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*Feeding of Perla grandis nymphs (Plecoptera, Perlidae)
in an apennine first order stream (Rio Berga, NW Italy)*

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Running title:

Feeding of *Perla grandis* in an apennine stream

21 **Abstract**

22

23 Feeding habits of *Perla grandis* nymphs have been investigated in the Rio Berga, an
24 Apenninic stream of Northwestern Italy. In this study, we analysed gut contents of 50 nymphs
25 of this species, with the aim to investigate feeding preferences. Nymphs were collected from a
26 single riffle, whose benthic coenosis was also determined. We detected a change in the diet
27 during ontogenesis, with small instars feeding mainly on detritus and large instars strictly
28 carnivorous. We also detected the existence of an evident trophic selection: diet was almost
29 entirely dominated by Chironomidae, independently from their availability on the substratum.
30 This finding is discussed on the basis of ecological and ethological considerations.

31

32 **Keywords:** *Perla grandis*, gut contents, diet, Plecoptera, NW Italy

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36 **Introduction**

37 The use of benthic invertebrates in biological monitoring has produced an evident increase in
38 the knowledge of taxonomy and systematic of these organisms (Merritt & Cummins 1996).

39 Unfortunately, the knowledge of great part of their ecology is still incomplete. In particular,
40 the analysis of the diet and the study of trophic ecology could represent important source of
41 data, that can be employed to improve our knowledge of the ecology of different species
42 (Elliott 2000), the structure of stream food webs (Huhta *et al.* 1999), and the functional
43 organization of lotic systems (Rosi-Marshall & Wallace 2002).

44 Plecoptera constitute a numerically and ecologically significant component in freshwater
45 ecosystem, mainly in running waters of all sizes, all over the world (Zwick 2004). For the
46 most part, larvae are either primarily carnivores (feeding largely upon other stream
47 invertebrates), as are many Systellognatha stoneflies and Euholognatha, or primarily leaf
48 shredders and detritivores, as are many Euholognatha (McCafferty 1998; Pattée *et al.* 2000).

49 Large sized stoneflies, such as Perlidae and Perlodidae, represent the main group of predators
50 in many small, fishless lotic systems where they act as top-down control elements in the
51 benthic community (Wipfli & Gregovich 2002). Among this group, feeding seems to have
52 little or no importance in the adult life (Tierno de Figueroa & Sánchez-Ortega 1999; Tierno
53 de Figueroa & Fochetti 2001), because no solid food has been found in the gut of any perlid
54 or large perlodid species (Tierno de Figueroa & Fochetti 2001; Fenoglio & Tierno de
55 Figueroa 2003). Apparently, adults rely on the rich diet of the preimaginal stages (Fenoglio
56 2003).

57 *Perla grandis* (Rambur, 1841) (= *P. maxima* sensu Auctorum nec Scopoli, 1763) is a typical
58 rheophilous-mesothermal species. This species belonging to the Middle-Sud-European
59 chorological group and is widely distributed in the Apennines of northwestern Italy (Ravizza
60 1974; Ravizza & Ravizza Dematteis 1977; Ravizza Dematteis & Ravizza 1994).

61 The aim of our study was to investigate the diet of the nymphs of *P. grandis* in a fishless, first
62 order Apenninic stream, where this species constitutes the top predator taxon.

63

64 **Material and Methods**

65 In the days 09-10 January 2006, 50 *P. grandis* nymphs were collected in a 150 m uniform
66 riffle of the Berga stream (Carrega Ligure, High Borbera Valley, UTM 509.852 - 4.939.795;
67 780 m a.s.l, fig.1). In the sampling station, Rio Berga is a typical Apennine lotic environment,
68 characterized by elevate slope, coarse riverbed and fast-swallow flowing waters. Riparian
69 vegetation is mainly constituted by *Quercus* sp., *Castanea sativa*, *Alnus glutinosa* and some
70 specimens of *Fagus sylvatica*. In the upper Rio Berga catchment there are no anthropic
71 activities, so that this lotic system shows a good environmental quality, corresponding to an
72 environment without trace of human-induced alteration (first class in the Italian Extended
73 Biotic Index, Ghetti 1997). Main environmental characteristics and abiotic parameters
74 (measured by Eijkelkamp 13.14 and 18.28 portable instruments) are reported in tab. 1.
75 Samplings were realized early in the morning, because Systellognatha are considered to be
76 chiefly nocturnal feeders (Vaught & Stewart 1974). Moreover, using a Surber net (20 x 20
77 cm; mesh 255 μ m), we collected 13 samples in the same reach to assess the presence and
78 abundance of the taxa of the natural benthic invertebrate population. Samples were preserved
79 in 90% ethanol. In the laboratory, all organisms were counted and identified to genus or
80 species level, except for: Lumbricidae, Lumbriculidae, Niphargidae and early instars of some
81 Diptera, which were identified to family or sub-family level.

82 Total length of *P. grandis* nymphs was measured (0.1 mm accuracy) and processed to assess
83 food consumption by means of gut content analysis. The most common method to measure
84 patterns of differential predation by aquatic insects is the examination of relative numbers of
85 prey remains in predator stomach contents, and the comparison of those numbers to prey

86 density estimated from samples from the predator's habitat (Peckarsky 1984; Peckarsky &
87 Penton 1989).

88 To analyze the dimensional shift in food preference, we separately considered gut contents of
89 smaller nymphs (body length < 15.0 mm) and larger nymphs (body length > 15.0 mm).

90 During the analysis of small specimens, gut content of nymphs was studied using a
91 transparency technique which has also been used to study feeding in imaginal stages (Fenoglio
92 & Tierno de Figueroa 2003). We use Hertwig's liquid, a modification of Hoyer's liquid,
93 which clears the body wall, thus allowing direct examination of the gut content without
94 dissection. To examine larger specimens we removed guts and the contents of the alimentary
95 canal were analysed by using the transparency method for slides. Fragments of animal prey
96 were identified to the lowest taxonomic level possible. Identification of prey was based on
97 sclerotized body parts, particularly head capsules, mouthparts and leg fragments. We also
98 differentiated four fractions: vegetable matter (diatoms, algae and fungi), animal matter,
99 unidentified organic matter (FPOM-fine particulate organic matter) and mineral matter (sand).
100 During the laboratory-phase of the study we use a NIKON SMZ 1500 light microscope (60-
101 100 x) with JVC TK-C701EG videocamera.

102 To investigate the existence of feeding preferences, gut contents were compared with the
103 natural composition and abundance of macroinvertebrate communities in the riverbed using
104 the trophic electivity index of Ivlev (1961):

$$105 \quad E = (r_i - p_i) / (r_i + p_i)$$

106 where r_i = the proportion of ingested species and p_i = the relative abundance in the benthic
107 community. The index ranges from -1.0 to 1.0. A value of -1.0 means total avoidance, 1.0
108 indicates preference and 0 indicates indifference. The presence of algae and detritus (e.g.
109 fragments of terrestrial vegetation) was recorded and quantified on a scale of 0-3 (0 = no
110 presence; 3 = the highest abundance class).

111

112 **Results**

113 We examined the gut contents of 50 *Perla grandis* nymphs; medium length of *P. grandis*
114 immature stages was 19.4 mm, with a minimum of 5.0 mm and a maximum of 27.2 mm. We
115 divided the nymphs in two dimensional classes: “small specimens” (n=13, total length < 15.0
116 mm) and “large specimens” (n=37, total length >15.0 mm).

117 In total we collected and identified 1115 aquatic invertebrates belonging to 38 taxa.

118 Taxonomical list and relative abundance are reported in tab. 2. Analysing the entire dataset,
119 we found that 6% of guts contained sand and that 12 % of guts were completely empty.

120 Considering the two dimensional classes, we detected an evident difference: smallest nymphs
121 showed a detritivorous diet (53.8 % of guts), with sporadic ingestions of midges and small
122 mayflies while largest ones are carnivorous, feeding on different invertebrate species (fig. 2).

123 In largest individuals we detected an evident trophic preference for Chironomidae. Midges
124 represented the most abundant item in the diet of *P. grandis*, with a relative importance that is
125 noticeably greater than their abundance in the substratum, and an high value of the Ivlev’s
126 electivity index (47.8 – fig. 3). Gut content analysis revealed that Chironomidae were ingested
127 also entire, without chewing: in facts, we found head capsules and fragments but also 13
128 complete larvae. Ephemeroptera Baetidae and Plecoptera Leuctridae, also if well represented
129 and abundant in the river bottom, were ingested with a minor frequency, such as
130 Ephemeroptera Heptageniidae, Leptophlebiidae and Trichoptera Hydropsychidae. Other
131 groups, also if well represented in the natural environment, were always avoided, such as
132 different families of Coleoptera (Hydraenidae and Dryopidae, for example) and Crustacea
133 Niphargidae.

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136 **Discussion**

137 Many studies noticed that some predaceous stoneflies undergo changes in feeding pattern as
138 they grow, moving from a detritus based diet to a strictly carnivorous alimentation (Bo &
139 Fenoglio 2005). Our study confirms this findings, providing new data about the increase of
140 trophic spectrum during the ontogenesis of great Systellognatha nymphs. The increase in
141 number and type of preys is probably related not only to a dimensional increase of the
142 nymphs (and the related ability in to catch more prey types) but also to an increase in the
143 energetic demand in organisms that don't feed in the adult stage and rely on the preimaginal
144 stages diet to perform gametogenesis.

145 Another interesting finding of this study is the evidence of clear trophic selection
146 mechanisms: Chironomidae, also if represented only a little component of the benthic
147 coenosis of Rio Berga, resulted the most present item in the food of *P. grandis* nymphs. The
148 importance of Chironomidae as food resource were also underlined in Neotropical
149 environments by Fenoglio (2003) in the genus *Anacroneuria* sp. (Perlidae), and in Nearctic
150 environments in *Acroneuria californica* (Perlidae), as reported by Monakof 2003. This latter
151 species feed mainly on Chironomidae, various Ephemeroptera and Trichoptera, but electivity
152 index result positive only for midge larvae.

153 This result led to formulate the hypothesis that midges represent the preferred food item for
154 many Systellognatha: probably they offer a good combination of different elements, such as
155 mobility, dimensions and microhabitat overlap.

156

157 **Acknowledgments**

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159 support. We would also thank Dr. E. Guafa for continuous support and useful suggestions.

160

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212

212 Table 1: Some environmental characteristics and abiotic parameters of stream reach during
213 field sampling

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216	Stream order	1 th
217	Altitude (m asl)	800
218	Width (cm)	170 ± 20
219	Depth (cm)	15 ± 5
220	Water temperature (°C)	3.8 ± 0.5
221	Air Temperature (°C)	- 2.0 ± 1.0
222	pH	7.9
223	Conductivity (µS/cm)	25.0
224	O ₂ (mg/l)	102.0

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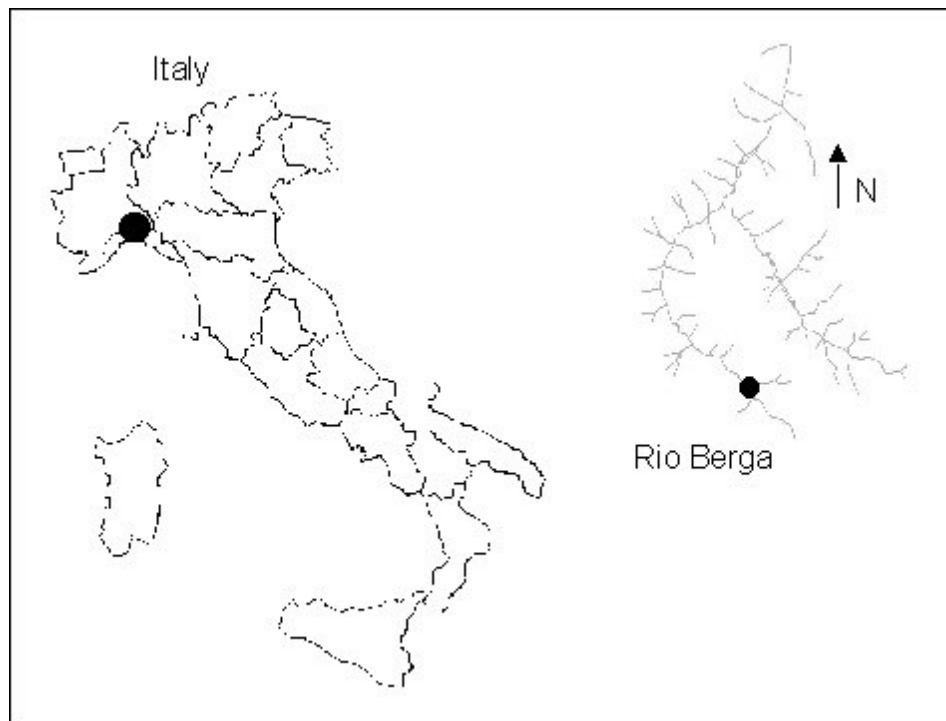
229 Table 2: Percent relative abundance (% value in the community) for macroinvertebrates
 230 collected in the natural riverbed in the Rio Berga (NW Italy).

231	<i>Taxa</i>	<i>relative</i>	abundance %	FFG*
232				
233				
234				
235				
236	Plecoptera			
237	Perlidae	<i>Perla grandis</i>	4,48	P
238		<i>Perla marginata</i>	0,90	P
239		<i>Dinocras cephalotes</i>	3,41	P
240	Perlodidae	<i>Isoperla</i> sp.	7,00	P
241	Leuctridae	<i>Leuctra</i> sp.	14,53	Sh
242	Nemouridae	<i>Nemoura</i> sp.	8,70	Sh
243		<i>Protonemura</i> sp.	0,18	Sh
244		<i>Amphinemura</i> sp.	1,35	Sh
245	Chloroperlidae	<i>Chloroperla</i> sp.	1,08	P
246	Taeniopterygidae	<i>Brachyptera</i> sp.	1,88	Sh
247	Ephemeroptera			
248	Heptageniidae	<i>Ecdyonurus</i> sp.	7,62	Sc
249		<i>Rhithrogena</i> sp.	6,46	Sc
250		<i>Epeorus sylvicola</i>	2,06	Sc
251	Baetidae	<i>Baetis</i> sp.	15,61	Cg
252	Ephemerellidae	<i>Torleya major</i>	0,54	Cg
253	Leptophlebiidae	<i>Habroleptoides</i> sp.	5,20	Cg
254	Trichoptera			
255	Hydropsychidae	<i>Hydropsyche</i> sp.	7,09	F
256	Philopotamidae	<i>Philopotamus</i> sp.	0,18	F
257	Rhyacophilidae	<i>Rhyacophila</i> sp.	0,72	P
258	Sericostomatidae	<i>Sericostoma</i> sp.	0,27	Sh
259	Odontoceridae	<i>Odontocerum albicorne</i>	0,09	Sh
260	Limnephilidae	<i>Potamophylax cingulatus</i>	1,70	Sh
261		Undet.	0,18	Sh
262	Diptera			
263	Chironomidae	<i>Tanypodinae</i>	0,36	P
264		<i>Chironominae</i>	1,43	Cg
265	Tipulidae	<i>Tipula</i> sp.	1,08	Sh
266	Athericidae	<i>Atherix</i> sp.	1,61	P
267	Empididae	<i>Emerodrominae</i>	0,09	P
268	Limoniidae		0,18	P
269	Coleoptera			
270	Hydraenidae	<i>Haenydra devillei</i>	0,54	Sc
271	Helodidae (larvae)		0,18	Sh
272	Dryopidae	<i>Helichus substriatum</i>	0,09	Sh
273	Crustacea			
274	Niphargidae		1,61	Cg
275	Annelida			
276	Erpobdellidae	<i>Dina lineata</i>	0,45	P
277	Lumbriculidae		0,54	
278	Lumbricidae		0,09	
279	Lumbricidae	<i>Eiseniella tetraedra</i>	0,36	Cg
280	Arachnida			
281	Hydracarina		0,18	P

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 284 (*) FFG: functional feeding groups (Cg=collectors-gatherers; F=filterers; P=predators; Sc=scrapers;
 285 Sh=shredders. See Merritt and Cummins, 1996).

286 Fig. 1: Rio Berga and sampling station.

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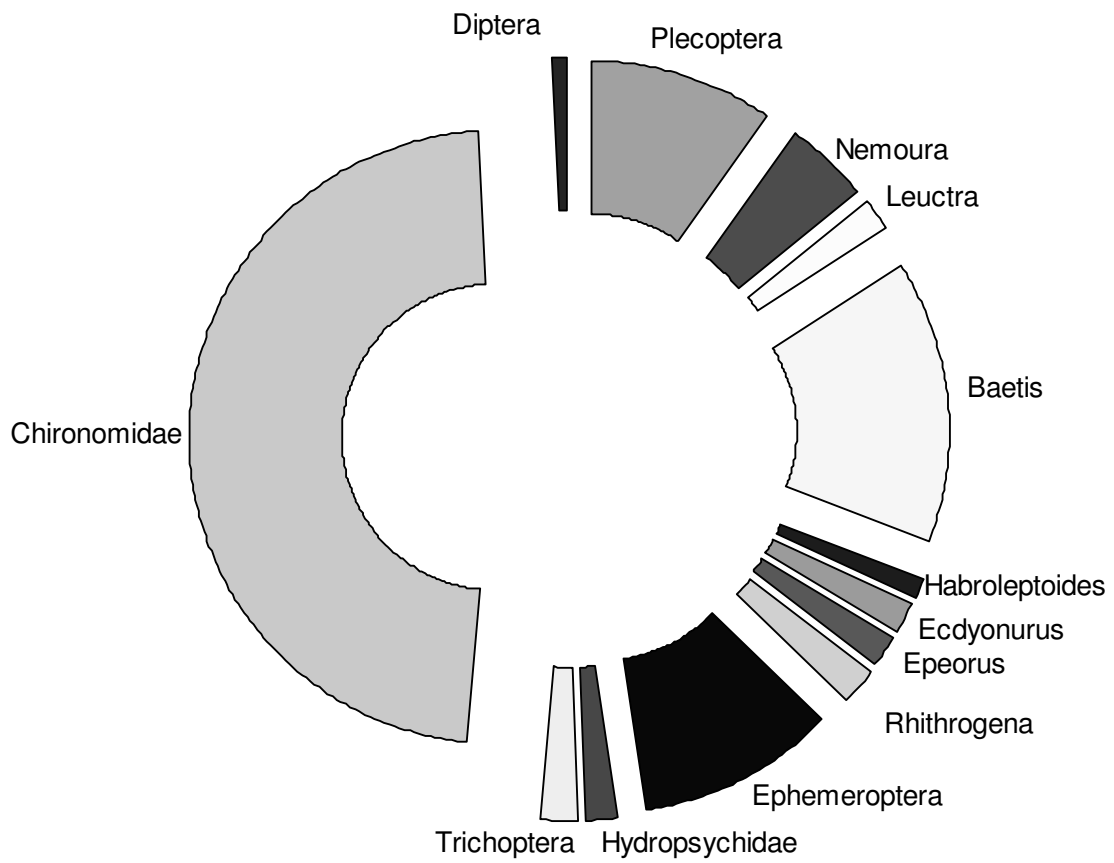
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301 Fig. 2: Relative abundance of prey items in the *Perla grandis* nymphs.
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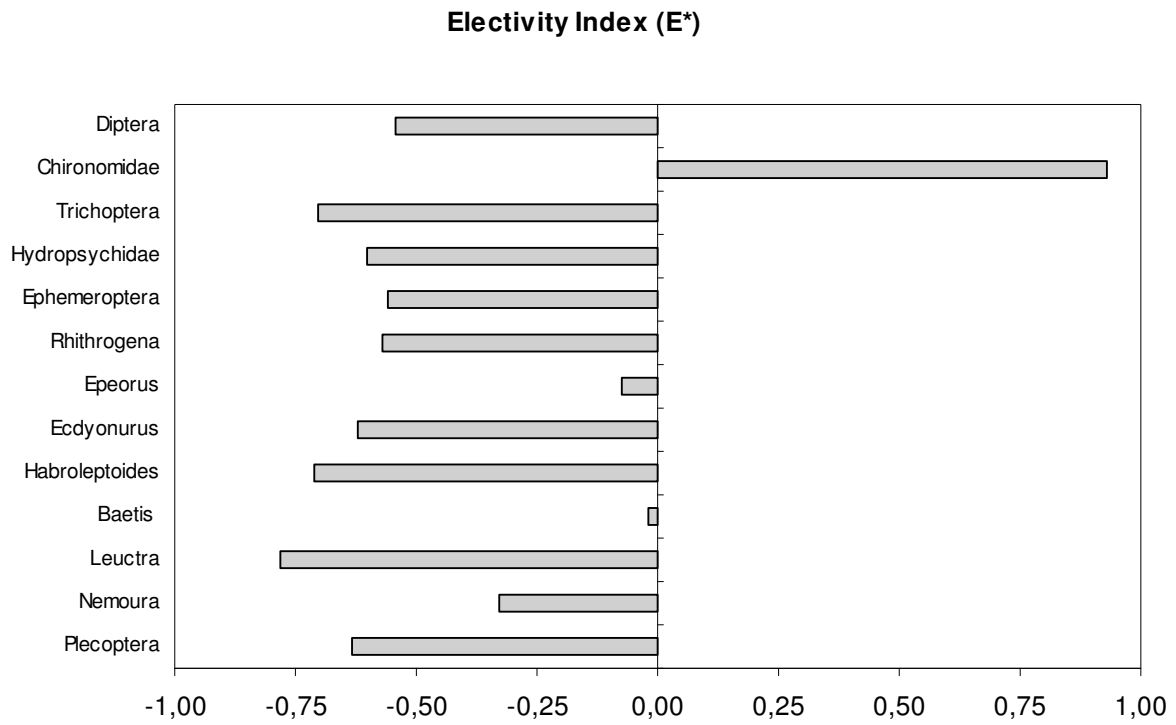


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305 Fig. 3: Electivity index (E^*) for the macroinvertebrate taxa in the guts of the three size groups
306 of *Perla grandis* nymphs.

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