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# Spatial distribution of chironomids (Diptera: Chironomidae) in an alpine catchment

Leopold Füreder

## ABSTRACT

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Among freshwater insects, chironomids are perhaps the most successful group of insects inhabiting the most extreme aquatic habitats. At higher altitudes and latitudes, the proportion of chironomids in the aquatic fauna is relatively high compared to freshwater at lower elevations. In alpine areas, stream character is mostly influenced by local water sources and the origin of major tributaries. Usually, a complex mosaic of different habitats and specific environmental conditions in alpine catchments is found. Here, the chironomid assemblages of four biotopes with various microhabitats were compared.

## Introduction

The dipteran family Chironomidae or non-biting midges is distributed worldwide, where they have successfully colonized a variety of freshwater and terrestrial habitats (Cranston 1995). The family's realized ecological niches cover a wide spectrum of environmental conditions, they may occur in fresh and saline waters, in the hypolimnion and littoral of lakes, in glacial lakes and thermal water, in springs, in all kinds of riverine habitats and even in small water bodies like phytothelmic water (Pinder 1995).

Among freshwater insects, chironomids are perhaps the most successful group inhabiting the most extreme aquatic habitats. They regularly occur in ice-cold glacial trickles, turbulent glacial streams and temporary waters as well as in a considerable variety of semi-aquatic habitats. They may be the dominant component of the malicolic fauna that lives in hygropetric biotopes (Pinder 1995).

At higher altitudes and latitudes, the proportion of chironomids in the aquatic fauna is relatively high compared to freshwater at lower elevations

(Füreder 1999; Lods-Crozet & al. 2001a, 2001b; Boggero & al. 2006; Füreder & al. 2006; Füreder 2007). In extreme aquatic biotopes they usually contribute more than 80% of taxa numbers and abundances, and this value may even increase with increasing degree of harshness (Füreder 2007).

Ecosystems at high elevations and high latitudes are characterised by extremely harsh conditions, among them daily and annual extremes in wind and low temperature, extended periods of snow cover, low humidity, and precipitation. The snow-free season can be relatively short where the incident solar radiation may be intense in high alpine areas of the temperate and tropical zone, but low in the polar region. The combination of physiologically demanding conditions, a short growing season, and limited energy and nutrient resources make survival, development, and reproduction difficult. Year-round low temperature appears to be the single most important factor limiting biotic communities; it requires special adaptations for survival in winter and limits development and reproduction in summer. This has been the subject of numerous studies of terrestrial organisms and has just begun in aquatic systems.

Climate, (i.e., regional climate and also local weather conditions), magnitude and seasonality of rain fall, watershed geology, and riparian vegetation influence hydrology; temperature gradients, substrate composition, channel geomorphology, and chemistry define the local character of running waters (Brown & al. 2006). In alpine areas, however, stream character is mostly influenced by local water sources and the origin of major tributaries. This has led to the designation of three stream types that can be generally distinguished based on their origin and/or glacial influence: glacier-fed, spring-fed, and rainfall-/snow-melt dominated streams have been recorded from various cold regions (e.g. An der Lan, 1936; Steffan, 1973; Kownacka & Kownacki, 1972; Ward, 1992, 1994; Gislason & Adalsteinsson, 1996; Oswood & al. 1995; Petersen & al., 1995).

Nevertheless, a complex mosaic of environmental conditions in alpine catchments was asserted (e.g. Ward & al. 2002) which furthers the development of quite a variety of aquatic habitats in an alpine catchment (Malard & al. 1999). Therefore, apart from four general stream types defined by Ward (1994) and Füreder (1999), alpine catchments may contain a great diversity of aquatic and semi-aquatic habitats and microhabitats.

Typical macrozoobenthic assemblages of alpine running waters consist of Ephemeroptera, Plecoptera and Trichoptera and numerous Diptera, but also non-insects like oligochaete and nematode worms and crustaceans. The benthic community of alpine aquatic systems has been identified from species-poor to species-rich and from low to high abundance, depending on season



and freshwater type (Brittain & Milner 2001, Füreder & al. 2001, Schütz & al. 2001). Chironomids, a very successful group of aquatic insects, which have developed special adaptations to a variety of harsh environments, including extreme temperatures and even freezing (e.g. Irons & al. 1993), often dominate the alpine stream fauna (Füreder & al. 2001).

The dipteran family Chironomidae belongs to the species-richest and often individual-richest insect family of alpine and arctic running waters. Especially at higher altitudes in the Alps they are the dominant group of aquatic invertebrates. Because of their consistent occurrence, their diversity and their ecological and biological traits, they may be used as indicator organisms for the demonstration of effects from environmental change. They also are favourable as keystone species for the reference conditions of freshwater habitats. Despite these values, a detailed knowledge about autecological and synecological ramifications is nearly lacking. A species- or species-group level consideration of chironomids has often been ignored or given little more than a brief mention in many ecological studies. Only recently, some investigations analysed alpine chironomids in more detail (Füreder & al. 1998, 2000; Lencioni 2000; Füreder & al. 2001; Lods-Crozet & al. 2001a, b; Lencioni & al. 2007; Boggero & al. 2006; Füreder & al. 2006; Füreder 2007).

Former investigations in alpine areas showed a stronger seasonal and longitudinal gradient in a glacier-fed stream when compared to a spring-fed stream (Füreder & al. 2001, Schütz & al. 2001). A lower taxa richness but also lower insect abundances were observed for most periods of the year. Although alpine springs can show considerable variations in the invertebrate fauna (Crema & al. 1996), spring-fed streams sometimes have higher zoobenthic densities and more taxa than kryal and rhithral habitats due to relatively benign and stable environmental conditions (Ward 1994).

Based on the results of former investigations the objectives of the present research were to investigate taxa richness, abundance and diversity patterns of chironomids in a variety of aquatic and semi-aquatic habitats in an alpine catchment.

This contribution is dedicated to Konrad Thaler who was an excellent scientist, accurate teacher, cooperative colleague and good friend, who intensively carried out his investigations in the Alps above the tree line with a particular interest in the mountainous area around Obergurgl.

# Material and Methods

## Study area

The study area was situated within the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve "Gurgler Kamm". The area is easily accessible as the University of Innsbruck operates an alpine research station in Obergurgl. The Rotmoosache is a tributary of the Gurgler Ache which drains the Inner Oetz Valley near Obergurgl (1900 m a.s.l., 46°52' N, 11°02' E), in the Austrian Central Alps, Tyrol. The Rotmoosache sub-catchment (Rotmoostal), where the study was conducted, is 10.3 km<sup>2</sup> large, there the Rotmoosache is 4.5 km long and is glacier-fed (4.1 km<sup>2</sup> are glaciated). The highest peaks in the catchment are around 3000 m a.s.l. (Tab. 1). After a steeper reach below the glacial snout (Rotmoosferner, the main glacier of ~3 km<sup>2</sup> in area) a long lower gradient sector follows where distinct deglaciation zones are visible: firstly, the outer Rotmoostal, ice free for several centuries, then terminal and lateral moraines of 1850, terminal and lateral moraines of 1920, and the recent ice free area (up to the glacial snout). Below the glacial floodplain, the stream enters a canyon before it flows into the Gurgler Ache, the main river of the Gurgl Valley. The mean gradient from the glacial snout to the lowest sampling station was 7.2%.

Benthic samples were collected randomly from four principal biotopes: the glacial stream itself, the Rotmoosache (RM), a spring-fed stream with mixed

	Rotmoosache
Latitude, Longitude	46° 49' N, 11° 03' E
Highest point in the catchment [m a.s.l.]	3472
Catchment area at lowest sampling point	10.4 km <sup>2</sup>
Glacier area	4.1 km <sup>2</sup>
Glacier state	retreating
Treeline [m a.s.l.]	~2000
Altitudinal range of river studied [m a.s.l.]	2250–2450
Mean gradient [%]	7.2
Degree of glaciation [%] at lowest point	40
Number of study sites / samples / specimens	4 / 60 / 18649
Taxa richness / mean chironomid abundance [Ind. m <sup>-2</sup> ]	43 / 7065
Chironomids within all aquatic invertebrates [%]	58.1
Chironomids within all aquatic insects [%]	81.0

**Tab. 1. General characteristics of sampling area and sites in the Rotmoosache catchment (Tyrol, Austria).**



<b>Glacier-fed Rotmoosache</b>				
Microhabitat:	Rocks	Lithal	Lithal (near bank)	
Rel. densities [%]: (min-max):	95.7 (86.2–100)	79.9 (39.9–93.0)	73.4 (21.7–98.1)	
Chironomid taxa:	<i>Brillia modesta</i> <i>Corynoneura</i> sp. <i>Diamesa cinerella/zernyi</i> -Gr. <i>Diamesa</i> juv. <i>Diamesa latitarsis</i> -Gr. <i>Diamesa steinboeckii</i>  <i>Eukiefferiella fuldensis</i> Orthoclaadiinae juv. <i>Orthoclaadius rivicola</i> -Gr. <i>Parametriocnemus stylatus</i> Tanytarsini juv.	<i>Brillia modesta</i> <i>Chaetocladius</i> sp. <i>Corynoneura</i> sp. <i>Diamesa bertrami</i> <i>Diamesa cinerella/zernyi</i> -Gr. <i>Diamesa</i> juv.  <i>Diamesa latitarsis</i> -Gr. <i>Diamesa steinboeckii</i>  <i>Diamesa latitarsis</i> -Gr. <i>Diamesa steinboeckii</i>  <i>Eukiefferiella fuldensis</i> <i>Diamesa steinboeckii</i> <i>Eukiefferiella fuldensis</i> <i>Eukiefferiella minor/fittkaui</i> <i>Eukiefferiella tirolensis/brevicalcar</i> -Gr. <i>Micropsectra</i> sp. Orthoclaadiinae juv. <i>Orthoclaadius frigidus</i> <i>Orthoclaadius rivicola</i> -Gr. <i>Orthoclaadius</i> sp. <i>Parametriocnemus stylatus</i> <i>Parorthoclaadius nudipennis</i> <i>Pseudodiamesa nivosa</i> <i>Pseudokiefferiella parva</i> <i>Stilocladius montanus</i> <i>Thienemanniella</i> sp. <i>Tvetenia bavarica</i>	<i>Corynoneura</i> sp. <i>Diamesa bertrami</i> <i>Diamesa cinerella/zernyi</i> -Gr. <i>Diamesa</i> juv. <i>Diamesa latitarsis</i> -Gr. <i>Diamesa steinboeckii</i>  <i>Eukiefferiella fuldensis</i> <i>Heleniella</i> sp. <i>Krenosmittia</i> sp. Orthoclaadiinae juv. <i>Orthoclaadius rivicola</i> -Gr.  <i>Parorthoclaadius nudipennis</i> <i>Pseudodiamesa branickii</i> <i>Thienemanniella</i> sp. <i>Tvetenia bavarica</i> <i>Tvetenia calvescens</i>	Psammal 63.2 (0–100)  <i>Corynoneura</i> sp. <i>Diamesa cinerella/zernyi</i> -Gr. <i>Diamesa</i> juv. <i>Diamesa latitarsis</i> -Gr.  <i>Eukiefferiella tirolensis/brevicalcar</i> -Gr. <i>Micropsectra</i> sp. Orthoclaadiinae juv. <i>Pseudodiamesa branickii</i> <i>Pseudokiefferiella parva</i> <i>Thienemanniella</i> sp.

**Tab. 2. Chironomidae of an alpine catchment - glacier-fed Rotmoosache: Microhabitats, relative abundance of Chironomidae and typical chironomid taxa occurring in the microhabitats.**

calcareous geology (SBS), a spring-fed stream with crystalline geology (SWS) and the very slow-flowing to stagnant water in the floodplain (FEN) within the alpine catchment of the Rotmoosache. The variable nature of sites necessitated different sampling methods and efforts. Details on types of sites and habitats as well as number of replicates are provided in Tab. 1.

Chironomid larvae and pupae were sorted from the zoobenthos samples and kept in separate vials in 70% alcohol for further taxonomic processing. Species identification was conducted with dissecting and transmitted-light microscopes at highest magnification by considering widely accepted identification keys. Apart from several specific publications basically the following keys were used: Janecek (1998); Ferrarese & Rossaro (1981); Rossaro (1982); Wiederholm (1983, 1986); Ferrarese (1983); Nocentini (1985); Langton (1991); Schmid (1993).

Biodiversity patterns of benthic assemblages are herein presented with a special focus on the chironomids. Taxa richness, abundance, Shannon's diversity index and evenness are compared between biotopes, habitats and micro-habitats, in order to provide some estimate of the diversity patterns of typical alpine aquatic systems.

## Results

A total of 60 benthic samples yielded 18 649 chironomid specimens from the four biotopes sampled in the alpine catchment (Tab. 1). Within a variable number of aquatic invertebrate taxa, 43 chironomid taxa were identified, accounting for a mean abundance of 7065 m<sup>-2</sup> and a relative share of 58.1% in all aquatic groups and 81.0% in the aquatic insects.

Despite seasonal and habitat-specific variations, the dipteran family Chironomidae exhibited the highest relative abundance in most biotopes. This was especially true for the glacier-fed RM where all habitats/micro-habitats were dominated by chironomids (Tab. 2). In the spring-fed SBS and SWS, the mean relative abundance of chironomids was in most habitats above 50% (Tab. 3). A lower relative share was observed in the ecotone area, where less than 50% of the fauna were chironomids (Tab. 4).

Of the 43 chironomid taxa occurring in all sampled biotopes, about half were found in the lithal habitat of RM (23 taxa). Numerically important taxa were of the sub-family Diamesinae, dominated by several species of *Diamesa latitarsis*-Gr. and *D. cinerella/zernyi*-Gr. The other subfamily typical for alpine streams, the Orthoclaadiinae, was represented with more but numerically less important taxa. Regular recurrent taxa were within the genera *Corynoneura*, *Eukiefferiella*, *Orthocladius*, *Parametriocnemus*, *Parorthocladius*, *Thienemanni-*



Spring-fed streams			
Microhabitat:	Spring area	Riffle	Pool
Rel. densities [%]: (min-max):	72.6	51.4 (31.4–71.3)	65.4
Chironomid taxa:	<i>Corynoneura</i> sp. <i>Diamesa cinerella/zernyi</i> -Gr. <i>Diamesa</i> juv. <i>Orthoclaadiinae</i> juv. <i>Orthoclaadiinae</i> "COP" <i>Paratrichocladus nivalis</i> <i>Parorthocladus nudipennis</i> <i>Pseudokiefferiella parva</i> <i>Thienemanniella</i> sp.	<i>Brillia modesta</i> <i>Corynoneura</i> sp. <i>Diamesa cinerella/zernyi</i> -Gr. <i>Diamesa</i> juv. <i>Diamesa latitarsis</i> -Gr. <i>Krenosmittia</i> sp. <i>Micropsectra atrofasciata</i> -Gr. <i>Orthoclaadiinae</i> juv. <i>Orthocladus frigidus</i> <i>Orthocladus</i> sp. <i>Parakiefferiella</i> sp. <i>Paratrichocladus nivalis</i> <i>Parorthocladus nudipennis</i> <i>Pseudokiefferiella parva</i> <i>Rheocricotopus effusus</i> <i>Smittia</i> sp. <i>Thienemanniella</i> sp. <i>Tvetenia bavarica</i>	<i>Diamesa cinerella/zernyi</i> -Gr. <i>Heterotrissocladus marcidus</i> <i>Micropsectra atrofasciata</i> -Gr. <i>Orthoclaadiinae</i> juv. <i>Orthocladus frigidus</i> <i>Orthocladus</i> sp. <i>Parakiefferiella</i> sp. <i>Paratanytarsus</i> sp. <i>Paratrichocladus nivalis</i> <i>Pseudodiamesa branickii</i> <i>Pseudokiefferiella parva</i> <i>Thienemanniella</i> sp.

**Tab. 3. Chironomidae of an alpine catchment – Spring-fed streams: Microhabitats, relative abundance of Chironomidae and typical chironomid taxa occurring in the microhabitats.**

*ella* and *Tvetenia*. Only one genus per subfamily or tribe was found in the Prodiamesinae and Tanytarsini, respectively.

The chironomid association of the spring-fed streams compared well with the assemblage of the glacier-fed stream, however, it was dominated by taxa of the subfamily Orthoclaadiinae. Only one to three *Diamesa* taxa and single taxa within the Tanytarsini were found in the spring-fed habitats (Tab. 3).

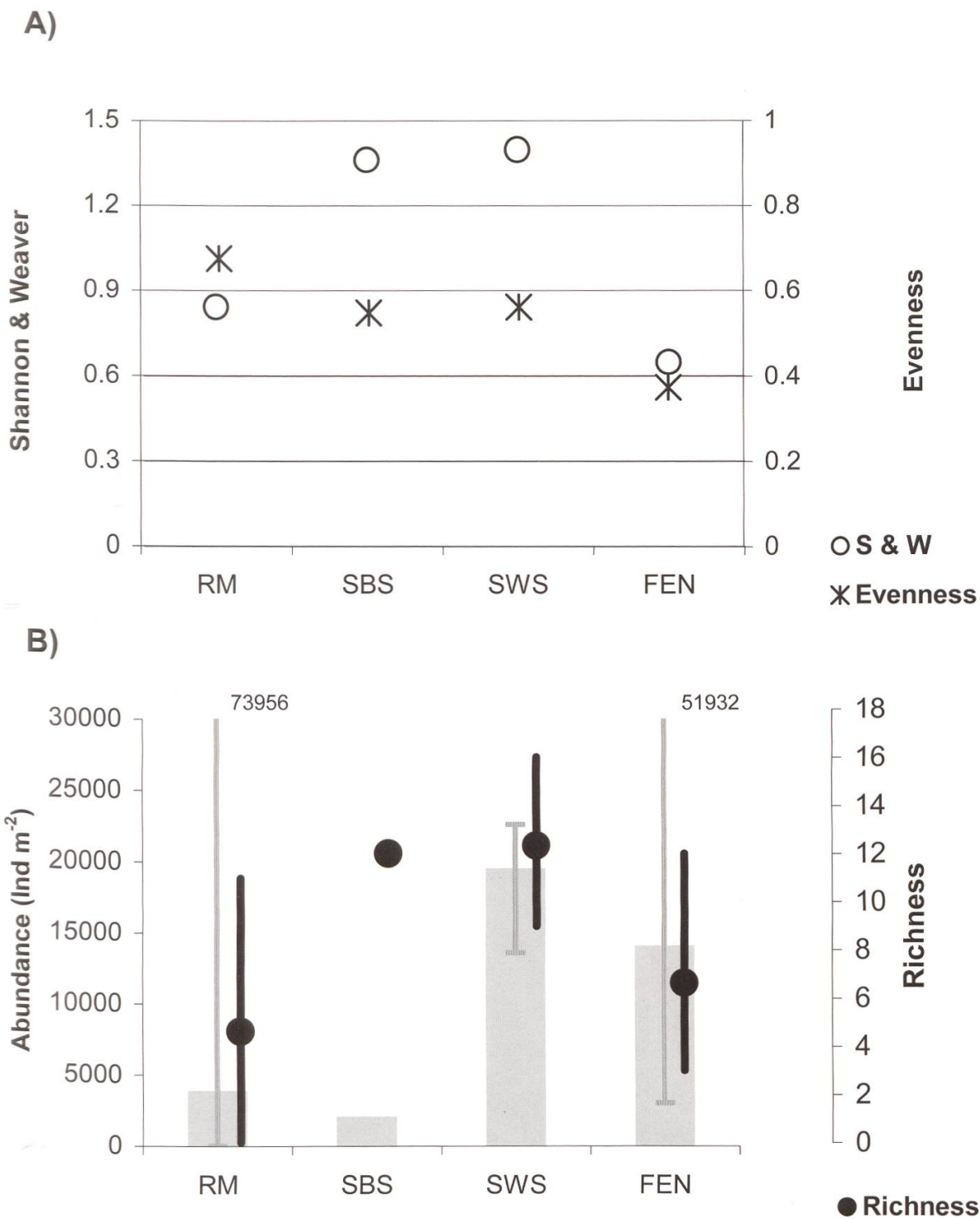
As expected, the species assemblage of the ecotone was considerably different (Tab. 4). The obvious distinctions from the glacier-fed Rotmoosache (substrate, temperature, current) accounted for the occurrence of taxa known to be typical for less harsh conditions. Besides some abundant Orthoclaadiinae, representatives of the tribes Tanytarsini and Pentaneurini (*Micropsectra atrofasciata*-Gr., *Neozavrelia* sp., *Paratanytarsus* sp., *Tanytarsus lugens*-Gr., *Krenopelopia binotata*) were typical. Most of these taxa are known to occur in aquatic moss and spring habitats; some of them are considered hygropetric species (e.g. species of *M. hygropetricus*-Gr.).



## Spring-fed aquatic, semi-aquatic and fen biotope

Microhabitat:	Spring, cobble	Moss	Algae	Detritus	Pool
Rel. densities [%]: (min-max):	19.1 (18.1–20.2)	15.1 (9.1–23.4)	4.3 (3.6–5.0)	41.1 (27.2–54.9)	10.8 (7.3–20.9)
Chironomid taxa:	<i>Chaetocladius</i> sp. <i>Corynoneura</i> sp. <i>Krenopelopia</i> sp. <i>Krenosmittia</i> sp. <i>Micropsectra atrofasciata</i> - Gr. <i>Orthoclaadiinae</i> juv. <i>Parametriocnemus stylatus</i> <i>Parorthoclaadius nudipennis</i> <i>Rheocricotopus effusus</i> Tanypodinae juv. Tanytarsini juv. <i>Thienemanniella</i> sp. <i>Tvetenia bavarica</i>	<i>Chaetocladius</i> sp. <i>Corynoneura</i> sp. <i>Krenopelopia binotata</i> <i>Krenopelopia</i> sp. <i>Metriocnemus</i> <i>hygropetricus</i> -Gr. <i>Micropsectra</i> sp. <i>Orthoclaadiinae</i> juv. <i>Orthoclaadius</i> sp. <i>Parametriocnemus stylatus</i> <i>Rheocricotopus effusus</i> <i>Pentaneurini</i> juv. <i>Rheocricotopus effusus</i> Tanytarsini juv. <i>Tvetenia bavarica</i>	<i>Chaetocladius</i> sp. <i>Corynoneura</i> sp. <i>Krenopelopia binotata</i> <i>Krenopelopia</i> sp. <i>Metriocnemus</i> <i>hygropetricus</i> -Gr. <i>Neozavrelia</i> sp. <i>Orthoclaadiinae</i> juv. <i>Parametriocnemus stylatus</i> <i>Rheocricotopus effusus</i> <i>Tanytarsini</i> juv.	<i>Corynoneura</i> sp. <i>Diamesa</i> juv. <i>Diamesa cinerella/zernyi</i> -Gr. <i>Heterotrissocladius</i> <i>marcidus</i> <i>Krenopelopia</i> sp. <i>Micropsectra</i> sp. <i>Orthoclaadiinae</i> juv. <i>Orthoclaadius</i> sp. <i>Paratanytarsus</i> sp. <i>Pseudodiamesa nivosa</i> <i>Rheocricotopus effusus</i> Tanytarsini juv. <i>Tvetenia bavarica</i>	<i>Corynoneura</i> sp. <i>Diamesa</i> juv. <i>Micropsectra</i> sp. <i>Neozavrelia</i> sp. <i>Orthoclaadiinae</i> juv. Tanytarsini juv. <i>Tanytarsus lugens</i> -Gr.

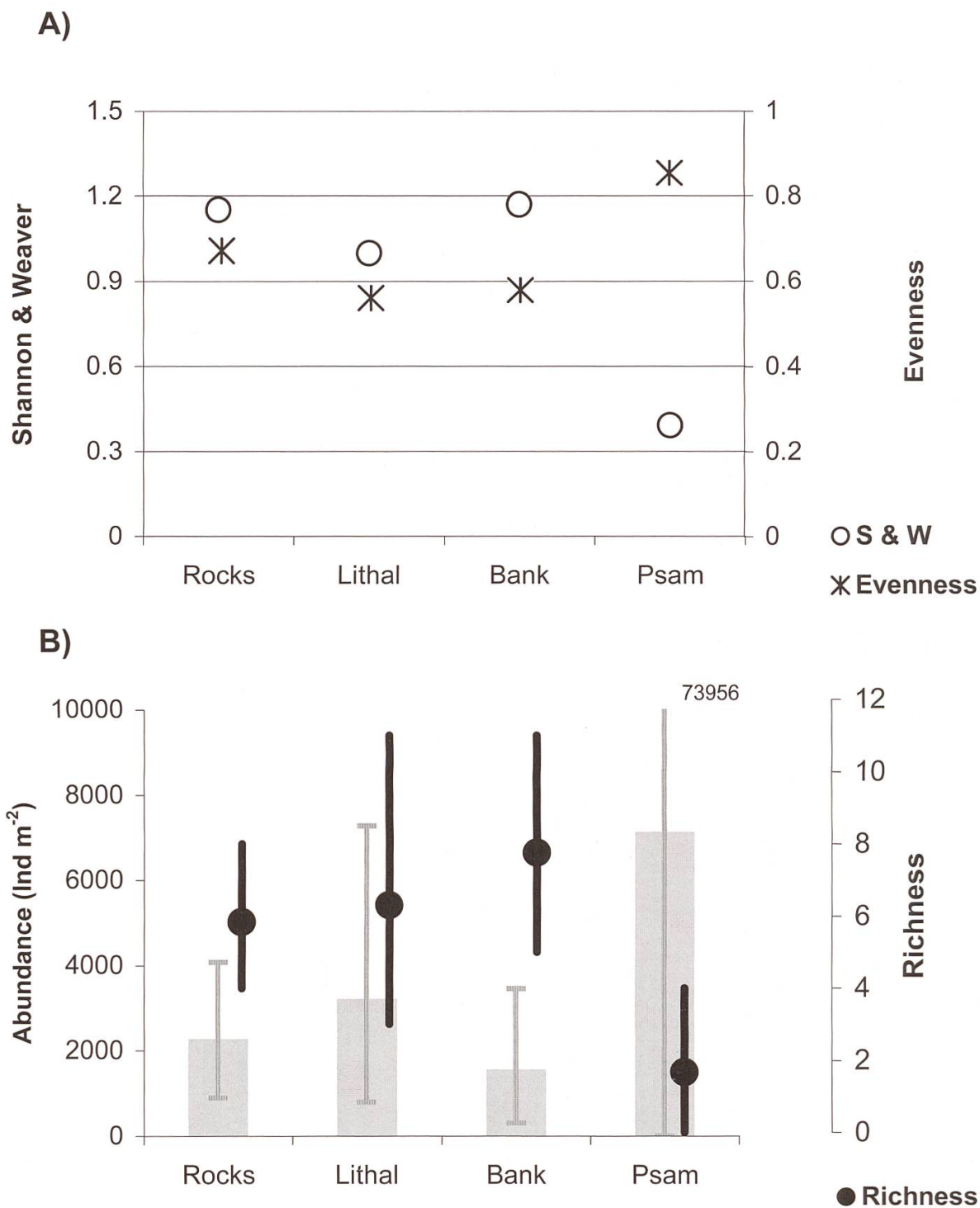
Tab. 4. Chironomidae of an alpine catchment - Spring-fed aquatic, semi-aquatic and fen biotope: Microhabitats, relative abundance of Chironomidae and typical chironomid taxa occurring in the microhabitats.



**Fig. 1. Chironomids in an alpine catchment - Comparison of biotopes. – A: diversity and evenness (symbols are means of available replicates); – B: abundance (grey columns are means of sampled microhabitats, vertical bars indicate maximum and minimal abundances), and taxa richness (black dots indicate the mean and bars maximum and minimum taxa numbers). RM glacial Rotmoosache, SBS and SWS spring-fed Schneebergzugbach and Schönwiesbach, FEN variable spring-fed aquatic and semi-aquatic habitats.**

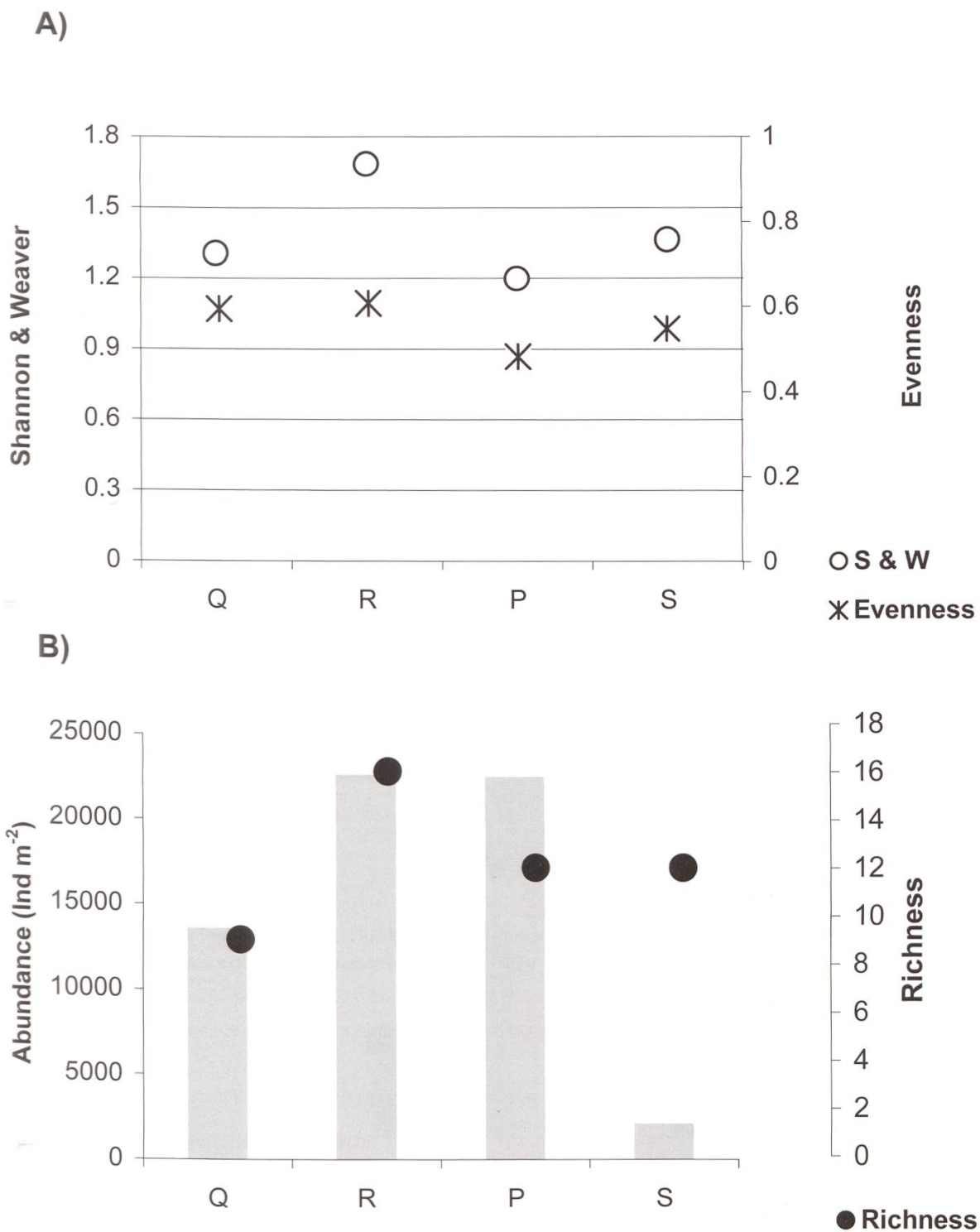
Total densities of chironomids ranged from 0 to almost 74 000 m<sup>-2</sup>, varying across temporal and spatial dimensions. Mean chironomid abundance was lowest in the spring-fed SBS and the glacier-fed RM (Fig. 1). Highest mean abundance was observed in spring-fed SWS and the aquatic/semi-aquatic





**Fig. 2. Chironomids in an alpine catchment – Comparison of microhabitats in the glacial Rotmoosache.** – A: Diversity and evenness (symbols are means of all available replicates); – B: Abundance (grey columns are means of all sampled microhabitats, vertical bars indicate maximum and minimum abundances), and taxa richness (black dots are means and bars maximum and minimum taxa numbers). Samples were from different microhabitats: Rocks - rocks > 40 cm; Lithal – cobble of varying size; Bank – cobble near the bank with low current, Psam – Psammal, sand and silt with very low current.

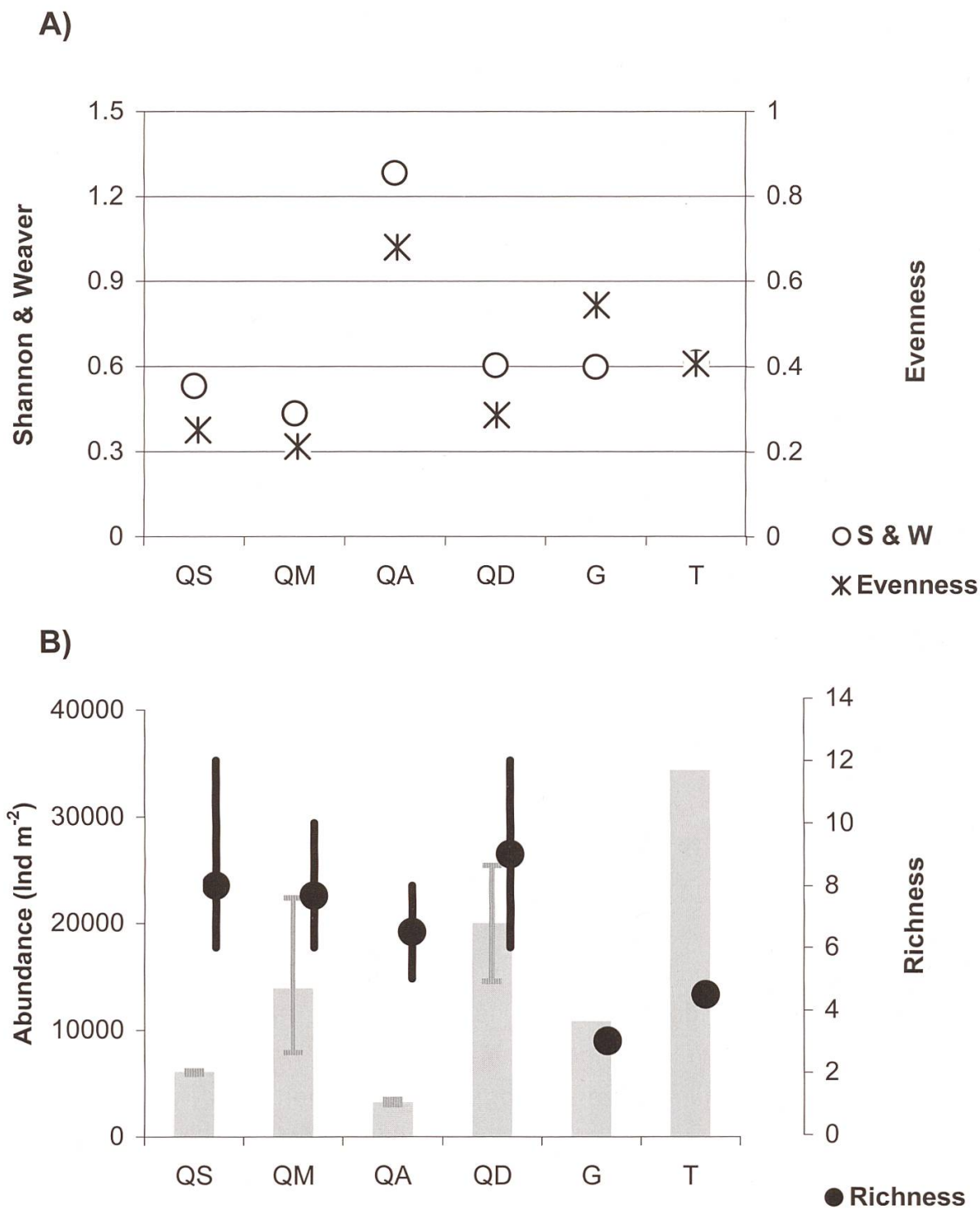
habitats (FEN), whereas a maximum abundance of 73 956 m<sup>-2</sup> was sampled in the glacier-fed RM. Except for the spring-fed SBS, taxa richness followed a comparable pattern, being low in glacier-fed RM (4.6 taxa) and highest in the spring-fed streams (12 taxa). In the aquatic and semi-aquatic habitats (FEN),



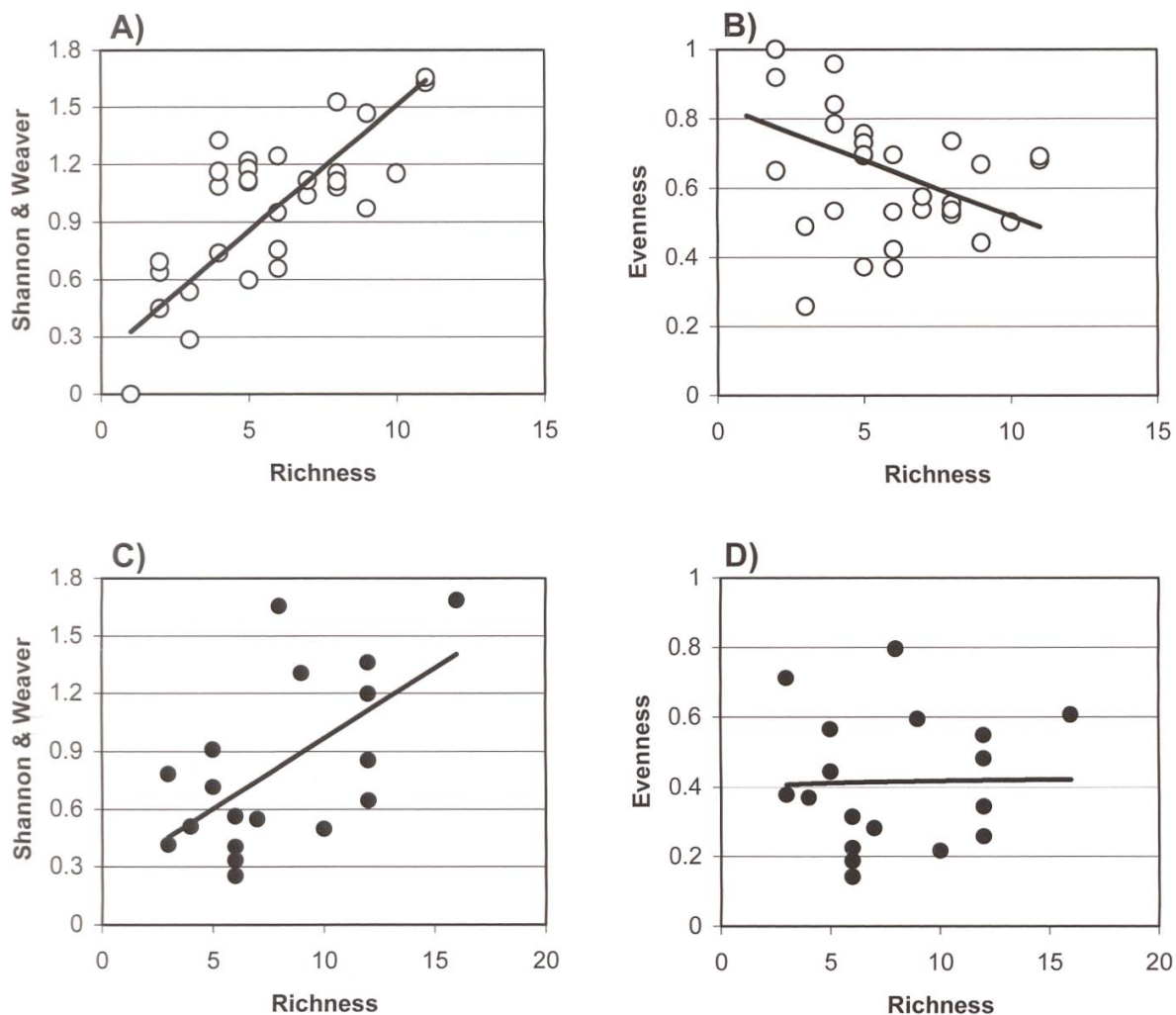
**Fig. 3: Chironomids in an alpine catchment – Comparison of habitats/sites in the spring-fed streams Schönwiesbach and Schneebergzugbach. – A: Diversity and evenness; – B: Abundance and taxa richness. All symbols and columns are single sample values. Letters indicate different habitats: Q – spring area, R – riffle, P – pool, S – riffle in Schneebergzugbach.**

mean chironomid taxa number (6.6) lay in-between the glacier-fed and spring-fed biotopes. Correspondingly, Shannon's diversity was highest in the spring-fed streams (1.4), followed by the glacier-fed RM (0.8) and was lowest in the ecotone (0.7). Evenness was generally low, mean values were highest in RM





**Fig. 4: Chironomids in an alpine catchment – Comparison of habitats in various aquatic and semi-aquatic habitats and FEN area. – A: Diversity and evenness (symbols are means of all available replicates); – B: Abundance (grey columns are means of all sampled microhabitats, vertical bars indicate maximum and minimum abundances), and taxa richness (black dots are means and bars maximum and minimum taxa numbers). Samples were from different microhabitats: QS – cobble substrate in spring-fed system, QM – moss in spring-fed system, QA – algae in spring-fed system, QD – detritus in spring-fed system, G - lotic system with grass (presumable temporary system) and T – pool. At G and T only two replicates were available.**



**Fig. 5: Chironomids in an alpine catchment – Chironomid diversity in glacier-fed (A, B) and spring-fed (C, D) systems. – A and C: Shannon-Weaver Diversity and taxa richness; – B and D: Evenness and taxa richness.**

(0.7), moderate in the spring-fed streams (0.5; 0.6) and lowest again in the aquatic/semi-aquatic biotope (0.4).

When the habitats and microhabitats in the sampled biotopes were compared, observed differences became even more distinct. Apart from a single maximum in the sand microhabitat of the glacier-fed Rotmoosache (Fig. 2), highest chironomid densities were found in the spring-fed Schönwiesbach (Fig. 3). Corresponding high taxa numbers and highest Shannon-diversity demonstrate the distinctiveness of this result. Abundances and richness across habitats were generally lower in the glacier-fed stream, and were moderate in the ecotone habitats (Fig. 4). Evidently, here the relatively high abundances were accompanied by the lowest diversity and evenness values.

In both systems, the glacier-fed and the spring-fed, respectively, there was an increase in diversity with higher taxa richness (Fig. 5). In terms of a balanced distribution of the chironomids, the two kinds of systems responded



differently. While in the glacier-fed Rotmoosache evenness values decreased with increasing richness, evenness in the spring-fed systems was generally low and did not follow a specific trend.

## Discussion

Ecosystem structure, dynamics and function in Alpine streams at higher elevations are dependent on regional climate and local weather conditions, geomorphology of the catchment but primarily on their prevailing water source, such as groundwater and glacial meltwater (Ward 1994, Tockner & al. 1997, Füreder 1999, Ward & al. 1999). The alpine catchment chosen for this investigation comprises different aquatic biotopes, from the glacier-fed Rotmoosache, spring habitats and adjacent spring-fed streams (SWB, Schönwiesbach, SBS Schneebergzugbach) and other aquatic and semi-aquatic habitats (ecotone, FEN). These different types of aquatic habitats comprised a spectrum of habitat conditions typical for an alpine catchment.

In a literature review, Füreder (1999) concluded that the presence of relatively few species and the absence of many common "temperate" taxa suggested the extreme conditions in alpine areas to exclude many species. This is true for terrestrial ecosystems as well as for streams. While this has been generally accepted, contradicting evidence also exists from some investigations. Although a common alpine assemblage has been repeatedly observed, the harshest alpine conditions (e.g., in glacier-fed streams) are known to eliminate all but a few species. Less extreme locations (i.e., downstream and/or near a spring source) support a more diverse community, facts that were also demonstrated in our findings.

The present results suggest that the chironomid assemblages in alpine aquatic systems is characterised by specialists, which dominate in the various habitats and microhabitats. This is true for the glacier-fed stream, where harsh environmental conditions favour well adapted species (e.g. *Diamesa* spp.), or the various spring-fed systems, where specialists for less dynamic environmental conditions dominate. Local richness in the individual habitats appears to be to a high degree dependent on the surrounding taxa pool (of the whole catchment) and secondarily to the rigors of environmental conditions. The mosaic pattern of aquatic (micro-) habitats favours the heterogeneous situation of species diversity and equability.

The consistence and diversity of chironomids when compared between habitat and microhabitat types, demonstrates that a taxonomic consideration of this family is necessary when specific questions in alpine areas are





Plate I. Typical chironomid taxa of a glacial catchment. a) and b) taxa with a preference for higher current velocities, c) – d) taxa with a preference for slower current and/or stagnant water. – a: *Diamesa cinerella/zernyi*-Gr. (70x); – b: anal setae of *D. latitarsis*-Gr. (very short and short) and *D. cinerella/zernyi*-Gr. (longer setae) (50x); – c: *Corynoneura* sp. (70x) in the psammal habitat of the glacial stream; – d: *Corynoneura* sp. (70x); – e: *Micropsectra* sp. (70x); – f: *Rheocricotopus effuses* (30x) in the aquatic and semi-aquatic ecotone in the FEN-area.

addressed. Most of the aquatic species are chironomids and they are highly adapted to a specific habitat type (or environmental condition). Although this investigation has to be considered preliminary, the regional chironomid diversity pattern supports well the general conclusion that chironomids are key elements in alpine aquatic habitats. In investigations and methods designed to elucidate effects from climate or environmental change, the qualitative and quantitative structure of the chironomid fauna has to be considered.



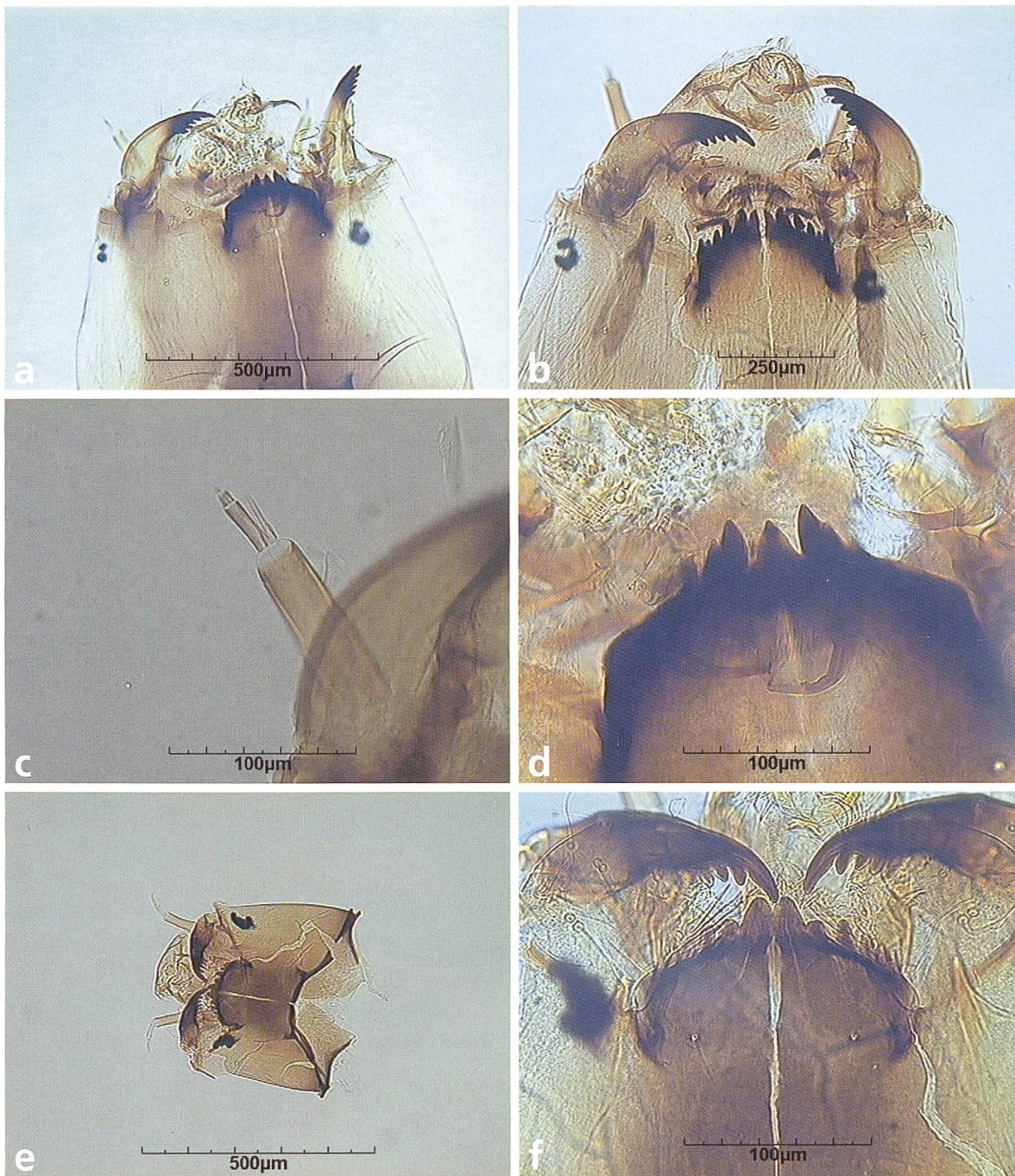


Plate II. Typical chironomid taxa of a glacial catchment: Examples of head capsules and mentum. – a) *Pseudodiamesa branickii* (100 x); – b) *Pseudodiamesa nivosa* (100 x); – c) *Pseudodiamesa branickii* Antenna (400 x); – d) *Pseudodiamesa branickii* Mentum (400 x); – e) *Heterotrissocladius marcidus* (100 x); – f) *Heterotrissocladius marcidus* Mentum, Mandibel (400 x).

Identification at species, species-group or at least generic level (which is in many cases the only option with chironomid larvae) has to be considered essential. Combined efforts should be directed towards a better understanding of aquatic insect taxonomy together with explorative and experimental studies to understand the role of environmental factors for species occurrence. Both features are necessary for describing and understanding biodiversity patterns in alpine landscapes.



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