



Régime alimentaire de l'omble de fontaine anadrome du Saguenay

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RÉSUMÉ

Dans le fjord du Saguenay, le succès de pêche sportive à l'omble de fontaine anadrome (*Salvelinus fontinalis*) a fortement diminué dans les dernières années, ce qui suggère une diminution des stocks. Il s'agit d'un écotype dont la gestion est un enjeu prioritaire afin d'assurer la pérennité de la ressource. Il est donc très important d'étudier cette espèce et les conditions qui pourraient limiter la croissance et l'abondance des stocks. Ce mémoire visait à décrire l'alimentation des ombles de fontaine anadromes dans le Saguenay. L'échantillonnage a été réalisé en collaboration avec le MELCCFP, par l'entremise du programme de Pêcheurs Repères, qui sont des citoyens volontaires qui ont accepté de faire don des têtes et des viscères de leurs captures durant les saisons de pêche 2021, 2022 et 2023 afin de contribuer à la recherche scientifique. L'analyse du contenu de l'estomac de 213 ombles de fontaine a permis d'identifier les gammares (33%), les poissons (19%) et les polychètes (17%) comme les principales proies contribuant à la masse de nourriture ingérée dans le fjord. L'alimentation variait fortement en fonction de la taille de l'omble de fontaine, avec une alimentation dominée par les poissons chez les individus de grande taille. L'omble de fontaine anadrome ne devient jamais complètement piscivore et demeure opportuniste, consommant des invertébrés à toutes les tailles. Une variation interannuelle dans la consommation de poisson a été observée, qui se manifeste par une plus faible masse de poisson consommée en 2022 et 2023 par rapport à 2021. Lors des années de faible consommation d'éperlan arc-en-ciel, les individus ont consommé plus d'autres espèces de poissons comme les épinoches (*Gastoresteus spp.*), le lançon (*Ammodytes americanus*) et le fouille roche zébré (*Percina caprodes*). Une variation saisonnière du régime alimentaire est également observée et semble concorder avec la disponibilité des différents types de proies durant l'année. Peu de variation spatiale a été observée dans l'alimentation de l'omble de fontaine. Le succès d'alimentation des ombles était plus élevé en 2021, mais ne variait pas significativement entre les différents mois ou sites d'échantillonnage. Les données montrent que l'omble de fontaine anadrome consomme des proies de faible valeur énergétique, ce qui pourrait représenter une préoccupation pour la santé du stock. La consommation de proies de plus forte valeur énergétique, comme l'éperlan arc-en-ciel, est nécessaire afin de favoriser la croissance de l'omble de fontaine anadrome.

TABLE DES MATIÈRES

RÉSUMÉ	I
TABLE DES MATIÈRES	II
LISTE DES TABLEAUX	IV
LISTE DES FIGURES	IV
LISTE DES ABRÉVIATIONS ET SIGLES	V
REMERCIEMENTS	VI
AVANT-PROPOS	VII
CHAPITRE 1	1
INTRODUCTION GÉNÉRALE	1
1.1 L'OMBLE DE FONTAINE ANADROME	1
1.2 ÉTAT DE L'OMBLE DE FONTAINE ANADROME DU FJORD DU SAGUENAY	3
1.3 FACTEURS DE DÉCLIN	4
1.4 OBJECTIFS DU MÉMOIRE	7
CHAPITRE 2	11
Diet of anadromous brook trout (<i>Salvelinus fontinalis</i>) in the Saguenay fjord, Canada.	11
2.1 INTRODUCTION	11
2.2 MATERIALS AND METHODS	13
2.2.1 STUDY SITE	13
2.2.2 SAMPLING	14
2.2.2.1 ANADROMOUS BROOK TROUT	14
2.2.2.2 CALORIMETRY	16
2.2.3 LABORATORY ANALYSIS	16
2.2.3.1 STOMACH CONTENTS	16
2.2.3.2 CALORIMETRY	17
2.2.4 DATA ANALYSIS	17
2.2.4.1 DIET DESCRIPTION	17
2.2.4.2 FEEDING SUCCESS	18
2.2.4.3 CALORIMETRY	19
2.3 RESULTS	20
2.3.1 LENGTH FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION OF ANADROMOUS BROOK TROUT	20
2.3.2 STOMACH CONTENT ANALYSIS	20
2.3.3 ONTOGENETIC VARIATION	22
2.3.4 SEASONAL AND SPATIAL VARIATION	23
2.3.5 FEEDING SUCCESS	25
2.3.6 FISH LENGTH - PREY LENGTH RELATIONSHIPS	26
2.3.7 ENERGY CONTENT OF BROOK TROUT PREY	28

2.4 DISCUSSION	29
2.4.1 SEASONAL AND SPATIAL VARIATION	29
2.4.2 ONTOGENETIC VARIATION.....	32
2.4.3 FEEDING SUCCESS	33
2.4.4 FISH LENGTH - PREY LENGTH RELATIONSHIPS	34
2.4.5 ENERGY CONTENT OF PREY	35
2.5 IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT.....	36
CONCLUSION GÉNÉRALE	38
LISTE DE RÉFÉRENCES	41
ANNEX I	47
ANNEX II	49

LISTE DES TABLEAUX

TABLE 1. NUMBER OF BROOK TROUT SAMPLED FOR EACH SAMPLING SITE IN THE SAGUENAY FJORD IN 2021, 2022 AND 2023. BROOK TROUT THAT HAD MISSING LOCATION DATA (3) ARE EXCLUDED.	15
TABLE 2 PERCENT OF OCCURRENCE AND CONTRIBUTION TO WET WEIGHT OF THE STOMACH CONTENT (%) FOR EACH PREY TYPE FOUND IN THE STOMACH OF ANADROMOUS BROOK TROUT SAMPLED IN THE SAGUENAY FJORD BETWEEN 2021 AND 2023 (N=213).	21
TABLE 3. MEAN ENERGY CONTENT (KJ/G OF DRY WEIGHT, DW) OF DIFFERENT PREY TYPES OF ANADROMOUS BROOK TROUT ASSESSED BY BOMB CALORIMETER.....	28

LISTE DES FIGURES

FIGURE 1. NOMBRE D'OMBLES DE FONTAINE ANADROMES EN MONTAISON DÉNOMBRÉS PAR ANNÉE À LA BARRIÈRE DE COMPTAGE DE LA RIVIÈRE SAINTE-MARGUERITE (SITUÉE AU BIG POOL) ENTRE 2002 ET 2021. LES DONNÉES NE SONT PAS DISPONIBLES POUR 2007 À 2010, 2012 ET 2019 (DONNÉES COMMUNIQUÉES PAR KARINE GAGNON, BIOLOGISTE DU MFFP.).	5
FIGURE 2. NOMBRE D'OMBLES DE FONTAINE ANADROMES EN MONTAISON DÉNOMBRÉS PAR ANNÉE À LA BARRIÈRE DE COMPTAGE DE LA RIVIÈRE À MARS. DONNÉES TIRÉES DE CONTACT NATURE (2022).	6
FIGURE 3. FISHING ZONES IN THE SAGUENAY FJORD FOR ANADROMOUS BROOK TROUT SAMPLING BETWEEN 2021 AND 2023 (N= 208) AND SAMPLING SITES FOR CALORIMETER ANALYSIS PREY IN THE SAGUENAY FJORD FOR 2023 AND 2024. NO TRIBUTARIES WERE PART OF THE SAMPLING. SITES SAMPLED FOR CALORIMETRY INCLUDE RIVERINE SITES IN THE BAIE DES HA! HA ! AND A PELAGIC SITE NEAR SAINTE-ROSE-DU NORD, SAGUENAY FJORD. COLOURS INDICATE PREY TAXA SAMPLED.	15
FIGURE 4. LENGTH DISTRIBUTION OF ANADROMOUS BROOK TROUT SAMPLED IN THE SAGUENAY FJORD BETWEEN 2021 AND 2023 (N=213).	20
FIGURE 5. PERCENT OF OCCURRENCE IN THE STOMACH (A) AND CONTRIBUTION TO STOMACH CONTENT WW (B) OF EACH PREY TYPE FOR DIFFERENT LENGTH CLASSES OF ANADROMOUS BROOK TROUT SAMPLED IN THE SAGUENAY FJORD BETWEEN 2021 AND 2023 (N=213). "OTHER FISH" INCLUDES UNIDENTIFIED FISH. "POLY." = POLYCHAETES; "OTHER INV." = OTHER INVERTEBRATES; "AQUA. INS." = AQUATIC LARVAE OF TERRESTRIAL INSECTS; "TERR. INS."= TERRESTRIAL INSECTS; "OTHER CRUS."= OTHER CRUSTACEANS; "GAMM"= GAMMARIDS; "PLANT M." = PLANT MATTER; "DIGESTED M."= DIGESTED MATTER.	23
FIGURE 6. WET-WEIGHT CONTRIBUTION OF EACH PREY TYPE TO THE TOTAL STOMACH CONTENT WW OF ANADROMOUS BROOK TROUT SAMPLED IN THE SAGUENAY FJORD FOR THE DIFFERENT YEARS (A) (N=213), MONTHS (B) (N=213) AND FISHING ZONES (C) (N=210) SAMPLED. "OTHER FISH" INCLUDES UNIDENTIFIED FISH. "POLY" = POLYCHAETES; "OTHER INV." = OTHER INVERTEBRATES; "AQUA. INS." = AQUATIC LARVAE OF TERRESTRIAL INSECTS; "TERR. INS."= TERRESTRIAL INSECTS; "OTHER CRUS."= OTHER CRUSTACEANS; "GAMM"= GAMMARIDS; "PLANT M." = PLANT MATTER; "DIGESTED M."= DIGESTED MATTER.	24
FIGURE 7. LINEAR REGRESSION BETWEEN STOMACH CONTENT WET WEIGHT IN G +1 (LN SCALED) AND BROOK TROUT TOTAL LENGTH IN CM (A) AND RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE RESIDUALS OF LINEAR REGRESSION (B) AND BROOK TOTAL LENGTH IN CM (N=213).	25
FIGURE 8. ANOVA COMPARISON OF MEAN FEEDING SUCCESS OF BROOK TROUT BETWEEN THE DIFFERENT YEARS (A) (N=213), MONTHS (B)(N=213) AND FISHING ZONES (C) (N=210). MONTHS AUGUST, SEPTEMBER, OCTOBER WERE POOLED TOGETHER DUE TO LOW EFFECTIVES.	26
FIGURE 9. LINEAR REGRESSION BETWEEN TOTAL LENGTH OF PREY FISH (A), GAMMARIDS (B) AND INSECTS (C) IN MM AND BROOK TROUT TOTAL LENGTH IN CM (N=213).	27

LISTE DES ABRÉVIATIONS ET SIGLES

ANOVA	Analysis of variance
AQUA. INS.	Aquatic larvae of terrestrial insects
DIGESTED M.	Digested matter
DW	Dry weight
eDNA	Environmental DNA
EE	Energy equivalent
GAMM.	Gammarids
IUCN	Union internationale pour la conservation de la nature
MELCCFP	Ministère de l'Environnement, de la Lutte contre les Changements Climatiques, de la Faune des Parcs
%O	Percent occurrence
OTHER CRUS.	Other crustaceans
OTHER INV.	Other invertebrates
PES	Percent of empty stomachs
PLANT M.	Plant matter
POLY.	Polychaetes
SD	Standard deviation
TERR. INS.	Terrestrial insects
WW	Wet weight

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AVANT-PROPOS

Ce mémoire a été réalisé dans le cadre de la maîtrise en ressources renouvelables de l'Université du Québec à Chicoutimi. Ce projet de recherche a été rendu possible grâce à la collaboration entre la Chaire de recherche sur les espèces aquatiques exploitées de l'UQAC et le ministère de l'Environnement, de la Lutte contre les changements climatiques, de la Faune et des Parcs.

La structure du mémoire est sous forme d'article. Une introduction générale, rédigée en français, permet de mettre en contexte la problématique abordée et de présenter les objectifs du mémoire. Le deuxième chapitre est un manuscrit qui sera soumis à un journal scientifique pour évaluation par les pairs. Le troisième chapitre est constitué d'une conclusion générale en français qui résume les principales découvertes et propose des avenues de recherche futures.

CHAPITRE 1 INTRODUCTION GÉNÉRALE

1.1 L'OMBLE DE FONTAINE ANADROME

L'omble de fontaine (*Salvelinus fontinalis*) est une espèce de poisson indigène de l'est de l'Amérique du Nord, où elle y fréquente les lacs et rivières d'eau claire, froide et bien oxygénée (Scott et Crossman 1973). Sa zone de distribution naturelle inclut les provinces maritimes du Canada, l'Ontario et le Québec ainsi que les états américains du Maine, du Vermont, du New Hampshire et de New York (Power 1980). Cette espèce est aujourd'hui très largement répandue sur la planète, car elle fut introduite dans de nombreux pays d'Amérique du Sud, d'Europe, d'Océanie et d'Asie dû à son intérêt pour la pêche récréative (Muhlfeld *et al.* 2019). Au Québec, cette espèce revêt une importance particulière, puisqu'il s'agit de l'espèce aquatique exploitée la plus répandue et qui est la plus ciblée par les pêcheurs sportifs (Écoressources 2014). L'omble de fontaine est aussi l'espèce de poisson ayant les plus grandes retombées économiques dans la région du Saguenay (Bureau d'études stratégiques et techniques en économie 2020).

Au Québec, on retrouve deux écotypes d'omble de fontaine : l'écotype « résident » retrouvé en eau douce, dans les lacs et les rivières, et l'écotype dit « anadrome » dont les individus réalisent des migrations vers les milieux d'eau saumâtres ou salées afin de s'alimenter, puis reviennent se reproduire dans leur rivière natale. Dans la région du Saguenay, les deux écotypes cohabitent dans les tributaires du fjord. L'omble de fontaine anadrome exploite les ressources disponibles dans les eaux saumâtres du fjord et atteint de plus grandes tailles que ceux qui résident en rivière (Castonguay et Fitzgerald 1982). La présence de l'omble de fontaine anadrome a été relevée dans huit tributaires du Saguenay en plus de la rivière Saguenay : la rivière Sainte-Marguerite, la Sainte-Marguerite Nord-Est, la rivière à Mars, la rivière Saint-Jean, la rivière Éternité, la rivière Ha ! Ha !, la

rivière Valin et la rivière de la descente des femmes. L'omble de fontaine anadrome du Saguenay, communément appelé truite de mer, est reconnu pour réaliser de grands déplacements, migrant sur des distances allant jusqu'à 100 km (Lenormand *et al.* 2004). Les ombles anadromes ont la caractéristique de migrer vers un fjord, un milieu qui présente une forte stratification entre les eaux de surface, chaudes et saumâtres et les eaux profondes, froides et salées. La dévalaison vers le fjord débute au printemps et se termine fin juin (Lesueur 1993). Certains ombles vont passer plusieurs saisons à s'alimenter dans le fjord, et on suppose que pendant l'hiver, ils se réfugient dans des zones d'eau douce comme les embouchures de rivière et l'amont du Saguenay. Chez l'omble de fontaine, la fraie a lieu en automne, déclenchée par le raccourcissement de la photopériode et la diminution de la température (Power 1980). L'omble de fontaine anadrome a une forte fidélité à retourner dans sa rivière natale pour se reproduire (Castonguay et Fitzgerald 1982). La montaison des ombles vers leur rivière natale débute à la mi-juin et continue jusqu'au début d'octobre. Les plus gros ombles, motivés par la maturation de leurs gonades, vont commencer leur migration en premier, mais des ombles de petite taille vont aussi remonter la rivière plus tard dans la saison (Lesueur 1993). Les ombles immatures vont probablement remonter la rivière afin de passer l'hiver dans des conditions plus favorables. Plusieurs patrons de migration sont possibles, mais après la fraie, le plus fréquent semble être le retour dans le fjord à la fin octobre (Lesueur 1993).

L'anadromie va engendrer des coûts énergétiques très importants qui sont reliés à l'action de migration en elle-même, mais aussi au besoin d'osmorégulation lors de l'arrivée en eau salée (McCormick and Saunders 1987). Malgré ces coûts énergétiques, l'anadromie demeure avantageuse pour les salmonidés, puisque les ressources alimentaires plus riches en milieu marin leur permettent d'atteindre un taux de croissance plus élevé (Jonsson et Jonsson 1993). L'omble de fontaine anadrome sera caractérisé par un taux de croissance élevé qui va lui permettre d'atteindre des tailles supérieures à celles de l'écotype résident.

Par exemple, les ombles anadromes de la rivière Saint-Jean (Gaspésie) ont une plus grande longévité et atteignent une plus grande longueur maximale (525 mm) comparé aux ombles résidents dans un lac avoisinant, le lac McLaren (339 mm) (Castonguay et Fitzgerald 1982). Les ombles anadromes vont être matures sexuellement plus tard et à une taille plus grande que ceux des populations dulcicoles (en lac), ce qui s'expliquerait par leur différence de longévité, les ombles anadromes vivant plus longtemps (Castonguay et Fitzgerald 1982).

1.2 ÉTAT DE L'OMBLE DE FONTAINE ANADROME DU FJORD DU SAGUENAY

L'écotype anadrome est un poisson très prisé par les pêcheurs sportifs dans le Saguenay. La gestion de ces populations est donc un enjeu important. En effet, cette pêche s'est grandement développée en parallèle avec la pêche au saumon dans plusieurs rivières. Puisque les populations de saumon présentent un fort déclin au Saguenay, plusieurs organismes misent sur la pêche à l'omble de fontaine anadrome comme ressource de remplacement. Il y a peu de connaissances sur les populations d'ombles de fontaine anadromes du Saguenay, et la méthode principale de suivi de l'exploitation est par l'entremise d'un Carnet du pêcheur, qui permet de comptabiliser les heures d'efforts et le nombre de captures réalisées par des pêcheurs sportifs repères (Ministère des Forêts de la Faune et des Parcs 2020). Entre 2015 et 2016, une diminution importante du succès de pêche a été observée dans l'estuaire moyen et le fjord du Saguenay. Depuis, le succès de pêche est resté bas (2016 à 2018), ce qui indique que la population d'omble de fontaine anadrome ne s'est pas rétablie. Cette diminution de population suit la tendance générale à la baisse des autres populations du Québec (Ministère des Forêts de la Faune et des Parcs 2020).

Un autre indicateur de la population d'omble de fontaine anadrome est le nombre de reproducteurs en montaison à chaque année. Un suivi est réalisé dans trois rivières du

Saguenay à l'aide de barrières de comptage : la rivière Sainte-Marguerite, la rivière à Mars et la rivière Saint-Jean (Ministère des Forêts de la Faune et des Parcs 2020). La contribution de chaque population des rivières au stock dans le fjord du Saguenay est méconnue. La rivière Sainte-Marguerite est celle qui accueille la plus grande population d'omble de fontaine anadrome et celle qui se porte le mieux. La contribution de la rivière Sainte-Marguerite au recrutement de l'omble de fontaine anadrome du Saguenay atteignait jusqu'à 80% des reproducteurs en 1995 (Lesueur 1998). Il s'agit donc d'un cours d'eau clé au maintien de la population d'ombles du Saguenay.

1.3 FACTEURS DE DÉCLIN

On peut définir la production d'une population de poissons comme le nombre de poissons générés, qui est déterminé par des éléments démographiques (reproduction, immigration, mortalité et émigration) ou par la biomasse produite, qui est influencée par leur taux de croissance dans l'habitat (Allen 1969). Il y a donc plusieurs éléments qui peuvent justifier les fluctuations dans les populations de salmonidés. Divers éléments peuvent mener à une réduction de la production de la population, comme une baisse du succès reproductif, une hausse du taux de mortalité, ou une réduction de la croissance qui entraîne à son tour une diminution de la quantité de poissons produite, les femelles plus petites produisant moins d'œufs (Allen 1969). L'alimentation joue un rôle crucial, pouvant affecter la croissance (Persson et De Roos 2006), la survie (Regular *et al.* 2022) ainsi que le succès de la reproduction chez les poissons (Scott 1962; Berglund 1995).

Chez les salmonidés, qui fraient en rivière, la production en jeunes va dépendre du nombre d'œufs qui sont déposés dans le gravier et de la survie des œufs pendant l'incubation (Allen 1969). Donc les premiers facteurs qui peuvent influencer la production sont le nombre de femelles reproductrices, la taille des femelles, la fertilité des femelles, l'aire totale des habitats de fraie disponibles et la qualité des habitats de fraie (débit d'eau

des ruisseaux, perméabilité du gravier) (Allen 1969). Des données de montaison sont disponibles pour la rivière Sainte-Marguerite et la rivière à Mars. Dans la rivière Sainte-Marguerite, on observe une diminution générale du nombre d'ombles de fontaine en montaison, mais le nombre semble remonter depuis 2018 (Figure 1). Dans la rivière à Mars, on observe un déclin constant du nombre d'ombles de fontaine en montaison depuis 2010 (Figure 2). Il semble donc que le faible nombre de reproducteurs est un facteur qui contribue au déclin de population. La qualité de l'habitat de fraie a été diminuée après le déluge du Saguenay de 1996 en raison d'un fort apport de sédiment dans les rivières et des enrochements mis en place par certaines municipalités (Valentine et Dumont 2006). Toutefois, selon le bilan diagnostic des habitats de fraie de l'omble de fontaine anadrome qui été réalisé en 2006, le potentiel d'habitats de fraie était assez grand dans la rivière Sainte-Marguerite et semblait même sous-utilisé. Pour d'autres rivières comme la rivière à Mars et la rivière Saint-Jean, la quantité d'habitats de fraie était insuffisante (Valentine et Dumont 2006).

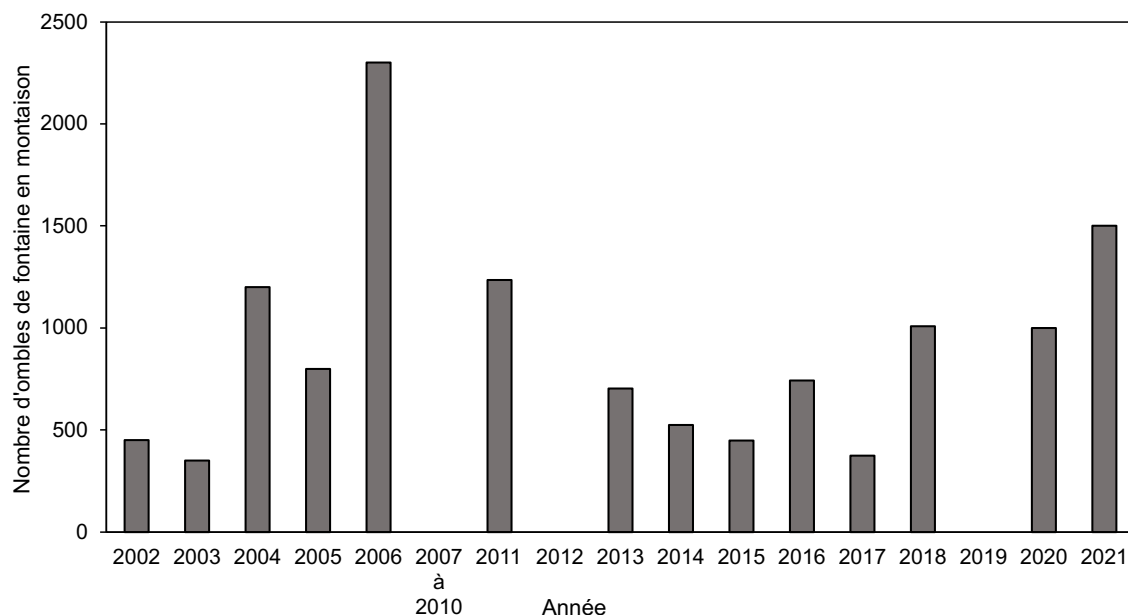


Figure 1. Nombre d'ombles de fontaine anadromes en montaison dénombrés par année à la barrière de comptage de la rivière Sainte-Marguerite (située au Big Pool) entre 2002 et 2021. Les données ne sont pas disponibles pour 2007 à 2010, 2012 et 2019 (Données communiquées par Karine Gagnon, biologiste du MFFP.).

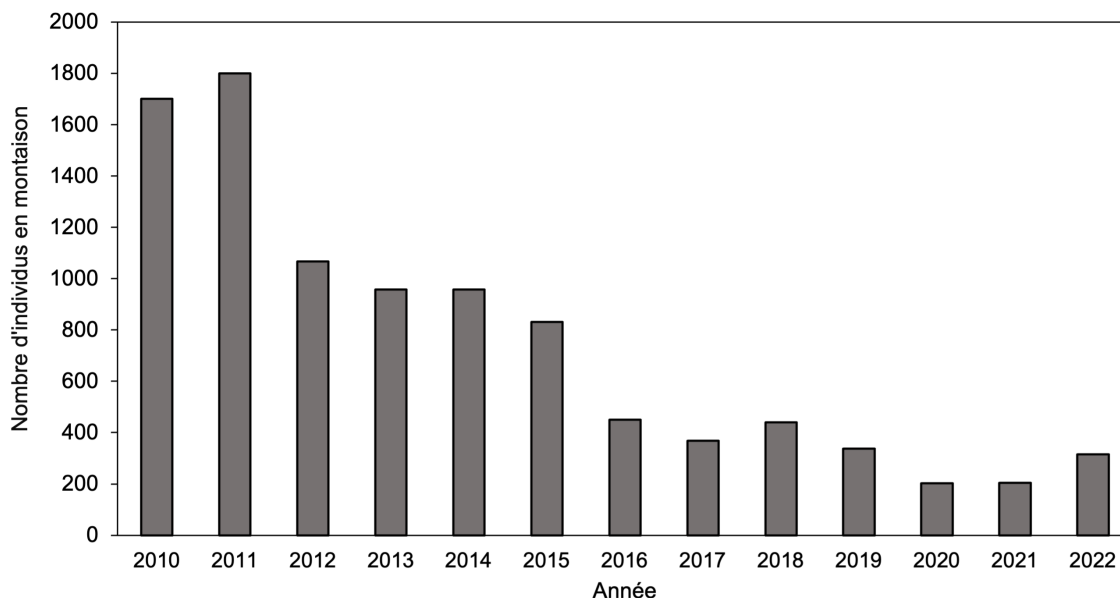


Figure 2. Nombre d'ombles de fontaine anadromes en montaison dénombrés par année à la barrière de comptage de la rivière à Mars. Données tirées de Contact Nature (2022).

Des études ont été réalisées sur les caractéristiques des populations d'omble de fontaine anadromes du Saguenay. Dans la rivière Sainte-Marguerite, la pêche expliquait la mortalité de 10 % des juvéniles et 30 % des individus matures (Theriault *et al.* 2008), ce qui démontre la vulnérabilité de l'omble de fontaine anadrome à la surpêche. Quant à la population de la rivière Éternité, elle se renouvelle après 3 saisons de croissance et le taux de survie d'une saison de croissance à l'autre est d'environ 13% (Lesueur 1993). La mortalité est de 100% à 5+ ans, ce qui signifie que les ombles atteignent maximum 4 ans dans la rivière Éternité (Lesueur 1993). Les quotas de pêche ont été diminués dans l'optique de protéger les populations du Saguenay, passant de 20 à 5 ombles de fontaine anadromes. Cela a probablement permis de réduire la pression de pêche sur l'omble de fontaine anadrome. En revanche, il est possible que du braconnage ait lieu dans le fjord et aucune donnée n'est disponible à ce sujet.

La disponibilité des ressources alimentaire est aussi un facteur important, puisque l'abondance et la qualité des poissons-proies peuvent influencer la survie, la croissance et

le fitness des poissons piscivores (Bryan *et al.* 1996). L'omble de fontaine est considéré majoritairement piscivore à maturité, bien qu'il démontre plutôt une stratégie d'alimentation opportuniste, son alimentation variant selon sa taille, la saison ou l'habitat (Power 1980). Dans le fjord du Saguenay, la principale espèce de poisson-fourrage est l'éperlan arc-en-ciel. Le capelan est aussi présent, mais en moins grand nombre au cours des dernières années (données de chalut des 0+, MELCCFP, données non publiées). L'éperlan arc-en-ciel est une des espèces les plus abondantes résidant dans le fjord du Saguenay et il va occuper la couche d'eau saumâtre (2 à 25 PSU) et chaude de surface (Sirois *et al.* 2009). La population d'éperlan arc-en-ciel du Saguenay, contrairement à d'autres espèces de poissons, dépend entièrement de la reproduction qui a lieu dans le fjord du Saguenay et est génétiquement isolée des autres populations de l'estuaire et du golfe du Saint-Laurent (Dodson *et al.* 2015). Puisque l'omble de fontaine ne devient jamais strictement piscivore, la disponibilité et la qualité d'autres proies comme les invertébrés aquatiques est aussi à prendre en compte. En effet, les invertébrés peuvent constituer une part importante du régime alimentaire d'ombles de fontaine adultes.

1.4 OBJECTIFS DU MÉMOIRE

Les causes du déclin de population de l'omble de fontaine sont méconnues et plusieurs facteurs tels que la mauvaise qualité d'habitats de reproduction, les ressources alimentaires disponibles et la surexploitation par la pêche sportive pourraient être en cause. Afin de bien gérer la ressource, il est important d'en apprendre plus sur l'état de la population et sur ses caractéristiques biologiques. L'approche choisie dans ce mémoire est donc l'analyse de l'aspect alimentaire. Ce mémoire s'inscrit dans l'horizon d'un projet de recherche à plus grande ampleur visant à mieux caractériser les relations trophiques de toutes les espèces aquatiques exploitées du fjord du Saguenay. L'objectif était de décrire le

régime alimentaire d'ombles de fontaine anadromes juvéniles et adultes dans le Saguenay lors de leur migration dans le fjord. Une étude précédente (Morinville et Rassmussen 2006) a décrit le régime alimentaire de l'omble de fontaine grâce à l'analyse du contenu stomacal et des isotopes stables, toutefois, cette étude date de deux décennies. Considérant les changements observés des conditions environnementales dans les milieux côtiers québécois, l'exploitation de cet écotype et la baisse de la population observée dans le fjord ces dernières années, il est nécessaire de mettre à jour nos connaissances concernant le régime alimentaire de l'omble de fontaine anadrome du Saguenay.

Premièrement, nous avons analysé le régime alimentaire des ombles de fontaine dans le Saguenay grâce à l'analyse des contenus stomacaux, et ce pour plusieurs sites de capture sur une période de trois ans. Nous nous attendons à ce que l'alimentation de l'omble de fontaine soit variée, incluant des crustacés, des annélides, des insectes et des poissons. Selon une recherche précédente, les ombles de petite taille consomment massivement des crustacés (gammarés, mysidacés), tandis qu'une fois arrivés à 25 cm, ils se montrent plus sélectifs pour les proies de taille plus grande telles que les poissons (Morinville et Rassmussen 2006). Nous nous attendons également à une hausse de la consommation de poissons lorsque la taille des ombles de fontaine augmente. Chez les individus de grandes tailles, qui doivent soutenir un métabolisme et des coûts énergétiques importants liés à la reproduction, la consommation de poisson est préférée, car ceux-ci ont une densité énergétique élevée et une plus grande masse. Selon la théorie de la stratégie de recherche optimale de nourriture, la proie optimale pour un prédateur sera celle avec le plus grand rapport entre sa valeur énergétique et le coût énergétique lié à sa recherche et sa capture (Pyke et al. 1977). Ainsi, il devient plus rentable de manger des proies de plus grande taille, puisque le coût associé à la recherche de nourriture (en temps et en nombre d'attaques) augmente plus que la proie est petite en comparaison au prédateur (Kerr 1971).

Deuxièmement, nous avons déterminé la densité énergétique de divers taxons de proies observés dans les estomacs des ombles de fontaine en utilisant une méthode calorimétrique. Nous nous attendons à ce que les poissons soient les proies présentant la densité énergétique la plus élevée, du fait de leur riche teneur en lipides, ces molécules étant les plus concentrées en énergie (Schaafsma et al. 2018). En raison de leur exosquelette de chitine et d'une teneur en lipides moindre, les crustacés possèdent une densité nutritive inférieure à celle des poissons (Donnelly et al. 1994 ; Torres et al. 1994 ; Schaafsma et al. 2018). Chez les crustacés, la densité énergétique des amphipodes sera inférieure à celle des décapodes, car ils ont une teneur plus élevée en chitine (Donnelly et al. 1994 ; Torres et al. 1994). Nous avons estimé que la densité des polychètes serait comparable ou inférieure à celle des décapodes (Donnelly et al. 1994). Les insectes pourraient être considérés comme les proies ayant la plus faible valeur nutritive en raison de leur contenu élevé en protéines et de leur exosquelette. Ces résultats permettront de bonifier l'interprétation des données relatives aux taxons de proies trouvés dans les estomacs des ombles de fontaine, en prenant en compte la valeur énergétique de chaque proie.

CHAPITRE 2

Diet of anadromous brook trout (*Salvelinus fontinalis*) in the Saguenay fjord, Canada.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Trout and char are a widely distributed taxonomic group of cold-water fish native to all continents of the northern hemisphere (Berra 2001). In their native range, 73% of trout and char species assessed by the IUCN are threatened by global extinction (Muhlfeld *et al.* 2019). Introduction of invasive species (69% of species threatened), overfishing (47% of species threatened) pollution (33%), and dams (28%) are the biggest factors in endangering trout and char populations worldwide (Muhlfeld *et al.* 2019).

Brook trout (*Salvelinus fontinalis*) is a fish native to North America, where it is found in great abundance in rivers and lakes of the United States and Canada (Power 1980). Brook trout, like other trout and char species, has great cultural, economic, and ecological importance and is a source of subsistence fishing for First Nations (Muhlfeld *et al.* 2019; Assance *et al.* 2022). Two ecotypes of brook trout have been described: the resident, that completes its entire life cycle in freshwater rivers and lakes and the anadromous, that migrates between freshwater rivers and saltwater estuaries and coastal zones. The resident and anadromous ecotypes generally coexist in the same stream (Scribner *et al.* 2012). Anadromous brook trout migrate to saltwater feeding grounds in the summer and migrate upstream to reproduce in their natal river in the fall. While brook trout is considered of least concern by the IUCN, the conservation status of anadromous populations worldwide remains uncertain (Hammerson 2024). Anadromous brook trout has been extirpated from 20% of sub watersheds in the eastern United States, and as many sub watersheds have unknown population status (Dauwalter and McGurrian 2013). In the Canadian province of Quebec, most anadromous brook trout populations studied show a downward trend and

many populations exploited by commercial and sport fisheries show signs of overfishing (Ministère des Forêts de la Faune et des Parcs 2019). Overfishing of large anadromous individuals by anglers can act as a selective force, leading to a decrease in body size, a decline in fertility, and population decline (Theriault *et al.* 2008).

Anadromous brook trout is found in the Saguenay fjord and eight of its tributaries, where they have the particularity of migrating in brackish waters of a fjord instead of seawater. In the Saguenay fjord, anadromous brook trout is subject to a recreational fishery, especially in the context of the collapse of the local Atlantic salmon population, causing anglers to turn to anadromous trout (Morinville and Rassmussen 2006). Fishing mortality is not significant during their first year at sea, but for subsequent years, trout face 25-35% mortality due to fishing in the fjord (Valentine 2004). According to fishing success data, a decline of captures has been observed in the Saguenay fjord (Ministère des Forêts de la Faune et des Parcs 2020). The number of spawners in rivers has also decreased in the last few years. The situation has alarmed local authorities to investigate causes of the population decline and to develop a better understanding of the ecotype.

Anadromy requires higher energetic costs (migration, osmoregulation), but remains advantageous to salmonids, since saltwater habitats provide better feeding opportunities, allowing them to reach higher growth rates (Jonsson and Jonsson 1993). This allows anadromous brook trout to reach larger sizes than the resident ecotype (Castonguay and Fitzgerald 1982). However, anadromous individuals also face higher mortality rates from predation (Jensen *et al.* 2019). Thus, for anadromy to be an evolutionary viable strategy, the benefits of higher growth must outweigh the added energetic costs and higher risks of mortality. Since for piscivorous fish the abundance of fish prey can impact growth, survival, and condition, limited food resources can be a factor of population decline (Bryan *et al.* 1996).

This study aims to describe the feeding patterns of anadromous brook trout during their migration in the fjord in the context of a declining population and a changing ecosystem. Brook trout is considered an opportunistic feeder, but it is piscivorous at maturity (Power 1980). Previous studies on anadromous brook trout suggest their diet should be composed of a variety of prey: fish (*Osmerus mordax*, *Mallotus villosus*, *Ammodytes* sp., *Gasterosteus* sp. and *Fundulus diaphanus*) amphipods, mysids, shrimp, polychaete worms, and insects (Dutil and Power 1980; Gaudreault *et al.* 1982; Morinville and Rassmussen 2006). Our hypothesis is that brook trout is an opportunistic feeder whose diet will change according to habitat, according to the season, and according to the size of the trout.

Our predictions were that anadromous brook trout will have higher feeding opportunities in saltier water sites situated downstream of the fjord. The type of prey would also vary depending on the habitat type. Brook trout in the downstream fjord would consume more fish and marine crustaceans. Brook trout near the fresh water upstream section of the Saguenay River would consume more insects and freshwater species. We predicted that prey abundances in the diet would vary according to the life cycles of the prey, with more insects being consumed in early spring and summer.

We also predicted that the diet of brook trout would change according to the length of the trout. Mature trout would need to consume higher caloric content prey, like fish, to support their higher energetic needs. The works of Morinville and Rassmussen (2006) found that brook trout would shift to a piscivorous diet at 25 cm. While brook trout in the Sainte Marguerite Bay and the Saguenay fjord became piscivorous at 25 cm, fish did not remain the only prey, even in trout >25 cm (Morinville and Rassmussen 2006).

We predicted that brook trout would select prey with higher caloric density to support their metabolic needs. We predicted that using calorimeter analysis, fish would have the higher caloric density. Crustaceans and insects would have lower caloric density due to their chitinous exoskeletons. Since previous studies focused on a specific section of the fjord,

the goal of this study was to have the widest sampling possible of anadromous brook trout in the fjord, while reconciling with a low population count.

2.2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.2.1 STUDY SITE

The Saguenay Fjord (Quebec, Canada) is a subarctic fjord that finds its source in Lac Saint-Jean and flows into the St. Lawrence River. It harbors a rich marine biodiversity, and eight of its tributaries are home to anadromous brook trout populations (Ministère des Forêts de la Faune et des Parcs 2020). The main freshwater source of the fjord, the Saguenay River, is controlled by three hydroelectric dams upstream. The Saguenay fjord has a total length of 167 km and is comprised of three basins of different depths divided by aquatic sills (Drainville 1968). The main upstream basin is the deepest (276m) and the largest, containing 75% of the water of the fjord. The other two smaller basins have maximum depths of 180 and 250m. At the downstream end of the fjord, exchanges with the St. Lawrence are limited by the shallowness of the sill (20m) (Drainville 1968).

The waters of the fjord are mainly constituted of a brackish warm surface layer (5-20m) and a deep cold saltwater layer coming from the St. Lawrence Estuary (Schafer *et al.* 1990). The surface layer is characterized by low salinity, warm waters (0 to 16.8°C; 0,2 to 26,9 PSU), with the lowest salinity being found at the upstream portion of the fjord, and near freshwater affluents mouths. (Bourgault *et al.* 2012; Belzile *et al.* 2016). A strong pycnocline is found at an average depth of 15m, between the surface and deeper layers (Côté and Lacroix 1978b). The deeper layers are characterized by cold (0.9 to 4°C) higher salinity waters (27.3 to 29.8 PSU) (Bourgault *et al.* 2012; Belzile *et al.* 2016). The waters show high oxygen saturation levels, between 80% and 107% throughout the fjord (Côté and Lacroix 1978a; Côté and Lacroix 1978b) Water renewal rates are considered high for this type of

fjord, with the water of the inner basin renewing completely on average in 3-6 months (Belzile *et al.* 2016). The large tidal forcing and the presence of three sills contribute to the strong mixing and water renewal in the fjord (Belzile *et al.* 2016).

2.2.2 SAMPLING

2.2.2.1 ANADROMOUS BROOK TROUT

Sampling was done in collaboration with Quebec Ministère de l'Environnement, de la Lutte contre les Changements Climatiques, de la Faune et des Parcs (MELCCFP)'s volunteer fishermen program, a participative science initiative. Sports fishermen contributed their catch data as well as the head and viscera of anadromous brook trout caught during the fishing season. Fish were captured in the Saguenay fjord, in the upper river portion and down to the lower fjord portion. Brook trout were sampled in 17 sites along the Saguenay River and fjord and were separated into 3 zones: the upstream fjord, the mid fjord, and the downstream fjord (Figure 3). For sampling, more successful sites, such as river mouths and tidal flats, are typically favored by fishermen. The sampled sites exclude tributaries of the fjord to avoid harvesting resident ecotype brook trout. In total, 213 brook trout were captured for three years (2021-2023) between May and October (Table 1). Three of the trout sampled had missing information about their catch location and were excluded from spatial analysis. No trout were sampled in winter due to the closing of the fishing season. Anadromous brook trout sampling proved difficult for all three years due to the declining population. The fishing site, date of capture, and length of fish were self-reported by fishermen. Fish heads and viscera were fixed and preserved in 95% ethanol until examination.

Table 1. Number of brook trout sampled for each sampling site in the Saguenay Fjord in 2021, 2022 and 2023. Brook trout that had missing location data (3) are excluded.

Fishing Zone	2021	2022	2023	Total
Upstream fjord	29	30	15	74
Mid Fjord	44	7	11	62
Downstream Fjord	15	32	27	74
Total	88	69	53	210

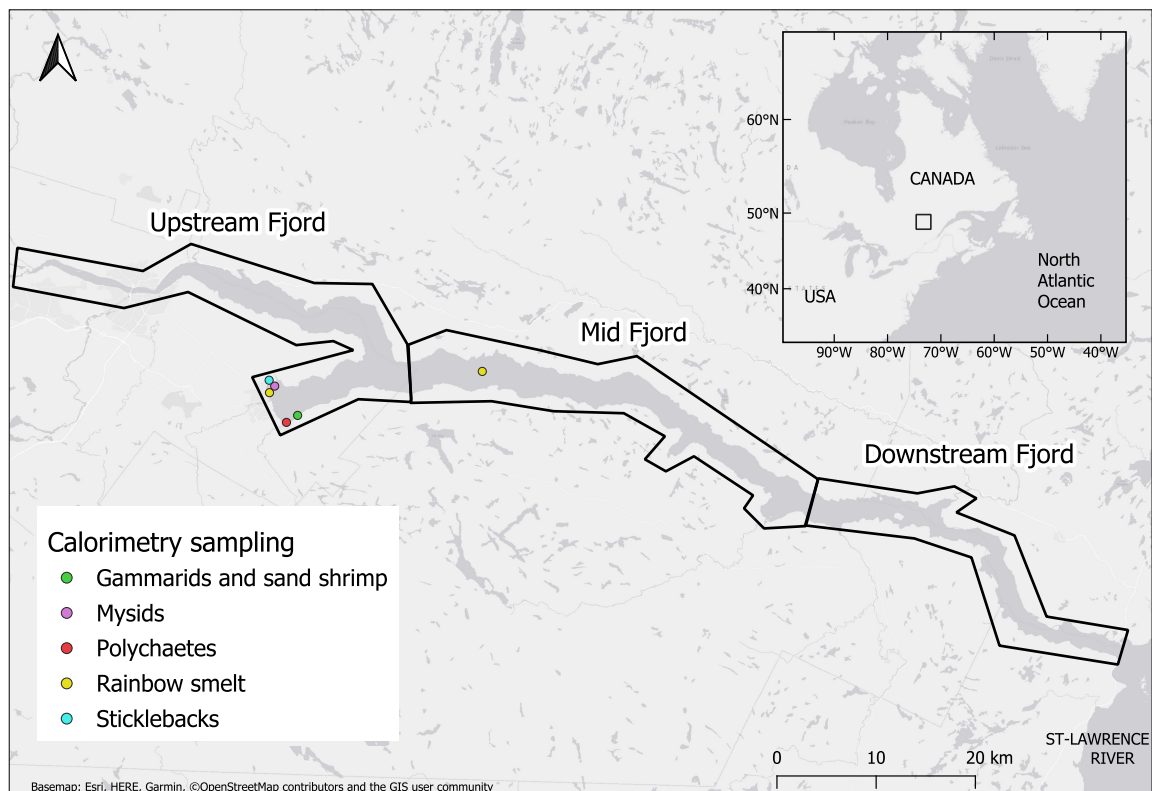


Figure 3. Fishing zones in the Saguenay fjord for anadromous brook trout sampling between 2021 and 2023 (n= 208) and sampling sites for calorimeter analysis prey in the Saguenay fjord for 2023 and 2024. No tributaries were part of the sampling. Sites sampled for calorimetry include riverine sites in the Baie des Ha! Ha! and a pelagic site near Sainte-Rose-du Nord, Saguenay fjord. Colours indicate prey taxa sampled.

2.2.2.2 CALORIMETRY

For calorimetry, the sampling of prey of anadromous brook trout was conducted between September 2023 and November 2024. Invertebrate prey of anadromous brook trout were sampled by kick net in a bay of the Saguenay fjord. Fish prey and mysids were sampled by trawling in the fjord. Smelt were also caught by line and hook from a pier in the bay. Five sampling sites were in Baie des Ha! Ha! and one was near Sainte-Rose-du-Nord (Figure 3). Prey were frozen on ice before being stored in a -20°C freezer.

2.2.3 LABORATORY ANALYSIS

2.2.3.1 STOMACH CONTENTS

First, morphological data (head length, snout length, and eye diameter) was taken using a caliper. In cases of imprecise fish lengths, total length was estimated using the regression between head length and total fish length. The stomach was dissected and rinsed 3 times with distilled water over a 50 µm sieve. The stomach content was placed in a distilled water dish to rehydrate. Stomach content was then put through a sieve, blotted dry, and weighted. When a stomach contained >300 prey, the content was halved or quartered using a Folsom sample splitter. Prey were identified under a stereomicroscope to the highest taxonomical degree possible. Usually, insects were identified to the family, while fish and decapods were identified to the species. Prey fish were identified mostly by otolith morphology using Campana (2004)'s Atlas of Fish Otoliths of the Northwest Atlantic Ocean. Terrestrial annelids were excluded from the data because they were considered fishing bait, as the trout were caught with baited hooks. For each taxon, the prey were counted and weighted. For highly digested prey, only heads were counted. When many incomplete prey were present and it was impossible to distinguish individuals, they were weighed together by taxa as "prey parts 'A' ". Highly digested, unidentifiable material was weighed together as

“digested matter”. A subsample of prey (10 per stomach) missing no significant body parts were weighted and measured individually under a stereomicroscope when possible. Insects were measured from head to tail, and amphipods from telson to eye. Fish prey standard length and total length were measured.

2.2.3.2 CALORIMETRY

In the laboratory, preys were frozen at -80°C for 4 hours before being lyophilized using a Labconco Freezone 2.5L lyophilisator (0.200 mBar, -51°C) for 2 days. For invertebrate prey (gammarids, shrimp, polychaetes), 15 to 30 individuals were pooled for each sample due to their small size. Individuals were pooled in order to reach a dry weight of minimum 0,1 g per sample. Samples were then ground into a fine powder using a mortar and pestle. Prey fish were ground using a CryoMill ball mill (10 minutes, 0,5 oscillations/s, no cryogenization cycle), because of their resistant bones and bony plates. Gelatin capsules were weighted prior to analysis. Just before calorimeter analysis, powdered samples were weighed and placed in a gelatin capsule. Sample weight in the capsules varied from 0,1000g to 0,2821g. Samples were analyzed in a Parr 6100 Calorimeter following standard methodology (Parr 2010). When analysing results, a correction was applied to remove unwanted heat created by nitric acid formation, the combustion of the cotton ignition thread and the combustion of the gelatin capsule. Sulfur correction was not performed.

2.2.4 DATA ANALYSIS

2.2.4.1 DIET DESCRIPTION

The percent of occurrence (%O) and gravimetric (% wet-weight) methods were chosen to describe stomach content as recommended by Amundsen et Sánchez-Hernández (2019). The percent of occurrence is calculated by noting the presence/absence of each prey type

in the stomach content and expressing it as a percentage of the total number of stomachs (number of stomachs containing prey type “A” / total number of stomachs *100). It gives an idea of which prey is the most frequent in the diet but doesn’t indicate the amount of it consumed (Hyslop 1980). This is why it was used in conjunction with the gravimetric method, which is calculated as the contribution in wet weight (%WW) of each prey type to the total stomach content wet weight, expressed as a percentage (weight of prey type “A”/ total weight of stomachs*100). The wet-weight gravimetric method was preferred even if it tends to underestimate the contribution of small, numerous preys because it gives a better indication of the caloric contribution of each prey to the diet. The goal of the study was more to investigate the energetic contribution in the diet. The gravimetric method is a better indicator of the nutritional importance of each prey in the diet (Amundsen and Sánchez-Hernández 2019). Percentage of empty stomachs was calculated as $PES = N_e/N \times 100$, where N_e was the number of empty stomachs and N the total number of stomachs.

2.2.4.2 FEEDING SUCCESS

In the study, stomach content wet weight was positively correlated with the length of brook trout. To compare the amount of food consumed by trout between years and between sites, an index of feeding success was calculated as a simple method to remove the influence of trout length on the stomach content weight. Feeding success was determined by subtracting the effect of brook trout length from the mass of prey consumed by brook trout. A linear regression between brook trout total length and prey mass in the stomach was performed, and the residues were extracted, which provides a measure of feeding success for each fish. The rest of the analyses were performed with feeding success data to subtract the effect of fish size. Mean feeding success was compared between the different years, months, and sites using ANOVA and post hoc Tukey HSD.

2.2.4.3 CALORIMETRY

To determine calorimetric content of prey, the energy of combustion (Q) is determined by the formula:

$$Q_{comb} = \frac{(\Delta T \times EE) - (1,38 \times V_{NaOH} - 50 \text{ cal} - (E_{capsule} \times m_{capsule \text{ used}}))}{m_{sample}}$$

where Q_{comb} is the heat produced by the combustion of the sample (cal), ΔT is the temperature rise recorded by the calorimeter (°C), EE is the energy equivalent of the calorimeter, V_{NaOH} is the volume (mL) of NaOH required to neutralize the amount of nitric acid produced (mL), m_{sample} is the weight of the sample in the capsule (g) and -50 cal is equivalent to the energy contained in the cotton ignition thread.

Energy contained in a gelatin capsule ($E_{capsule}$) was measured using same equation, and using the mean value from 2 capsules analyzed. The energy equivalent of the calorimeter (around 2400) must be determined with the formula:

$$EE = \frac{(6318 \text{ cal} \cdot \text{g}^{-1} \times m_{ba}) + (1,38 \times V_{NaOH})\text{cal} + 50 \text{ cal}}{\Delta T}$$

where EE is the equivalent energy of the calorimeter, m_{ba} is the mass of the benzoic acid tablet used (g), V_{NaOH} is the volume (mL) of NaOH required to neutralize the amount of nitric acid produced (mL) is the temperature raise recorded by the calorimeter (°C) and +50 cal is equivalent to the energy contained in the cotton ignition thread.

2.3 RESULTS

2.3.1 LENGTH FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION OF ANADROMOUS BROOK TROUT

Trout total length for all years ranged from 15,9 cm to 58 cm. Anadromous brook trout sampled had mean lengths of 27.50 ± 6.28 (SD) cm in 2021, 35.93 ± 8.56 (SD) cm in 2022 and 34.37 ± 7.07 (SD) cm in 2023. Few individuals were sampled in the 15-20 cm ($n=12$) and >50 cm length classes ($n=5$; Figure 4). In addition, trout in the 45-50 cm length class were absent in 2021, and trout from the 15-20 cm and >50 cm classes were absent in 2023. Fishermen expressed great difficulty capturing trout in 2023, resulting in a smaller sample and uneven trout length frequency distribution for this year.

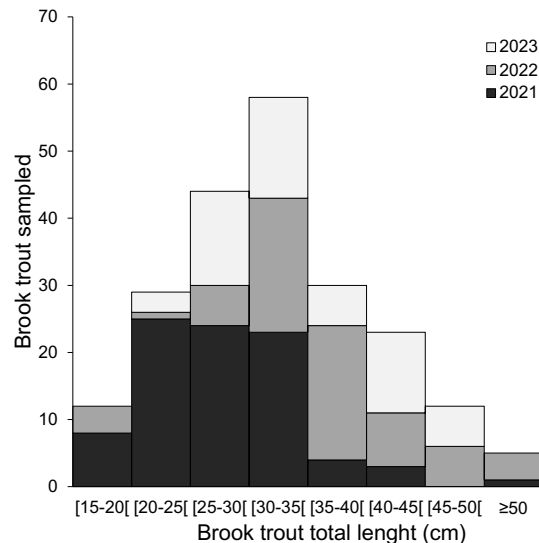


Figure 4. Length distribution of anadromous brook trout sampled in the Saguenay fjord between 2021 and 2023 ($n=213$). Bars are stacked.

2.3.2 STOMACH CONTENT ANALYSIS

In total, 213 stomachs were analyzed. Trout sampled had a low percentage of empty stomachs (1.9%). Stomach content data of trout pooled for all length classes show that a few categories of prey dominated the diet in terms of percentage of occurrence (Table 2). Gammarids (54.9%), polychaete worms (48.4%) and terrestrial insects (40.8%) were the

most common prey in the diet. Fish prey (24.4%) such as osmerids (12.2%) and other fish (12.2%), aquatic insect larvae (19.2%), other invertebrates (16.4%) and shrimp (15.0%) occurred less frequently in stomachs. In terms of wet weight, gammarids (33.3%) and polychaete worms (15.4%) also contributed the most to the weight of the stomach, followed by osmerids (14.1%) and terrestrial insects (11.2%). Other prey types accounted for very small percentages (5% to <1%) of stomach wet weight. Brook trout stomachs contained prey belonging to 36 different taxa (Annex 1). Insects were the most diverse type of prey, with 11 orders identified in the stomach content. Brook trout consumed nine different fish species. Smelt was the most important prey fish as it constituted 61.7% of all identified fish in stomach contents. Capelin (13.3%) and banded killifish (10.0%) were the other most common prey fish. New prey species were identified in the stomach contents of anadromous brook trout in the fjord, like common logperch (*Percina caprodes*), fallfish (*Semotilus corporalis*) and one gadidae (species unknown).

Table 2 Percent of occurrence and contribution to wet weight of the stomach content (%) for each prey type found in the stomach of anadromous brook trout sampled in the Saguenay fjord between 2021 and 2023 (n=213).

Prey type	Percent occurrence (%)	Wet-weight contribution (%)
Digested matter	56.3	12.0
Gammarids	54.9	33.3
Polychaete worms	48.4	15.4
Terrestrial insects	40.8	11.2
Aquatic larvae of terrestrial insects	19.2	3.7
Other invertebrates	16.4	0.3
Shrimp	15.0	3.3
Plant matter	13.1	0.5
Osmerids	12.2	14.1
Other fish	12.2	5.0
Other crustaceans	12.2	1.2

2.3.3 ONTOGENETIC VARIATION

The composition of the diet of trout varied according to the total length of trout (Figure 5). In the smallest trout length class (15-20 cm), polychaete worms (42.1%) and terrestrial insects (25.1%) contributed to the majority of stomach content wet weight. However, a shift in the diet can be observed following the length of trout. Intermediate trout length classes (25 to 30 cm) stomach content was mostly comprised of gammarids, polychaete worms, terrestrial insects, and shrimp in terms of wet weight. The highest percentage of shrimp wet weight (9.5%) was found in trout 25-30 cm. Fish first appeared in the diet at >20 cm but contributed to a low percentage of wet weight for trout of 20-25 cm (6.0%), 25-30 cm (6.7%) and 30-35cm (2.8%). Fish consumption became more important in trout 35-40 cm where smelt contributed to 26.2% of stomach content wet weight. Terrestrial insects (19.1%), polychaete worms (17.6%), and gammarids (16.2%) also contributed to stomach content wet weight of this length class. Fish consumption diminished in 40-45 cm trout in favor of greater gammarid consumption (15.0% of stomach content wet weight). Trout in the 45-50cm class consumed more other fish species (22.1% of wet weight) than any other length class, but the main prey remained gammarids (37.1%) and polychaete worms (13.9%). Trout shifted to a majority piscivorous diet (92.7%) at >50cm length, with smelt (88.3%) contributing the most to the stomach content wet weight. In terms of occurrence, the most frequent prey for the smallest trout (15-20 cm) were insects and polychaetes. Crustacean prey became more frequent in mid-sized trout (20-35 cm), especially gammarids and shrimp. The %O of polychaetes, insects, shrimp, other crustaceans and other invertebrates showed a steep drop in trout 50+cm. The %O of fish prey began to rise at 35+cm (37%), and the %O stayed high up trout 50+cm, at around 40%. Fish was never consumed by a majority of trout, as the highest %O for fish prey was recorded in trout 45-50 cm (42%).

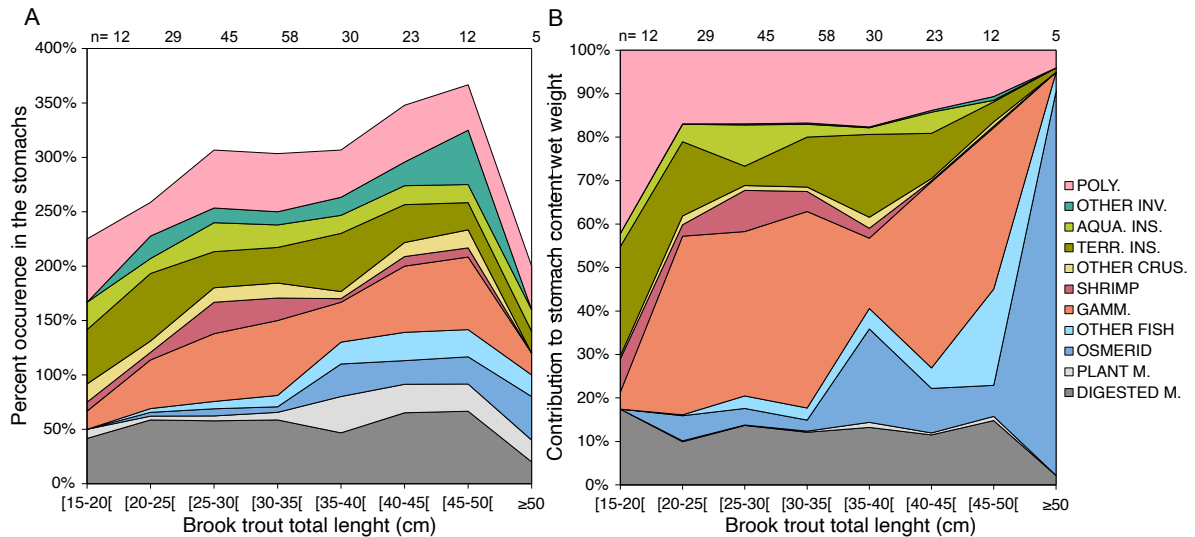


Figure 5. Percent of occurrence in the stomach (A) and contribution to stomach content WW (B) of each prey type for different length classes of anadromous brook trout sampled in the Saguenay fjord between 2021 and 2023 (n=213). “Other fish” includes unidentified fish. “POLY.” = polychaetes; “OTHER INV.” = Other invertebrates; “AQUA. INS.” = Aquatic larvae of terrestrial insects; “TERR. INS.” = Terrestrial insects; “OTHER CRUS.” = Other crustaceans; “GAMM” = Gammarids; “PLANT M.” = Plant matter; “DIGESTED M.” = Digested Matter.

2.3.4 SEASONAL AND SPATIAL VARIATION

The composition of the diet of brook trout was compared between different years, months, and fishing sites using the percentage of wet weight of each prey type in the diet (figure 6). The weight percentage is similar for most prey types between the three years, except for fish. Gammarid consumption was higher in 2023. The percentage of fish in the stomach was lower in 2022 and even lower in 2023 when compared to 2021. The type of fish consumed is also different, as in 2021, osmerids were the main fish prey, but in 2022 and 2023, other fish species represented half the fish weight in the diet. The diet of brook trout varies seasonally. Insects are mostly consumed during the spring and summer months of May, June, and July. In May, most of the insect weight consumed is composed of aquatic insect larvae. Anadromous brook trout in the Saguenay fjord show opportunistic feeding behavior. In the fall months, crustaceans like gammarids and shrimp contributed the most

to stomach content wet weight. Fish consumption is higher in June than in all other months. Brook trout diet composition was very similar for all 3 fishing zones. The main difference is that the highest consumption of mysids and shrimp occurred in the Mid Fjord zone. Fish consumption was also slightly higher in the Mid Fjord zone than in the Upstream Fjord and Downstream Fjord zones.

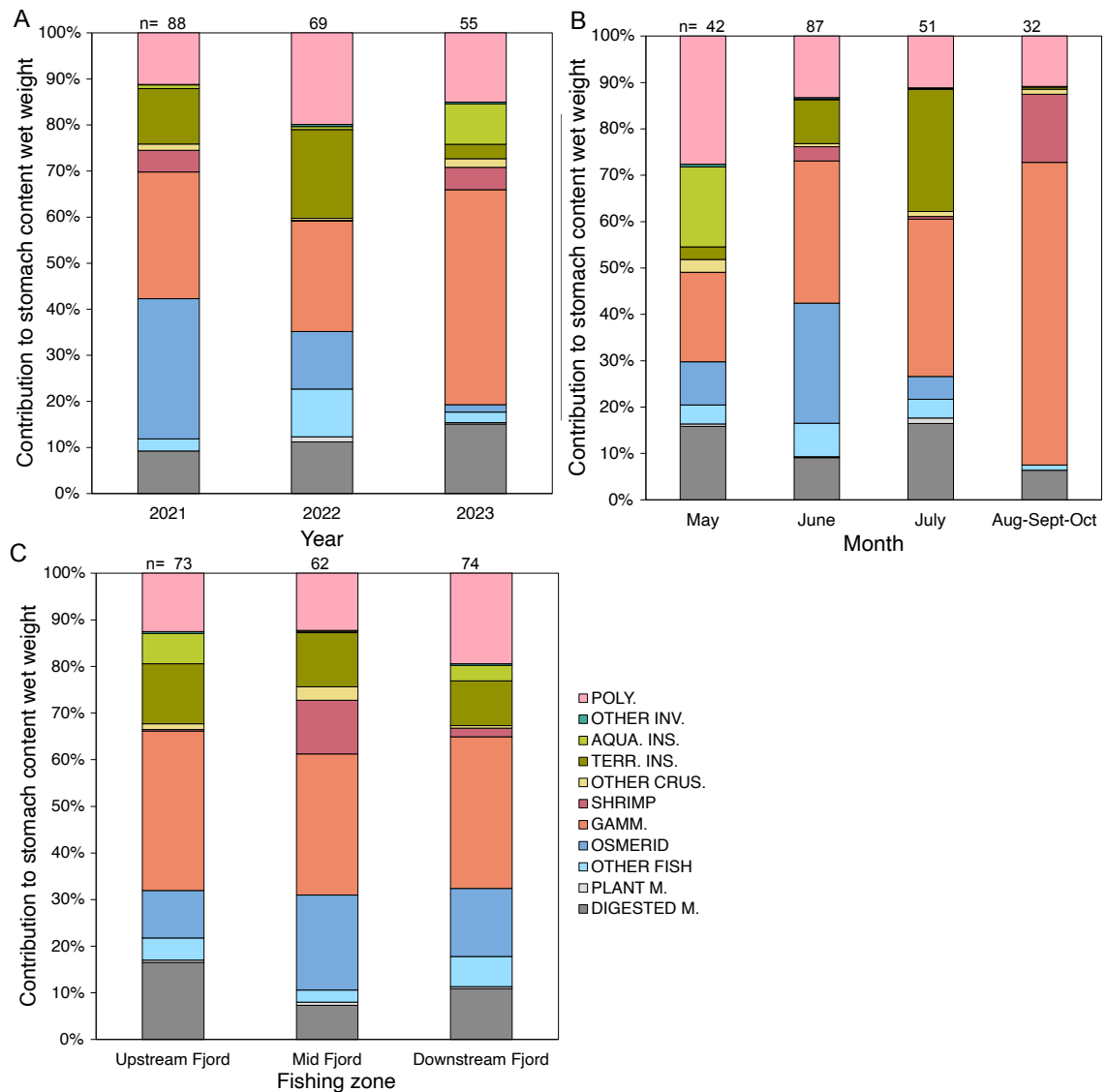


Figure 6. Wet-weight contribution of each prey type to the total stomach content WW of anadromous brook trout sampled in the Saguenay fjord for the different years (A) (n=213), months (B) (n=213) and fishing zones (C) (n=210) sampled. “Other fish” includes unidentified fish. “POLY” = polychaetes; “OTHER INV.” = Other invertebrates; “AQUA. INS.” = Aquatic larvae of terrestrial insects; “TERR. INS.” = Terrestrial insects; “OTHER CRUS.” = Other crustaceans; “GAMM” = Gammarids; “PLANT M.” = Plant matter; “DIGESTED M.” = Digested Matter.

2.3.5 FEEDING SUCCESS

Linear regression between brook trout total length and the stomach content wet weight (Ln scaled) was assessed and showed a significant ($R^2 = 0.13$, $p < 0.05$) weak positive relationship (Figure 7A). Larger trout have higher stomach content wet weight. The residues of the linear regression were extracted and plotted in Figure 8b to show the stomach content wet weight when the influence of brook trout length is removed. The residues of the linear regression were used as an index of the feeding success of brook trout for the following analyses.

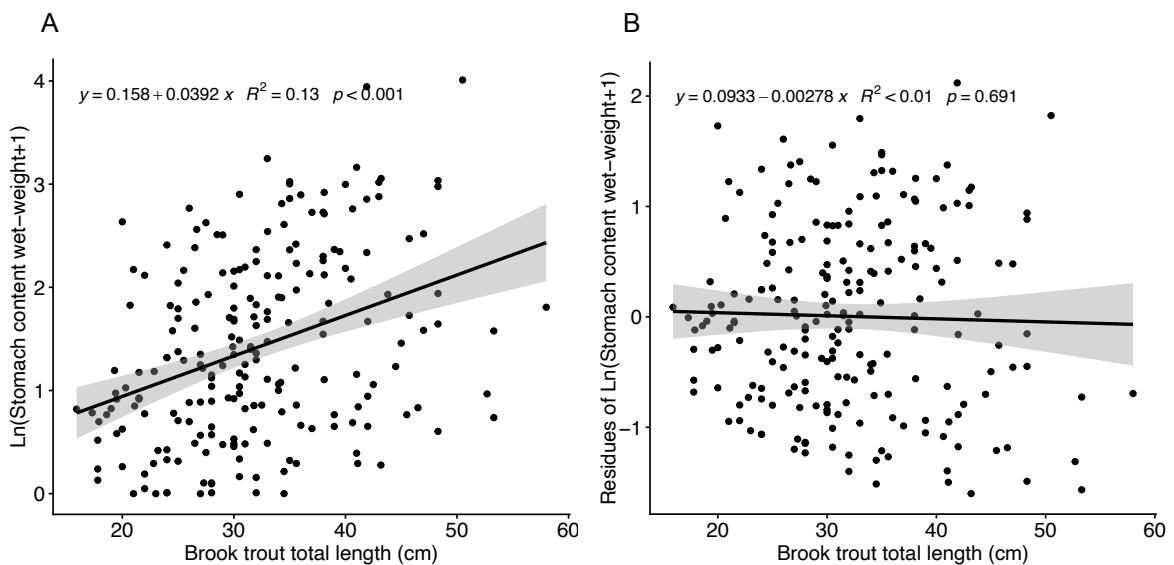


Figure 7. Linear regression between stomach content wet weight in g +1 (Ln scaled) and brook trout total length in cm (A) and relationship between the residues of linear regression (B) and brook total length in cm (n=213).

After comparing the composition of the diet, the amount of food consumed was compared between years, months, and fishing zones via the index of feeding success. Mean feeding success of brook trout was compared by ANOVA and Tukey post hoc test for all three years and showed significant difference ($p > 0.05$) with the year 2023 having higher feeding success than 2022 and 2021 (Figure 8). There was no significant difference in feeding success between 2021-2022. Mean feeding success was not significantly different

between the different months of the year (ANOVA, $p > 0.05$). Mean feeding success did not differ significantly between the three fishing zones (ANOVA, $p > 0.05$).

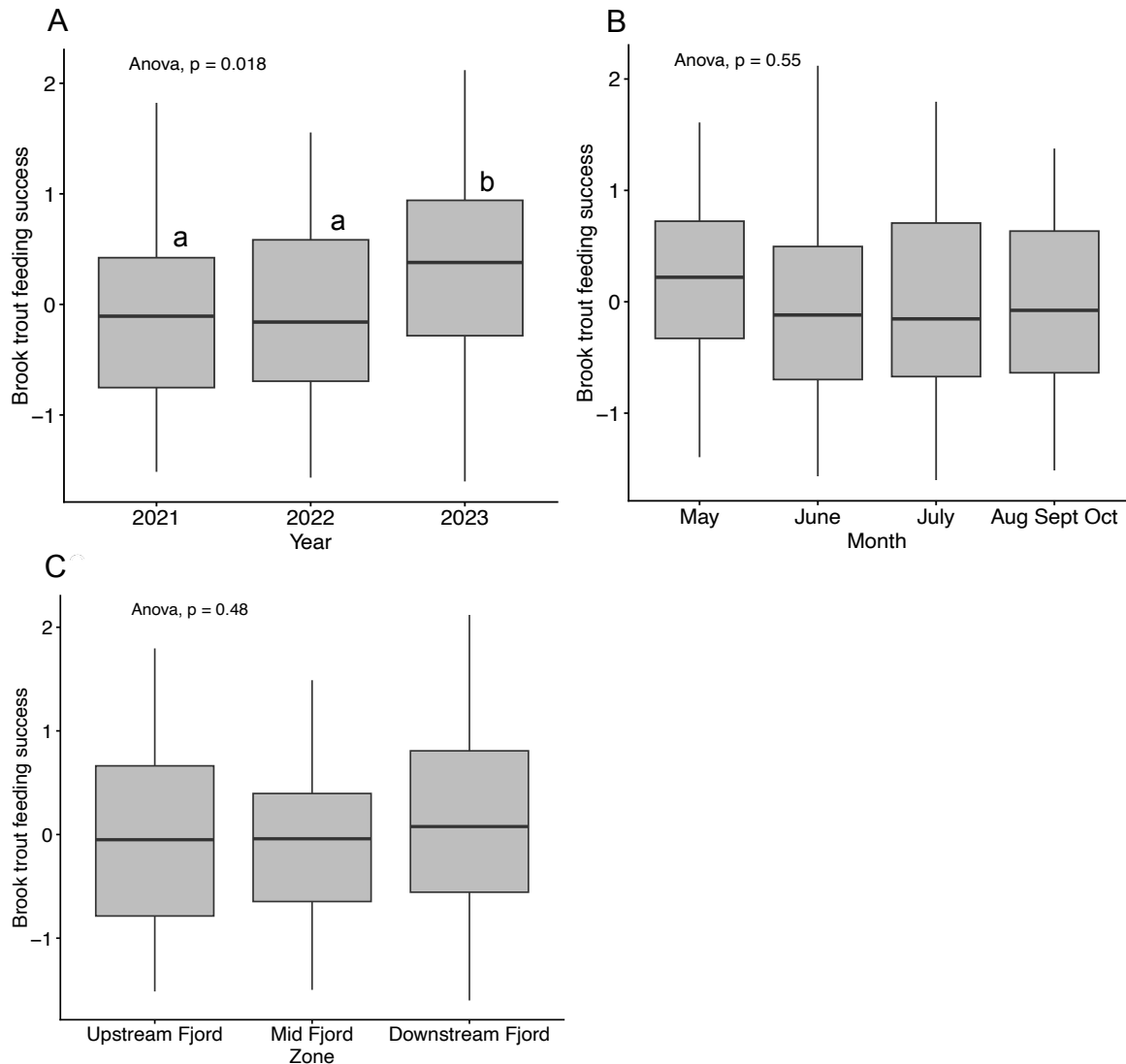


Figure 8. ANOVA comparison of mean feeding success of brook trout between the different years (A) ($n=213$), months (B) ($n=213$) and fishing zones (C) ($n=210$). Months August, September, October were pooled together due to low effectiveness.

2.3.6 FISH LENGTH - PREY LENGTH RELATIONSHIPS

The length of the prey consumed by brook trout was also investigated. Linear regression between brook trout total length and the length of 3 main prey consumed was

assessed (Figure 9). Other prey, like polychaete worms were impossible to measure due to their highly digested state. Fish prey length showed a significant ($p < 0.05$) positive relationship with brook trout total length. Insect and gammarid prey length showed a weaker, significant ($p < 0.05$) positive relationship to brook trout total length.

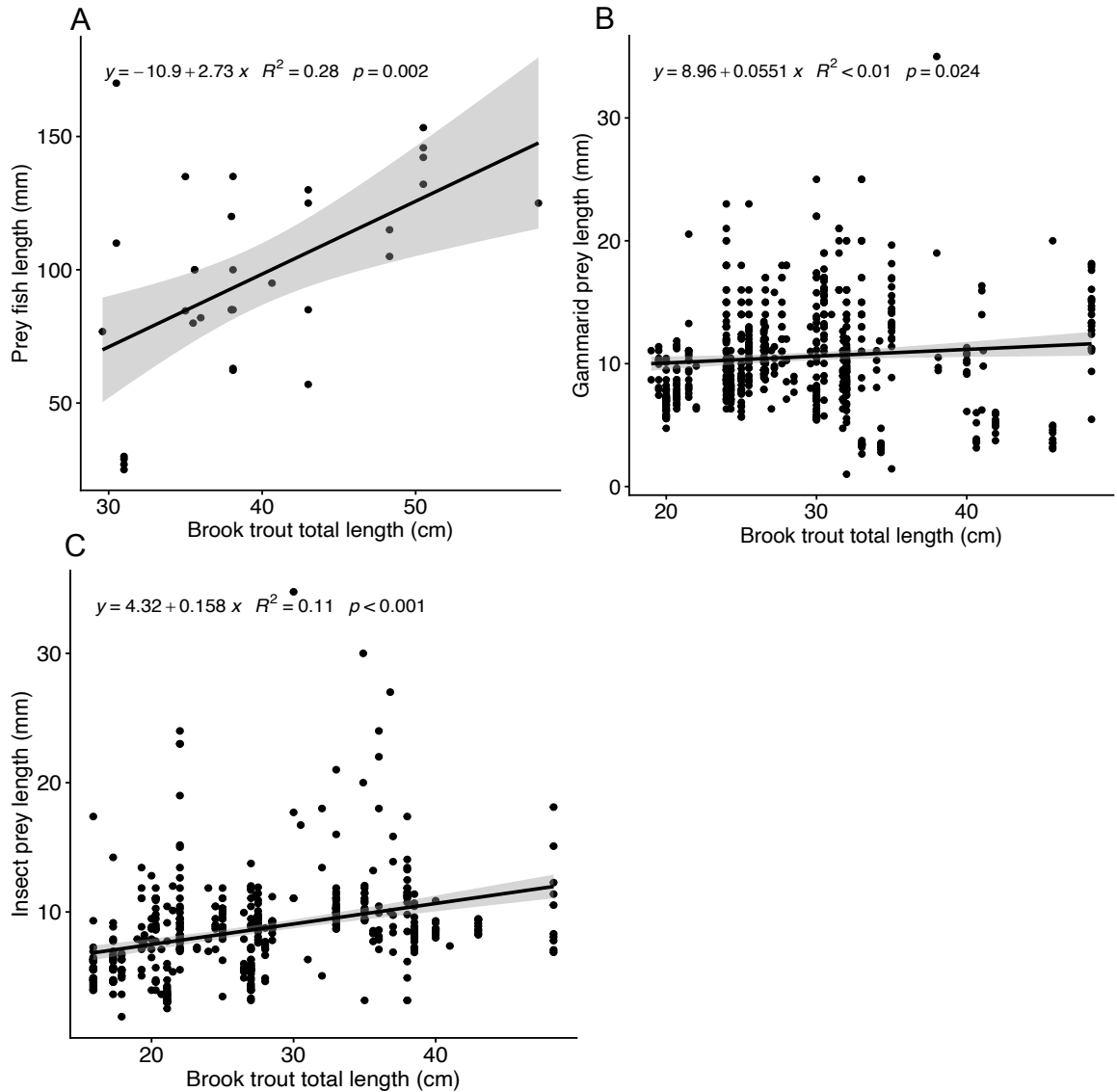


Figure 9. Linear regression between total length of prey fish (A), gammarids (B) and insects (C) in mm and brook trout total length in cm (n=213).

2.3.7 ENERGY CONTENT OF BROOK TROUT PREY

Brook trout consumed prey of varying energy content, from 11.6 to 21.5 kJ/g (Table 3). Polychaete worms, the lowest energy content prey analyzed, contained almost half the energy of smelt per gram. Crustacean prey like gammarids (14.1 kJ/g) and sand shrimp (14.4 kJ/g) had similar energetic content, except for mysids, which showed a higher caloric content (19.4 kJ/g). Smelt (21.5 kJ/g) had higher energy content than threespine sticklebacks (17.5 kJ/g). This could be due to the presence of bony plates and spines in the sticklebacks, since whole fish were analyzed. Generally, caloric content obtained for all prey was in accordance with literature values for similar species. Sand shrimp values should be taken carefully, as only one analysis was performed, and they showed lower energy content than most decapods. This could be due to the size of the shrimp, since the shrimp sampled were juvenile, and smaller individuals might have a higher exoskeleton mass to body mass ratio. Since a low number of analyses were performed, this could explain some of the difference with published values.

Table 3. Mean energy content (kJ/g of dry weight, DW) of different prey types of anadromous brook trout assessed by bomb calorimeter.

Prey	Samples n=	Energy content (kJ/g DW)	Standard deviation	Values in the literature (kJ/g DW)	Source
<i>Osmerus mordax</i>	8	21.5391	0.5433	21.3-23.0	(Anthony <i>et al.</i> 2000; Dai 2018)
<i>Gastoresteus aculateus</i>	2	17.5131	0.4551	Adult: 19.60- 24.35	(Meakins 1976)
Gammarus sp.	2	14.1508	0.0766	Amphipods: 9.9 to 18.2	(Schaafsma <i>et al.</i> 2018)
Mysidae	2	19.4018	0.5258	Mysids: 18.2 to 24.0	(Schaafsma <i>et al.</i> 2018)
<i>Crangon septemspinosa</i>	1	14.4001	NA	Decapods: 19.0 to 25.3	(Schaafsma <i>et al.</i> 2018)
<i>Polychaeta</i>	3	11.5958	0.5258	Polychaeta: 9.2 to 14.2	(Schaafsma <i>et al.</i> 2018)

2.4 DISCUSSION

Ontogeny was the major factor that drives changes in brook trout diet, with a shift toward a fish-dominated diet in larger individuals. Brook trout never became strict piscivores and remained opportunistic, consuming invertebrates at all sizes. An interannual variation in fish consumption was observed. In 2023, fish consumption decreased when compared to previous years 2022 and 2021. Brook trout turned to other fish species for the two years of lower rainbow smelt consumption. The consumption of fish prey also starts later in the life of the trout when compared to 1998-2002 (Morinville and Rassmussen 2006). Some seasonal variation occurred in the diet and seemed to follow prey availability. Low spatial variation was observed in brook trout diet when comparing the different sampling sites. A higher feeding success was observed in 2021 when compared to 2022-2023, but feeding success did not vary significantly between months or sampling sites. While this study is limited by sampling, it provides an insight into the diet of anadromous brook trout during a population decline

2.4.1 SEASONAL AND SPATIAL VARIATION

An interannual variation is observed in the diet when comparing stomach content of brook trout. Similar prey were consumed for all three years of sampling, but weight percentages vary for certain taxa. The main difference is the decline in overall fish consumption when comparing 2021 to 2022-2023. Fish contributed less to stomach content wet weight in 2022 and 2023. This cannot be totally explained by a bias in total length, as more large trout (40 cm +) were caught in 2022 and 2023. This decrease in fish consumption could be most probably attributed to lower smelt abundances in the fjord. Abundance of young-of-the-year rainbow smelt in the fjord was slightly higher in 2021 when compared to 2020. (MELCCFP, unpublished data). No smelt abundance data is available for 2022-2023,

making further analysis impossible. We can also observe that in 2022-2023, the proportion of osmerids consumed was lower, with other prey fish representing half the fish consumed. Smelt was the main prey of trout in the fjord, with capelin being consumed occasionally. As trout is an opportunistic feeder, it shifts to other fish prey when smelt abundance is low. Gammarid percentage in the diet (wet weight) was also highest in 2023, suggesting that in periods of low smelt availability, trout rely on small crustacean prey.

Anadromous brook trout in the Saguenay fjord is an opportunistic feeder whose diet varies according to prey availability and follows seasonal patterns. The consumption of aquatic insect larvae was the highest in May, which coincides with the availability of an abundance of aquatic larvae of flying insects in the habitat. Ephemeroptera, Plecoptera, Odonata and Trichoptera nymphs were the most common prey. In the following months (June-July), insect prey consisted mostly of flying insects caught at the surface. We observed many cases of brook trout feeding on many (up to hundreds) individuals of the same type of prey. The presence of ants or moths (spruce budworm) on the water surface, likely due to major insect reproductive events, led to strong predation by trout. The most fish was consumed during the month of June, however, all of the largest trout (50+ cm) were caught in June, and the large trout consume more fish. In a previous study, the highest fish consumption was recorded in May-June and during the winter months in the Saguenay fjord, and the lowest fish consumption occurred in August (Morinville and Rassmussen 2006). From mid-June to September, brook trout in the fjord begin their migration back to their native river to spawn, the smallest trout migrating last (Lesueur 1993). The lower fish consumption seen in fall (August to October) could be explained by less large trout being sampled, as no 45 cm + trout were sampled. It is also important to note that water temperature influences digestion rates and gut transit time of food in fish, leading to shorter gut transit time in the summer and longer gut transit time in the cooler months (Volkoff and Rønnestad 2020). The consumption of fast digesting prey is thus likely to be underestimated

in the summer. Prey with resistant, bony parts perdure in the stomach longer and are likely to be overestimated (Santos and Jobling 2006).

The diet of anadromous brook trout was similar for the three fishing zones studied. The wet weight percentage of gammarids, insects and polychaetes are similar throughout fishing zones. The only notable difference observed is the higher consumption of fish and shrimp in the Mid-Fjord zone. The only described spawning area for rainbow smelt in the fjord is located in the Upstream Fjord zone, upstream of the bridge in Chicoutimi, where smelt massively congregates in May (Lesueur 1998). Another zone of smelt concentration can be found in the Upstream Fjord zone in spring prior to spawning and in winter, but distribution of smelt in the fjord in summer is unknown (Lesueur 1998). Experimental fishing data for juvenile smelt in mid-August (2021) found higher concentrations of smelt in littoral areas when compared to pelagic sampling, and the highest concentration was observed in the Upstream fjord (MELCCFP, unpublished data). Morinville et Rassmussen (2006) also reported the highest levels of piscivory by brook trout occurred in the upstream Saguenay River. We did not observe more osmerid consumption by brook trout in these zones of high smelt concentration. It is possible that the Mid-Fjord zone harbours higher smelt abundance in months that have not been previously studied (ex. summer or fall), which could explain this difference. More data on the distribution of smelt in the fjord is necessary to conclude. Feeding behaviour of anadromous brook trout has rarely been studied by direct observation or tracking, thus it is not well documented. Studies of a similar species, anadromous arctic char, showed frequent use of the intertidal zone (Spares 2015). In the fjord, brook trout consume a diet rich in intertidal dwelling invertebrates, like nereididae, amphipods and insects. Study by DNA metabarcoding found brook trout eDNA only above the thermohaline layer (0-20m) throughout the fjord (Tremblay *et al.* 2026). It is possible that similar habitats are exploited throughout the fjord and that the temperature and salinity gradient in the fjord doesn't cause major changes in diet.

2.4.2 ONTOGENETIC VARIATION

It seems that ontogeny is the factor that drives more important changes in their diet. Smaller trout feed exclusively on invertebrates like insects and small crustaceans. As fish grow larger in size, larger types of prey become available to them (Gaeta *et al.* 2018). Another factor that can explain this shift in diet is the different habitat use between length classes of trout. Salinity tolerance of brook trout is size dependent and smaller trout have a limited capacity to face osmotic stress when migrating (McCormick and Naiman 1984; McCormick *et al.* 1985). Thus, smaller migrant-of-the-year trout spend a longer time feeding in river mouths and bays while they adapt to the salinity change (Lenormand *et al.* 2004). Many organisms consumed by small brook trout are found in the benthic zone, such as polychaete worms, gammarids and insect larvae (Esselink and Zwarts 1989; Pinder 1995; Holzenthal *et al.* 2015; Ritter and Bourne 2024). Larger trout can migrate into the fjord earlier and consume more pelagic prey. Rainbow smelt are pelagic fish and can be found in a wide range of salinity (Dodson *et al.* 2009). This behaviour could also allow a decrease in intraspecific competition between different length classes of trout. Mid-sized trout feed mostly on marine crustaceans, terrestrial insects and polychaetes. The shift to piscivorous behaviour appears to occur later than in previous studies. In 1998-2002, fish consumption began at 20 cm, and at 25 cm, 50% of trout consumed fish (Morinville and Rassmussen 2006). In our study, only 9% of trout sized 25-30 cm consumed fish, and only 37% of trout size 35-40 cm consumed fish. Fish only became the main prey item for fish 50+ cm. Osmerids were the most important prey fish in the diet, with rainbow smelt being the most frequent, and capelin consumption being occasional. However, trout continued feeding on crustaceans and polychaetes at all sizes. This is consistent with the stable isotope analysis done by Morinville and Rassmussen (2006), which concluded that trout in the fjord never become strict piscivores. Mature trout still fed on invertebrate prey in addition to fish. Earlier consumption of fish (at a smaller body size) has previously been identified as the factor that

explains the higher growth rate of salmonids in oceans compared to salmonids in streams or lakes (Keeley and Grant 2001). If brook trout begin feeding on prey fish later in life, they could experience lowered growth rates. However, if marine invertebrate prey (ex. amphipods and shrimp of medium energy density) are present in high enough abundance a compensatory effect could occur, allowing trout to reach their full energy needs.

2.4.3 FEEDING SUCCESS

Feeding success was significantly higher in 2021 when compared to years 2022-2023. Brook trout in 2021 had the highest feeding success and the highest consumption of fish prey. This suggests that brook trout had better access to quality food resources in 2021. The feeding success was stable throughout the Saguenay River and fjord, as we found no significant differences between the different zones. The homogeneity in feeding success is surprising, since marine ecosystems are generally considered to provide better food resources (higher productivity, better prey sizes) (Gross *et al.* 1988; Keeley and Grant 2001). This has been observed in the Sainte-Marguerite Bay (fjord), where mean invertebrate size was larger than in the Sainte-Marguerite River (Morinville and Rassmussen 2006). We expected the downstream fjord zone to provide more resources than the upstream fjord zone, but no difference in feeding success was observed. According to recent metabarcoding studies, fish communities in the fresh to brackish surface layer (0-20m) are uniform throughout the fjord and smelt eDNA rates were similar from upstream to downstream (Tremblay *et al.* 2026). It is thus possible that food resources are similar throughout the fjord, and that a difference can only be observed when comparing freshwater river ecosystems with the fjord.

Since stomach content analysis targets the last meal of the fish up to its death, we considered that the location the fish was caught at must correspond approximately to the

last location it was actively feeding. However, it is noted that anadromous brook trout in the fjord migrate throughout the summer, and some have been found up to 100 km away from their natal river (Lenormand *et al.* 2004). In other populations of anadromous brook trout, dispersal at sea is limited and they tend to stay within estuaries near river mouths (Dutil and Power 1980). Since the present study does not include any tracking of the movement of the fish, it's impossible to determine how long a fish resided in a location before it was caught. It is thus possible that frequent movement between upstream and downstream habitats occurred, muddling the detection of patterns. No significant difference was found in feeding success between the different months of the study (May to October). It is likely that the low sample of brook trout prevented the detection of seasonal patterns in the feeding success.

2.4.4 FISH LENGTH - PREY LENGTH RELATIONSHIPS

A relationship between the size of brook trout and the size of the prey it consumes was observed in the fjord. A positive linear relationship was observed between the length of the trout and the length of the prey consumed. This relationship was statistically significant for fish and insects and gammarids. It is to note that fewer gammarid and insect prey were measured in larger (40 cm +) brook trout, due to a lower sample and due to the larger trout feeding more on fish. Other taxa were not analyzed because too few length measurements were taken. As trout grow longer, they consume prey of increasing size, and this is especially true for fish prey. Similar relationships between prey size and predator size have been described in other fish species (Dörner *et al.* 2007; Gaeta *et al.* 2018). The maximum prey size for a given fish is determined by morphological limitations, such as mouth gape size (Hambricht 1991) and behavioural limitations like the effort needed to capture it (Scharf *et al.* 1998). While mean prey size and maximum prey size usually increase as fish grow larger, minimal prey size consumed tends to stay more consistent (Mittelbach and Persson 1998).

Brook trout begin by consuming juvenile fish and smaller species before moving on to larger fish as they grow. The average prey fish length / trout total length ratio was $24.7\% \pm 9.6$ (SD). The smallest ratio observed was banded killifish measuring 8% of its predator length and the biggest ratio measured was a sand lance measuring 55.7% of its predators' length. In piscivorous fish, prey usually represent a maximum length of 32–46% of predator total length (Gaeta *et al.* 2018). The width of the prey is key, as fish can usually consume longer fusiform prey, but smaller laterally compressed prey (Gaeta *et al.* 2018). The elongated shape of sand lance might allow brook trout to consume larger individuals easier compared to rainbow smelt. The longest size classes of gammarids and insects consumed by brook trout (35 mm) probably correspond to maximum size available in the habitat (Annex II; Morinville and Rassmussen 2006). Brook trout instead shift to preying on bigger species such as shrimp and fish prey as they grow. Thus, the shift in prey size occurs through a change in prey taxa consumed.

2.4.5 ENERGY CONTENT OF PREY

The analysis of energy density of brook trout prey confirms the importance of fish prey in brook trout diet. Smelt had the highest energy density of all prey analyzed. Mysids had the second highest energy density but were rarely found in the stomach content. Their low consumption could be due to lower availability or a change of behaviour of trout. Sand shrimp and gammarids had similar energy density, but gammarids are consumed more often by trout. This could be due to factors such as a higher gammarid abundance or ease of catch of gammarids. Polychaetes worms were consumed by trout throughout their life, despite showing the lowest energy density values. Polychaete worms must therefore remain an interesting prey for brook trout due to a very large abundance in the fjord, or because of the ease of catch. The size of the prey can also have an impact on its energy content. For

rainbow smelt, energy density increases linearly with total length of the fish (Dai 2018). Since the smelt analysed in this study were all large, mature smelt, we can expect smaller individuals to have lower caloric values. Energy density of prey can also vary seasonally. Energy density of smelt is lower after spawning and increases in summer and fall (Dai 2018). The smelt analyzed were caught in fall, so the values should represent peak energy density of smelt. The lower smelt consumption observed in 2022-2023 could indicate a lacking in energy rich food for brook trout in the fjord. Brook trout also consume other fish species when less rainbow smelt is consumed, but prey like sticklebacks have lower energy density. When preferred prey are insufficient, piscivorous fish must resort to consuming multiple alternative prey types, increasing energy expenditure and negatively affecting growth and survival if base energy needs are not met (Graeb *et al.* 2008; Fincel *et al.* 2014). Food restriction has also been shown to delay sexual maturation in Atlantic Salmon (Berglund 1995).

2.5 IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT

The Saguenay fjord is a changing ecosystem that faces threats of invasive species through both marine and freshwater routes. Recently, invasive freshwater species have been identified, such as smallmouth bass (*Micropterus dolomieu*). In addition, after the successful reintroduction of striped bass (*Morone saxatilis*) in the St. Lawrence River, it has started frequenting the waters of the fjord. Rockfish populations have exploded in the St. Lawrence estuary and are also found in great abundance in the fjord. Both these species are known to feed on rainbow smelt (Brown-Vuillemin *et al.* 2022; Lapointe *et al.* 2022). The increased predation pressure on rainbow smelt could impact anadromous brook populations. Such changes in population dynamics can impact the trophic network in the fjord. An increase in competition for a key prey, changes in prey abundance, and changes

in prey distribution can all impact the feeding behavior of brook trout. Brook trout are known to change their resource use in the presence of a competing species. For example, brook trout coexisting in lakes with yellow perch will shift to more pelagic feeding (Browne and Rassmussen 2009). Interspecific competition could be a factor that modifies brook trout feeding behaviour. Changes in environmental conditions brought on by global warming will also impact brook trout populations. According to models, brook trout may suffer stronger population decline if combined warmer temperatures and frequent droughts occur (Rodríguez et al. 2025). However, anadromous brook trout in the fjord have access to more thermal refuges because of the dept of the fjord and may adapt better to warming waters. Overfishing remains the main suspected cause of the population decline of brook trout in the fjord. Diet studies provide crucial information about key preys in the trophic network and can help to improve population assessment models and to maintain sustainable harvest (Garvey and Chipps 2012). Fjords are home to rich biodiversity, so we must continue to gain more knowledge on these ecosystems in order to face global changes and maintain sustainable fisheries.

CONCLUSION GÉNÉRALE

Le but de ce mémoire était de réaliser une étude de l'alimentation de l'omble de fontaine anadrome à l'échelle de l'ensemble du fjord du Saguenay. Compte tenu du contexte de déclin de population actuel et du fait que la dernière étude de ce type remonte à 2006, il est important de mettre à jour nos connaissances sur cette espèce. En effet, on observe un déclin de population similaire dans plusieurs populations au Québec (Ministère des Forêts de la Faune et des Parcs 2020). C'est pourquoi il est important de mieux comprendre cette espèce qui est la cible de la pêche récréative. Mieux connaître les facteurs qui influencent les variations de population permet d'assurer une gestion durable de la pêche. Nous avons pu atteindre ce but en analysant les estomacs d'ombles de fontaine et en étudiant la variation spatiale, temporelle et ontogénique dans leur alimentation. Nous avons déterminé que l'omble de fontaine anadrome du Saguenay a un comportement de chasse opportuniste. Son alimentation varie selon la disponibilité saisonnière des proies. La principale variation interannuelle observée est la diminution de la consommation de poisson en 2022 et 2023. Il s'agit plus précisément d'une diminution de la consommation d'éperlan-arc-en-ciel. Cette diminution pourrait être liée à une plus faible abondance de l'éperlan arc-en-ciel. De plus, les ombles de fontaine semblent consommer du poisson plus tard que ce qui avait été observé par Morinville et Rassmussen (2006). Dans l'étude de 2006, 50% des ombles consomment du poisson à 25 cm, alors que dans la présente étude, la fréquence de piscivorie est de seulement 9% chez les ombles de 25-30 cm (Morinville et Rassmussen 2006). Dans la présente étude, la fréquence de piscivorie la plus élevée qui a été observée est de 42% chez les ombles de 45 à 50 cm. Il semble donc y avoir eu un changement dans le régime alimentaire des ombles de fontaine, avec une plus grande importance des

invertébrés marins (surtout les gammares) et une plus faible consommation de poisson. La consommation de proies de forte densité énergétique est nécessaire afin que les gros ombles de fontaine puissent soutenir leur croissance. Dans d'autres systèmes, il a été possible de démontrer la relation cyclique entre une population de piscivore et de sa proie principale, comme avec la ouananiche (*Salmo salar*) et l'éperlan arc-en-ciel (Kircheis et Stanley 1981; Fortin *et al.* 2009). Dans le Saguenay, il semble que l'omble de fontaine anadrome est plus opportuniste, puisqu'il compense en consommant d'autres espèces de poissons et d'invertébrés marins lorsqu'il consomme moins d'éperlan. Il semble tout de même que l'éperlan demeure une proie importante pour les ombles de fontaine matures (surtout ceux de 40+cm), puisqu'il a une valeur énergétique plus élevée que toutes les autres proies analysées. Cependant, plus de données sont nécessaires afin de pouvoir tirer des conclusions sur la dynamique entre la population d'éperlan et de son prédateur. Il serait nécessaire d'évaluer si la consommation de plus d'invertébrés marins permet à l'omble de fontaine de compenser et de répondre complètement à ses besoins énergétiques. Afin de pouvoir mieux étudier la relation possible entre les variations de population d'omble de fontaine et d'éperlan, il est important de poursuivre le suivi de population d'éperlan-arc-en-ciel et de suivre la densité de ses prédateurs dans le fjord.

La principale limite de cette étude est le faible échantillon d'estomacs qui ont été analysés par année. Cela est dû au faible effectif de population d'ombles de fontaine et au faible succès de pêche dans le fjord du Saguenay. Afin de réaliser des analyses spatio-temporelles plus poussées, il serait nécessaire d'avoir un plus grand échantillon, couvrant également tous les mois et tous les sites du fjord. Une autre limitation est le manque de connaissances sur l'abondance et la répartition des proies de l'omble de fontaine dans le fjord. Des contraintes techniques ont empêché la réalisation du suivi de l'abondance de l'éperlan dans le fjord en 2022 et 2023. Les données de pêche au chalut pour les poissons et les invertébrés ne sont donc pas disponibles, ce qui a freiné l'étude de la sélectivité de

l'omble de fontaine envers ses proies. Un aspect qui reste à explorer est l'alimentation hivernale des ombles de fontaine dans le Saguenay, puisque les mois d'hiver n'ont pas pu être échantillonnés dans ce mémoire. L'étude précédente de Morinville et Rassmussen (2006) avait observé une plus grande consommation de poisson en hiver chez les ombles de fontaine. Puisque la consommation d'éperlan semble avoir changé dans les dernières années, il serait intéressant de vérifier si l'alimentation hivernale des ombles est insuffisante. Il serait aussi intéressant d'étudier le comportement des stades juvéniles en rivière, car ils n'ont pas été inclus dans la présente étude. Peu de données sont disponibles sur l'abondance et la répartition des différents types de proies dans le fjord et plus de recherche est nécessaire afin d'évaluer la sélectivité de l'omble de fontaine envers ses proies. L'analyse de caractéristiques biologiques des ombles, comme la condition et leur santé en général pourrait compléter cette étude et présenter un meilleur indicateur de la santé de la population. Il serait aussi pertinent d'étudier la croissance des ombles de fontaine ainsi que l'âge à la première migration afin de voir si des changements sont observables dans les dernières années. Ce projet de recherche s'inscrit dans un projet à plus grande échelle visant à décrire le réseau trophique dans le fjord du Saguenay. En étudiant l'alimentation des autres prédateurs dans le Saguenay, il sera possible de décrire les relations trophiques dans le fjord. Des études futures pourront ainsi analyser la compétition entre ces différentes espèces et la pression de prédation qui s'exerce sur les proies telles que l'éperlan arc-en-ciel. Les données récoltées sur l'alimentation de l'omble de fontaine représentent donc une infime partie de cette chaîne très complexe. En intégrant toutes ces données, cela pourrait permettre de mieux prévoir les impacts des variations de populations d'un prédateur ou d'une proie dans ce système. Il s'agit donc de connaissances cruciales afin d'assurer une gestion durable de la pêche récréative dans le fjord du Saguenay.

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ANNEX I

Annex I. Summary table of all prey taxa identified in the stomach of anadromous brook trout sampled in the Saguenay fjord between 2021 and 2023.

Class	Order	Family	Taxa	% Occurrence	% Wet-Weight	Number
Polychaeta	Phyllodocida	Nereididae	<i>Nereis diversicolor</i>	NA	NA	NA
			<i>Phyllodocida</i> sp.	42.25%	14.73%	591
			Unidentified phyllodocida fragments	7.04%	0.70%	NA
Nematoda			<i>Nematoda</i> sp.	NA	NA	NA
Gastropoda	Littorinimorpha	Littorinidae	<i>Littorina</i> spp.	2.35%	0.02%	10
Malacostraca	Mysida	Mysidae	<i>Mysidae</i> sp.	9.39%	0.99%	184
	Amphipoda	Gammaridae	<i>Amphipoda</i> spp.	0.94%	0.08%	2
			<i>Gammaracanthus loricatus</i>	0.4%	0.12%	2
			<i>Gammarus</i> sp.	54.46%	32.88%	7247
	Decapoda	Crangonidae	<i>Crangon septemspinosa</i>	14.55%	3.25%	118
		Pandalloidea	<i>Pandalus borealis</i>	0.47%	0.01%	1
	Isopoda	Janiridae	<i>Jaera albifrons</i>	0.47%	0.10%	1
			<i>Isopoda</i> spp.	1.41%	0.07%	11
Diplopoda			<i>Diplopoda</i> sp.	0.47%	0.01%	1
Arachnida			<i>Arachnida</i> spp.	2.82%	0.04%	10
Insecta			<i>Insecta</i> spp.	2.82%	0,06%	6
			Unidentified insect fragments	7.04%	2.38%	NA
	Ephemeroptera		<i>Ephemeroptera</i> spp.	3.29%	0.04%	9
			<i>Ephemeroptera</i> spp. (larve)	5,63%	0.21%	72
	Trichoptera		<i>Trichoptera</i> spp.	4.23%	0,11%	35
			<i>Trichoptera</i> spp. (larvae)	8.92%	1.26%	501
	Hymenoptera		<i>Hymenoptera</i> spp.	13.15%	1.34%	450
	Hemiptera		<i>Hemiptera</i> spp.	3.29%	0.04%	19
	Homoptera		<i>Homoptera</i> spp.	1.41%	0.01%	4
	Diptera		<i>Diptera</i> spp.	13.15%	0.29%	243
			<i>Diptera</i> spp. (larvae)	0.19%	0.19%	29
	Coleoptera		<i>Coleoptera</i> spp.	19.72%	1.07%	240
			<i>Coleoptera</i> spp. (larvae)	2.35%	0.07%	6
	Lepidoptera		<i>Lepidoptera</i> spp.	12.21%	4.65%	877
			<i>Lepidoptera</i> spp. (larvae)	0.47%	0,00%	1
	Plecoptera		<i>Plecoptera</i> spp.	0.94%	0.00%	4
			<i>Plecoptera</i> spp. (larvae)	10.33%	1.11%	414

	Orthoptera		<i>Orthoptera</i> spp.	1.88%	0.27%	10
	Odonata		<i>Odonata</i> spp.	5.63%	0.81%	49
			<i>Odonata</i> spp. (larvae)	5.16%	0.91%	37
Appendicularia	Copelata		<i>Copelata</i> sp.	6.10%	0.04%	161
Actinopterygii			<i>Actinopterygii</i> spp.	8.45%	2.24%	22
			Unidentified <i>actinopterygii</i> fragments	1.41%	0.32%	NA
	Osmeriformes	Osmeridae	<i>Osmerus mordax</i>	11.27%	9.12%	37
			<i>Mallotus villosus</i>	1.88%	4.95%	8
	Gadiformes	Gadidae	<i>Gadidae</i> sp.	0.47%	1.06%	1
	Labriformes	Ammodytidae	<i>Ammodytes americanus</i>	1.88%	0.66%	4
	Perciformes	Percidae	<i>Percina caprodes</i>	0.47%	0.41%	1
		Gasterosteidae	<i>Gasterosteus aculeatus</i>	0.47%	0.04%	1
			<i>Gasterosteus wheatlandi</i>	0.47%	0.03%	1
	Cyprinodontiformes	Fundulidae	<i>Fundulus diaphanus</i>	0.94%	0.11%	6
	Cypriniformes	Leuciscidae	<i>Semotilus corporalis</i>	0.47%	0.13%	1
			Unidentified organisms	58.69%	12.22%	153
			Unidentifieds vegetal matter	13.15%	0.49%	50
			TOTAL		100%	11630

ANNEX II

Annex II. Length measurements of prey from the stomach content of anadromous brook trout sampled in the Saguenay fjord between 2021 and 2023.

Taxa	n=	Min. length (mm)	Max. length (mm)	Mean length	Standard deviation
<i>Ammodytes americanus</i>	2	95.00	170.00	132.50	53.03
<i>Mallotus villosus</i>	7	84.59	145.77	118.51	23.68
<i>Gadida</i> sp.	2	85.00	115.00	100.00	21.21
<i>Osmerus mordax</i>	18	57.00	153.31	99.41	28.60
Polychaetes	8	15.00	87.00	38.13	25.55
<i>Crangon septemspinosa</i>	12	3.20	55.00	30.84	13.32
<i>Fundulus diaphanus</i>	4	25.00	30.00	27.75	2.22
Mysids	40	7.90	34.00	19.05	8.79
Gammarids	664	1.44	35.00	10.57	4.19
Aquatic larvae of terrestrial insects	43	7.61	30.00	10.02	3.70
Terrestrial insects	440	1.90	34.76	8.52	3.78

