

IOWA'S WATER

Ambient Monitoring Program

What in the world are *Benthic Macroinvertebrates*?

Benthic macroinvertebrates are aquatic bottom-dwelling (benthic) animals that can be seen with the naked eye (macro), but lack backbones (invertebrates). Based on statewide sampling results from the Iowa Department of Natural Resources' stream biological assessment program, the most common benthic macroinvertebrates in Iowa include insects, clams, crustaceans, leeches, snails, and worms (Figures 1 & 2).

Where and when are benthic macroinvertebrates found?

These animals are widespread. They can be found in large rivers, small creeks, small ponds, wetlands, and lakes and can live on all bottom types, such as sand or rocks. Most benthic macroinvertebrates are present throughout the year; however, they are most easily found in the summer months. During the colder months, many species burrow deep in the sediment or remain inactive on rock surfaces.

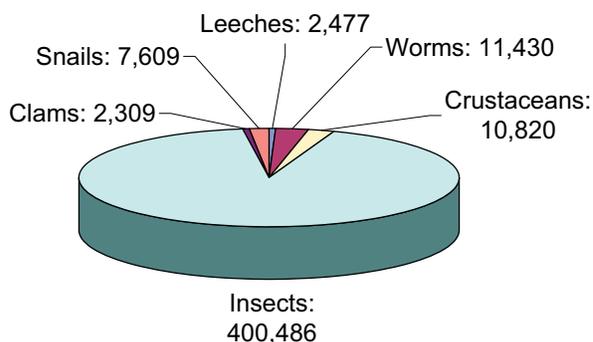


Figure 1. Total benthic macroinvertebrates found in Iowa's streams from 1994-2008.

A benthic macroinvertebrate's life (stage)

Many aquatic insects undergo metamorphosis, which is the transition between life stages: egg to larva to pupa, and finally to adult. They remain in the water for most of their lives in the egg, larva, and pupa stage. Some aquatic insects stay in the water into their adult stage (e.g., aquatic beetles); however, most adults take on a winged terrestrial form. The majority of these insects live only a brief time as adults, usually a few hours to a few weeks or months, while they locate mates and reproduce.

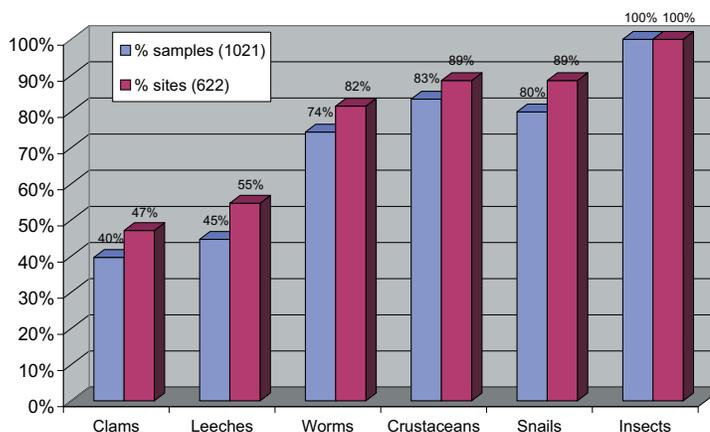


Figure 2. Percent occurrence of benthic macroinvertebrates found in Iowa's streams from 1994-2008.

Table 1. Families of benthic macroinvertebrates found in Iowa's streams from 1994-2008.

Class	Families					
Clams: Bivalvia 4 different orders 10 total taxa	Corbiculidae	Unionidae				
	Pisidiidae					
	Sphaeriidae					
Leeches: Clitellata 3 different orders 24 total taxa	Erpobdellidae					
	Glossiphoniidae					
	Haemopidae					
Crayfish/others: Crustacea 3 different orders 15 total taxa	Asellidae	Gammaridae				
	Cambaridae	Talitridae				
	Crangonyctidae					
Snails: Gastropoda 3 different orders 18 total taxa	Ancylidae	Physidae	Succineidae			
	Hydrobiidae	Planorbidae	Valvatidae			
	Lymnaeidae	Pleuroceridae				
Insects: Insecta 10 orders 505 total taxa	Aeshnidae	Athericidae	Baetidae	Baetiscidae	Belostomatidae	
	Brachycentridae	Caenidae	Calopterygidae	Capniidae	Carabidae	
	Ceratopogonidae	Chaoboridae	Chironomidae	Chrysomelidae	Coenagrionidae	
	Corduliidae	Corixidae	Corydalidae	Cosmopterigidae	Crambidae	
	Culicidae	Curculionidae	Dixidae	Dolichopodidae	Dryopidae	
	Dytiscidae	Elmidae	Empididae	Ephemerellidae	Ephemeridae	
	Ephydriidae	Gerridae	Glossosomatidae	Gomphidae	Gyrinidae	
	Haliplidae	Hebridae	Helicopsychidae	Helodidae	Heptageniidae	
	Heteroceridae	Hydrochidae	Hydrometridae	Hydrophilidae	Hydropsychidae	
	Hydroptilidae	Isonychiidae	Lampyridae	Lepidostomatidae	Leptoceridae	
	Leptohyphidae	Leptophlebiidae	Lestidae	Leuctridae	Libellulidae	
	Limnephilidae	Macroveliidae	Mesoveliidae	Metretopodidae	Miridae	
	Muscidae	Naucoridae	Nemouridae	Nepidae	Noteridae	
	Notonectidae	Oligoneuriidae	Perlidae	Perlodidae	Philopotamidae	
	Phoridae	Phryganeidae	Pleidae	Polycentropodidae	Polymitarcyidae	
	Potamanthidae	Psephenidae	Psychodidae	Psychomyiidae	Pteronarcyidae	
	Ptilodactylidae	Ptychopteridae	Pyralidae	Rhyacophilidae	Saldidae	
	Sciomyzidae	Scirtidae	Sialidae	Simuliidae	Sisyridae	
	Staphylinidae	Stratiomyidae	Syrphidae	Tabanidae	Taeniopterygidae	
		Tipulidae	Uenoidae	Veliidae		
Worms: Oligochaeta 1 order 4 total taxa	Lumbricidae					
	Naididae					
	Tubificidae					

Why are benthic macroinvertebrates important?

As an integral part of the aquatic food web, benthic macroinvertebrates convert energy stored in organic matter into a food source that fish and other vertebrates can utilize. They eat leaves, algae, and bacteria and, in turn, are eaten by fish, amphibians, birds, and other vertebrates. In death, benthic macroinvertebrates release nutrients that are reused by aquatic plants and animals, repeating the cycle.

Why use benthic macroinvertebrates to monitor water quality?

Benthic macroinvertebrates serve as useful biological indicators in water. As water quality and habitat conditions change, the benthic macroinvertebrate community also changes. Unlike fish and other vertebrates, benthic macroinvertebrates are less mobile and are unable or unlikely to escape the effects of sediment and other pollutants that diminish water quality. Benthic macroinvertebrates represent a diverse group of aquatic animals. The large number of individual taxa have a wide range of responses to stressors such as toxic pollutants, sedimentation, and habitat disturbance. Therefore, the number and kinds of taxa collected and identified are relatively good indicators of stream health. Having an abundance of different types of taxa, or high biodiversity, is important.

A few benthic macroinvertebrates in depth



larvae

Net Spinning Caddisfly – Trichoptera, or caddisflies, comprises an order of insects that is completely aquatic until reaching the adult stage, living in all kinds of waterbodies. Caddisflies can produce silk threads which they use to make cases from wood, plant material, sand, or small rocks for protection, camouflage, and sometimes to collect food. Due to their sensitivity to pollution and habitat disturbance they are widely used as an environmental indicator. Adult caddisflies are winged, terrestrial insects.

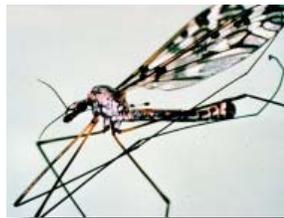


silk net

One family of Trichoptera, Hydropsychidae, is the net spinning caddisfly. The larvae spin a fine silk net which they attach to a hard surface. In flowing water these nets catch food such as algae, detritus, and smaller invertebrates. Densities of Hydropsychidae can be very high in areas with abundant food sources, causing larvae to become territorial and defend their nets. They warn others of their presence by rubbing a sharp, pointed structure on their front legs against their head. When overtaken they will abandon their net and must spin a new one or take over an existing one. Hydropsychidae are tolerant to moderate levels of nutrient enrichment (organic pollution).



larva



adult

Crane Fly – Tipulidae, or crane flies, is a family belonging to the Order Diptera (true flies). As larvae, crane flies can be found in streams, lakes, and wetlands often under leaf packs, snags, rocks, and in algal mats. A crane fly resembles a caterpillar with its head retracted into its body. As an adult it resembles a large mosquito that does not bite.

The larvae are important contributors to the aquatic environment by shredding leaves, making them more accessible to other invertebrates. All Diptera are generally tolerant to pollution and habitat disturbance, however the Tipulidae is one of the more sensitive Dipteran families.



Leech – Hirudinea, or leeches, is a segmented worm found in lakes, wetlands, and streams. Most people think of leeches as bloodsuckers that feed on warm-blooded animals, like humans, but most are predators of other invertebrates or scavengers of dead plants and animals. While many are plainly colored some are brightly colored, striped, or have marbled coloration. Leeches obtain oxygen through their skin and are not very sensitive to pollution or habitat disturbance.



Crayfish – Cambaridae, or crayfish, is a freshwater crustacean found in streams, lakes, ponds, and wetlands. Crayfish usually hide under rocks and logs or burrow into the substrate. The front legs (first set) on a crayfish are enlarged claws used for defense and in territorial disputes. They are scavengers feeding on living and dead animals and plants which they shred using

their second and third sets of legs. Crayfish breathe with feather-like gills on the underside of their bodies. They are somewhat tolerant to a wide range of environmental conditions, but are susceptible to metals and pesticides.

Benthic macroinvertebrates found in Iowa

The Iowa Department of Natural Resources Watershed Monitoring and Assessment Section, in cooperation with the University of Iowa Hygienic Laboratory, has collected benthic macroinvertebrate samples in Iowa streams and rivers since 1994. Table 1 lists all of the families of benthic macroinvertebrates found in samples from 1994-2008. For additional information about benthic macroinvertebrates found in Iowa visit the University of Iowa Hygienic Laboratory's "Iowa's Aquatic Macroinvertebrates" website: www.uhl.uiowa.edu/services/limnology/macroinvertebrates/index.xml. To learn more about biological monitoring of streams in Iowa, go to the DNR's Biological Stream Monitoring site at www.igsb.uiowa.edu/wqm/publications/TOCbiologicalMonitoring.htm. If you would like to learn how to sample benthic macroinvertebrates, consider attending an IOWATER workshop. Go to www.iowater.net for the IOWATER workshop schedule.

References

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Photo Credits

Caddisfly larvae and crane fly larva courtesy of the University of Iowa Hygienic Laboratory.
Caddisfly net and crane fly adult courtesy of the North American Benthological Society.
Leech and crayfish courtesy of the Missouri Department of Conservation.

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Iowa Watershed Monitoring and Assessment Program Web Site – www.igsb.uiowa.edu/wqm/



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