Science of the Total Environment 803 (2022) 150110

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Science of the Total Environment

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/scitotenv

Urban proximity while breeding is not a predictor of perfluoroalkyl substance contamination in the eggs of brown pelicans

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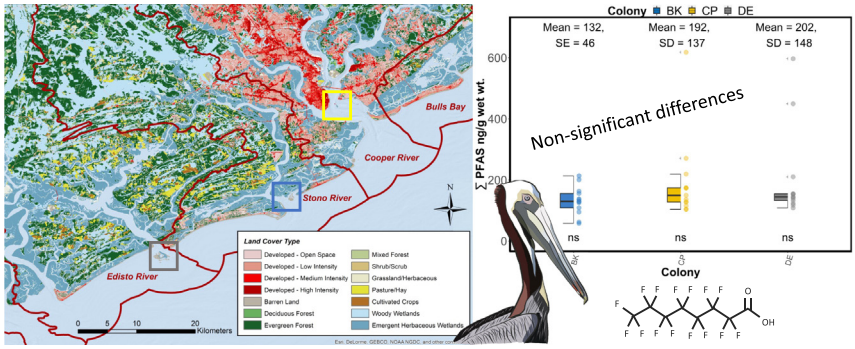
HIGHLIGHTS

- Brown pelican eggs from Charleston, SC, contain significant concentrations of PFAS
- PFAS concentrations are largely similar regardless of urban habitat use
- Mobility of organisms and contaminants may confound the identification of point sources

GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT



ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 18 February 2021
Received in revised form 30 August 2021
Accepted 30 August 2021
Available online 4 September 2021

Editor: Henner Hollert

Keywords:
Brown pelican
Perfluoroalkyl substances
Urban
Tracking
GPS
Seabird

ABSTRACT

Identifying sources of exposure to chemical stressors is difficult when both target organisms and stressors are highly mobile. While previous studies have demonstrated that populations of some organisms proximal to urban centers may display increased burdens of human-created chemicals compared to more distal populations, this relationship may not be universal when applied to organisms and stressors capable of transboundary movements. We examined eggs of brown pelicans (*Pelecanus occidentalis*), a nearshore seabird with daily movements ranging from local to 50 km and annual migrations ranging from year-round residency to 1500 km. Thirty-six eggs from three breeding colonies located at increasing distances to a major urban center (Charleston, South Carolina, USA) were analyzed for concentrations of *per*- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS). Areas of high use for each colony during the breeding season were also assessed via the tracking of adult pelicans from each colony using GPS-PTT satellite transmitters and overlapped with measures of relative urbanization via land cover data. We report potentially significant ∑PFAS concentrations in the eggs of pelicans (175.4 ± 120.1 ng/g w wt. SD), driven largely by linear perfluorooctane sulfonate (n-PFOS) (48–546 ng/g w wt.). Residues of the precursor compound perfluorooctane sulfonamide (FOSA) were also present in pelican eggs, suggesting continued exposure of local wildlife beyond implemented phaseouts of some PFAS. For most analytes, egg concentrations did not exhibit a significant spatial structure despite some differentiation in high-use areas unlike similar data for another regional apex predator, the bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*). We suggest that the partially migratory nature of brown pelicans during the non-breeding season, combined with daily ranges that may extend to 50 km from local point sources, may have homogenized exposure across individuals. Charleston likely remains a major source for PFAS in the overall region, however, given the high concentrations observed as well as known releases of PFAS in the nearshore environment.

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2021.150110
0048-9697/

1. Introduction

Ranging behaviors of highly mobile organisms can expose these species to lethal and sublethal stressors not experienced by more sedentary organisms (Jodice and Suryan, 2010; Mello et al., 2016; Odsjö, 1975). The risks to vagile organisms are amplified when the stressors themselves are also mobile in nature, capable of affecting organisms across relatively broad spatial or temporal scales (Cabrera-Cruz et al., 2018; Henkel et al., 2012). The opportunity for individuals far from local sources of exposure to encounter the stressor should be greater when both organism and stressor are capable of frequently moving among systems, compared to organisms which occupy a distinct spatiotemporal distribution removed from the stressor or for which the stressor is relatively concentrated in a given area. Proximity to sources of environmental stressors may therefore only be a good predictor of exposure for relatively sedentary populations or those with distinct, consistent, or local ranges, and may not be as relevant for highly mobile species interacting with a highly mobile environmental stressor (Adams et al., 2008; Power et al., 2020).

Anthropogenic chemicals, including compounds of emergent interest such as *per*- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), can act as mobile stressors because they are capable of long-range dispersal from point sources (Lohmann et al., 2007). PFAS are widespread chemicals that are persistent in both marine and terrestrial environments worldwide (Houde et al., 2006a). Manufactured for their stability and ability to repel both oily and aqueous substances, PFAS have been used for coating paper and packaging products, non-stick cookware, stain-resistant carpet and clothing, as industrial surfactants, and in fire-fighting foams (Sunderland et al., 2019). In production since the 1940s, PFAS contamination in the environment has occurred globally via both direct release and remote transport (Armitage et al., 2009). Perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS) and perfluorooctanoate (PFOA), two of the most commonly-detected PFAS, have been observed to be pervasive in the blood of both wildlife and human populations, and are associated with harmful and diverse biological effects across taxa (Fenton et al., 2020; Houde et al., 2006a; Houde et al., 2011; Sunderland et al., 2019).

Exposure to PFAS can vary by physicochemical properties of the compound, toxicokinetic and ecological qualities of the organism at risk, or characteristics of the ecosystem within which the organism resides. For example, PFAS bioaccumulate and biomagnify in apex predators via direct consumption of contaminated prey, making them particularly harmful to species that occupy upper trophic levels (Houde et al., 2006b). Individual exposure can also be affected by intrinsic properties of the ecosystem in which the species forages as well as the behavior of the organism itself. For example, large-scale boundary habitats (i.e. coastal systems) which integrate pollution inputs from both marine and terrestrial domains may present a higher risk to individuals that forage there as opposed to individuals that forage in systems that tend to function as isolated units or have less input from adjacent systems (i.e. pelagic habitats or upland systems) (Crain et al., 2009). Furthermore, exposure potential may not be spatially predictable within an ecosystem, and different aspects of the abiotic environment may serve to collect or distribute risk. For example, although areas with high levels of urban development can concentrate anthropogenic stressors such as toxic pollutants (Adams et al., 2014; Gewurtz et al., 2016), the transport capabilities of many ecological toxicants can result in high levels of exposure even to organisms relatively far from source inputs (Robuck et al., 2020). The long-range broadcasting of risk may thus create a heterogenous exposure landscape that is not defined simply by the location of the source.

Our goal was to assess PFAS concentrations in the eggs of a highly mobile apex predator breeding near an urbanized landscape. Charleston, South Carolina, USA is a rapidly developing city located within a complex coastal morphology of rivers, estuaries, and nearshore marine environments. Prior research suggests that habitats in the Charleston region have significantly elevated levels of PFAS relative to other regions (Keller et al., 2005; Houde et al., 2006b; Vander Pol et al., 2012; Bangma et al., 2017). For example, White et al. (2015) reported sediment PFAS concentrations from estuarine habitats in and around Charleston Harbor in excess of any other previously examined U.S. city, with approximately half of tested sites within the study area above the global median concentration for PFOS (0.54 ng/g d wt.). Bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) resident within the harbor possess plasma PFAS levels comparable to occupationally exposed humans and are some of the highest recorded in marine mammals globally (Houde et al., 2005; Houde et al., 2006b; Fair et al., 2013; Fair and Houde, 2018). Several fish species frequently consumed by both humans and wildlife in the Charleston area also were commonly above recommended levels for safe consumption by mammals, posing a potentially significant health risk (Fair et al., 2019).

Here we assess concentrations of 24 PFAS in 36 eggs of a locally abundant seabird, the Eastern brown pelican (*Pelecanus occidentalis carolinensis*). Pelicans nest colonially on only 2-3 islands within the vicinity of Charleston in any given year, and these islands and the colonies on them vary in both distance from the urban center (~ 2–35 km) as well as in the number of breeding adults (~ 250–3000 pairs). We hypothesized there would be an inverse relationship between distance to Charleston Harbor and ΣPFAS, with birds breeding closer to the urban center and therefore also closer to likely point sources acquiring greater toxicity burdens. Therefore, we sought to (i) assess the presence of PFAS in pelican eggs from the Charleston Harbor region relative to published values for other seabird eggs collected from other locales and (ii) investigate the influence of urban habitat use on concentrations of PFAS in pelican eggs using movement data from an additional subset of GPS-tracked adult pelicans from each colony.

2. Methods

2.1. Sample collection and processing

Eggs for contaminant analysis were collected from three breeding colonies of Eastern brown pelicans located at progressively greater distances from urban Charleston (Figs. 1 & 2). Castle Pinckney (32° 46′ 26″ N, 79° 54′ 40″ W) is an urban seabird colony centrally located on a small shell island within the harbor and has hosted approximately 250 breeding pairs of brown pelicans near-annually since individuals first started nesting in 1999 (Jodice et al., 2007). Bird Key Stono (32° 38′ 00″ N, 79° 58′ 04″ W) is a larger sand island located at the mouth of the Stono River approximately 17 km to the southwest of Charleston Harbor. This island is a regionally important nesting site for brown pelicans, with approximately 3000 nesting pairs annually since recolonization in 2014 (Jodice et al., 2007, Sanders et al., 2021). Deveaux Bank (32° 32′ 46″ N, 80° 11′ 30″ W) has hosted annual breeding pairs of brown pelicans since 1989, with an average count of 1300 nests per year (Jodice et al., 2007). Deveaux Bank is located approximately 37 km southwest of Charleston Harbor at the outflow of the North Edisto River.

Thirty-six eggs were collected in total, with efforts split evenly among colonies ($n = 12$ per breeding site). All eggs were collected between 10 May 2019 and 15 May 2019, with procedures approximating those of Vander Pol et al. (2012). Briefly, eggs were floated to estimate approximate age, with an effort made to collect eggs in as early a stage of incubation as possible. Brown pelicans typically lay a clutch of three eggs, and we aimed to collect first-laid eggs as these tend to have higher concentrations of maternally transferred chemical compounds than second- and third-laid eggs (Vicente et al., 2015; Parolini et al., 2021). The laying order of eggs was based on visual inspection of shell cleanness. Only eggs which sank in water were collected for analysis, with resting angles ranging from approximately 0°- 60° relative to the bottom of the floating vessel (Rush et al., 2007). Only one egg was collected per nest, and an attempt was made to distribute the collection throughout the spatial footprint of the colony (~ 0.01 km^2).

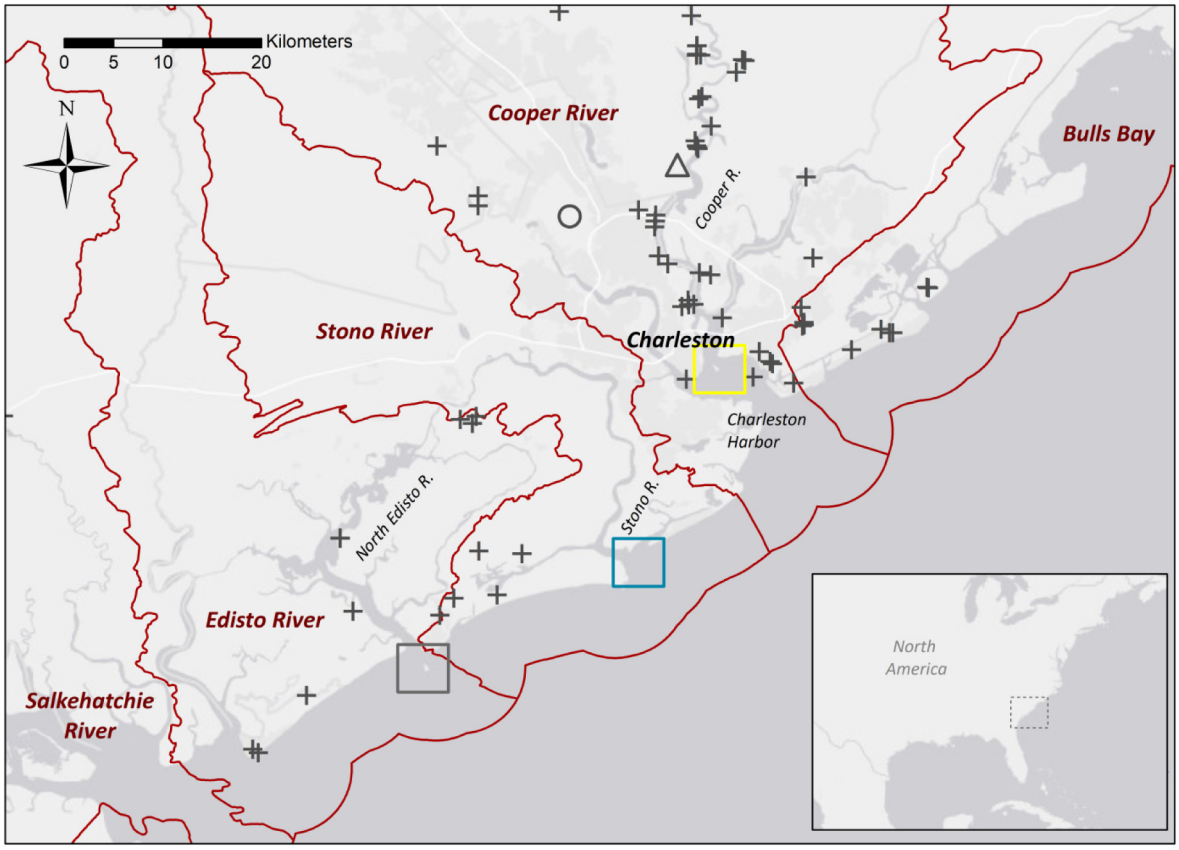

Fig. 1. Map of the study area and relevant brown pelican colonies in coastal South Carolina, USA. Yellow, blue, and gray boxes indicate the locations of Castle Pinckney, Bird Key Stono, and Deveaux Bank, respectively. Red lines indicate eight-digit watershed boundaries with corresponding labels. Crosses indicate National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES)-permitted discharge pipes, with the open circle indicating the location of Joint Base Charleston Air Force Base and the open triangle indicating the location of the former Charleston Navy Base. (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

Eggs were transported from the colony to an off-site refrigerator (4 °C) until homogenization. Egg contents were separated from the shell and homogenized using a bag mixer (BagMixer 400 W, Interscience Laboratories, Inc.) in non-filter 400 mL polyolefin blender bags (BagLight PolySilk, Interscience Laboratories, Inc.). Aliquots of homogenized sample (15 mL) were then transferred to polypropylene vials via individual transfer pipettes and stored at -80 °C until sample extraction and analysis (March 2020).

2.2. Sample preparation and analysis

Sample preparation and analysis followed a modified protocol based on Chu and Letcher (2008). Sample aliquots were thawed at room temperature, and 0.5 g of homogenate were weighed into polypropylene centrifuge tubes and spiked with 20 μL of isotopically labeled internal standard (0.5 ng/μL). Samples were extracted with 4 mL 10 mM potassium hydroxide (KOH) in methanol (MeOH) and vortexed. Following sonication (20 min) and centrifugation (2 min × 4000 rpm), the resulting supernatant was transferred to 15 mL polypropylene tubes. Remaining pellets received a secondary wash of 4 mL 10 mM KOH in MeOH, sonication, and centrifugation (10 min × 4000 rpm), with supernatant decanted and added to the prior fraction.

Supernatant samples were diluted with 80 mL of Milli-Q (MQ) water prior to solid phase extraction (SPE). Waters Oasis WAX cartridges (Waters Corp.) were preconditioned with 4 mL 0.1% ammonium hydroxide (NH_4OH) in MeOH, 4 mL MeOH, and 4 mL MQ water. Samples were then loaded onto cartridges at an approximate flow rate of 1 drop/s. Cartridges were then allowed to dry under vacuum for 5 min and eluted with 4 mL MeOH and 4 mL 0.1% NH_4OH in MeOH. Eluent was collected in 15 mL polypropylene tubes containing 200 mg ENVI Carb sorbent. Following vortexing and centrifugation (10 min × 4000 rpm), the resulting supernatant was transferred to 50 mL polypropylene tubes. The ENVI Carb sorbent was rinsed with MeOH, centrifuged, and the resulting supernatant was decanted and combined with the prior sample fraction. Samples were evaporated to dryness, and reconstituted using 50:50 water:MeOH with 2 mL ammonium acetate. Solutions were microcentrifuged at 15,000 rpm for 15 min and transferred to autosampler vials for analysis.

Sample extracts were analyzed for 24 PFAS using an Agilent (Santa Clara, CA, U.S.A.) 6460 triple quadrupole liquid chromatograph tandem mass spectrometer (LC-MS/MS) equipped with an Agilent 1290 Infinity Flex Cube online SPE, following previously published methods with slight modifications (Weber et al., 2017). A 100 μL aliquot of each sample extract was injected and loaded onto an Agilent Zorbax SB-Aq (4.6 × 12.5 mm; 5 μm) online SPE cartridge with 0.85 mL of 0.1% formic acid at a flow rate of 1 mL min^{-1}. Following sample loading, analytes were eluted from the SPE cartridge and loaded onto an Agilent Poroshell 120 EC-C18 (3.0 × 50 mm; 2.7 μm) reversed-phase HPLC column using ammonium acetate (2 mM) in MQ water (A) and ammonium acetate (2 mM) in MeOH (B) at a flow rate of 0.5 mL min^{-1} and a column temperature of 50 °C. Initial gradient conditions were 97% A and 3% B. From 0.85 to 3.5 min the gradient was linearly increased to 54% B and from 3.5 to 15 min, linearly increased to 85% B, before increasing to 100% B and maintaining at 100% B from 15.5 to 16.5 min. Sample analytes were introduced to the tandem mass spectrometer after being ionized with an electrospray ionization source operated in negative ion mode at a temperature of 300 °C, gas flow rate of 13 L min^{-1}, and nebulizer pressure of 45 psi.

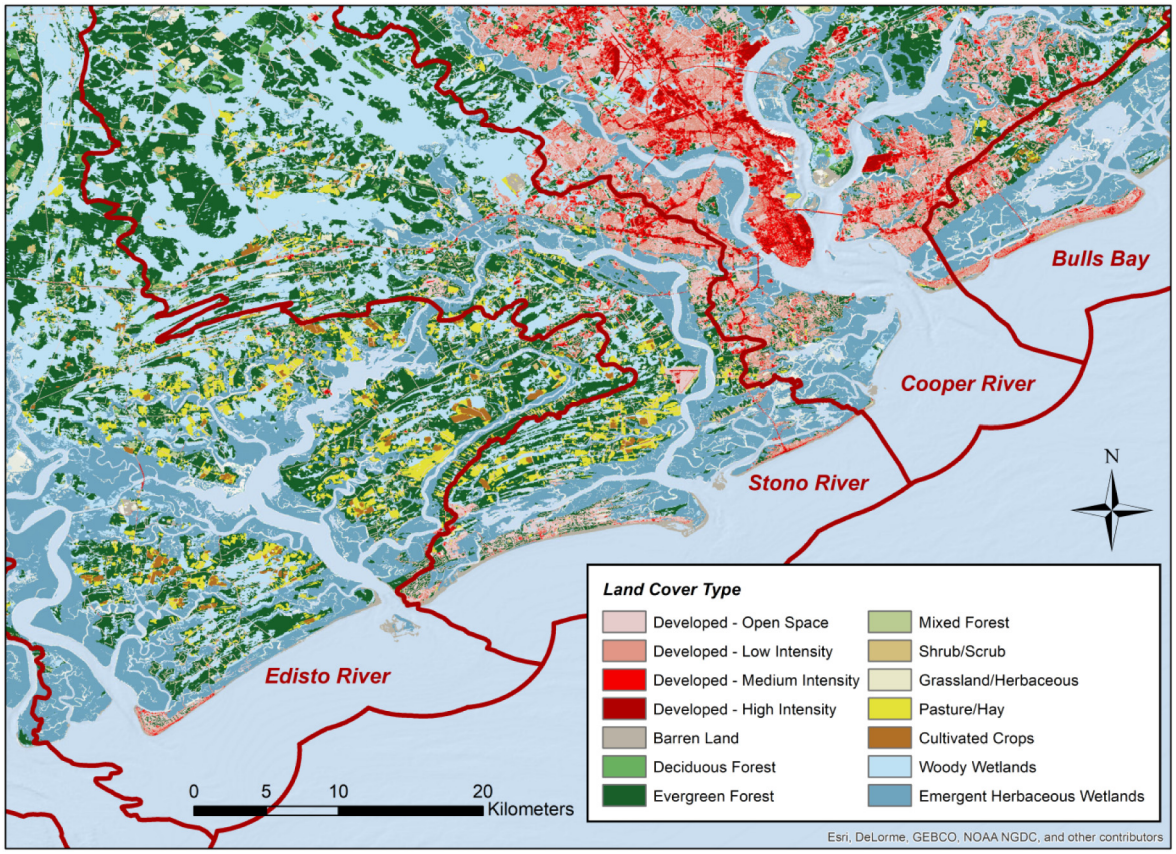

Fig. 2. Map of the study area in coastal South Carolina, USA, with land cover types. Red lines indicate eight-digit watershed boundaries with corresponding labels. Note that specific land cover types were collated into dominant categories following the Anderson Level I Land Cover classification system for analysis. (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

2.3. Quality assurance and quality control

Matrix spikes and procedural blanks were included with the sample set to monitor matrix effects, process recovery, and background contamination. Matrix effects were addressed using a 7-point matrix-matched curve, made up of chicken egg homogenate extracted in an identical fashion to egg samples, and spiked with native and isotope-labeled standards directly prior to analysis. The chicken egg matrix used for the curve contained trace levels of n-PFOS and was corrected for background n-PFOS using the average of triplicate chicken egg samples taken through the extraction. Recoveries for detected compounds ranged from 27 to 150% for FOSA, perfluorotridecanoate (PFTrDA), and perfluorotetradecanoate (PFTeDA) having the lowest recoveries due to predictable loss of these analytes during sample preparation (Taniyasu et al., 2005). Excluding these outliers, average analyte recovery ranged from 63 to 150%, with an average recovery of 78%. Data reported in this study were not blank corrected, due to low levels of process contamination identified in procedural blanks. Method detection limits (MDLs) were defined as procedural blank levels of a given analyte plus 3 times the standard deviation. In the absence of quantifiable blank concentrations, the lowest curve point (0.25 ng/mL) was deemed the method detection limit. Values below MDLs were considered zero for summation purposes. Summary statistics and group comparisons were derived using uncensored data analyzed using the *cenfit* function in the R package *NADA* version 1.6 - 1.1 (Lee, 2020) to account for artifacts of left-censored data (Helsel, 2011). Significant differences in contaminant concentrations among colonies were assessed using both uncensored and censored log-transformed data. The *cendiff* function in the R package *NADA*, which uses Kaplan-Meier (KM) model estimates, was used to evaluate group differences via Peto & Peto modification of the Gehan-Wilcoxon test. Left-censored data was also assessed for significant differences by habitat and compound using Kruskal-Wallis tests followed by post-hoc application of Dunn's test for multiple comparisons.

2.4. GPS tracking and spatial analysis

Movements of representative adult brown pelicans were ascertained via GPS satellite tracking during the nesting period. GPS-equipped pelicans were not the same individuals from which eggs were collected; therefore comparisons between contaminant exposure and movement are population-based (i.e., at the level of the colony) and not individual-based. For the purposes of contaminant exposure, we also assume that habitat use before and after egg laying is approximately equivalent. Adult pelicans typically spend 2-3 weeks at the colony engaged in courtship activities (e.g. nest site selections, mate advertisement, nest construction) prior to egg laying (Schreiber, 1977) and during incubation and chick-rearing forage within the vicinity of the colony while mates trade-off incubation, nest attendance, and provisioning duties. A total of 68 solar-powered GPS-PTT units (GeoTrak Inc., North Carolina, USA) were deployed annually in spring/summer from 2017 to 2020 on adult pelicans during incubation or early (i.e. 2-4 weeks post-hatch) chick-rearing (Castle Pinckney, $n = 20$; Bird Key Stono, $n = 25$; Deveaux Bank, $n = 23$). Transmitters weighed ~65 g ($10 \times 3.3 \times 3$ cm) and were ≤3% body mass of instrumented pelicans (range = 2475–4350 g). Adult pelicans were captured at the nest with either a leg or neck lasso and equipped in the field. Transmitters were attached dorsally via a backpack-style harness system as described in Lamb et al. (2017a), and were programmed to record 12 GPS positional fixes per day at 90 min intervals between the hours of

10:00–02:30 GMT (fixes limited by power availability). Unit error was assumed to be approximate to that of Lamb et al. (2017b), i.e. 4.03 ± 2.79 m. Equipped pelicans were typically released within 20 min of capture and 50 m of the nest site.

We used a recursive detection algorithm in the R package *recurse* (Bracis et al., 2018) to identify nest-site attendance of instrumented pelicans for delimiting breeding locations. Exact nest coordinates were extracted from release locations, with a 250 m radius buffer established around each nest. Regular nest attendance was defined as the presence of locational fixes within the 250 m radius buffer separated by ≤168 h. This relatively conservative time cutoff was chosen to balance the infrequency of locational fixes compared to the amount of time an adult may spend at the nest, which decreases as chicks age (Sachs and Jodice, 2009), with the observation that pelican chicks may be able to survive without provisioning for at least 2–3 wks (Shields, 2020). All GPS points were then extracted from initial deployment to the last date of nest attendance for each individual. For pelicans that remained near the nest site beyond the breeding season (i.e. non-migratory individuals), a 90-day cutoff was imposed for adults that were initially instrumented with chicks and a 120-day cutoff for adults initially instrumented with eggs, corresponding to the maximum recorded time to successfully raise offspring (Lamb et al., 2017b; Shields, 2020). We included telemetry data from both incubation and chick-rearing stages in spatial analyses, as the majority of locations were collected during chick-rearing. It should be noted that home ranges tend to decrease in size as chicks age, so estimates of overlap in high-use areas by colony may be somewhat biased towards increased segregation (Geary et al., 2019). However, home range size reduction is driven by increased foraging site fidelity, so that habitats used during chick-rearing are derived from those used during incubation (Geary et al., 2019).

Breeding movements included $n = 22{,}274$ locational fixes and ranged from 12 May – 21 October within each year (mean duration = 34.4 ± 27.8 days). To identify high-use areas for each colony, we utilized a grid-cell based approach based on the number of GPS fixes per cell. To reduce spatial bias introduced by time spent at the nest, all points within 250 m of the relevant breeding colony were removed. A 2.25 km^2 grid was then imposed over the study area, and the number of locations in each cell was calculated using ArcMap version 10.1 (ESRI, Redlands, California, USA). For each colony, the upper quartile (25%) of grid cells containing the most points was defined as the area of high use and subsequently mapped. The upper quartile was chosen in part because the majority of cells above this threshold contained multiple relocations, indicating high use; additional grid cells beyond this level were populated almost exclusively by single relocations which is likely not reflective of frequent use at the population level.

We used the boundaries of 8-digit watersheds along the coastline of South Carolina to describe potential differences in urban habitat use by pelicans from each colony. We chose to use watershed boundaries not only because they are ecologically meaningful for coastal birds, but also because each watershed likely has a varying contaminant profile based on differences in source inputs. Hydrologic unit levels are defined by the U.S. Geological Survey and represent the standard units of measurement for describing watersheds. These definitions correspond to regional, subregional, accounting, and cataloging levels (nested from largest to smallest in size, respectively). 8-digit watersheds correspond to the cataloging level, and are therefore of relatively high resolution. Watershed boundaries were obtained from the S.C. Watershed Atlas (SCDHEC, 2020a). Within ArcMap, we calculated the relative percentages of dominant land cover types by watershed following the Anderson Level I Land Use classification system (Anderson, 1976) using data from the 2016 USGS National Land Cover Database (Jin et al., 2019). We also calculated the number of facilities with a National Pollutant Discharge Elimination Discharge (NPDES) permit registered in each watershed (SCDHEC, 2020b). Finally, the percentage of high-use grid cells for each pelican colony that occurred in each watershed was calculated as a measure of overlap with urbanized habitats, for the purpose of making qualitative comparisons in urban habitat use between colonies. In this way, we expected that eggs from pelican colonies linked to highly urbanized habitat use (i.e., a large percentage of high-use grid cells occurring in watersheds dominated by urban land cover) would contain greater concentrations of PFAS than eggs from pelican colonies linked to lower urban habitat use if urban exposure was indeed a reliable predictor of PFAS contamination (e.g., Adams et al., 2008).

3. Results and discussion

Of the 24 PFAS analytes assessed (Table S1), 15 were measured above detection limits in ≥50% of pelican eggs sampled across colonies (Table 1). Perfluorohexanesulfonic acid (PFHxS), PFOS, PFOA, perfluorononanoic acid (PFNA), perfluorodecanoic acid (PFDA), perfluoroundecanoic acid (PFUnDA), perfluorododecanoic acid (PFDoA), and PFTeDA were found in 100% of tested samples. When averaged by colony location, eggs from Deveaux Bank contained the highest mean $\sum$PFAS concentration (202 ± 148 ng/g w wt, $n = 12$), followed by Castle Pinckney (192 ± 137 ng/g w wt, n = 12), and Bird Key Stono (132 ± 46 ng/g w wt, n = 12), although these differences were not statistically significant likely due to the high variability among samples within colonies (Fig. 3). The most abundant compound across all samples was n-PFOS (mean = 127.5 ± 17.5; range = 48–546 ng/g w wt, $n = 36$). After n-PFOS, the following most abundant

Table 1
Table of means (ng/g w wt.), standard errors, ranges, and % detection for compounds found in ≥50% of samples. Mean and standard error derived from NADA package to consider data below MDLs in estimation of summary stats. "n-" and "br-" refer to linear and branched analytes, respectively. Each colony has a sample size of ($n = 12$) eggs.

		Castle Pinckney				Bird Key Stono				Deveaux Bank			
Comp.	MDL	Mean	Std. Err.	Range	% Detect	Mean	Std. Err.	Range	% Detect	Mean	Std. Err.	Range	% Detect
FOSA	0.250	1.135	0.1	0.4 - 3	100.0	0.856	0.1	0 - 2	84.6	0.986	0.2	0 - 3	100.0
br - PFHxS	0.004	0.041	0.002	0 - 0.1	92.3	0.039	0.003	0 - 0.1	84.6	0.041	0.002	0.03 - 0.1	100.0
n - PFHxS	0.034	0.504	0.1	0.2 - 1	100.0	0.443	0.1	0.1 - 1	100.0	0.503	0.1	0.2 - 1	100.0
PFHpS	0.250	1.425	0.4	0 - 6	53.8	1.108	0.3	0 - 4	38.5	1.479	0.4	0 - 5	53.8
br - PFOS	0.024	7.615	1.4	0 - 16	92.3	6.788	1.3	1 - 15	100.0	7.678	1.8	0 - 28	92.3
n - PFOS	0.053	141.17	35.5	74 - 546	100.0	90.195	6.9	48 - 137	100.0	151.22	37.6	80 - 527	100.0
PFDS	0.250	2.703	0.5	1 - 8	100.0	2.391	0.5	0 - 7	84.6	2.322	0.4	1 - 5	100.0
PFPeA	0.047	0.336	0.1	0 - 2	84.6	0.105	0.0	0 - 0.3	92.3	0.590	0.2	0.05 - 3	100.0
PFOA	0.262	0.984	0.1	0.6 - 1	100.0	0.906	0.1	0.3 - 2	100.0	1.202	0.1	0.6 - 2	100.0
PFNA	0.295	3.793	0.3	3 - 6	100.0	3.787	0.4	1 - 6	100.0	4.789	0.4	2 - 7	100.0
PFDA	0.102	12.997	1.3	7 - 25	100.0	10.581	1.2	3 - 18	100.0	14.413	1.4	5 - 24	100.0
PFUnDA	0.163	8.142	0.8	4 - 13	100.0	6.637	0.8	2 - 12	100.0	7.838	0.8	4 - 14	100.0
PFDoA	0.086	2.248	0.2	1 - 4	100.0	1.956	0.3	0.5 - 5	100.0	2.091	0.2	1 - 4	100.0
PFTrDA	0.098	7.449	1.0	4 - 15	100.0	5.589	0.9	1 - 12	100.0	5.557	0.6	0 - 9	92.3
PFTeDA	0.161	0.930	0.1	0.5 - 2	100.0	0.903	0.2	0.2 - 3	100.0	0.907	0.1	0.4 - 2	100.0

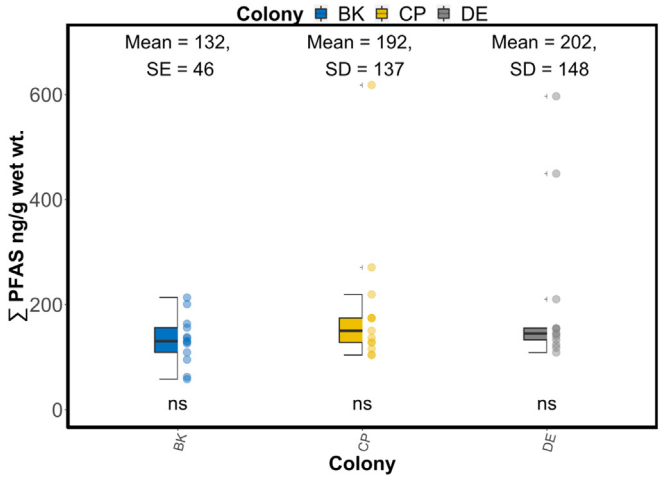

Fig. 3. Boxplots of ∑PFAS (ng/g w wt.) representing 15 analytes found in sampled eggs from brown pelicans nesting on three colonies near Charleston, South Carolina. BK, CP, and DE signify Bird Key Stono, Castle Pinckney, and Deveaux Bank, respectively. Within the boxplots, dark lines represent the median, box limits denote the first and third quartiles, whiskers denote 1.5 times the interquartile range, and crosses denote outliers. Differences between colonies were not significant (as indicated by 'ns' notations). (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

compounds included PFDA (12.7 ± 0.8; 3–25 ng/g w wt), PFUnDA (7.5 ± 0.5; 2–14 ng/g w wt), PFTrDA (6.2 ± 0.5; 0–15 ng/g w wt), and PFNA (4.1 ± 0.2; 1–7 ng/g w wt). Of these, only PFNA exhibited significant differences in concentrations among colonies, being higher at Deveaux Bank compared to Castle Pinckney (Fig. 4). Other analytes found to significantly differ in concentration among colonies were FOSA, perfluoropentanoic acid (PFPeA), and PFOA although the pattern of differences among colonies differed among analytes (Fig. 4). Concentrations of all remaining analytes examined did not differ significantly among colonies. Although few statistical differences were found, we should note some caution may be warranted given the relatively small number of sampled eggs and potential limitations of statistical power.

Five watersheds contained at least 10% of high-use grid cells for any of the three pelican colonies, including the Edisto River, St. Helena Island, Cooper River, Bulls Bay, and Stono River watersheds. Of these, the most highly urbanized watershed was the Cooper River (17.3% developed land), which also contained nearly 4 times the number of NPDES-registered facilities (68) as the next nearest watershed (Table 2). All remaining watersheds contained <10% developed land cover, and <20 NPDES facilities. Pelicans from Castle Pinckney used the Cooper River watershed the most frequently (58.8% overlap), while use by individuals from Bird Key Stono was infrequent (8.9%) and use by individuals from Deveaux Bank was absent (Table 2). Individuals from Bird Key Stono instead used all five watersheds at relatively similar levels (range = 8.9–28.3%), while over half of the high-use grid cells for individuals from Deveaux Bank occurred within the Edisto River watershed.

3.1. Potential sub-lethal effects

Brown pelican eggs from the Charleston region displayed relatively elevated levels of ∑PFAS (175.4 ± 120.1 ng/g w wt) compared to published values of ∑PFAS from eggs of other seabirds (Table S2). These high concentrations were driven in large part by PFOS loads in individual eggs. Exposure to PFAS may precipitate reproductive impacts for seabirds, including pelicans. Critically, it remains unclear exactly which PFAS analytes or mixtures of analytes may induce reproductive impairment and at what concentrations these effects begin to manifest (Custer, 2021). Research examining reproductive impacts to wild populations in field setting is especially limited (Custer, 2021). Tree swallows (*Tachycineta bicolor*) at a contaminated location experienced a detectable reduction in hatching success when PFOS levels in eggs were as low as 148 ng/g w wt, and a 50% reduction in hatching success compared to the average rate throughout the USA with PFOS levels of 494 ng/g w wt (Custer et al., 2014). In the current study, 5 of 36 pelican eggs were above the 148 ng/g value and 2 of 36 were above the 494 ng/g value. Tartu et al. (2014) reported a correlation between plasma PFDoA concentrations and reduced hatching success in black-legged kittiwakes (*Rissa tridactyla*) from the Arctic. Additional research on tree swallows as well as great tits (*Parus major*) has suggested a possible association between reduced hatching success and elevated levels of PFDA at concentrations similar to those found in pelican eggs from this study (Groffen et al., 2019; Custer, 2021). Taken together, these results suggest that further study of hatchability in relation to concentrations of PFAS may be warranted at pelican colonies in the region.

3.2. FOSA contamination and recent exposure

The concentrations of the semi-volatile precursor compound FOSA measured in brown pelican eggs (mean = 1.0 ± 0.1, range = 0–3 ng/g w wt) suggest relatively recent inputs of PFAS into the Charleston system extending beyond the phase-out period for this compound (Robuck et al., 2020). As avian consumers may have the capacity to biotransform FOSA in vivo to more stable compounds (e.g. PFOS; Gebbink et al., 2009), significant concentrations of precursor compounds may indicate that the metabolic capacity for transformation has been exceeded as a result of continued, elevated exposure to FOSA or other FOSA-precursors (Gebbink et al., 2016; Robuck et al., 2020). For example, over the period 1990-2010, Gebbink et al. (2011) were unable to detect FOSA in herring gull (*Larus argentatus*) eggs from the Great Lakes after 2006 which is consistent with industrial PFAS phase-outs during that same time period. Importantly, FOSA generally declined throughout the two decades of study, with concentrations never exceeding 1.7 ng/g w wt (Gebbink et al., 2011). A follow-up study also was unable to detect FOSA and other precursor compounds from eggs of herring gulls in the same area (Letcher et al., 2015). These patterns suggest that the occurrence of FOSA in our samples may be due to continued exposure and not to historic exposure, particularly given that we found brown pelican eggs with maximum concentrations of FOSA approaching 3 ng/g w wt (Table 1).

FOSA was also one of four compounds with significant differences in concentrations among colonies, and was most elevated in eggs from Castle Pinckney. Foraging pelicans from this urban colony consistently showed frequent use of the Cooper and Ashley Rivers during the breeding season compared to pelicans from Bird Key Stono and Deveaux Bank, which both had relatively low overlap of high-use areas with the Cooper River watershed (Table 2). Together with the ability of FOSA to be biotransformed, and therefore the increased likelihood of relatively recent exposure, the spatial segregation of daily breeding-season movements found here suggest that differences in habitat used for foraging during reproduction may at least partially contribute to the loads of this precursor compound. Establishing interannual trends of FOSA concentrations from urban colonies such as Castle Pinckney may therefore assist efforts to determine changes in regional production or use that may drive changes in FOSA or FOSA precursor concentrations in the environment.

3.3. Other differences in analytes

While FOSA is likely influenced primarily by recent inputs of FOSA or its precursors into the local environment, observed differences in PFNA, PFPeA, and PFOA concentrations between colonies are likely influenced not only by freshwater industrial sources of these perfluorocarboxylic acids (PFCA). Most likely, the latent transport, oxidation, and accumulation of PFCA precursors will have contributed to the observed PFCA in the marine environments and biota

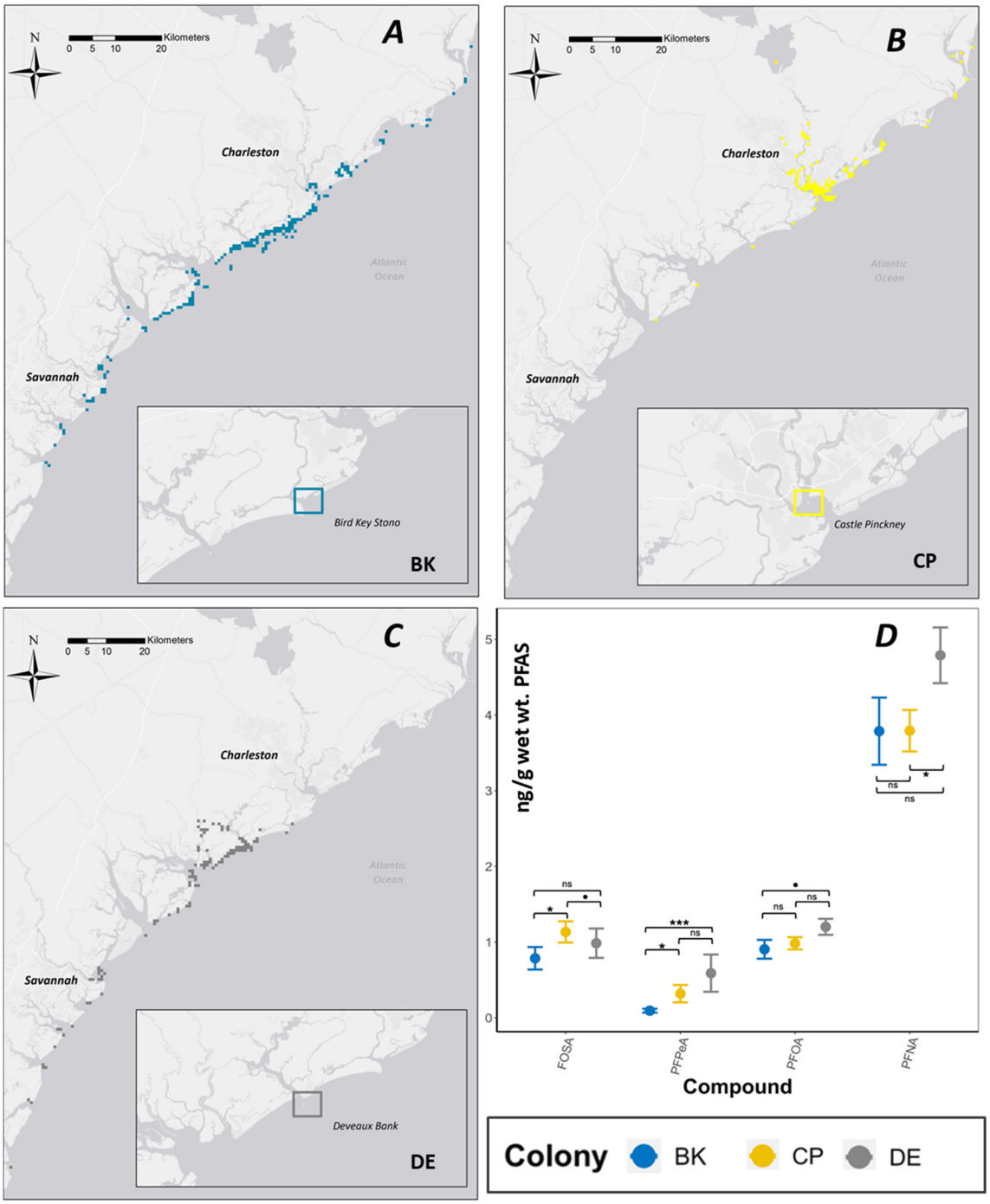

Fig. 4. High-use areas of adult brown pelicans actively nesting on three colonies near Charleston, South Carolina, USA determined via GPS tracking. Blue squares represent high-use areas of birds from Bird Key Stono (A), yellow squares represent Castle Pinckney (B), and gray squares represent Deveaux Bank (C). Open boxes indicate colony locations following the same color scheme. Panel (D) shows points representing arithmetic means stratified by habitat, with whiskers denoting standard error. Differences between group means were determined using Dunn's test of multiple comparisons, with "ns" equal to "not significant", while * indicates $p < 0.05$, *** indicates $p < 0.001$, and • representing $p < 0.1$. BK, CP, and DE signify Bird Key Stono, Castle Pinckney, and Deveaux Bank, respectively. (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

(Ellis et al., 2004; Thackray et al., 2020). For example, Zhang et al. (2019) observed higher than expected bioaccumulation of PFPeA in marine plankton off the northeastern Atlantic coast of the United States, and attributed this to the in situ biotransformation of precursors. Several studies have implied that the consumption of marine prey is causing a PFAS profile enriched in longer-chain PFCAs, including PFNA (Dassuncao et al., 2017; Robuck et al., 2020). Indeed, longer chain PFCAs have been increasing linearly with time in seabird eggs globally (Gebbink et al., 2011; Miller et al., 2015; Pereira et al., 2021), perhaps as a result of an increased bioaccumulation ability of longer-chain compounds or an increase in their anthropogenic use. Pelican eggs from the current study contained high concentrations of several long-chain PFCAs (e.g. PFDA and PFUnDA) compared to shorter-chain analytes, and this may be a result of their highly marine diet.

3.4. Similarities in contamination profiles among colonies

A thorough assessment of contaminant profiles within an ecosystem is possible only when multiple species and temporal points are considered. For example, Adams et al. (2008) examined PFAS contamination in

Table 2
Percent land cover type, number of National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES)-registered facilities, and percent high use grid cell occurrence by pelican colony for five watersheds in the Charleston, South Carolina region. Each watershed listed contained at least 10% of high use grid cells for at least one colony. Land cover classification follows the Anderson Level I Land Cover system.

Watershed	Edisto River	St. Helena Is.	Cooper River	Bulls Bay	Stono River
% Land cover type					
Developed	4.33	1.91	17.32	3.28	7.76
Forested	28.76	4.43	27.47	8.51	27.17
Agriculture	11.43	1.45	3.29	0.51	2.97
Wetland	38.93	22.74	34.40	31.54	36.67
Open Water	12.62	67.60	13.60	53.59	22.16
Barren Land	0.25	0.76	0.37	0.86	0.93
Shrub/Scrub	1.79	0.31	1.39	0.20	1.04
Grassland/Herbaceous	1.66	0.54	1.40	0.17	1.05
# of NPDES permits					
Registered facilities	18	5	68	11	4
% High use grid cells					
Castle Pinckney	0.98	1.96	58.82	30.39	0.98
Bird Key Stono	12.78	14.44	8.89	13.89	28.33
Deveaux Bank	50.94	12.26	0.00	0.00	5.66

plasma of bottlenose dolphins from the Charleston region and suggested a positive relationship between contaminant concentrations and urban habitat use immediately following industrial PFAS phaseouts, which was consistent with our initial prediction. While the overall pattern of analyte abundance in the plasma of dolphins was similar to that found in pelican eggs during our study (PFOS > PFDA > PFUnDA > PFNA > PFOA), dolphins residing primarily in or near the harbor exhibited significantly higher concentrations of PFOS, PFDA, and PFUnDA compared to those living in a less urbanized environment (i.e., the Stono River estuary; Adams et al., 2008). No differences were found spatially for PFOA and PFNA (Adams et al., 2008). In contrast, we found no differences in levels of PFOS, PFDA, or PFUnDA among pelican colonies based on the same land cover and watershed classifications, while reporting significant differences for PFOA and PFNA (Fig. 3). Of note is that pelicans from Deveaux Bank, which primarily used the Edisto River watershed, had the highest concentrations of PFOA and PFNA in sampled eggs. Two non-exclusive hypotheses explaining the spatial structuring found in Adams et al. (2008) compared to our results are that (i) the dolphin study reflected the direct release of PFAS from local point sources before industrial phaseouts in comparison to our study that occurred after phaseouts were implemented or that (ii) dolphins in the region may have displayed a higher degree of fidelity to specific locations compared to pelicans, especially across the annual cycle (i.e. a lack of migration in dolphins). The contrast between our results and those of Adams et al. (2008) highlights the need to examine multiple apex predators with different life histories and at different temporal points when investigating contaminant profiles for a given region.

Indeed, the relatively broad similarities in concentrations of the majority of PFAS analytes among the three pelican colonies in our study suggest that the frequency of using highly urbanized watersheds by foraging adults cannot reliably predict PFAS concentrations in eggs of brown pelicans. Lamb et al. (2020) made a similar conclusion when assessing concentrations of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) in blood samples of adult brown pelicans from the northern Gulf of Mexico. There, it was expected that PAHs would differ among regions of the Gulf based on differing background levels of oil and gas activity but the data did not consistently support that supposition. Lamb et al. (2020) posited that other inputs unrelated to the level of oil and gas activity and extensive ranging patterns in individuals may have contributed to the lack of consistent regional differences. Similarly, Newtoff and Emslie (2017) were unable to find differences in methylmercury concentrations in pelican eggs between two estuarine complexes with differing intensities of anthropogenic influence, contrary to expectations. While some tissues (e.g. blood) reflect relatively local contamination due to their high turnover times, and therefore tend to minimize the influence of migratory and non-breeding areas in determining source locations (Miller et al., 2020 but see Leat et al., 2013), eggs primarily reflect the contamination levels of the nutrient sources that were used to create them (Bond and Diamond, 2010). Individuals may mobilize nutrients for egg production from energy reserves acquired while on migratory or non-breeding areas (*capital* strategy) or through the rapid conversion of local resources obtained at the breeding grounds (*income* strategy) (Drent and Daan, 1980). Capital and income strategies are best represented, however, not as dichotomous alternatives but as two endpoints on a spectrum containing many intermediates (Meijer and Drent, 1999). While the balance of endogenous versus exogenous nutrients involved in egg deposition in brown pelicans remains unclear, it is likely to be a combination of sources rather than one or the other in totality.

According to traditional life-history theory, species with large body sizes or those undertaking relatively short migrations are likely to favor a capital breeding strategy (Klaassen et al., 2006). Brown pelicans are one of the largest avian species in North America and exhibit a facultative partial migration that can range from completely sedentary to highly migratory (Lamb et al., 2017b). However, brown pelicans also lay relatively small eggs compared to other seabirds and a full clutch may comprise <8% body mass of an average adult (Bartholomew and Goldstein, 1984). Pelicans may therefore pay a relatively low energetic cost for producing eggs, suggesting a reduced need to build energetic reserves for this purpose. The local estuarine systems inhabited by pre-breeding pelicans are also likely relatively productive, unlike more temperate or polar systems favored by capital breeders that may not be as predictably productive during pre-breeding for individuals returning from wintering areas (Schelske and Odum, 1962; Hahn et al., 2011; Hupp et al., 2018). Results from Geary et al. (2020) indicated that adult pelicans begin the reproductive cycle foraging in suboptimal habitats relative to the surrounding environment, foraging in optimal habitats only as chicks age and energetic costs rise. This suggests that local productivity is not a limiting factor when considering resource acquisition immediately following egg laying, and that pre-breeding conditions are likely capable of providing the energy necessary for egg formation as well.

If brown pelicans are therefore capable of using local resources for egg production, their reliance on foraging habitats at the interface of actively dynamic and complex estuarine systems near Charleston may pose a significant risk for PFAS contamination, as the potential for the release, transport, and accumulation of harmful anthropogenic compounds appears high. Prior investigations into both abiotic and biotic PFAS concentrations centered on the estuarine regions of Charleston suggest that the surrounding aquatic environment, particularly the Cooper River watershed, may indeed be more heavily contaminated than other comparable urbanized estuaries (White et al., 2015; Fair and Houde, 2018; Fair et al., 2019). Identifying specific source inputs of PFAS in the Charleston region, however, is difficult. Candidate sources include PFOS-contaminated groundwater associated with relatively recent releases of aqueous film-forming foams (AFFF) from Joint Charleston Air Force Base near the Ashley River (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 2018), as well as older AFFF events from the former Charleston Navy Base on the Cooper River (operational from 1901 to 1996) (White et al., 2015). Wastewater treatment plants (WWTP) discharging effluent into Charleston Harbor have also been identified as potential sources, with tested effluent containing relatively large amounts of both PFOS and PFOA (Houde et al., 2006b). Other suggested point sources include commercial container ships entering the Port of Charleston as well as various anthropogenic activities along freshwater inputs, especially the Cooper River, which aggregates discharge from numerous industrial facilities indicated by NPDES permit registries (White et al., 2015; Leads and Weinstein, 2019) (Fig. 1). Importantly, increasing concentrations from 2004 to 2012

of some compounds in estuarine sediments from the Charleston area suggest continuing inputs into the system despite widespread production bans in the early 2000s (White et al., 2015). Although the Cooper River watershed contained the highest levels of urban development as well as the most NPDES facilities, no watersheds examined were completely free of development or discharge facilities, indicating the widespread potential for PFAS exposure throughout the entirety of the study area.

However, if egg production is reliant instead on resources acquired during the non-breeding season or while migrating, local point sources of PFAS in urban Charleston may have a reduced impact on observed egg concentrations. Linking overwintering areas with contaminant exposure in brown pelicans is difficult and compounded by the relatively broad range occupied at the population level, driven by variation in post-breeding movements at the level of the individual (Poli, 2015). For example, pelicans from colonies in the northern Gulf of Mexico did not exhibit uniform migratory strategies among individuals but instead displayed a range of behaviors from complete sedentarism to long-distance migrations (e.g., ~1500 km; Lamb et al., 2017b). Preliminary observations of GPS-tracked pelicans from our study colonies in South Carolina, as well as earlier tracking work by Poli (2015), suggest that high-use areas during the non-breeding season occur in coastal Georgia, Florida Bay, and Cuba, as well as along the central and southern coast of South Carolina (i.e., our study area). Each of the aforementioned regions is likely to have a discrete contaminant profile based on anthropogenic activity, local abiotic factors, and regional transport mechanisms (O'Connell et al., 2010; Robuck et al., 2020). The highly variable nature of pelican migratory destinations, both within and between individuals, may therefore have homogenized contaminant exposure between breeding colonies over relatively long temporal scales. This study highlights the need to resolve the relative importance of endogenous versus exogenous resources in eggs when examining contaminants in avian species for making assessments about where contamination may occur during the annual cycle.

A limitation of the current study was that we were unable to assess local habitat use for the same individual pelicans from which eggs were collected, due to logistical difficulties, instead relying on colony-level assessments of both movement and contaminant levels. The conclusions made are therefore applicable at the level of the colony, and may not reflect how individual-specific habitat use and movement patterns contributes to PFAS levels. Future studies may better resolve potential associations between habitat use and PFAS contamination by tracking and assaying the same individual.

4. Conclusion

Our results indicate that potentially impactful $\sum$PFAS concentrations exist in brown pelican eggs from the Charleston region. Taken together with previous studies as well as known releases of PFAS in the region (i.e. AFFF exposure from military installations), it appears that Charleston may act as a significant source for these contaminants in the nearshore environment. Impacts of this contamination remain unclear but the potential for reproductive or physiological impairment at current exposure levels appears to be possible based on previous avifaunal studies (Custer, 2021). Contrary to expectations, we were unable to find a relationship between PFAS contamination and use of urbanized habitats for the majority of analytes studied. We therefore suggest that proximity to likely point sources for environmental contaminants may not always act as a reliable proxy for exposure when both stressor and organism are capable of transboundary movement, and that individuals even relatively distant from likely sources may still show elevated risk. Given that brown pelicans were previously listed under the Endangered Species Act largely as a result of interactions with anthropogenic contaminants (Wilkinson et al., 1994), continued monitoring of this species for PFAS contamination may be particularly valuable (Vander Pol et al., 2012).

CRediT authorship contribution statement

BW – Study design, data collection, manuscript writing.
AR – Data analysis, manuscript editing.
HP – Data analysis, manuscript editing.
RL – Manuscript editing, logistics.
PJ – Study design, manuscript editing, logistics.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank St. Johns Yacht Harbor for logistical support. Landis Pujol provided assistance in the field. Stacy Schuur and the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) provided key support advising data collection and housing samples. Felicia Sanders, Janet Thibault, and South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) were instrumental accessing pelican colonies. The South Carolina Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit is jointly supported by the U.S. Geological Survey, South Carolina DNR, and Clemson University. R.L., A.R.R., and H.M.P. acknowledge support from the NIEHS STEEP Superfund Research Program at URI (Grant P42-ES027706). A.R.R. also acknowledges financial support from the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Dr. Nancy Foster Scholarship Program (NA17NOS4290028). P.G.R.J. and B.P.W. acknowledge research funding by the U.S. Geological Survey Ecosystems Missions Area, and facilitated by Mona Khalil. Any use of trade, firm, or product names is for descriptive purposes only and does not imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2021.150110.

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