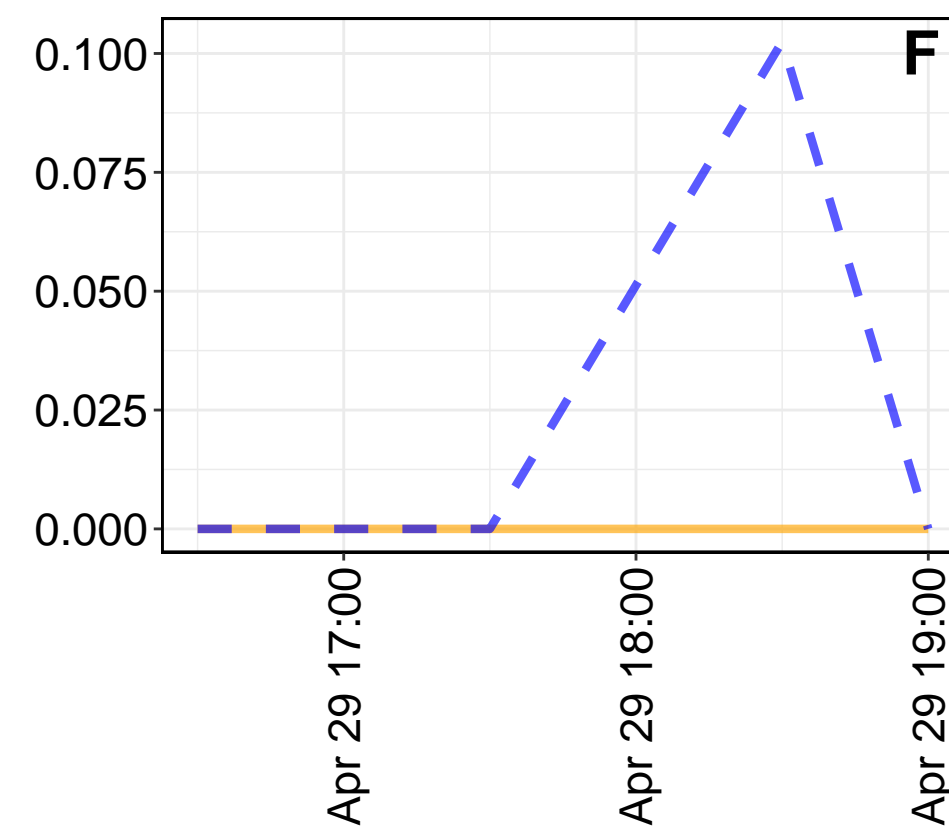
N2526



UF272829



N29



Smolt Density (per hour)