



# Taxonomic uncertainty in North Atlantic and Mediterranean zooplankton limits species-level monitoring accuracy

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## Abstract

Taxonomic discussions often permeate the broader scientific community slowly, yet they may hold more relevance than typically assumed. In many zooplankton groups, identification issues arise from cryptic species complexes, increasingly revealed by molecular approaches, and from groups with high morphological similarity. These challenges can lead to substantial uncertainties in species-level identification, questioning whether the expected species are truly covered and whether those sharing names across ecosystems are indeed distinct entities. This review provides a condensed overview on identification challenges of key species in the ICES zooplankton time series from the North Atlantic and adjacent seas. Examples are given across all relevant groups, including copepods, gelatinous plankton, and meroplanktonic larvae. The high prevalence of challenging species complexes underscores the need to further explore the implications of an accurate species assignment for understanding what defines a species' role in an ecosystem. This review highlights the dynamic nature of taxonomy, with species being split and cryptic species eventually becoming morphologically distinguishable. It provides examples showing that relying solely on molecular methods without deep taxonomic expertise poses significant risks. It also aims to serve as a starting point for delving deeper into the taxonomy of the ICES zooplankton time series.

**Keywords:** zooplankton; cryptic species; species complexes; ICES time series



## Introduction

Marine zooplankton time series are essential tools to understand the variability of biodiversity patterns and productivity processes in the ocean. Within the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) area, monitoring is a critical tool for providing advice. From an ecosystem-based assessment approach, multiple time-series analyses are crucial for the understanding of ecosystem change due to climate and anthropogenic impacts. The ICES Working Group on Zooplankton Ecology (WGZE) and its Zooplankton Status Reports cover over a hundred time series sites, located in western and eastern North Atlantic, Nordic, Barents, Baltic, North, and Mediterranean Seas. The comprehensive examination of long-term changes of dominant zooplankton species and food web dynamics can provide improved model parameterizations and a pan-regional view of the relationships between the physical–chemical environment and plankton communities in the context of climate change (reviewed in Ratnarajah et al. 2023). However, zooplankton monitoring is not a straightforward task. Taxonomic identification of the zooplanktonic organisms requires a high level of specialization, and the number of expert taxonomists is rapidly declining. Considering this, a new series of the ICES Leaflets for the identification of plankton was initiated by the WGZE revising morphological identification keys and providing additional molecular information on key zooplankton groups. In many monitoring programs, taxa are morphologically identified at the class or family level, and only some groups (e.g. copepods) are routinely identified at the genus or species level. Even well-known or very abundant species are not always effectively identified due to the presence of sibling, cryptic, and pseudocryptic species, or absence of apparent morphological characters to separate species.

In the last two decades, the use of molecular tools in zooplankton research has led to a revolution in species delineation and identification as well as in the assessment of ecosystem diversity (Laakmann et al. 2020, Bucklin et al. 2021a). The increasing application of DNA-based species research has resulted in a stronger recognition of the existence and importance of species complexes in marine ecosystems (Fig. 1). However, recent taxonomic findings on newly revealed species complexes, or on uncertainties of identification in some taxa, are often quite slow to penetrate the broader scientific community. This is due in part to the relatively low number of journals of common interest, a general persistence of established terminologies in regions and data sets, and the lack of resources to routinely reassess taxonomic knowledge on all important taxa in the ecosystem.

This review therefore aims (i) to provide condensed up to date information on various important taxa from the zooplankton time series in the North Atlantic and adjacent seas, including the Baltic and Mediterranean Seas; (ii) to pinpoint important species complexes as well as identification issues for some key taxa; and (iii) to assess the relevance of potentially hidden diversity (cryptic species complexes) or nonaccessible diversity (highly laborious identification) for ecosystem and time series studies.

In essence, this review is based on the collective expertise of the ICES Working Groups on Integrated Morphological and Molecular Taxonomy (WGIMT) and Zooplankton Ecology (WGZE) and seeks to shed light on critical issues in the field of zooplankton taxonomy in time series data. Yet, we ac-

knowledge the inherent limitations of our exploration, as it merely scratches the surface of the taxonomic complexity of zooplankton communities and the inherent questions on the role of species identification for ecosystem studies. However, we believe that it can be a good starting point for discussion on exploring taxonomic challenges and the significance of species complexes in zooplankton time series.

## Key taxa

Taxonomic challenges, such as identification of specimens from cryptic species complexes or species groups with high morphological similarity, are not a minor issue restricted to rare taxa. These challenges exert a significant impact on taxa identification in many zooplankton time series. A qualitative meta-analysis (based on top 10 taxa lists for each station according to expert evaluation) summarizing abundant taxa from 19 monitoring stations in the North Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean (Fig. 2) has identified 60 species groups, or taxon groups, to be of high importance in the various ecosystems. Most of them belong to the calanoid copepods (mainly to the genera *Acartia*, *Temora*, *Calanus* as well as *Para-*, *Pseudo-*, and *Clausocalanus*), the cyclopoid genus *Oithona*, to meroplanktonic larvae or gelatinous plankton (ICES 2021). The group of Diplostraca (formerly known as Cladocera) has high impact in several ecosystems, but species are varying between different areas.

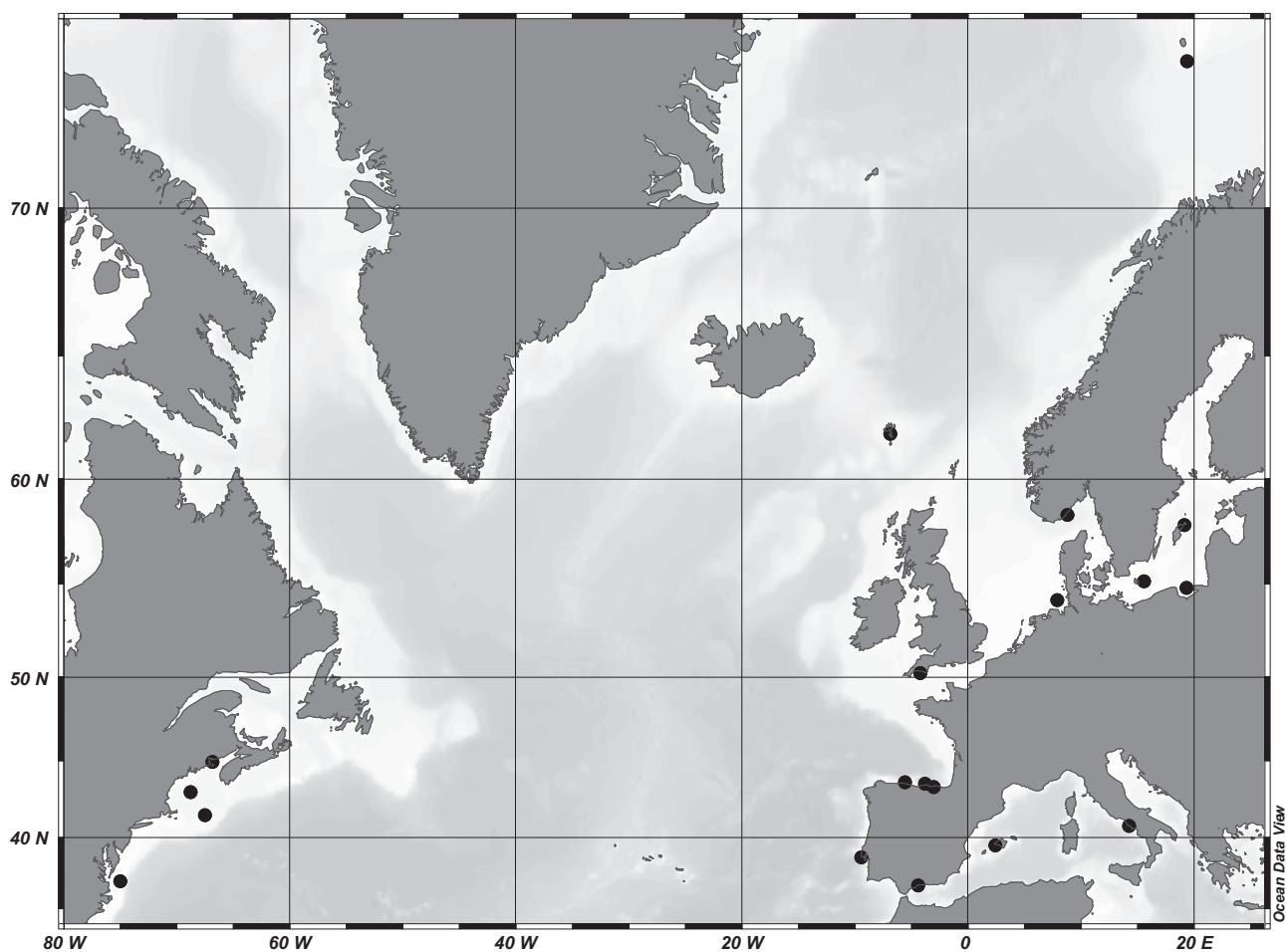
Some widely distributed species that rank in the top ten at many stations (Table 1) are readily identifiable based on current knowledge and are assumed to be conspecific throughout their range. One example is *Temora longicornis* that is among the most abundant copepods found in the coastal and neritic waters of the northern hemisphere (Di Capua 2021). Other groups, however, are commonly merged into a very high taxonomic level in routine analyses, or species classification differs between regions due to uncertainties in identification. For example, the calanoid copepod *Paracalanus parvus* is reported in the top ten taxa from more than 50% of the monitoring stations. However, recent studies revealed that diagnostic characters of *Paracalanus* congeners are variable and that a larger complex of species is commonly grouped under the species name *P. parvus* (Cornils and Held 2014, Kasapidis et al. 2018, Khelifi-Touhami and Ounissi 2023). *Oithona* and *Acartia* species exhibit high abundance across all stations. The taxonomic lists for both genera, as well as for the genera *Pseudocalanus*, *Paracalanus*, and *Clausocalanus*, reveal that species-level identification is not straightforward, as many monitoring stations report them as unidentified species or as groups with mixed genera. They are often referred to as “P-Cal” or “PCPCalanus” categories that comprise the copepodites of the three abovementioned genera plus *Ctenocalanus* (Albaina and Irigoien 2007, Uriarte et al. 2016).

In addition to the top 10 list coming from expert evaluation on the different sites, this review incorporates several taxa that we believe are of significant importance and pose challenges for taxonomic identification. These taxa are missing in the species ranking, e.g. due to marked seasonality or suboptimal sampling strategy, which is a critical factor for many gelatinous groups. We therefore also included the hydrozoans *Obelia*, *Clytia*, and *Muggiaea*, the scyphozoans *Aurelia*, *Cyanea*, and *Rhizostoma*, as well as the ctenophore *Beroe* as they can be of seasonally high importance at regional scale. Further challenges in time series analysis may arise from





**Figure 2.** Time-series stations (black dots) in the ICES area and the Mediterranean included in the meta-analysis of key taxa, modified from the WGZE report (ICES 2021).





**Table 1.** Overview of key taxa listed in time series within the ICES eco-regions based on expert evaluation from program scientists on the different sites (overview in Fig. 2) supplemented by taxa selection by authors of this study. The categories of prominence (Prom.) are specified as: x: prominence not reported, 1: occasional prominence, i.e. <20% of all sites, 2: frequent prominence, i.e. 20%–40% of all sites, and 3: predominant prominence, i.e. >40% of all sites. Please note that the time series use different taxonomic resolutions for the different taxa.

Taxon as referred to in LTER	Prom.	Taxonomic challenge
<b>Copepoda</b>		
<i>Acartia</i> spp.	2	Species identification laborious, also cryptic species
<i>Acartia bifilosa</i>	2	No cryptic complex reported so far
<i>Acartia clausi</i>	2	No cryptic complex reported so far
<i>Acartia longiremis</i>	1	No cryptic complex reported so far
<i>Acartia tonsa</i>	1	Cryptic species complex
<i>Calanus</i> spp.	1	Species identification laborious
<i>Calanus finmarchicus</i>	2	Reliable separation from <i>C. glacialis</i> only via molecular methods or for later copepodite stages (CV and adults)
<i>Calanus helgolandicus</i>	1	Reliable separation from <i>C. finmarchicus</i> via molecular methods or for later copepodite stages (CV and adults)
<i>Centropages</i> spp.	1	Species identification laborious
<i>Centropages hamatus</i>	2	No cryptic complex reported so far
<i>Centropages typicus</i>	2	No cryptic complex reported so far, but may be misidentified as <i>C. chierchiae</i>
<i>Clausocalanus</i> spp.	1	Species identification laborious
<i>Clausocalanus arcuicornis</i>	1	No cryptic complex reported so far
<i>Clausocalanus furcatus</i>	1	No cryptic complex reported so far
<i>Clausocalanus lividus</i>	1	No cryptic complex reported so far
<i>Clausocalanus paululus</i>	1	No cryptic complex reported so far
<i>Clausocalanus pergens</i>	1	No cryptic complex reported so far
<i>Para-/Clausocalanus</i> spp.	1	Species identification laborious for young stages
<i>Paracalanus parvus</i>	3	Cryptic species complex
<i>Pseudo-/Paracalanus</i> spp.	1	Only separable as older copepodite stages/adults
<i>Pseudocalanus</i> spp.	2	Complex morphometry needed to separate species
<i>Pseudocalanus acuspes</i>	1	Complex morphometry needed to separate species
<i>Pseudocalanus elongatus</i>	1	Complex morphometry needed to separate species
<i>Pseudocalanus minutus</i>	1	Complex morphometry needed to separate species
<i>Metridia</i> spp.	1	Difficult species complex
<i>Metridia lucens</i>	2	Difficult species complex
<i>Pseudodiaptomus marinus</i>	1	NIS, species identification possible
<i>Temora longicornis</i>	3	No cryptic complex reported so far
<i>Temora stylifera</i>	1	No cryptic complex reported so far
<i>Euterpina acutifrons</i>	2	Cryptic species complex suspected
<i>Oithona</i> spp.	2	Species identification laborious, also cryptic species
<i>Oithona davisae</i>	1	NIS, might be overlooked or misidentified
<i>Oithona longispina</i>	1	Species identification laborious
<i>Oithona nana</i>	2	Cryptic species complex suspected
<i>Oithona plumifera</i>	1	Species identification laborious
<i>Oithona similis</i>	3	Cryptic species complex
<i>Oncaea</i> spp.	1	Species identification laborious
<i>Oncaea media</i>	1	Cryptic species complex suspected
<i>Eurytemora carolleeae</i>	x	NIS, might be overlooked or misidentified
<i>Eurytemora affinis</i>	x	Cryptic species complex, mainly estuarine and brackish waters
<i>Tachidius discipes</i>	1	No cryptic complex reported
<i>Microcalanus</i> spp.	1	Cryptic species complex (Cornils, unpublished data)
<i>Nannocalanus minor</i>	1	No cryptic complex reported so far
<i>Calanipeda aquaedulcis</i>	1	No cryptic complex reported so far
<b>Diplostraca</b>		
<i>Penilia avirostris</i>	1	Only species in genus, no cryptic complex reported
<i>Podon intermedius</i>	1	No cryptic complex reported
<i>Podon</i> spp.	1	No cryptic complex reported, <i>P. leuckartii</i> and <i>P. intermedius</i> only species in genus, <i>Pleopis</i> (formerly <i>Podon</i> ) <i>polyphemoides</i> morphol. similar
<i>Evadne nordmanni</i>	1	No cryptic complex reported
<i>Bosmina coregoni maritima</i>	1	No cryptic complex reported
<i>Evadne spinifera</i>	1	No cryptic complex reported
<i>Cergopagis pengoi</i>	1	No cryptic complex reported
<b>Cnidaria</b>		
<i>Muggiaea atlantica</i>	1	Eudoxid stage not separable from that of <i>Muggiaea kochii</i>
<i>Aurelia</i> spp.	x	Cryptic species complex
<i>Cyanea</i> spp.	x	Unresolved taxonomy, laborious species identification
<i>Obelia</i> spp.	x	No differentiation on medusae stage
<i>Clytia</i> spp.	x	No differentiation on medusae stage
<i>Rhizostoma</i> spp.	x	Species identification laborious











deposited in GenBank (Figueroa et al. 2020). In addition, exceptionally high and uncommon divergence to other calanoid copepods was observed in the genus *Acartia* when analyzing 18S rDNA, which highlights the need for further morphological and molecular taxonomic studies to resolve uncertainties within this genus (Laakmann et al. 2013). Also, high intraspecific genetic divergence has been found in some species, when analyzing different gene–enzyme systems, which may indicate the presence of multiple cryptic species (Cervelli et al. 1995). For instance, molecular studies suggest that *A. tonsa* represents a complex of several cryptic species (Caudill and Bucklin 2004, Chen and Hare 2008, da Costa et al. 2011, Plough et al. 2018, Figueroa et al. 2020). Analyses of DNA sequences of the mtCOI, and rRNA 16S have revealed several phylogenetic clades of *A. tonsa* in the northwestern Atlantic and Europe, which are mainly geographically separated, but in some cases, they occur in sympatry (Caudill and Bucklin 2004, Figueroa et al. 2020). Although no morphological differences between the cryptic species in *A. tonsa* have been identified yet, differences may exist in size and chemical composition (Plough et al. 2018). Signs of crypsis are also found for *A. clausi*, with distinct subclades without detectable gene flow between the North Sea and the Mediterranean Sea (Di Capua et al. 2022).

The ability to produce resting eggs and tolerance to brackish or hyperhaline environments, enables *Acartia* copepod species to spread to new habitats. Some species of this genus have been introduced to Europe by human activities, such as *A. tonsa*, *A. margalefi*, *A. teclae*, and *A. omorii*, and are classified as NIS. *Acartia tonsa* is reported as invasive in some coastal areas, where they may exclude local indigenous species (Sei et al. 1996, Aravena et al. 2009, Belmonte et al. 2011). Just recently, the species *Acartia hudsonica* has been identified several times in the North Sea (Ohnesorge et al. 2023), the Limfjord (Ohnesorge et al. 2024), and the Baltic Sea (Hahn and Brennan 2024, Ohnesorge et al. 2024) based on molecular techniques. This species is generally distributed in the North Pacific and the Northwest Atlantic Ocean (OBIS 2024a), but the recurring identification of this species in European waters indicates its presence in this area. It remains to be clarified (Hahn and Brennan 2024) whether this is a NIS in the North and Baltic Seas, or whether this species was previously overlooked and is hence native to the North and Baltic Seas; note that this species was a subspecies of *A. clausi* before it was considered as a single species (Bradford 1976, Ueda 1986).

*Eurytemora* spp.

The calanoid copepod *Eurytemora affinis* complex is divided into at least six major genetically divergent clades, four native to the North American continent and one in Europe, revealed by two mitochondrial gene regions: 16S rRNA and cytochrome oxidase I (COI; Lee 1999, 2000). Subsequently, three geographically separated subclades in Western Europe were identified showing sequence divergence of 1.7%–2.1% on the COI gene (Winkler et al. 2011). The East Atlantic subclade is present in the Gironde and the Loire, the North Sea English Channel subclade spans from the Seine, the Scheldt and the Elbe rivers, and the third subclade is restricted to the Baltic Sea (Winkler et al. 2011, Sukhikh et al. 2016). Morphological stasis of sexual characteristics was marked among clades, except the European one (Lee and Frost 2002). However, an increased effort in the last decade, revealed differentiation at the fine scale of morphological characteristics and led to the description of two new species within the

complex, *E. carollaeae* (Alekseev and Souissi 2011) and *E. caspica* (Sukhikh and Alekseev 2013). *Eurytemora carollaeae*, formerly the Atlantic clade, is considered native to brackish waters of North America and has invaded freshwater environments, such as the Great Lakes (Winkler et al. 2008, Lee 2016, Vasquez et al. 2016) and more recently European waters (Sukhikh et al. 2013, 2019, Labuce et al. 2018, 2020). Besides the identification of the cryptic species using molecular approaches (Favier and Winkler 2014, Cabrol et al. 2015), morphometry on adults can help to distinguish the species and clades of the species complex (Sukhikh et al. 2013, LaJus et al. 2020). Three morphometric indices are well distinguished based on the caudal rami, the shape of the female genital segment, and the exopodite first segment in male leg P5. Shortcomings of this method, however, are that these measurements are time consuming, thus not likely to be applied in routine time series zooplankton identification and furthermore this morphometry approach is restricted to adult individuals for the moment. Alternatively, a relatively simple quantitative polymerase chain reaction (qPCR) approach might be a cost and time efficient solution, to detect the occurrence of the invasive *E. carollaeae* in samples (Avila et al. 2024).

*Oithona* spp.

The cyclopoid copepod genus *Oithona* is common and very diversified in the ICES regions (Wootton and Castellani 2017), though many surveys report generically about *Oithona* spp. (e.g. John et al. 2001, Licandro et al. 2001, Continuous Plankton Recorder Survey Team 2004, Eloire et al. 2010). The most common species occurring in the North Atlantic and adjacent seas have been recently presented in an ICES plankton leaflet (Mazzocchi 2019) that is mainly based on the comprehensive taxonomic review of Nishida (1985). *Oithona* species are mostly small and thin copepods whose abundance is certainly underestimated in mesozooplankton samples due to the typical use of 200 µm mesh nets (Gallienne and Robins 2001), and whose specific identification in routine analyses is in many cases rather difficult because it is based on the ornamentation of the swimming legs and mouthparts as well as the shape of the rostrum (Nishida 1985).

A clear latitudinal gradient appears in the distribution of *Oithona* richness, with only three species occurring in the Arctic and subArctic regions, seven in the eastern North Atlantic, and up to 23 in the Mediterranean Sea (Razouls et al. 2024). In this latter basin, the cooccurrence of congeneric species is characterized by their distinct seasonal peaks (e.g. Mazzocchi and Ribera d'Alcalà 1995), and contrasting distributional preferences in the horizontal (Mazzocchi et al. 2014) or vertical space (Scotto di Carlo et al. 1984, Lindegren et al. 2020). For example, *O. atlantica*, common in the ICES area, is quite difficult to distinguish from the closely allied *O. longispina* (Nishida 1985) with which it shares the Mediterranean epipelagic habitat. Similarly, *O. decipiens*, occurring in the Mediterranean Sea and in the Ibero-Moroccan area, is very similar to *O. similis* in its general shape and differentiates for spinulation on thoracic leg exopods.

Molecular analyses suggest that the cosmopolitan and often abundant *O. similis* is likely a species complex with distinct lineages separated by climate zones (polar and temperate), oceans (Atlantic and Pacific), and hemispheres (Arctic and Antarctic) (Cornils et al. 2017). Although no morphological differences have been described so far for the putative species within *O. similis* s.l. (Cornils et al. 2017), it is likely



that morphometric diagnostic characters do exist. Shuvalov (1972) described significant differences in prosome lengths and cephalon shape between *O. similis* specimens from Arctic and North Atlantic water masses and based on these results he stated that *O. similis* might be a polytypic species with distinct temperature preferences. It has also been speculated whether *O. helgolandica* described by Claus (1863) and *O. similis* are synonymous (see review in Cepeda et al. 2016). Both descriptions, however, are incomplete and the description of *O. helgolandica* may also match with *O. nana* (Sars 1918).

*Oithona setigera* may also be a species complex that is widely distributed in the ICES regions. This is supported by Farran's (1929) previous suggestion of two groups for the Irish and Pacific specimens, as well as differences in size and other minor morphological characters that have been observed in open Mediterranean populations (MG Mazzocchi, personal observations).

The copepod species *O. davisae* has become increasingly abundant in the ICES area or has replaced native species such as *O. similis* or *O. nana* (Cornils and Wend-Heckmann 2015, Isinibilir et al. 2016, Pansera et al. 2021). *Oithona davisae* is native to the eutrophic coastal waters of East Asia with pronounced seasonality in hydrography and food availability (Nishida 1985, Uye and Sano 1998). During the past two decades, it has been introduced to many European coastal regions including e.g. the Black Sea (Temnykh and Nishida 2012, Isinibilir et al. 2016), the North Sea (Cornils and Wend-Heckmann 2015), the Bay of Biscay (Uriarte et al. 2016, Barroeta et al. 2020), and the Mediterranean Sea (Saiz et al. 2003, Terbiyik Kurt and Beşiktepe 2019, Vidjak et al. 2019, Pansera et al. 2021). The most likely vectors of its introduction are the ballast water tanks of ships, as has been suggested for the North Pacific (Choi et al. 2005). *Oithona davisae* is characterized by a strong ventrally pointed rostrum and thus easily distinguishable from indigenous species such as *O. similis* or *O. nana* in the Northern Atlantic (Ferrari and Orsi 1984, Cornils and Wend-Heckmann 2015). Additional morphological information is available in Nishida (1985) or Temnykh and Nishida (2012).

#### *Paracalanus* spp.

Species of the calanoid copepod genus *Paracalanus* are abundant in the pelagic shelf ecosystems of the Northern Atlantic and the Mediterranean Sea (Siokou-Frangou 1996, OBIS 2024b). Of the 12 accepted species (Walter and Boxshall 2024), 6 occur in the ICES area of the Northern Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea: *P. aculeatus*, *P. denudatus*, *P. indicus*, *P. nanus*, *P. parvus*, and *P. quasimodo* (Razouls et al. 2024). One species, *P. tropicus*, occurs in subtropical to tropical regions of the Northern Atlantic Ocean (Khelifi-Touhami and Ounissi 2023). A molecular phylogeny confirmed the separation of the *Paracalanus* genus into two species groups (Cornils and Blanco-Bercial 2013): the *P. aculeatus* group (with *P. denudatus*) and the *P. parvus* group (all other *Paracalanus* species). Morphologically, the *P. aculeatus* and the *P. parvus* species group differ from each other in the segmentation of the antennules (Sewell 1929), and the morphometry of the fourth pair of thoracic legs (Cornils and Blanco-Bercial 2013).

In the ICES region, species of the *P. parvus* group are often abundant. While *P. nanus* is morphologically easy to distinguish from the other species due to its small size and the short antennules, the separation of the other three species, namely

*P. parvus*, *P. indicus*, and *P. quasimodo* is based mainly on the differences in serration of the distal outer edges of the third exopods of the swimming legs and the shape of the cephalothorax (Bowman 1971, Bradford 1978, Bradford-Grieve et al. 1999, Khelifi-Touhami et al. 2007). Due to net sampling however, the distal parts of the swimming legs are often broken, making correct morphological identification often impossible. Recent molecular studies using the mitochondrial COI gene have shown that the abovementioned diagnostic characters of the three species are not persistent and that our knowledge on their distribution has to be revised (Cornils and Held 2014, Kasapidis et al. 2018, Di Capua et al. 2022). It was long assumed that the species *P. parvus* was widely distributed in the ICES region and also in other oceans. Based on the molecular results, the species *P. parvus* s.s., originally described from the North Sea (Claus 1863) appears to be restricted to the Northeastern Atlantic Ocean, including the Mediterranean Sea (Cornils and Held 2014, Kasapidis et al. 2018) and is not a panmictic species. Specimens from the northwestern Atlantic Ocean are morphologically indistinguishable from *P. parvus* s.s., but are genetically divergent and thus belong to a putative new species (Cornils and Held 2014). In the Mediterranean Sea, a molecular study revealed that not *P. parvus*, but the subtropical *P. quasimodo* is the most abundant *Paracalanus* species (Kasapidis et al. 2018). *Paracalanus parvus* s.s. is only found in the northern parts of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. The subtropical *P. indicus* occurs in low numbers in the Mediterranean Sea.

#### *Pseudocalanus* spp.

In contrast to the species complexes in the previous chapters, in which recent molecular studies revealed a whole species complex hidden behind a single species name, interspecific morphological differentiation and potential cooccurrence of cryptic species have been discussed for the calanoid copepod genus *Pseudocalanus* for some time. Based on morphology, Frost (1989) suggested that the genus comprises seven species in total (*P. acuspes*, *P. elongatus*, *P. moultoni*, *P. minutus*, *P. major*, *P. mimus*, and *P. newmani*), using e.g. the shape of the cephalosome, ornamentation of the thoracic segments, and length ratios between urosome segments. Today, the validity of *P. major* is subject to discussion leaving six accepted species for this genus (Walter and Boxshall 2024). All species have been reported to occur in the North Atlantic Ocean (Corkett and McLaren 1979, Frost 1989). However, the species are remarkably similar morphologically and several lack diagnostic characters preventing routine microscopic identification, while the mitochondrial COI barcode region has proven to be reliable for discriminating and identifying the species (Bucklin et al. 1998, 2001, 2003, Unal et al. 2006, Aarbakke et al. 2011, Laakmann et al. 2013, Bailey et al. 2016, Questel et al. 2016). Species delimitation by morphological parameters seems to be less unambiguous than originally assumed. And while investigations show morphological differences between species that have so far been overlooked (Markhaseva et al. 2012), this species group is often being assigned to a cryptic species complex highlighting the fluidity of the taxonomic categories used in this review.

The congeners have been shown to exhibit unique life history characteristics and distinct ecological roles in the pelagic ecosystem (Cleary et al. 2016, Aarbakke et al. 2017, Crouch et al. 2020, Ershova et al. 2021) as well as different patterns of population connectivity and phylogeography in the











in neritic water of the NW Atlantic (OBIS 2024c), its distribution in European waters is much less certain.

#### *Euterpina acutifrons*

The copepod *Euterpina acutifrons* is recognized as a globally distributed warm-water species. It spans diverse regions from the southern coast of Norway to the Brazilian coast, with extensive records in Oceania, the Mediterranean, and both North American coasts (Lang 1948, Walter and Boxshall 2024). It has been found in ballast water tanks as confirmed morphologically in the Mediterranean and European coastal waters (Choi et al. 2005, David et al. 2007, Cabrini et al. 2019). Metabarcoding studies indicate its presence to British Columbia, Svalbard, and Australian waters (Takahashi et al. 2020, Van den Heuvel-Greve et al. 2021, Bailey et al. 2022). However, the presence in metabarcoding studies, coupled with the prior absence of observations of the species e.g. in the Arctic, suggests a recent introduction, still low in abundance. Morphological variability within *E. acutifrons* has been observed, particularly in males (Haq 1965, Stanczyk and Moreira 1988), resulting in distinctly different male-types. Breeding experiments indicate that these differences are rather intraspecific variation and not an indication of a sympatric species complex (Haq 1972). While morphological and molecular approaches seemingly agree on a cosmopolitan distribution, molecular data of the East Atlantic population introduces the possibility of undiscovered cryptic diversity within *E. acutifrons* (Blanco-Bercial et al. 2014). Further scrutiny, especially in remote locations, is recommended to unravel potential hidden diversity within this species (Blanco-Bercial et al. 2014).

#### Diplostraca

Only eight diplostracan branchiopod species (formerly known as cladocerans) from five genera are truly marine (Egloff et al. 1997): *Evadne nordmanni* and *E. spinifera*, *Pleopis polyphemoides* and *P. schmackeri* (the latter mainly distributed outside the North Atlantic area), *Podon leuckartii*, *P. intermedius*, *Pseudevadne tergestina*, and *Penilia avirostris*. Furthermore, the endemic *Bosmina coregoni* as well as the NIS Ponto-Caspian *Cercopagis pengoi* and *Evadne anonyx* occur in the brackish environment of the Baltic Sea (Möllmann et al. 2002, Telesh and Ojaveer 2002, Rodionova and Panov 2006, Telesh et al. 2008). This introduction of NIS diplostracan species is observed also in other basins. For example, *P. schmackeri* of Indo-Pacific origin has recently arrived into the Levantine Sea (Eastern Mediterranean), where it was found for the first time in 2012 and has become abundant since then (Terbiyik-Kurt and Polat 2018). For the currently known and described marine taxa, as well as for *B. coregoni* and *C. pengoi* in the Baltic Sea, the challenges in identification are mainly due to the small size of the organisms and their delicate bodies, as all these species are well described and easily distinguishable by distinct morphological characteristics (see Onbé 1999 and references therein). The occurrence of cryptic species has not been mentioned so far in marine diplostracans. A phylogenetic analysis of six marine species, based on COI, has supported an ancient radiation of Podonidae and a recent worldwide expansion of Sididae and has highlighted the identity or high similarity of haplotypes in different oceans (Durbin et al. 2008). The worldwide distribution of *P. avirostris* has been reviewed by Della Croce and Venugopal (1972) and that of six of the

seven marine podonid species by Mordukhai-Boltovskoy and Rivier (1987).

#### Gelatinous plankton

##### *Sagitta* spp.

Chaetognaths are a small phylum with only two orders and 120 species, but are widely distributed in many marine ecosystems. In ICES ecoregions, 28 epi- and mesopelagic species occur of which 20 species belong to the genus *Sagitta* (Pierrot-Bults 2020). Identification of chaetognaths is not straightforward, requires substantial taxonomic expertise and chaetognaths are often only identified in time series samples to genus or phylum levels. The general morphological simplicity of the phylum has led to much debate about chaetognath taxonomy specifically whether to divide the genus *Sagitta* into multiple genera or to maintain the original classification (Tokioka 1965, Bieri 1991). Resolving this taxonomic debate will likely require a comprehensive approach integrating both morphological and molecular data. Several studies examining mitochondrial DNA variation within species uncovered unusually high levels of genetic variation, often combined with spatial genetic structure, and suggest the presence of cryptic species (Peijnenburg et al. 2004, 2006, Jennings et al. 2010, Miyamoto et al. 2012, Kulagin et al. 2014). For example, the coastal species *Sagitta setosa* (accepted as *Parasagitta setosa*), which is abundant in the North East Atlantic, Mediterranean, and Black Sea, shows genetic isolation among populations in different European basins (Peijnenburg et al. 2004, 2006). Additionally, highly divergent mitochondrial lineages were found that did not match morphology, geography or nuclear DNA (Peijnenburg et al. 2005, 2006). Marlétaz et al. (2017) showed that by analyzing entire mitochondrial genomes combined with nuclear genetic markers, chaetognaths have unusual patterns of mitochondrial evolution and can have extreme levels of mitochondrial diversity without reproductive isolation. Therefore, conclusions about cryptic speciation in chaetognaths cannot be drawn in the absence of information from the nuclear genome.

##### *Aurelia* spp.

The cosmopolitan genus *Aurelia* hides considerable cryptic diversity (Dawson and Jacobs 2001, Schroth et al. 2002, Dawson 2003, Lawley et al. 2021) and the number of valid species remains subject to ongoing debate (Mayer 1910, Kramp 1965, Dawson and Jacobs 2001, Jarms and Morandini 2019, Collins and Morandini 2025). By 2021, WoRMS listed 11 described *Aurelia* species, out of which 7 were genetically characterized (Dawson and Jacobs 2001, Dawson et al. 2005, Scorrano et al. 2016, Brown et al. 2021, Collins and Morandini 2025), while genetic studies had identified 17 additional clades, which were previously only numbered. Lawley et al. (2021) attempted to resolve the problem by classifying several of these clades based solely on genetic data without accompanying morphological descriptions, an approach that also faced criticism (Brown and Gibbons 2022, Lawley et al. 2022).

Based on the current taxonomic status, the moon jelly *A. aurita* is not the only species observed in the ICES region (Lawley et al. 2021, Moura et al. 2023) as there are at least seven recorded *Aurelia* species: *A. hyalina* (Greenland), *A. coerulea* (NE Atlantic and Mediterranean), *A. aurita* (North Atlantic, Black Sea, and Baltic Sea), *A. solida* (Mediterranean), recently described *A. pseudosolida* (Adriatic Sea), *A. relicta*



(Adriatic Sea—Mljet lakes), and *A. persea* (East Mediterranean) (Scorrano et al. 2016, Lawley et al. 2021, Garić and Batistić 2022, Gittenberger et al. 2023). *Aurelia solida* seems to be the main bloom forming species in the coastal waters of the Mediterranean Sea, while *A. aurita* is the same for the Black Sea, North Atlantic, and Baltic area. *Aurelia coerulea* inhabits ecosystems with less stable hydrological conditions compared to the open sea (Scorrano et al. 2016). *Aurelia relicta* is an endemic species from marine Mljet lakes (Adriatic), while *A. persea* is a recently resurrected species based on genetic data of an *Aurelia* species from the East Mediterranean (Lawley et al. 2021). A recent paper by Moura et al. (2023) presented morphological and genetic evidence for another two *Aurelia* species from the Azores, which are still not formally described.

Overall, the *Aurelia* species complex remains challenging as species are very difficult to identify based on morphology. Morphological characters are e.g. the number of marginal tentacles, the morphology of gonads, manubrium, and rhopalia or the number and organization of radial canals. Many species can only be reliably identified through genetic analysis. Some authors overcome this challenge by referring to *A. aurita* s.l. (e.g. Suzuki et al. 2018, Goldstein and Javidpour 2023). We want to emphasize here that species identification and the use of the term *A. aurita* in many publications has to be approached with caution.

#### *Cyanea* spp.

The taxonomy of the scyphozoan genus *Cyanea*, which is widely distributed in neritic waters of the target region and beyond, is not fully resolved. While WoRMS currently lists 18 species of *Cyanea* as valid (Collins and Morandini 2025), assessing the actual diversity in the genus is currently not possible (Jarms and Morandini 2019), and a taxonomic revision integrating morphological and molecular data is required. Recent molecular studies have suggested undescribed cryptic diversity among *Cyanea* from Canadian waters (Hotke 2015), and studies on *Cyanea* specimens collected at the northwest Atlantic coast (Niantic River, Chesapeake Bay, and Gulf of Mexico) revealed the occurrence of two species not identical to *Cyanea capillata* (Bayha 2005). Agassiz (1862) already differentiated three species with morphological differences in color, shape of marginal lappets, size of oral folds, and the dimensions of the subumbrellar muscles and with successive core distribution areas along the east coast of North America from north to south: *C. arctica*, *C. fulva*, and *C. versicolor*. Fewkes (1881) interpreted the morphological differences between the three species as variations and combined them under the name *C. arctica*. Later *C. arctica*, *C. fulva*, and *C. versicolor* were considered to be varieties of *C. capillata* (Mayer 1910, Stiasny and van der Maaden 1943, Kramp 1961). To clarify whether *C. fulva* and *C. versicolor* are valid species in the northwestern Atlantic as recently suggested (Jarms and Morandini 2019, Collins and Morandini 2025), additional studies combining molecular and morphological approaches are needed. Three species are known to occur in European waters: *C. capillata*, *C. lamarckii*, and the recently described *C. tzetlinii* (Kolbasova et al. 2015). *Cyanea capillata* is found throughout the region and is sympatric with both *C. lamarckii*, which has the core of its distribution in the North Sea and around the British Isles, and *C. tzetlinii*, which has so far only been recorded from the White Sea. The main diagnostic difference between *C. capillata* and *C. tzetlinii* is the pres-

ence of a rhopalial bulb with an eyespot in the latter species (Kolbasova et al. 2015). Combined morphological and molecular genetic analysis confirmed that *C. capillata* and *C. lamarckii* can be differentiated by diagnostic morphological features as well as by mitochondrial (COI) and nuclear (18S rDNA) gene fragments (Holst and Laakmann 2014). However, a morphological differentiation between the two species requires close inspections whereas the simple identification based on the bell color is not reliable, because of high color variations in the “blue jellyfish” *C. lamarckii*, which can also be yellow (Holst and Laakmann 2014). Gastrovascular intrusions into the circular and radial muscle folds are present in *C. capillata* in specimens with a rhopal diameter >10 mm but are not found in *C. lamarckii* specimens in any size, whereas *C. lamarckii* medusae with a rhopal diameter of <10 mm can be distinguished from *C. capillata* by the presence of conspicuous papillae at the central exumbrella (Holst and Laakmann 2014). As these characters require closer morphological scrutiny of the specimens, reliable identification is probably often only made to the genus level (e.g. Köhler et al. 2022).

#### *Rhizostoma* spp.

All three species of the rhizostome jellyfish genus *Rhizostoma*: *R. pulmo*, *R. octopus*, and *R. luteum* occur in European waters, and studies integrating molecular data suggest that these three species are indeed valid (Prieto et al. 2013). *Rhizostoma octopus* occurs in Atlantic waters of western Europe with a distribution range from the Scottish Clyde Sea area down to the Bay of Biscay (Russel 1970, Lilley et al. 2009, Lee et al. 2013), while *R. luteum* is found in Atlantic waters from Portugal down the west coast of Africa and in the western Mediterranean (Alboran Sea) (Kienberger and Prieto 2018). *Rhizostoma pulmo* is distributed in the Mediterranean Sea and adjacent waters, e.g. Black Sea and Adriatic Sea (Mariottini and Pane 2010, Leoni et al. 2021). All three species can reach large bell diameters of >600 mm (Elliot et al. 2017, Kienberger et al. 2018). *Rhizostoma octopus* and *R. pulmo* often appear in blooms and haplotype network analyses revealed that both species occur in geographically separated populations (Lee et al. 2013, Glynn et al. 2015, Ben Faleh et al. 2017). The two species have very similar morphology, and thus, *R. octopus* has been regarded as a variety of *R. pulmo* by some earlier authors (Mayer 1910, Kramp 1961), leading to incorrect reports of *R. pulmo* in the North Sea (e.g. Dittrich 1988). To date, there is only one obvious morphological character that can be used to distinguish the two species: the number of velar lappets that is on average ten per octant in *R. octopus* but has been reported to be always eight per octant in *R. pulmo* (Russel 1970, Kienberger and Prieto 2018). However, species identification by this morphological difference should be regarded with caution, since the number of velar lappets increases with medusa growth (Russel 1970). Moreover, detailed observations have shown that the number of velar lappets is not only variable between specimens but also varies between octants of the same specimen in *R. octopus* (Russel 1970), as well as in *R. pulmo* (Holst and Laakmann, unpublished). *Rhizostoma luteum* has been regarded as a rare species (Prieto et al. 2013) before it was frequently reported from the Alboran Sea, where its distribution overlaps with *R. pulmo* (Kienberger and Prieto 2018). Although the morphology of *R. luteum* differs remarkably from its congeners in lacking the distinct blue color of the marginal lappets and in forming very long oral arm appendages, it is likely that, in the past, the species has often



been misidentified in the Mediterranean Sea. It can be confused with the Mediterranean species *R. pulmo*, or the morphologically similar rhizostome medusa *Catostylus tagi*, that differs from species of the genus *Rhizostoma* only by the structure of its oral arms (Kienberger and Prieto 2018).

#### *Muggiaea* spp.

Only four species of the siphonophore hydrozoan jellyfish genus *Muggiaea* are recognized globally (Schuchert 2024), of which only *M. delsmanni* does not occur in the ICES ecoregions (Totton 1965). *Muggiaea bargmannae* is considered a bipolar species, but in the Northern Hemisphere it has been detected as far as mid-Atlantic Ridge near the waters off the British Isles (Hosia et al. 2008). The remaining two congeneric forms, *M. atlantica* and *M. kochii*, are frequently found within European waters (Blackett et al. 2017, and references therein). Although taxonomic identification of the two is possible, it is tedious, since their nectophore morphology differs only in the depth of hydroecium and the length of somatocyst (Totton 1965). Moreover, this applies only to the nectophore-bearing polygastric stage in their life cycle, whereas the sexually reproducing eudoxids remain morphologically indistinguishable (Totton 1965). These species represent differing thermal preferences, with *M. atlantica* more typical for warmer waters, and *M. kochii* preferring colder waters (Blackett et al. 2014). Spatial avoidance between the two species has been suggested (Mackie et al. 1988) and distinguishing between them in surveys is of interest as climate-driven changes in their distributions and relative dominance have been proposed (e.g. Licandro et al. 2012, Batistić et al. 2013).

#### *Obelia* spp.

More than 100 species of Hydrozoa *Obelia* have been described over the years, but to the date, only four valid species with wide or cosmopolitan distributions are recognized: *O. bidentata*, *O. dichotoma*, *O. geniculata*, and *O. longissima* (Cornelius 1975, 1982, 1990). While several morphotypes of *Obelia* medusae have also been described, these cannot be unambiguously connected to specific hydroids, and reliable morphological species identification is not possible for the medusae (Laakmann and Holst 2014), but only for the hydroid stage (Cornelius 1990, 1995). However, more recent molecular data suggest that the cosmopolitan species recognized by Cornelius (1990) may indeed contain cryptic diversity (e.g. Govindarajan et al. 2005), and the 299 public records with sequences in the BOLD database form no less than 29 BINs (clusters) (boldsystems.org, accessed 24 May 2024). It is thus prudent to identify the planktonic *Obelia* hydromedusae to genus level only.

#### *Clytia* spp.

The medusa-producing *Clytia hemisphaerica* and *C. gracilis* are by far the most commonly recorded species in the genus, which comprises over 50 accepted species (Schuchert 2024), with 3952 and 736 globally distributed records, respectively, out of the total 7585 records of *Clytia* in the Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF) (24 May 2024). Both species are common in the ICES region. However, these two supposedly cosmopolitan and ubiquitous species are part of a larger, poorly resolved species complex. The medusa stages of *C. gracilis* and *C. hemisphaerica* cannot be reliably separated based on morphology, and genetic identification within the genus is also fraught with peril. Sequences assigned to *C. hemisphaer-*

*ica* or *C. gracilis* in BOLD and GenBank fall in numerous clusters, suggesting cryptic diversity, and there is reason to suspect that many specimens connected to these sequences may also have been misidentified. Cornelius (1995) states that difficulties in identification within the genus make nearly all records supporting the near-cosmopolitan distribution of *C. hemisphaerica* suspect. The conspecific medusa *C. languida* has also been recorded from the North Sea, based on a comparison with sequences from GenBank (Laakmann and Holst 2014). However, the medusa stage of *C. languida* is morphologically inseparable from *C. hemisphaerica* and solely identified based on area of occurrence (Kramp 1959), and is currently regarded as synonymous to *C. hemisphaerica* (Schuchert 2024). Therefore, morphological identification of *Clytia* medusae of type *C. hemisphaerica/gracilis* should not be attempted, and caution should also be exercised if assigning a species based on molecular data from e.g. GenBank.

#### *Beroe* spp.

Species identification and delimitation of the ctenophore genus *Beroe* is often uncertain and many species may become synonymized in future studies (Mills 2024) or new species being described. In 2024, the European Register of Marine Species lists four species as occurring in European waters: *B. cucumis*, *B. forskalii*, *B. gracilis*, and *B. ovata*. However, also *B. abyssicola* has been commonly observed in the European side of the Arctic (Ciambelli 2023; A. Hosia and S. Majaneva, personal observation), as well as in the Norwegian and Icelandic Seas (Licandro et al. 2015, Neitzel et al. 2021).

There has been considerable confusion particularly regarding *B. cucumis* and *B. ovata* (Bayha et al. 2004, Shiganova and Abyzova 2022) further compounded by the suggested existence of two potentially undescribed species named *B. "norvegica"* and *B. "anatoliensis"* along the coast of Norway and Turkey (Johansson et al. 2018). However, a subsequent study (Shiganova and Abyzova 2022) synonymized *B. "norvegica"* with north Atlantic *B. cucumis* (see Table S1), and *B. "anatoliensis"* with *B. mitrata*, native to the Mediterranean. Shiganova and Abyzova (2022) also clarified some of the confusion around the nomenclature of *B. cucumis* and *B. ovata*, concluding (1) that the species name *B. ovata* should be used for the species native to the western Atlantic coasts, and (2) that the Mediterranean species, which was first incorrectly characterized as *B. ovata*, and later as *B. cucumis* (*sensu* Mayer 1912) is genetically distinct from *B. cucumis*, and was thus described as *B. pseudocucumis* sp. nov. However, the latter species is currently unaccepted in WoRMS due to not being compliant with the ICZN code.

Overall, the collection and preservation of ctenophores is challenging, and of all observations logged in the GBIF, 30% are identified to genus level only (GBIF.org accessed 03 June 2024). It is important to emphasize that even when species level identification exists, the use of the names *B. cucumis* and *B. ovata* in particular in many publications should be approached with caution. For young specimens, accurate species identification is dependent on molecular tools, yet sometimes requiring use of multigene approach, but for live larger specimen morphological identification is possible, although hampered by the lack of identification literature. In addition to the body shape, which can be somewhat plastic, characters such as the branching and anastomoses of the meridional canals, the relative lengths of the comb rows, and macrociliary patterns can be diagnostic.







such as the “Ecological Species Concept,” discussed by Robert Sokal and Peter Sneath, and later by Daniel Levin, which considers ecological niches or functions, proposing that species are sets of organisms adapted to a particular set of resources (niches) in the environment (Sokal and Sneath 1963, Levin 1979). While morphological species have historically been the primary taxonomic unit in time series studies, molecular species delineated by genotypic characteristics are increasingly prevalent in the routine identification of zooplankton.

Regardless of whether we are dealing with cryptic or difficult-to-resolve species, taxonomic information is very often lost in routine monitoring, or species identification comes with a certain bias. The extent to which this missing or imprecise information will influence our understanding of ecosystem dynamics depends very much on the function of the taxon in the ecosystem and remains one key question in biodiversity research. In theory, undetected sympatric cryptic species will lead to an underestimation of species number in an ecosystem and an overestimation of the respective species abundances. Missing cryptic species not only has implications for understanding the dynamics of specific ecosystems but also exerts an influence on our global understanding of diversity and the effects of climate change on species and species richness. The existence of nonresolved allopatric cryptic species, for instance, can result in an overestimation of geographical distribution ranges and subsequently lead to erroneous evaluations regarding connectivity, adaptive potential, niche ranges, species vulnerability, and invasiveness estimations (e.g. Darling and Carlton 2018, Chenuil et al. 2019, Cerca et al. 2020, Starko et al. 2023).

While the importance of hidden diversity for understanding the functioning of a marine ecosystem seems intuitive, its essential role remains largely unverified within the marine system. This raises the provocative question of how crucial species-level resolution of challenging taxa is in routine monitoring within a specific ecosystem, given the high resource costs involved. Some real-world examples advocate for species-level identification, even when the effort required is substantial. One such instance is the common grouping of the highly abundant congener copepods *A. biflosa* and *A. longiremis* into *Acartia* spp. in the Baltic Sea (e.g. Musialik-Koszarowska et al. 2019), despite the two (noncryptic) species likely being affected very differently by ecological drivers: *A. longiremis* is a marine species with a boreal–Arctic distribution, probably persisting in the Baltic Sea near its physiological limit (Dutz and Christensen 2018), while *A. biflosa* is a brackish warm water species. We currently have only limited knowledge about the physiological variation within morphologically cryptic species complexes in zooplankton. Field studies have attempted to differentiate the ecophysiology and ecological roles of cryptic species, revealing e.g. differences in food selection within the *Eurytemora* species complex in a Canadian estuary (Cabrol et al. 2015), as well as within the species group of *P. minutus*, *P. newmani*, and *P. acuspes* in the Bering Sea (Cleary et al. 2016).

Molecular identification significantly facilitated the discovery of cryptic diversity. High-throughput sequencing of both zooplankton bulk samples and eDNA promises new insights into the role of species complexes in LTER data and databases such as GenBank and BOLD offer swift species identification. However, the lack of clarity in data calibration and the risk of outdated or even incorrect species identifications may result in inaccurate assignments. It is also crucial to acknowledge

that relying solely on molecular species identification without deep taxonomic expertise of the morphospecies and detailed expertise of the local and regional fauna poses inherent risks. This is exemplified by the case of the copepods *Calanus euxinus* and *C. helgolandicus*, which are morphologically nearly indistinguishable and cannot be differentiated based on genetic markers (Papadopoulos et al. 2005, Unal et al. 2006, Yebra et al. 2022, Ohnesorge et al. 2023). Despite their genetic similarity, these species are still recognized as distinct (Walter and Boxshall 2024), yet there is ongoing discussion regarding their status as populations rather than species (Yebra et al. 2011). Another example illustrating the risks of relying solely on molecular units is evident in the case of the decapods *Polybius holsatus* and *Polybius henslowii*, of which the larvae are widespread in the North Sea and thus occur in LTERs. Despite displaying distinct differences in morphology and behavior during adulthood (Hazerli et al. 2022), these two species cannot be genetically delineated based on various mitochondrial markers (Plagge et al. 2016) and are nearly indistinguishable morphologically as larvae. These instances exemplify the importance of understanding species communities and their potential challenges, serving as but two among numerous others. A strong synergy of molecular techniques with morphological taxonomic and ecological knowledge would help to unravel diversity within natural systems. Extensive regional or seasonal sampling efforts and application of genetic tools can discover cryptic species in sympatry, a good case study is the detection of seasonally and regionally occurring cryptic hydrozoan species in the Gulf of Mexico (Miglietta and Pruski 2023). But these approaches require a wise allocation of resources in monitoring to balance taxonomic precision on the one hand and temporal or spatial resolution on the other.

The high number of challenging species complexes in marine zooplankton communities calls for a deeper exploration of species identification. Are we truly covering the expected species in the LTER stations? Might those sharing names across ecosystems actually be distinct entities? Should we rather follow a polytypic species concept, subdividing biological species geographically (Lukhtanov 2024)? It is essential to recognize that species concepts extend beyond singular definitions and defining every lineage as putative (cryptic) species without evidence for reproductive isolation bears a risk of taxonomic inflation in species numbers (Dufresnes et al. 2023). Overall, we hope to have shown in this review compelling evidence that species concepts and species complexes are not solely of interest to specialist taxonomists, but hold significance in many ICES zooplankton time series. The uncertainties inherent in the taxa utilized in time series datasets lead to challenges in connecting datasets or ecological knowledge through these entities. This will be particularly significant for scientists working with highly comprehensive community and ecosystem data, as it is impossible to have taxonomic expertise across all groups. Therefore, a close integration of taxonomy and data science remains essential for informed ecological research and conservation efforts.

## Food for thought for the future of zooplankton taxonomy

A central premise of this study is that molecular methods have revealed species identity to be even more complex than what already highlighted by morphological taxonomy. This even applies for the most common taxa in well-studied epipelagic



neritic systems right on our doorstep, let alone the broader ecological implications of resolving these species complexes. What actions should be taken based on this knowledge, and which insights does this review aim to provide?

Our initial recommendation is a pragmatical one. First, to adapt to the rapidly evolving advancements in analytical methods, it will be necessary to anticipate imminent and prospective requirements for sample collection, fixation, and storage. At its core, this requires parallel fixation suitable for DNA analysis (e.g. ethanol) within established sampling regimes and long-term storage of at least a subset of material suitable for future analyses (e.g. cold storage). It is essential not only to maintain morphological-based repositories (e.g. museum collections, digitalization of type individuals by microCT scanning or laser confocal microscopy) and molecular-based databases (e.g. BOLD or GenBank), but also to develop sustainable repositories (e.g. biobanks) of specimens, tissue, or genetic material that is suitable for future access to molecular information on ecosystems and their inhabitants. Conversely, when developing new methods, it is essential to consider not only their future value but also their applicability to existing material. Only this approach would allow calibration and retrospective species resolution.

Second, we encourage having an open-mind to methods beyond the well-established morphological and genetic approaches. Morphological taxonomy generally relies on specific diagnostic traits, much like molecular identification often depends on specific genetic markers. These traits can be difficult to access and may require extensive specimen preparation. Expanding our taxonomic toolbox by incorporating other phenotypic characters, such as proteomic fingerprints or morphometric traits, may offer a promising path forward. For example, using metric data of many easy-accessible morphological traits simultaneously may provide a less qualitative but more quantitative method for species delimitation, and could even be integrated into automated systems.

Our third recommendation is of a more strategic perspective regarding the role of taxonomy in modern biodiversity research. In recent years, significant investments have been made in developing novel methodologies for species detection and their integration into field research, not only in marine ecosystems but also across diverse areas of ecosystem and biodiversity science. While we highly welcome this progress, this manuscript also conveys a note of caution. Alongside the advancement of techniques, there has been a corresponding severe decline in morphological-based taxonomic knowledge and expertise within the community. Beyond the confines of museums and collections, there is a paucity of opportunities and supports for young scientists to engage with taxonomy in a sustained manner. There is growing concern that the expertise of traditional taxonomists is at serious risk of being lost. Given the exponential growth of artificial intelligence capabilities, we may envision the development of systems that not only preserve the vast legacy of historical taxonomic literature and the profound expertise of retiring taxonomists, but also enhance this knowledge through machine learning and semantic integration. However, such a path must be taken with caution. While AI may replace classical taxonomic keys with accessible, dynamic, and integrative platforms to advance global biodiversity research, human expertise does remain essential to ensure quality control and taxonomic rigor.

Finally, we would like to highlight that “not all that glitters is gold.” Genetic barcoding and molecular databases such as

BOLD and GenBank have indeed revolutionized how we collect molecular information about species, unlocking new possibilities and revealing an increasing number of species. However, there is a concomitant risk that molecular identification could become isolated and self-contained, thereby severing its connection to morphological taxonomy and compromising quality control. Reliable ground-truthing remains essential. The quality-controlled MetaZooGene database, which focuses on marine zooplankton, may serve as a good example of integrating molecular and morphological taxonomists (Bucklin *et al.* 2021b). Molecular taxonomy often raises more questions than it answers, and we are still far from fully understanding the implications of molecular diversity and entities in terms of species and ecology. More effort must be dedicated to understanding the relationship between taxonomic units—whether morphological or molecular—and the variation in ecological niches, physiology, or adaptation potential. Many approaches to understanding ecosystems necessitate an initial simplification of complex relationships, often focusing more on traits than on taxonomic units. As a result, the choice of species on which to base such assessments may become less critical in these cases. Nevertheless, we should continue to sensitize the community engaged in species-based research to the inherent limitations of our taxonomic knowledge and the associated uncertainties, even within well-studied and highly abundant species complexes.

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## Author contributions

Conceptualization was done by J.P., A.C., E.F., and J.R., investigation and writing of the original draft by all coauthors, visualization by J.P., T.O.B., J.R., and A.B., supervision, project administration and writing the review & editing by J.P. and A.C., funding acquisition by J.P.

## Supplementary data

[Supplementary data](#) is available at *ICESJMS* online.

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## Data availability

No new data were generated or analysed in support of this research.

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