



Australian Government
Bureau of Meteorology

Monthly Data Report – December 2020

Australian Baseline Sea Level Monitoring Array



Australian Government

Bureau of Meteorology

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Executive Summary

This summary, and the overview that follows, are intended to provide a synopsis of the recent month's observations in addition to longer term variations over the life of the project to date.

December 2020

- The Australian Baseline Sea Level Monitoring Array (ABSLMA) network continued to collect high quality sea level and associated meteorological information to support long-term sea level monitoring around Australia.
- The overall rate of sea level data returned from the operating network during December was 99.6%.
- The Thevenard SEAFRAME was recommissioned on the 29th of October 2020 following refurbishment of the wharf. The nearby temporary gauge operated by Flinders Ports for the interim remains in situ.
- Monthly mean sea levels were slightly higher than normal at most locations with significant sea level anomalies observed at Broome (+11 cm higher than normal), Groote Eylandt (+8 cm) and Darwin (+7 cm). Sea levels were 4 cm lower than normal at both Esperance and Thevenard this month.

Introduction

Welcome to the December 2020 Monthly Data Report for the Australian Baseline Sea Level Monitoring Array (ABSLMA). The report details the month by month operation of SEAFRAME sea level monitoring stations around Australia, including operational problems with the network and the occurrence of abnormal sea level events in the context of related astronomical tide, weather and climate variations. A companion array of SEAFRAME sea level monitoring stations in Pacific Island Countries is supported under the Pacific Sea Level and Geodetic Monitoring Project.

The ABSLMA was originally developed and supported from grants under the Australian Climate Change Science Program through the Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency, with a primary goal to monitor long-period sea level changes around Australia focussing particularly on the enhanced greenhouse effect. Operation of the array continues to be supported by the Bureau of Meteorology, underpinning the advanced technologies gathering global observations for climate change research as well as providing real-time information for tidal monitoring and tsunami detection.

The Baseline sea level monitoring array consists of 15 standard SEAFRAME stations operated by the Bureau of Meteorology at representative sites around Australia, as well as two customised,

privately-owned stations at Lorne and Stony Point (Figure 1). The SEAFRAME at Port Stanvac was removed in November 2010 to allow Mobil Refining Australia to decommission the oil refinery. Re-establishment of a tide gauge near Port Stanvac is being investigated.

The standard SEAFRAME stations not only measure sea level, but also observe several “ancillary” variables - air and water temperatures, wind speed, wind direction and barometric pressure. The privately-owned stations at Lorne and Stony Point do not measure the ancillary variables, although winds are measured at Stony Point.

The Bureau of Meteorology and Geosciences Australia, through their membership on the Intergovernmental Committee on Surveying and Mapping (ICSM) Permanent Committee on Tides & Mean Sea Level (PCTMSL), strive to sustain geodetic levelling programs implemented by various state surveying organisations in order to monitor shifts in the vertical of the sea level sensors due to local land movement.

Observations collected by the sea level monitoring network are routinely processed into a range of quality-controlled data products. The monthly data report is the primary source of up-to-date information relating to these data products.



Figure 1. Australian Baseline Sea Level Monitoring Network of SEAFRAME stations.

Sea Level and Climate

Astronomical tides and weather conditions are largely responsible for daily perturbations in sea level, but over monthly, seasonal and longer timescales sea levels around Australia are largely influenced by fluctuations in climate and ocean heat content.

Intra-annual or seasonal changes in sea level are closely linked to the annual solar radiation cycle and associated shifts in weather patterns and ocean current systems. Across southern Australia, sea levels tend to be at their highest during winter, while the opposite is true across northern Australia, where sea levels tend to be higher during the summer wet season. Further information relating to seasonal climate variations around Australia is provided by the Bureau of Meteorology at <http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/>

Inter-annual sea level variations are largely influenced by the El Niño – Southern Oscillation climate cycle, particularly across the northern and

western Australian coastlines. Sea levels are generally lower than normal around Australia during El Niño, in response to cooler than normal ocean temperatures and higher than normal barometric pressures that are brought about by weaker than normal easterly Trade Winds across the Pacific. Conversely, during La Niña sea levels around Australia are generally higher than normal, in association with warmer than normal ocean temperatures and lower than normal barometric pressures, due to stronger than normal easterly Trade Winds across the Pacific.

A summary of recent and past El Niño – Southern Oscillation climate conditions is provided by the Bureau of Meteorology at <http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/enso/>

December SEAFRAME Data

Monthly Sea Level and Environmental Data

The observed sea levels (Figure 3) are dominated by the daily oscillations of the tide. In most cases, the tide rises and falls twice per day (semi-diurnal), but at Groote Eylandt and Hillarys the tide tends to have a single high and low per day (diurnal). Where the tides follow a semi-diurnal pattern, the greatest tidal variations are called spring tides, which tend to occur around the time of the new and full moons. The new moon fell on the 14th December while a full moon fell on the 30th.

Gaps in the data are the result of instrumental errors or data retrieval problems and are discussed under Instrument Performance.

The residuals (Figure 4) are the differences between the observed sea levels and the astronomical tidal predictions. They highlight non-tidal sea level fluctuations, such as those due to the effects of weather or tsunamis.

Low pressure systems can produce storm surges where the combination of low barometric pressure and strong winds raise sea levels well above the predicted astronomical tides for a period of a day or more. The non-tidal sea level fluctuations can be amplified or sustained by the shape of the bay or harbour in which the gauge is located. Some of the SEAFRAME stations are located in harbours that exhibit 'sloshing' under certain conditions (a phenomenon referred to as a seiche).

The sea level residuals at all stations from time to time and to some degree exhibit semi-diurnal or

diurnal fluctuations which last a few days or weeks and then disappear. If these fluctuations were to persist, they would form part of the astronomical tide prediction and thus not appear as residuals. Consequently, semi-diurnal and diurnal residual fluctuations will always be transient in nature.

The barometrically corrected residuals (Figure 5) have had a major part of the effect of atmospheric pressure fluctuations removed from the sea level residuals of Figure 4. The rule of thumb for the 'inverse barometer effect' is that a 1-hPa fall in the barometer, if sustained over a day or more, produces a 1-cm rise in the local sea level (within the area beneath the low-pressure system).

The winds, temperatures and barometric pressures are plotted in Figure 6 to Figure 11. The incident winds in Figure 8 follow the meteorological convention, that is, they point in the direction the wind is coming from. For example, the winds at Hillarys were from the south-west for much of December.

Air and water temperatures (Figure 9 and Figure 10) are plotted using the same vertical scale for the purpose of comparison. The air temperatures are seen to fluctuate over a much wider range than the water temperatures.

Barometric pressures (Figure 11) tend to fluctuate by around 3 hPa twice-daily at all stations as a result of atmospheric tides, which are largest in the tropical regions and reduce to near zero toward the

poles. The longer-term barometric pressure fluctuations that occur over periods of days to weeks are due to passing weather systems. These fluctuations tend to be larger at sites farther away from the equator, particularly those along the southern Australian coastline.

The monthly data extremes are put into perspective by Figure 12. In this figure, if an open circle falls above (below) a solid dot, a new maximum (minimum) for the particular month has been set. The data sets only include the ABSLMA data, which have been collected since May 1990 when the first station was installed at Darwin.

The SEAFRAME station at Thursday Island has only been collecting data since April 2015, and the monthly data extremes do not include data from an earlier tide gauge.

Record high December barometric were observed at Portland (1031.1 hPa), Burnie (1033.2 hPa), Spring Bay (1033.6 hPa) and Port Kembla (1030.5 hPa).

Further sea level and meteorological statistical information is available at <http://www.bom.gov.au/oceanography/projects/abslmp/data/monthly.shtml>

Monthly Means and Anomalies

Figure 13 through Figure 16 show the monthly means, or simple arithmetic averages, for sea level, barometric pressure, water temperature and air temperature. The monthly means demonstrate the seasonal variations of the recorded parameters. Groote Eylandt, for example, normally experiences an annual sea level cycle of about 0.6 m that peaks around February of each year.

Figure 17 through Figure 20 show the monthly mean sea level, barometric pressure, air temperature and water temperature anomalies. The sea level anomalies are the residuals after tides, annual and semi-annual seasonal cycles and linear slope have been removed by way of harmonic tidal analysis of the complete record. The annual sea level cycle at Groote Eylandt (which has the largest consistent annual cycle) is quite notable in Figure 13 but less apparent in Figure 17. By removing the seasonal cycles, the anomalies help to bring out irregular features, such as lower than normal sea levels around much of Australia during the 1997/98 El Niño.

Monthly mean sea levels were slightly higher than normal at most locations for December 2020. Significant sea level anomalies were observed at

Broome (+11 cm higher than normal), Groote Eylandt (+8 cm) and Darwin (+7 cm). Sea levels were 4 cm lower than normal at both Esperance and Thevenard this month.

The anomalies of barometric pressure (Figure 18), water and air temperature (Figure 19 and Figure 20 respectively) are determined in the same manner as the sea level anomalies, except the linear slope is not calculated.

Barometric pressures were higher than normal at Esperance (anomaly of +1.5 hPa), Thevenard (+2.0 hPa), Portland (+1.5 hPa), Burnie (+1.6 hPa), Spring Bay (+1.8 hPa) and Port Kembla (1.9 hPa), and near normal at the remaining sites.

Water temperature anomalies varied spatially from positive to negative across the network this month. Significant water temperature anomalies were observed at Broome (+0.4 °C), Thursday Island (+0.4 °C), Thevenard (-0.5 °C), Portland (-0.6 °C) and Burnie (-0.4 °C).

Air temperature anomalies also varied spatially across the during December with anomalies ranging from -0.8 °C lower than normal to +1.0 °C higher than normal.

Overall Rate of Movement in Sea Level

Table 1 shows the overall rate of movement in sea level at individual Australian Baseline stations based on the data so far collected at those sites. For most sites, the underlying data sets now exceed twenty years in length, Thursday Island being the exception.

The overall rates of movement are updated every month by calculating the linear slope during the tidal analysis of all the data available at individual stations. The rates are relative to the SEAFRAME

sensor benchmark, whose movement relative to inland benchmarks is monitored by Geosciences Australia.

Please exercise caution in interpreting the overall rates of movement of sea level – the records are too short to be inferring long-term trends and have not been corrected for land movement or other parameters that may influence the reported rates.

Table 1. Updated overall rates of sea level movement based on SEAFRAME data from installation through December 2020.

Location	Latitude	Longitude	Date of first data	Rate ¹ (mm/yr)	Change in rate from previous month (mm/yr)
Cocos Island	12°07'07.1"S	96°53'30.9"E	Sep 1992	7.1	0.0
Groote Eylandt	13°51'36.2"S	136°24'56.1"E	Sep 1993	4.0	+0.1
Darwin	12°28'18.4"S	130°50'45.1"E	May 1990	5.5	0.0
Broome	18°00'03.0"S	122°13'07.1"E	Nov 1991	5.6	+0.1
Hillarys	31°49'32.0"S	115°44'18.9"E	Nov 1991	6.2	0.0
Esperance	33°52'15.2"S	121°53'43.3"E	Mar 1992	4.3	0.0
Thevenard ³	32°08'56.2"S	133°38'28.8"E	Mar 1992	4.1	0.0
Port Stanvac ²	35°06'31.0"S	138°28'1.3"E	Jun 1992	4.7	0.0
Portland	38°20'36.4"S	141°36'47.4"E	Jul 1991	2.8	0.0
Lorne	38°32'49.4"S	143°59'19.8"E	Jan 1993	2.4	0.0
Stony Point	38°22'19.7"S	145°13'28.9"E	Jan 1993	2.5	0.0
Burnie	41°03'0.3"S	145°54'54.0"E	Sep 1992	2.9	0.0
Spring Bay	42°32'45.1"S	147°55'57.8"E	May 1991	3.5	0.0
Port Kembla	34°28'25.5"S	150°54'42.7"E	Jul 1991	3.4	0.0
Rosslyn Bay	23°09'39.7"S	150°47'24.6"E	Jun 1992	4.9	0.0
Cape Ferguson	19°16'38.4"S	147°03'30.4"E	Sep 1991	4.8	0.0
Thursday Island	10°35'11.4"S	142°13'18.8"E	May 2015	11.2	+0.6

¹Relative to SSBM (SEAFRAME Sensor Bench Mark)

²Port Stanvac decommissioned November 2010

³Thevenard recommissioned October 2020

Instrument Performance

In Figure 21, which shows sea level data return, the columns represent the percentage of quality-controlled data returned from the gauge each month.

Sea level data return from the operating network during December 2020 was 99.6% (93.7% when Port Stanvac, which was removed in November 2010 is included in the network) (Table 2).

The Thevenard SEAFRAME was recommissioned on the 29th of October following refurbishment of the wharf. The nearby temporary gauge operated by Flinders Ports for the interim remains in situ.

The performance of the meteorological sensors was generally satisfactory this month; the water temperature sensors at Groote Eylandt, Rosslyn Bay and Cape Ferguson remain faulty. Uncertainty remains as to the accuracy of the Stony Point anemometer and the winds have not been published. The anemometers at Thursday Island and Burnie began under-reporting wind speeds in June and September respectively and wind data have been removed from the records.

The anemometers at Esperance and Spring Bay were removed in 2012 and 2014 respectively, due to infrastructure changes at those sites.

Table 2. Rates of sea level data return.

Location	Installation Date	Data Return Since Installation (%)	Data Return in December 2020 (%)
Cocos Islands	Sep 1992	98.3	100
Groote Eylandt	Sep 1993	98.3	100
Darwin	May 1990	99.8	100
Broome	Nov 1991	97.2	100
Hillarys	Nov 1991	99.9	100
Esperance	Mar 1992	98.0	93.9
Thevenard ²	Mar 1992	94.3	100
Port Stanvac ¹	Jun 1992	85.2	0.0
Portland	Jul 1991	99.3	100
Lorne	Jan 1993	95.6	99.7
Stony Point	Jan 1993	98.9	100
Burnie	Sep 1992	98.8	100
Spring Bay	May 1991	99.5	100
Port Kembla	Jul 1991	99.6	100
Rosslyn Bay	Jun 1992	99.3	99.9
Cape Ferguson	Sep 1991	98.0	100
Thursday Island	May 2015	97.7	100
Network Average		97.5	93.7

¹Port Stanvac decommissioned November 2010

²Thevenard recommissioned October 2020

SEAFRAME Stations

Standard SEAFRAME stations now employ a TELMET (previously SUTRON) programmable data logger, water level gauges and other sensors. The data logger and associated electronics are normally housed in fibreglass huts. A sketch of a typical SEAFRAME station is shown in Figure 2.

Water level sensors include:

1. Primary water level using a Bartex 'AQUATRAK' acoustic-in-air sensor,
2. Secondary water level (or backup) using a Druck pressure transducer mounted close to the seabed, and
3. Tertiary water level using a Vega-puls62 radar sensor mounted above the water.

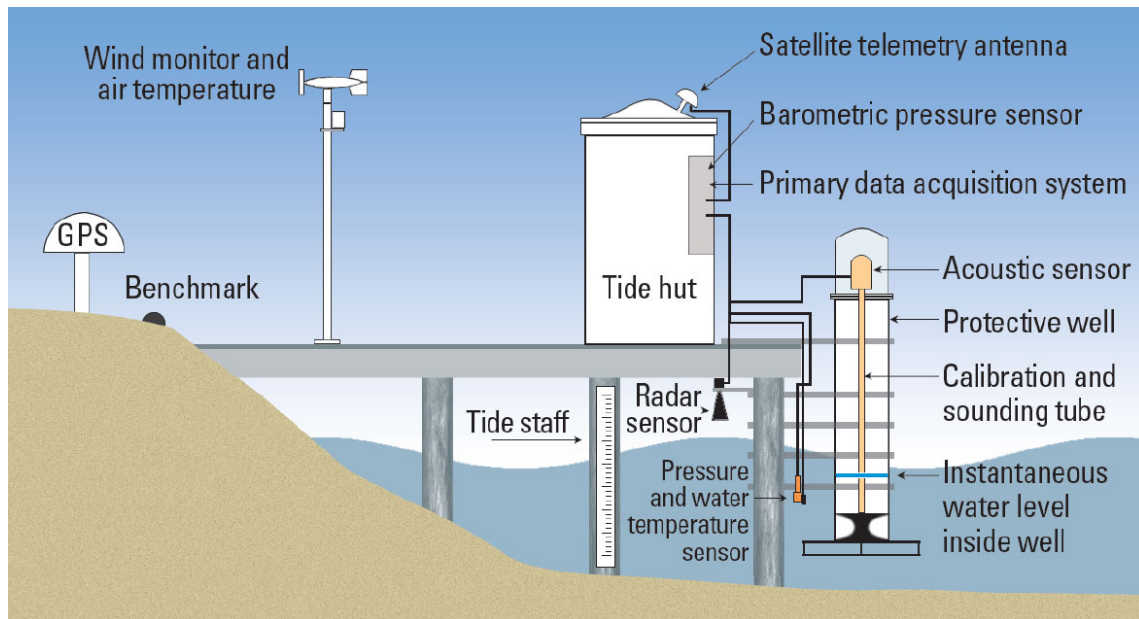


Figure 2. Schematic diagram of a SEAFRAME sea level monitoring station.

Further Information

Online Resources

ABSLMA Web site: <http://www.bom.gov.au/oceanography/projects/absImp/absImp.shtml>

ABSLMA Levelling Survey (Geosciences Australia): ftp://ftp.ga.gov.au/geodesy-outgoing/local_tie/TideGaugeLeveling/ABSLMA/

Ocean Forecasts: <http://www.bom.gov.au/oceanography/forecasts>

ENSO Wrap-Up - El Niño / La Niña information: <http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/enso/>

Sea Level Rise (CSIRO): <http://www.cmar.csiro.au/sealevel/index.html>

Acknowledgement

The Monthly Data Report is prepared by the Bureau of Meteorology.

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Appendix 1: SEAFRAME Data Figures

Please note: The privately-owned stations at Stony Point and Lorne do not record air temperature, water temperature and barometric pressure data and are not present in Figures 5, 9, 10, 11 and 12. The tide gauge at Lorne does not record wind data and is not present in Figures 6, 7 and 8.

The anemometers at Esperance and Spring Bay have been removed.

SIX MINUTE SEA LEVEL OBSERVATIONS (m)

December 2020 (UTC)

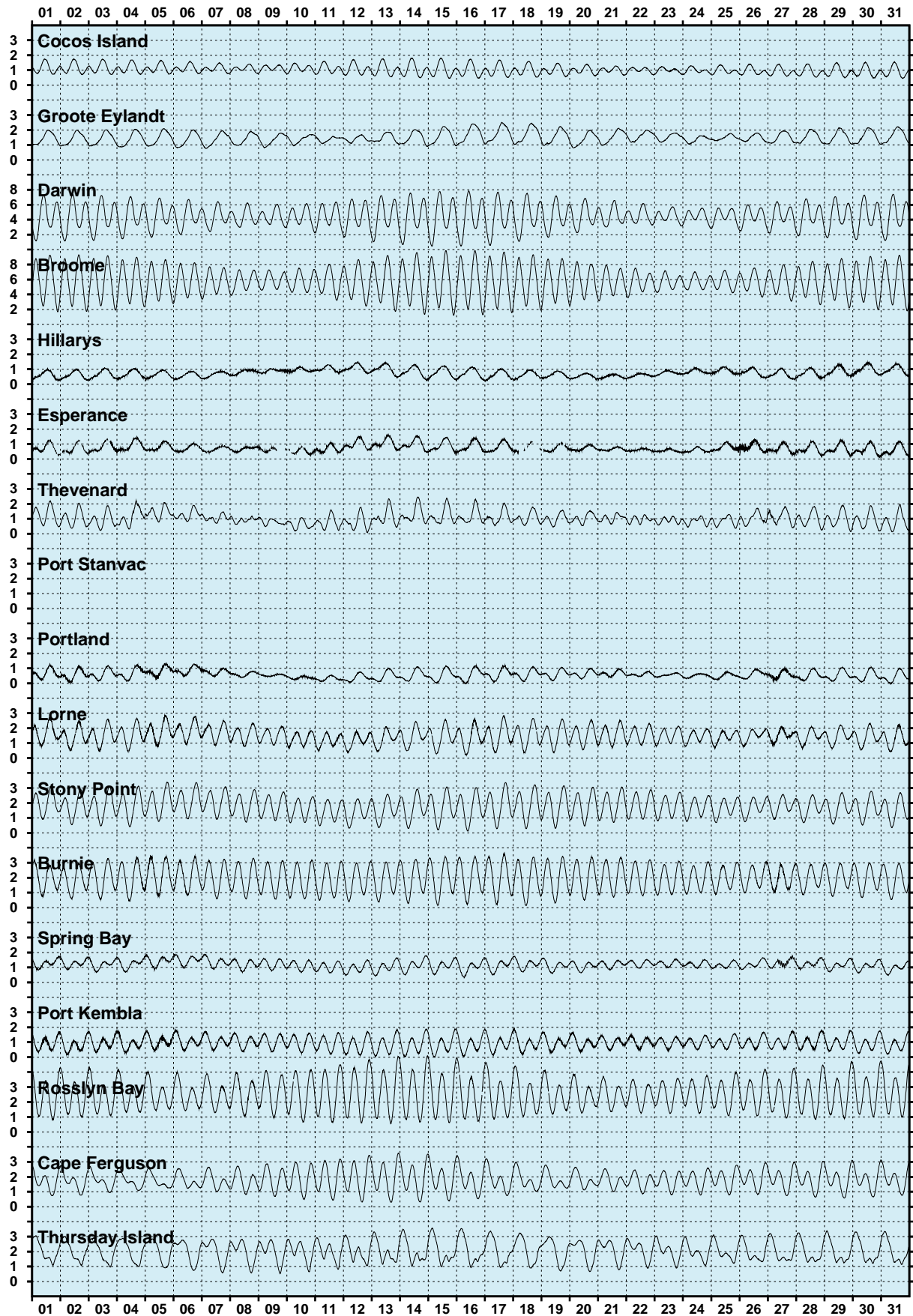


Figure 3. Sea level observations during December 2020.

SIX MINUTE RESIDUAL WATER LEVELS (m)

December 2020 (UTC)

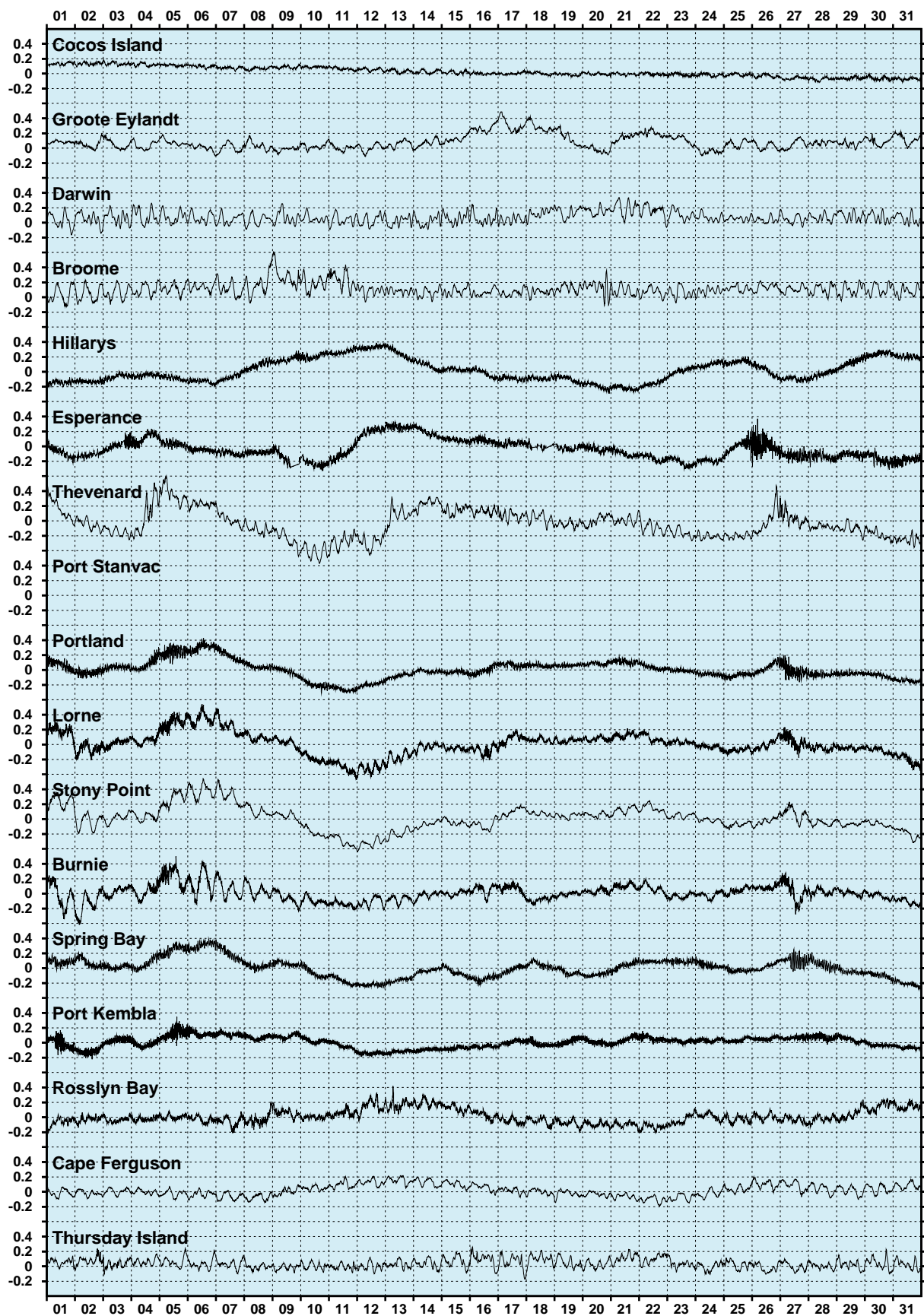


Figure 4. Residual sea levels during December 2020.

SIX MINUTE RESIDUALS ADJUSTED FOR BAROMETRIC PRESSURE (m)

December 2020 (UTC)

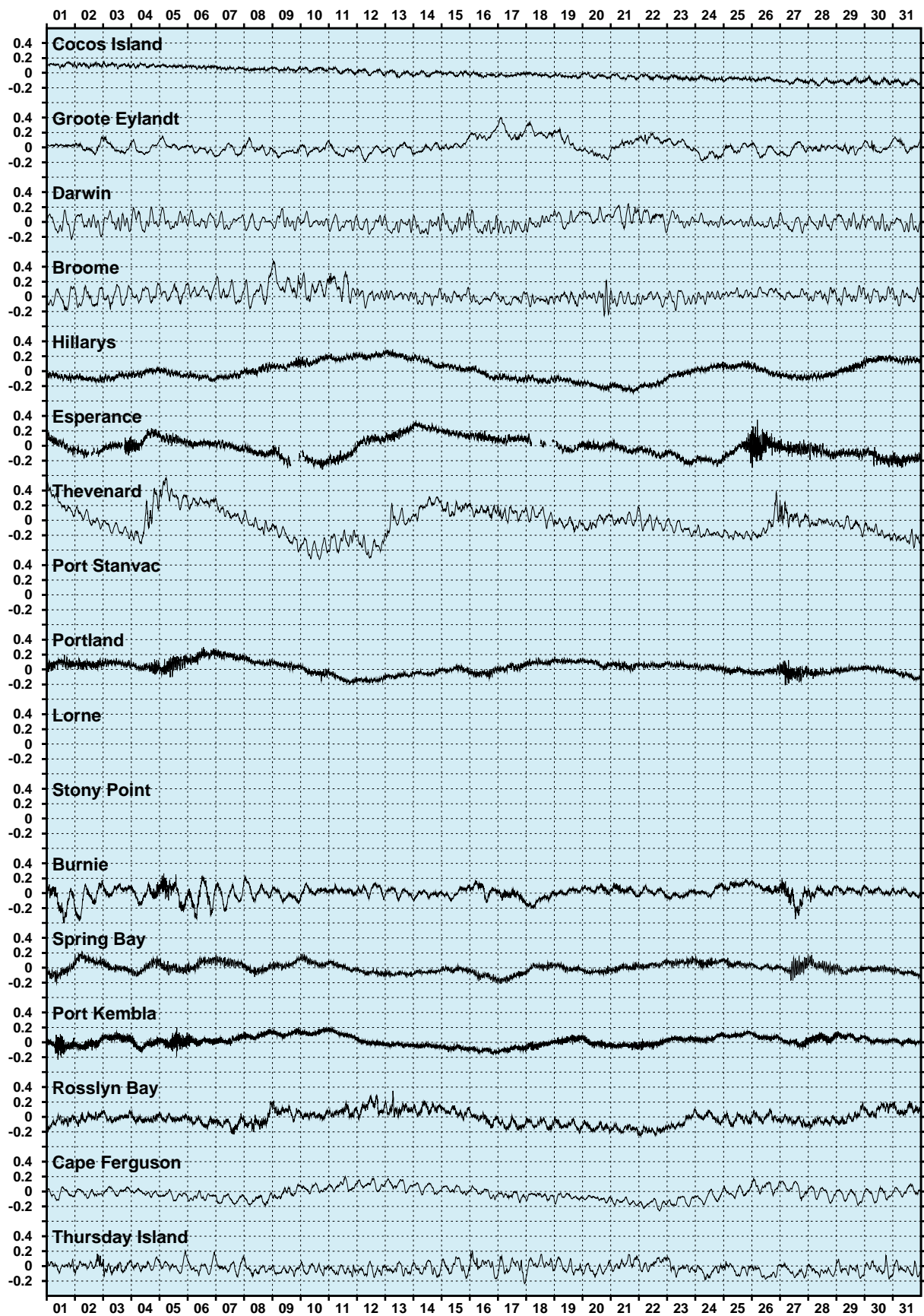


Figure 5. Residual sea levels adjusted for barometric pressure during December 2020.

HOURLY WIND SPEEDS (m/s)

December 2020 (UTC)

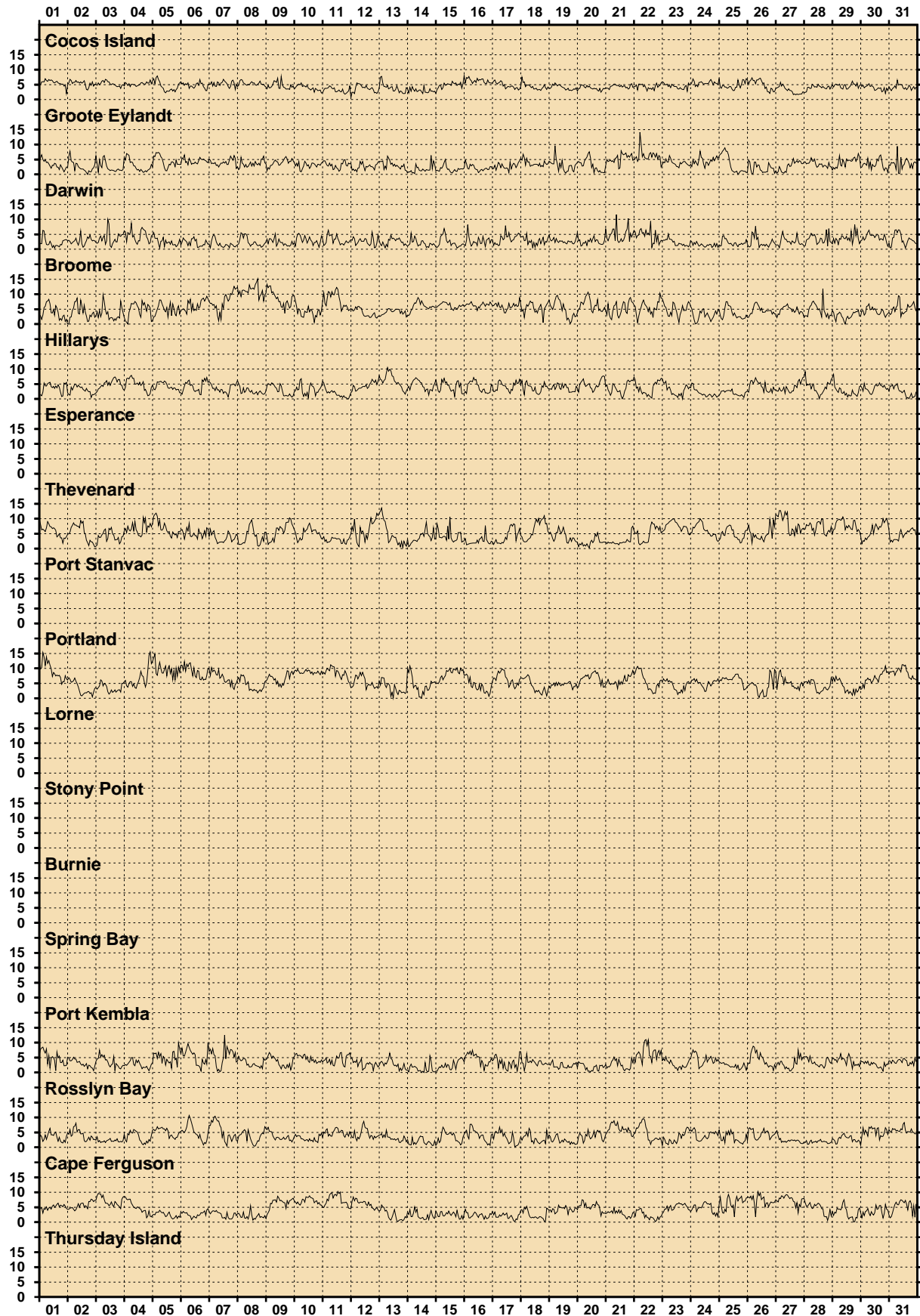


Figure 6. Wind speeds during December 2020.

HOURLY MAXIMUM WIND GUSTS (m/s)

December 2020 (UTC)



Figure 7. Wind gusts during December 2020.

HOURLY INCIDENT WINDS (m/s, °True)

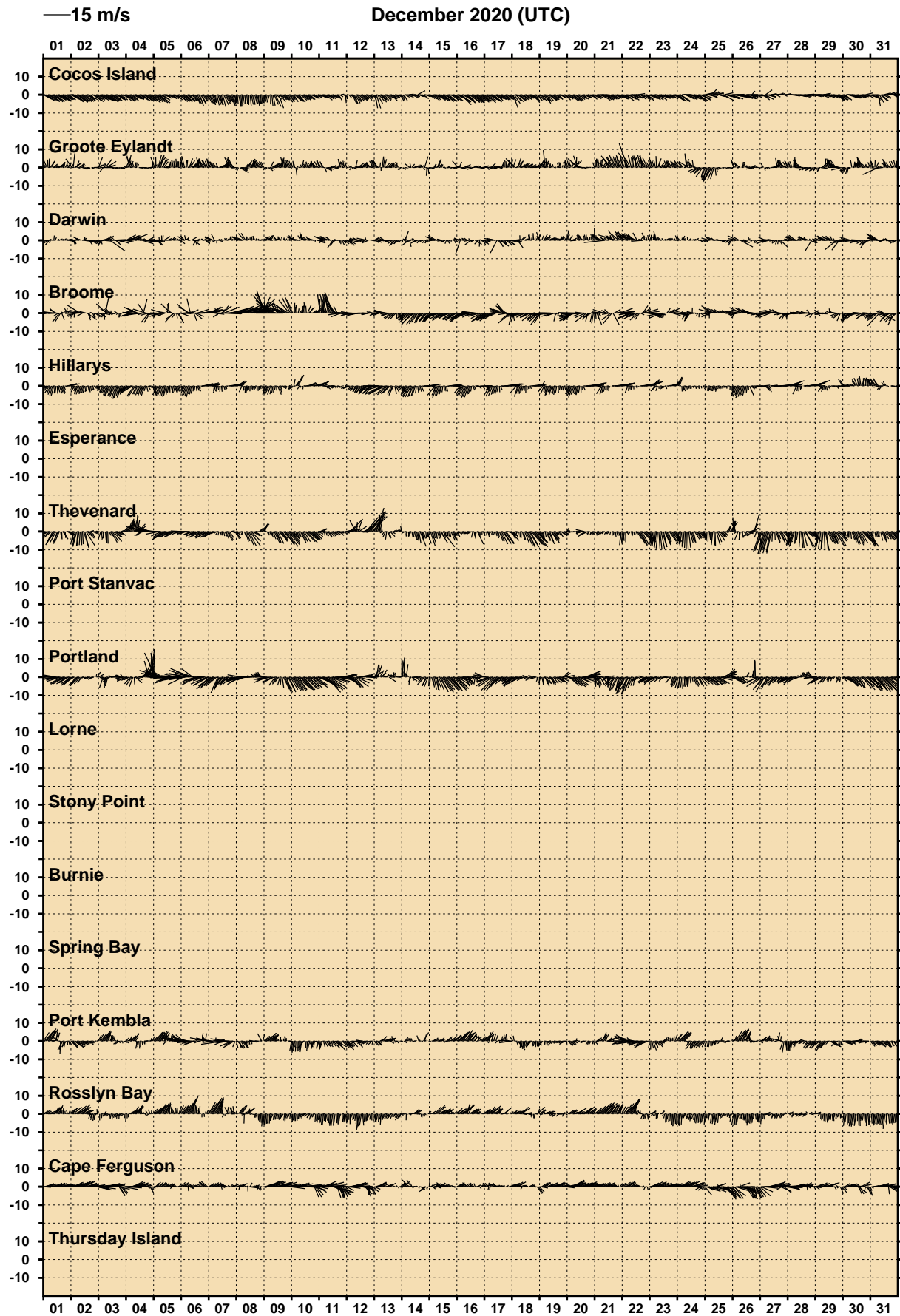


Figure 8. Incident winds during December 2020.

HOURLY AIR TEMPERATURES (°C)

December 2020 (UTC)

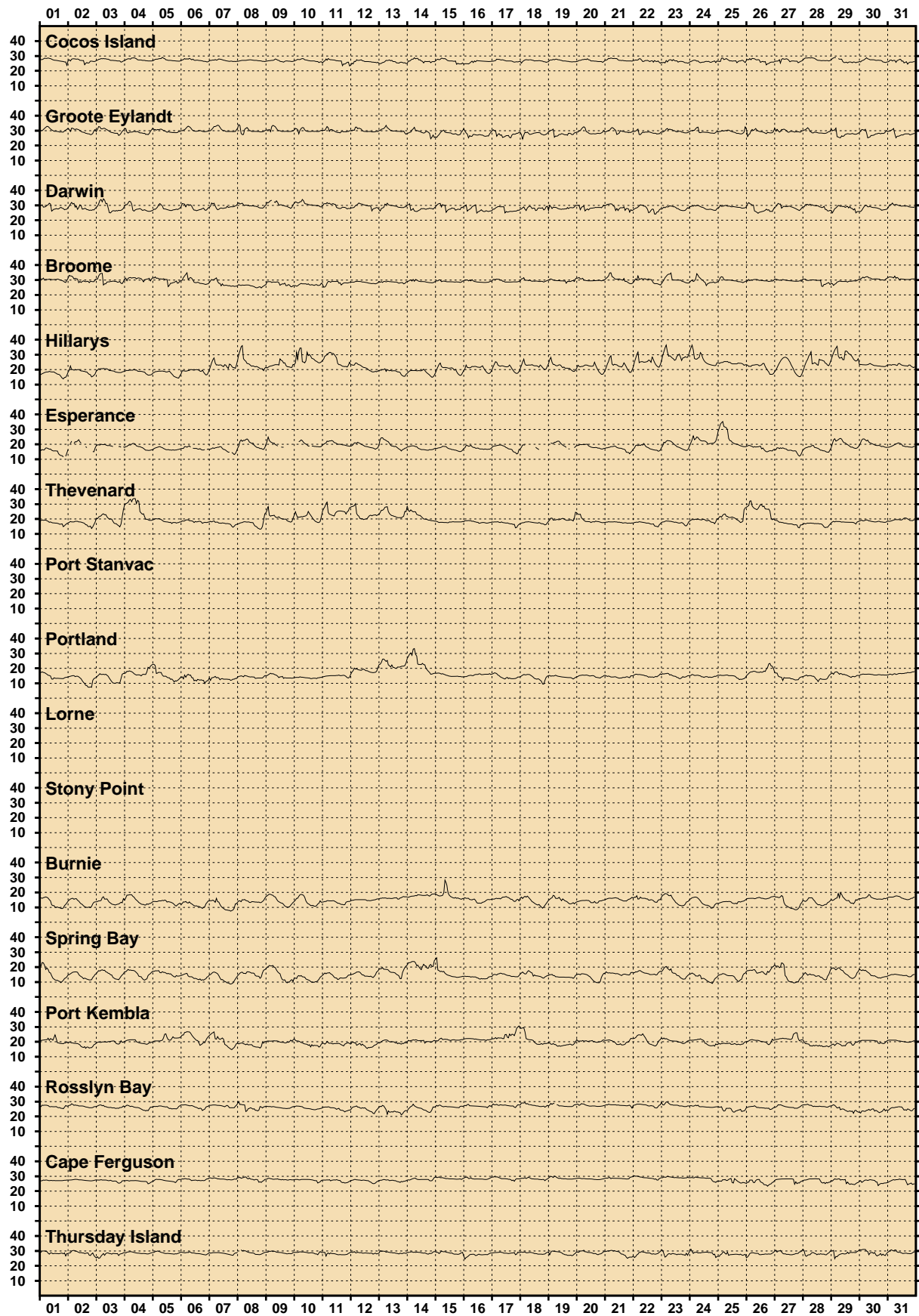


Figure 9. Air temperatures during December 2020.

HOURLY WATER TEMPERATURES (°C)

December 2020 (UTC)

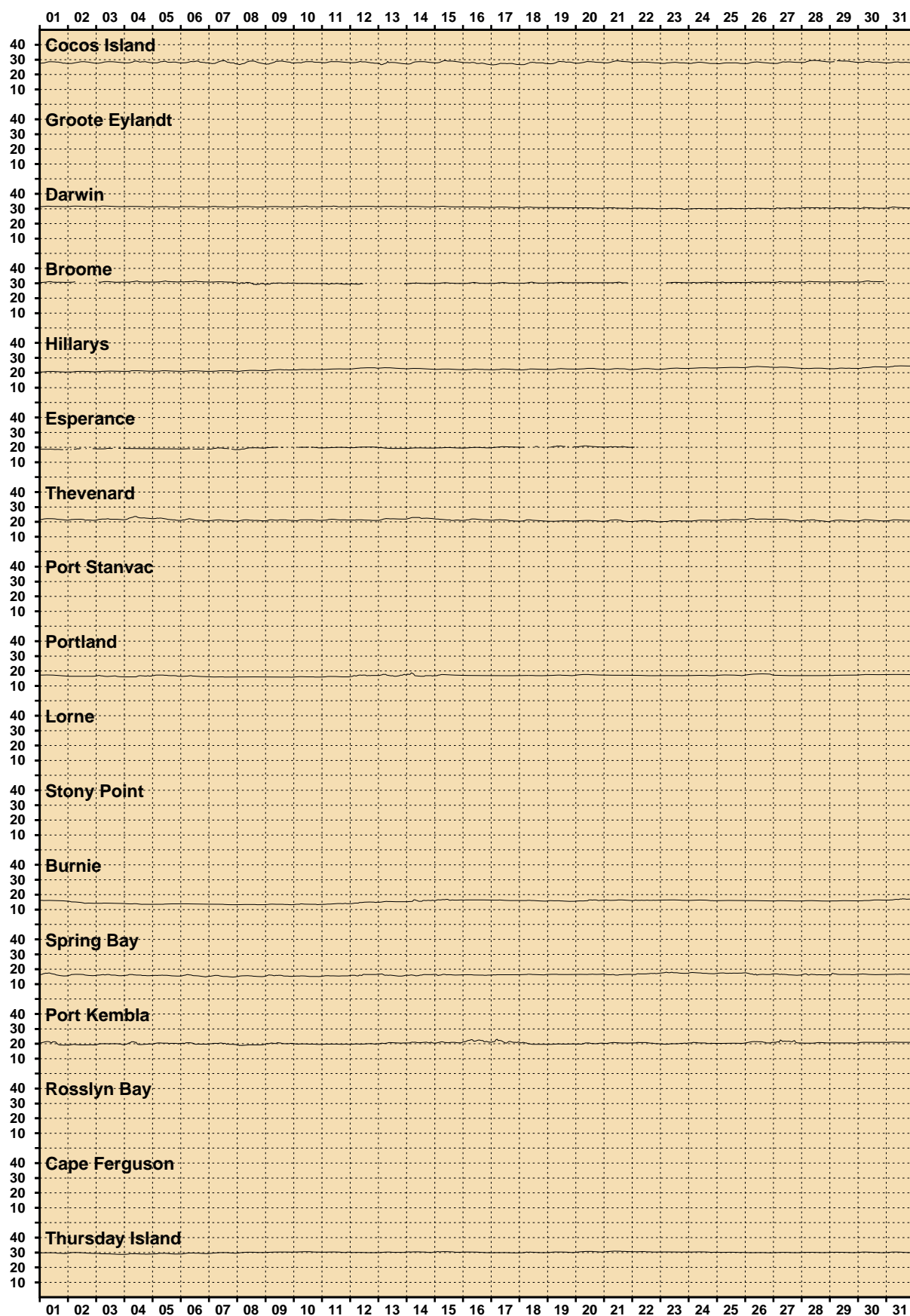


Figure 10. Water temperatures during December 2020.

HOURLY BAROMETRIC PRESSURE (hPa)

December 2020 (UTC)

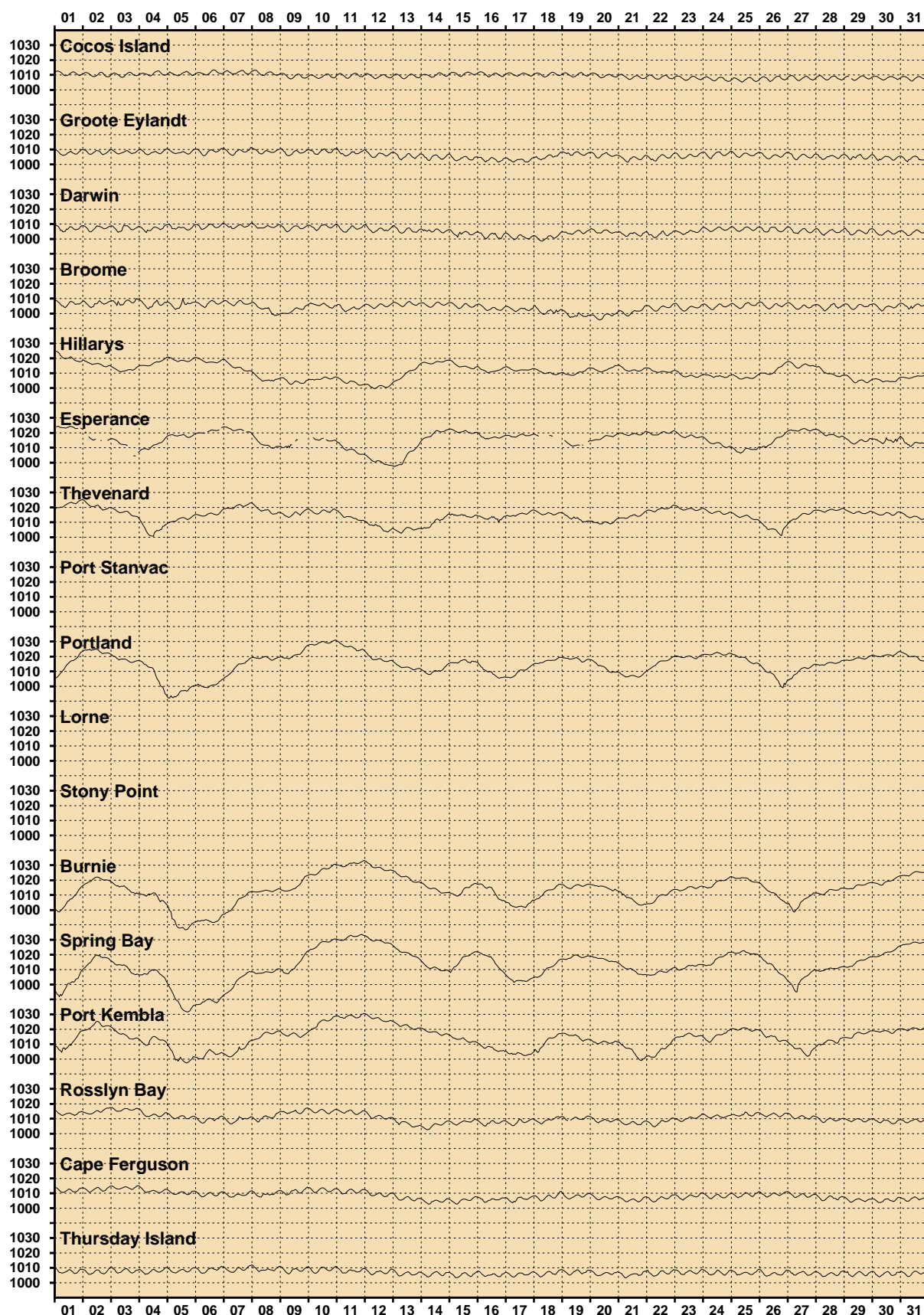


Figure 11. Barometric pressures during December 2020.

COMPARISON OF DECEMBER 2020 MAX,MIN AND MEAN WITH LONG-TERM DECEMBER VALUES

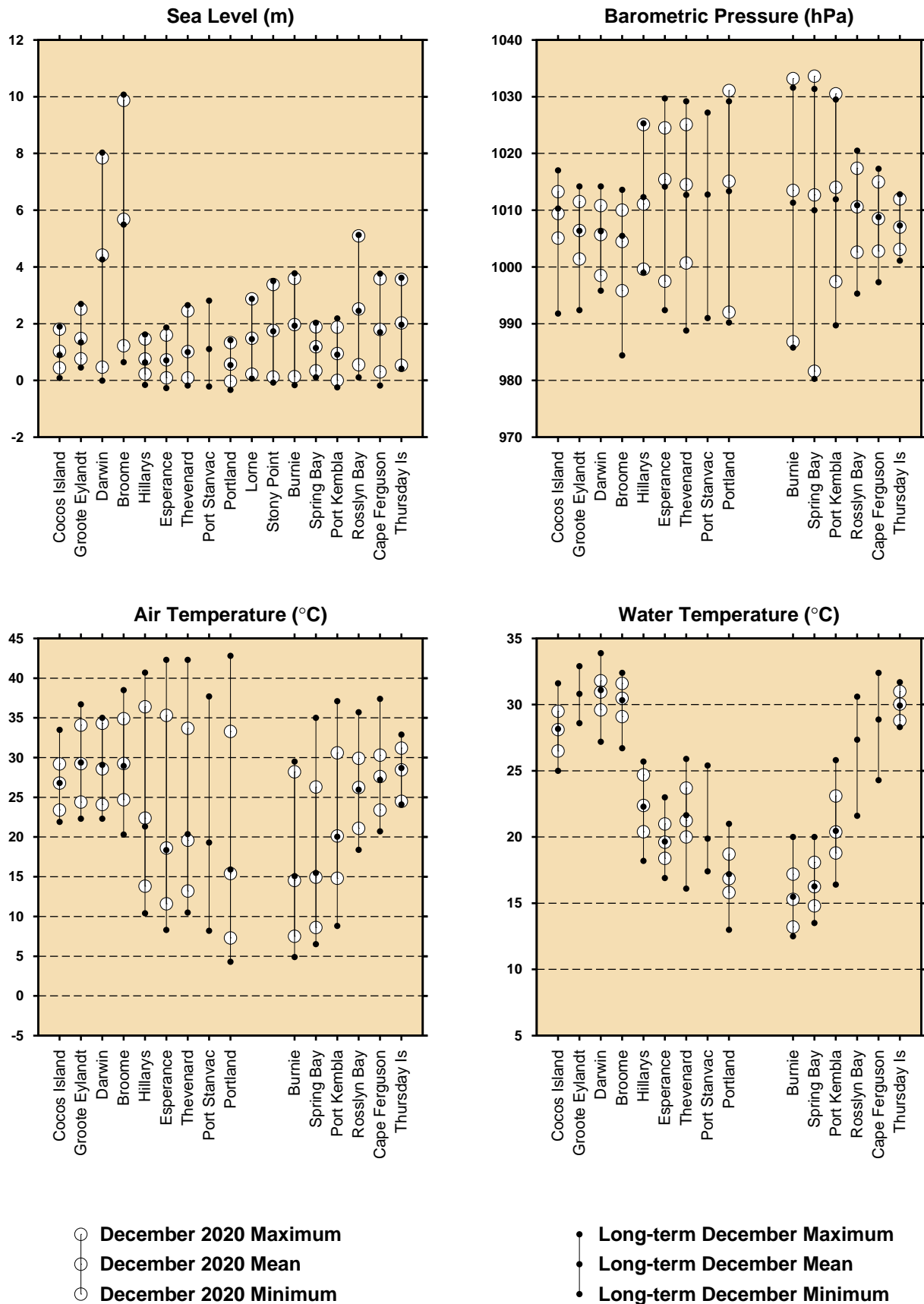


Figure 12. Comparison of December 2020 data with long-term December values.

MONTHLY MEAN SEA LEVELS THROUGH DECEMBER 2020 (m) **(The zero line represents mean sea level)**

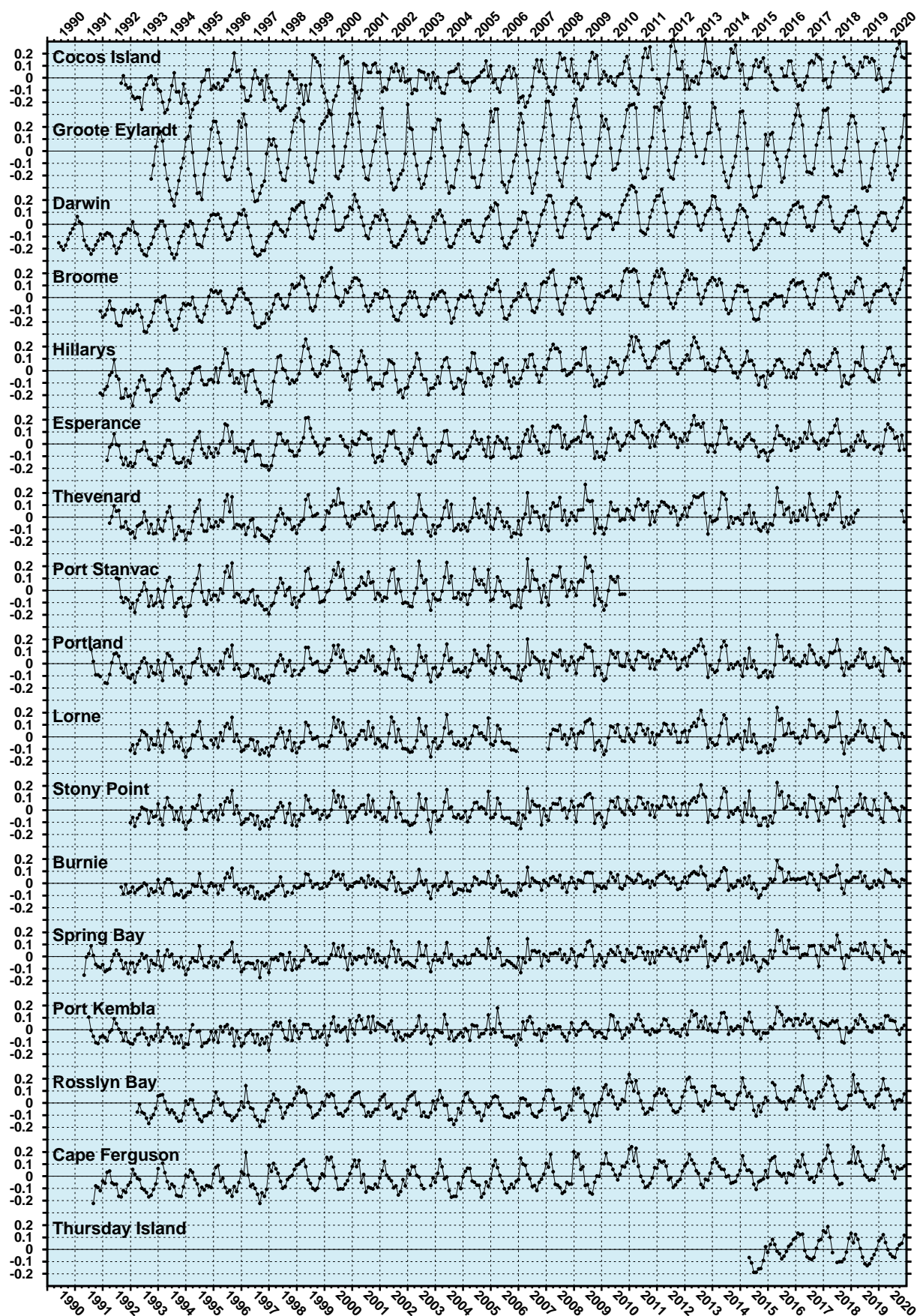


Figure 13. Monthly mean sea levels to December 2020.

MONTHLY MEAN BAROMETRIC PRESSURES THROUGH DECEMBER 2020 (hPa)

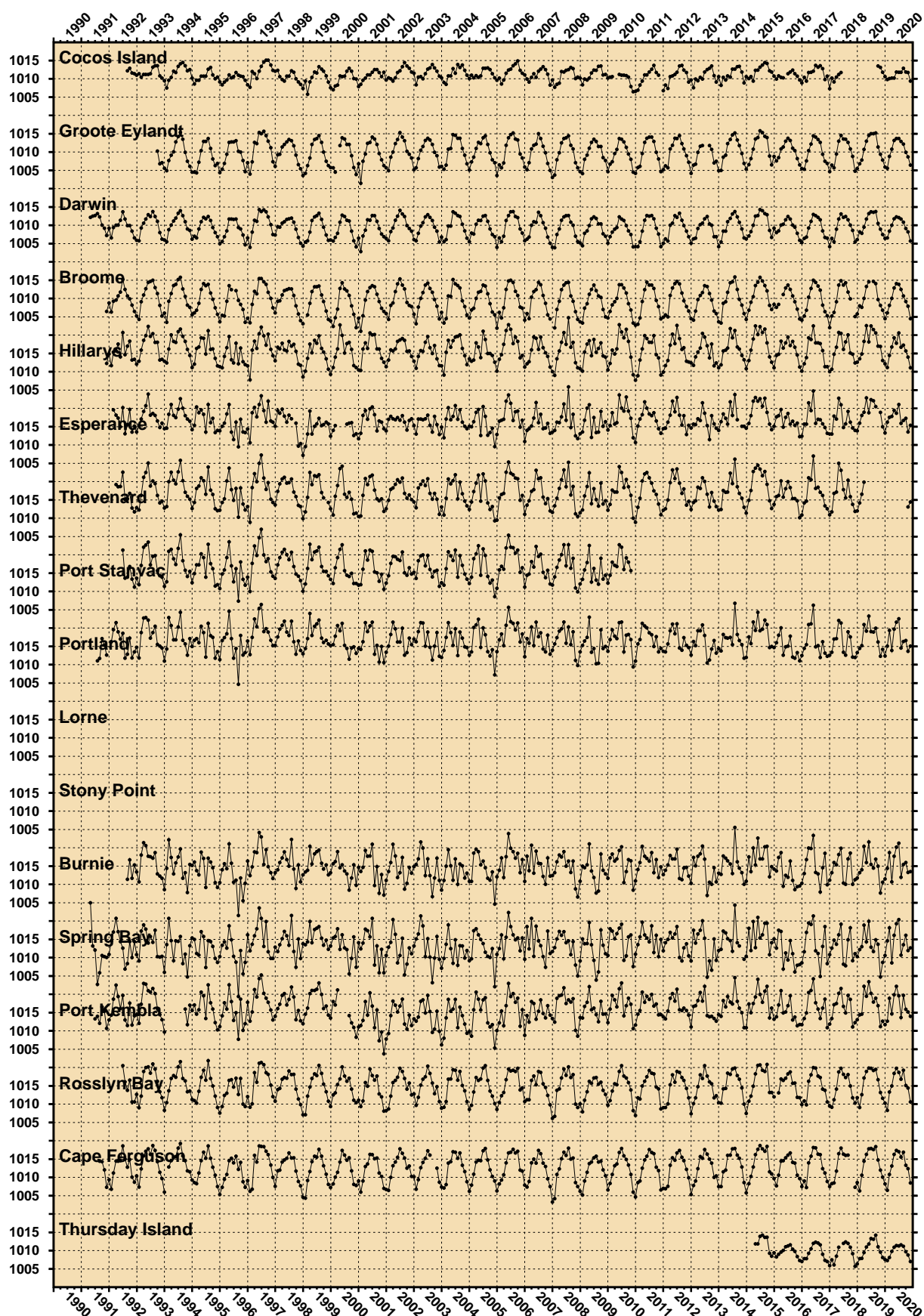


Figure 14. Monthly mean barometric pressures to December 2020.

MONTHLY MEAN WATER TEMPERATURES THROUGH DECEMBER 2020 (°C)

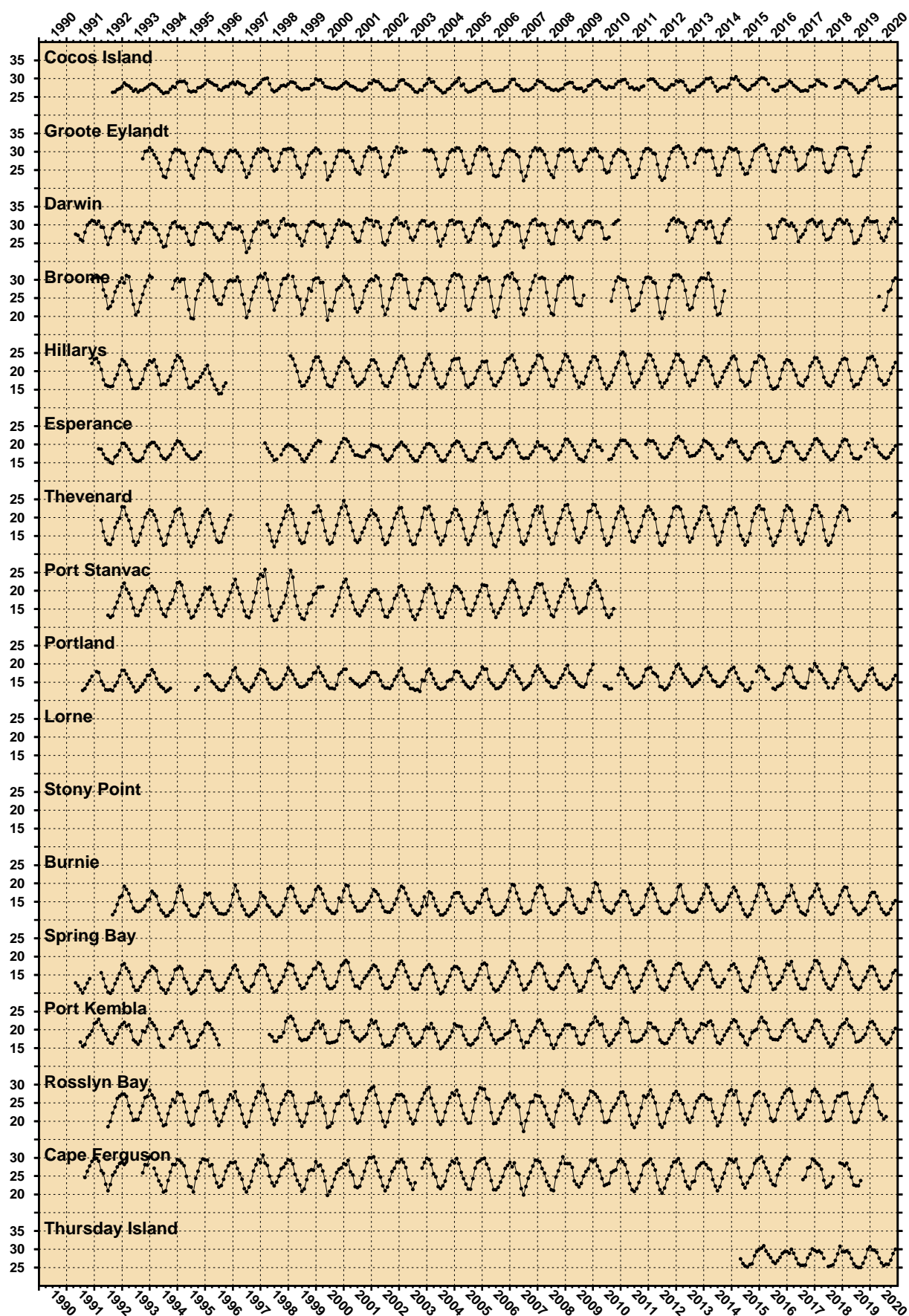


Figure 15. Monthly mean water temperatures to December 2020.

MONTHLY MEAN AIR TEMPERATURES THROUGH DECEMBER 2020 (°C)

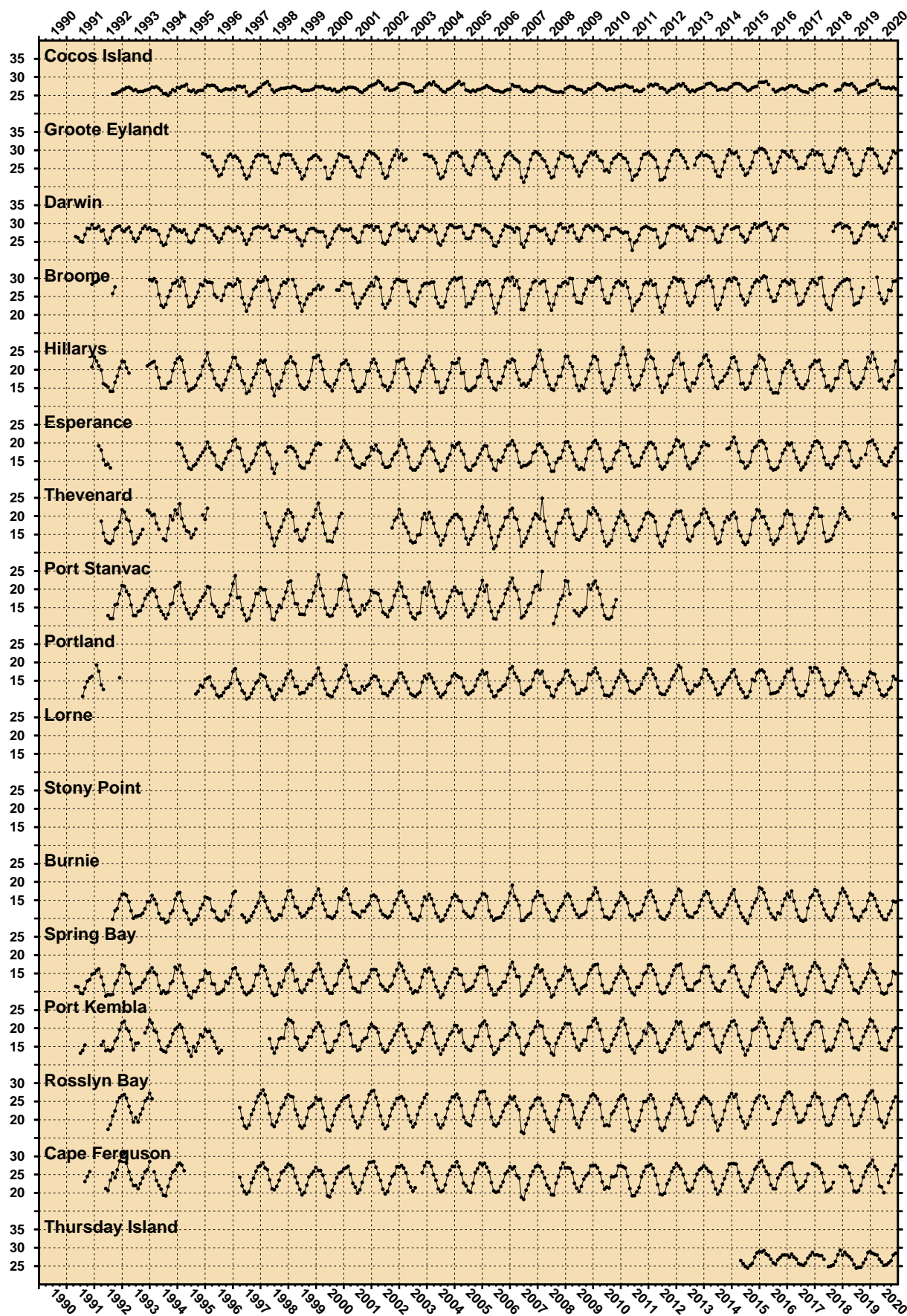


Figure 16. Monthly mean air temperatures to December 2020.

SEA LEVEL ANOMALIES THROUGH DECEMBER 2020 (m)

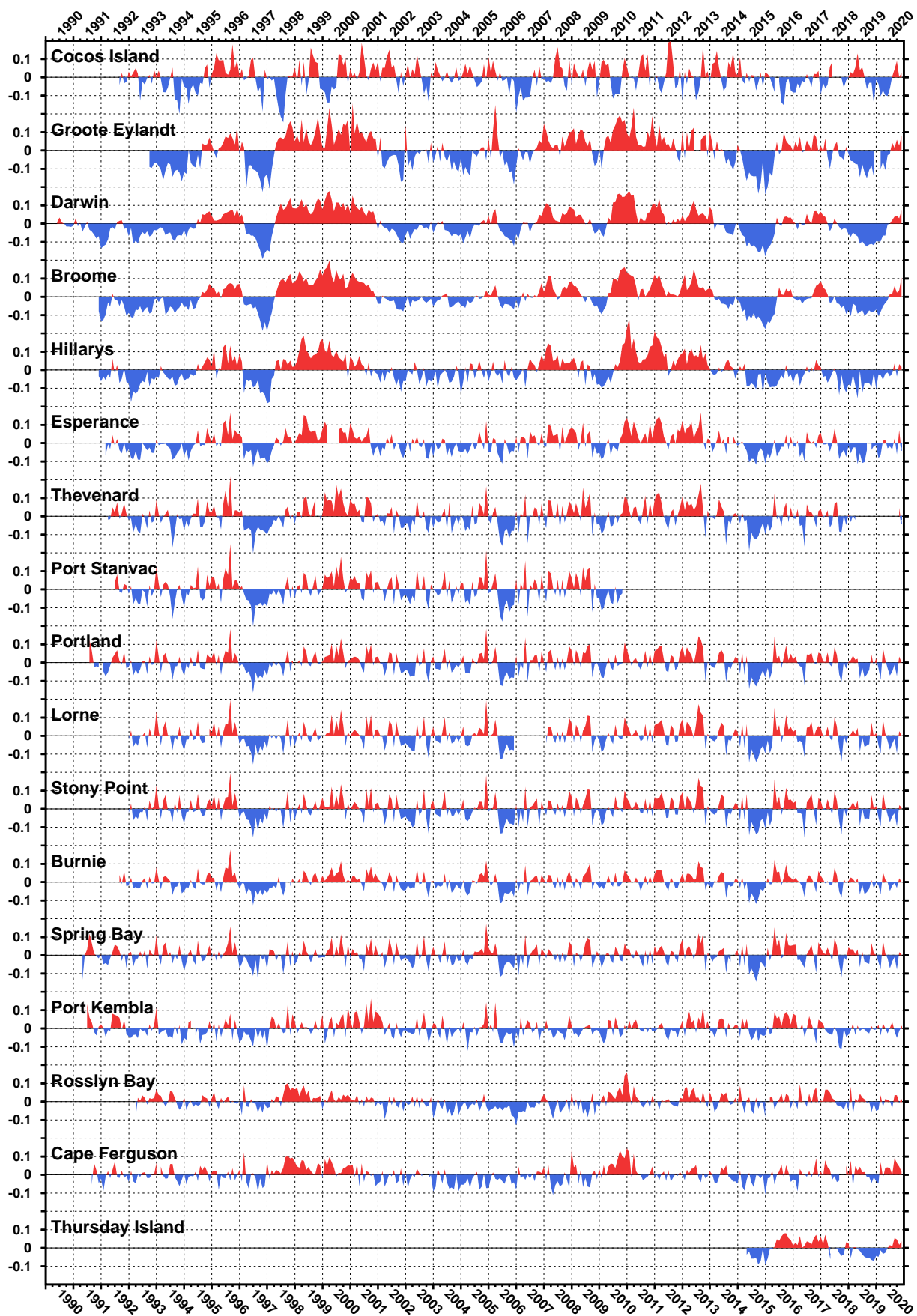


Figure 17. Monthly sea level anomalies to December 2020.

BAROMETRIC PRESSURE ANOMALIES THROUGH DECEMBER 2020 (hPa)

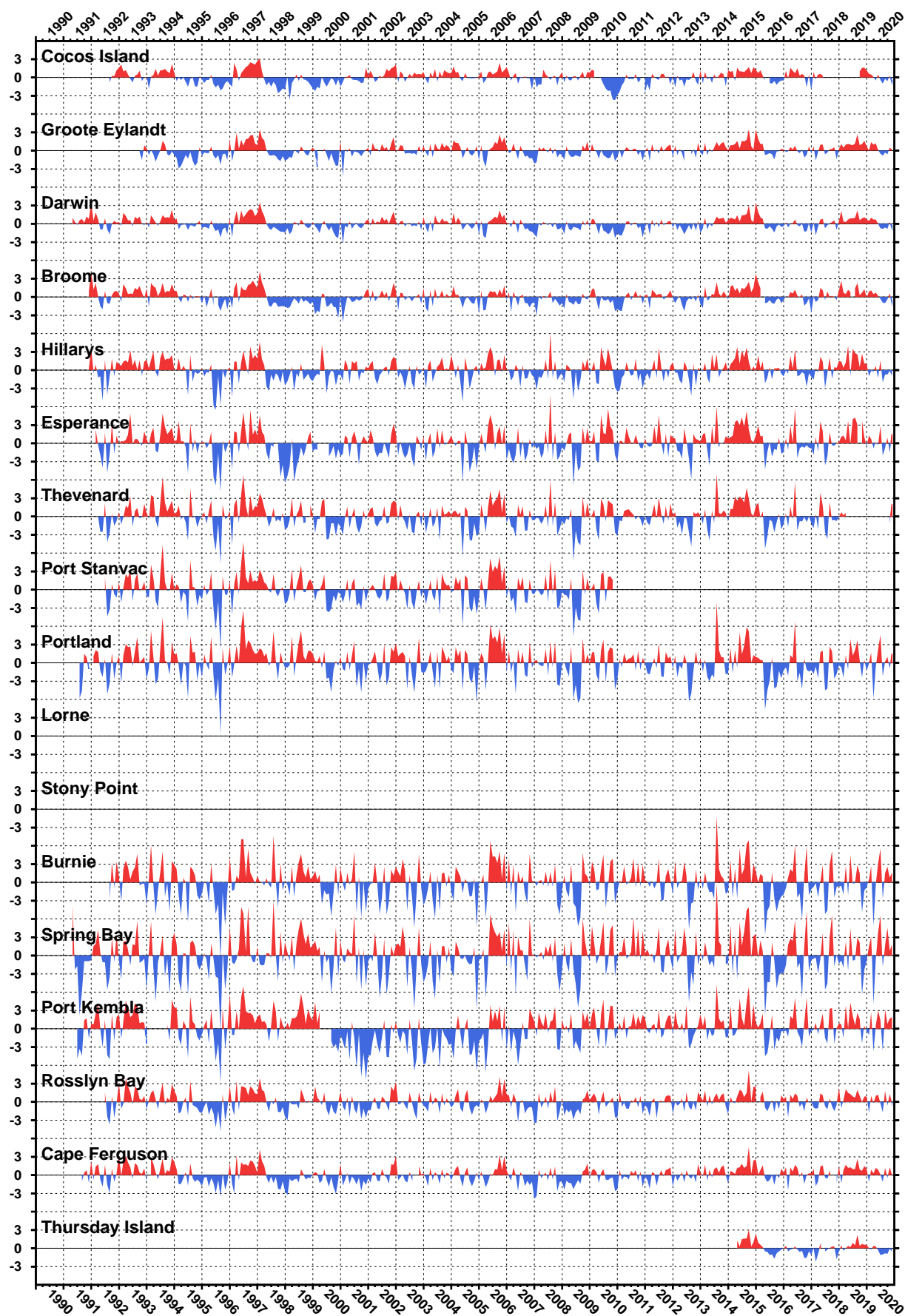


Figure 18. Monthly barometric pressure anomalies to December 2020.

WATER TEMPERATURE ANOMALIES THROUGH DECEMBER 2020 (°C)

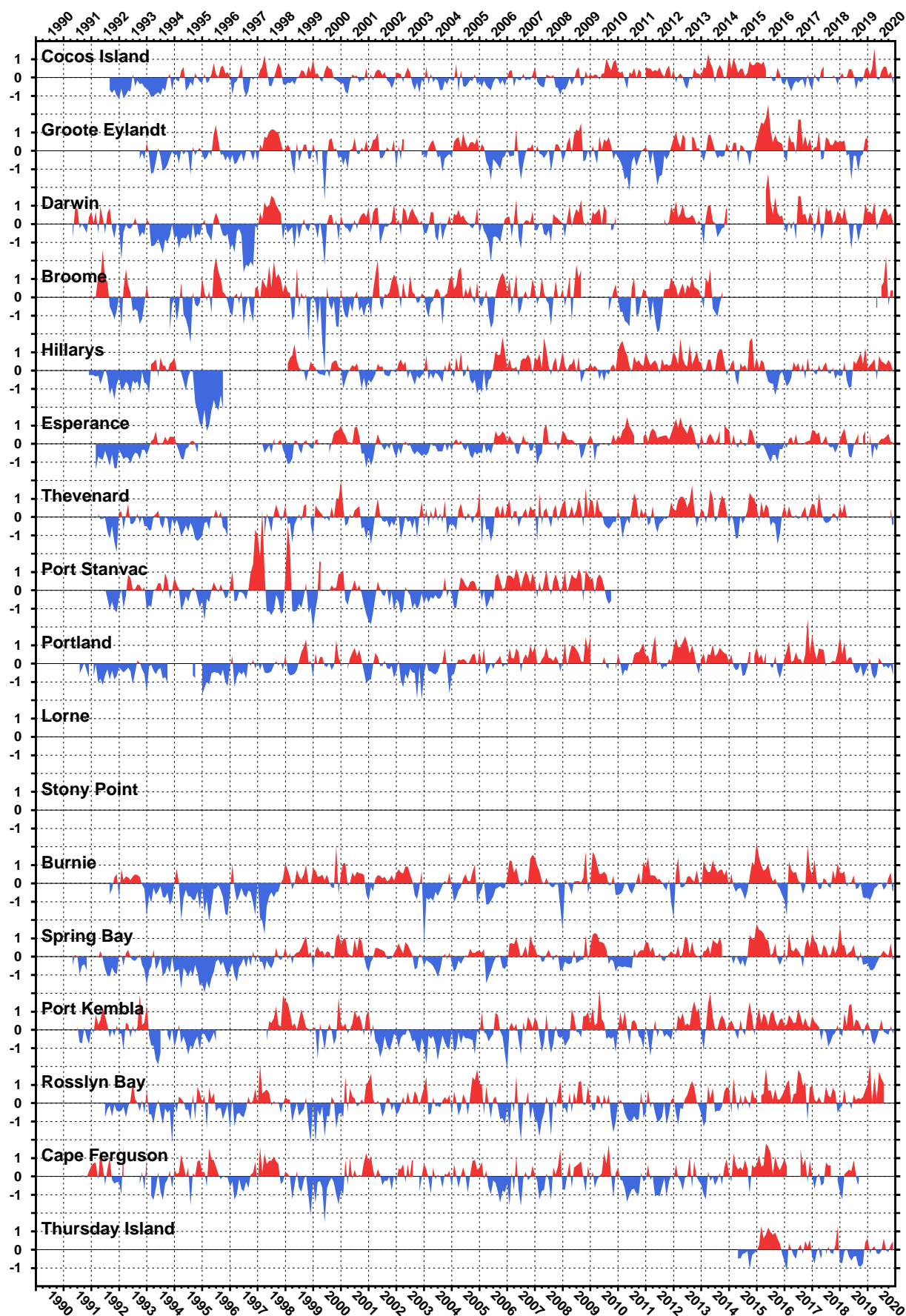


Figure 19. Monthly water temperature anomalies to December 2020.

AIR TEMPERATURE ANOMALIES THROUGH DECEMBER 2020 (°C)

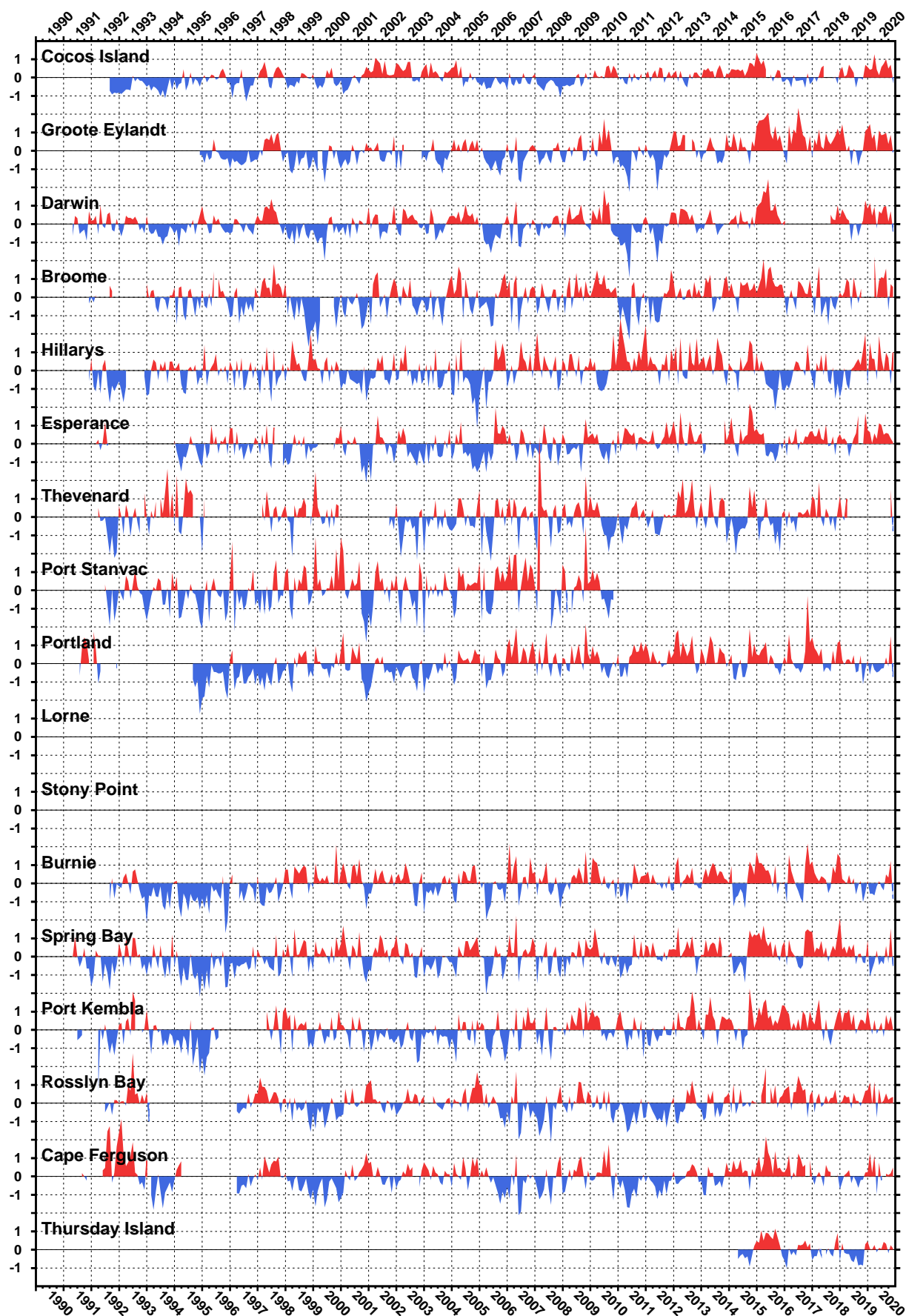


Figure 20. Monthly air temperature anomalies to December 2020.

MONTHLY SEA LEVEL DATA RETURN THROUGH DECEMBER 2020 (%)

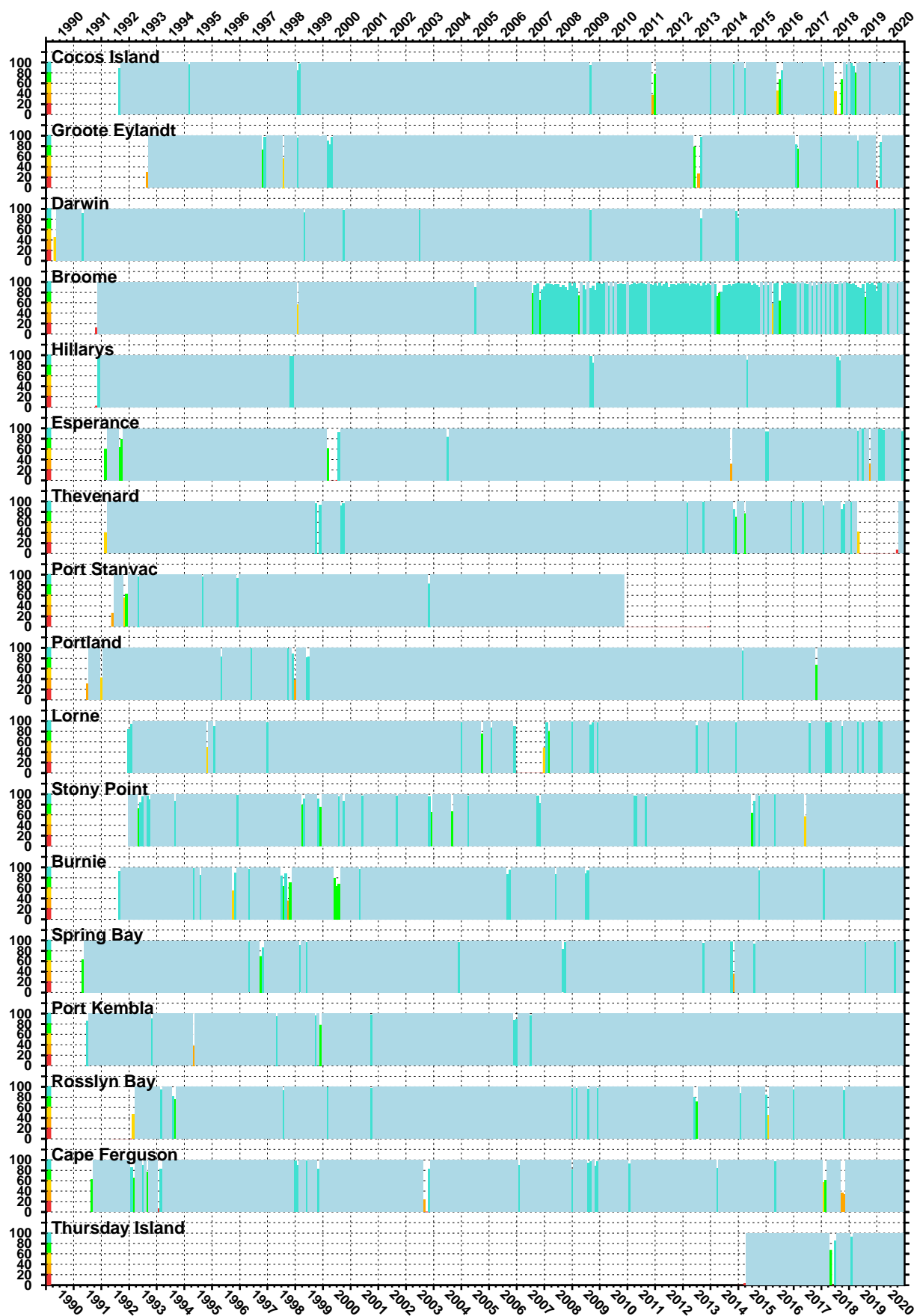


Figure 21. Sea level data return.