

## Riffle Bioassessment by Volunteers (RBV)

The RBV Program is a monitoring program that uses macroinvertebrates as bioindicators of water quality. In the program, volunteers are trained in a 1-2 day workshop by local RBV coordinators, and collect samples during the fall season. The RBV program depends on volunteers with highly variable expertise. Volunteers attempt to make a field identification of each macroinvertebrate taxa, which are categorized as “most wanted”, “moderately wanted”, and “least wanted”. Local RBV coordinators then send a voucher containing representative macroinvertebrates to the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP). DEEP’s RBV coordinator reviews the submitted voucher and produces the official list of macroinvertebrate identifications for the monitoring location. If four or more of the “most wanted” taxa are present, DEEP is able to confidently say that the location monitored is a healthy stream segment.



Fig 1: Water quality in a local riffle is tested using the RBV method.

## Study Objectives

The main objective of this study was to analyze volunteer macroinvertebrate identifications from watersheds throughout Connecticut and compare it with the DEEP staff identifications. To understand how volunteers are identifying macroinvertebrates, and to what extent the RBV training is preparing volunteers for identification, this study hopes to determine:

1. Which organisms are commonly checked off by volunteers but are not found during DEEP’s official review?
2. Which organisms are commonly found in the voucher during DEEP’s official review, but not checked off by the volunteer?
3. Did the redesigned field identification cards, introduced in 2016 and co-designed by DEEP and NRCA Alum Jake Renkert (Fig 3), improve volunteer identification accuracy?

## Methods

- The original volunteer-identified data from three watersheds: Salmon River watershed, Niantic River watershed, and Thames River watershed was compared to the official DEEP-identified matching records.
- The two sets of data were analyzed to identify the differences between what was identified by the volunteers and what was found in the official DEEP voucher.

- Organisms with differences greater than five between volunteer and state identifications of organism occurrence for the 2014 and 2015 years were marked as significant; the same organisms were analyzed in 2016 and 2017 to look for improvements (Fig 2) after the introduction of the new identification cards (Fig 3).

## Introduction of new field cards



Fig 2: The graphs above display the differences between volunteer (blue) and state (orange) identifications of macroinvertebrates from 2014 through 2017. Red arrow indicates organisms with discrepancies between volunteer and state identifications that are greater than five. Green arrow indicates organisms whose state and volunteer discrepancies then decreased to less than five after the introduction of the new field identification cards in 2016 (Fig 3).

**PANEL # 5A**

**COMMON STONEFLY**

Family: Perlidae  
Order: Plecoptera

Ecological Information  
Tolerance Value = 1  
Feeding Group = Predator

Key features to look for:  
 - Large active organism (up to 1.25 inches).  
 - Flat body with obvious legs.  
 - Dark body with or without pattern.  
 - 2 tails at the end of the abdomen.  
 - Two sets of wing pads.  
 - Gill tufts at the base of each leg.

Key behaviors to look for:  
 - Very active crawler, highly mobile.  
 - May hide on like colored objects in the tray.  
 - May be observed doing “push-ups” in the tray.

Points of Note:  
 When present in a sample, this organism will crawl out of the debris in the net. It is very active and extremely hard to miss. Often different sizes can be extremely hard to miss. Other different sizes can be collected at the same site. For the smaller versions be sure to check the key characteristics. Some of the darker variations of perlidae can be confused for a giant stonefly.

**MOST WANTED**

RBV Field Identification Card Panel 5A

**“Common” Stonefly**

Panel 5A  
Most Sensitive

DORSAL VIEW

KEY FEATURES

- Flat body with obvious, segmented legs. Some specimens (not all) have a tortoise-shell pattern on the head and thorax.
- Two long tails at the end of the abdomen.
- Two sets of wing pads
- Rounded thoracic plate
- Gill tufts resembling armpit hairs at the base of each leg.

VENTRAL VIEW

Taxonomic Information  
Order: Plecoptera  
Family: Perlidae  
Genus: All

Ecological Information  
Tolerance Value = 1  
Feeding Group = Predator  
Stream Habitat = Burrowed in substrate

Key Behaviors  
 - Very active crawler, highly mobile. (Watch out – they will crawl out of your ice cube trays!)  
 - May hide on like colored objects in the tray.  
 - May be observed doing “push-ups” in the tray. (This helps circulate water over their gills.)

Important Notes  
 When present in a sample, this organism will crawl out of the debris. Don’t be confused by size or color – often different sizes will be collected at the same site and coloration can vary quite a bit between organisms. Darker and/or larger versions of common stoneflies are often misidentified as the giant stonefly (see panel 5B).

Size and Color  
 Size: 8-32 mm (1/2 to 1 1/4 inches)  
 Color: Variable, light brown to brown to very dark, some with a tortoise-shell pattern.

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Fig 3: The identification cards before (left) and after (right) redesign. NRCA Alumni, Jake Renkert ('15), was responsible for DEEP’s Field Identification Card redesign as his community project.

## Major Findings

This study revealed that from these three watersheds:

1. The organisms that are consistently identified by volunteers but not found in the official voucher include: brush-legged mayfly, saddle-case caddisfly, cornucopia caddisfly, plant-case caddisfly, dobsonfly, and dragonfly.
2. The organisms that are consistently found in the state voucher but not identified by volunteers are: non biting midge, crane fly, and small miscellaneous stonefly.
3. The organisms for which the discrepancy between state and volunteer data decreased below five after the new field cards include: the two-tailed flathead mayfly, free living caddisfly, and aquatic snipe fly.

## Conclusions

In this study, a threshold of five occurrences of volunteer vs. state identification disagreement was used to flag organism types that were incorrectly identified. It is important to note that there were other organisms that did not meet this threshold, and that were consistently identified by volunteers, yet not found in state data. For example, the body-builder mayfly. The RBV program currently directs volunteers to sample in the fall, and these mayflies are typically only present in spring samples. Volunteers most likely misidentify this organism because they hope to find enough organisms (four or more from the “most wanted” section) to indicate good water quality.

Our findings in this study will hopefully give RBV coordinators the knowledge they need to best prepare volunteers for sampling. With an understanding of the most commonly misidentified organisms, trainers can focus on qualities of the organisms other than looks and color - like size, active season, and key behaviors.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Abby Beissinger at UCONN for supporting and helping me throughout this process. I would also like to thank my community partners: Patricia Young, at the Salmon River Watershed Organization, and Meghan Lally at CT DEEP. Additional thanks go to Jean Pillo of the Last Green Valley and Judy Rondeau of the Niantic River Watershed Committee, Inc. for sharing the original volunteer data from their watersheds.