

WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

LAKE SUPERIOR FALL SPAWNING LAKE TROUT SURVEY REPORT 2024

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INTRODUCTION

Lean lake trout populations in Lake Superior declined to historically low numbers from the 1930s to the 1950s due to the invasion of a new predator, sea lamprey, and overfishing. By the early 1960s, spawning activity had ceased at nearly all traditional spawning sites in the Apostle Islands. The Fall Lake Trout Survey was crucial in multiple aspects of aiding lake trout recovery in Lake Superior. This survey was instrumental in identifying and establishing both the Gull Island (1976) and Devils Island (1981) fish refuges surrounding critical spawning habitats in the Apostle Islands. The survey was then used to monitor the resurgence of lake trout on these spawning shoals within the refuges in the following decades. These two refuges encompass two of the largest lake trout spawning shoals in the entire lake, which support the majority of lake trout reproduction in the Apostle Islands and substantially contribute to other regions in Lake Superior. Additionally, this survey was the method the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) used to collect lake trout eggs, raise them at the Bayfield State Fish Hatchery and provide supplemental stocking in the Apostle Islands. This stocking program was a tool used to help boost lake trout populations and ceased in 1995 in the Apostle Islands region after the population had fully recovered.

Today our management team does not face the same problems with lake trout management, but this assessment is still a useful management tool with three main objectives. First, we monitor the size, age and sex structure of the lake trout spawning stocks on multiple shoals. Managers agree that maintaining or continuing to increase spawner biomass is essential to a self-sustaining lake trout population that supports both commercial and recreational fishery interests. Second, lake trout eggs are still collected to raise in the hatchery for supplemental lake trout stocking in the Western Arm Region (WI-1) near the Twin Ports. Third, during this assessment, we capture hundreds of fish each day, and the conditions of the survey (i.e., shallow sets, cool water temperature) allow a better than 95% survival rate. This allows us to tag and recapture hundreds of individual lake trout (identified with a unique number on a tag) each year to monitor growth, movement and exploitation in Wisconsin waters.

METHODS

Gill nets were set on the bottom of the lakebed on targeted lake trout spawning areas for one net night (24 hours) using the R/V Hack Noyes. The 2024 Fall Lake Trout Assessment was

conducted in the Apostle Islands region of Lake Superior (Figure 1) between Oct. 18 and Oct. 29. Gull Island Shoal (GIS) was sampled with an 823-meter monofilament gill net. The net was composed of alternating 140 and 152-millimeter mesh (stretch measure) panels arranged using the following sequence: 152, 140, 152, 140, 152, 140, 152, 140, 152. Both Gull Island (GI) and Michigan Island (MI) were sampled by dividing the standard GIS gill net. GI was sampled with a 366-meter gill net that used the following sequence of meshes: 152, 140, 152, 140. Michigan Island was sampled with a 457-meter gill net that used the following sequence of meshes: 152, 140, 152, 140, 152. Both GI and MI were combined for these analyses (GI/MI). Sand Cut Reef (SCR) was sampled with a 1,189-meter monofilament gill net that was divided between two humps (i.e., 549 meters on the west hump and 640 meters on the east hump). The meshes were arranged using the following sequence: 152, 140, 178, 114, 165, 127, 152, 127, 165, 114, 178, 140, 152. These same nets were used on Devils Island Shoal (DIS) and Cat Island Shoal (CIS) combined as one net. For some analyses, common shoals sampled with common gears are combined into spawning complexes (CIS/DIS, GI/MI/GIS and SCR).

Biological information (e.g., total length, weight, sex, gonad status, fin clips etc.) was collected from fish using standardized protocols. Otoliths were extracted from deceased individuals, and ages were estimated using thin cross-sections. All live lake trout were given external Floy tags with unique numbers, and tag information was recorded from all recaptured fish.

Assessing relative abundance during this spawning survey is not recommended due to the variable nature of sampling spawning aggregations. So, relative abundance was not assessed with this survey; however, numerous other population characteristics were summarized. This survey consistently provides information from larger and older lake trout compared with the Spring Lake Trout Survey and Summer Community Survey. Length and age frequency plots were used to compare size and age structure among these five Apostle Islands spawning shoals, and median length was used to look at trends in size structure over time. The presence or absence of a fin clip was used to determine wild (i.e., not hatchery-origin) and hatchery origins over time. Recapture histories were assessed with the number of years at large calculated for both the most recent capture (i.e., the number of years since the most recent capture of that individual) and the original capture event (i.e., the number of years since the original capture of that individual). The mean annual growth increment was calculated by grouping individual lake trout into 20-millimeter length bins based on the observed total length at the most recent capture. Growth rates were also assessed by fitting von Bertalanffy growth functions to length and age data. Lastly, a transition matrix was constructed to assess lake trout movement patterns among the five Apostle Islands spawning shoals sampled in this survey. Analyses were conducted using Program R.

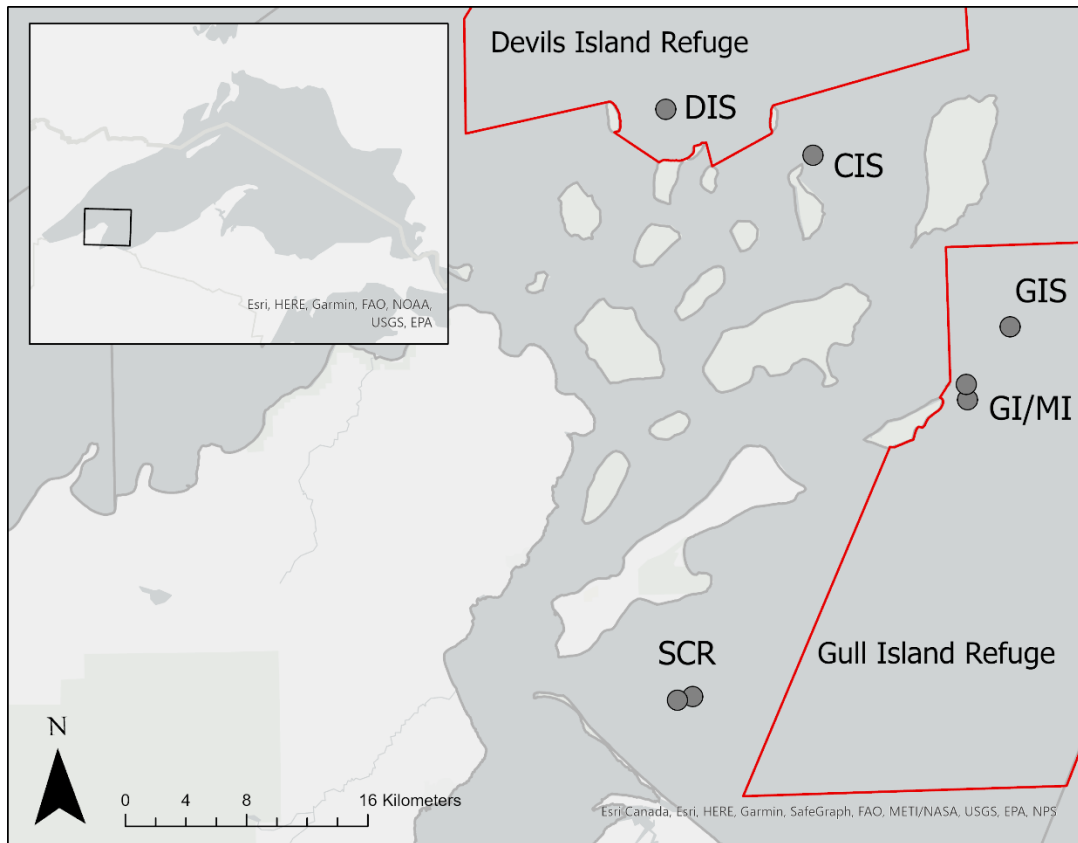


Figure 1. Map of DNR Fall Lake Trout Survey in the Apostle Islands region of Lake Superior. DIS = Devils Island Shoals, CIS = Cat Island Shoals, GIS = Gull Island Shoals, GI/MI = Gull Island/Michigan Island, SCR = Sand Cut Reef.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Despite using different gill net mesh sizes, the lake trout spawning stocks at all individual spawning shoals sampled had an overall similar size structure of both males and females in 2024 (Figure 2). Median lengths of both males and females were similar across spawning complexes in 2024 (Figure 3). The median length of both males and females increased throughout the 1980s and 1990s at the GIS/GI/MI spawning complex but has generally declined since about 2000 (Figure 3). The proportion of wild (non-hatchery origin) lake trout spawning stock was greater than 98% at all spawning shoals sampled in 2024 (Figure 4). The proportion of wild lake trout has increased in the Apostle Islands since restoration efforts began and the DNR ceased stocking lake trout in WI-2 in 1995 (Figure 4).

On average, lake trout appear in the spawning stock between ages 8 and 10 (Figure 5). Generally, males reach sexual maturity (i.e., appear in the spawning stock) one to two years earlier than females (Figure 5). Over the past several years, the lake trout spawning stock from SCR had a younger age structure than lake trout from CIS/DIS, and GIS/GI/MI lake trout had an older age structure than the other spawning complexes (likely due in part to larger average mesh sizes and age of surrounding refuges). The oldest lake trout age estimate from

this survey was 49 years old (sampled in 2019). The median age of both female and male lake trout spawning at the GIS/GI/MI complex consistently increased from 1988 to about 2010 and has since decreased (Figure 6).

The combined trends of length and ages of lake trout in the Gul Island Refuge suggest the spawning stock is currently younger than recent years. Current length and age compositions are similar to the 1990s and early 2000s (Figures 3 and 6).

Most recaptured fish in the 2024 assessment were originally captured and tagged in 2017 or later (Figure 7). However, one male recaptured lake trout was originally encountered and tagged as a mature spawning male in 1995, or 29 years ago.

The number of male lake trout recaptured each year had an exponential decay relationship with the number of years individual fish had been at large since its last detection, but female lake trout did not exhibit the same type of relationship (Figure 8).

CIS and SCR lake trout spawning stocks had a smaller mean number of years at large since the most recent capture and original capture compared to the other spawning shoals (Figure 9). GIS lake trout had the largest mean number of years at large since recent capture and original capture. In summary, lake trout captured on spawning shoals outside the two refuges (SCR and CIS; Figure 1) had an overall younger age composition (Figure 5) and shorter recapture histories (Figure 9) than those inside the refuges, suggesting a higher mortality rate within these population subsets due to recreational and commercial harvest allowances.

Subsequent recaptures of tagged lake trout allowed us to measure growth with a known number of years between the original capture event and recapture events. Smaller male lake trout (520-539 millimeters) on average grew 31 mm per year, but annual growth declined to an average of 16 mm per year for 620-639 mm male lake trout and evened out around an average of 7-11 mm per year for lake trout between 680 and 840 millimeters (Figure 10). Male lake trout greater than 860 mm on average grew less than 5 mm per year. On average, female lake trout reached their asymptotic length slightly faster than male lake trout (i.e., higher von Bertalanffy K value), but average maximum lengths near the growth asymptote were similar (i.e., similar von Bertalanffy L-inf values; Figure 11).

Lake trout captured on Apostle Islands spawning shoals had relatively high spawning site fidelity during subsequent recapture events in recent years (Figure 12). In other words, a lake trout tagged on a particular spawning shoal was likely recaptured on the same shoal in a later year. However, there was some degree of mixing among the five spawning shoals assessed from 2005 to 2024. Spawning lake trout captured on GI/MI were recaptured on GIS in a subsequent year 32/37% of the time and vice versa 12/16% of the time for males/females, suggesting the two shoals act more as a spawning reef complex. Likewise, but to a lesser degree, spawning lake trout captured on CIS were recaptured on DIS in a subsequent year 10/17% of the time and vice versa 8/9% of the time for males/females, suggesting these two shoals also act more as a reef complex together. Movement outside of these spawning reef complexes was rarer, as all other transitions occurred less than 5% of the time. SCR spawning lake trout were relatively isolated from both other spawning areas.

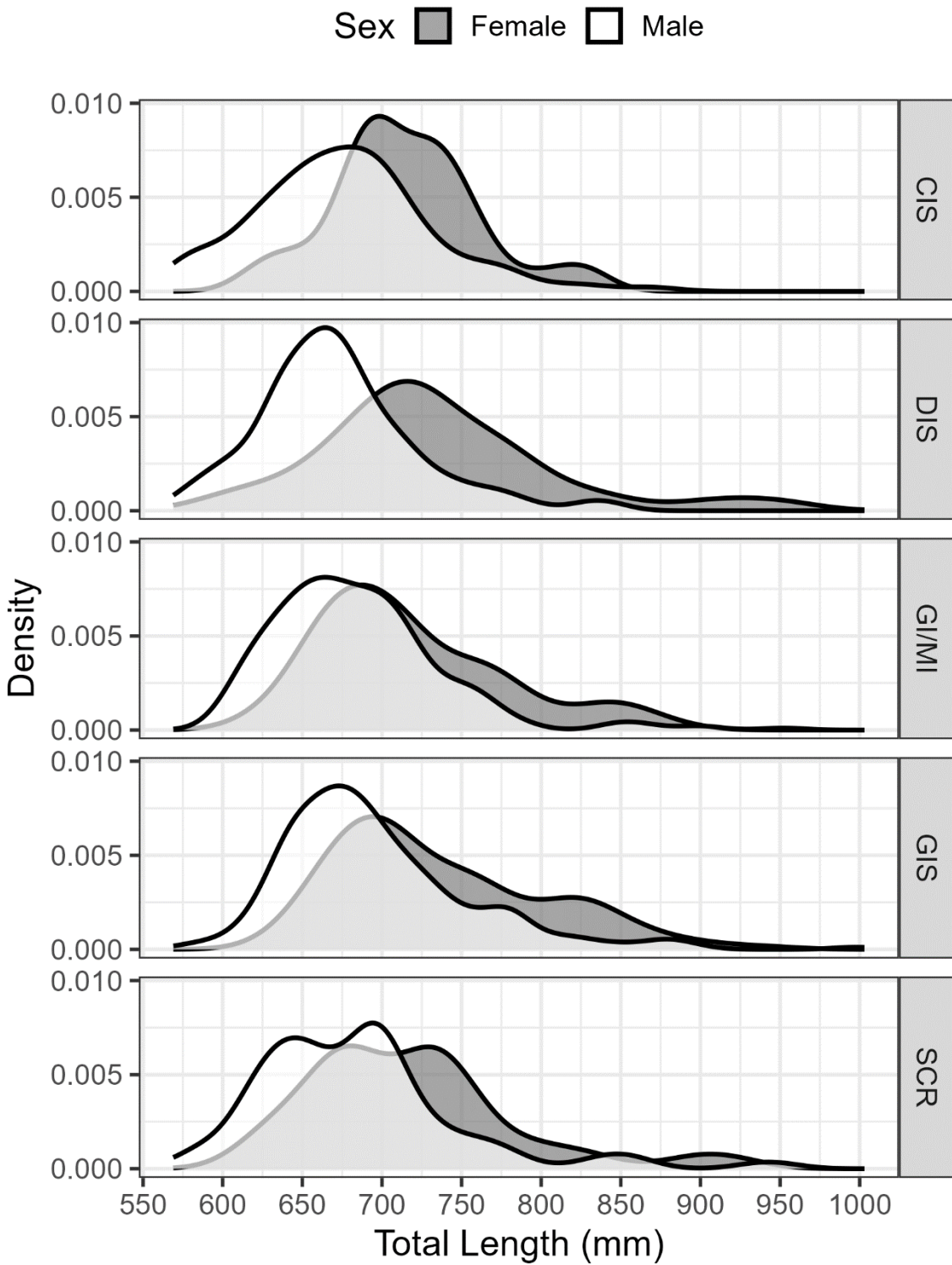


Figure 2. Length frequency of male (white) and female (grey) lake trout total lengths on five Apostle Islands spawning shoals in 2024.

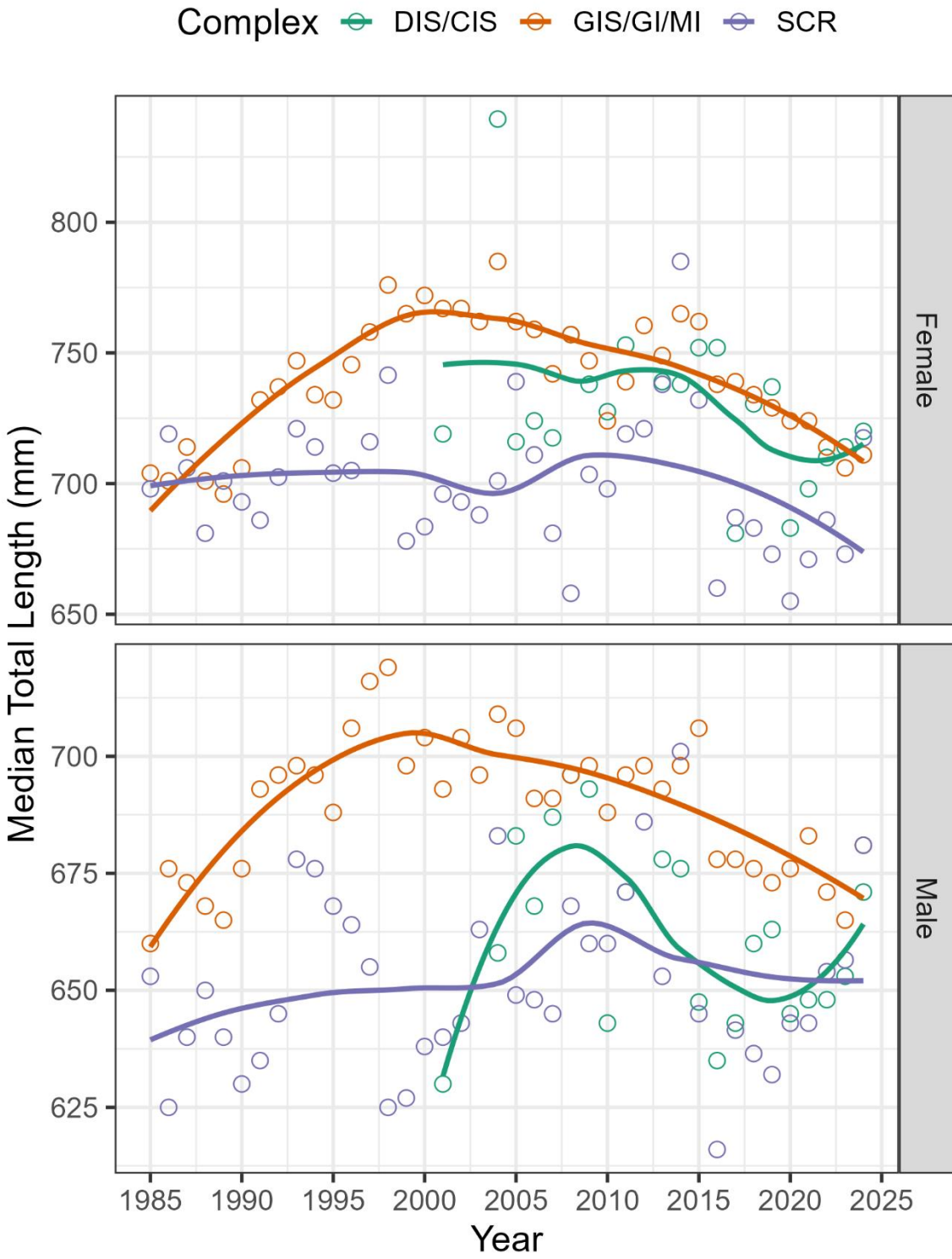


Figure 3. Time series of wild female (top) and male (bottom) lake trout median total length (mm) captured on three Apostle Islands spawning complexes from 1985 to 2024. Trend lines were fit using loess regression. Note the differing y-axis scales between panels.

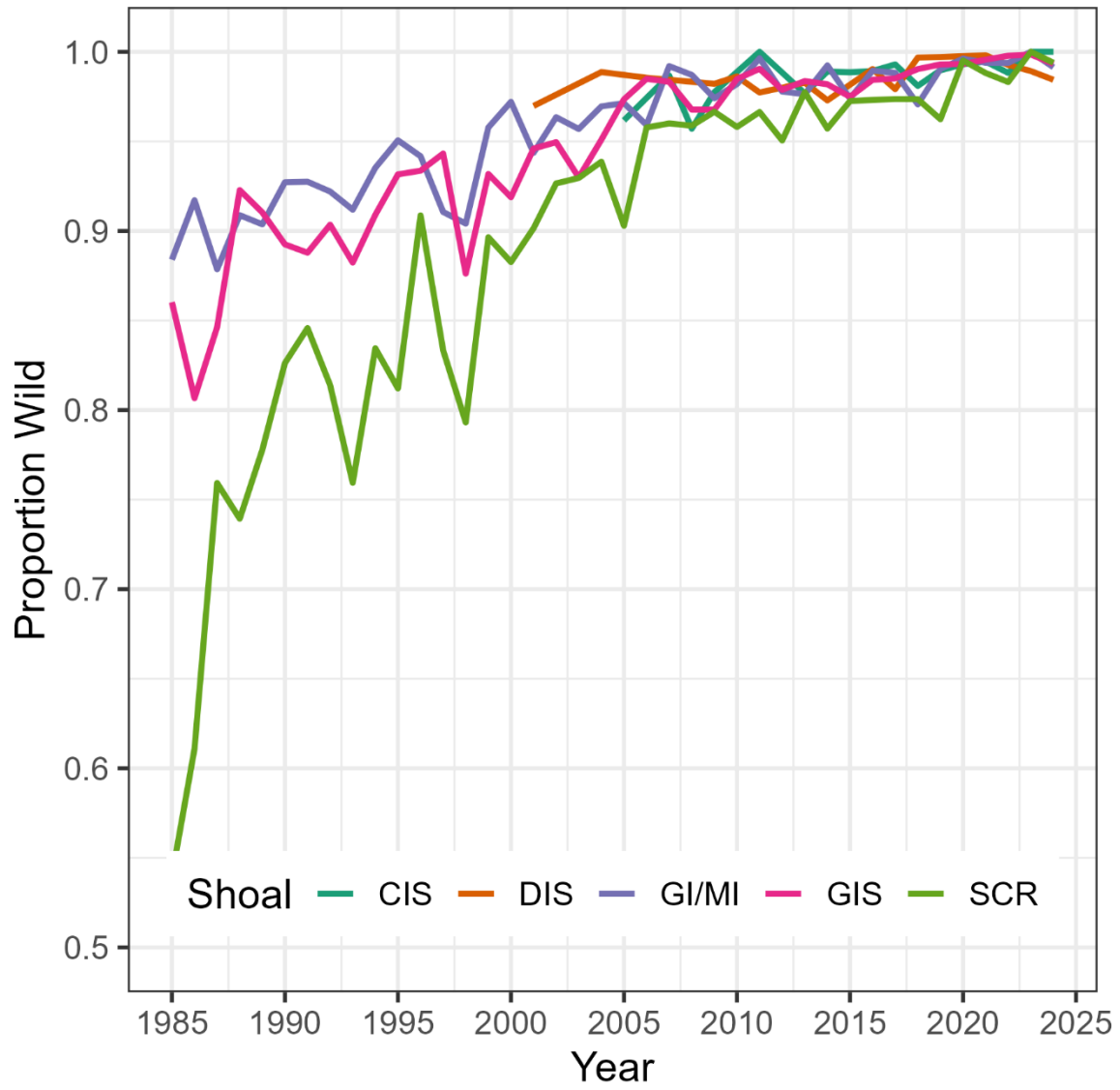


Figure 4. Time series of the proportion of wild (non-hatchery origin) lake trout among five Apostle Islands spawning shoals from 1985 to 2024.

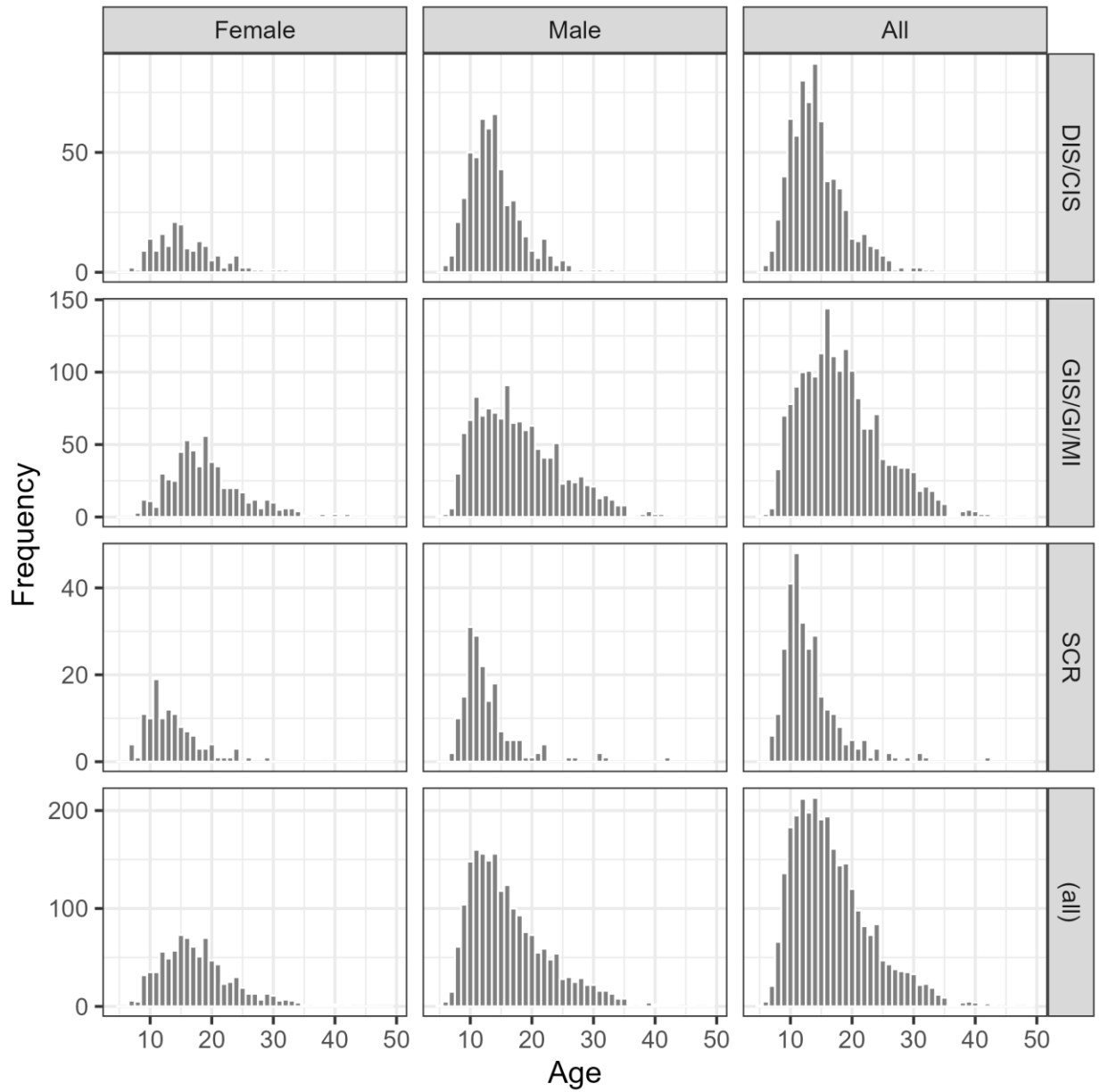


Figure 5. Age frequency plots for male, female and all sexes of lake trout combined captured among three Apostle Islands spawning complexes. Data include age estimates from the Fall Lake Trout Survey from 2005 to 2024. Note the differing y-axis scales among panels.

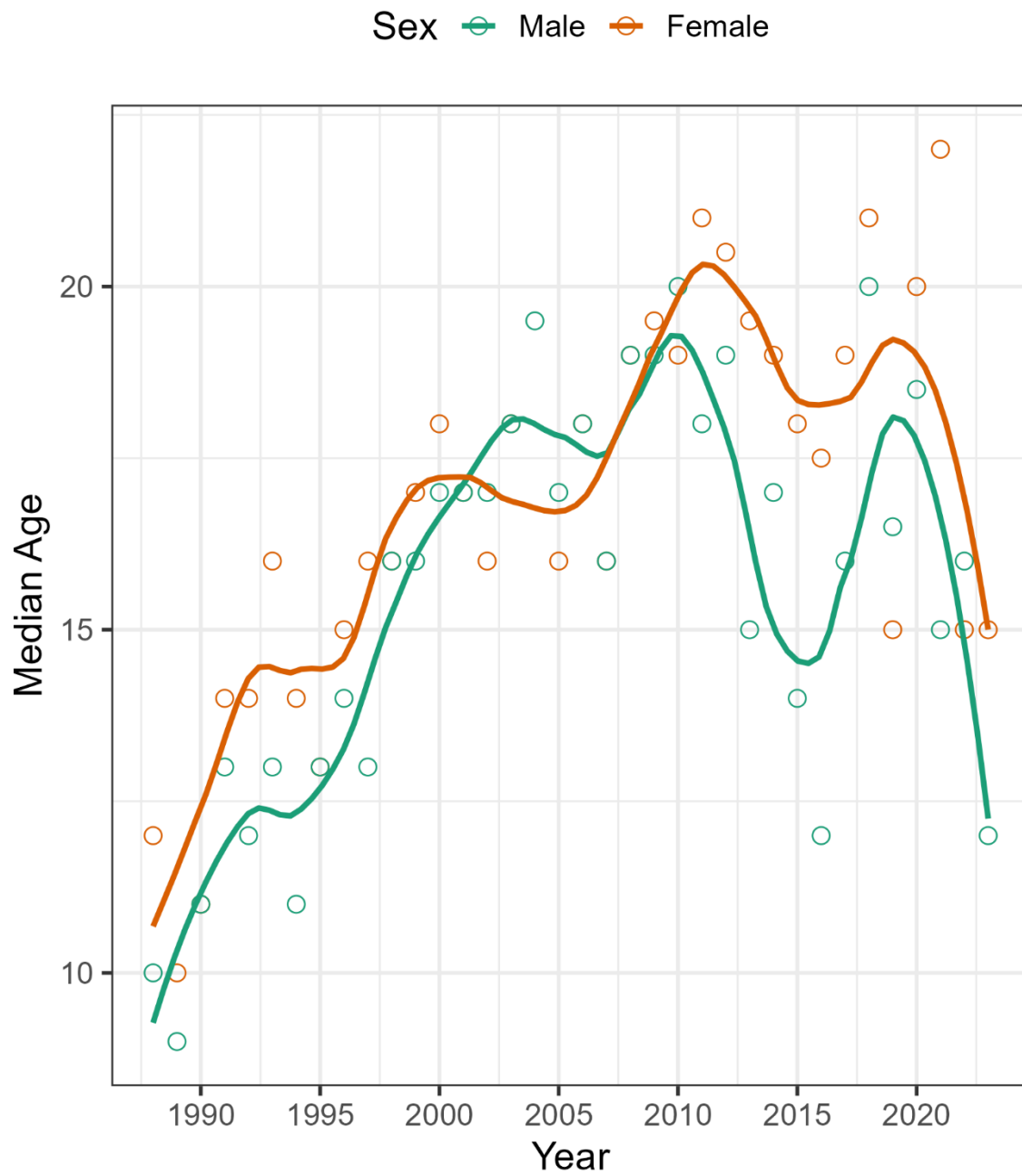


Figure 6. Median age of male (green) and female (orange) lake trout captured from the GIS/GI/MI spawning complex from 1988 to 2023.

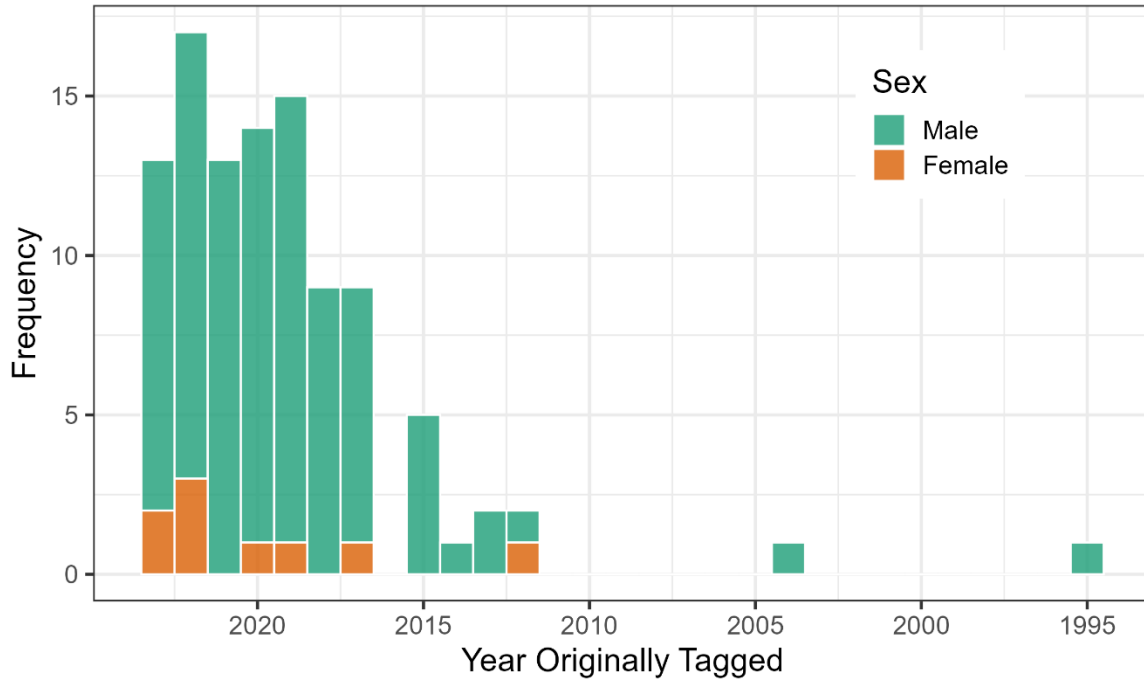


Figure 7. Frequency of fish recaptured in the 2024 Fall Lake Trout Survey per year the fish was originally tagged (male = green, female = orange).

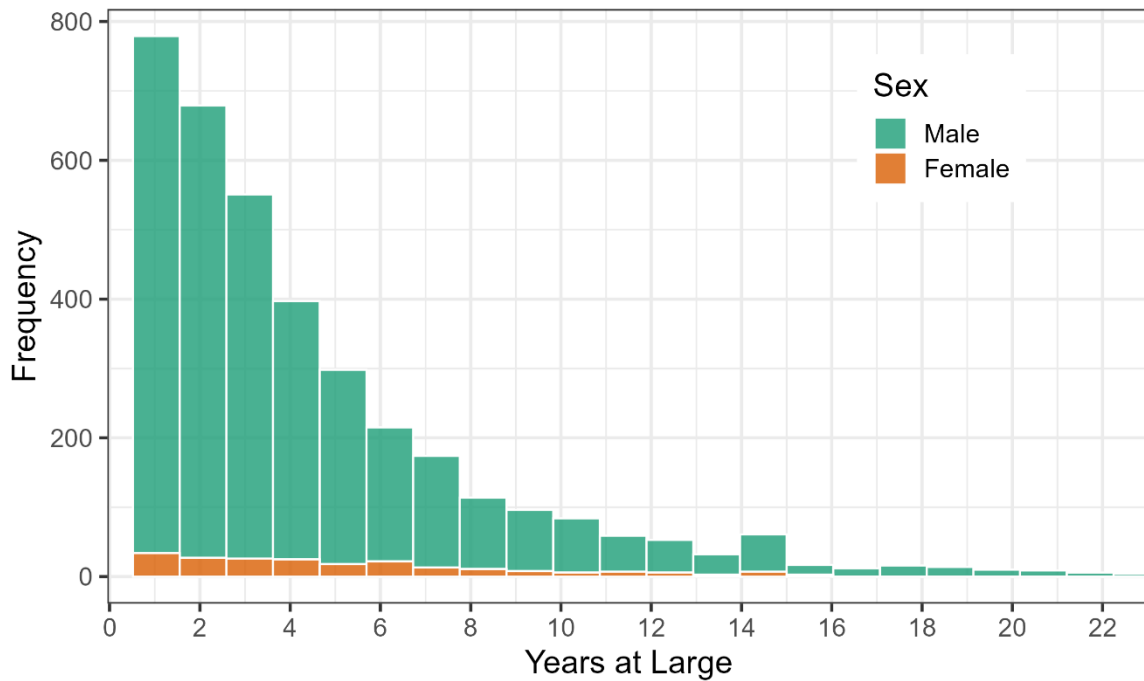


Figure 8. Frequency of the number of years at large since the most recent capture event for all individual recaptured lake trout during the Fall Lake Trout Survey from 2005 to 2024 with males in green and females in orange.

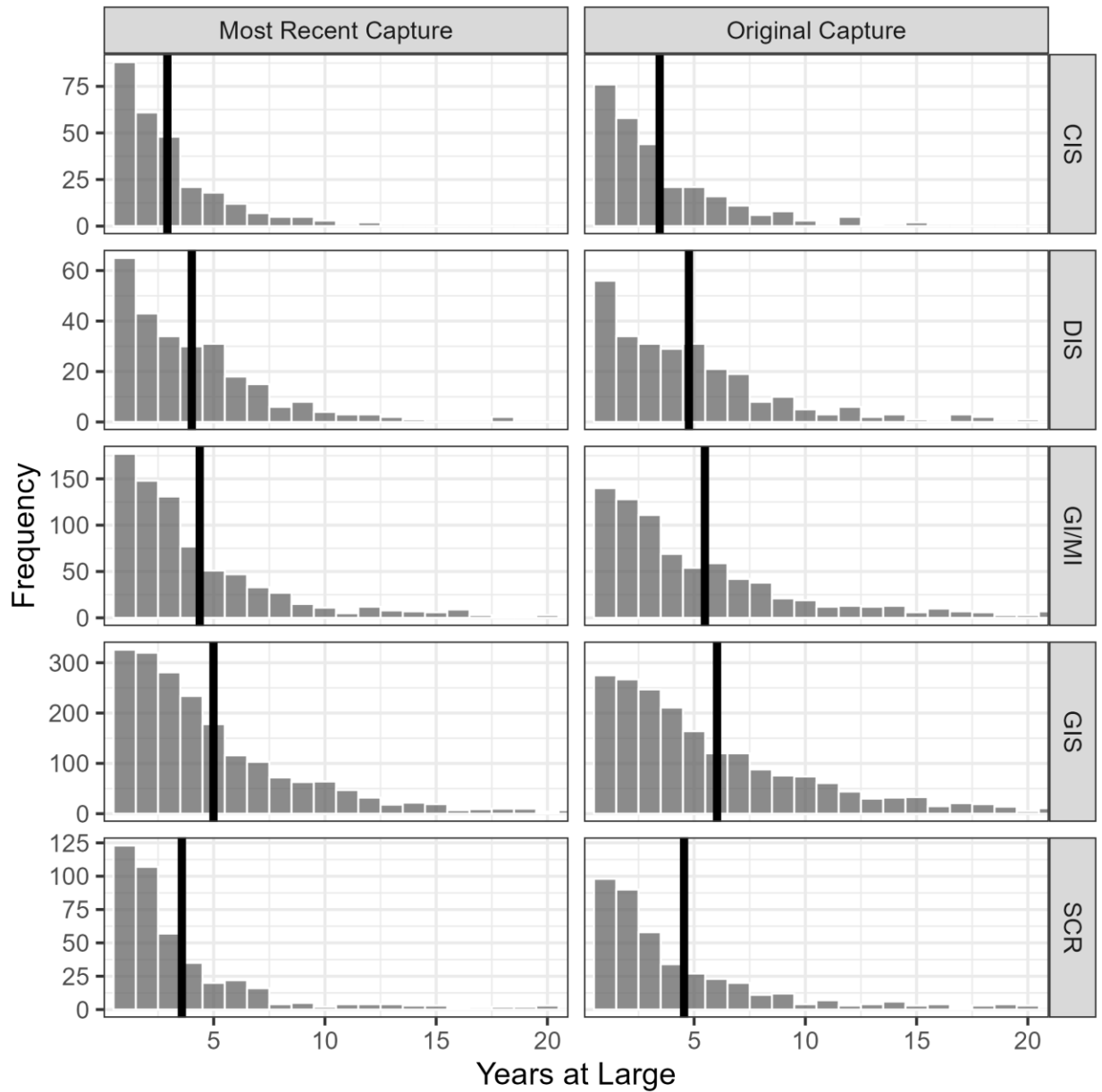


Figure 9. Frequency of the number of years at large since the most recent capture event (left) and the original capture event (right) for all individual recaptured lake trout during the Fall Lake Trout Survey from 2005 to 2024 from each individual spawning shoal. The mean number of years at large for each shoal is represented with black vertical lines.

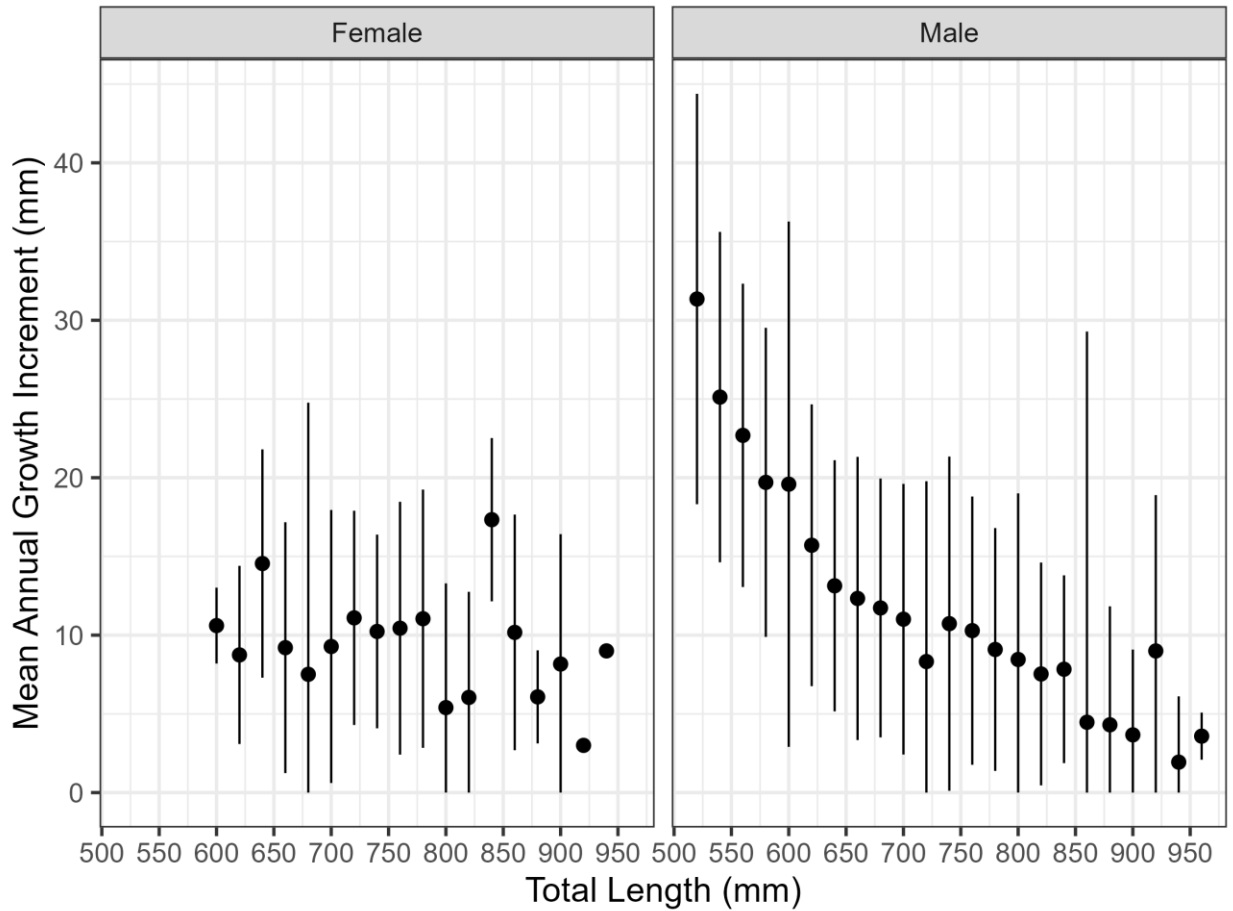


Figure 10. Mean annual growth increment (mm) of female (left) and male (right) recaptured wild lake trout during the Fall Lake Trout Survey using data from 2005 to 2024. Vertical bars represent +/- one standard deviation. Individual lake trout were grouped into 20 mm length bins based on the observed total length at the most recent capture. Growth increment was computed as the difference between the observed total length and the total length at the most recent capture event divided by the number of years since the most recent capture event.

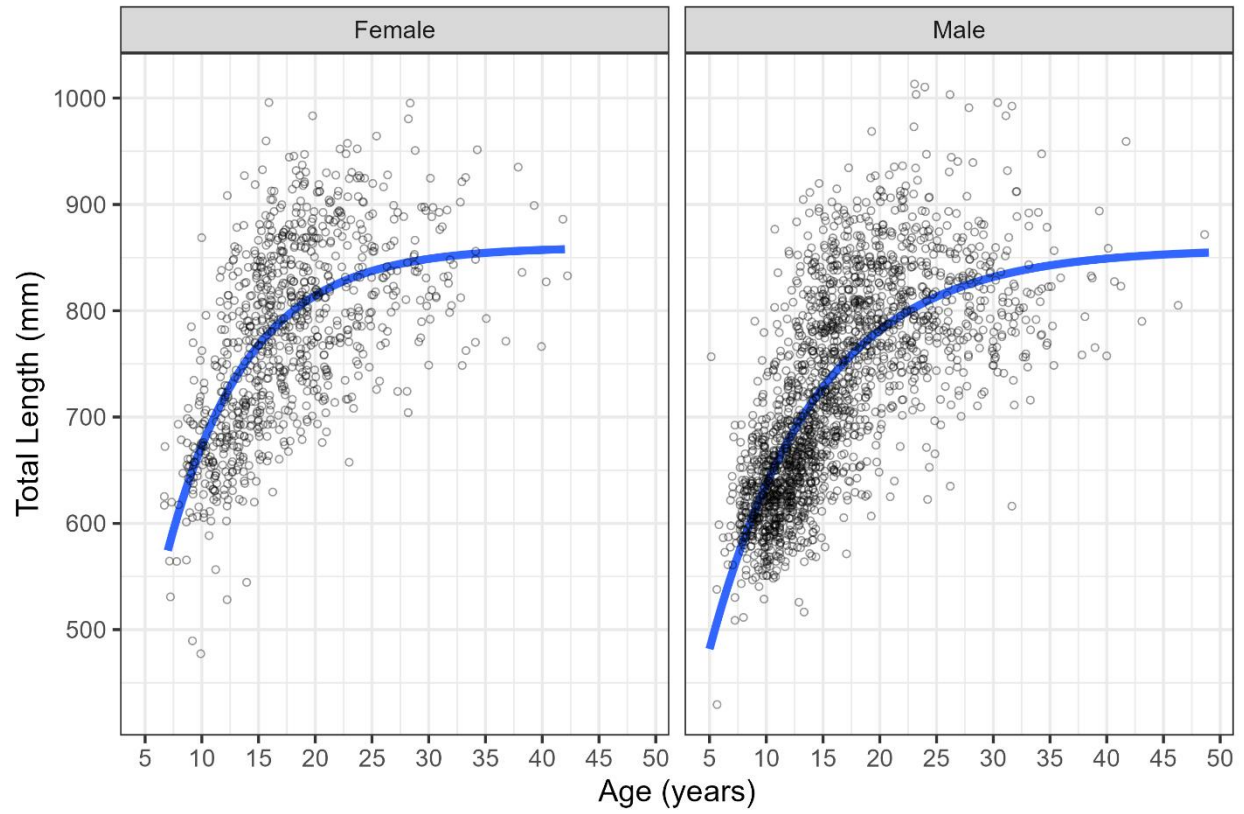


Figure 11. von Bertalanffy growth functions of both female (left) and male (right) lake trout from the Fall Lake Trout Survey from 2005 to 2024.

Female

Male

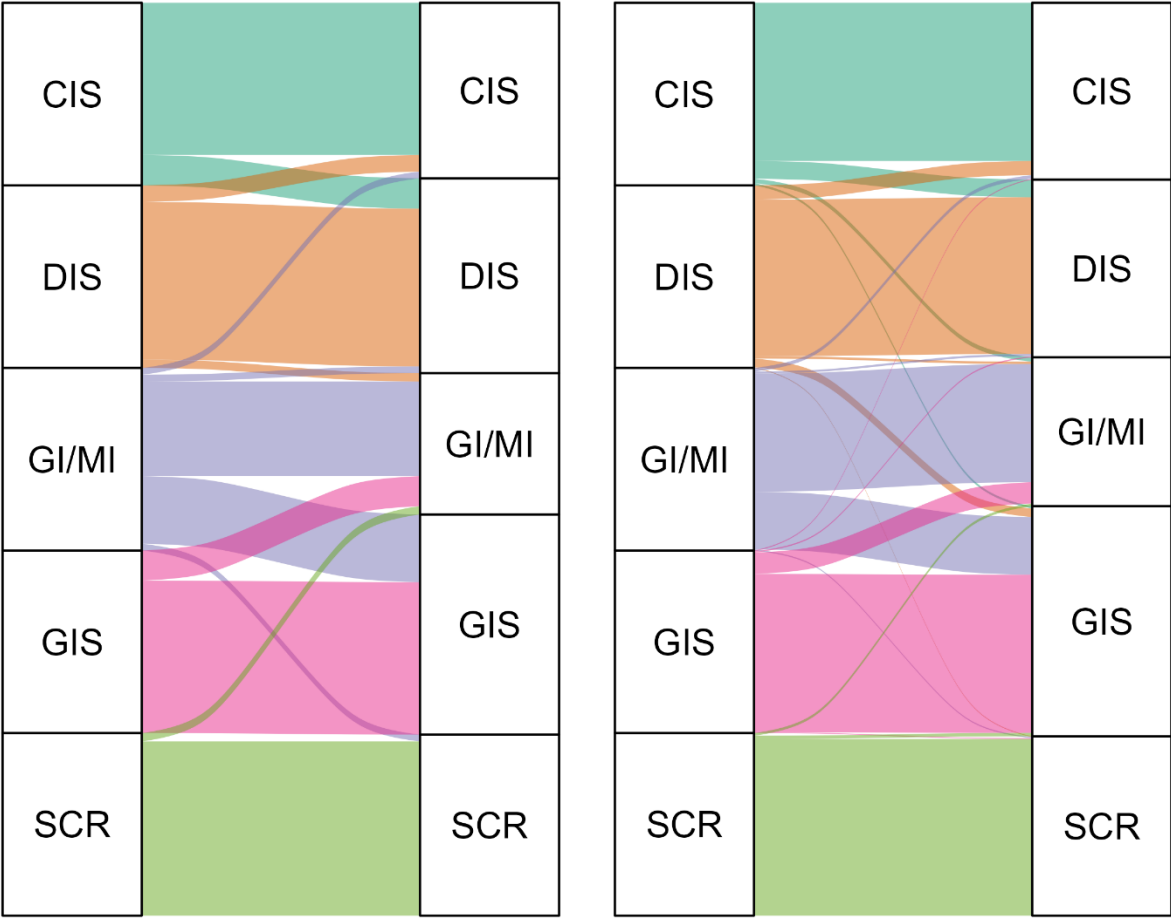


Figure 12. Transition plot representing trends of individual fish movement from its original capture location (left) to its next encounter location (right) for female (left panel) and male (right panel) lake trout. Thickness of transitions represents proportion of total lake trout recaptured within each original capture location. All recaptures from the fall spawning survey from 2005 to 2024 were used in this analysis.