



Greenland Lake Ice Break-up Detection from Sentinel-1 SAR

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Introduction

Lake ice is a parameter of the Essential Climate Variable (ECV) "lakes"^[1] and plays an important role in the biological, chemical, and physical processes of cold region freshwater^[2]. The timing of lake ice freeze-up and break-up are relevant climate indicators and can be useful for climate monitoring^[1]. Synthetic aperture radar (SAR) is unaffected by cloud cover and exhibits backscatter differences between water and ice due to dielectric properties of the materials. Several studies investigated the evolution and characteristics of freshwater ice such as river ice^{[3][4]} and lake ice^{[5][6]}. In this study, we explore the potential of utilizing Sentinel-1 SAR data for identifying temporal and spatial variations of lake ice break-up across Greenland between 2017 and 2021 and assess its latitudinal and vertical gradients. We apply a dynamic numerical threshold to identify the annual timing of break-up from SAR backscatter decline within three consecutive days. The term "lake ice break-up" used in this study describes the timing when most of the lake surface is liquid water and is therefore an approximation to the timing of "water clear of ice" (WCI)^[1] given the nature and limitations of the applied methods.

Data and Methods

The satellites of the Sentinel-1 mission acquires data with a center frequency of 5.407 GHz^[7]. Single polarized horizontal transmit/horizontal receive (HH) Level-1 ground range detected (GRD) data in both ascending and descending orbit is used in this study. The data is acquired in Interferometric Wide (IW) swath mode with a swath width of 250 km, which results in a revisiting time of a few days and a GRD resolution of 10 x 10 m^[7]. SAR data acquisition and processing is done using the Google Earth Engine Data Catalogue^[8] and Google Earth Engine Code Editor^[9], while the statistical analysis is performed using Python^[10].

The lake inventory^[11] includes peripheral lakes in Greenland ranging from 1.6 * 10⁻³ km² to 138 km² (n = 155870). We retrieve SAR backscatter data of lakes with a surface area ≥ 0.1 km² (n = 14336) to exclude potential inaccuracies due to the lake size. Lakes with a temporal acquisition resolution larger than ~ 3 days are excluded from the analysis. Backscatter data which lacks a pronounced annual evolution and exhibits strong uniform characteristics is also excluded. This means that only lakes with a difference in mean backscatter of ≥ 8 dB between January/February (most certainly ice covered) and August (most certainly ice free) are considered (Fig. 1 ①). After this pre-selection ~ 16% (n = 2281) of the initial number of lakes with a surface area ≥ 0.1 km² are suitable to perform the data analysis.

The backscatter signal for ice break-up detection is averaged for the central 20% of the lake area to mitigate edge effects of the lake and surrounding terrain (Fig. 2 ②). This results in an area of ~ 0.02 km² for the smallest lake, which corresponds to at least 200 pixels considered for averaging. We apply a locally weighted scatterplot smoothing (LOWESS) filter to reduce the temporal variability to ensure a more robust and confident ice break-up detection (Fig. 1 ③). Several trials proved that using 1% of the data for LOWESS filtering is robust for the analysis. For each lake, a dynamic numerical threshold is applied in each year to identify the timing of ice break-up. This yearly threshold amounts to 25% of the backscatter difference between the 98th and 2nd quantile and must be at least 2.5 dB. The day of year (DOY) of lake ice break-up is detected when the absolute value of backscatter decrease exceeds the threshold value within three consecutive acquisitions (Fig. 1 ④). The detection algorithm is applied between May 1 and August 1 to exclude misdetections (Fig. 1 ⑤).

The study area is divided into six regions (N, NE, SE, S, SW, NW) to explore spatio-temporal statistics. We choose a 0.95 significance level to assess differences and trends. In the statistics we include only lakes with detected break-up DOYs in at least 3 out of the 5 years (2017-2021) to get robust detection statistics and to mitigate random detections. Daily mean temperature data at 2 m is retrieved from the automated weather stations (AWS) KAN_L (67.09 °N, 49.97 °W, 631 m a.s.l.), NUK_L (64.48 °N, 49.55 °W, 500 m a.s.l) and AWS QAS_M (61.11 °N, 46.81 °W, 678 m a.s.l) operated by the Geological Survey of Denmark and Greenland^[12] (Fig. 5). We calculate daily cumulative positive degree days (PDD) to explore correlations with the timing of ice break-up for lakes within ± 0.5 °N and ± 200 m (KAN_L: n = 24, NUK_L: n = 6, QAS_M: n = 21). The break-up detection is assessed and validated by utilizing daily time-lapse images of three lakes in SW Greenland between 2017 and 2020^[13].

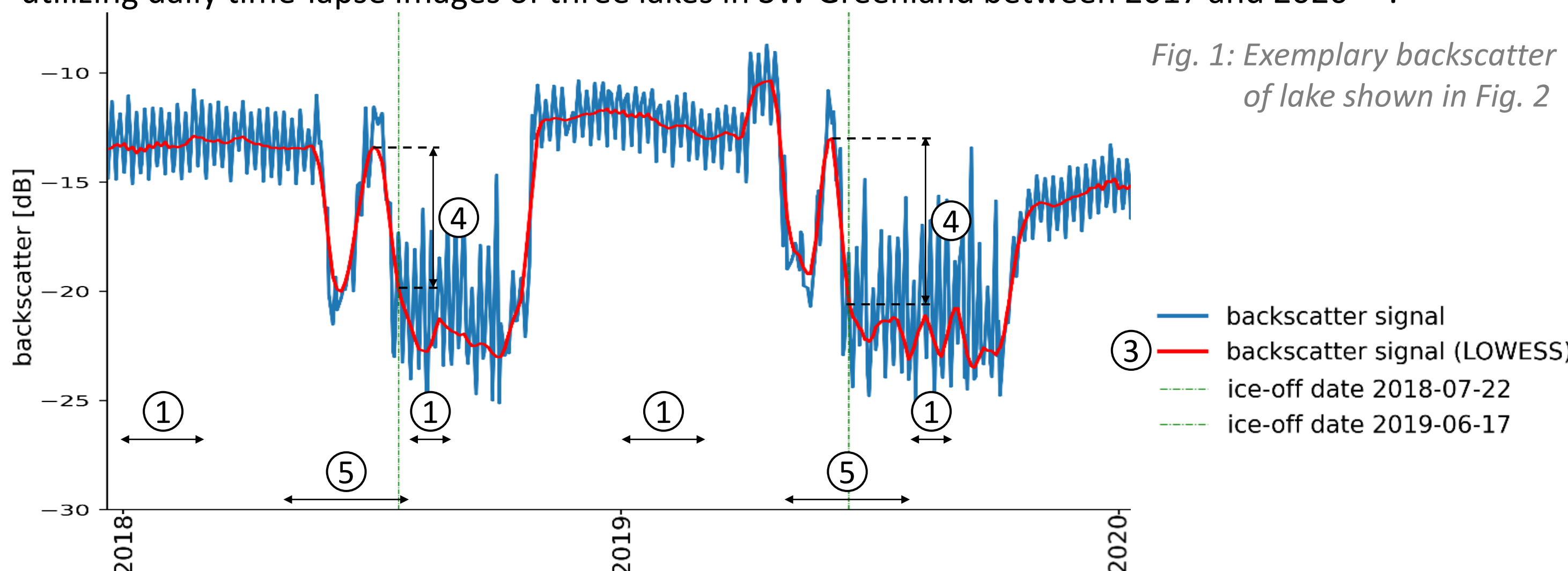


Fig. 1: Exemplary backscatter of lake shown in Fig. 2

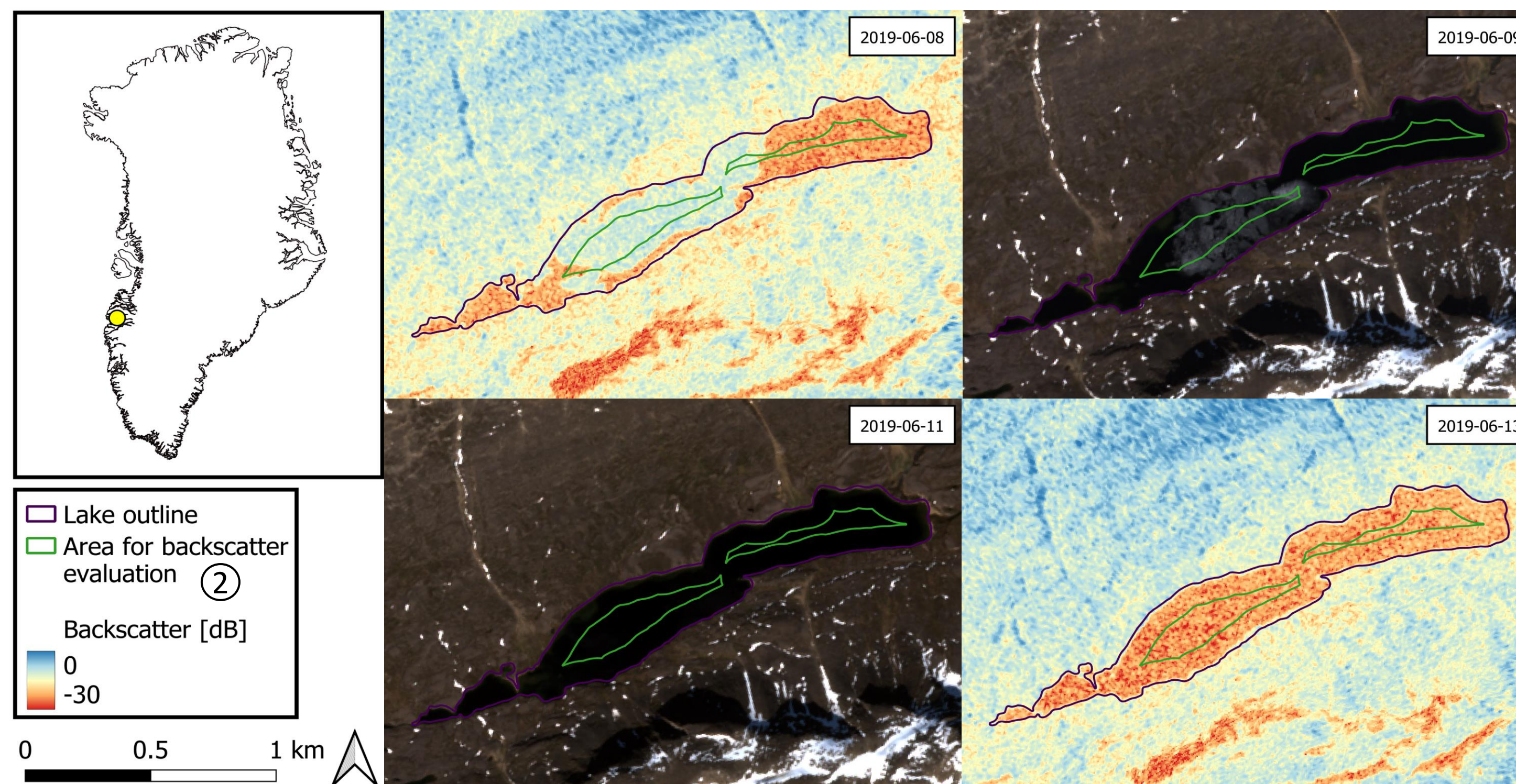


Fig. 2: Sentinel-1 and Sentinel-2 images of an exemplary lake

Results

The detection of the timing from SAR data proves to be conservative (i.e., later) compared to validation based on time-lapse camera data and allows characterizing break-up timing with a mean error of ~ 7 days. We find that only data from lakes in SE, S, SW, and NW exhibits characteristics for break-up detection (14%, 17%, 17% and 19% suitable) while coverage for lakes in N and NE lacks necessary radiometric and temporal characteristics (1% and 0% suitable).

Our results indicate that no significant trend of break-up timing between 2017 and 2021 can be identified. Annual median DOYs range between 179-205 (SE), 163-198 (S), 164-189 (SW) and 156-191 (NW) (Fig. 3). Annual ice break-up DOYs in SE are significantly later compared to S, SW and NW, except showing no difference to S in 2017, 2020 and 2021. The annual break-up timings in NW are significantly earlier in 2018 & 2021 compared to S as well as in 2019 & 2021 compared to SW. We explore spatio-temporal characteristics regarding latitudinal and vertical gradients for the regions S, SW and NW. Annual median DOYs for the regions S, SW and NW combined range between 164 (2019) and 191 (2018). The lake-specific break-up DOYs for 2017-2021 increase with elevation, while no confident latitudinal gradients could be identified. Subdivided into latitudinal bands of 1° between 60°N and 71°N, strong correlations (0.61 ≤ r ≤ 0.84) can be identified in several years which exhibit an increase of 3-5 DOY/100 m. The 2017-2021 median break-up DOY of lakes between 60-61°N and 67-68°N increase by 4 DOY/100 m (r = 0.81 and r = 0.63, respectively).

We find that cumulative PDD increase earliest and are highest in 2019 while increasing latest and being lowest in 2017 at every AWS, except being lowest in 2017 at QAS_M. NUK_L exhibits the fastest aggregation of cumulative PDDs and highest annual values, while QAS_M shows the slowest built-up and lowest values. For most of the years, the annual median DOY for lakes around QAS_M are latest, while being earliest for lakes around NUK_L. Median break-up DOYs for 2017-2021 exhibit a decrease by 1 DOY/12 °C cumulative PDD (r = 0.86) when comparing the three AWS locations (Fig. 6).

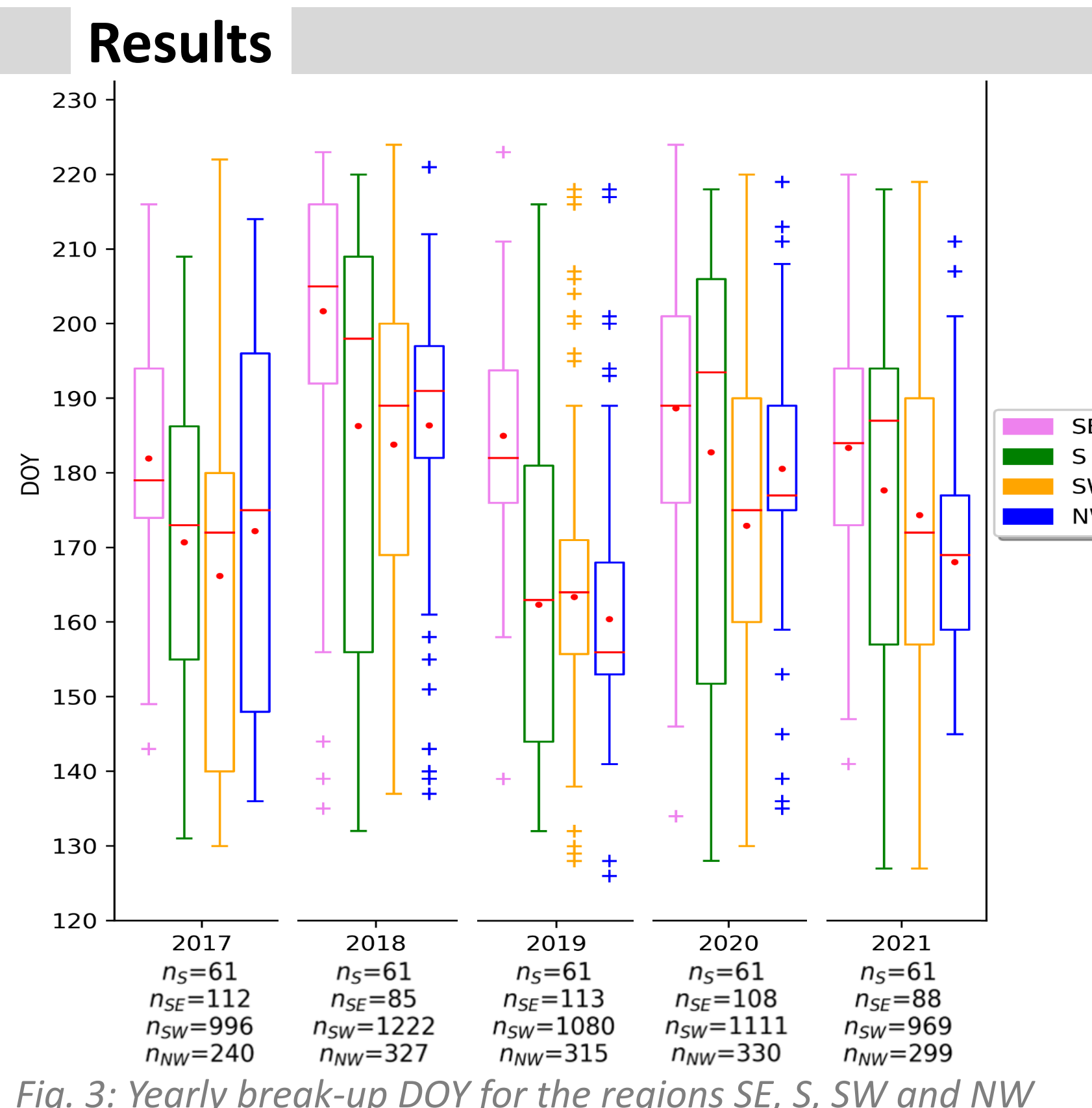


Fig. 3: Yearly break-up DOY for the regions SE, S, SW and NW

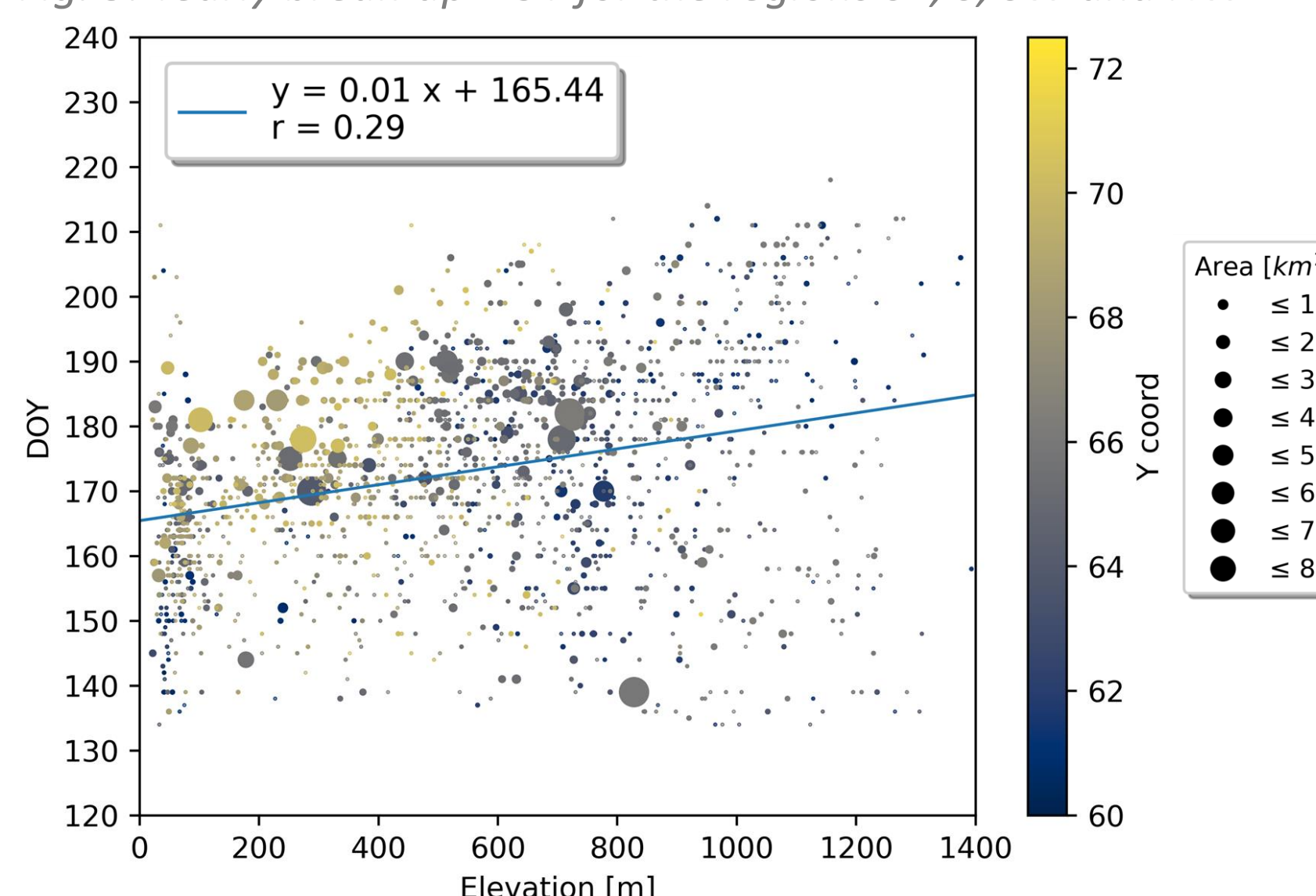


Fig. 4: DOY vs elevation of lakes in S, SW and NW Greenland

Discussion

We assess that elevation more strongly determines lake ice break-up timing than latitude does (Fig. 4). The significantly later timing of yearly median break-up DOYs in S compared to SW and NW can be explained by fewer lakes close to sea level (Fig. 5). Local topography such as elevation and extent of fjord systems might have a strong influence on the timing of break-up. Cumulative PDD at three AWS locations in S and SW are in line with median DOYs. The year 2019 with the lowest median DOY (164) for S, SW and NW combined exhibits the earliest increasing and highest cumulative PDD, while cumulative PDD are increasing latest and are lowest in the year 2018 with the highest median DOY (191). The presented vertical gradients of break-up timing in the magnitude of 3-5 DOY must be interpreted in regards with temporal limitation of the data and method. Very few higher elevated lakes exhibit early detection timings which must be questioned and explored in greater detail. However, the detection method proves to be conservative (i.e., later) and allows spatially characterizing lake ice break-up timing in Greenland.

Conclusion

Sentinel-1 SAR data can be utilized to detect the timing of lake ice break-up in SE, S, SW and NW Greenland limited by radiometric and temporal characteristics. We show that there is no significant trend in break-up timing between 2017 and 2021, however, early median DOYs are in agreement with years exhibiting early increasing and high cumulative PDD. Vertical gradients of break-up DOY can be identified in several years while no strong correlations can be found regarding latitude. The annual temporal evolution of SAR backscatter allows detecting the timing of lake ice break-up by a dynamic numerical threshold, while the gradual backscatter increase during freeze-up does not allow a robust detection. Excluding data from days with high wind speeds or coupling the SAR-based detection with optical detections from Sentinel-2 might yield more robust results but might also additionally decrease the temporal resolution. Applying machine learning or deep learning algorithms as a next step might further improve the break-up detection and decrease the number of pre-filtered lakes. We aim to explore the relationship between break-up timing and climatological variables such as radiation and temperature across Greenland in greater detail and intend to apply this algorithm for an analysis of lake ice break-up timing on a global scale.

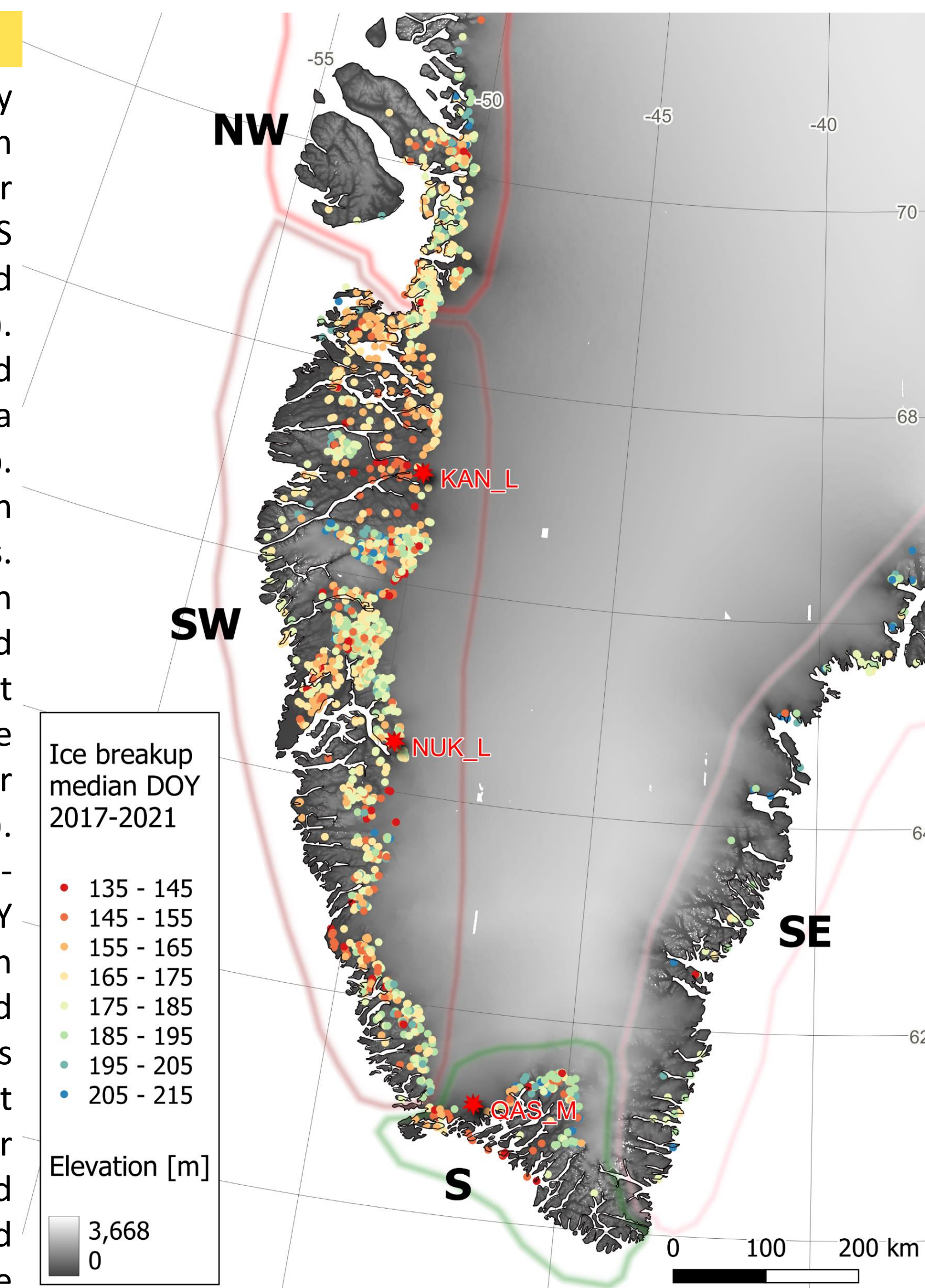


Fig. 5: Median break-up DOY (2017-2021) in SE, S, SW and NW

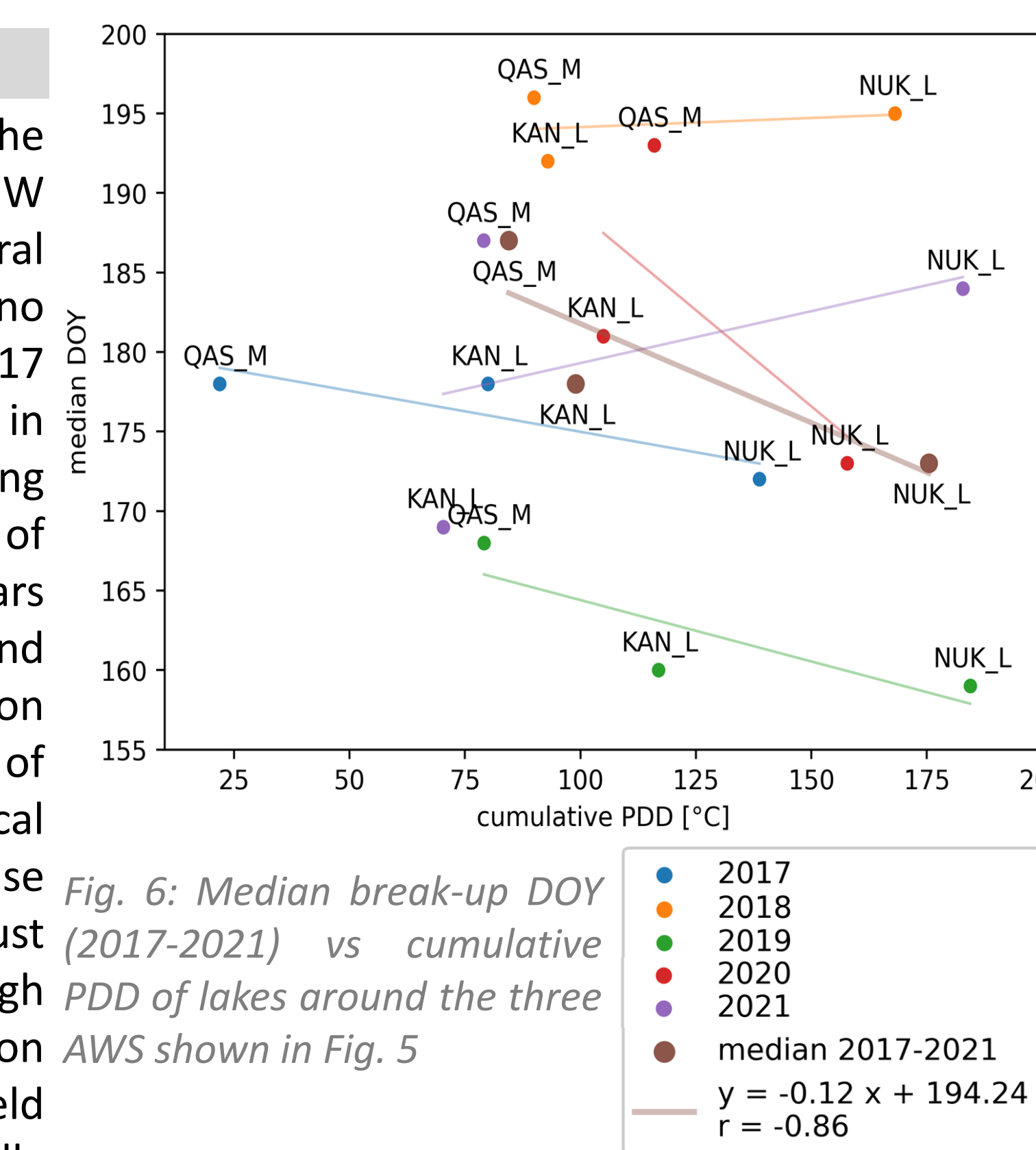
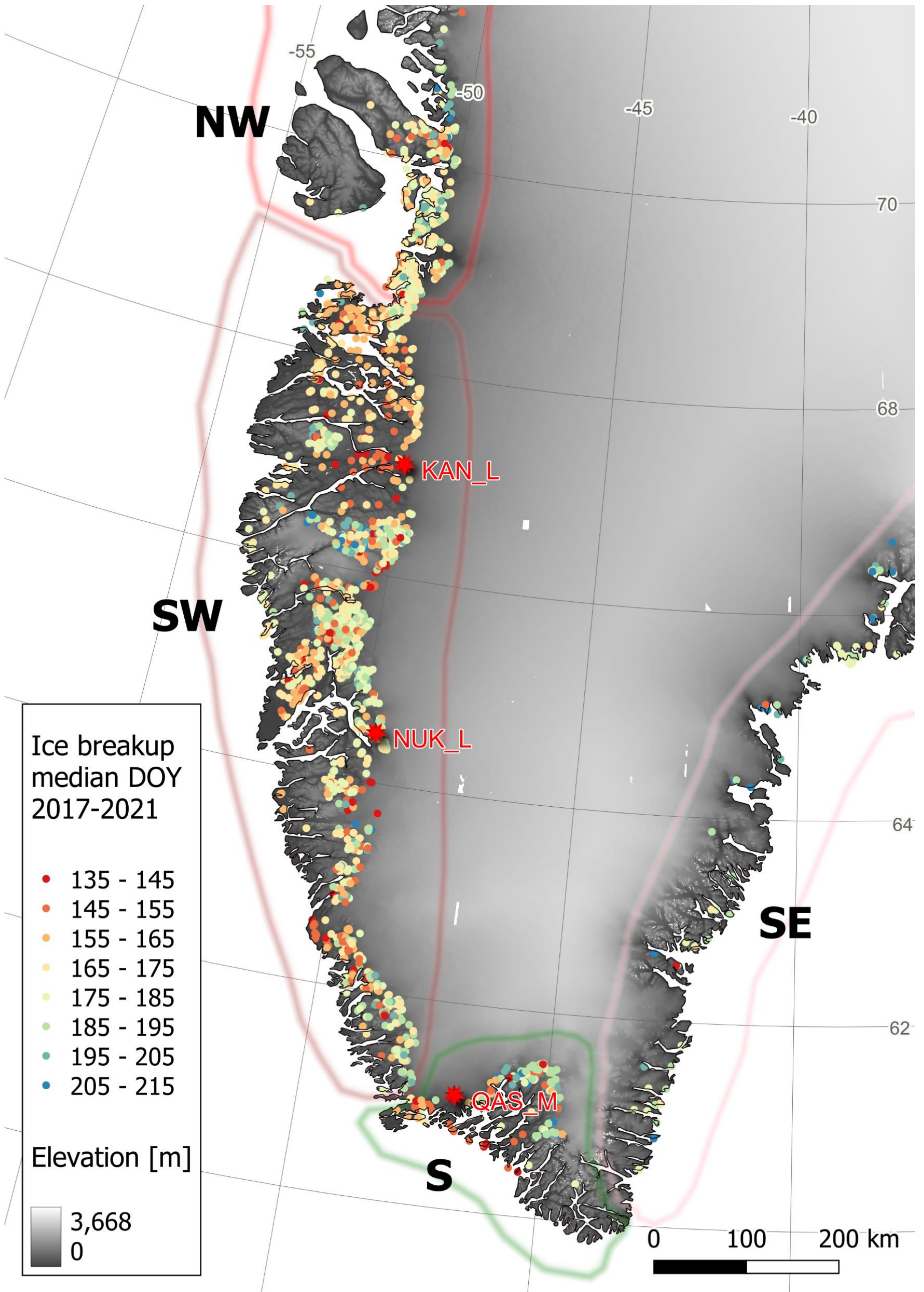
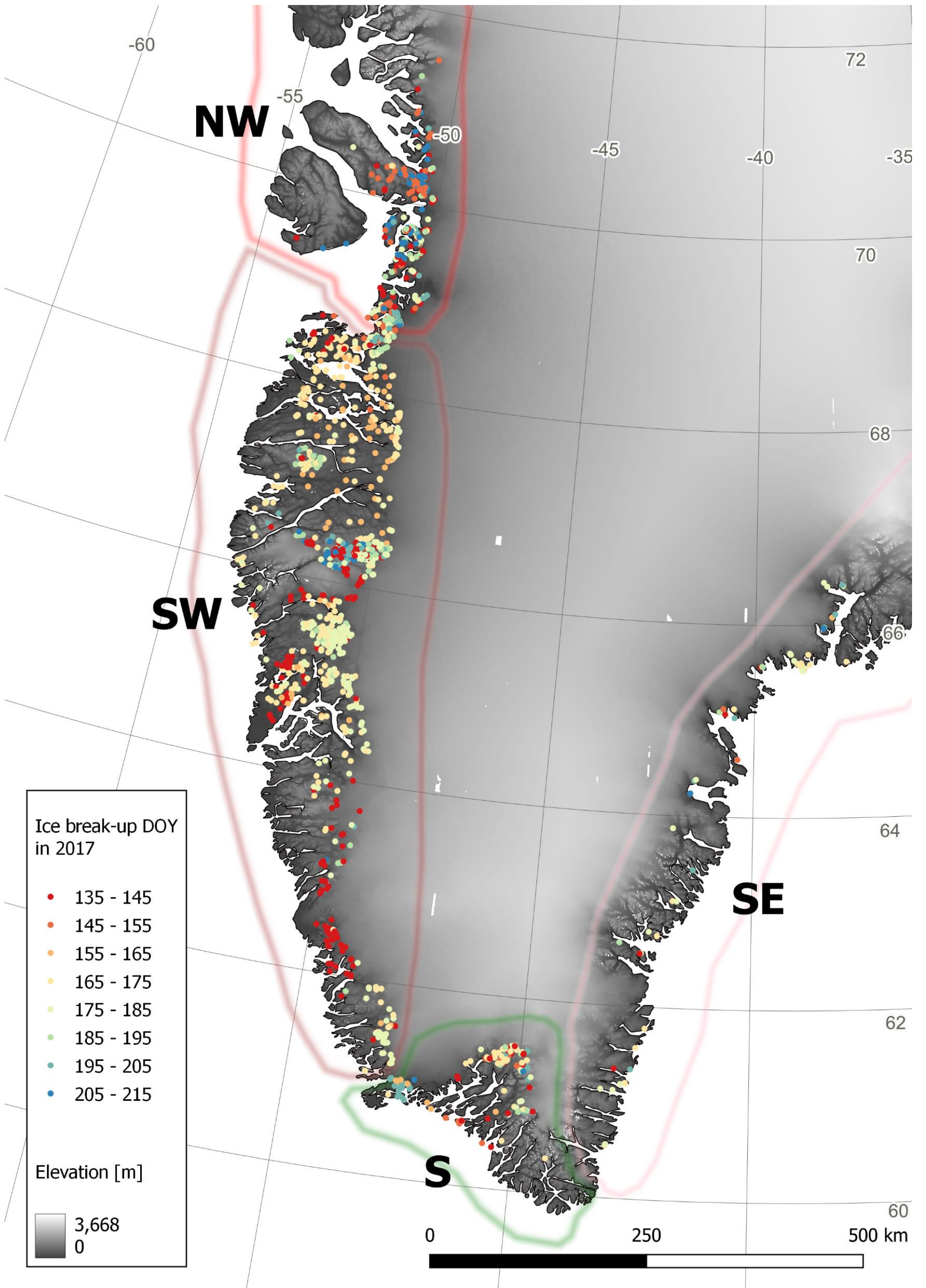
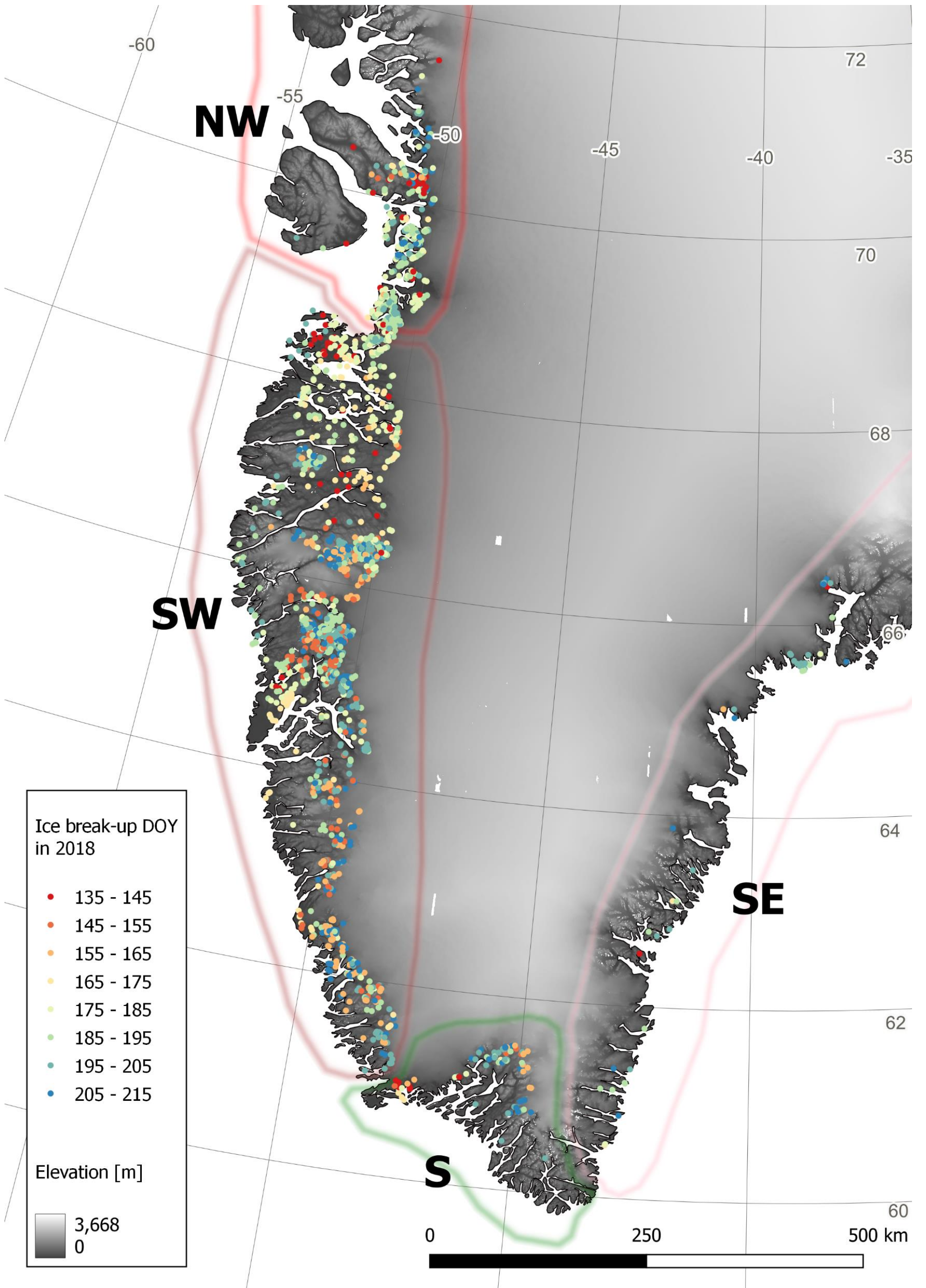


Fig. 6: Median break-up DOY (2017-2021) vs cumulative PDD of lakes around the three AWS shown in Fig. 5

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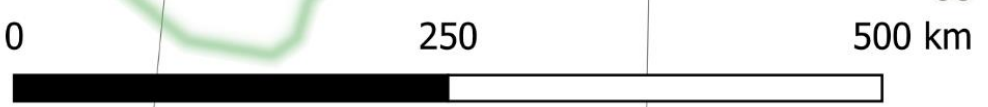


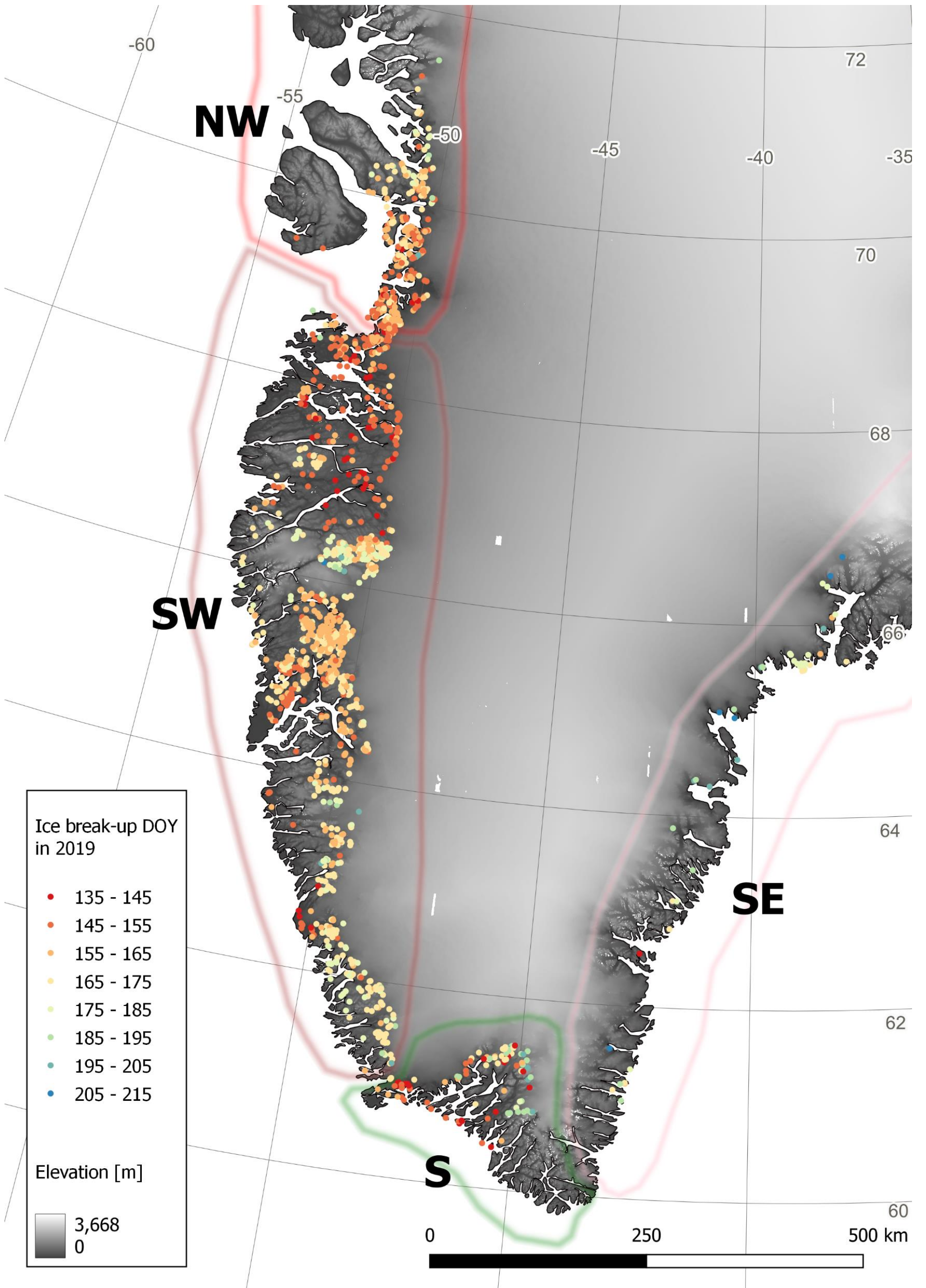


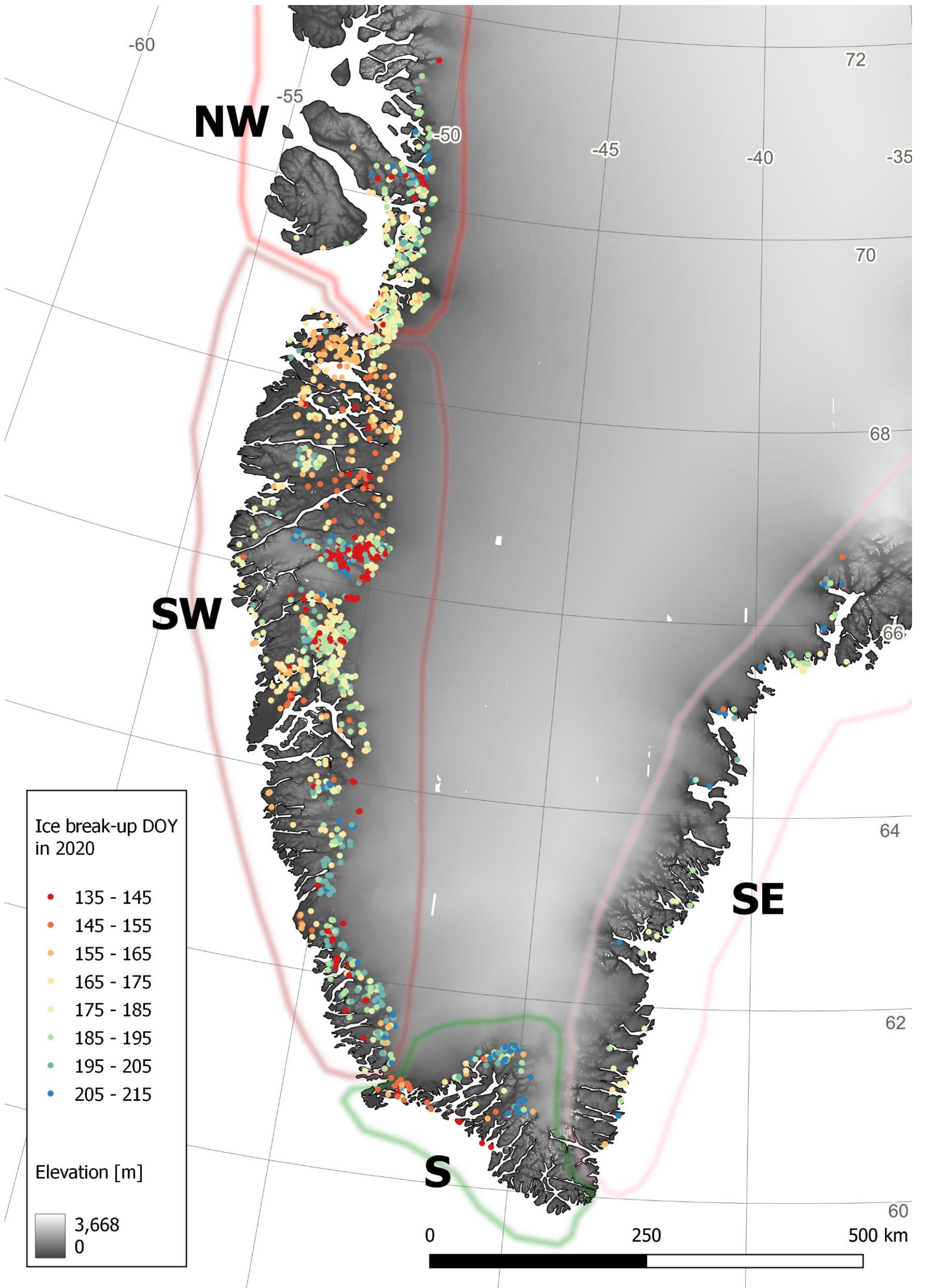
Ice break-up DOY
in 2018

- 135 - 145
- 145 - 155
- 155 - 165
- 165 - 175
- 175 - 185
- 185 - 195
- 195 - 205
- 205 - 215

Elevation [m]







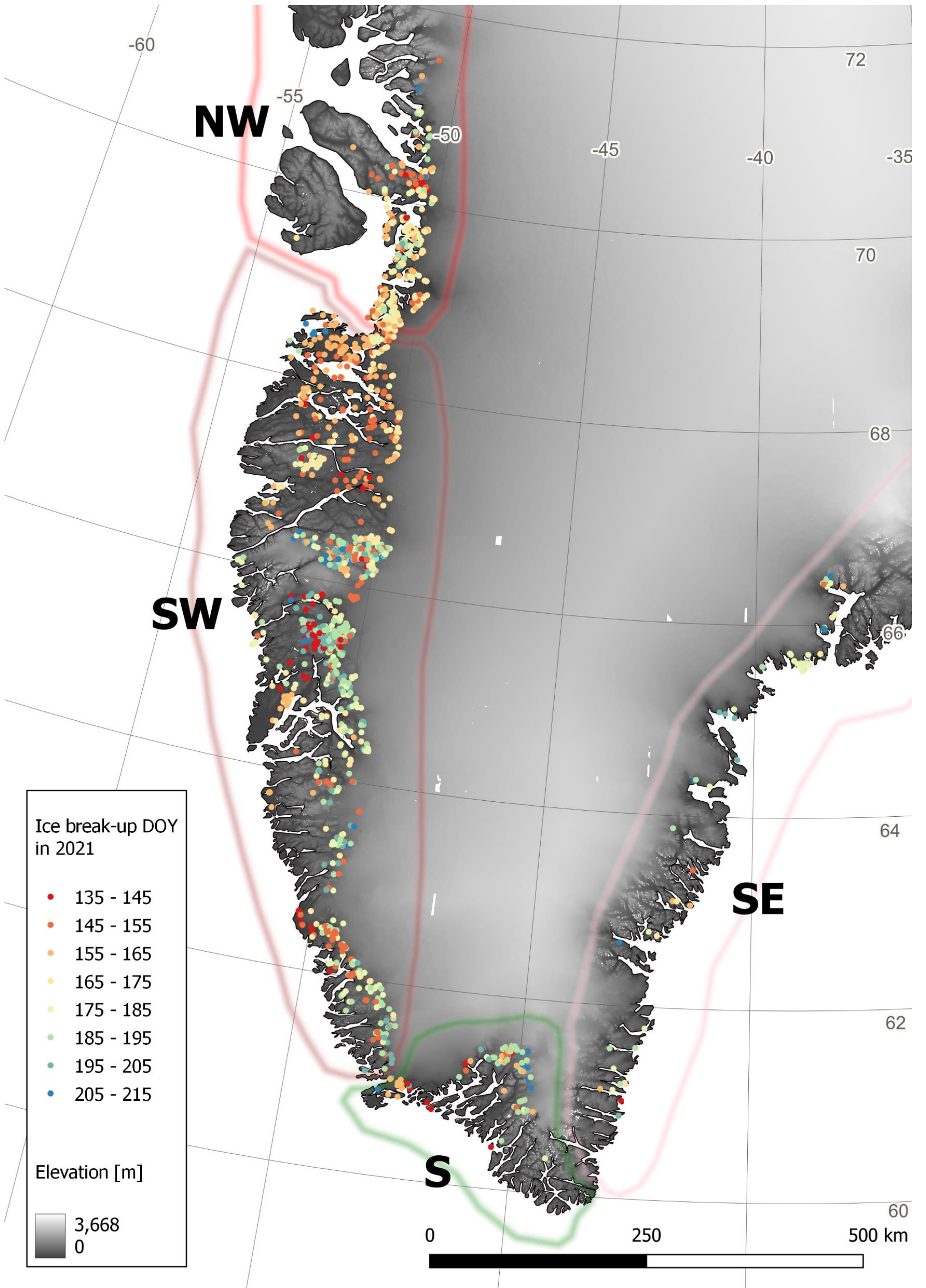
Ice break-up DOY
in 2020

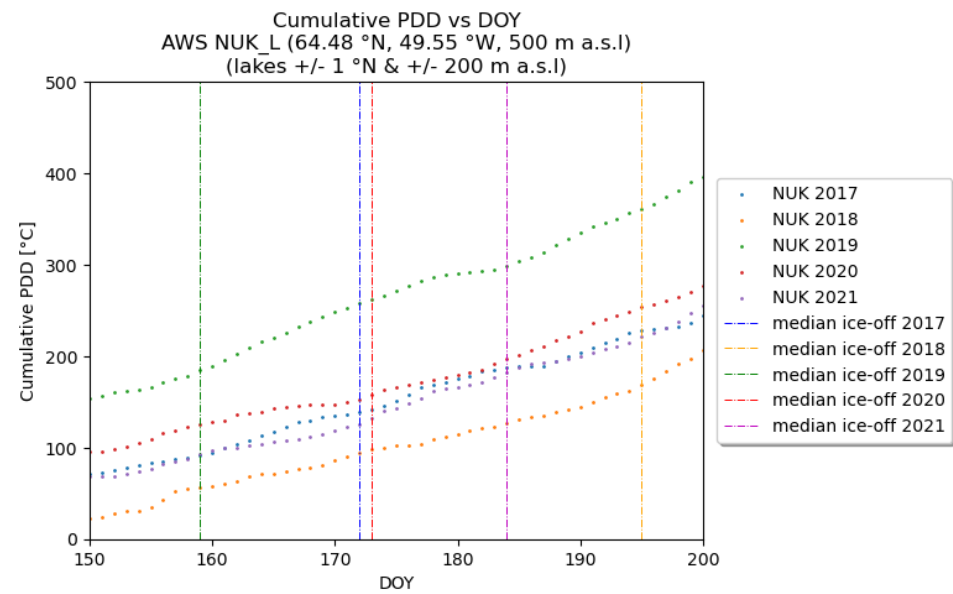
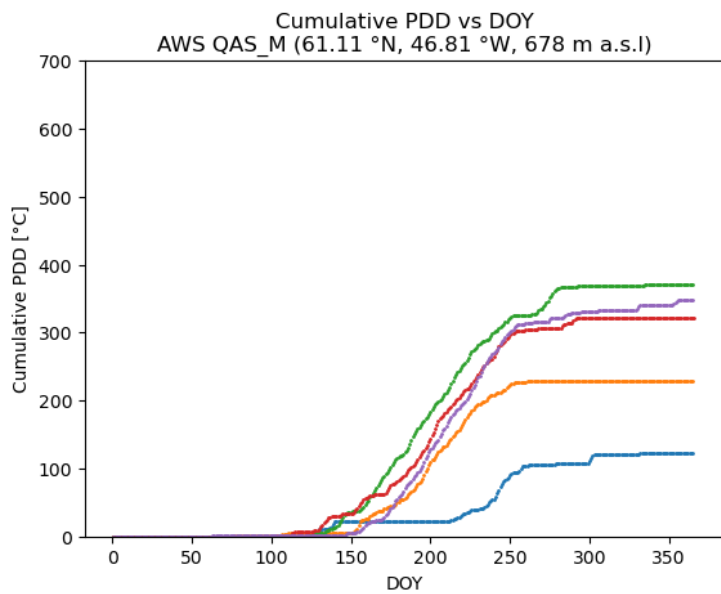
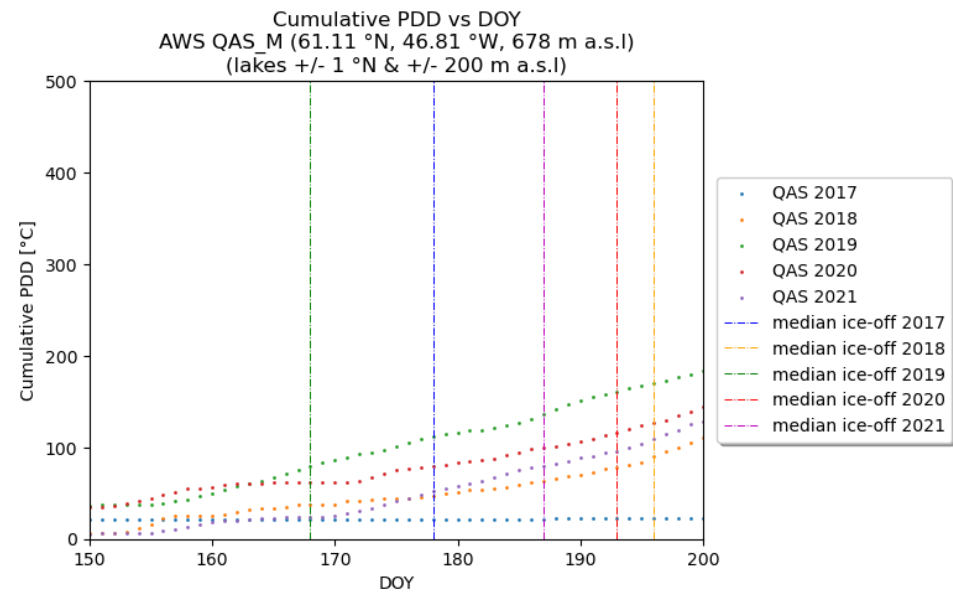
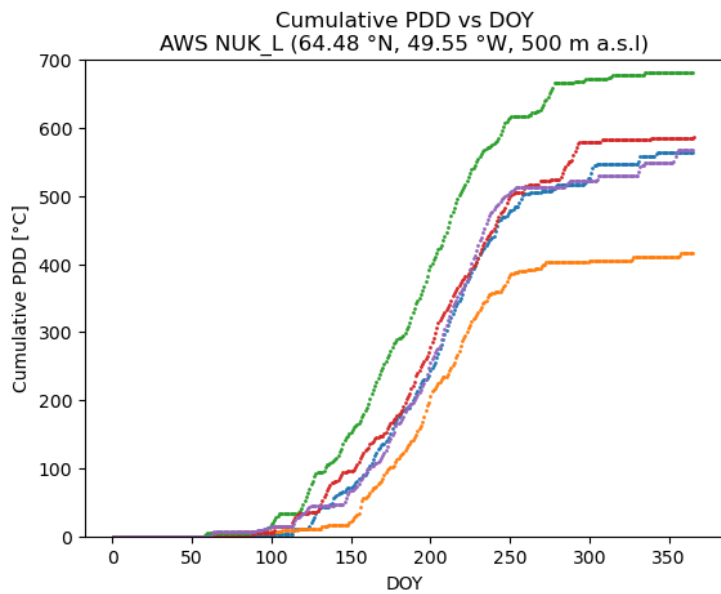
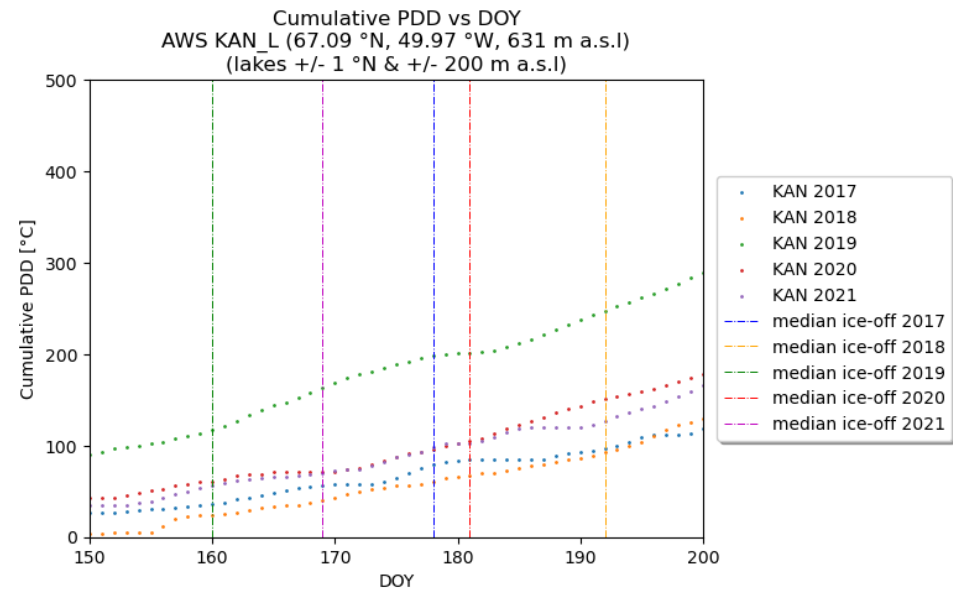
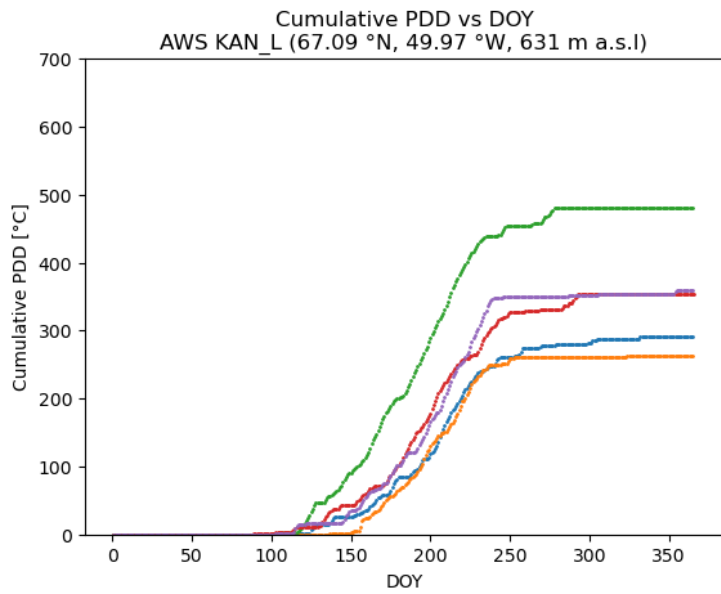
- 135 - 145
- 145 - 155
- 155 - 165
- 165 - 175
- 175 - 185
- 185 - 195
- 195 - 205
- 205 - 215

Elevation [m]

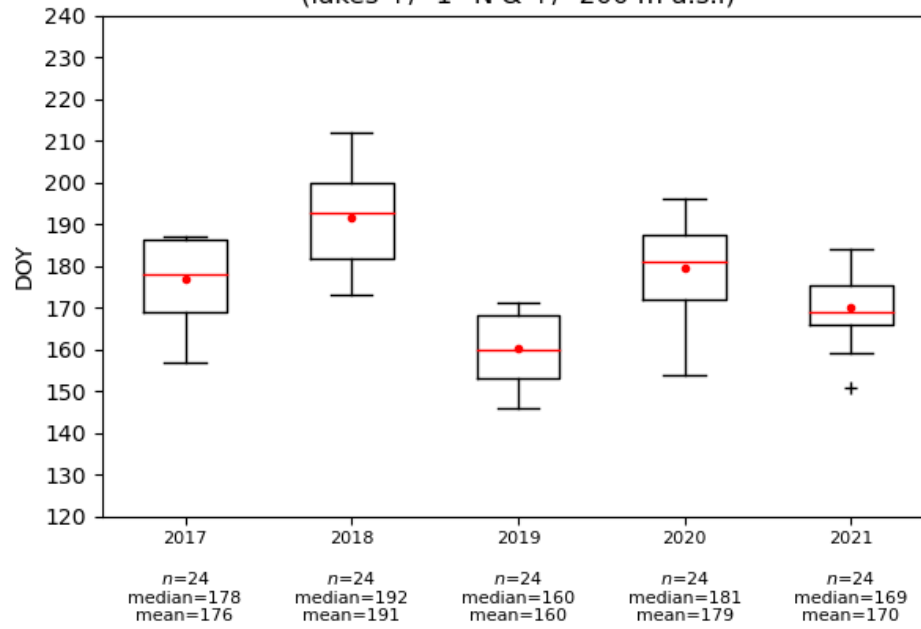


0 250 500 km

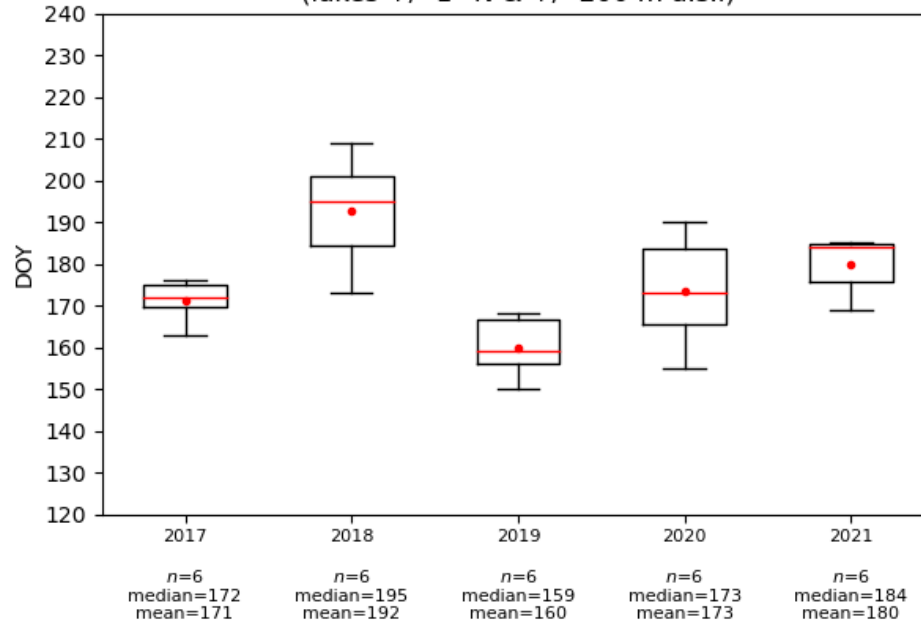




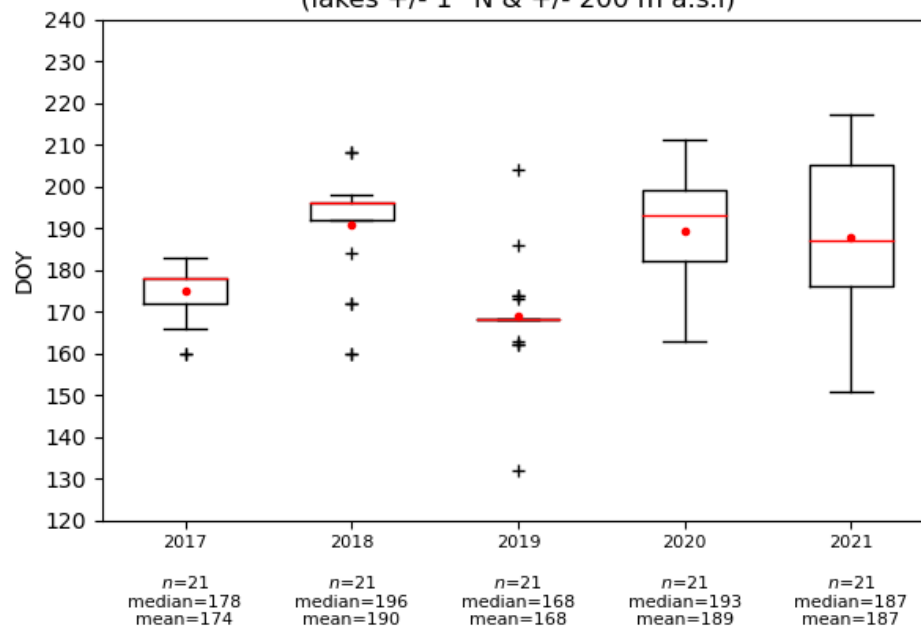
Boxplots (region KAN)
(lakes +/- 1 °N & +/- 200 m a.s.l)



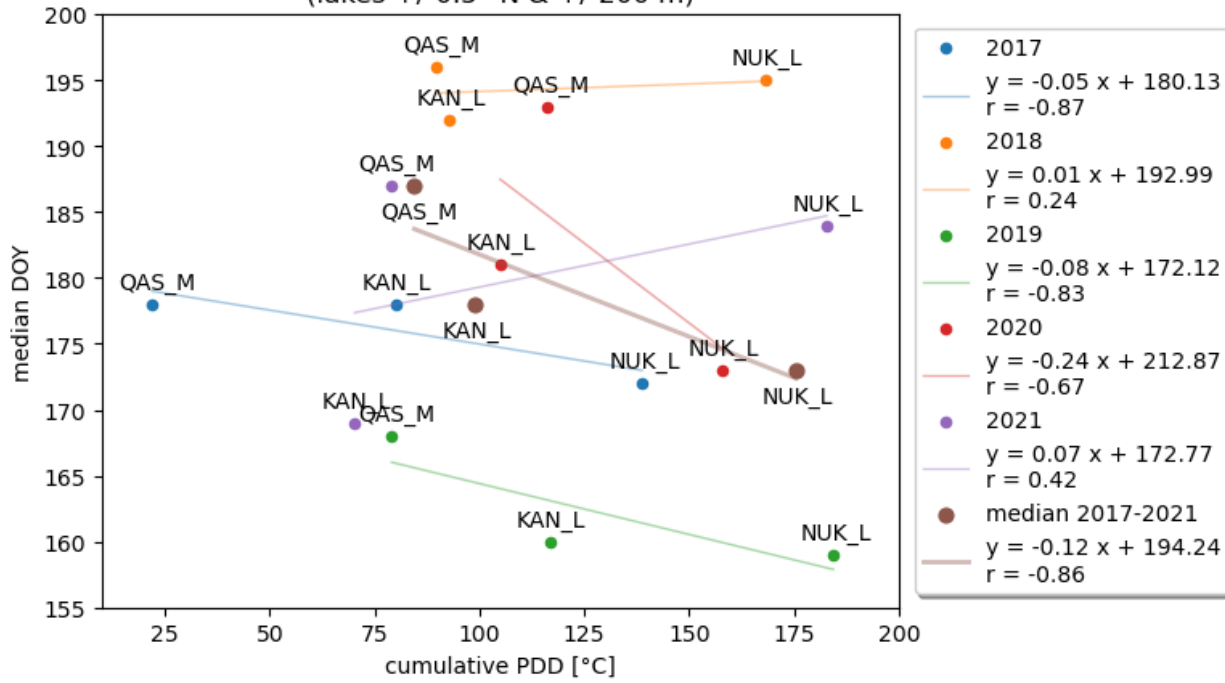
Boxplots (region NUK)
(lakes +/- 1 °N & +/- 200 m a.s.l)



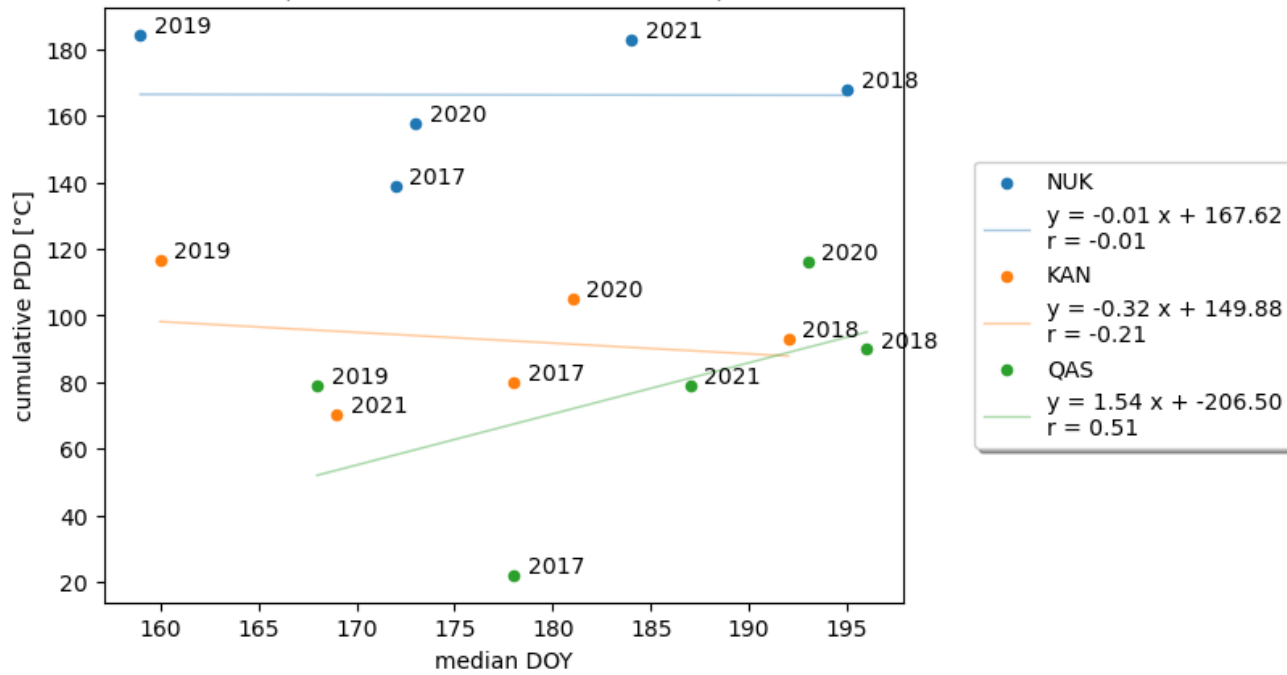
Boxplots (region QAS)
(lakes +/- 1 °N & +/- 200 m a.s.l)

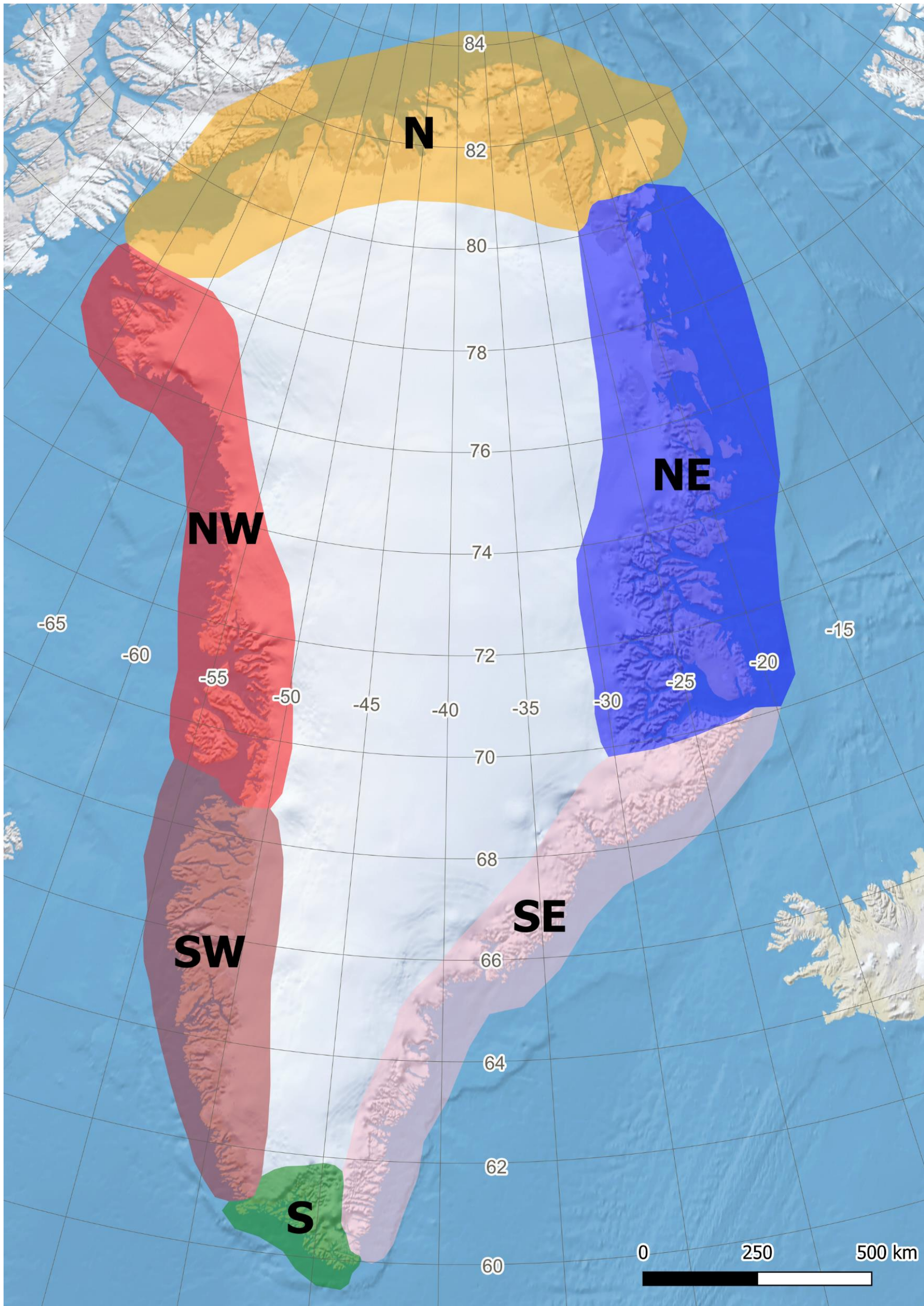


Median DOY vs cumulative PDD for KAN_L, NUK_L & QAS_M
(lakes +/-0.5 °N & +/-200 m)

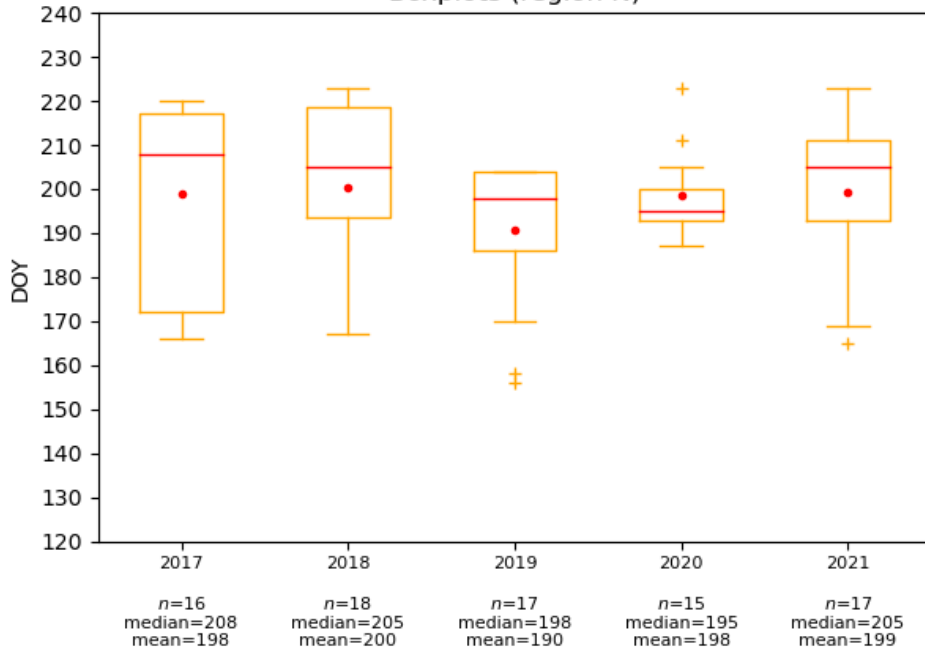


Cumulative PDD vs median DOY for KAN, NUK & QAS
(lakes +/- 1 °N & +/- 200 m a.s.l)

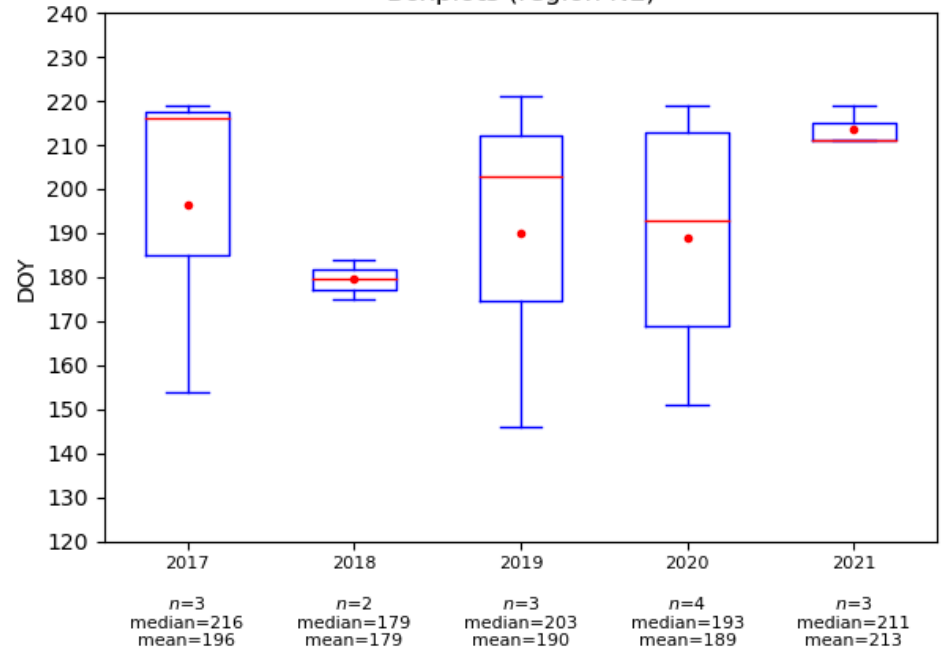




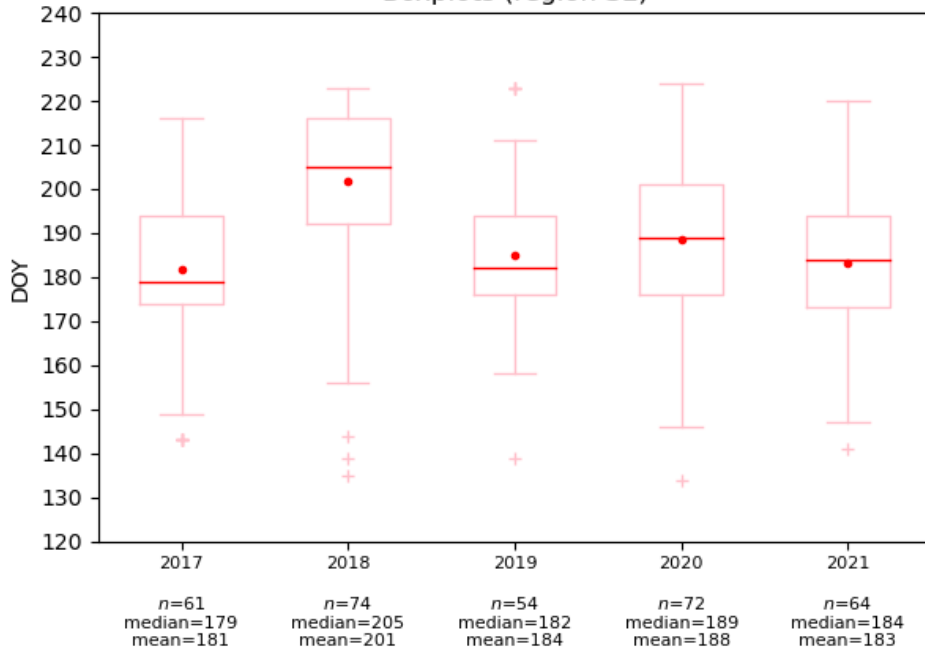
Boxplots (region N)



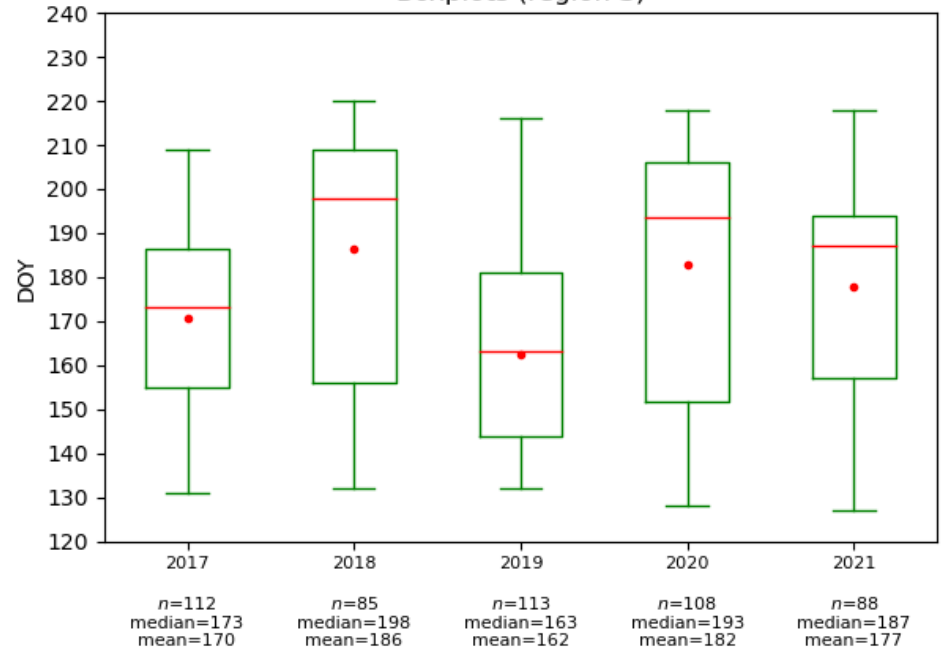
Boxplots (region NE)



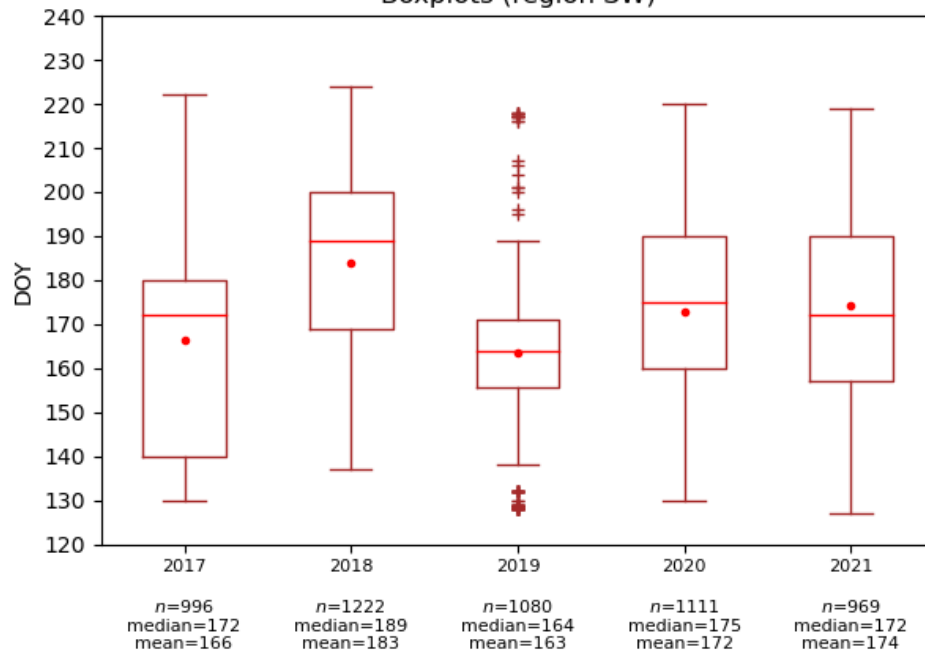
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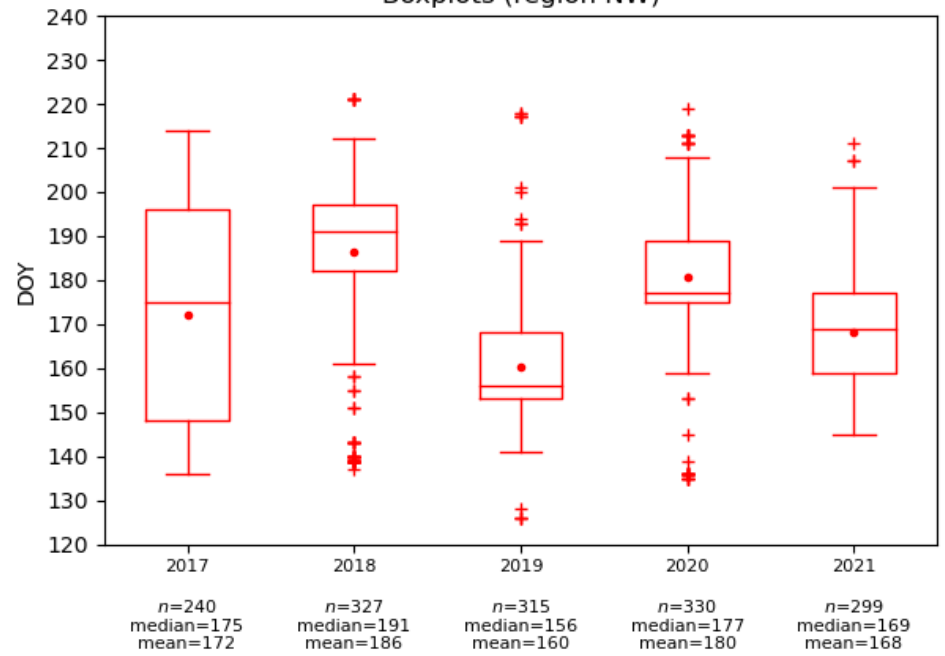
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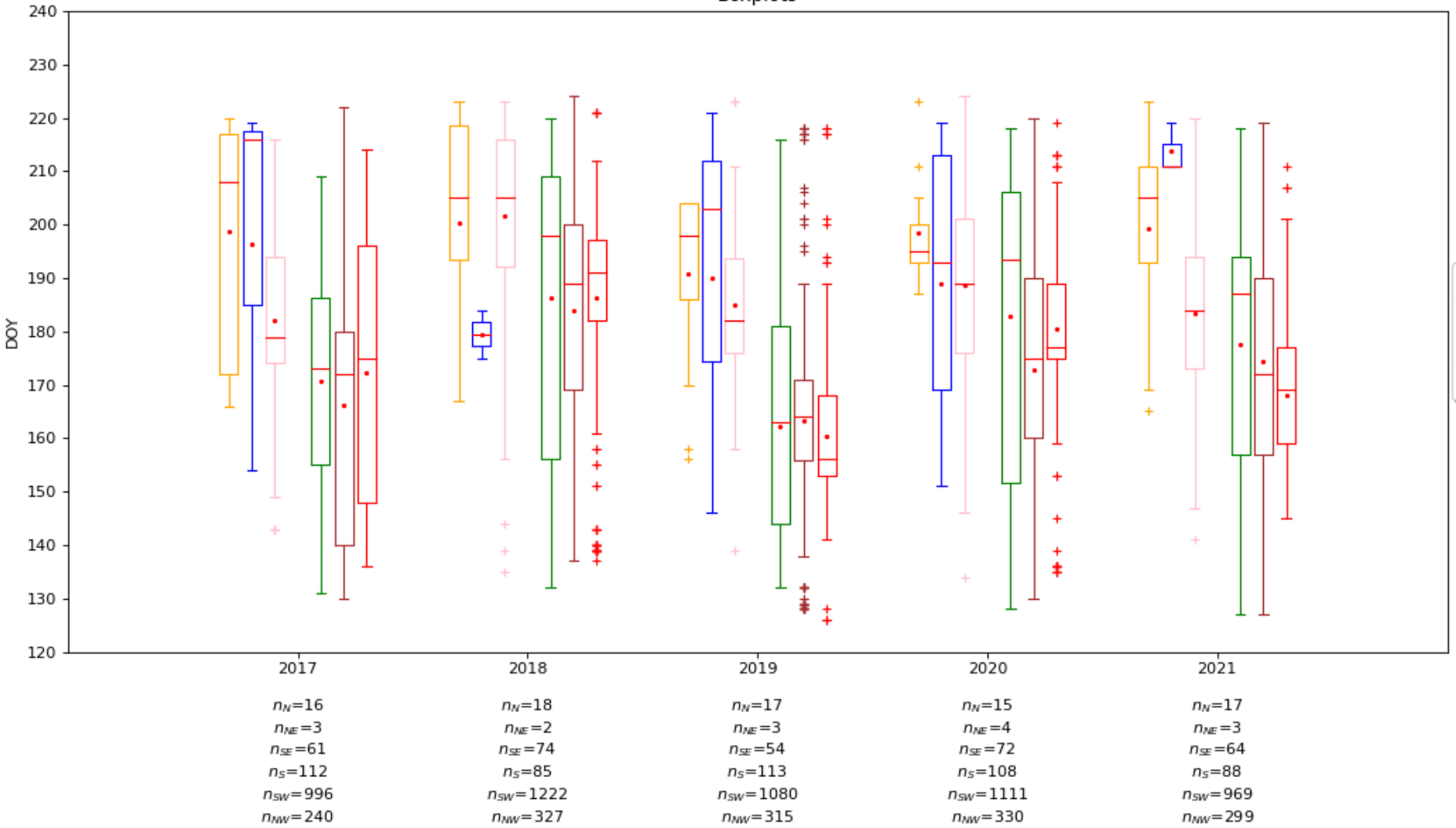
Boxplots (region SW)



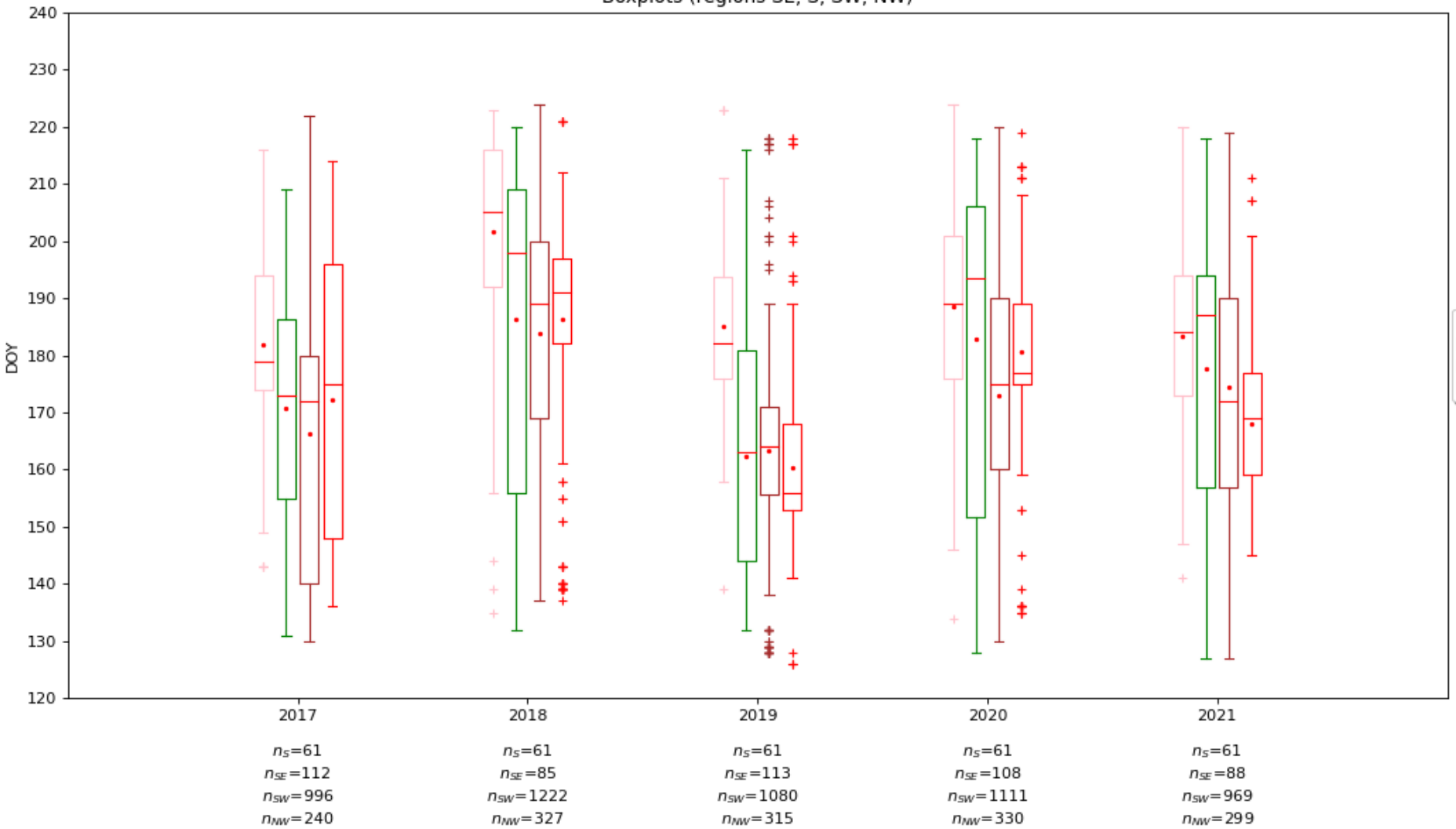
Boxplots (region NW)

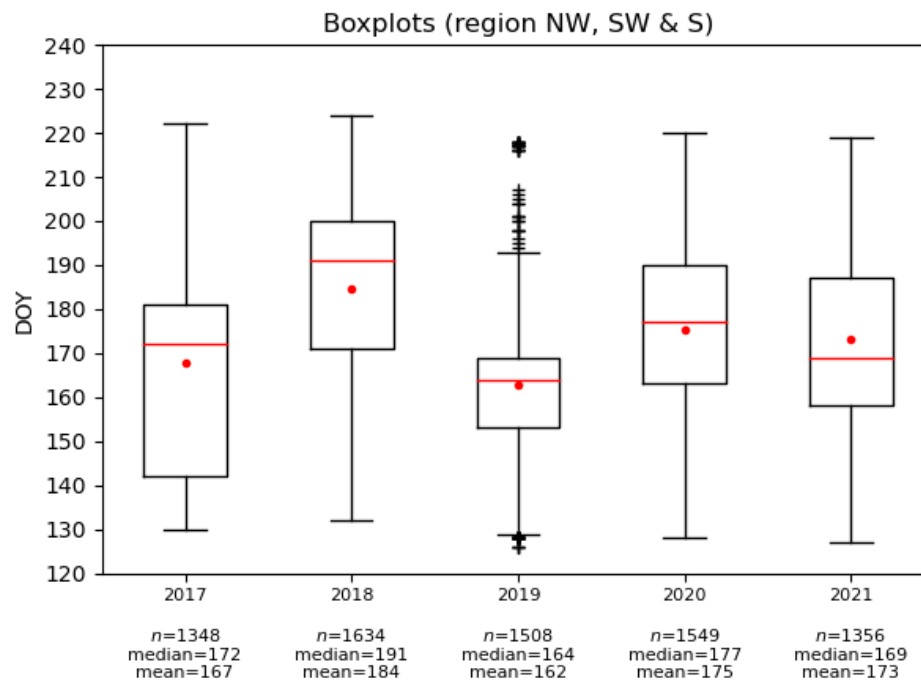
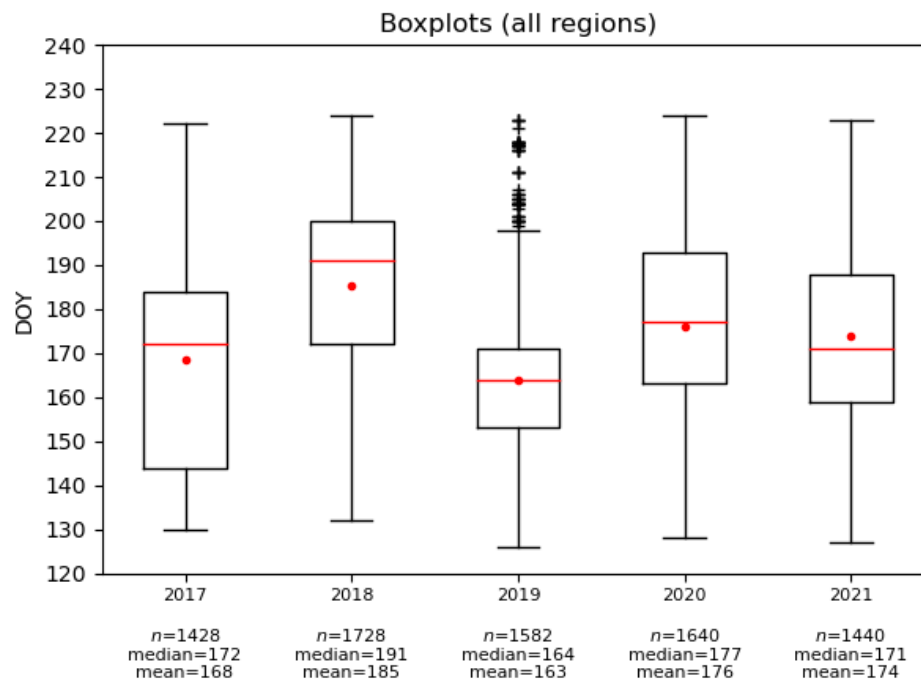


Boxplots

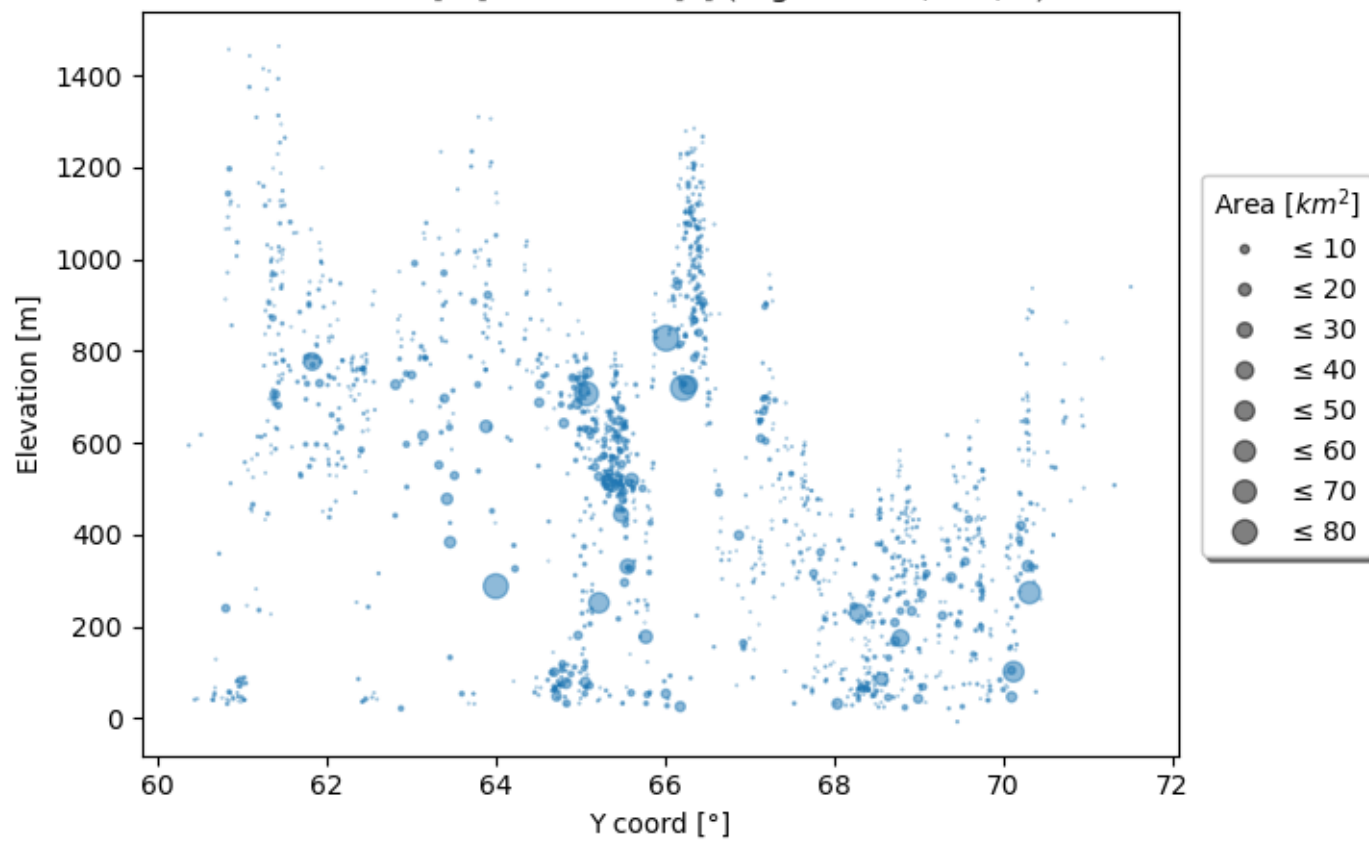


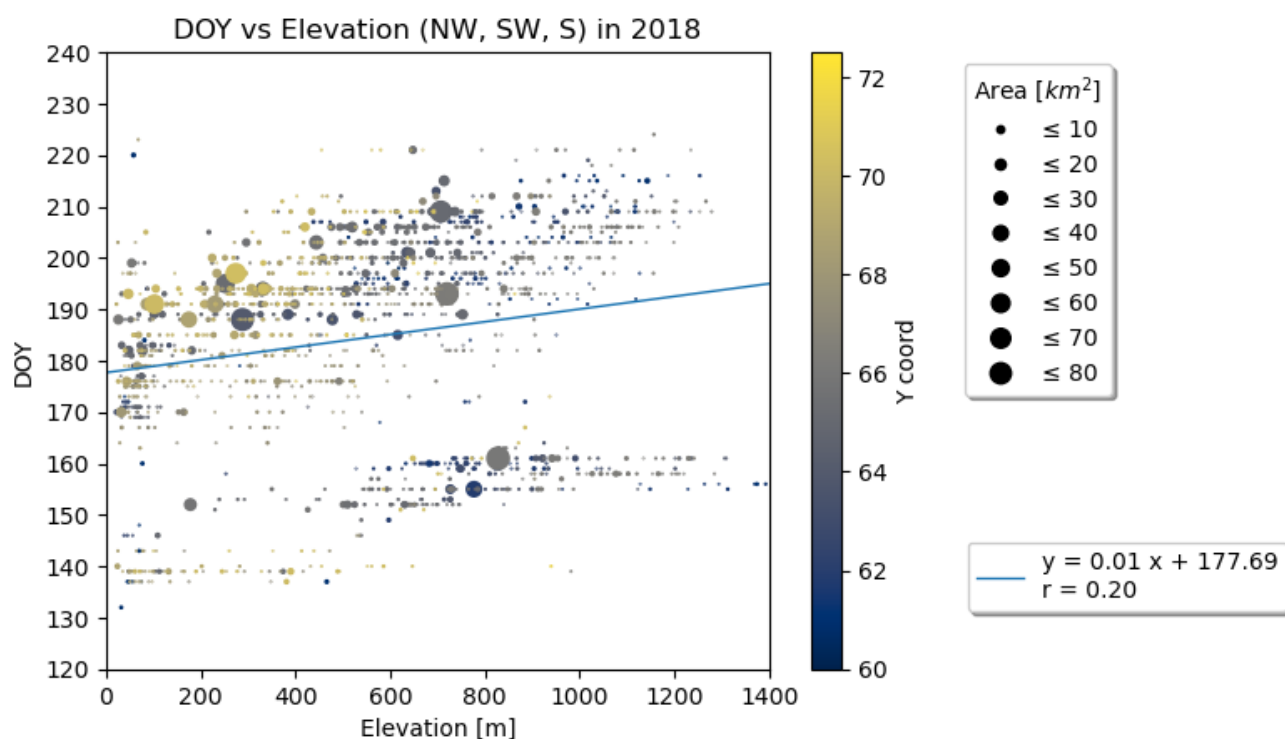
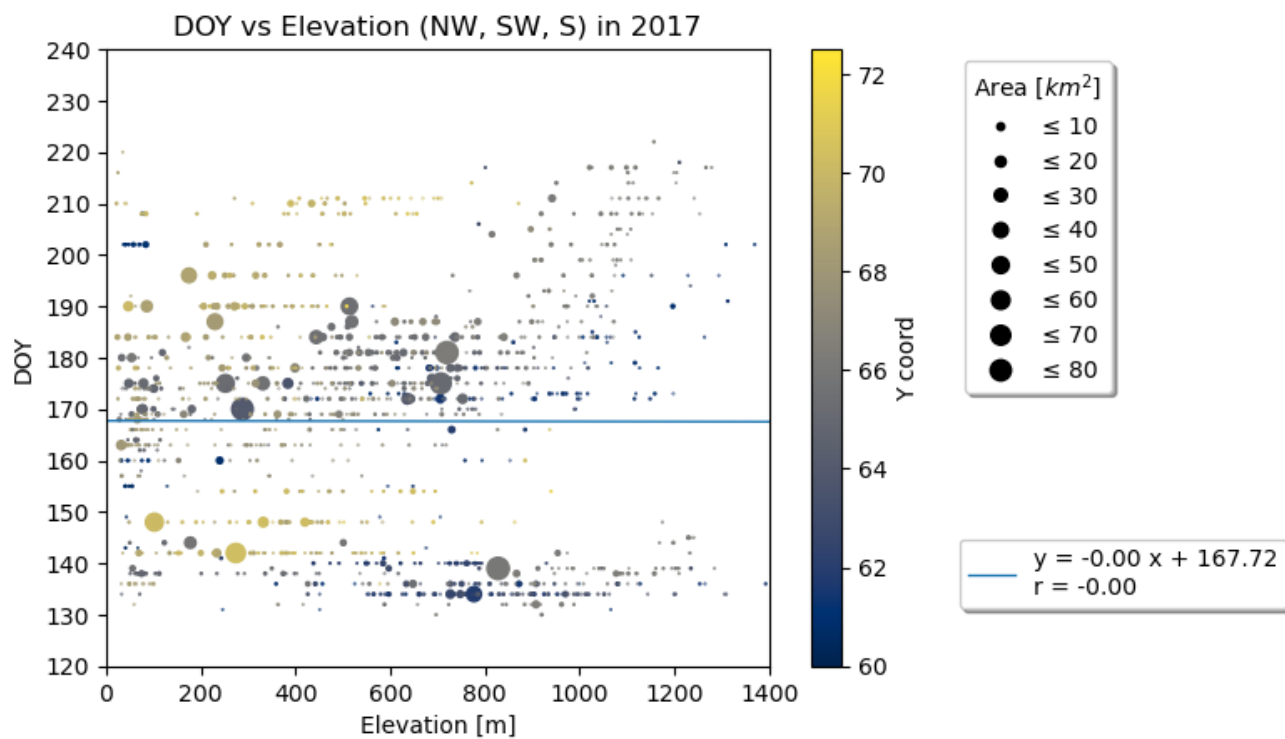
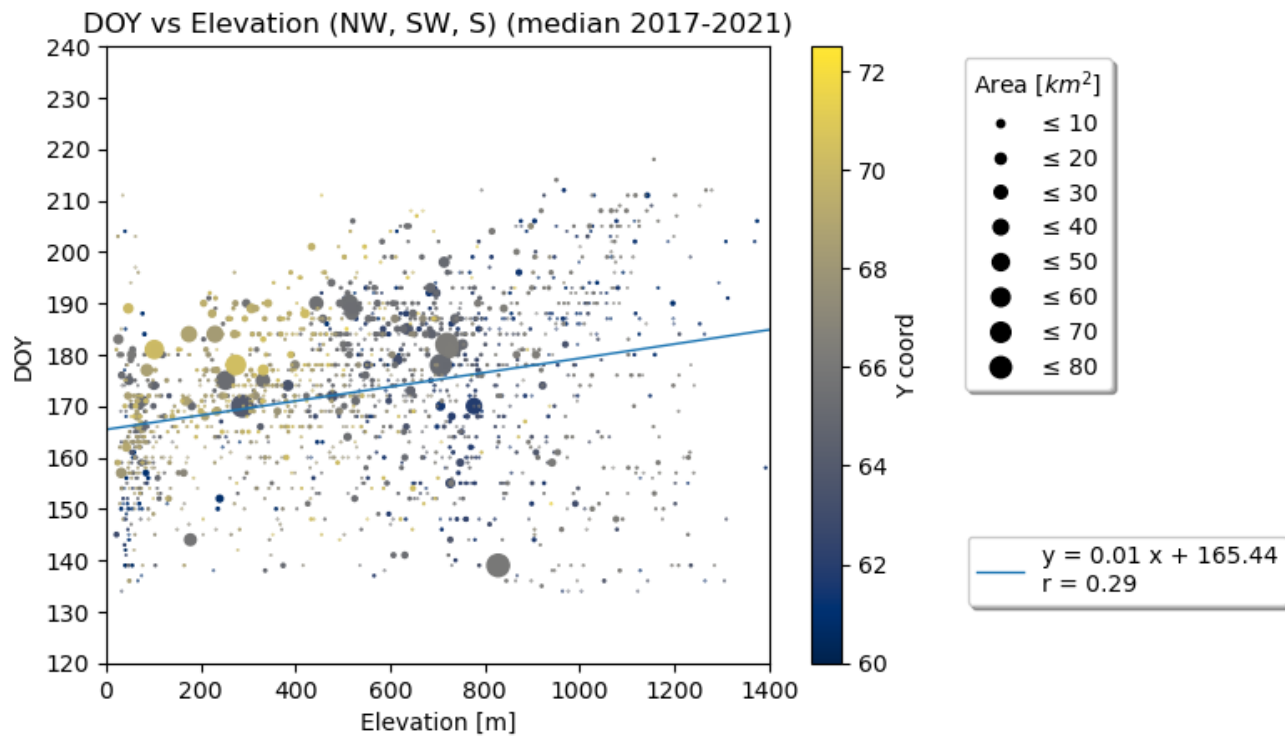
Boxplots (regions SE, S, SW, NW)

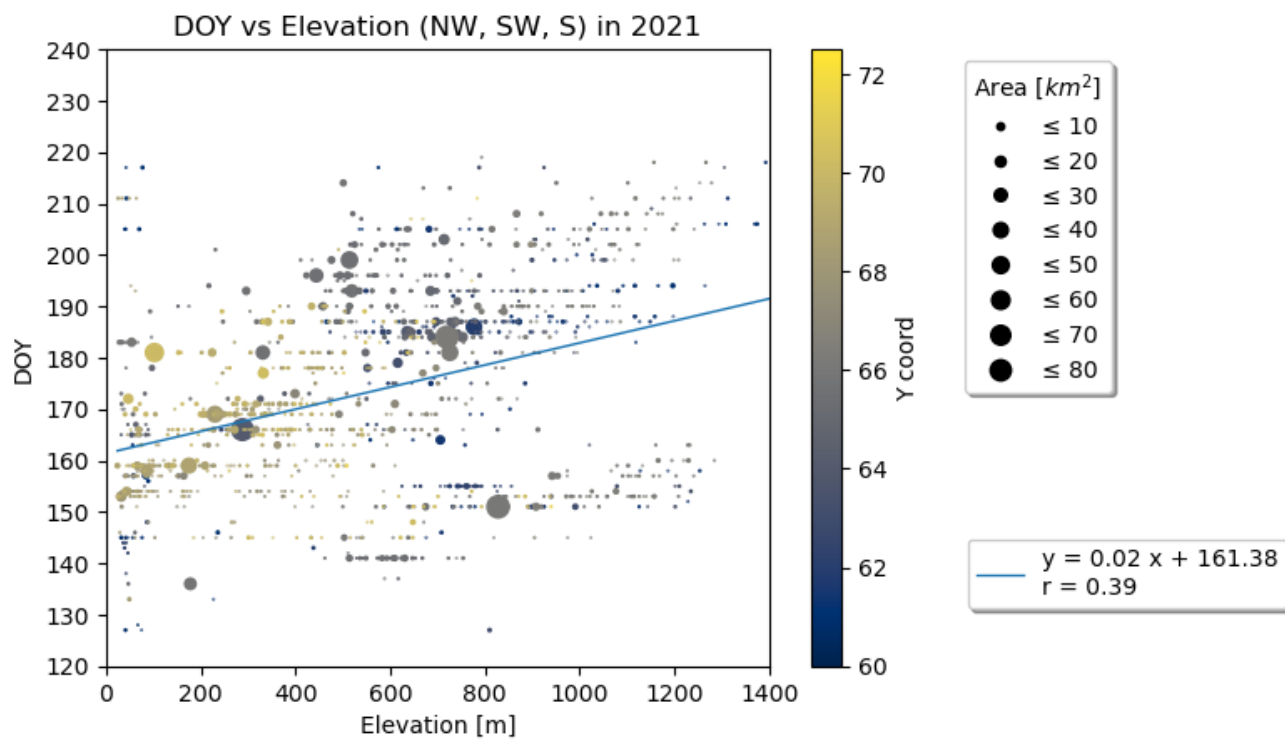
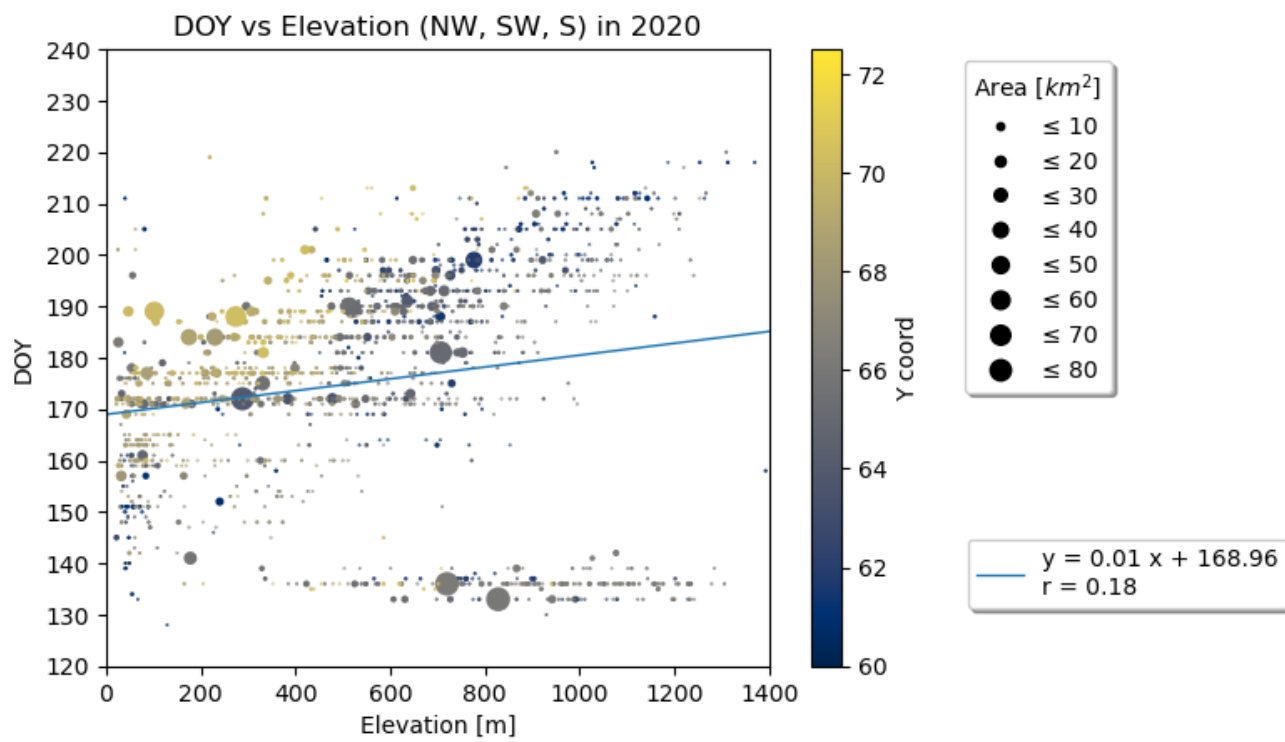
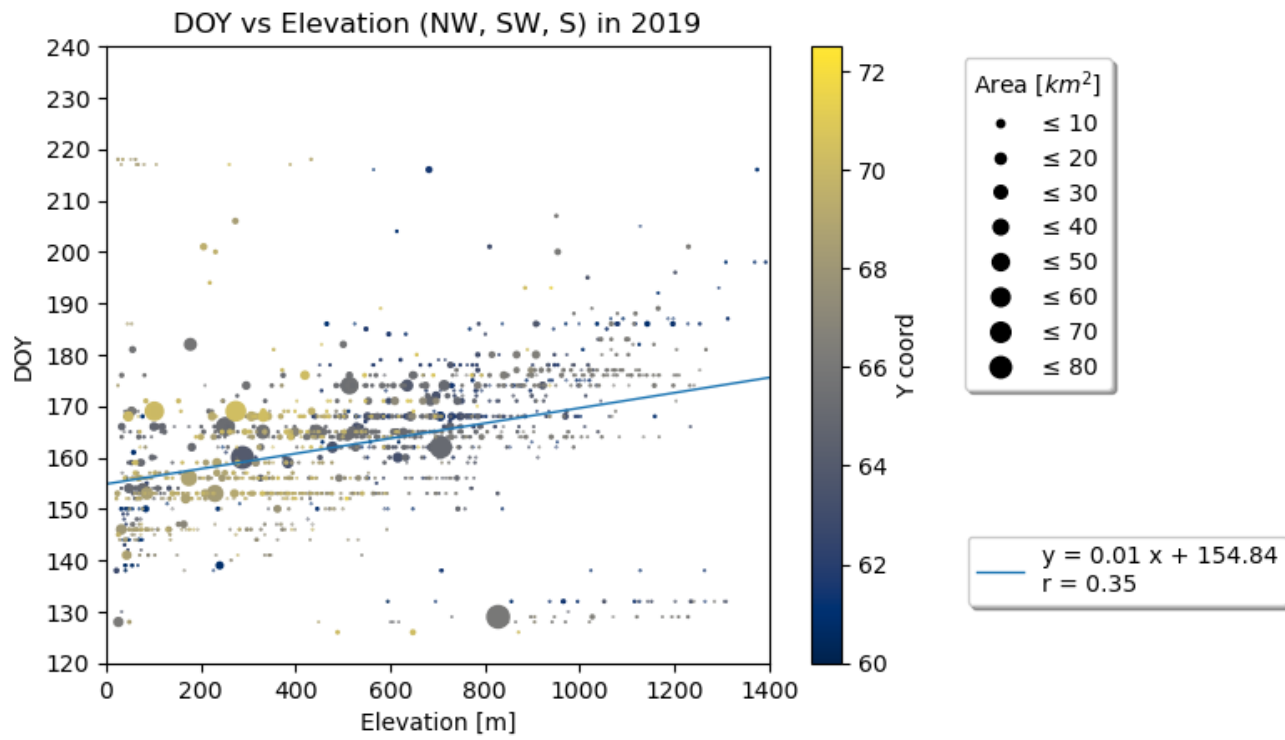


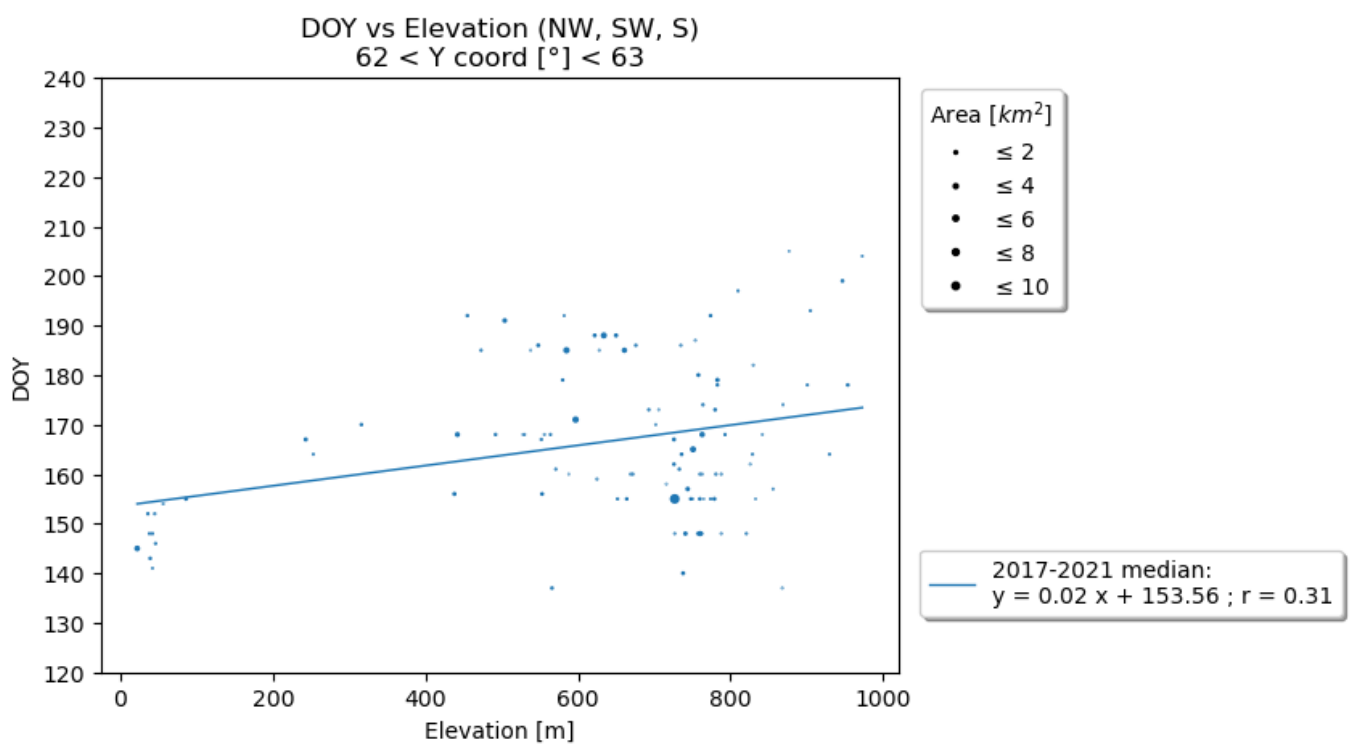
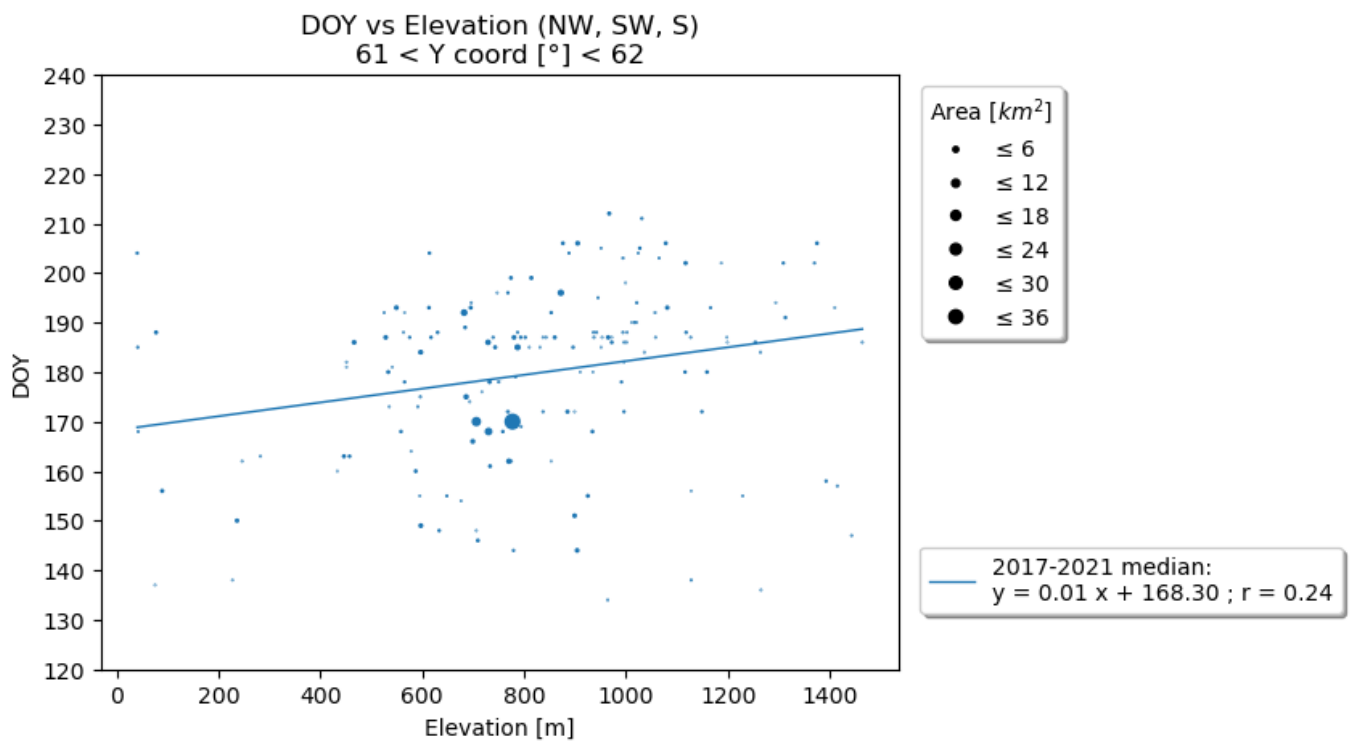
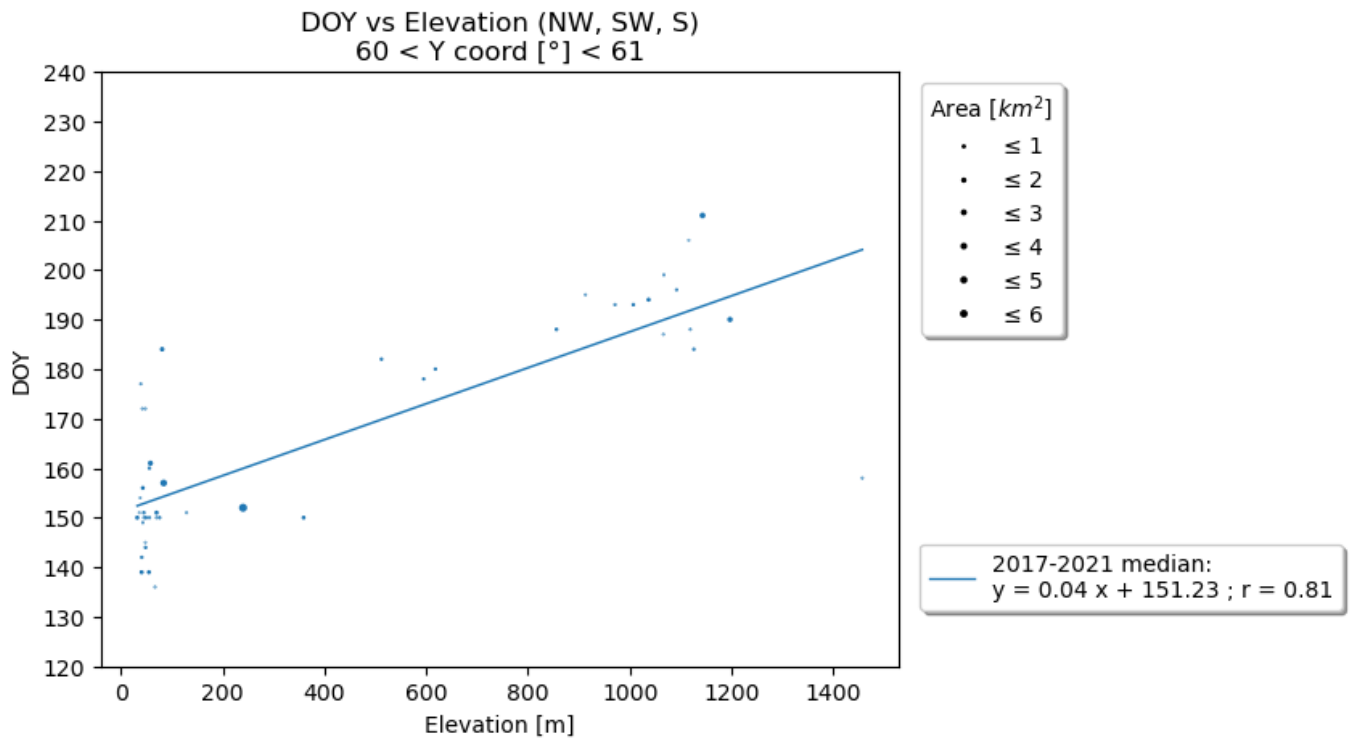


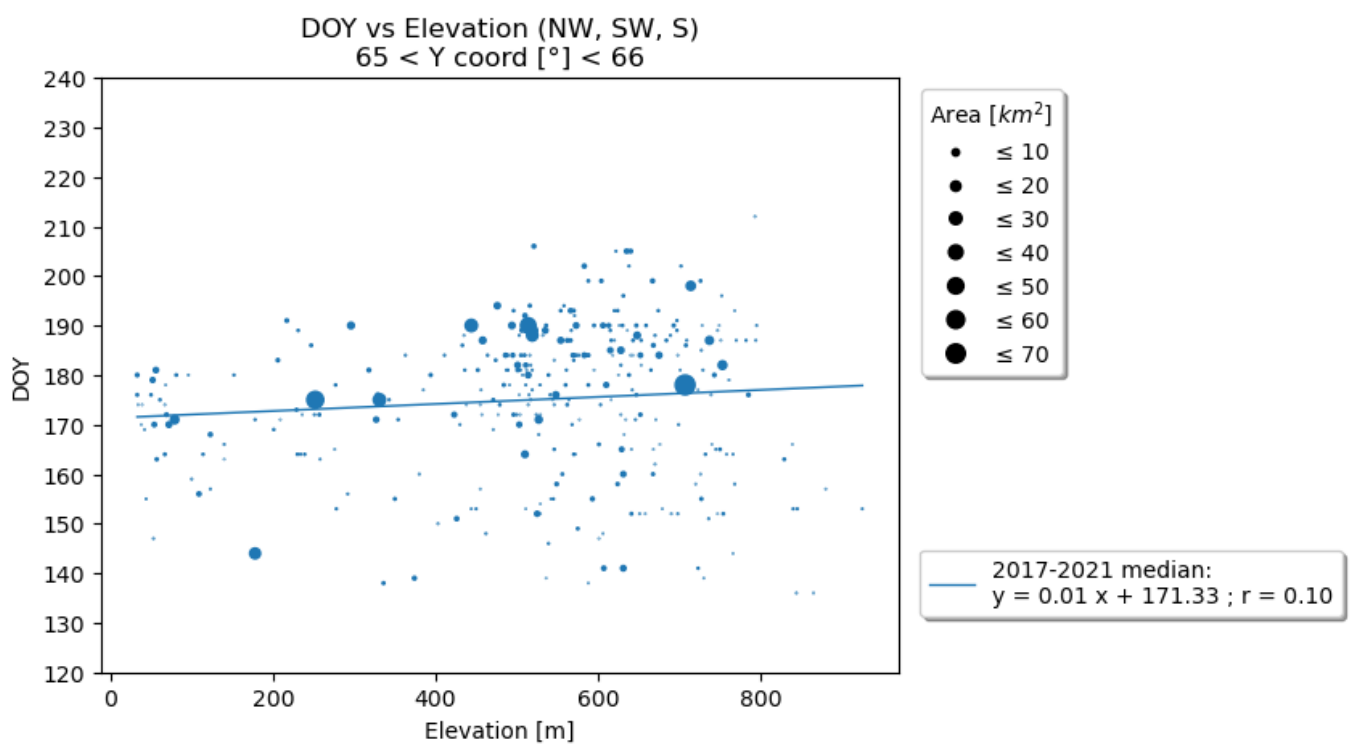
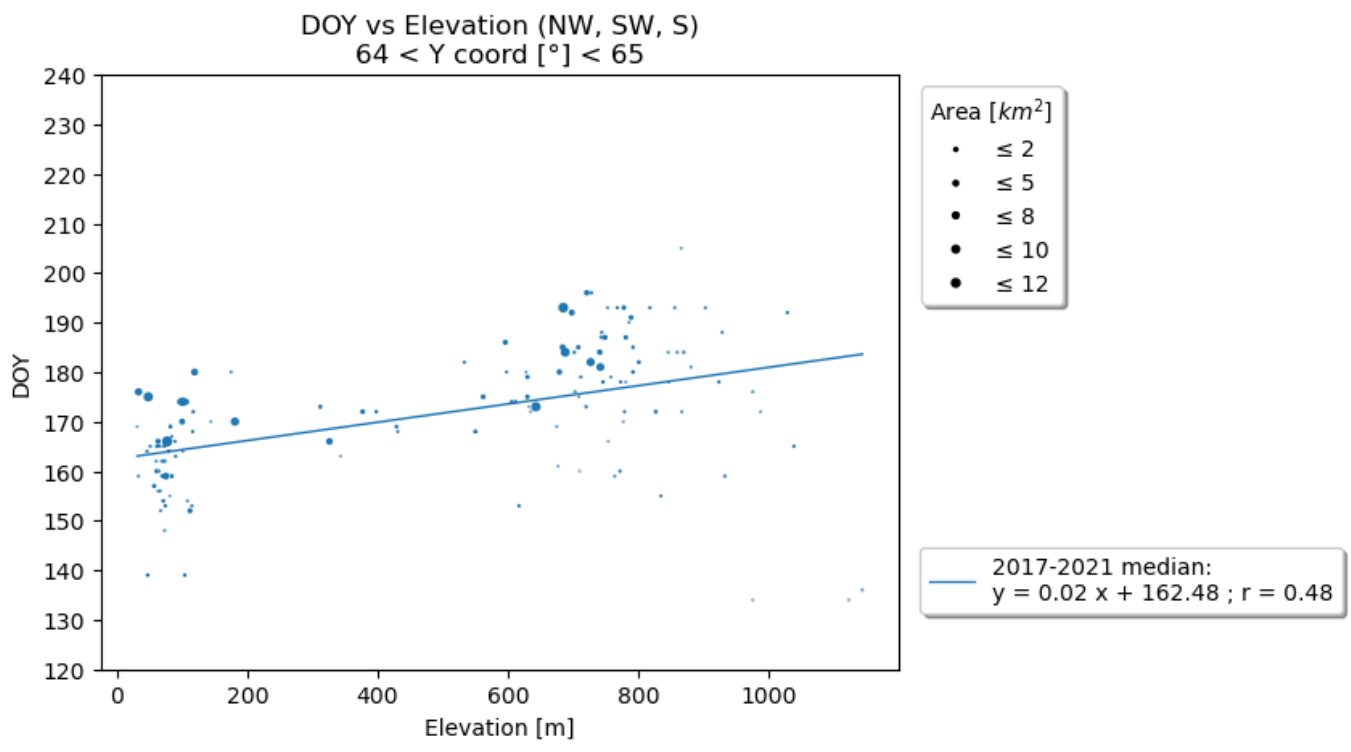
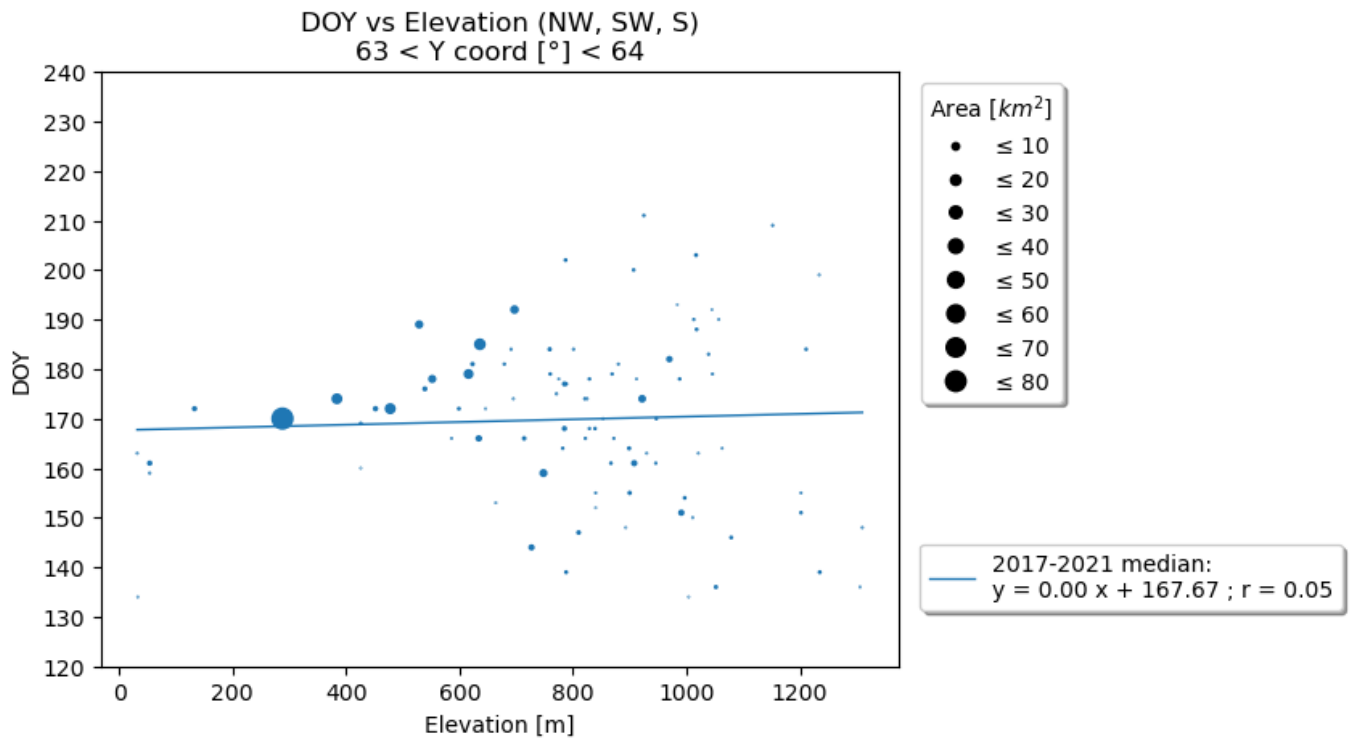
Elevation [m] vs Y coord [°] (regions NW, SW, S)

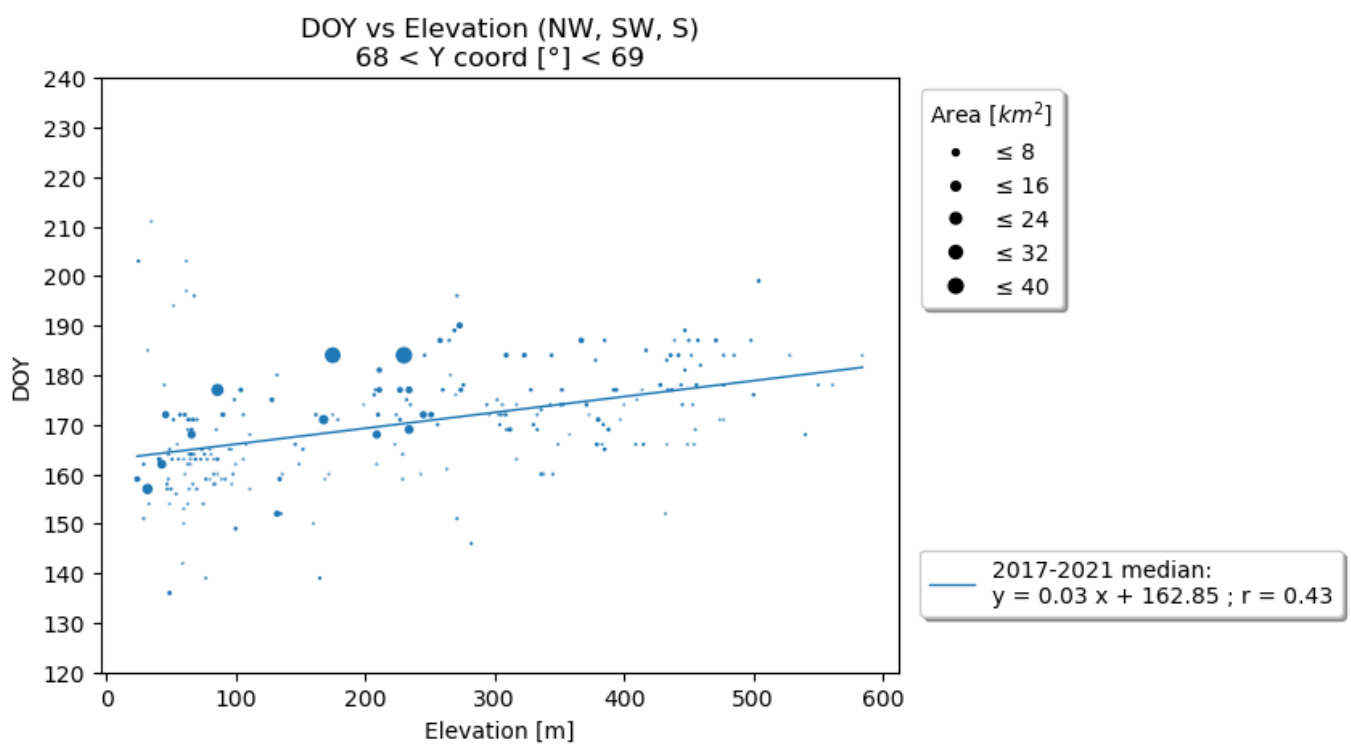
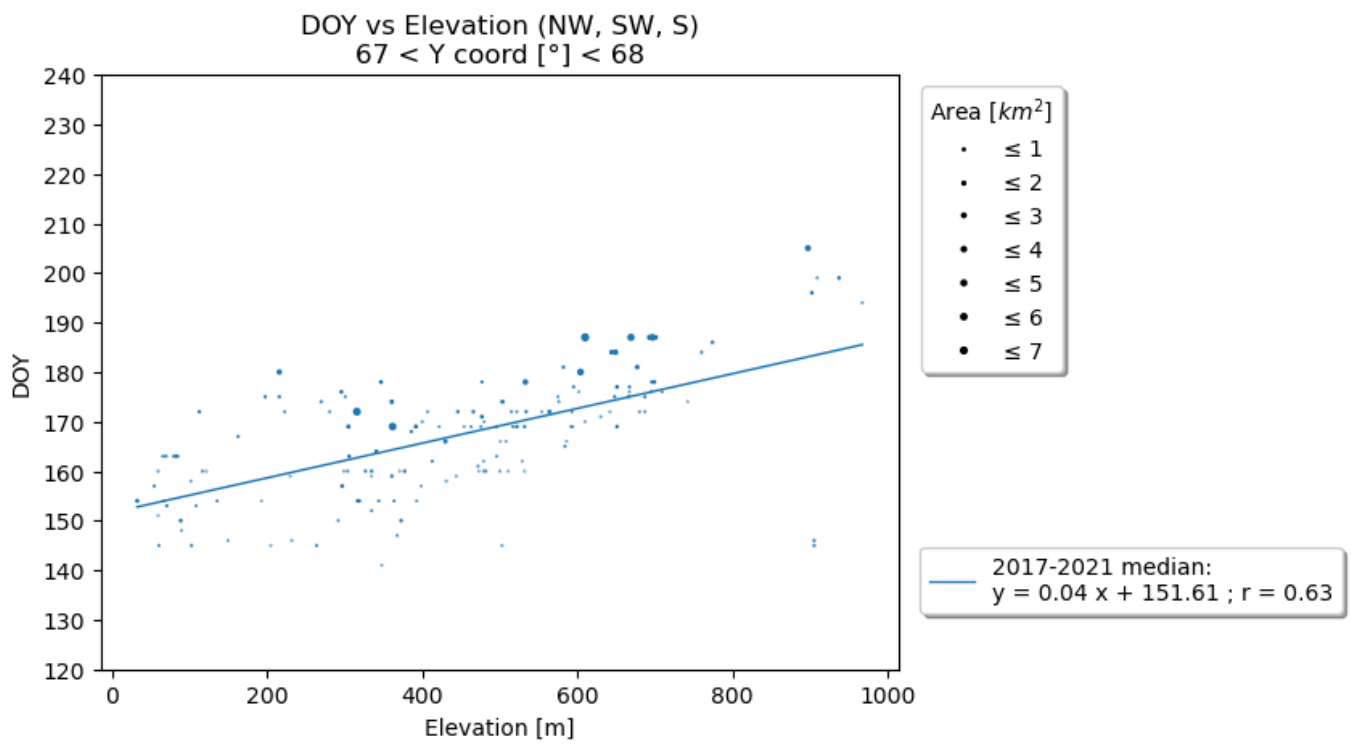
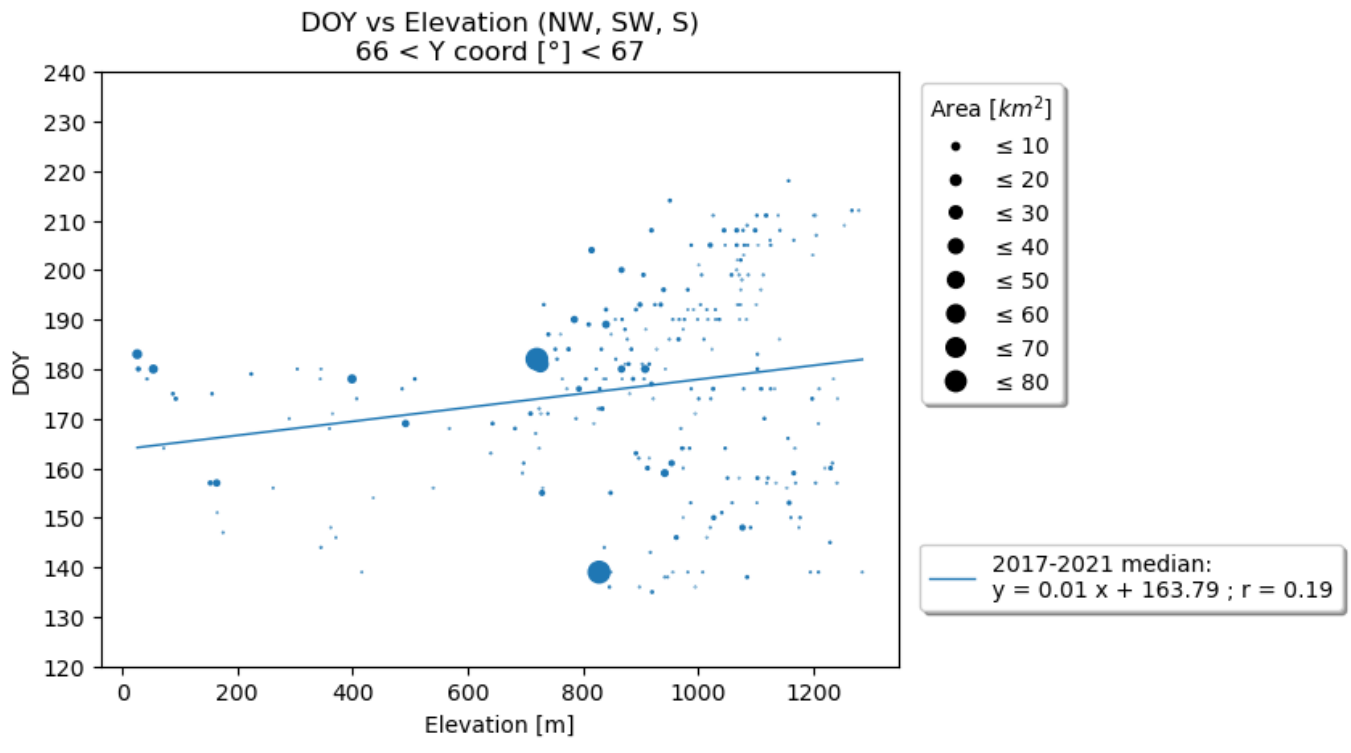


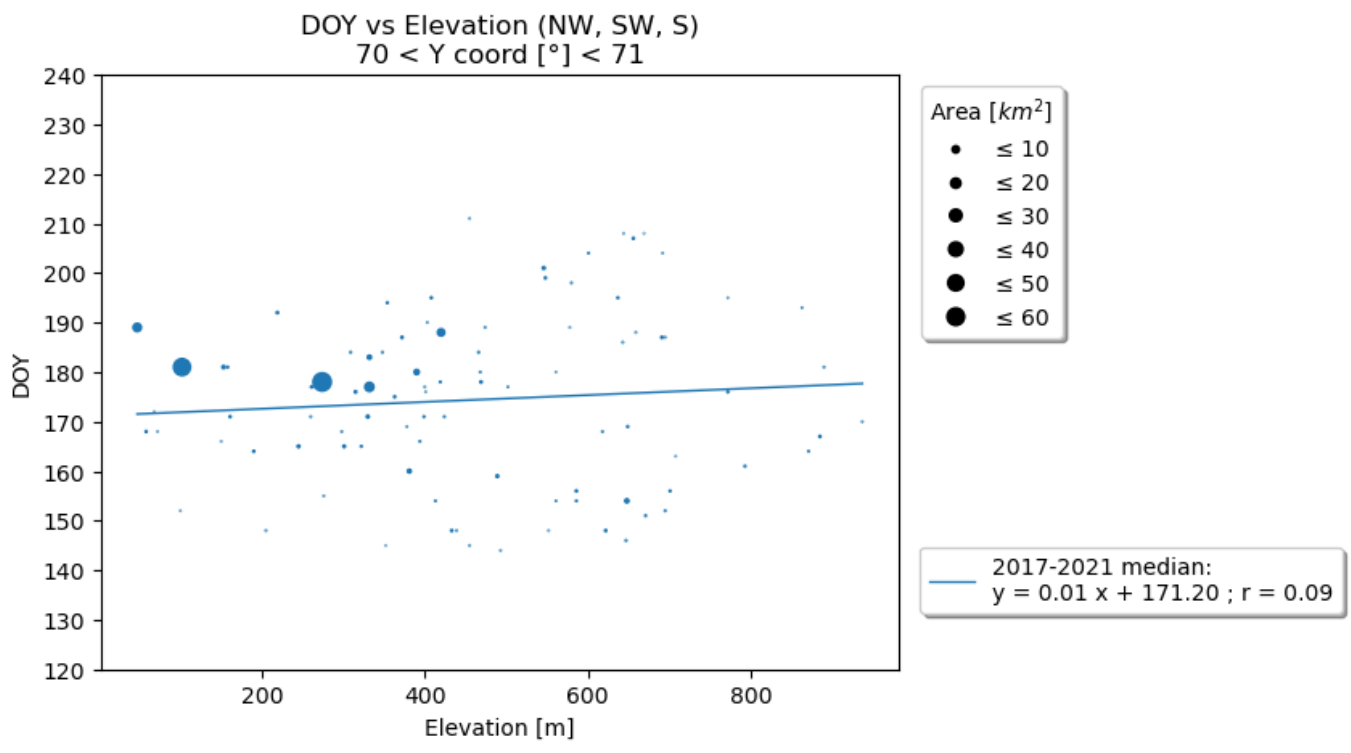
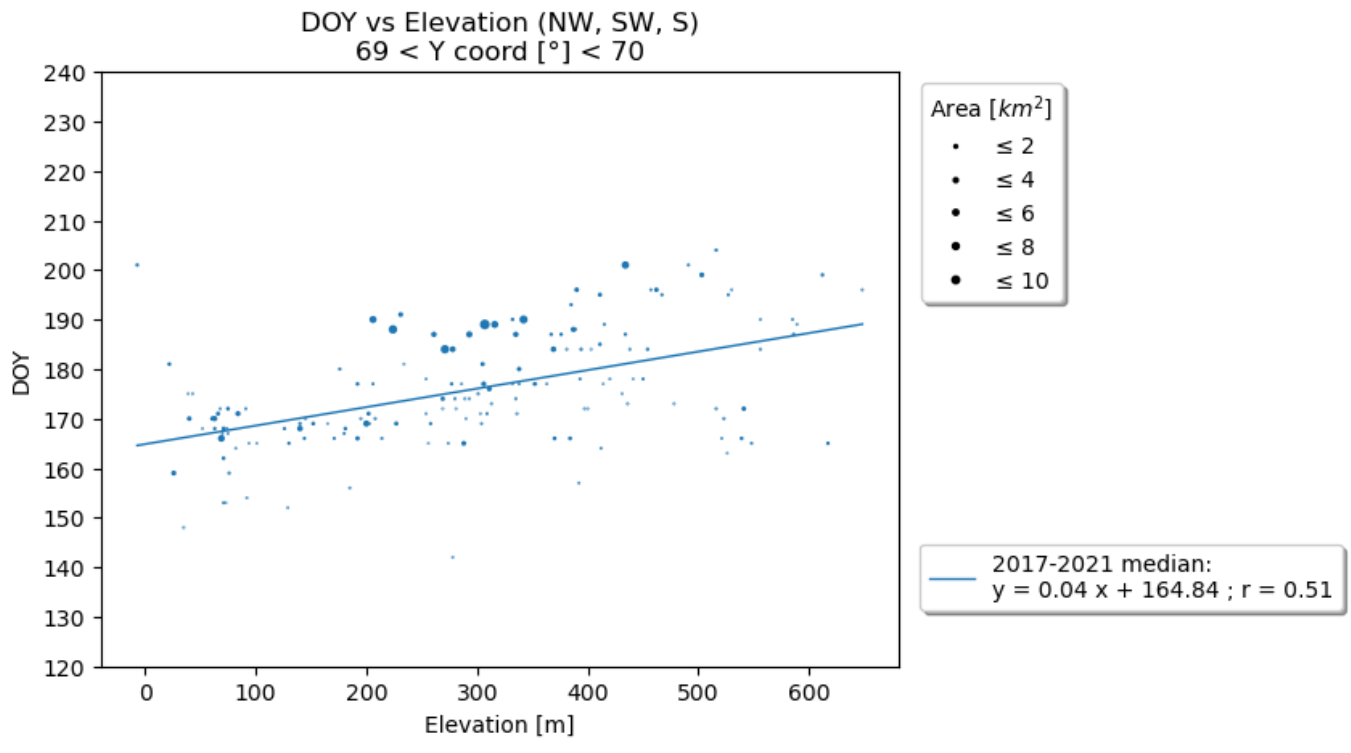


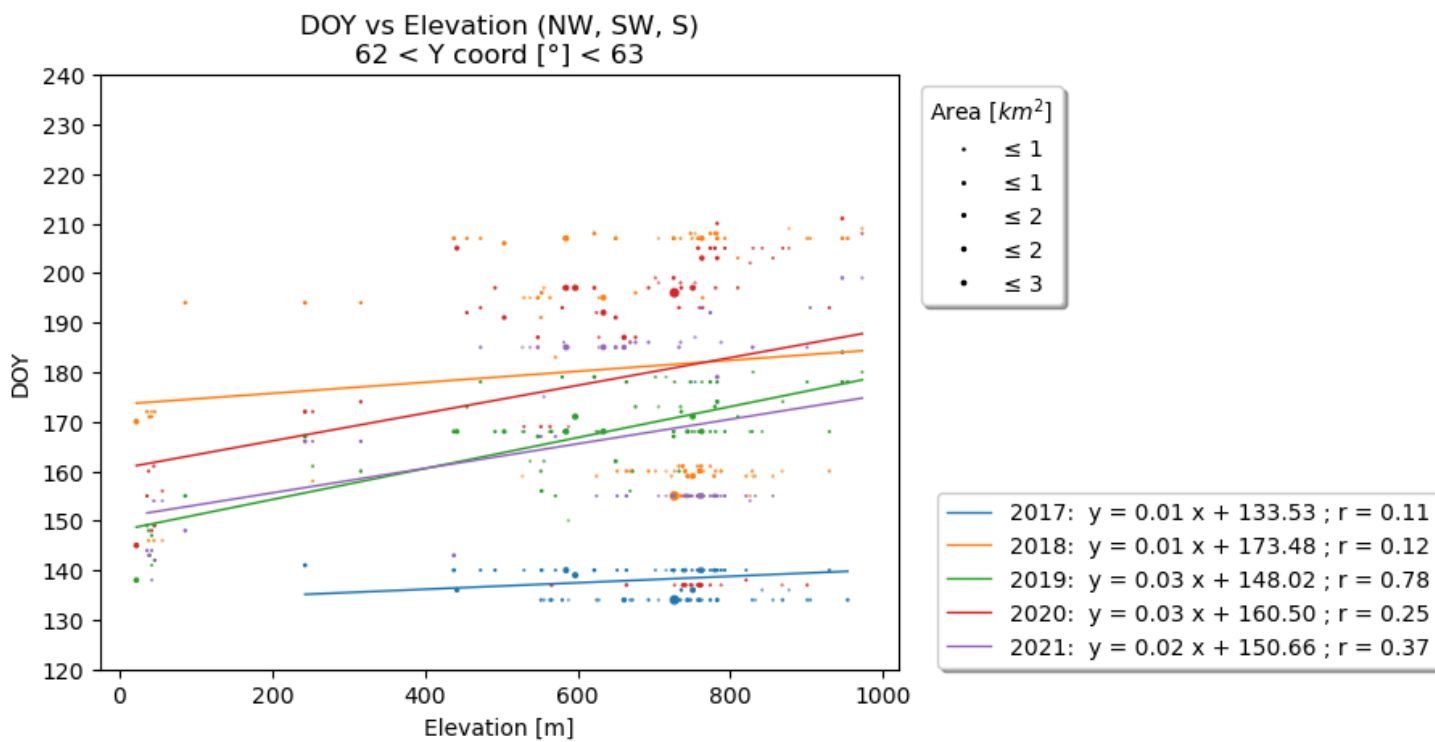
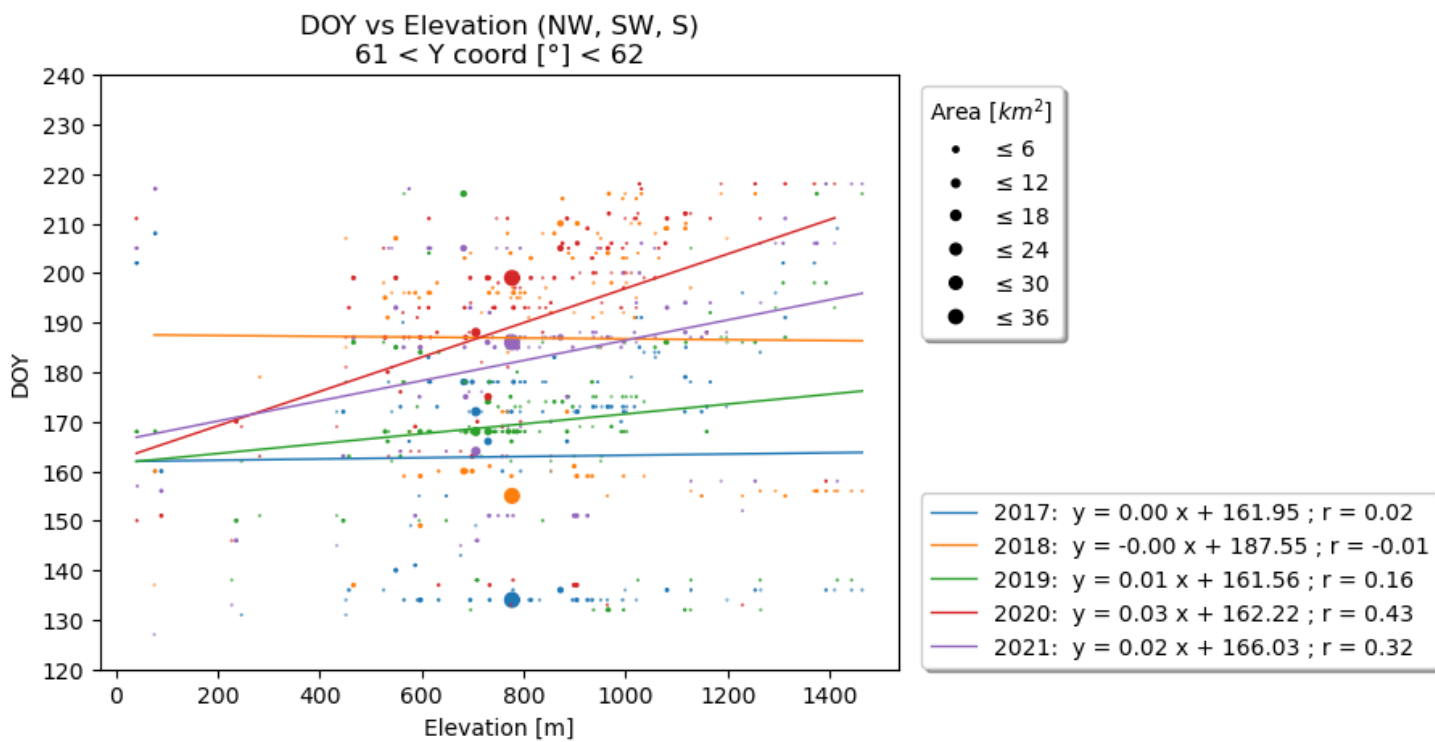
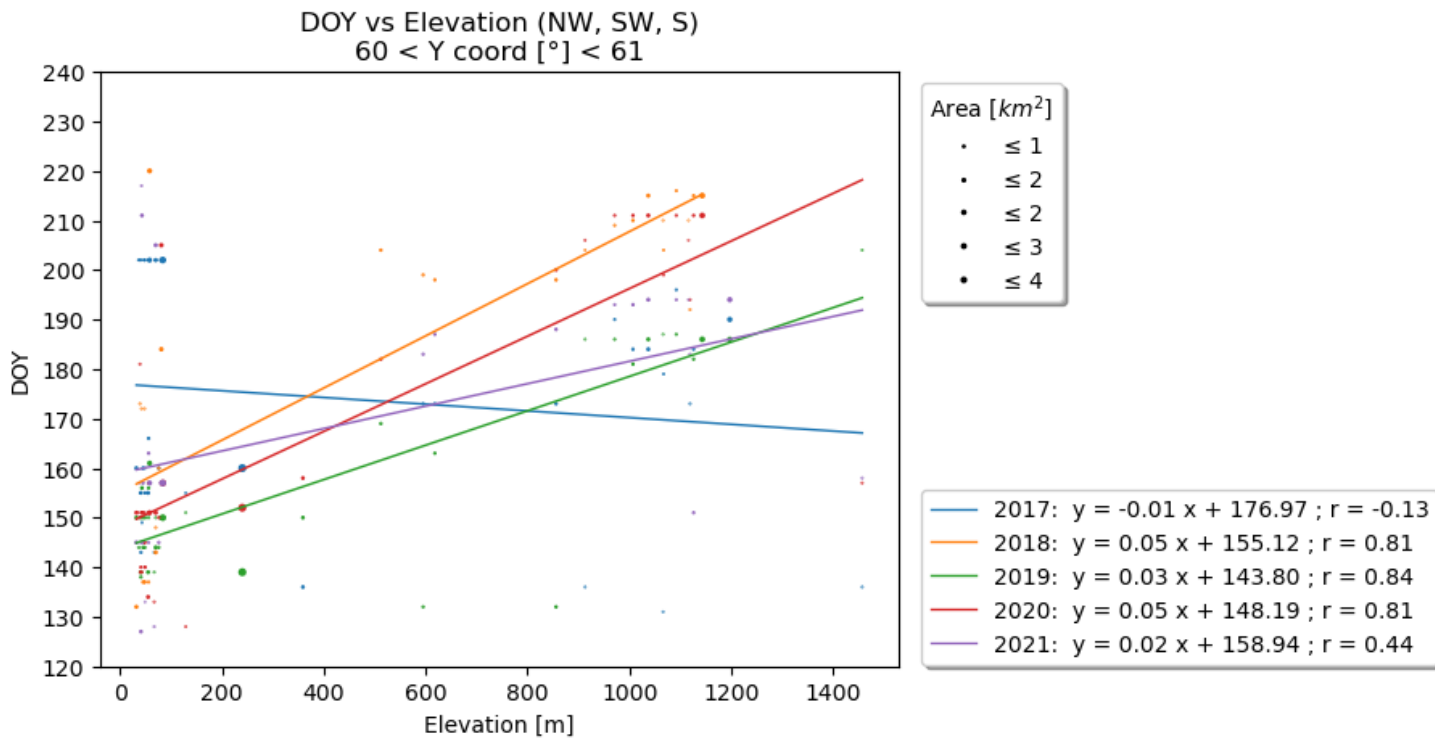


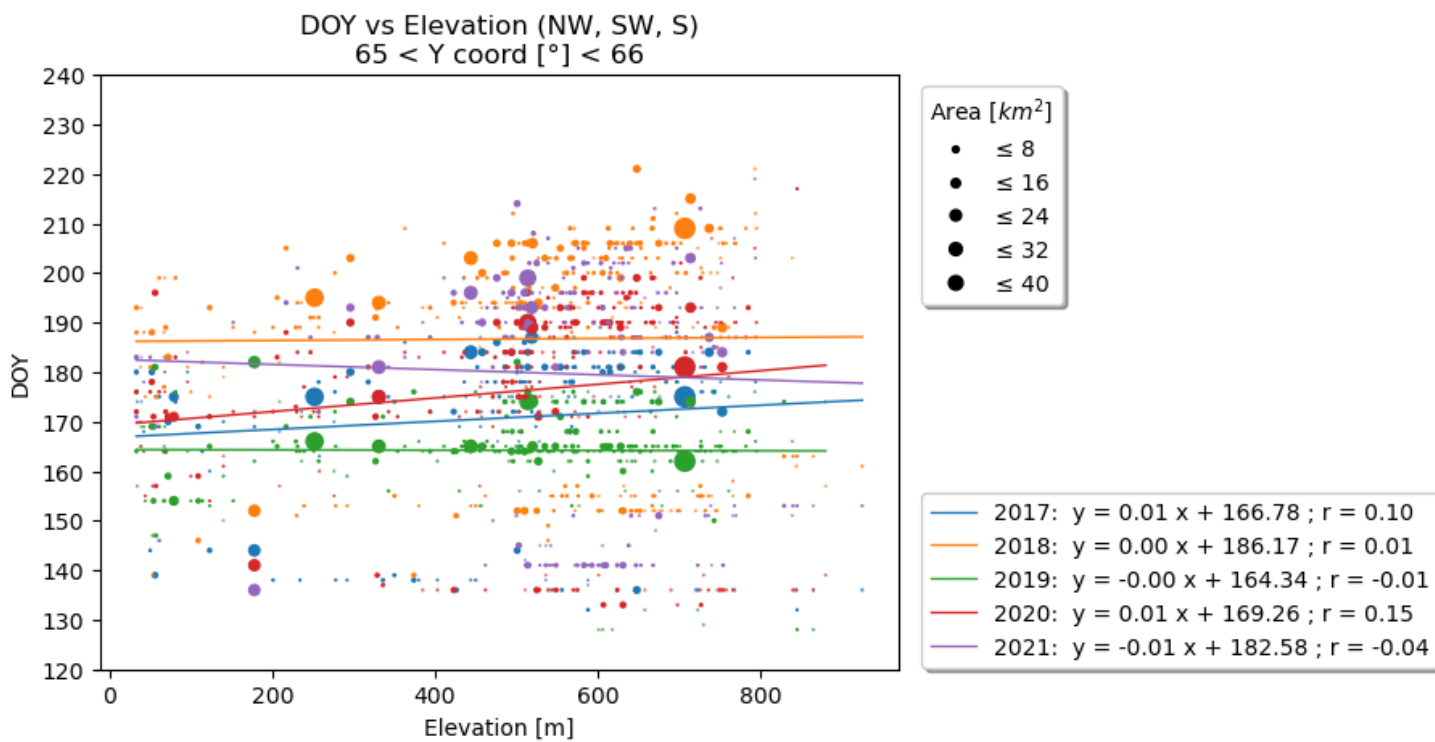
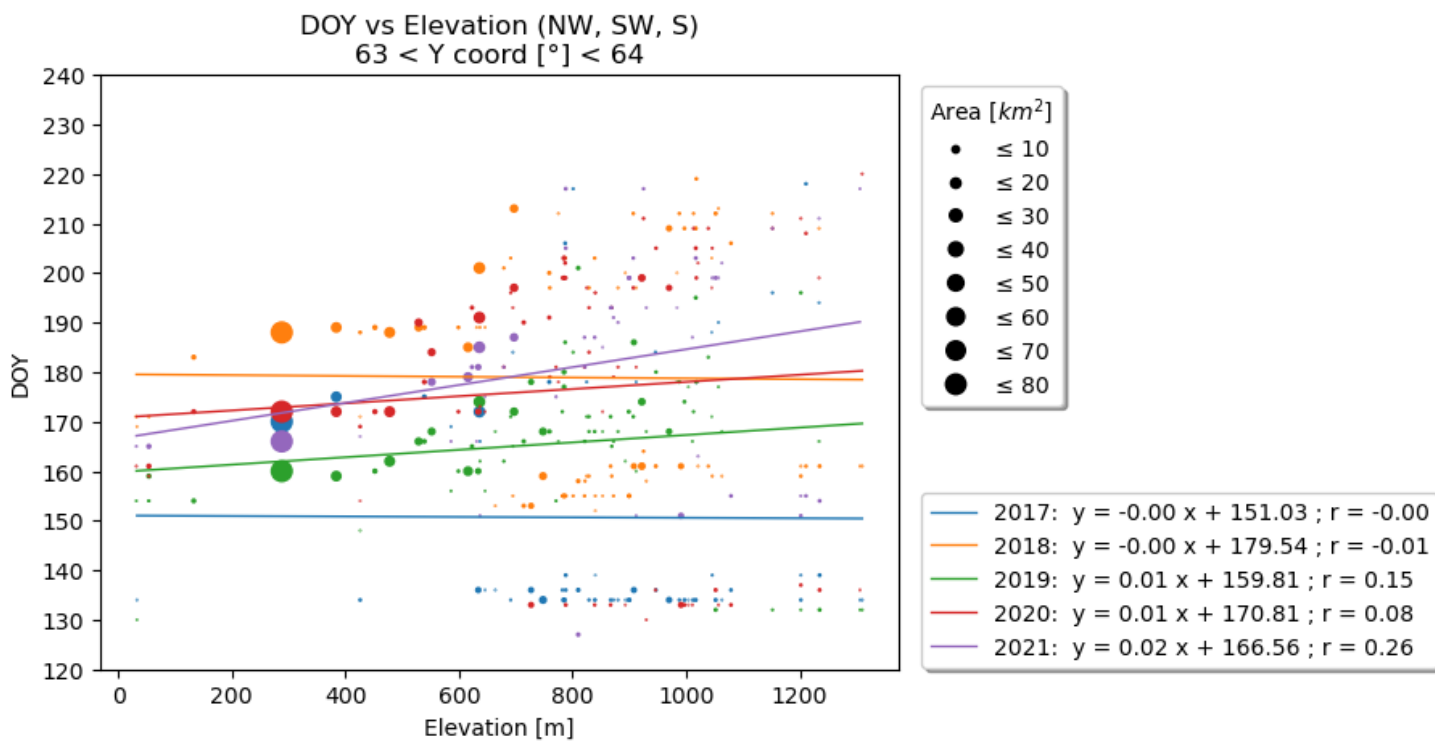
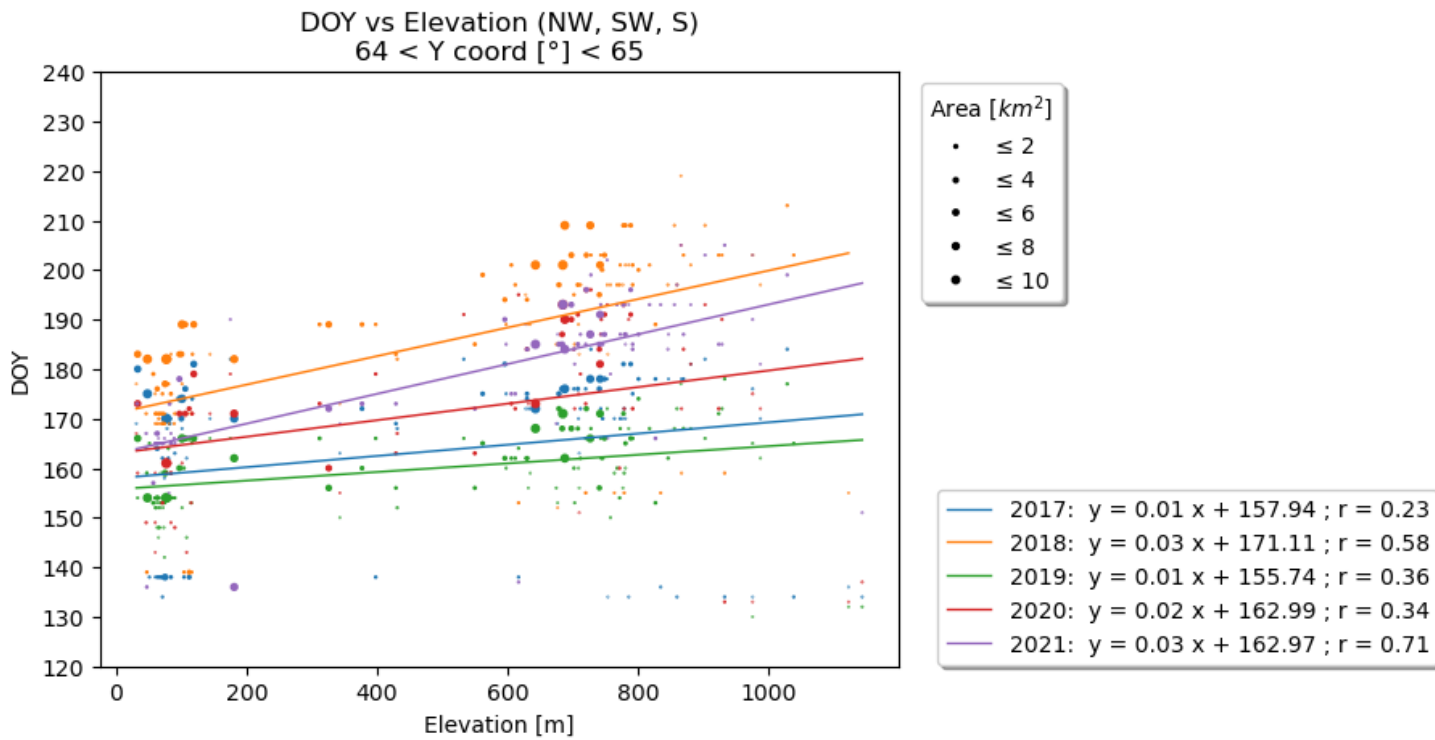


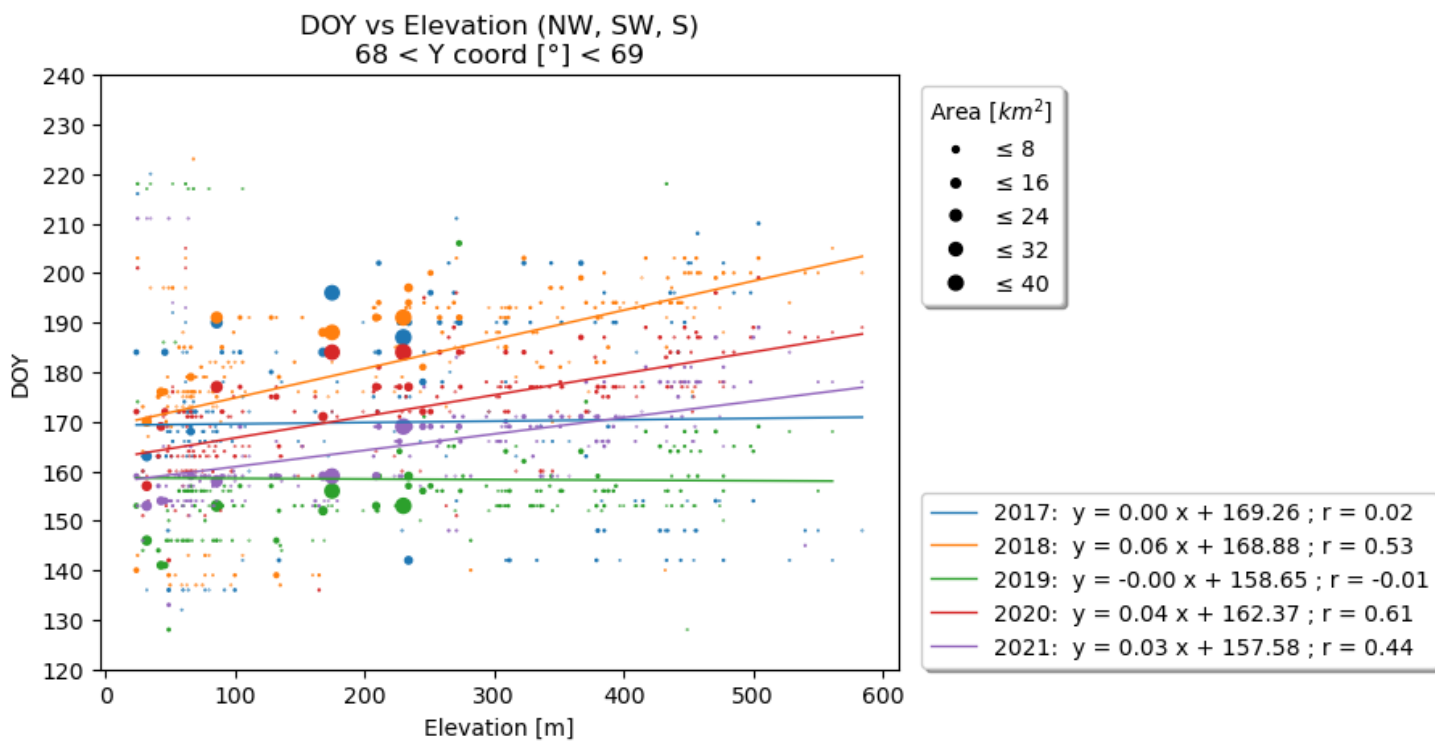
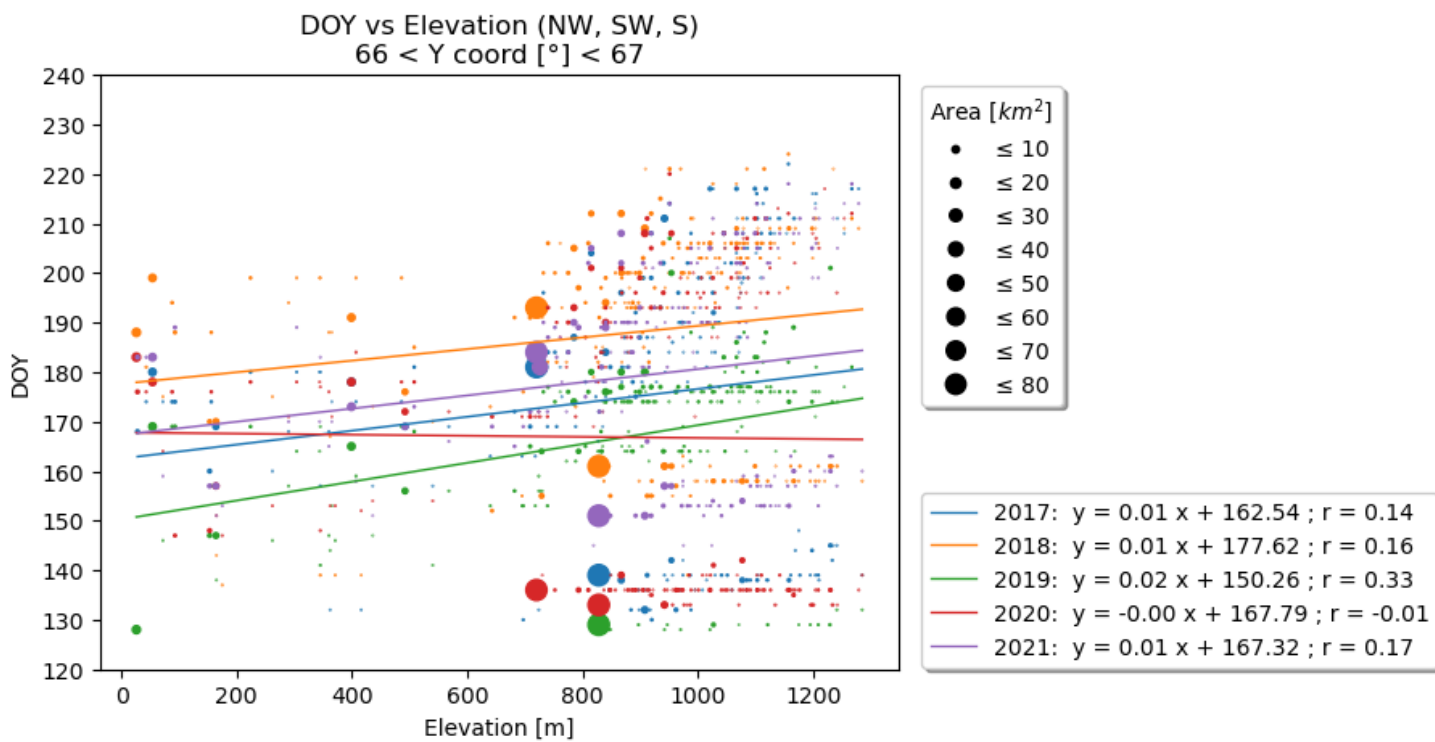
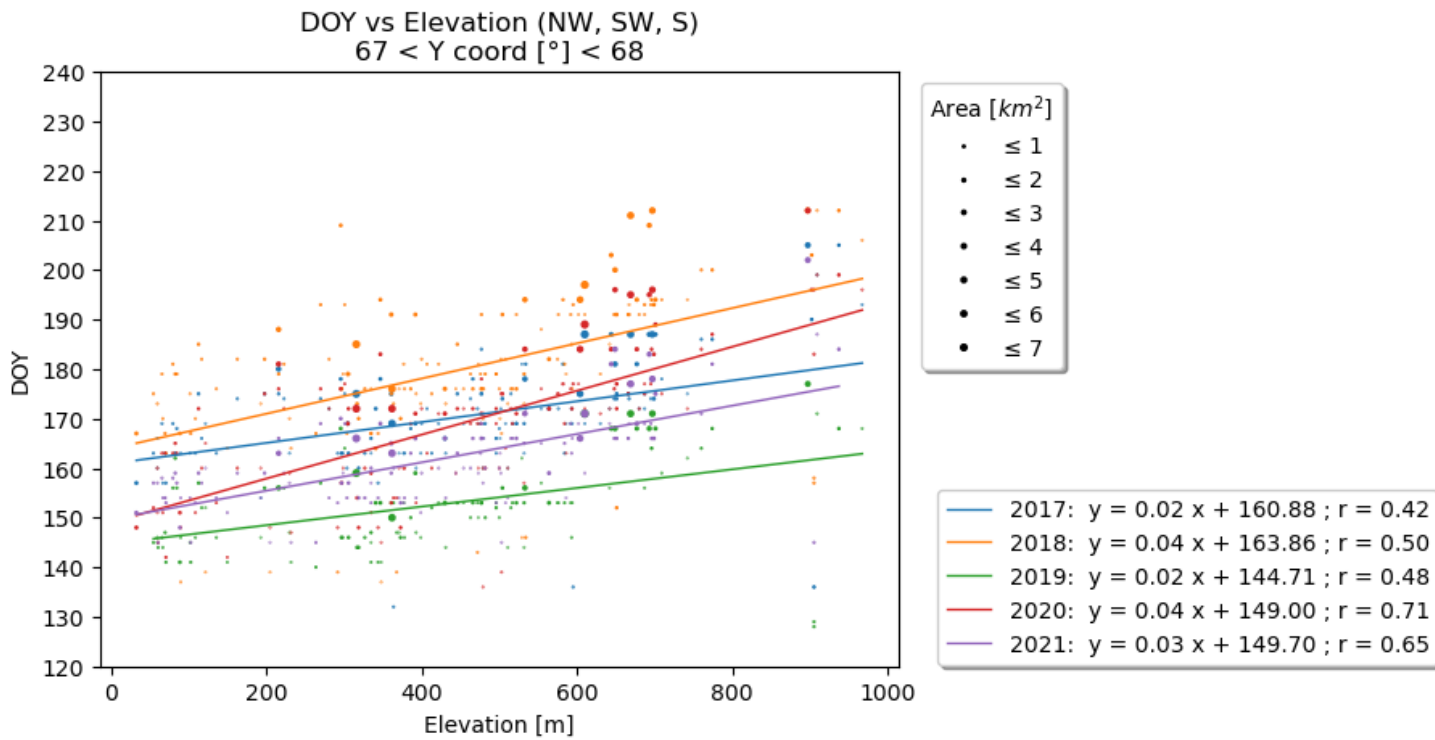


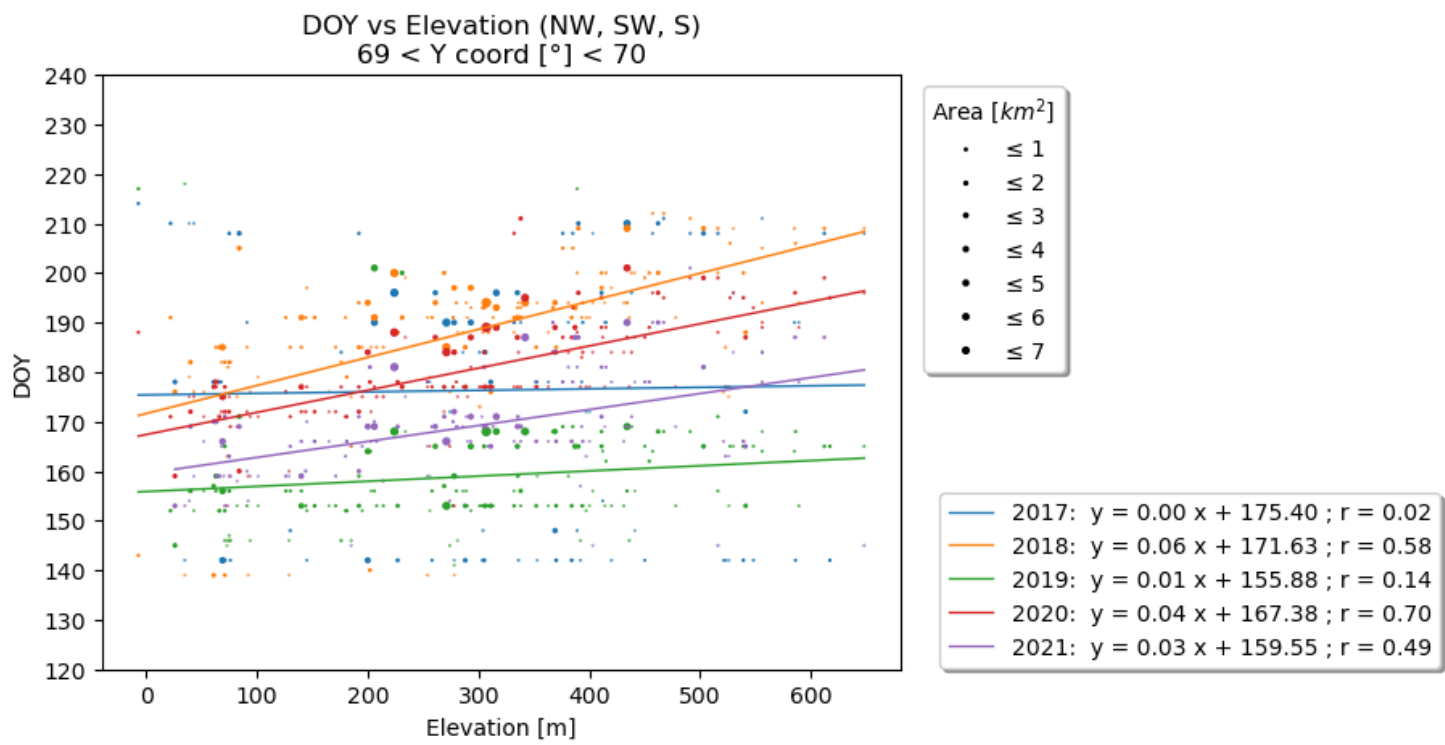
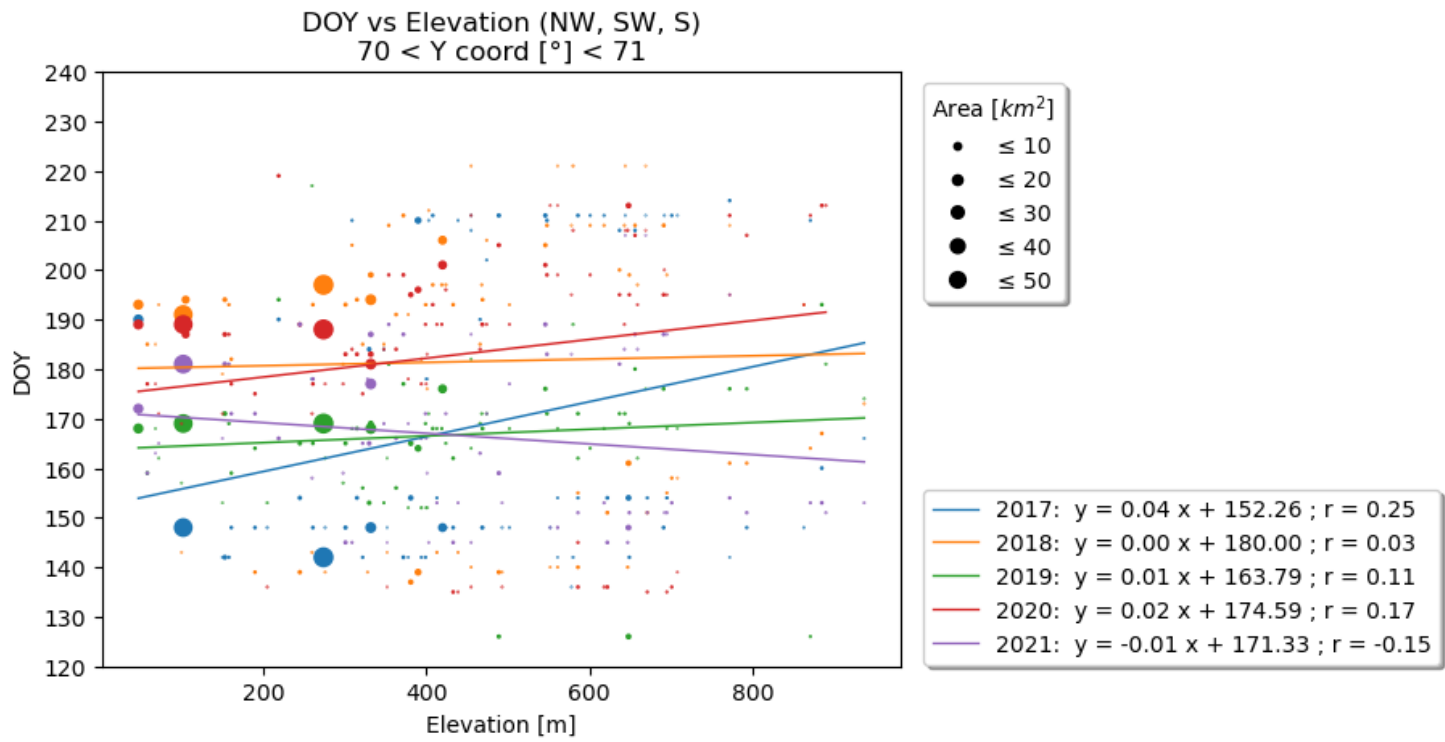


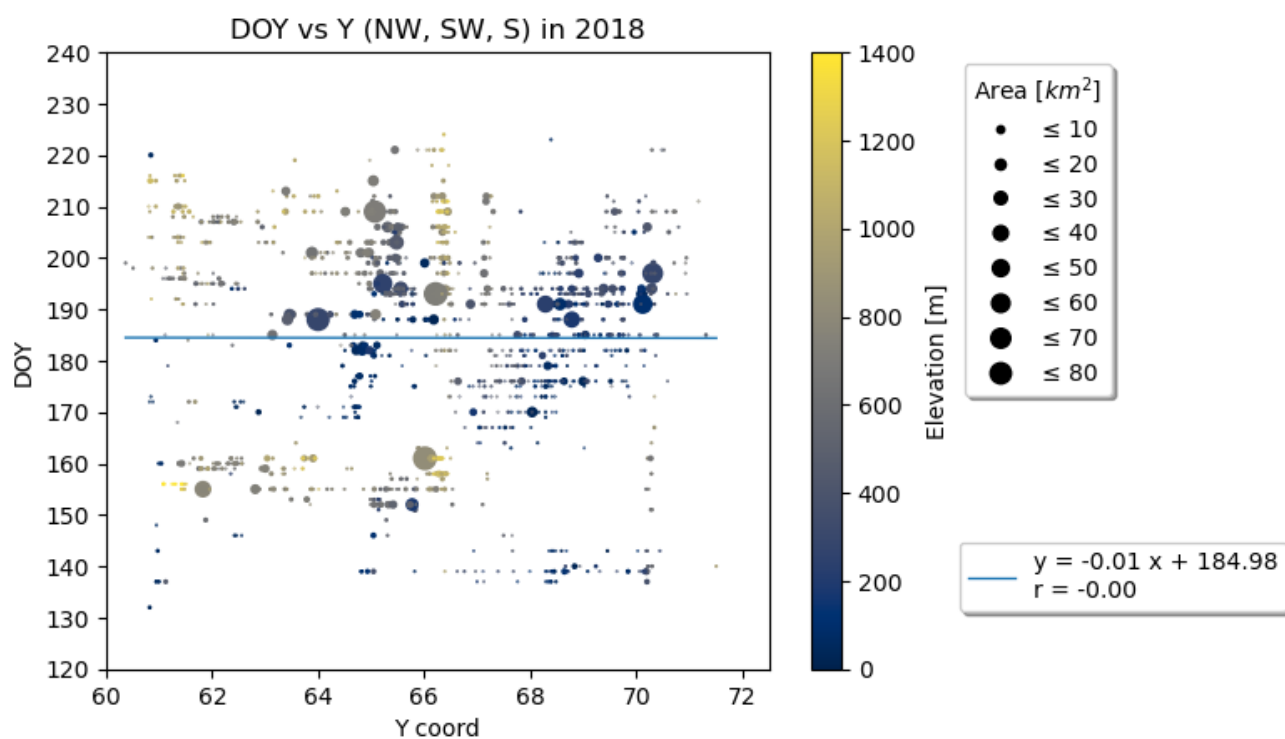
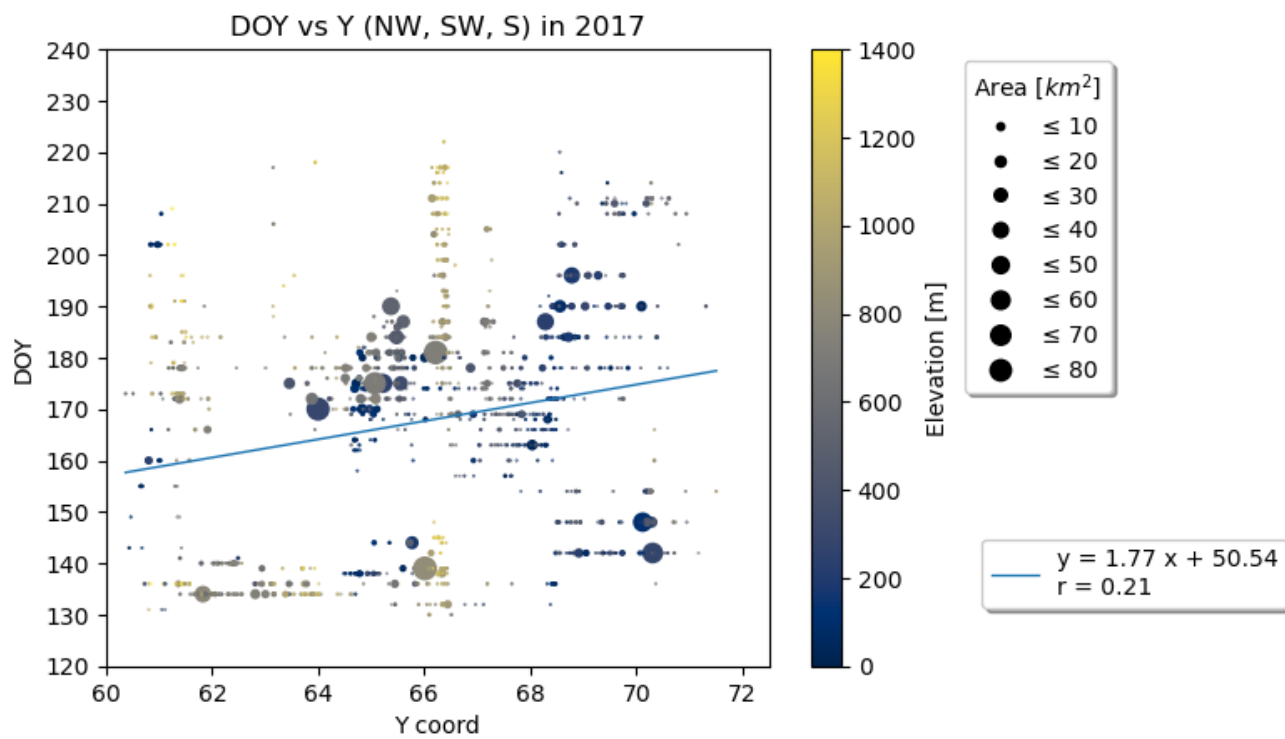
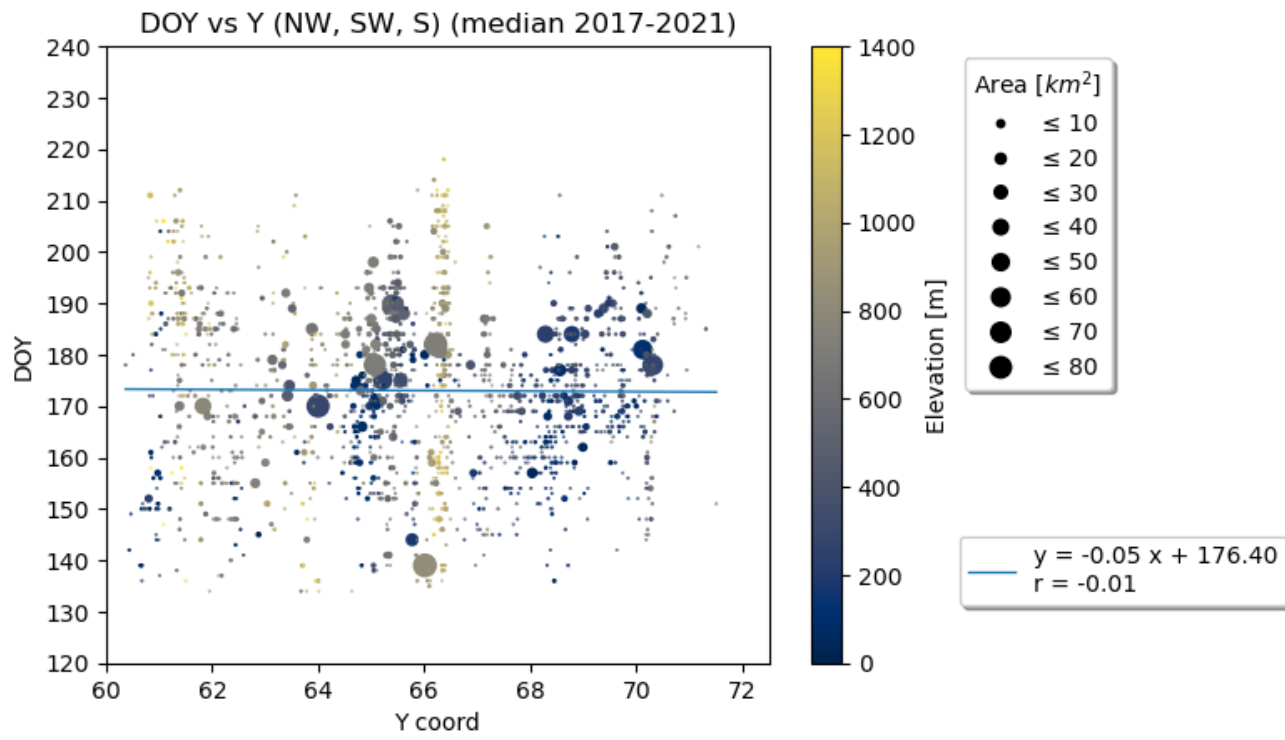


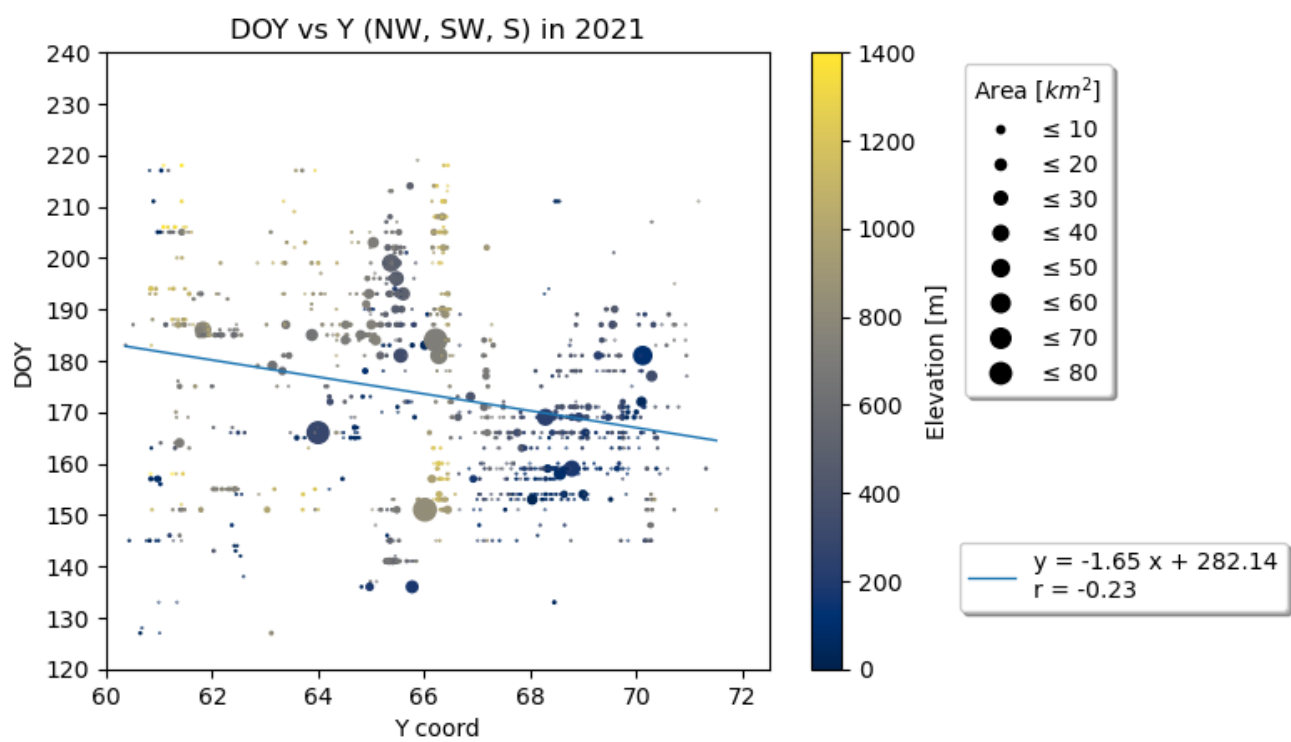
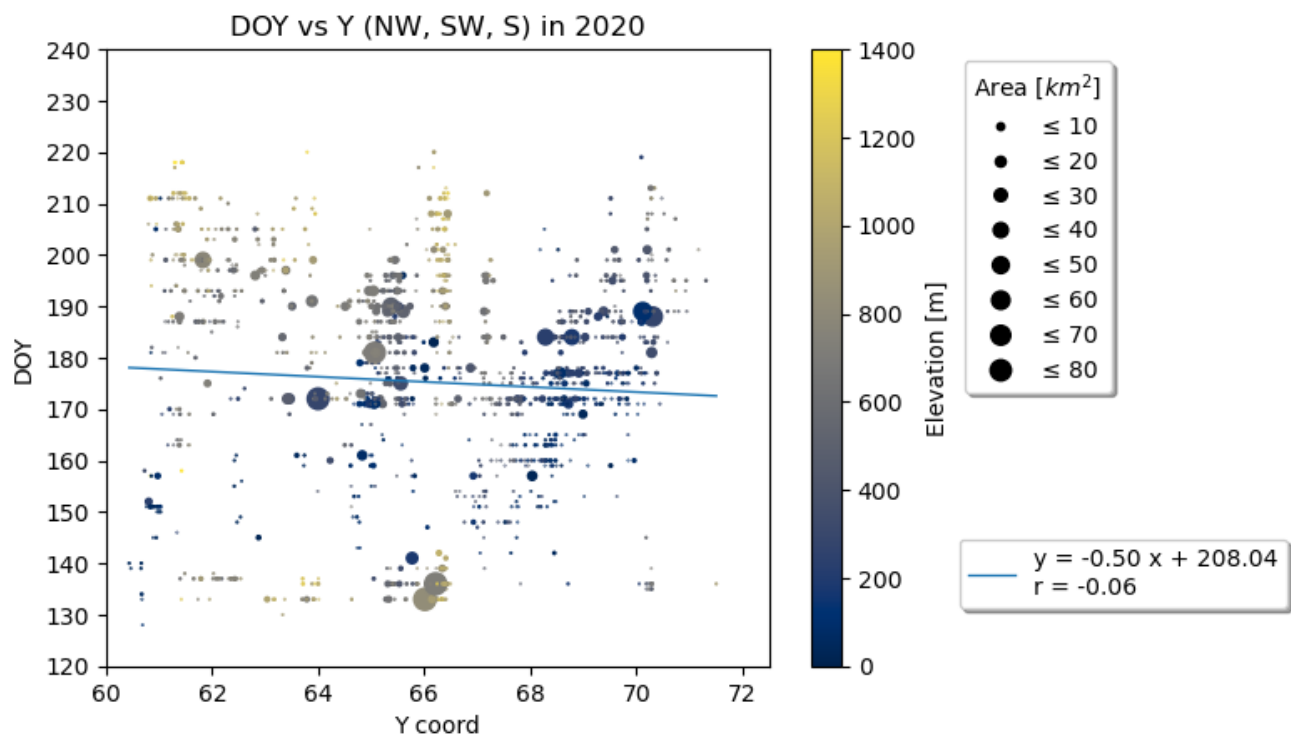
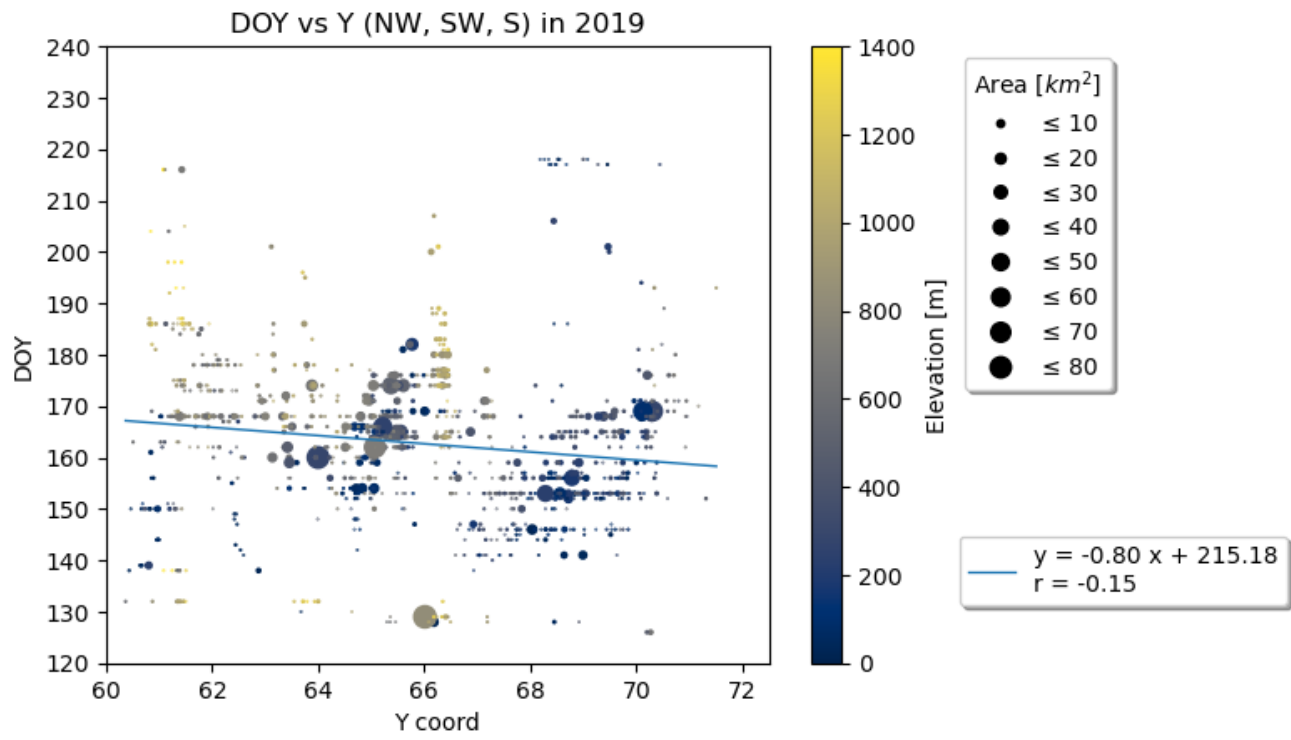


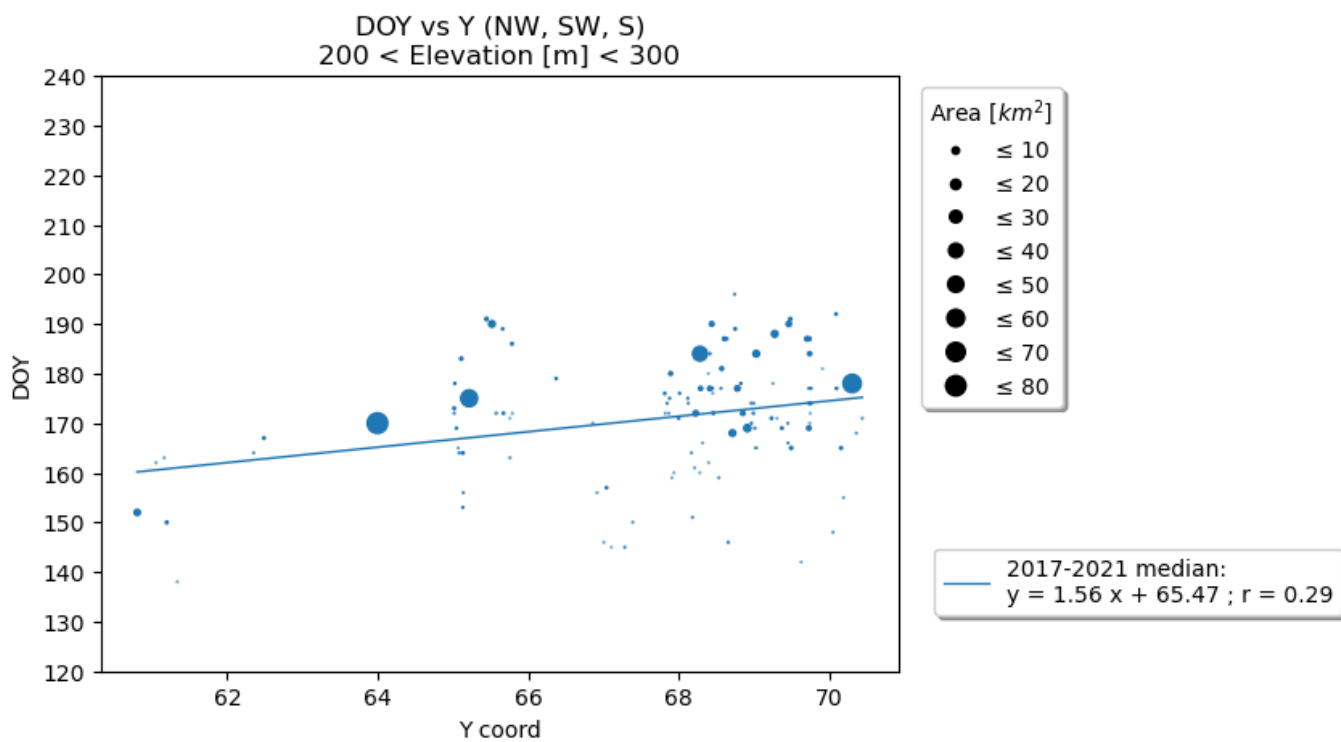
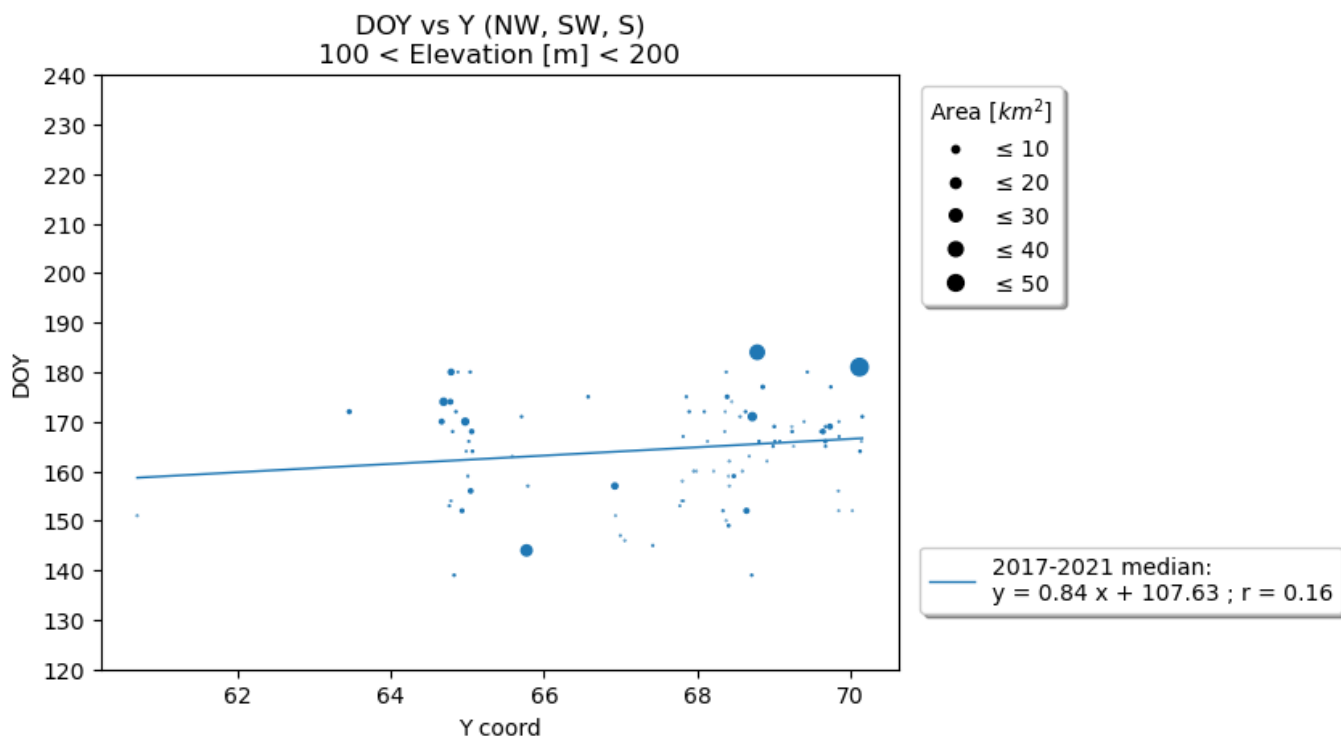
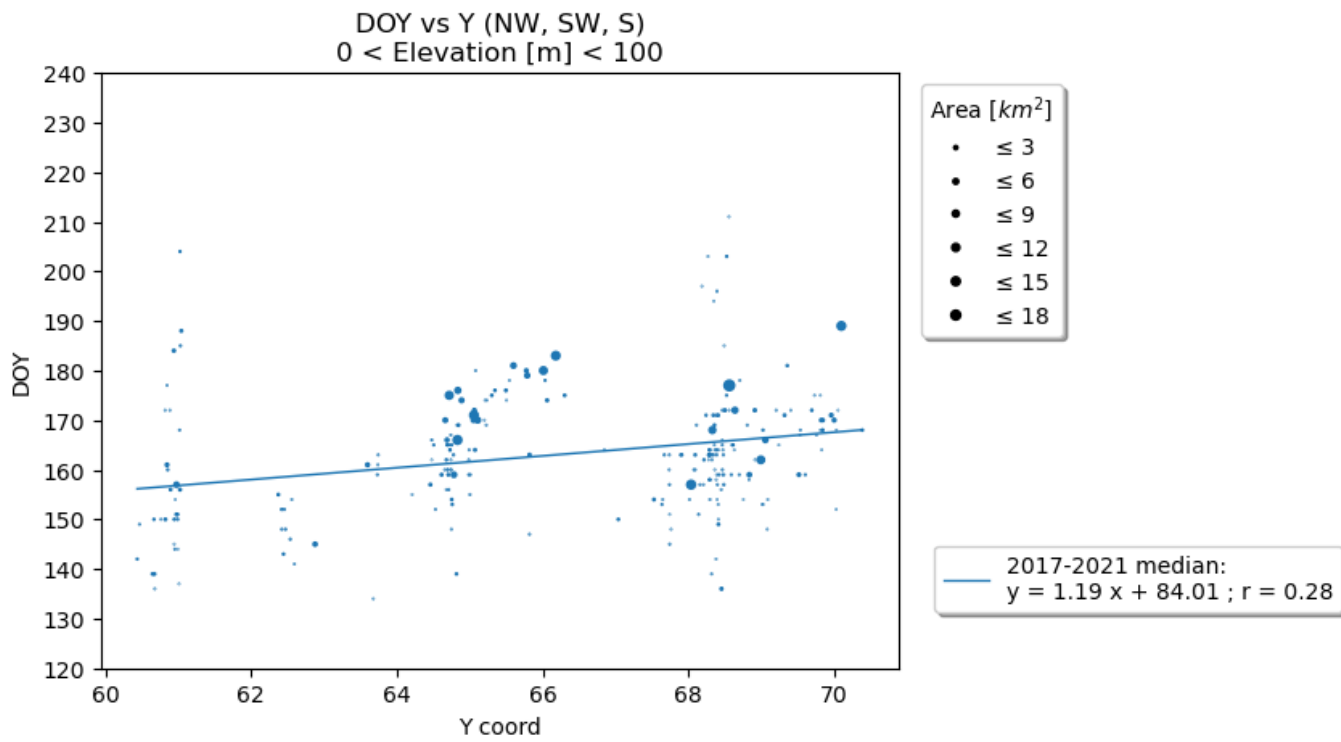


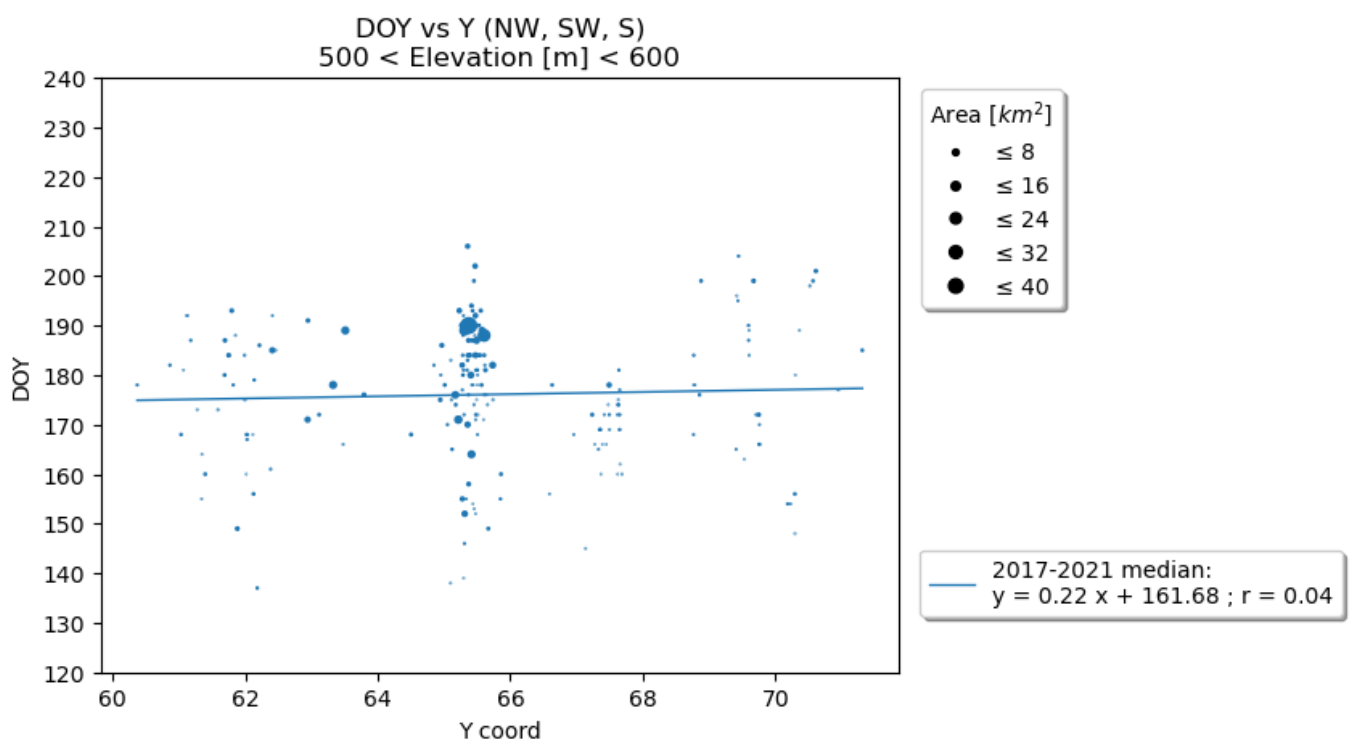
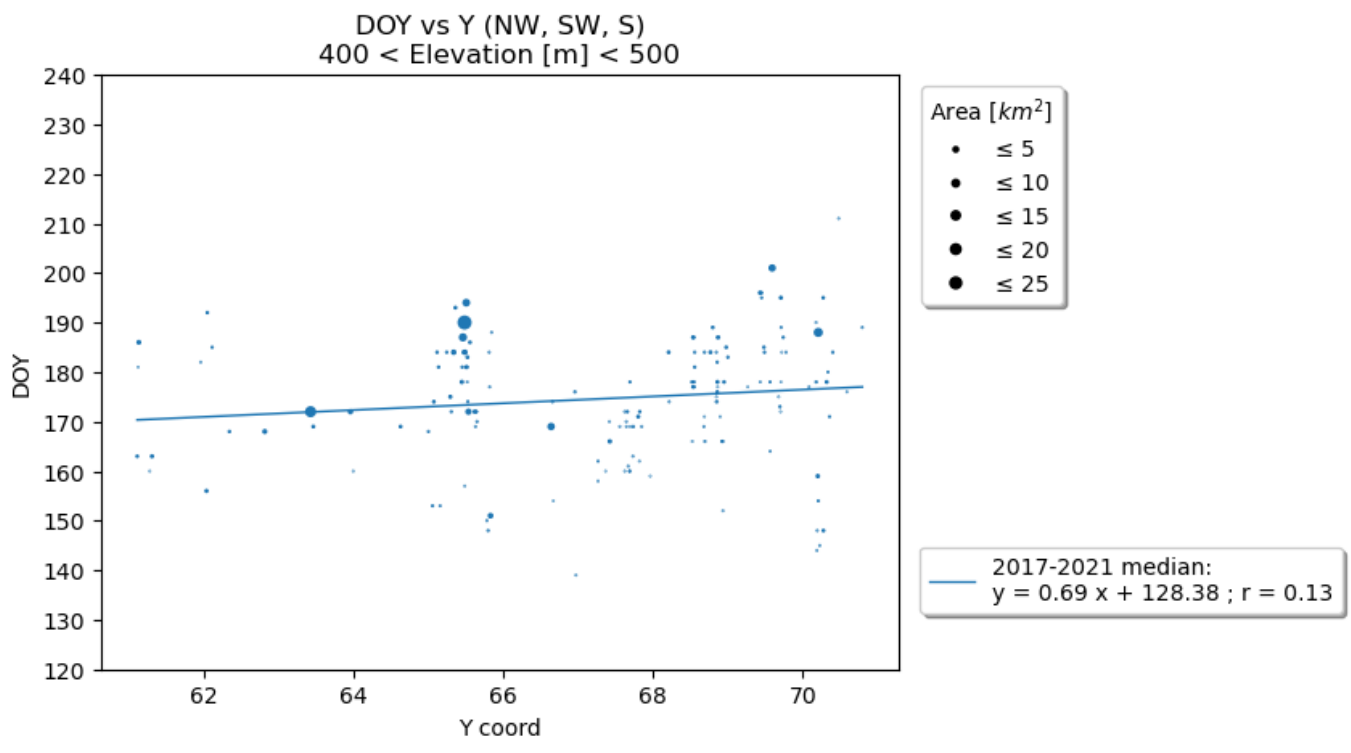
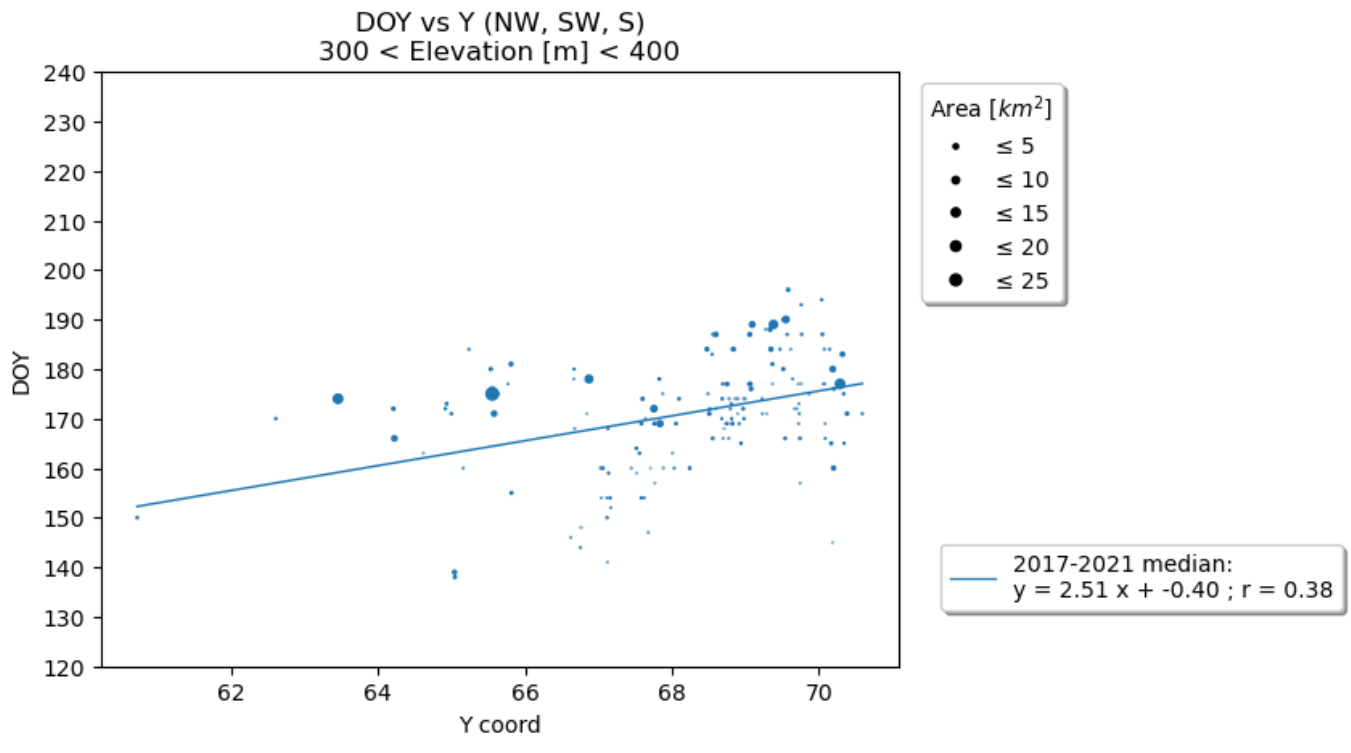


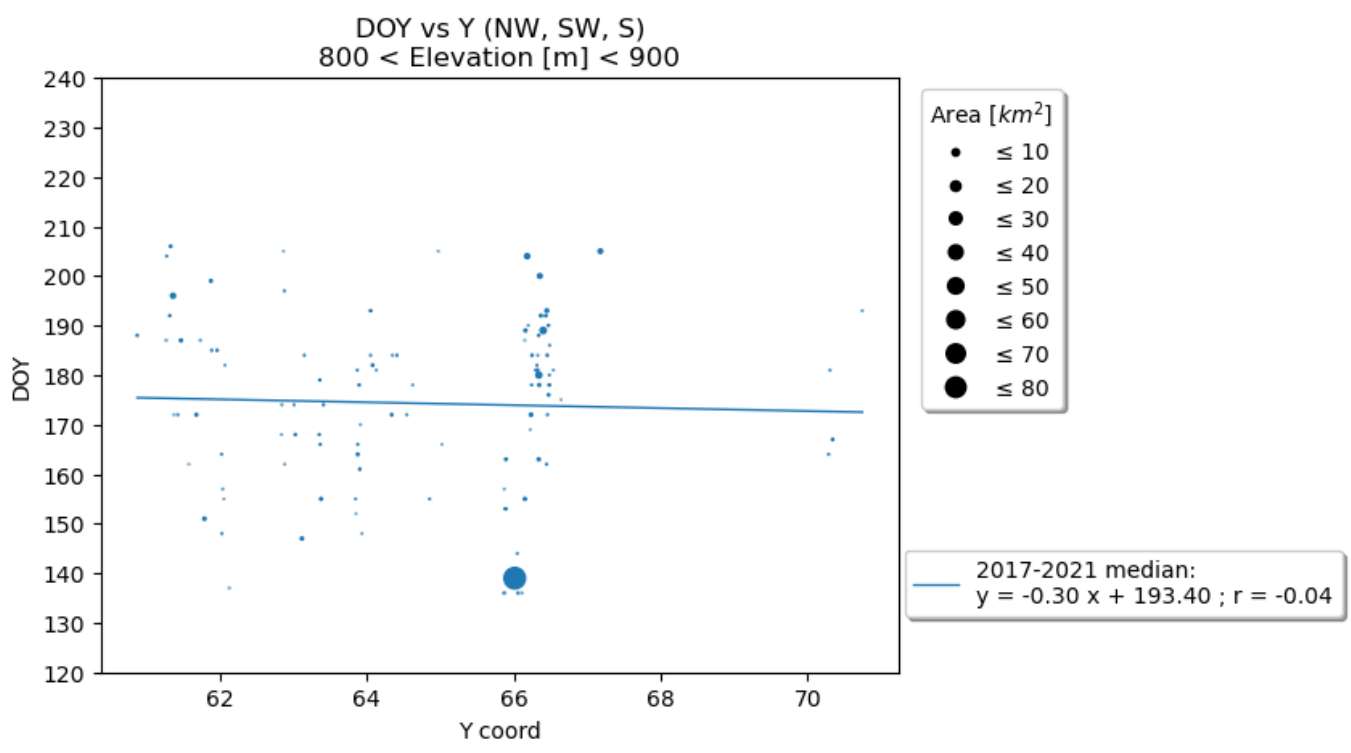
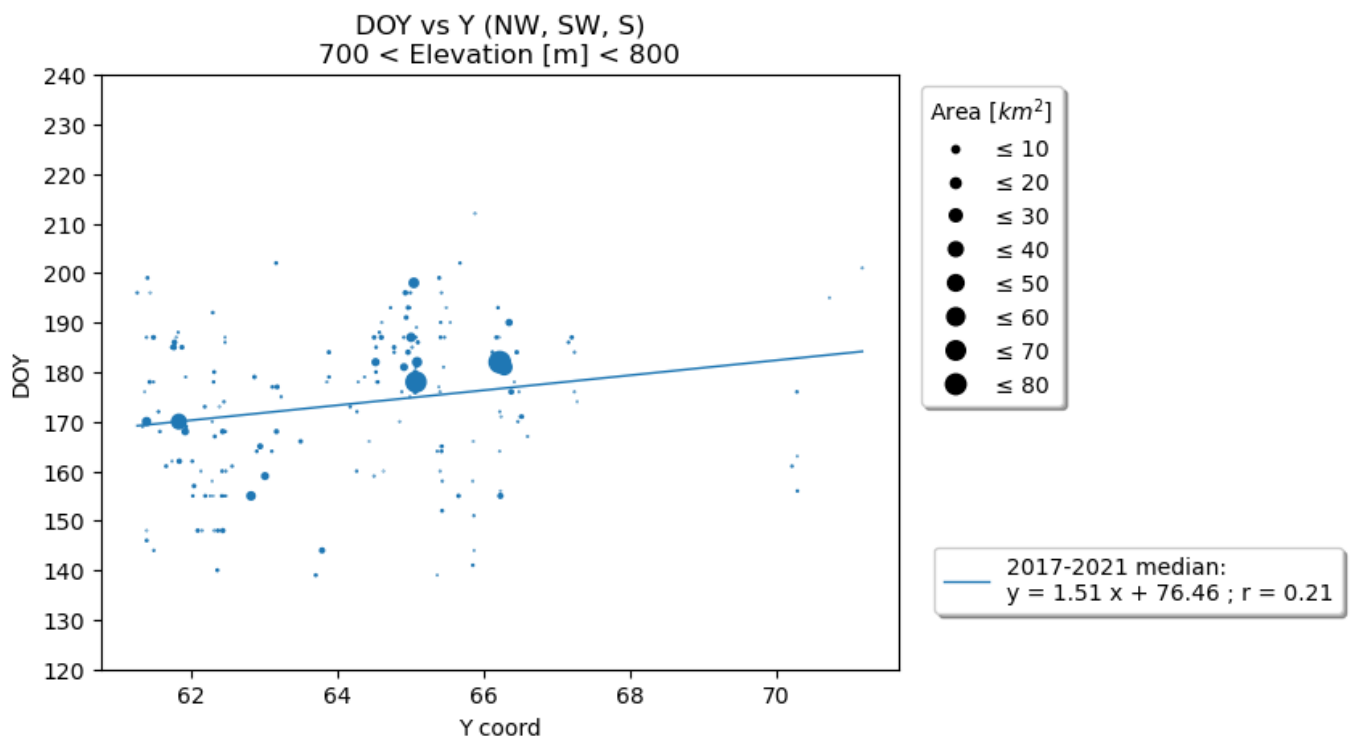
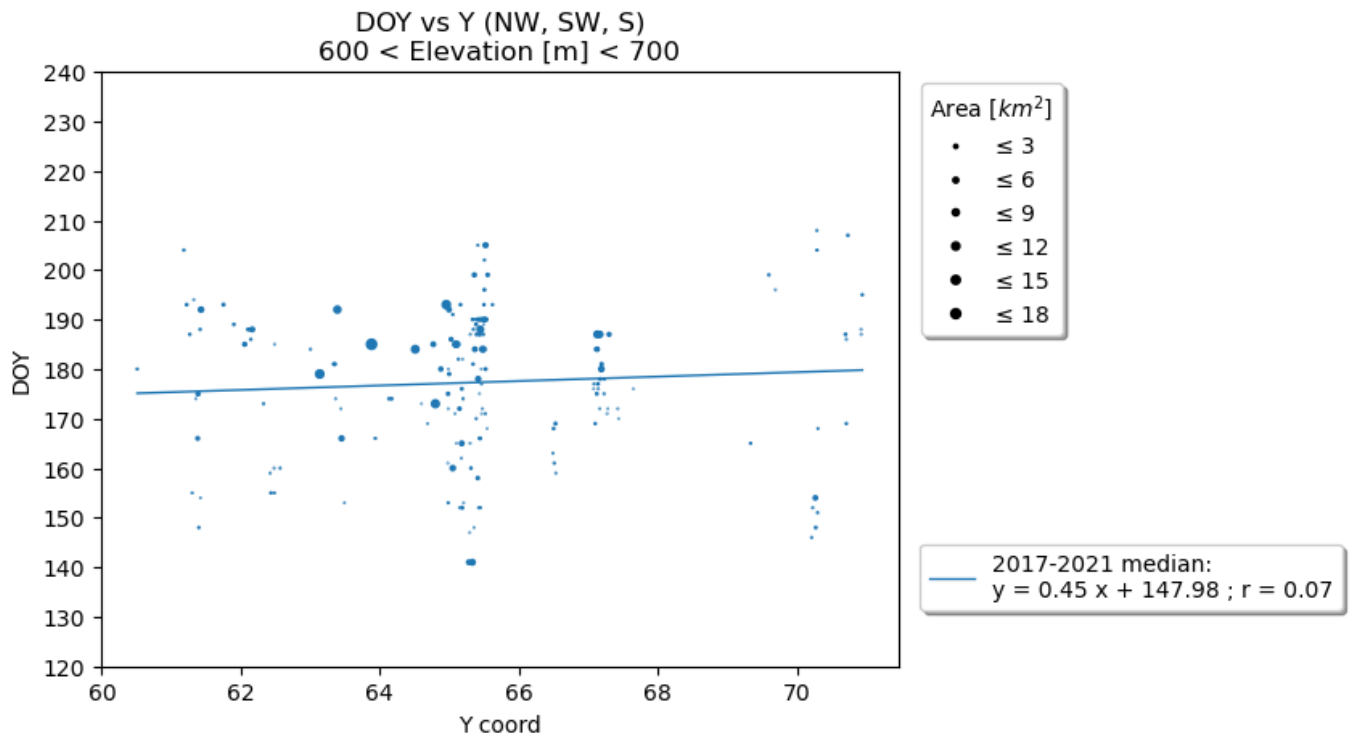


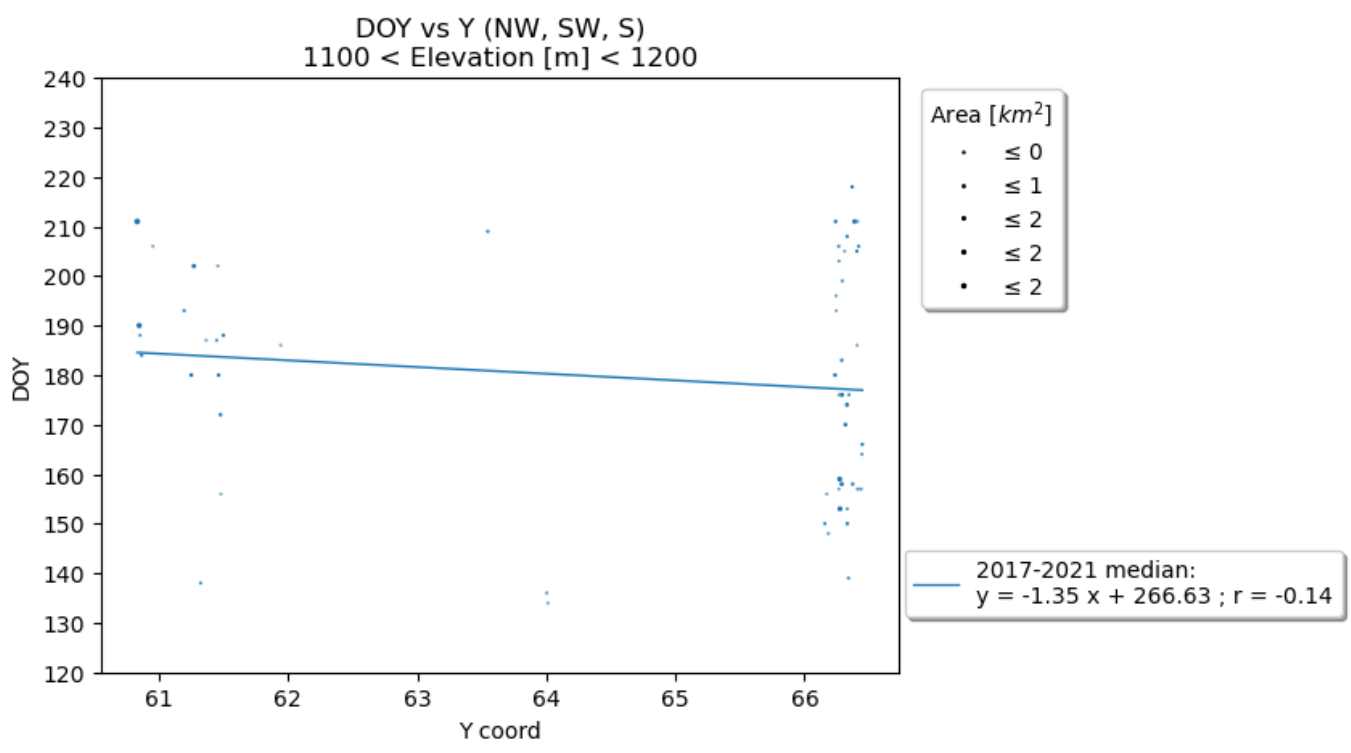
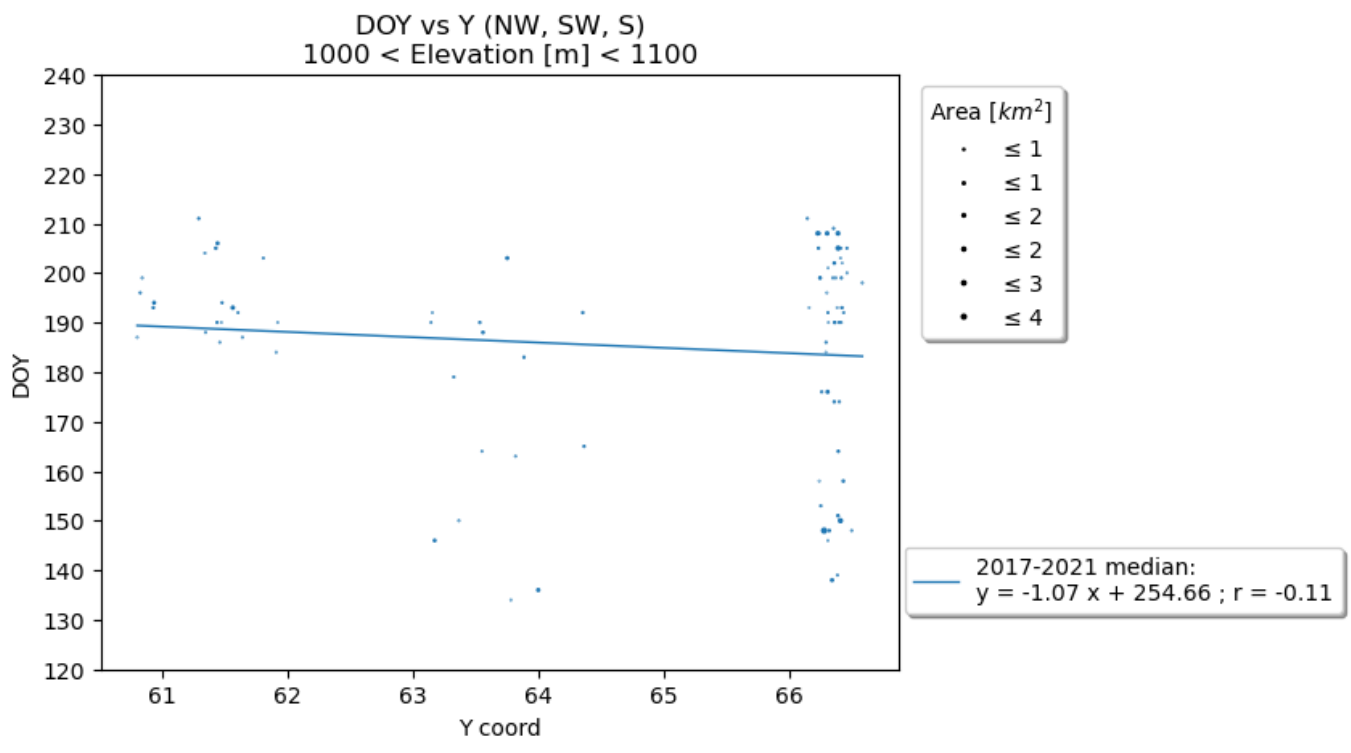
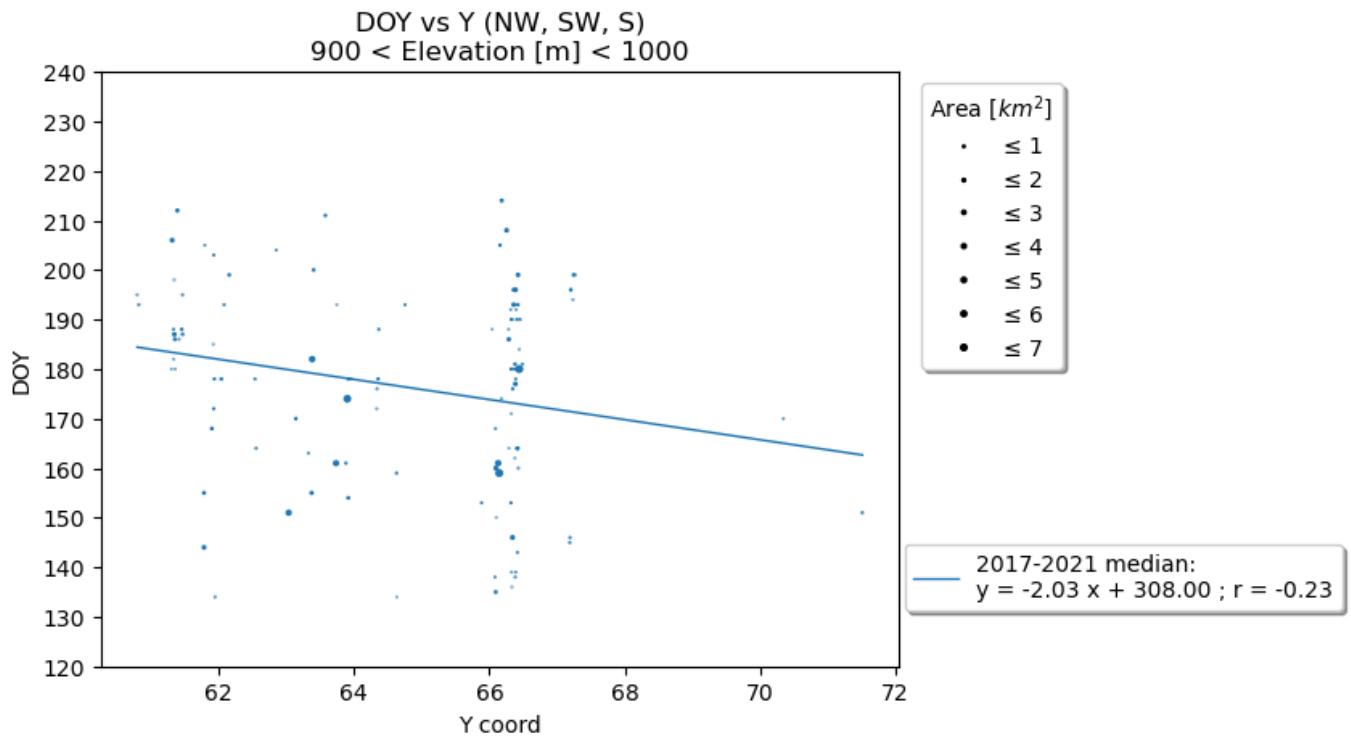


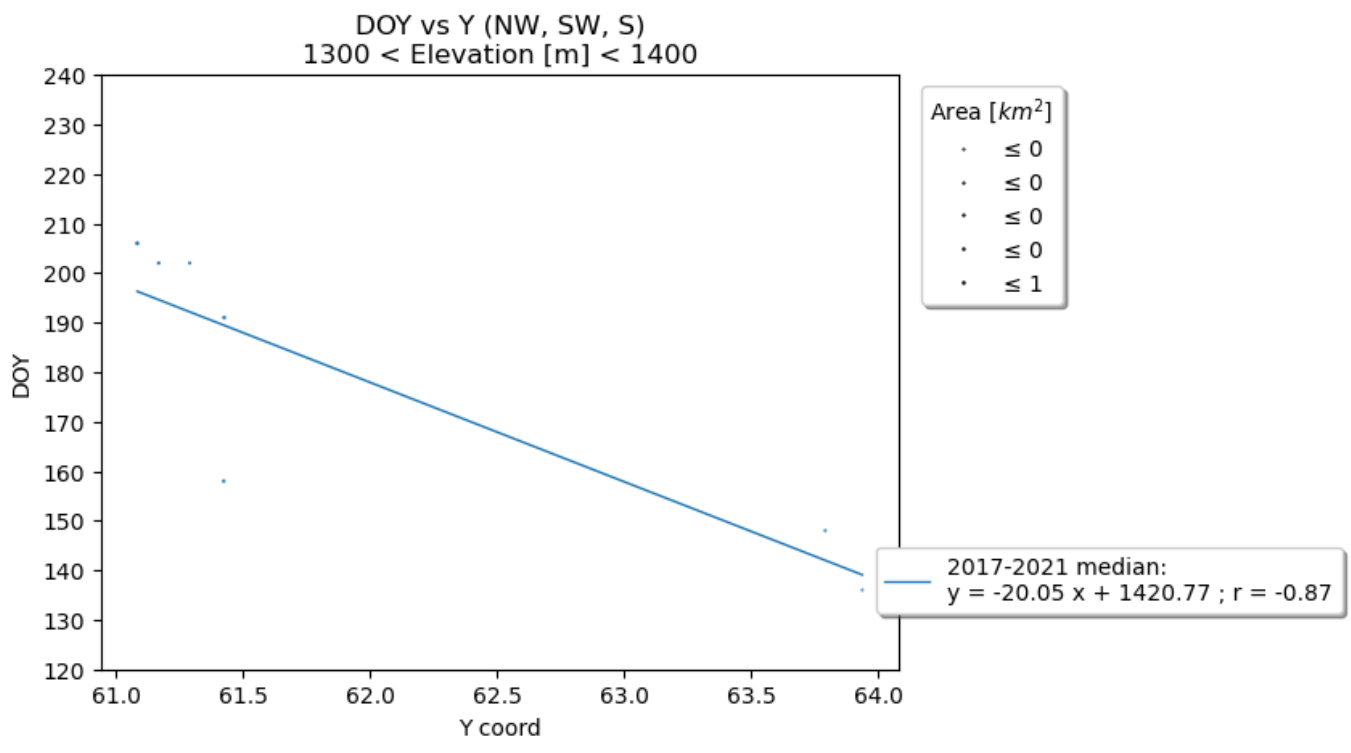
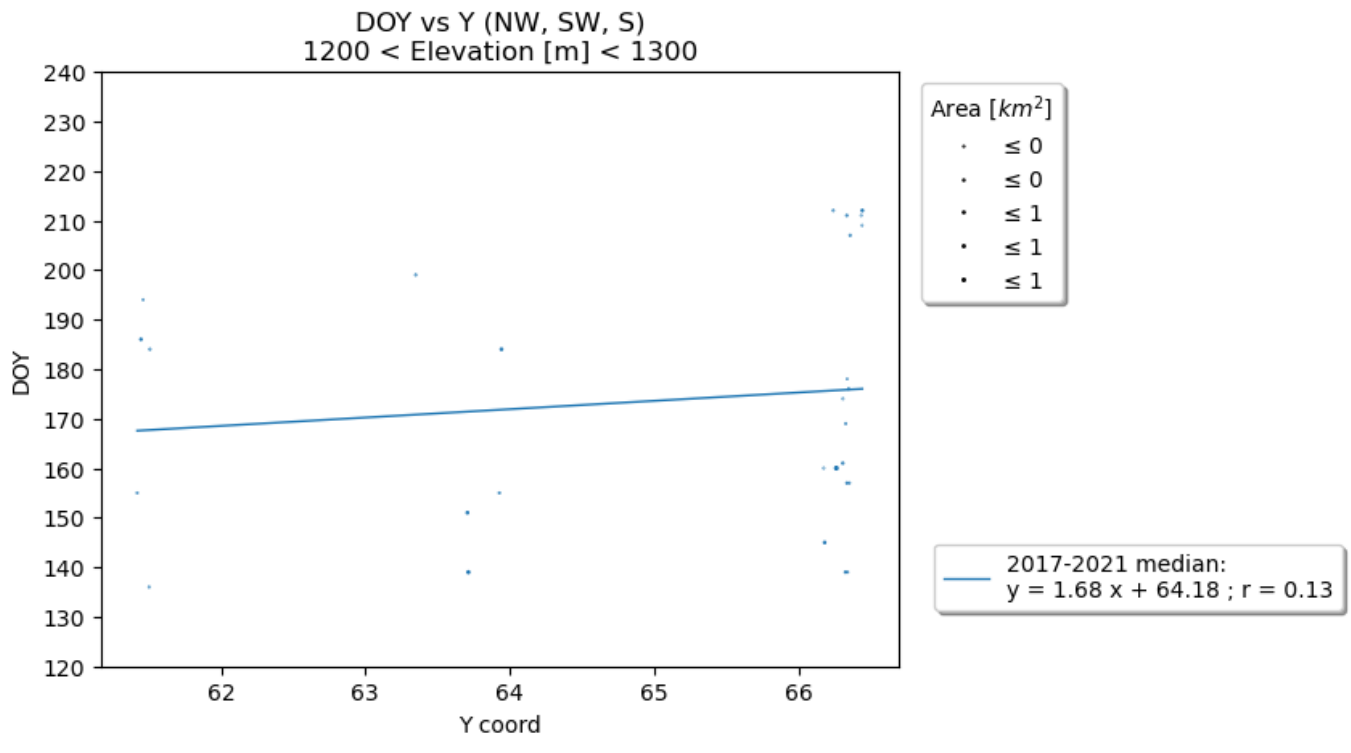


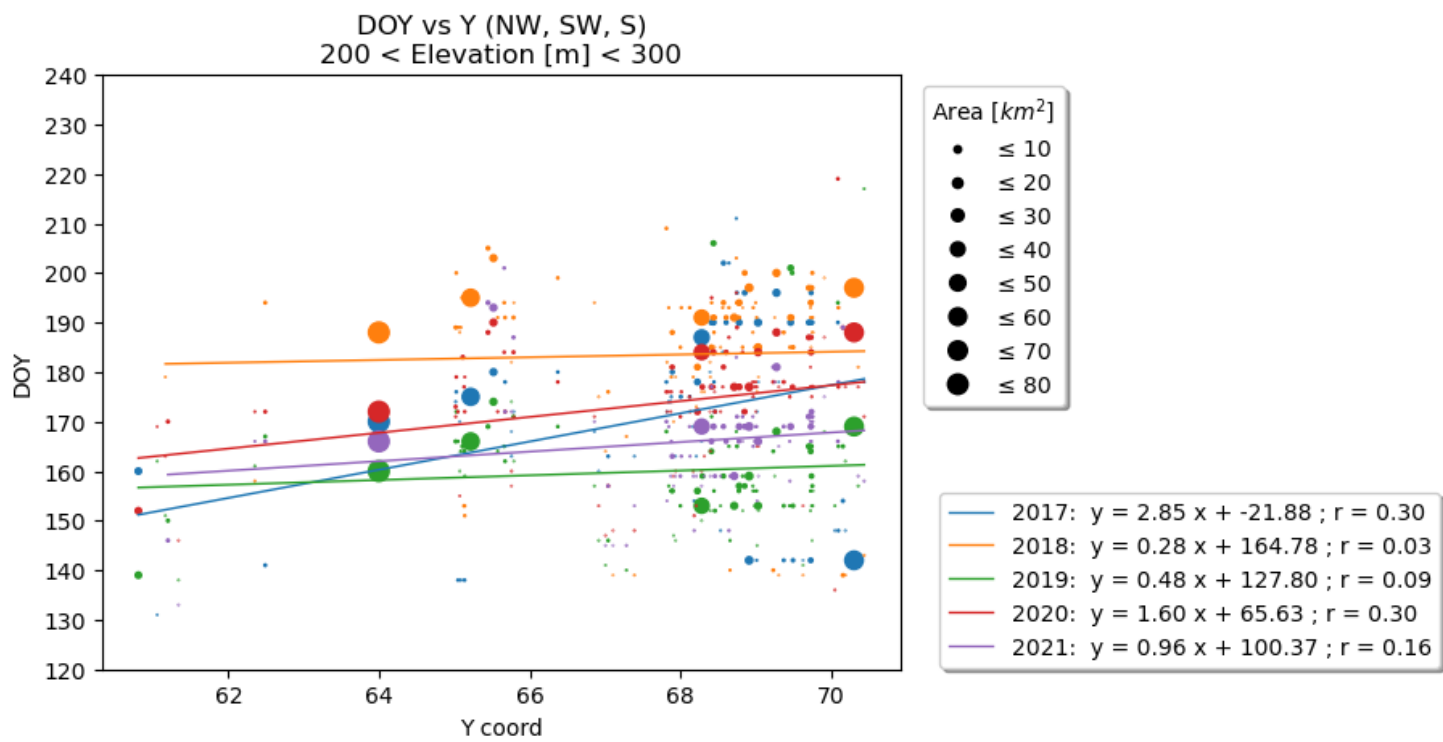
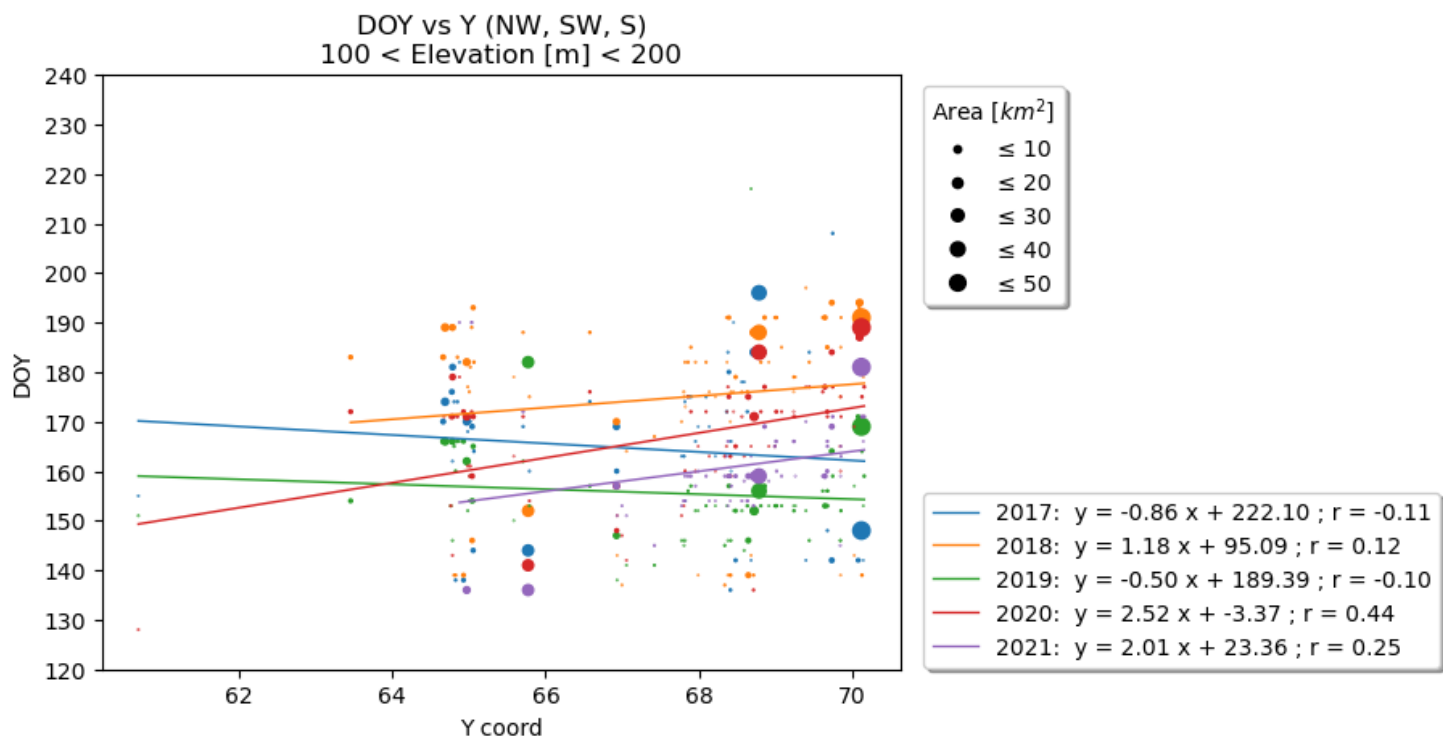
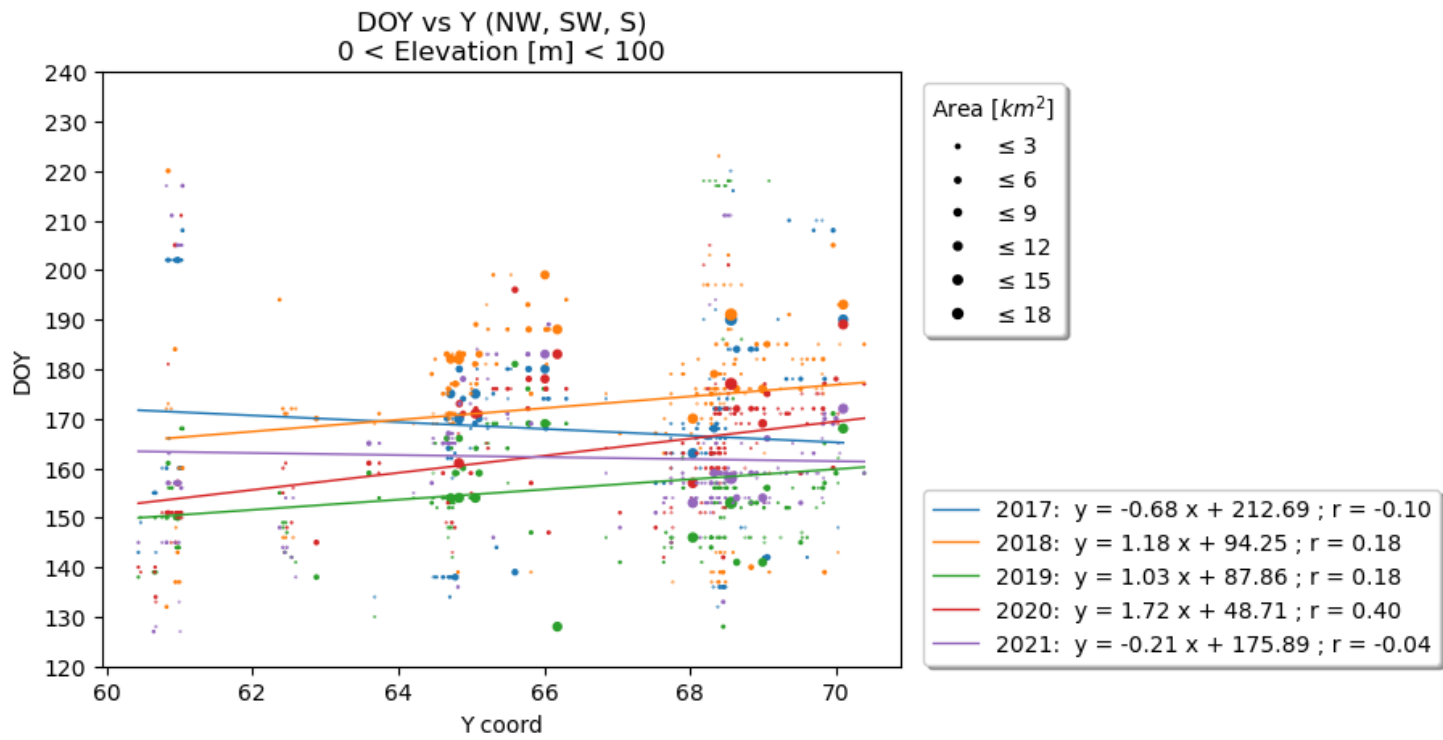


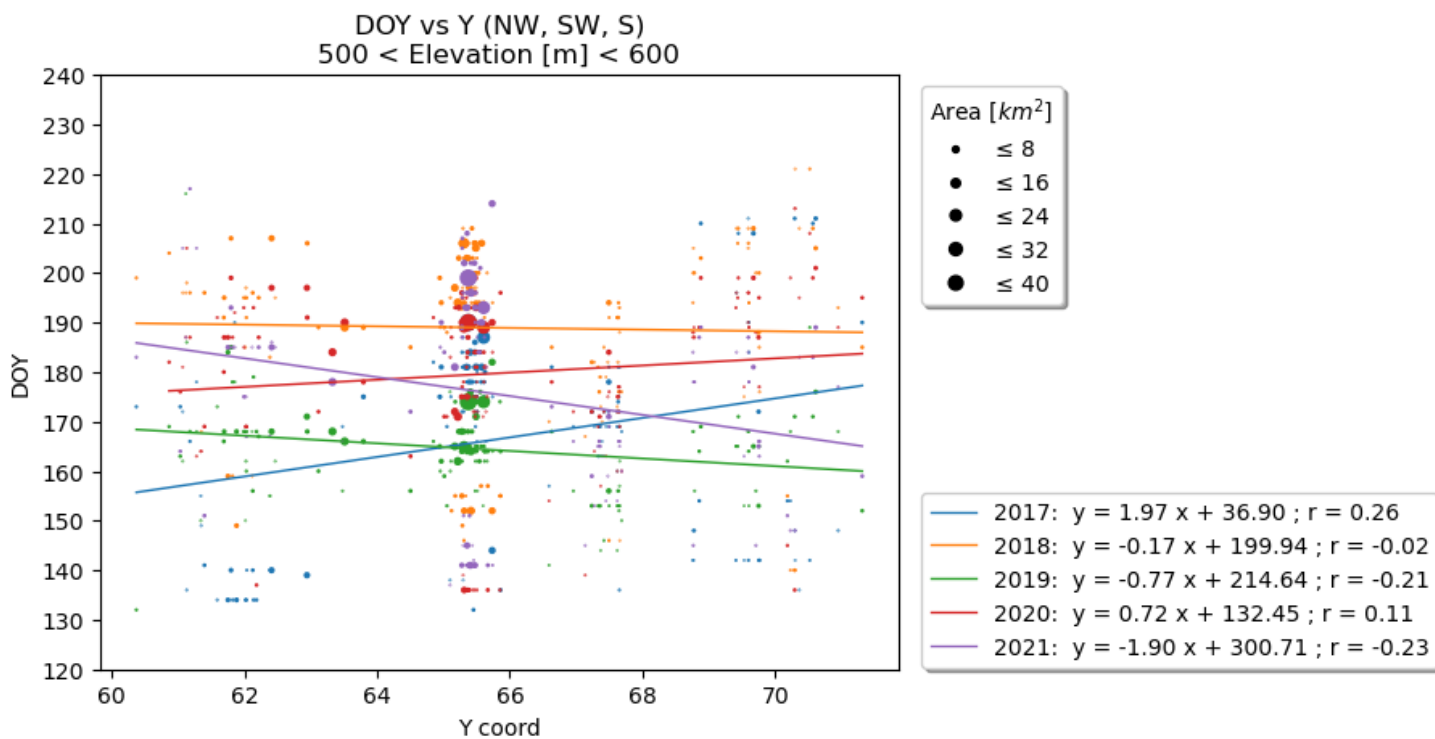
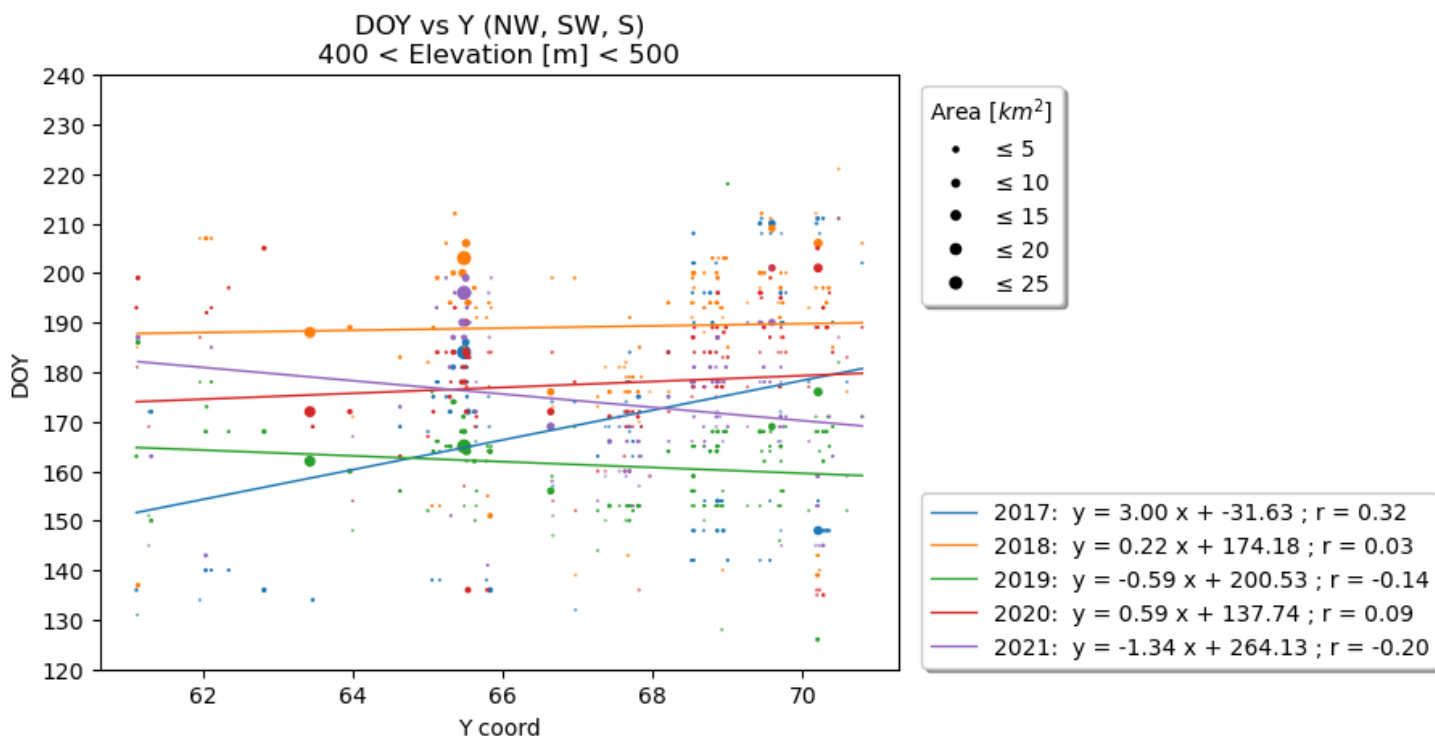
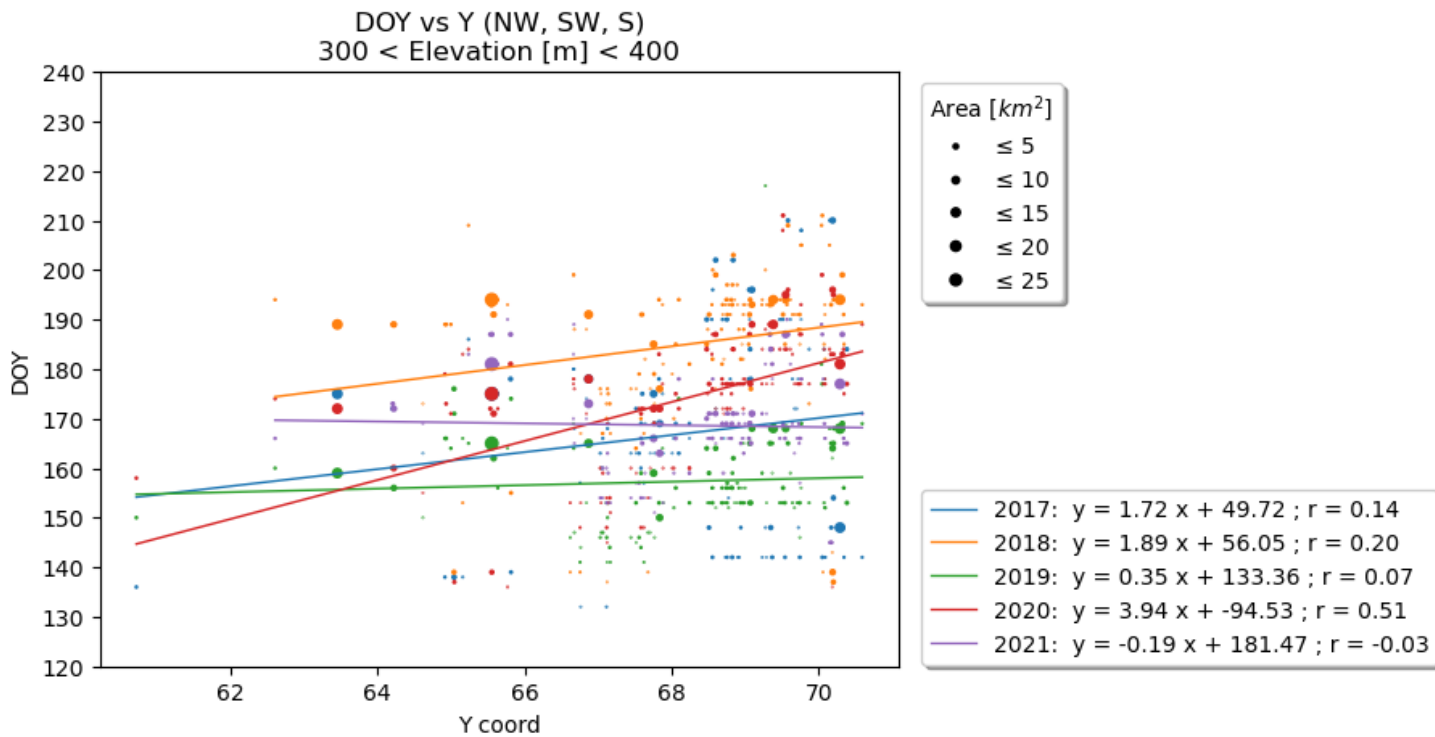


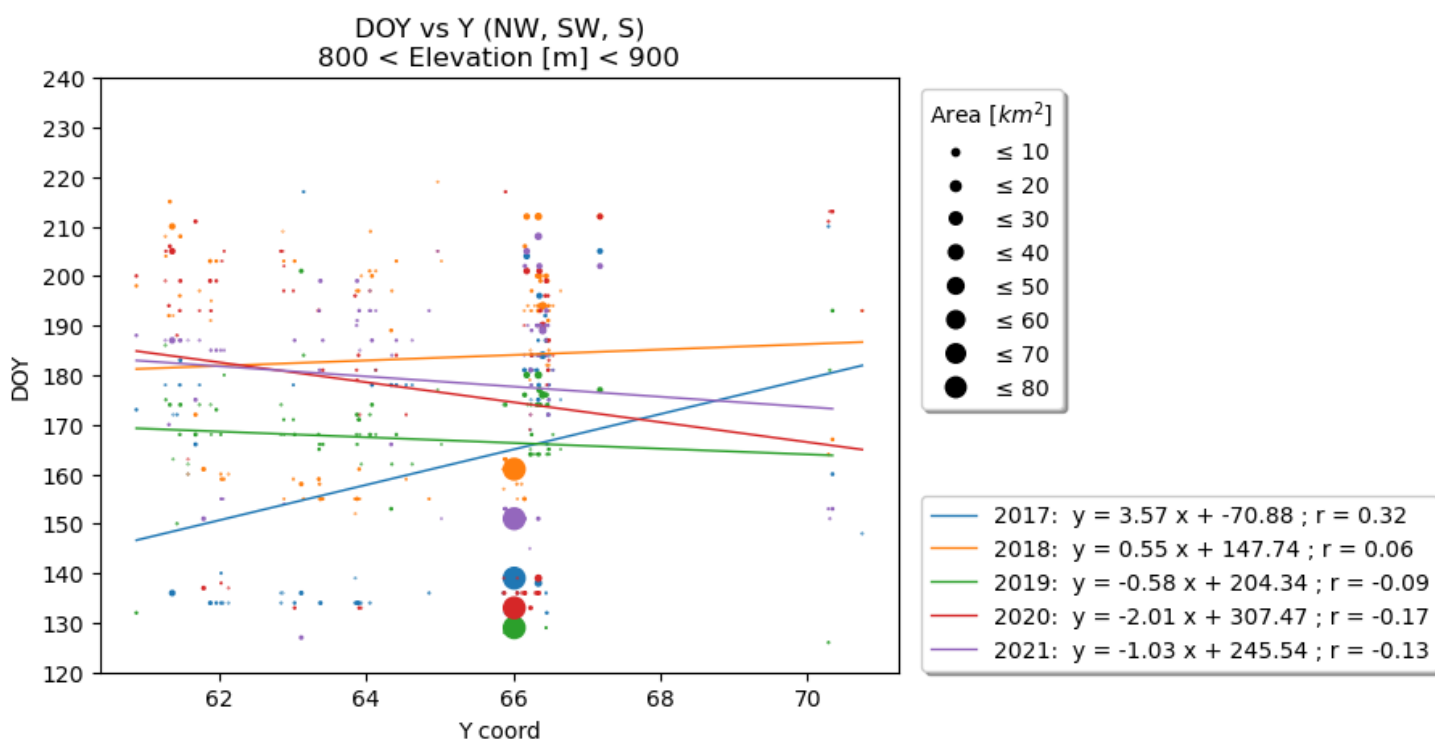
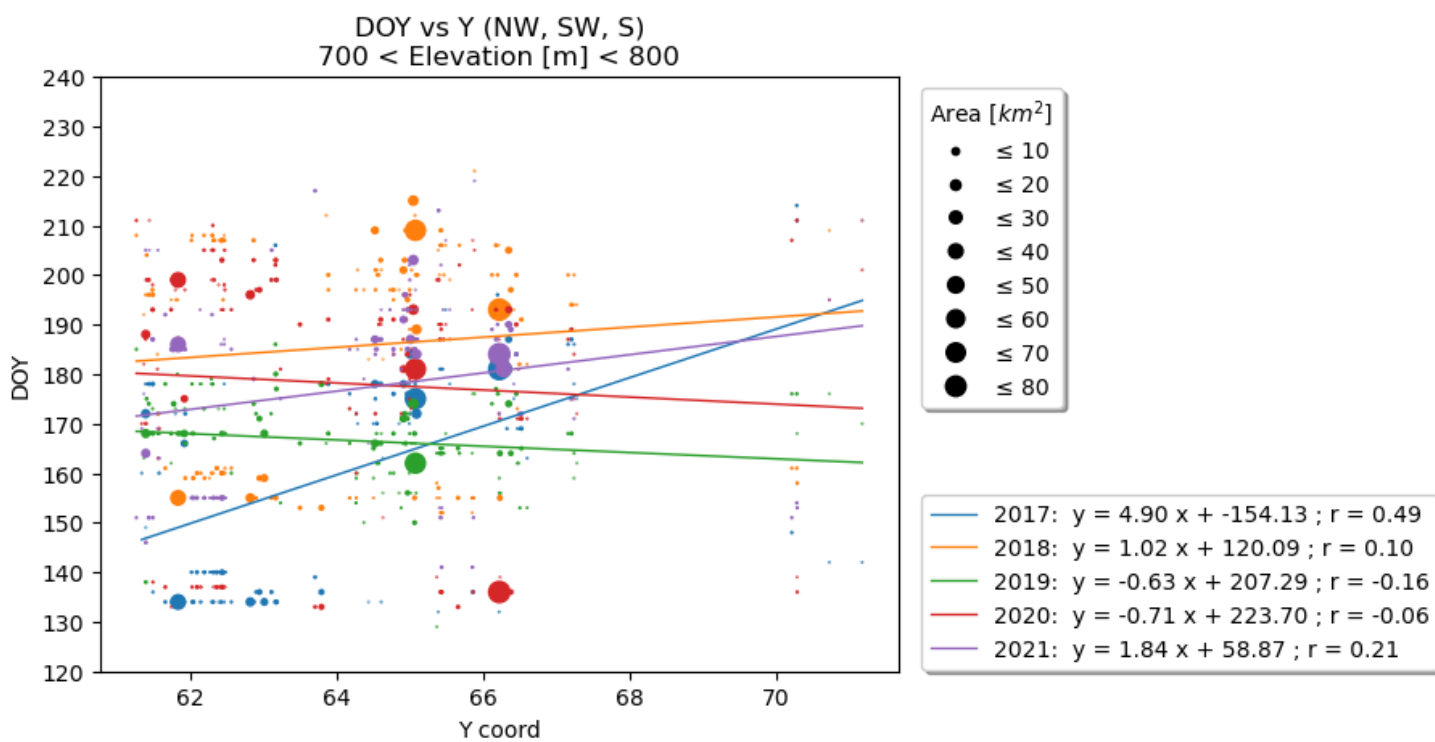
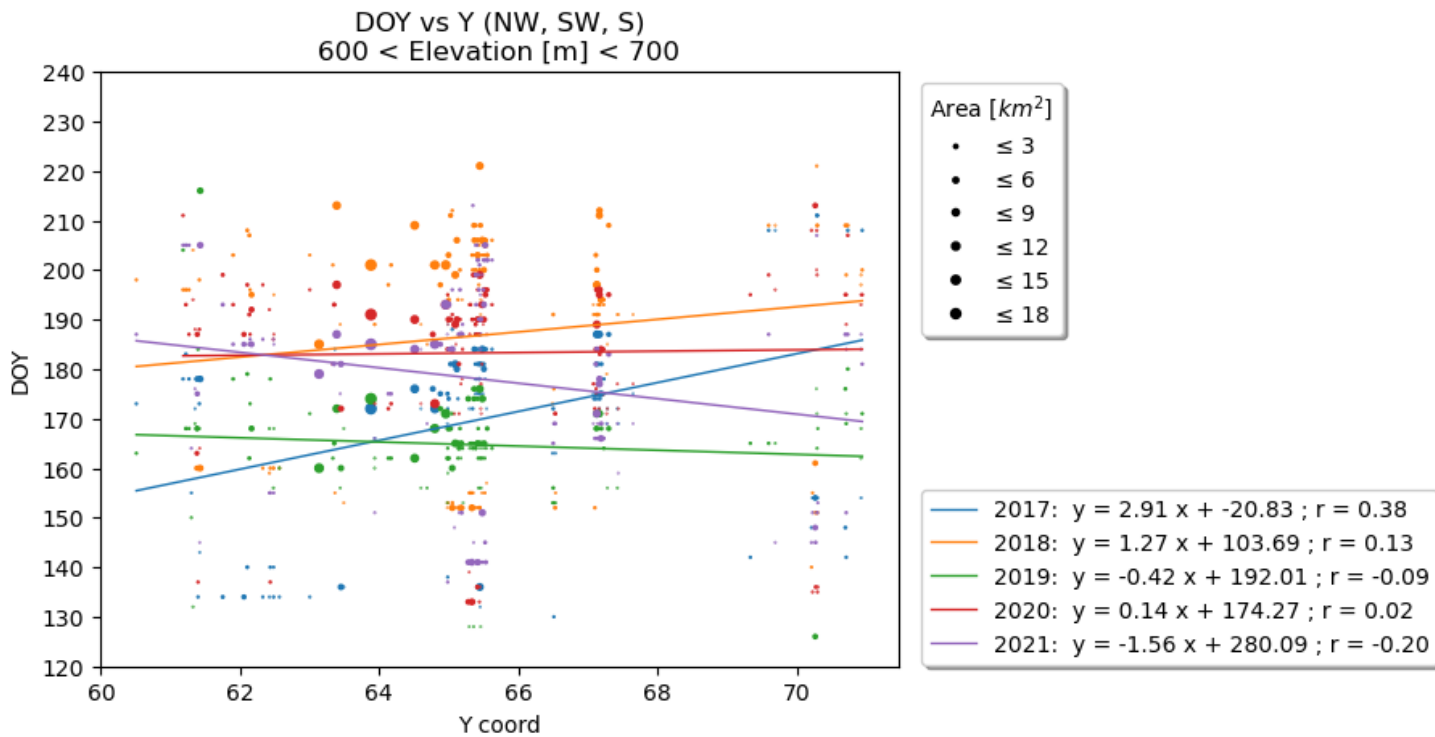


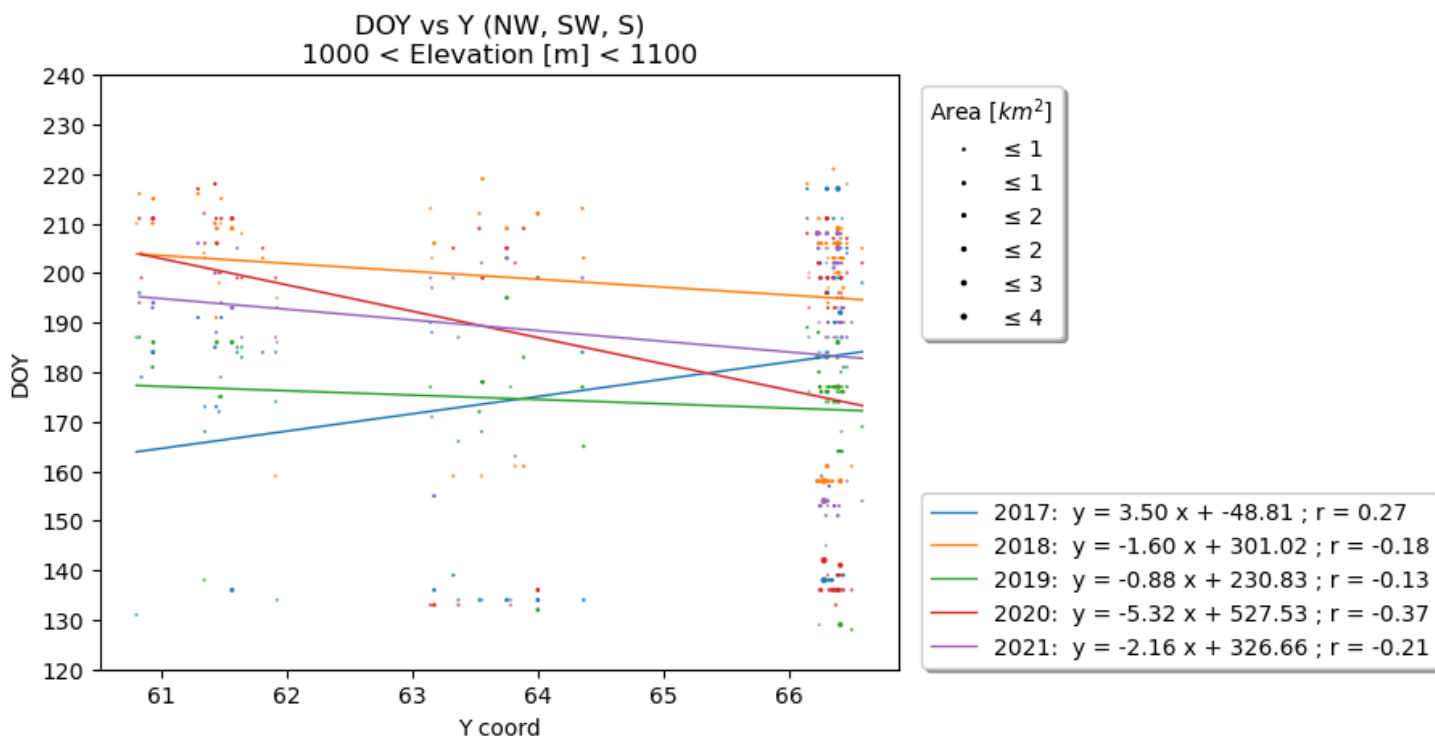
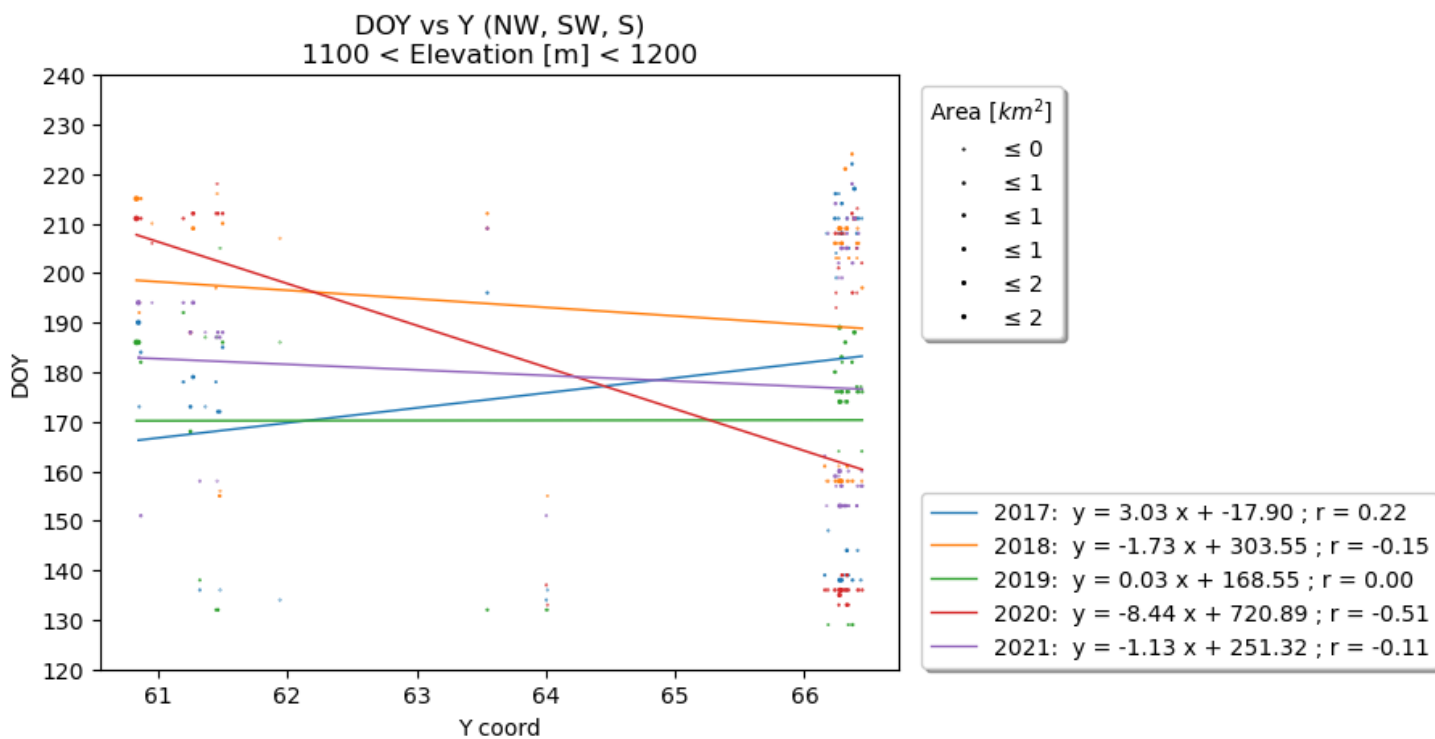
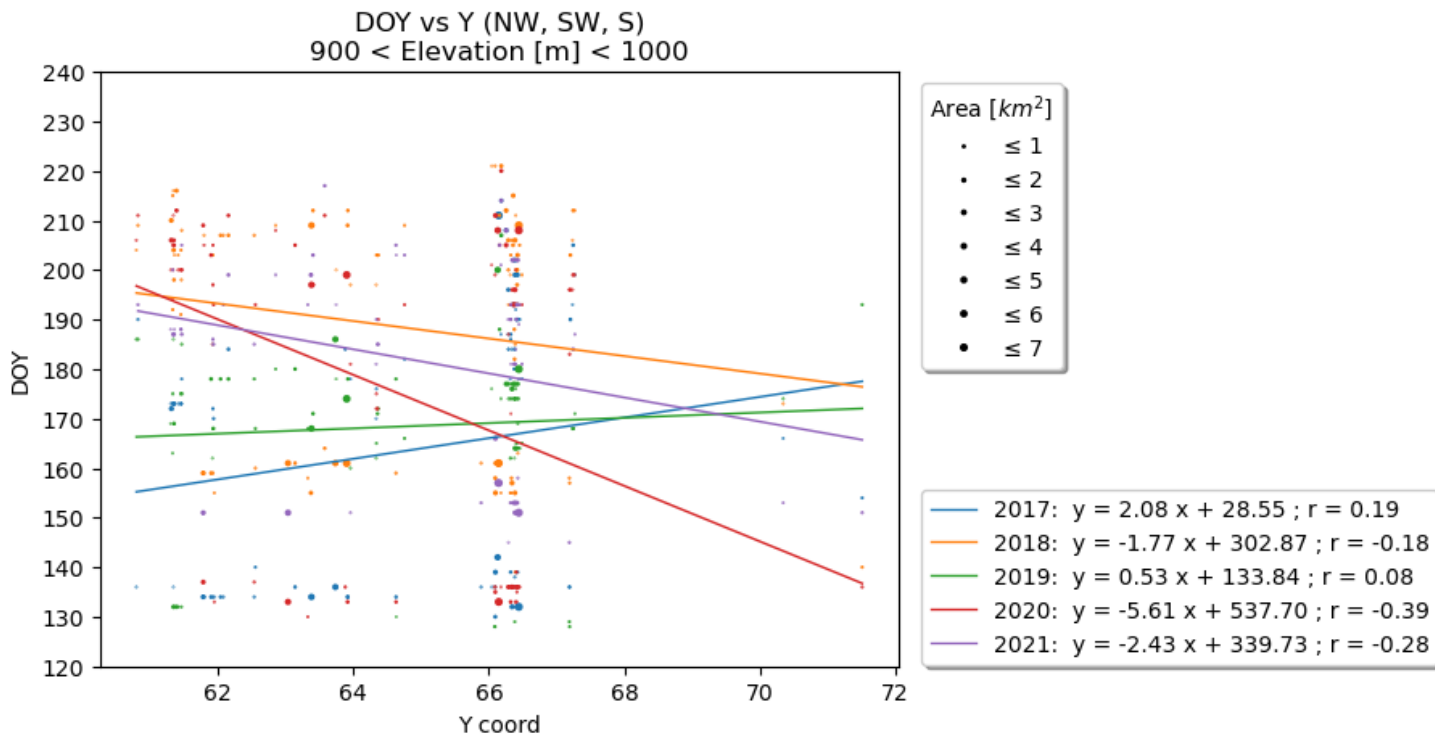


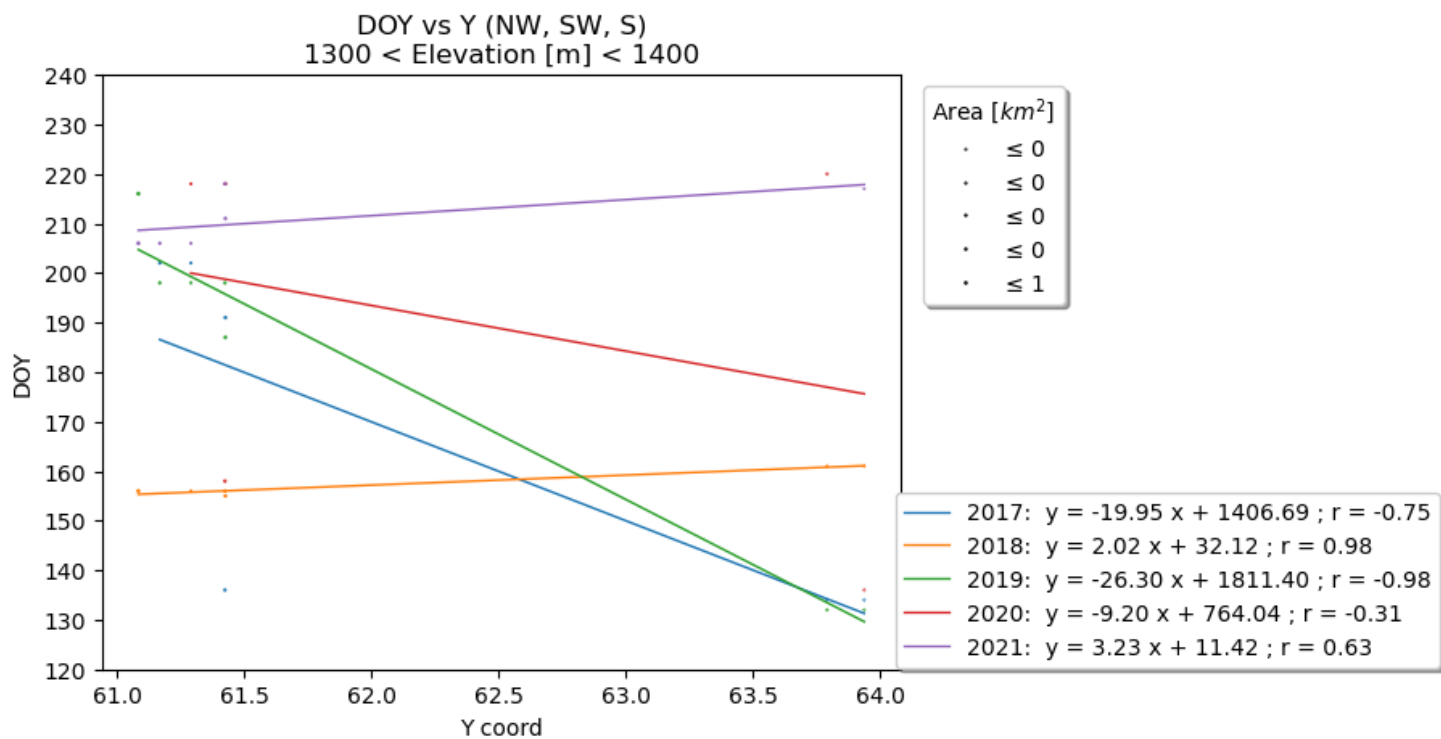
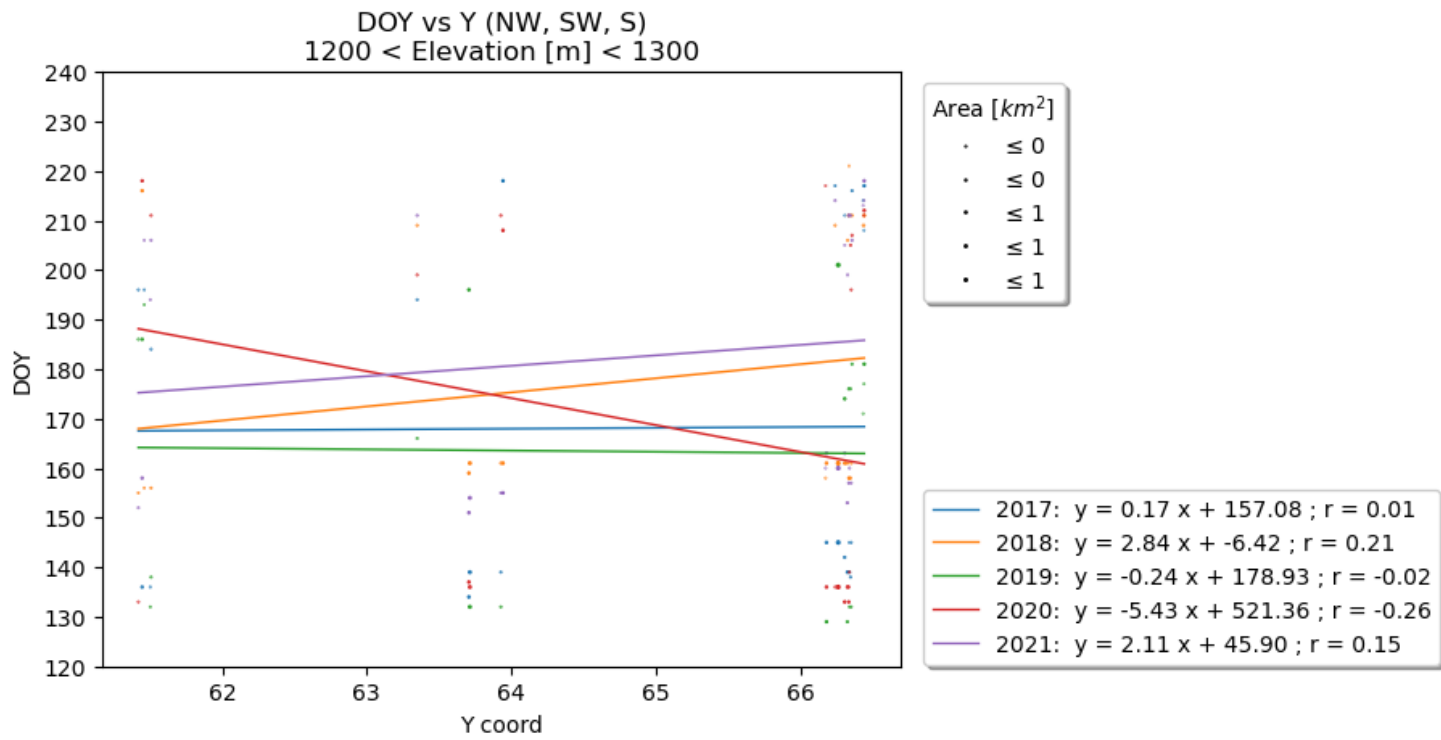


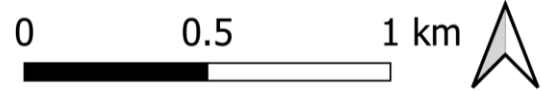
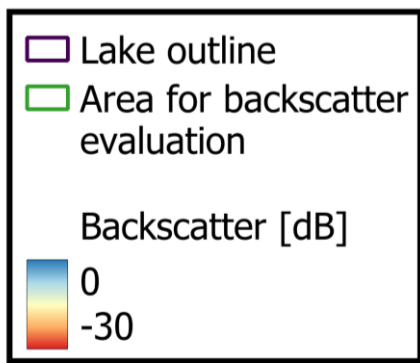




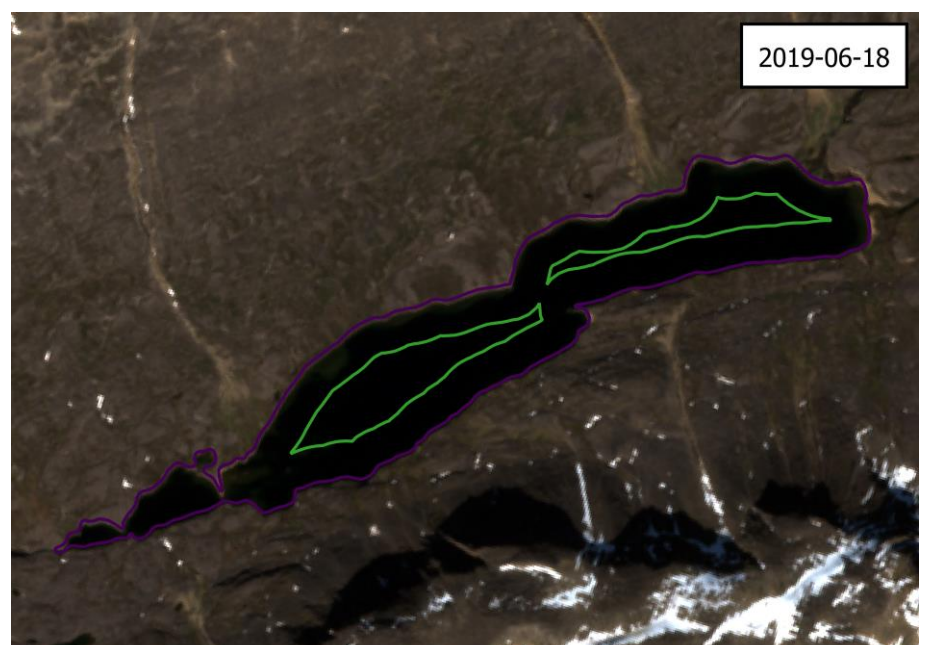
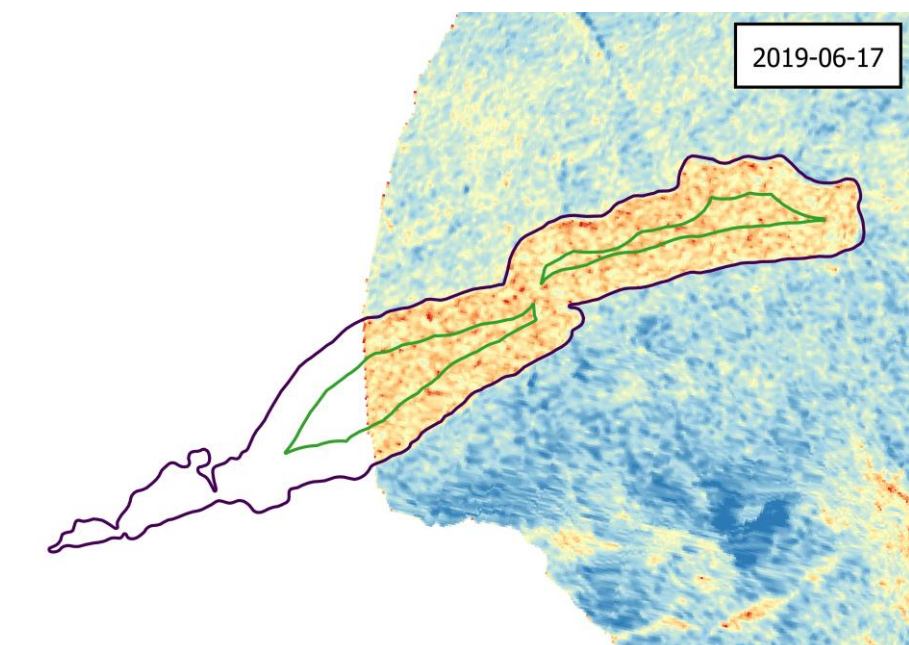
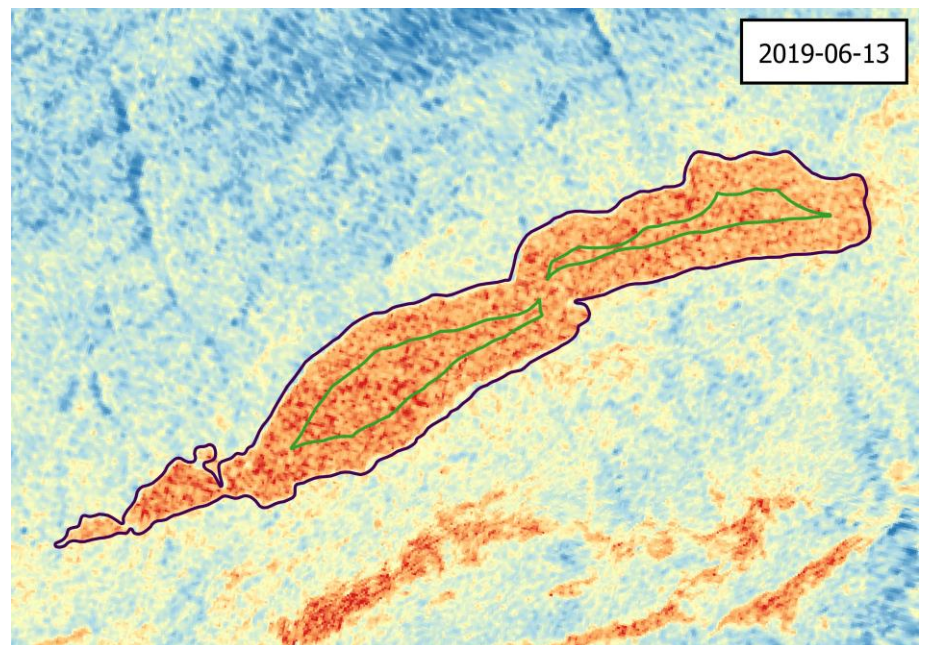
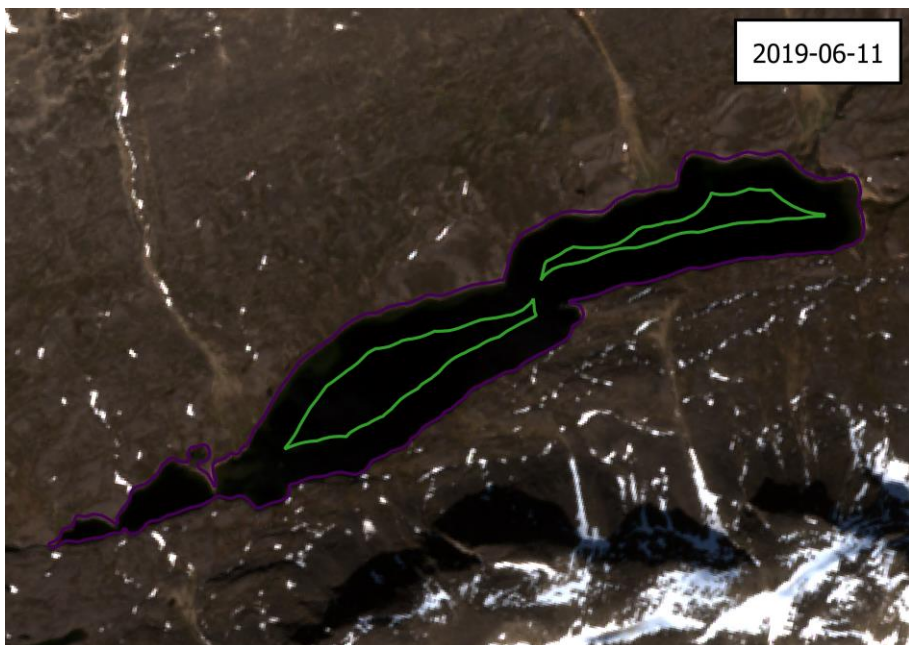
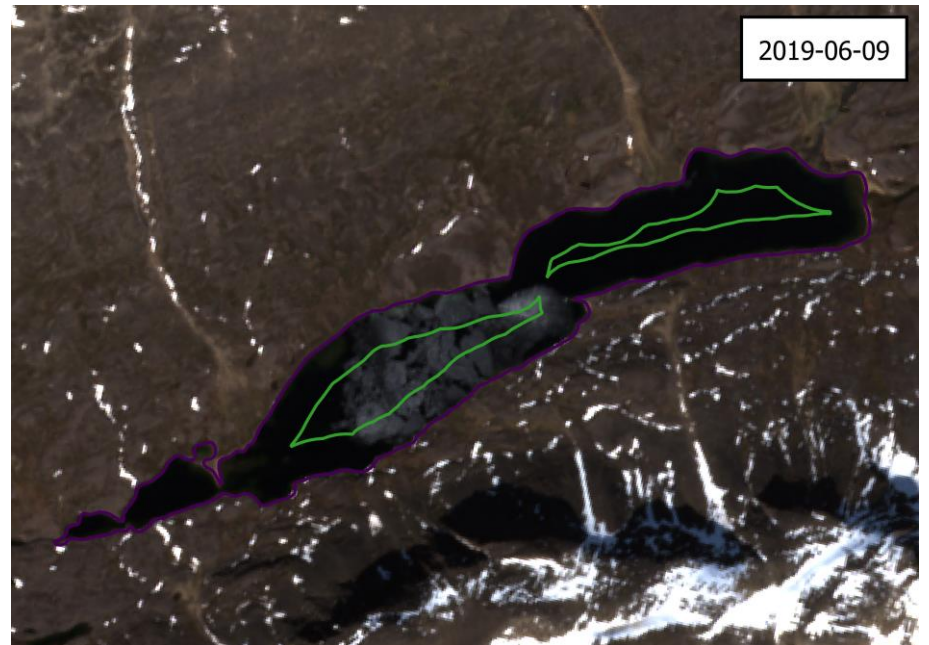
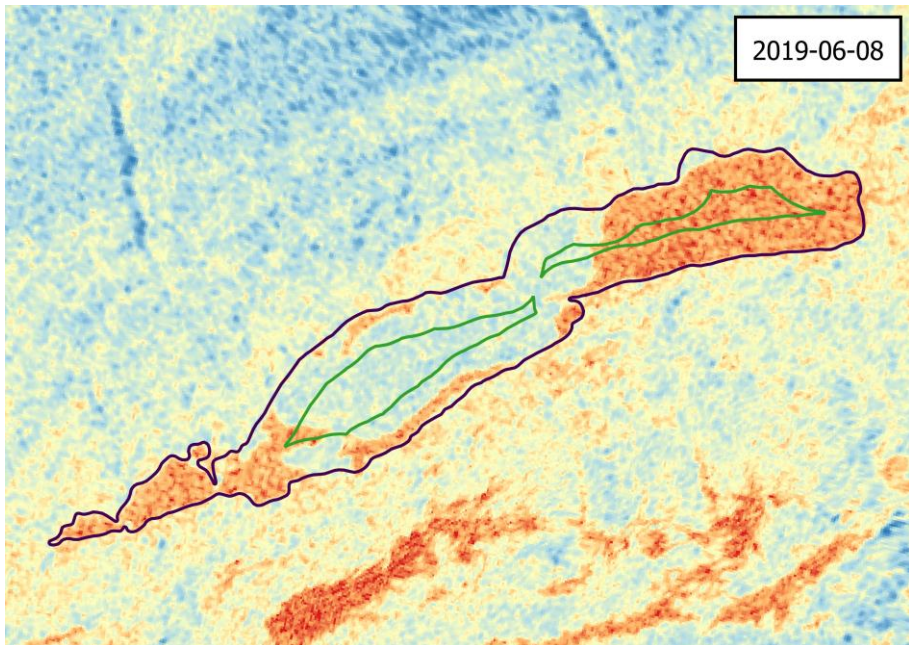
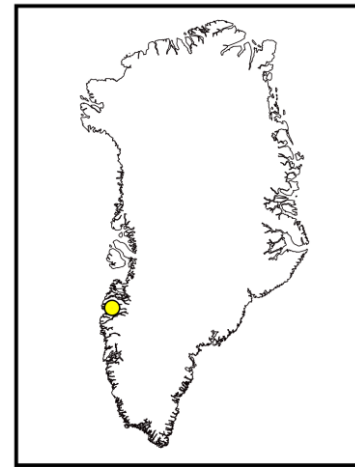








HH backscatter of lake 28300
(area = 1.53595 km², region SW)



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(area = 1.53595 km², region SW)

