

# Geophysical mapping of palsa peatland permafrost

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## Abstract

Permafrost peatlands are hydrological and biogeochemical hotspots in the discontinuous permafrost zone. Non-intrusive geophysical methods offer a possibility to map current permafrost spatial distributions in these environments. In this study, we estimate the depths to the permafrost table and base across a peatland in northern Sweden, using ground penetrating radar and electrical resistivity tomography. Seasonal thaw frost tables (at ~0.5 m depth), taliks (2.1 – 6.7 m deep), and the permafrost base (at ~16 m depth) could be detected. Higher occurrences of taliks were discovered at locations with a lower relative height of permafrost landforms indicative of lower ground ice content at these locations. These results highlight the added value of combining geophysical techniques for assessing spatial distributions of permafrost within the rapidly changing sporadic permafrost zone. For example, based on a back-of-the-envelope calculation for the site considered here, we estimated that the thickest permafrost could thaw completely within the next three centuries. There is a clear need, thus, to benchmark current permafrost distributions and characteristics particularly in under studied regions of the pan-Arctic.

## 1 Introduction

Permafrost peatlands are widespread across the Arctic and cover approximately 12 % of the arctic permafrost zone (Hugelius et al. 2013, Hugelius et al. 2014). They often occur in sporadic permafrost areas, protected by the peat cover, which insulates the ground from heat during the summer (Woo, 2012). In the sporadic permafrost zone the permafrost ground

1 temperature is often close to 0°C, and therefore even small increases in temperature can result  
2 in thawing of permafrost. In addition, permafrost distribution and thawing in these landscapes  
3 is influenced by several factors other than climate, including hydrological, geological,  
4 morphological and erosional processes, that often combine in complex interactions (e.g.,  
5 McKenzie and Voss, 2013; Painter et al., 2013; Zuidhoff, 2002). Due to these interactions,  
6 peatlands are often dynamic with regards to their thermal structures and extent as the  
7 distribution of permafrost landforms (such as dome shaped palsas and flat-topped peat  
8 plateaus) and talik landforms (such as hollows, fens and lakes) vary with climatic and local  
9 conditions (e.g., Sannel and Kuhry, 2011; Seppälä 2011; Wramner, 1968). This dynamic  
10 nature and variable spatial extent has potential implications across the pan-Arctic as these  
11 permafrost peatlands store large amounts of soil organic carbon (Hugelius et al., 2014;  
12 Tarnocai et al., 2009). The combination of large carbon storage and high potential for thawing  
13 make permafrost peatlands biogeochemical hotspots in the warming Arctic. In light of this,  
14 predictions of future changes in these environments require knowledge of current permafrost  
15 distributions and characteristics, which is sparse in today's scientific literature.

16 While most observations of permafrost to date consist of temperature measurements from  
17 boreholes, advances in geophysical methods provide a good complement for mapping  
18 permafrost distributions in space. Such techniques can provide information about permafrost  
19 thickness and the extents and distribution of taliks, which can usually not be obtained from  
20 borehole data alone. As the spatial distribution and extent of permafrost directly influences  
21 the flow of water through the terrestrial landscape (Sjöberg et al., 2013), adding knowledge  
22 about the extent and coverage of permafrost could substantially benefit development of  
23 coupled hydrological and carbon transport models in northern latitudes (e.g., Jantze et al.,  
24 2013; Lyon et al., 2010). This may be particularly important for regions where palsa peatlands  
25 make up a large portion of the landscape mosaic and regional-scale differences exist in carbon  
26 fluxes (Giesler et al., 2014).

27 Geophysical methods offer non-intrusive techniques for measuring physical properties of  
28 geological materials; however, useful interpretation of geophysical data requires other types  
29 of complementary data, such as sediment cores. Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) has been  
30 used extensively in permafrost studies for identifying the boundaries of permafrost (e.g.,  
31 Arcone et al., 1998; Doolittle et al., 1992; Hinkel et al., 2001; Moorman et al., 2003),

characterizing ground ice structures (De Pascale et al., 2008; Hinkel et al., 2001; Moorman et al., 2003), and estimating seasonal thaw depth and moisture content of the active layer (Gacitua et al., 2012; Westermann et al., 2010). Electrical Resistivity Tomography (ERT) has also been widely applied in permafrost studies (Hauck et al., 2003; Ishikawa et al., 2001; Kneisel et al., 2000), the majority of which focus on mountain permafrost. By combining two or more geophysical methods complementary information can often be acquired raising the confidence in interpretations of permafrost characteristics (De Pascale et al., 2008; Hauck et al., 2004; Schwamborn et al., 2002). For example, De Pascale et al. (2008) used GPR and capacitive-coupled resistivity (CCR) to map ground ice in continuous permafrost and demonstrated the added value of combining radar and electrical resistivity measurements for the quality of interpretation of the data. While some non-intrusive geophysical investigations have been done in palsa peatland regions (Dobinski, 2010; Doolittle et al., 1992; Kneisel et al., 2007; Kneisel et al., 2014; Lewkowicz et al., 2011), the use of multiple geophysical techniques to characterize the extent of permafrost in palsa peatland environments has not been employed.

In this study we use GPR and ERT in concert to map the distribution of permafrost along three transects (160 to 320 m long) in the Tavvavuoma palsa peatland in northern Sweden. Our aim is to understand how depths of the permafrost table and base vary in the landscape and, based on resulting estimates of permafrost thickness, to make a first order assessment of the potential time needed to completely thaw this permafrost due to climate warming. Further we hope to demonstrate the added value of employing complementary geophysical techniques in such landscapes. This novel investigation thus helps contribute to our understanding of the current permafrost distribution and characteristics across palsa peatlands creating a baseline for future studies of possible coupled changes in hydrology and permafrost distribution in such areas.

## **2 Study area**

Tavvavuoma is a large palsa peatland complex in northern Sweden at 68°28'N, 20°54'E, 550 masl (Fig. 1) and consists of a patchwork of palsas, peat plateaus, thermokarst lakes, hummocks and fens. Ground temperatures and weather parameters have been monitored at the site since 2005 (Christiansen et al. 2010). Sannel and Kuhry (2011) have analysed lake

1 changes in the area and detailed local studies of palsa morphology have been conducted by  
2 Wramner (1968, 1973).

3 Tavvavuoma is located on a flat valley bottom, in piedmont terrain with relative elevations of  
4 surrounding mountains about 50 m to 150 m above the valley bottom. Unconsolidated  
5 sediments, observed from two borehole cores (points 1 and 2 in Fig. 1), are of mainly  
6 glaciofluvial and lacustrine origin and composed of mostly sands, loams and coarser grained  
7 rounded gravel and pebbles (Ivanova et al., 2011). The mean annual air temperature is  $-3.5^{\circ}\text{C}$   
8 (Sannel and Kuhry 2011), and the average winter snow cover in Karesuando, a  
9 meteorological station approximately 60 km east of Tavvavuoma, is approximately 50 cm  
10 although wind drift generally gives a thinner snow cover in Tavvavuoma (Swedish  
11 Meteorological and Hydrological Institute, [www.smhi.se/klimatdata/meteorologi](http://www.smhi.se/klimatdata/meteorologi)).

12 Permafrost occurs primarily under palsas and peat plateaus in Tavvavuoma, where the  
13 average thickness of the active layer is typically 0.5 m (Christiansen et al., 2010; Sannel and  
14 Kuhry, 2011). The mean annual temperature in permafrost boreholes (at 2 and 6.1 m depth) in  
15 the peatlands of Tavvavuoma range from  $-0.3^{\circ}\text{C}$  to  $-0.4^{\circ}\text{C}$  (Christiansen et al., 2010).  
16 However, no observations of the depth to the permafrost base have been presented for the  
17 area. Warming of the air temperature of about  $2^{\circ}\text{C}$  has been observed in direct measurements  
18 from the region over the past 200 years (Klingbjer and Moberg, 2003). In light of this  
19 warming, winter precipitation (mainly snow) in northern Sweden shows increasing trends  
20 over the past 150 years (Alexandersson, 2002). Further, permafrost is degrading across the  
21 region and northern Sweden (Sjöberg et al., 2013). For example, peatland active layer  
22 thickness in Abisko (located about 60 km south-west of Tavvavuoma) is increasing according  
23 to direct observation over the past 30 years (Åkerman and Johansson, 2008) and inference  
24 from hydrologic shifts over the past century (Lyon et al., 2009). This regional permafrost  
25 degradation has led to changes in palsas as well. Regionally, reductions in both areas covered  
26 by palsas and palsa height have been observed (Sollid and Sorbel, 1998; Zuidhoff, 2002;  
27 Zuidhoff and Kolstrup, 2000). In Tavvavuoma, both growth and degradation of palsas have  
28 been observed in detailed morphological studies during the 1960's and 1970's (Wramner,  
29 1968; Wramner, 1973) and expansion and infilling of thermokarstic lakes have been observed  
30 through remote sensing analyses (Sannel and Kuhry, 2011). Palsa degradation and infilling of

lakes with fen vegetation have been the dominating processes during recent years (Sannel and Kuhry, 2011; Wramner et al., 2012).

### **3 Theory and methods**

Measurements of permafrost extent and structure were made with both GPR and ERT between 20 August 2012 and 26 August 2012 along three transects covering the main permafrost landforms in the Tavvavuoma area (Fig. 1). The ERT transects were somewhat extended (i.e. slightly longer) compared to the GPR transects to increase the penetration depth along the overlapping parts of the transects.

Transect T1 was 160 m long and crossed a peat plateau that was raised approximately 1.5 m above the surrounding landscape (Fig. 1). It further crossed two thermokarst depressions (centred at 45 and 130 m) within the peat plateau. Transect T2 was 320 m long, but the southern part covering about 180 m could not be measured with GPR due to dense vegetation cover (mainly salix sp.). Transect T2 started on a peat plateau surface at the edge of a drained lake and continued north over a fen (110-180 m) and a small stream (140 m). The northern part, measured with both ERT and GPR, crossed a palsa (200 m) that was raised about 4 m above the surrounding landscape. This palsa has been described via a bore-hole profile (Ivanova et al. 2011, point 1 in Fig. 1). Transect T2 then continued across two fens (250 and 290 m) separated by a lower palsa (270 m). Transect T3 was 275 m long. It started on a relatively low palsa and stretched over a flat area covered by hummocks and thermokarst depressions.

In addition to the geophysical investigations (details of which are described in the following sections), the depth to the permafrost table (the active layer) was probed every 2 meters along all transects using a 1 m steel rod. Sediment cores were retrieved at four points along T1 and two points along T3 down to 2 m. These cores were used to locate the depth to the peat-mineral substrate interface and the depth to the permafrost table (at points 3, 4, 5, and 6 in Fig. 1). The topography was measured along the transects using a differential GPS with supplemental inclinometer observations along profiles where only ERT was used. The position of the transects was measured using a tape measure and marked at regular intervals to ensure that locations of GPR and ERT transects coincided.

### 3.1 Ground penetrating radar

Ground penetrating radar (GPR) can be used to map near surface geology and stratigraphy because of differences in dielectric properties between different subsurface layers or structures. An electromagnetic pulse is transmitted through the ground and the return time of the reflected pulse is recorded. The resolution and penetration depth of the radar signal depends on the characteristics of the transmitted pulse and the choice of antennas, which usually range between 10 to 1000 MHz. Higher frequencies will yield a higher resolution but a smaller penetration depth, however, the penetration depth will also depend on dielectric and conductive properties of the ground material. Mapping of permafrost using GPR becomes possible due to the difference in permittivity between unfrozen and frozen water.

In this study, measurements were made with a Malå GeoScience ProEx GPR system using 200 MHz unshielded antennas along T1 and T2. The transmitting and receiving antennas were held at a constant distance of 0.6 m (common offset) and the sampling time window was set to 621 ns, with recorded traces stacked 16 times. Measurements were made at every 10 cm along the length of these two transects. Along T3 measurements were made using 100 MHz unshielded antennas with a 1 m antenna separation and measurements made every 0.2 s while moving the antennas along the transect. The sampling time window for T3 was 797 ns and traces were stacked 16 times. The GPR data were processed for a time-zero correction, and with a dewow filter, a vertical gain, and a normal-move out correction for antenna geometry using the software ReflexW (version 6.1, Sandmeier, 2012, [www.sandmeier-geo.de](http://www.sandmeier-geo.de)).

The depths to the permafrost table and the interface between peat-mineral substrates were calculated by converting the two-way travel time to known substrate transitions using estimated velocities for the speed through three different substrate materials: dry peat, saturated peat, and saturated mineral substrate (see Fig. 2 for conceptual sketch of these substrate layers and velocity profiles). To account for uncertainty due to small scale heterogeneity of these ground materials, in addition to the optimal ‘representative’ velocity identified, the likely maximum and minimum velocities for each substrate were considered in the GPR depth conversions (Table 1). The velocity in dry peat (found in the active layer of palsas, hummocks, and peat plateaus) was calibrated using the active layer thickness measurements made with a steel rod. The minimum and maximum velocities were obtained by subtracting and adding one standard deviation of the measured depths, respectively. For

velocities in saturated peat, which was found in taliks such as fens, the depths of saturated peat identified by coring with a 2 m steel pipe (points 3 and 5, Figure 1) were used. The velocity in pure water was used as the minimum velocity and the representative velocity for dry peat was used as the maximum velocity for saturated peat. To obtain velocities for unfrozen saturated mineral substrate, a common midpoint (CMP) GPR profile was measured on a drained lake surface (point 7 in Figure 1) by moving the GPR antennas apart from each other in 10 cm increments along a 15 m long transect (see Appendix A for a detailed description). The CMP approach, thus, allows for imaging the same point in space with different antenna offsets making it possible to back out material velocity estimates. CMP profiles were analysed using semblance analysis (Neidell and Taner, 1971) in ReflexW software (version 6.1, Sandmeier, 2012, [www.sandmeier-geo.de](http://www.sandmeier-geo.de)). Due to inherent difficulties with CMP approaches associated with heterogeneous ground substrate properties, the velocity estimate from this analysis were complemented with literature defined values to define the representative and minimum velocities. The end product here is a range of plausible substrate velocities accounting for potential uncertainties such that any resultant interpretation about subsurface conditions and interface locations can be considered robust.

### 3.2 Electrical resistivity tomography

Direct-current electrical resistivity measurements are based on a measured potential difference between two electrodes ( $\Delta V$ ) inserted with galvanic coupling to the ground and, similarly, two electrodes where current is injected into the ground ( $I$ ) with a known geometric factor ( $k$ ) depending on the arrangement of the electrodes. This gives a value of the apparent resistivity ( $\rho_a$ ) of the ground sub-surface as

$$\rho_a = k \Delta V / I \quad (1)$$

During a tomographic resistivity survey numerous of these measurements are made in lateral and vertical directions (by increasing the electrode spacing). The acquired data is subsequently modelled to generate an image of the resistivity distribution under the site. Values of resistivity vary substantially with grain size, porosity, water content, ice content, salinity and temperature (e.g. Reynolds, 2011), thus, the resistivity of permafrost also varies

1 to a large degree. This makes electrical resistivity tomography (ERT) techniques useful in  
2 detecting the sharp contrast between frozen and unfrozen water content within sediments.

3 At the Tavvavuoma site, measurements of electrical resistivity were made with a Terrameter  
4 LS from ABEM and an electrode spacing of 2 m for the T1 transect and 4 m for the T2 and  
5 T3 transects. The Wenner array configuration for the electrodes was used due to its high  
6 signal-to-noise ratio and for its accuracy in detecting vertical changes over other common  
7 array types (Loke, 2010). For the inverse modeling the smoothness-constrained least-square  
8 method was applied (Loke and Barker, 1996). The inversion progress was set to stop on the  
9 condition where the change in root mean squared error from the previous iteration was less  
10 than 5% (implying convergence of the inversion). The software Res2dinv (v.3.59.64,  
11 Geotomo Software, 2010) was used for the inverse modelling during this study.

12 To assess the quality and reliability of the resistivity modeling for the Tavvavuoma site, the  
13 depth of investigation (DOI) method (Oldenburg and Li, 1999) was used. This appraisal-  
14 technique uses the difference between two inverted models where the reference resistivity  
15 parameter is varied to calculate a normalized DOI-index map. From these values a depth at  
16 which the surface data is no longer sensitive to the physical properties of the ground can be  
17 interpreted. The method has previously been applied in permafrost studies (e.g., Fortier et al.,  
18 2008; Marescot et al., 2003). To calculate the DOI-index we used a symmetrical two-sided  
19 difference scheme where 0.1 and 10 times the average apparent resistivity of the resistivity  
20 model was considered (respectively) for the initial reference resistivity parameter. Normalized  
21 DOI values higher than 0.1 indicate that the model is likely not constrained by the data and  
22 should be given little significance in subsequent model interpretation.

23 To further validate the ERT interpretations, one shorter transect with 0.5 m electrode spacing  
24 was conducted over a palsa. This was used to acquire a local resistivity value for the interface  
25 between unfrozen and frozen sediments at the bottom of the active layer (surface of the  
26 permafrost table). This value (1700  $\Omega\text{m}$ ) allowed us to map permafrost boundaries in the ERT  
27 images, with all resistivity values  $> 1700 \Omega\text{m}$  interpreted as permafrost. However, as the  
28 resistivity of the ground varies with other sediment physical properties and the sediment  
29 distribution is complex at the site, the resistivity boundary value for permafrost will naturally  
30 vary along transects and with depth. For instance, sands generally have maximum values for  
31 the unfrozen state close to 1200  $\Omega\text{m}$  and for some gravels this can reach up to 3000  $\Omega\text{m}$



(Hoekstra et al., 1974). Finer sediments, such as clays and silts have lower values, ranging from ca 80 to 300  $\Omega\text{m}$  (Hoekstra et al., 1974). At our site sands dominate, but there is also evidence of loams. Lewkowicz et al. (2011) report a resistivity of 1000  $\Omega\text{m}$  at the base of permafrost under a palsa in similar, but somewhat finer, sediments conditions in southern Yukon. This value from Lewkowicz et al. (2011) was thus used as a possible minimum resistivity value for the permafrost boundary in the interpretations, while the local resistivity estimate (1700  $\Omega\text{m}$ ) was used as a maximum and representative value. All resistivity values < 1000  $\Omega\text{m}$  were thus interpreted as unfrozen ground and the values between 1000 and 1700  $\Omega\text{m}$  represent a range of uncertainty for the location of the interface between frozen and unfrozen sediments. Again, the motivation here was to account for potential uncertainty allowing for robust interpretation.

### 3.3 Calculations of active layer and thaw rates

To help put the geophysical measurements and their potential implications for this peatland palsa region in context, the thickness of the active layer as well as first order estimate of long-term thaw rates were estimated using a simple equation for 1-D heat flow by conduction, the Stefan equation (as described by Riseborough et al., 2008):

$$Z = \sqrt{\frac{2\lambda I}{Ln}}, \quad (2)$$

where  $Z$  is the thaw depth,  $\lambda$  is thermal conductivity,  $I$  is the thawing degree day index (as described by Nelson and Outcalt, 1987),  $L$  is the volumetric latent heat of fusion and  $n$  is the saturated porosity of the ground substrate. As a talik is by definition unfrozen ground occurring in a permafrost area, the Eq. (2) was used to confirm that ground identified as talik in Tavvavuoma through the GPR and ERT images did not correspond to locations of deeper active layer relative to surrounding positions (i.e. provide a confirmation that these sites would not freeze during winter).

Calculations of active layer depths in fens were made using as input a sinusoidal annual air temperature curve generated from the average temperature of the warmest and the coldest months of the year. The effect of the snow cover, which would give higher ground surface temperatures in the winter, was not explicitly taken into consideration in this simple calculation as we did not have any direct estimates of snow cover available for the transects.

1 As such, these calculations are simply a first-order approximation. Representative properties  
2 for saturated peat were chosen, including a thermal conductivity of 0.5 W/m/K and a  
3 saturated fraction of 0.80 (Woo, 2012).

4 In addition, a first-order approximation of long-term thaw rates was carried out. An  
5 instantaneous increase in air temperature of 2° C was assumed, which represents a warming  
6 within current climate projections for the 21st century, although at the low end of projections  
7 for Arctic warming (IPCC RA5, 2013). A saturated fraction of 0.5 was used to represent sand  
8 slightly oversaturated with ice. To account for some of the uncertainty in this rough estimate,  
9 a range of likely minimum and maximum values for thermal conductivity (2 and 3 W/m/K,  
10 respectively) for this material, were used to estimate a range of thaw rates. The annual  
11 freezing degree days were subtracted from the annual thawing degree days,  $I$  in Eq. (2), and  
12 the amount of days necessary to thaw the estimated local thickness of permafrost was  
13 estimated. This is a simple estimate since, clearly, the Stefan equation is not designed to  
14 calculate long-term thaw rates nor does such an estimate consider any density dependent  
15 feedbacks and/or subsequent hydroclimatic shifts. Regardless, combined with estimates of  
16 permafrost thickness made in our geophysical investigation, the aim of this back-of-the-  
17 envelope calculation was to provide an order-of-magnitude estimate for the time it could  
18 potentially take permafrost to completely thaw at this site to help place it in a pan-arctic  
19 context.

## 21 **4 Results**

### 22 **4.1 GPR data**

23 In the GPR images the permafrost table was clearly detectable under the palsa and peat  
24 plateau surfaces along all transects (Fig. 3). The interface between peat and mineral substrates  
25 was only detectable in unfrozen sediments. Deeper reflections, interpreted as the permafrost  
26 table under supra-permafrost taliks, were found under the fens and surface depression in all  
27 transects. At the beginning of both transects T1 and T2, deep reflections that end abruptly  
28 were present in the images at about 250 ns and 150 ns, respectively. In T1, this corresponds to  
29 a wet fen bordering a lake and for T2 it corresponds to a fen bordering a stream. The  
30 proximity to these water bodies suggests that these are likely not reflections from the

permafrost table. The base of the permafrost could not be detected at any point in the GPR images likely because of loss of signal strength at depth.

## **4.2 ERT data**

The inverted resistivity sections showed areas of high resistivity (1000-100000  $\Omega\text{m}$ ) where permafrost could be expected due to the sharp contrast to surrounding surfaces. This suggests permafrost boundaries are detectable for both the extent of the horizontal distribution and the vertical extent to the base of permafrost (Fig. 4). The highest resistivity values were found under the peat plateau in T1 and under the palsas in T2 and T3. Low resistivity values were found under the fens in all transects. DOI values increase with depth for all transects allowing the permafrost base to be interpreted only along parts of T2. In contrast, under T1 and T3 the DOI rapidly increases under the peat plateau and hummocks. Due to the wide electrode spacing adopted (2 and 4 m), the permafrost table under the active layer is too shallow to be visible in the ERT data.

## **4.3 Geophysical interpretations**

Permafrost occurs under the palsa and peat plateau surfaces along T1 and T2, as well as under the hummocks along T3 (Fig. 5). The active layer depths estimated from the GPR data closely matched the depths measured in the field (Table 2). This is expected since measured active layer depths were used to derive the velocity of the radar signal in the dry peat in the active layer. The depth to the base of the permafrost could only be estimated with good confidence along parts of T2 and is on average 15.8 m from the ground surface and at least 25 m at its deepest point. Along transects T1 and T3 the deepest permafrost was found at 8.4 m and 23.4 m respectively; however, the permafrost base could not be identified with confidence below this depth.

Potential taliks (Table 3 and Fig. 5) are numerous and occur in both wet fens, such as all taliks along T2, and relatively dry depressions in the terrain, such as all taliks along T1. The sediment cores used for estimating the GPR representative signal velocity in saturated peat were taken in both a relatively dry location and in a wet fen, but the calculated velocities were nearly identical, indicating that the soil moisture at depth was similar at both locations. Most of T3 was underlain by taliks and these were found under both wet fens and drier surface

depressions. The taliks range in depth from 2.1 m (T3f, numbering from Table 3 and Fig. 5) to 6.7 m (T1c) based on the GPR data and are slightly deeper, however within the range of uncertainty, based on the ERT results. From the ERT data, T1c is in fact interpreted as a potential through-going talik. Talik T1b was only detected from the ERT data, and taliks T3b – T3d appear as one large talik in the ERT data.

#### **4.4 Calculations of active layer and thaw rates**

The active layer depths calculated using the Stefan equation support the interpretation that identified taliks do not freeze during winter. The seasonal frost penetration depth was estimated to be 0.72 m which is about the same as the average peat depth along the transects and much less than the estimated minimum depth of the taliks (2.1 m). While a shallower peat depth would give a deeper frost penetration it is unlikely that the seasonal frost penetration is > 2.1 m in the area surrounding Tavvavuoma. This ancillary estimate confirms the aforementioned geophysical interpretation. Further, assuming a 2°C instantaneous temperature increase at the site, a first order approximation of the long-term thaw rate was calculated to be 6 - 8.5 cm/year. At this rate, the time to completely thaw permafrost assuming the estimated average thickness along T2 (15.3 m) was calculated to be 175 - 260 years.

### **5 Discussion**

#### **5.1 Permafrost and talik distribution at Tavvavuoma**

The spatial pattern of permafrost and taliks in Tavvavuoma is closely linked to the distribution of palsas, peat plateaus, fens and water bodies. This suggests that local factors, such as soil moisture, groundwater flow, ground ice content, sediment distributions and geomorphology, strongly influence the local ground thermal regime (see e.g. Delisle and Allard, 2003; McKenzie and Voss, 2013; Woo, 2012; Zuidhoff, 2002). The relative elevation of permafrost landforms, as well as permafrost resistivity values and sediment distributions suggest that there is a large variation in ground ice content in the area. Surface elevations of palsas and peat plateaus are highest along T2 and lowest along T3, indicating a higher ice content of the underlying ground along T2, which is likely related to differences in ground

1 substrates between the transects. Coring (<2 m) across the site, as well as existing borehole  
2 descriptions (Ivanova et al., 2011) confirm that the ground contains a larger fraction of coarse  
3 glaciofluvial sand and gravel, which are not susceptible to frost heave, closer to T3 as  
4 compared to T2.

5 Lewkowicz et al. (2011) used the height of palsas and permafrost thickness, estimated by  
6 ERT, to calculate excess ice fractions (EIF, defined as the ratio of palsa height to permafrost  
7 thickness) in permafrost mounds in southern Yukon. In Tavvavuoma, the highest palsa at T2  
8 is approximately 4 m high and underlain by 16 m thick permafrost at the highest point. This  
9 corresponds to an EIF of 0.25 which is comparable to the EIFs reported by Lewkowicz et al.  
10 (2011), which were generally ranging between 0.2 and 0.4. In contrast, along T3 the relative  
11 heights of permafrost landforms are lower and the permafrost is thicker for most of the  
12 transect. Similarly calculated EIFs along T3 were on average <0.03 and at maximum <0.09,  
13 but are likely lower in reality as the base of the permafrost is at a greater depth than what  
14 could be detected in our study. The relatively low resistivity of the permafrost along T3  
15 further supports interpretations for lower ice content in this permafrost. Permafrost with low  
16 ice content is more susceptible to thaw, as less energy is needed for latent heat exchange. This  
17 provides a possible explanation for why taliks are more widespread along T3, as permafrost  
18 with a low ice content would have reacted more rapidly to warming in the area.

19 The calculated thaw rate of 6 – 8.5 cm/year is considerably higher than the circa 1 cm/year  
20 deepening of the active layer observed in the region (Åkerman and Johansson, 2008) and  
21 inferred from hydrological records (Lyon et al. 2009). One possible reason for this is that  
22 these observations were made in the relatively ice rich top layer of peat, while for the  
23 calculations in this study a medium with higher thermal conductivity and lower ice content  
24 was used to represent the lower mineral sediment layer. The 2°C instantaneous step change in  
25 temperature could further have contributed to the higher thaw rates compared to the ones  
26 observed. As thawing is driven by gradients in heat it can be argued that permafrost thaw  
27 rates should increase with warmer air temperatures. Considering this, the calculated time of  
28 complete permafrost thaw of about 175 – 260 years can be considered reasonable in at least  
29 an order of magnitude. However, much more rapid palsa degradation has been observed in the  
30 region (Zuidhoff, 2002), due to block and wind erosion processes and thermal influence on  
31 palsas from expanding water bodies, and very rapid decay of palsa surface areas has been

observed in both southern Norway and the Canadian Arctic (Payette et al., 2004; Sollid and Sorbel, 1998). The coupled erosion, hydrological and thermal processes are not represented in the Stefan equation but can be of great importance for permafrost thaw rates (McKenzie and Voss, 2013; Painter et al., 2013; Zuidhoff, 2002). There is clearly a need for quantification of the relative importance of these processes for permafrost thaw to better understand expected future changes in these environments.

## **5.2 On the complementary nature of the geophysical techniques**

Several previous studies have shown the benefits of combining more than one geophysical technique for mapping permafrost (e.g. De Pascale et al., 2008; Hauck et al., 2004; Schwamborn et al., 2002), and also in this study the GPR and ERT data provided complementary information that allowed for interpretations that would not have been possible by using only one of the two datasets. Of course, combining multiple techniques for inference compounds our estimate uncertainties. To attain more precise estimates of depths to the different interfaces, deeper coring data would have been necessary for both more accurate signal velocity estimates for the GPR and for local resistivity values of the ground materials. The fact that ERT depth estimates are consistently higher than the GPR estimates suggest that either the resistivity boundary value for permafrost is in fact lower than our local estimate, or that GPR signal velocities are higher than the values used in this study. Since our local permafrost resistivity estimate was made in peat at the permafrost table, which can have a very high ice content compared to deeper sediment layers, it is a more likely explanation for this discrepancy.

GPR and ERT yielded somewhat overlapping data but the two datasets have different strengths and therefore complement each other well. The GPR data worked well for identifying the permafrost table with high confidence, especially in the top 2 meters where sediment cores could be easily obtained for validation and signal velocity estimates. This suitability of GPR for identifying permafrost interfaces in the top 1-2 meters has been shown in several studies (e.g. Doolittle et al., 1992; Hinkel et al., 2001; Moorman et al., 2003). The ERT data, using the setup in this study, does not yield data in the uppermost part of the ground and also has higher uncertainty where resistivity contrasts are high (Fig. 4), which makes it less well suited for the active layer and shallow taliks. With the ERT data it is,

1 however, possible to image relatively deep in the ground, where the GPR cannot penetrate.  
2 By combining both GPR and ERT the active layer, the base of permafrost, and potential taliks  
3 could be identified along at least parts of the transects, which could not have been achieved  
4 with good confidence by either of the two methods alone.

## 6 **6 Concluding remarks**

7 Peat plateau complexes offer an interesting challenge to the Cryosphere community as they  
8 are clear mosaics combining local-scale differences manifested as permafrost variations. As  
9 such variation occurs both horizontally and vertically in the landscape, geophysical  
10 techniques offer a good possibility to record current permafrost conditions across scales.  
11 Further, by combining methods, such as GPR and ERT as demonstrated here, complementary  
12 and independent views of the permafrost extents can be acquired. The results of this study  
13 show a heterogeneous pattern of permafrost extent reflecting both local and climatic processes  
14 of permafrost formation and degradation. To improve our understanding of landscape-  
15 permafrost interactions and dynamics will require a community effort to benchmark  
16 variability across the scales and environments within the pan-Arctic. This is particularly  
17 important in lesser studied regions and across the sporadic permafrost zone where changes are  
18 occurring rapidly.

## 20 **Appendix A: CMP analyses**

21 Common mid-point (CMP) analysis is a widely used method to estimate local GPR signal  
22 velocities through ground materials. By moving GPR transmitting and receiving antennas  
23 apart incrementally between measurements, the same point in space is imaged with different  
24 antenna offsets making it possible to back out material velocity estimates from the hyperbolic  
25 shape of the recorded reflectors. The measured reflectors must be relatively flat so that the  
26 signal moves through the same materials at the same depths independent of antenna offset.

27 In this study, a CMP profile was measured on a drained lake surface (point 7 in Figure 1).  
28 Coring down to 2 m with a steel pipe at this location revealed the existence of an unfrozen  
29 saturated peat layer down to 1.75 m depth and unfrozen mineral soils consisting of mainly  
30 sand and silt below that depth. The aim of the CMP measurement used in this study was to

1 estimate material velocities for the deeper unfrozen saturated mineral substrate. As such,  
2 deeper here means materials below the observation depths of the permafrost probe ( $< 1$  m)  
3 and coring with the steel pipe ( $< 2$  m). For the CMP measurement, 100 MHz unshielded  
4 antennas were moved apart in 10 cm increments along a 15 m transect with a time window of  
5 797 ns and 16 stacks of each trace.

6 The measured CMP data was analysed in ReflexW (version 6.1, Sandmeier, 2012,  
7 [www.sandmeier-geo.de](http://www.sandmeier-geo.de)). The data were processed for a time-zero correction, a dewow filter,  
8 and a vertical gain. Semblance analysis (Neidell and Tanner, 1971) was used to identify  
9 appropriate reflectors from which velocities could be estimated. Using semblance analysis  
10 numerous velocities are used to correct the recorded reflectors for the increased travel  
11 distance for each offset. When the hyperbolic reflection becomes coherent in the CMP (i.e. a  
12 flat line) a high semblance value is obtained indicating that the correct velocity has been used.  
13 .

14 Figure A1 shows the estimated velocity profile, recorded CMP radargram, and semblance plot  
15 for the CMP transect. Although a relatively flat reflector was identified for the CMP  
16 measurement, the results from the semblance analysis does not show one clear reflector and  
17 associated velocity at the identified depth of the peat-mineral interface. Instead, a wide range  
18 of possible velocities are shown in the semblance plot for the top ~200 ns, likely due to high  
19 heterogeneity in ground substrates and/or water content. Due to the difficulty in constraining  
20 the material velocities for the deeper layers using this method, these results were only used for  
21 estimating a probable maximum velocity in unfrozen mineral sediments (as this was higher  
22 than most literature values). This maximum velocity estimate was complemented with  
23 literature values for the representative and minimum velocities.

## 24 **Author contribution**

26 Ylva Sjöberg designed the study, carried out the GPR measurements and analysis, and did the  
27 main writing of the manuscript. Per Marklund carried out the ERT measurements and analysis  
28 and did the main writing for the sections on ERT methods and ERT results, as well as  
29 commented on the whole manuscript. Rickard Pettersson provided input on the geophysical



1 techniques and analyses and commented on the whole manuscript. Steve Lyon provided input  
2 on the project design and commented on the whole manuscript, including language and style.

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1 Table 1. Velocities used for converting two-way travel times to depth in GPR data.

Material	Velocity (m/ns)	Method/Source
Dry peat – representative	0.049	Calibration against every second field measurements <sup>i</sup> of active layer depths
Dry peat - min	0.046	Representative estimate minus one standard deviation of field measurements <sup>i</sup>
Dry peat - max	0.052	Representative estimate plus one standard deviation of field measurements <sup>i</sup>
Saturated peat – representative	0.036	Calibration against coring (point 3 and 5, in Fig. 1)
Saturated peat - min	0.033	Velocity in pure water (Davis and Annan, 1989)
Saturated peat - max	0.049	Representative estimate for dry peat
Saturated mineral – representative	0.060	Velocity in sand and clay from Davis and Annan (1989)
Saturated mineral - min	0.053	Calculated from Joseph et al. (2010) for saturated loams and sands
Saturated mineral - max	0.073	Highest estimated velocity from CMP analysis

2 <sup>i</sup> Field measurement using a 1 m steel rod

3



Table 2. Range of interpreted depths (m) of active layer, peat-mineral interface, and permafrost base averaged along transects at Tavvavuoma.

	T1			T2			T3		
	Min <sup>i</sup>	Representative <sup>ii</sup>	Max <sup>iii</sup>	Min <sup>i</sup>	Representative <sup>ii</sup>	Max <sup>iii</sup>	Min <sup>i</sup>	Representative <sup>ii</sup>	Max <sup>iii</sup>
<b>Active layer</b>									
<i>Observed</i> <sup>iv</sup>		<b>0.51</b>			<b>0.52</b>			<b>0.56</b>	
<i>GPR</i>	0.50	<b>0.53</b>	0.57	0.48	<b>0.51</b>	0.54	0.52	<b>0.56</b>	0.59
<b>Peat-mineral interface</b>									
<i>GPR</i>	0.77	<b>0.84</b>	1.14	0.68	<b>0.74</b>	1.01	0.63	<b>0.69</b>	0.93
<b>Permafrost base</b>									
<i>ERT</i>		-	-		<b>15.8</b>	17.3		-	-

<sup>i</sup> GPR: using the estimated minimum velocity (Table1). ERT: using 1000  $\Omega\text{m}$  resistivity boundary (talik).

<sup>ii</sup> GPR: using representative estimate velocity (Table 1). ERT: using 1700  $\Omega\text{m}$  resistivity value.

<sup>iii</sup> GPR: using the estimated maximum velocity (Table 1). ERT using 1000  $\Omega\text{m}$  resistivity boundary (permafrost base).

<sup>iv</sup> Depth from manual field measurement using a steel probe.

1 Table 3. Estimated depths (m) of taliks at deepest point. Numbering is the same as in Fig. 5.

<b>Talik</b>	<b>GPR min<sup>i</sup></b>	<b>GPR representativ e<sup>ii</sup></b>	<b>GPR max<sup>iii</sup></b>	<b>ERT min<sup>i</sup></b>	<b>ERT representativ e<sup>ii</sup></b>
T1a	2.4	<b>2.7</b>	3.4	2.5	<b>3.1</b>
T1b	-	-	-	1.6	<b>2.8</b>
T1c	6.0	<b>6.7</b>	8.3	> 4.7	<b>&gt; 4.7</b>
T2a	5.4	<b>6.1</b>	7.6	5.4	<b>6.9</b>
T2b	5.3	<b>6.0</b>	7.4	6.9	<b>8.8</b>
T3a	5.3	<b>5.9</b>	7.4	5.8	<b>7.8</b>
T3b	5.7	<b>6.4</b>	8.0	6.3	<b>8.2</b>
T3c	5.1	<b>5.7</b>	7.0	4.8	<b>7.9</b>
T3d	3.1	<b>3.5</b>	4.4	-	<b>4.0</b>
T3e	4.6	<b>5.2</b>	6.4	5.4	<b>7.2</b>
T3f	2.0	<b>2.1</b>	2.2	-	<b>3.8</b>
T3g	3.7	<b>4.1</b>	5.2	5.0	<b>6.8</b>

2 <sup>i</sup> GPR: using the estimated minimum velocity (table1). ERT: using 1000  $\Omega\text{m}$  resistivity  
3 boundary (talik).

4 <sup>ii</sup> GPR: using representative estimate velocity (table 1). ERT: using 1700  $\Omega\text{m}$  resistivity  
5 value.

6 <sup>iii</sup> GPR: using the estimated maximum velocity (table 1). ERT using 1000  $\Omega\text{m}$   
7 resistivity boundary (permafrost base).

8

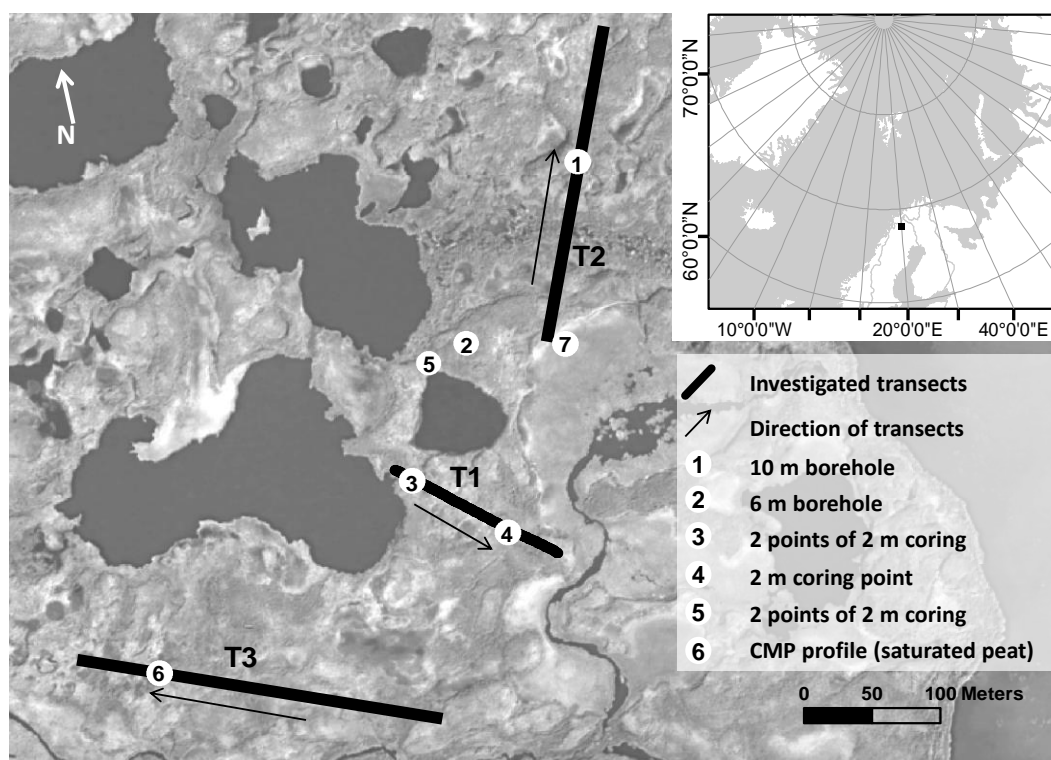


Figure 1. Location of the study site (inset), investigated transects, existing boreholes (Ivanova et al., 2011, points 1 and 2), coring points, and points of CMP measurement (described in section 3.1 and Appendix A). (Aerial photograph from Lantmäteriet, the Swedish land survey, 2012.)

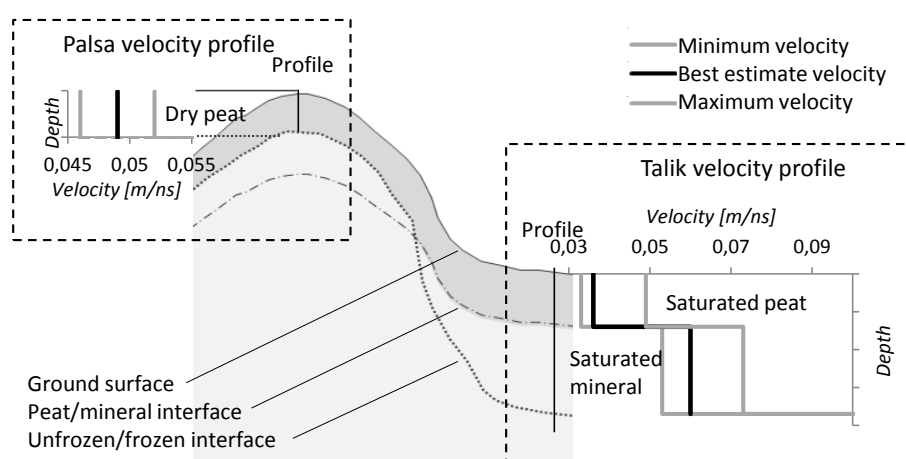
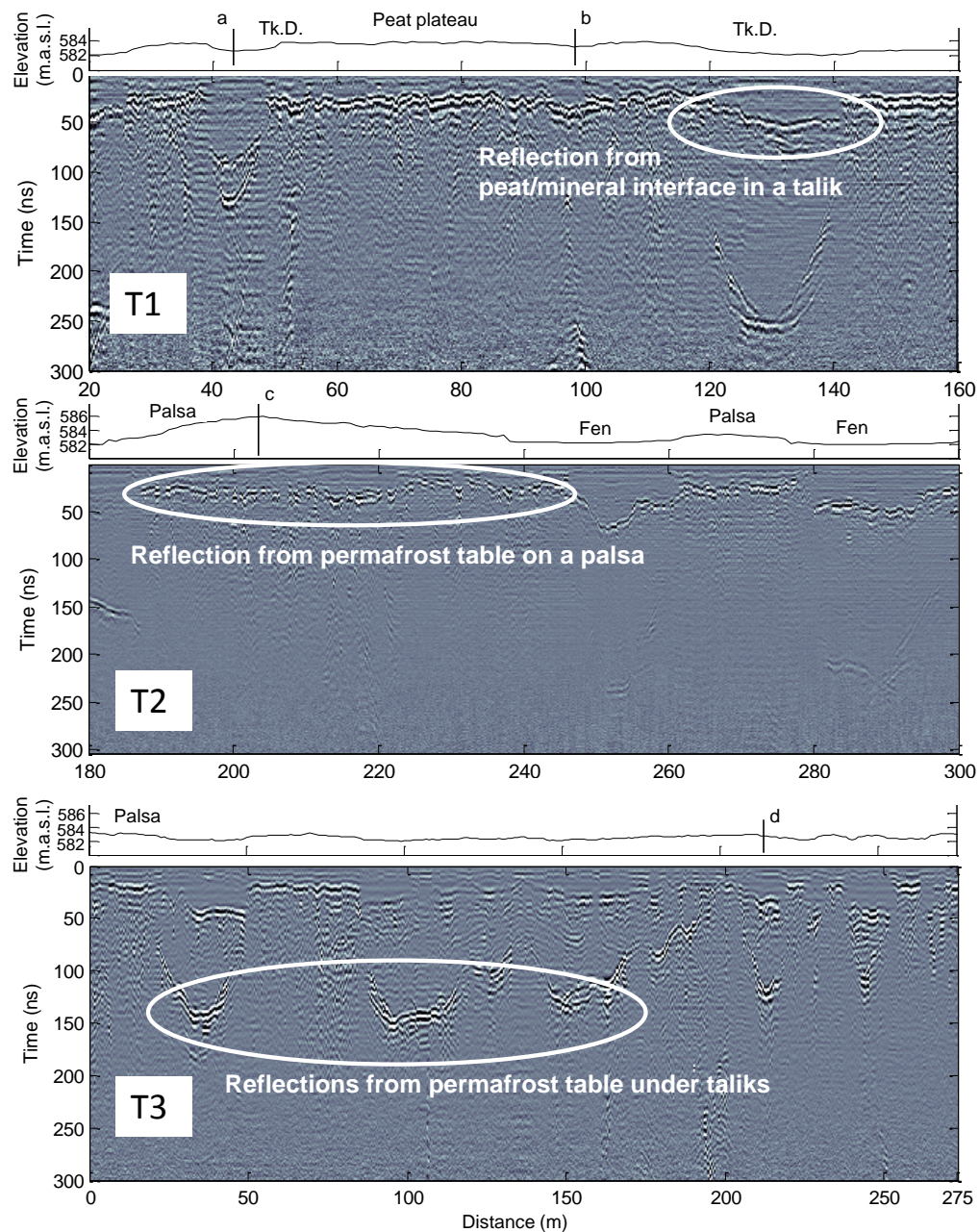
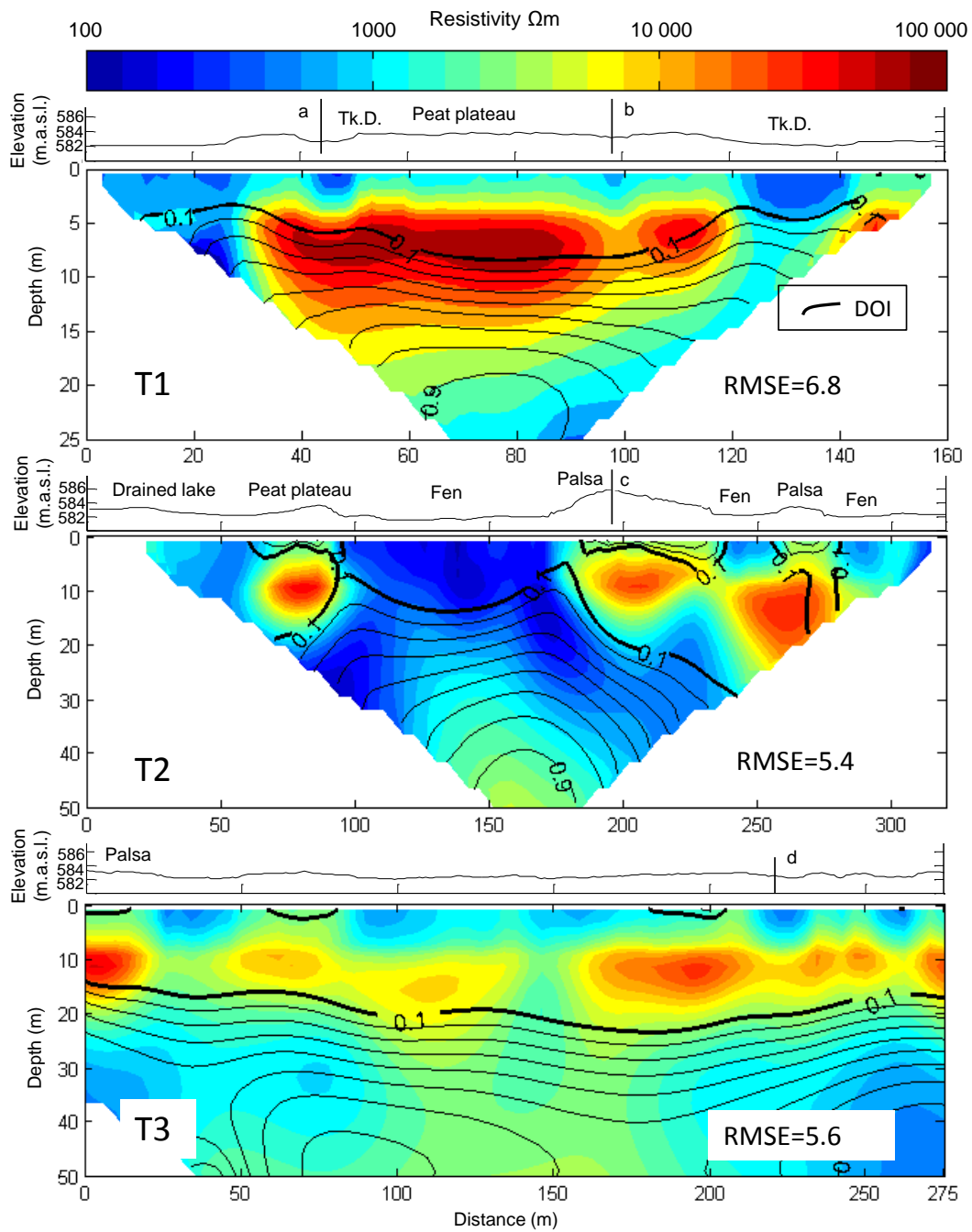


Figure 2. Conceptual sketch of typical distribution of ground substrates and associated estimated velocities for a palsa and talik ground profile.

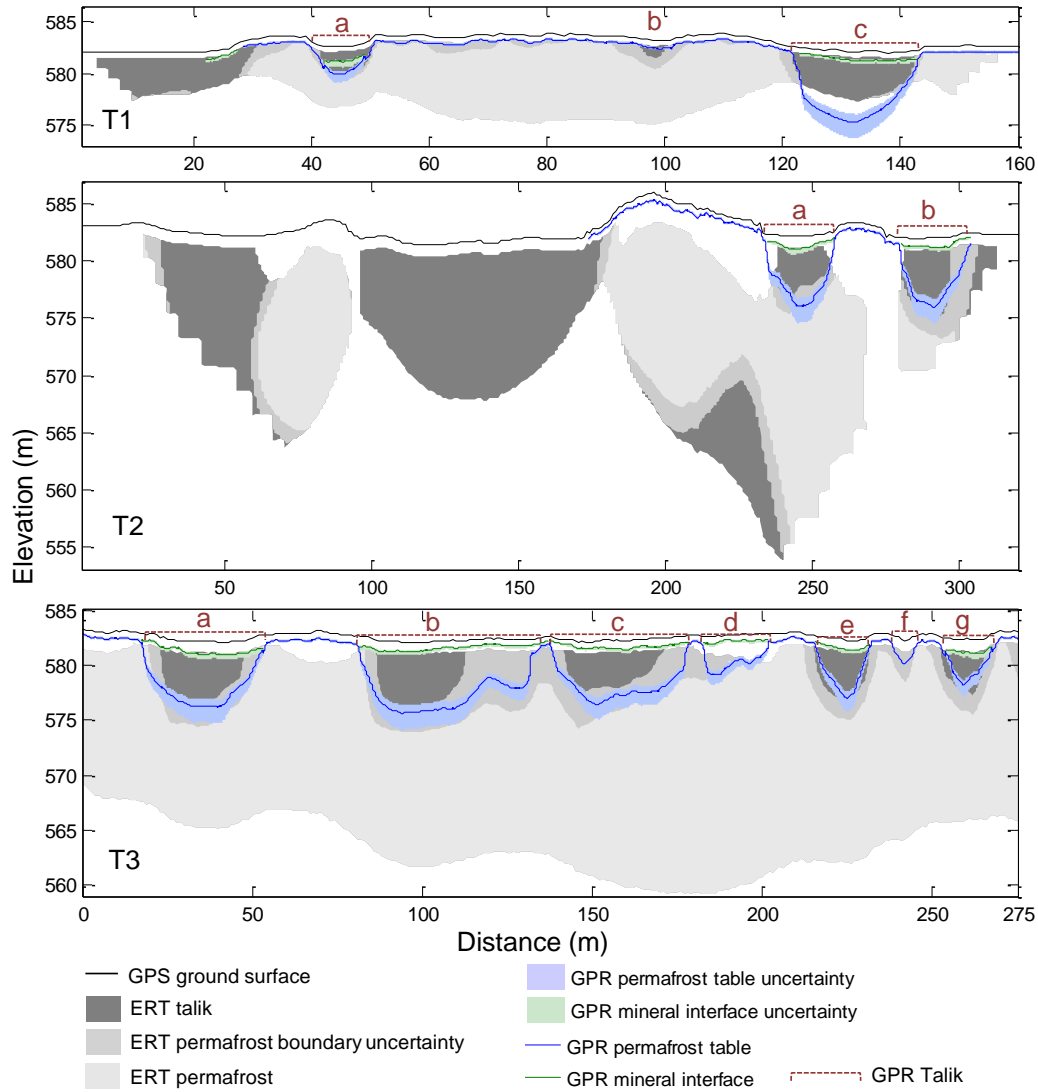


1  
 2 Figure 3. Elevation profiles and GPR images for T1, T2, and T3 with selected reflections  
 3 marked as examples of interfaces that were identified for this study. Landforms are indicated  
 4 on top of elevation profiles along T1 and T2 (Tk.D = thermokarst depression) together with  
 5 coring points in T1 (a = point 3 in Figure 1, and b = point 4 in Figure 1) and T3 (d = point 6 in  
 6 Figure 1) as well as the 10 m borehole in T2 (c = point 1 in Figure 1). No landforms are  
 7 indicated along T3 after the first palsa (0-25 m) due to the complex micro topography of  
 8 hummocks and thermokarst depressions along this transect.



1

2 Figure 4. Elevation profiles and ERT results for T1, T2, and T3. DOI < 0.1 (black lines)  
 3 indicates that the model is well constrained by the data. Landforms are indicated on top of  
 4 elevation profiles along T1 and T2 (Tk.D = thermokarst depression) together with coring  
 5 points in T1 (a = point 3 in Figure 1, and b = point 4 in Figure 1) and T3 (d = point 6 in  
 6 Figure 1) as well as the 10 m borehole in T2 (c = point 1 in Figure 1). No landforms are  
 7 indicated along T3 after the first palsa (0-25 m) due to the complex micro topography of  
 8 hummocks and thermokarst depressions along this transect.



2

3 Figure 5. Interpreted permafrost distribution along T1, T2, and T3. Uncertainty intervals come  
 4 from the range of estimated signal velocities for GPR (Table 1) and from the range of  
 5 resistivity values (1000-1700  $\Omega\text{m}$ ) used for identifying the permafrost boundary for ERT. In  
 6 sections marked *GPR Talik* (red dotted line) GPR depth conversions have been made using  
 7 saturated peat velocities down to the peat-mineral interface (green line) and then using  
 8 saturated mineral substrate velocities down to the permafrost table (blue line). In the  
 9 remaining parts of transects the dry peat velocities have been used down to the permafrost  
 10 table. No interpretations of ERT data with DOI > 0.1 are have been made and therefore the  
 11 permafrost base is only visible along parts of T2. Note the differences in scale in the x-  
 12 direction between figures and the vertical exaggeration.

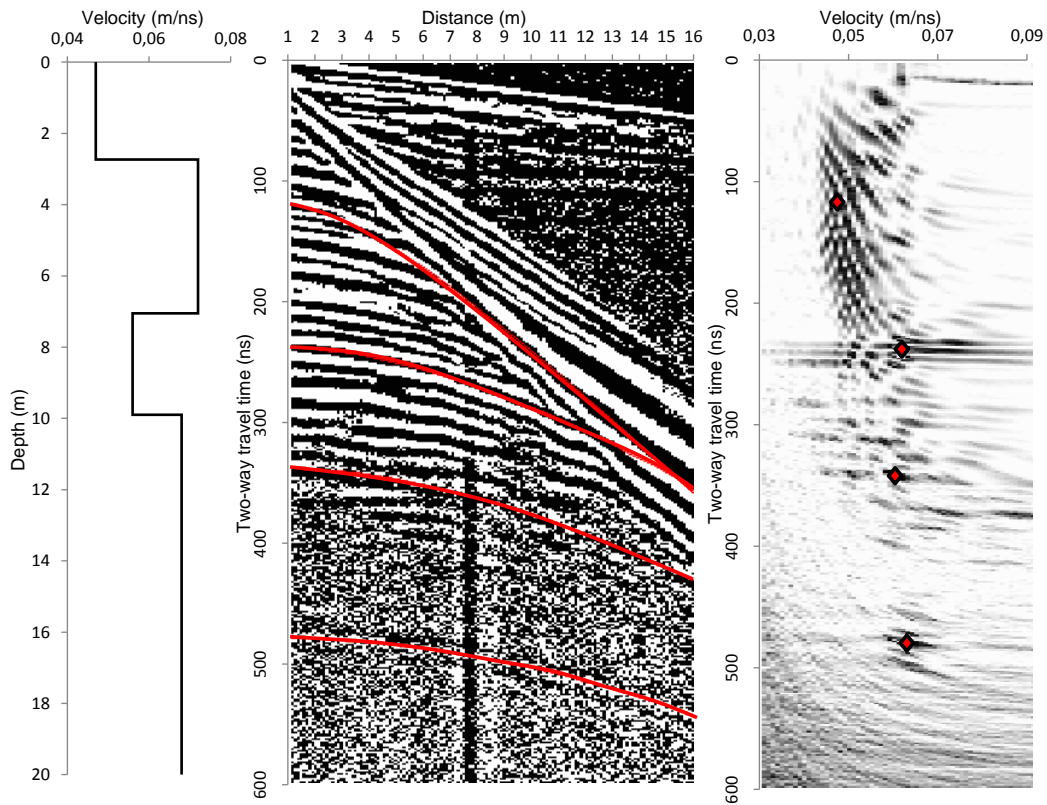


Figure A1. Estimated velocity profile, recorded CMP radargram, and semblance plot for the CMP transect measured on the drained lake surface. The semblance plot shows more likely velocities in darker shades of grey with the velocities from the reflectors (red lines in radargram) used for generating the velocity profile indicated by black and red diamonds.