



# Using neural networks to improve simulations in the gray zone

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**Abstract.** Machine learning represents a potential method to cope with the gray zone problem of representing motions in dynamical systems on scales comparable to the model resolution. Here we explore the possibility of using a neural network to directly learn the error caused by unresolved scales. We use a modified shallow water model which includes highly nonlinear processes mimicking atmospheric convection. To create the training dataset we run the model in a high and a low-resolution setup and compare the difference after one low resolution time step starting from the same initial conditions, thereby obtaining an exact target. The neural network is able to learn a large portion of the difference when evaluated "offline" on a validation set. When coupled to the low-resolution model, we find large forecast improvements up to one day on average. After this, the accumulated error due to the mass conservation violation of the neural network starts to dominate and deteriorates the forecast. This deterioration can effectively be delayed by adding a penalty term to the loss function used to train the ANN to conserve mass in a weak sense. This study reinforces the need to include physical constraints in neural network parameterizations.

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## 1 Introduction

Current limitations on computational power force weather and climate prediction to use relatively low resolution simulations. Subgrid scale processes, i.e. processes that are not resolved by the model grid, are typically represented using physical parameterizations (Stensrud, 2009). Inaccuracies in these parameterizations are known to cause errors in weather forecasts and biases in climate projections. While parameterizations are becoming more sophisticated over time, there is evidence that key structural uncertainties remain (Randall et al., 2003; Randall, 2013; Jones and Randall, 2011).

A particularly difficult problem in the representation of unresolved processes is the so-called gray zone (Chow et al., 2019; Honnert et al., 2020), where a certain physical phenomenon such as a cumulus cloud is similar in size to the model resolution and hence partially resolved. In the development of many classical parameterizations, features are assumed to be small in comparison to the model resolution. This scale separation provides a conceptual basis for specifying the average effects of the unresolved flow features on the resolved flow. In contrast, there is no theoretical basis for determining such a relationship in the gray zone. Instead, the truncation error of the numerical model is a significant factor. While we might still expect there to be some relationship between the resolved and unresolved parts of the flow, we have no way to define it.



25 The gray zone is of great importance in practice since the kilometer-scale models used operationally for regional weather prediction are in the gray zone for cumulus convection. These models are typically run without a parameterization for deep convection, but the resolution of 2-4 km does not give accurate results for typical convective cloud structures are often less than 10 km in size (Bryan et al., 2003; Wagner et al., 2018). The flow on these scales is also influenced by partially-resolved orography and other surface properties, which also belong to the gray zone. With no obvious methodology for developing a parameterization suitable for these scales, the most that can be hoped for current schemes is that their influence diminishes with increasing resolution (Jeworrek et al., 2019).

Using machine learning methods such as artificial neural networks (ANNs) for alleviating the problems described above has received increasing attention over the past years. One approach is to avoid the need of parameterizations all together by emulating the entire model using observations (Brunton et al., 2016; Pathak et al., 2018; Faranda et al., 2020; Fablet et al., 2018; Scher, 2018; Dueben and Bauer, 2018). In these studies a dense and noise free observation network is often assumed. Brajard et al. (2020a) and Bocquet et al. (2020) circumvent the requirement of this assumption by using data assimilation to form targets for ANNs from sparse and noisy observations.

Though studies have shown that surrogate models produced by machine learning can be accurate for small dynamical systems, replacing an entire numerical weather prediction model for operational use is not yet within our reach. Therefore, a more practical approach is to use ANNs as replacement for uncertain parameterizations. This has been done either by learning from physics based expensive parametrization schemes (O’Gorman and Dwyer, 2018; Rasp et al., 2018) or high resolution simulations (Krasnopolsky et al., 2013; Brenowitz and Bretherton, 2019; Bolton and Zanna, 2019; Rasp, 2020; Yuval and O’Gorman, 2020), which is the approach we take here. Such data driven techniques could be a way to reduce the structural uncertainty of traditional parameterizations, even at gray zone resolutions where the physical basis of the parameterization is no longer valid. The first challenge is to create the training data, i.e. to separate the resolved and unresolved scales from the high-resolution simulation. Brenowitz and Bretherton (2019) use a coarse-graining approach based on subtracting the coarse grained advection term from the local tendencies. This approach can be used for any model and resolution but is sensitive to the choice of grid and time step. Further, the resulting subgrid tendencies are only an approximation and may not represent the real difference between the low and high-resolution model. Yuval and O’Gorman (2020) use the same model version for low and high-resolution simulations and compute exact differences after a single low-resolution time step by starting both model versions from the same initial conditions. They manage to obtain stable long-term simulations using the low-resolution model with a machine learning correction that come close to the high-resolution ground truth.

Here, we use the modified rotating shallow water (modRSW) model to explore the use of a machine learning subgrid representation in a highly non-linear dynamical system. The modRSW is an idealized fluid model of convective-scale numerical weather prediction, in which convection is triggered by orography. As such, the model mimics the gray zone problem of operational kilometer-scale models. Using a simplified model allows us to focus on some key conceptual questions surrounding machine learning parameterizations, such as how choices in neural network training affect long-term physical consistency. In particular, we include weak physical constraints in the training procedure.

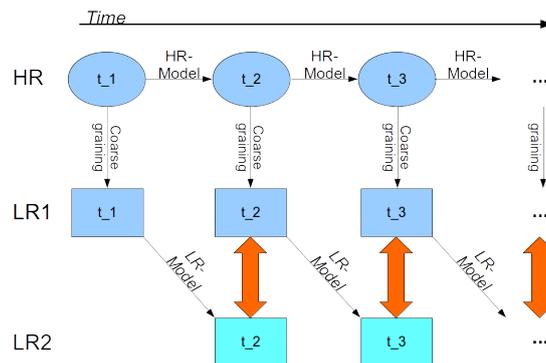


The contents of this work are outlined in the following. Section 2 introduces the experiment setup used to obtain and analyze  
 60 results. The modRSW model is briefly explained in Section 2.1, followed by a description of the training data generation in  
 Section 2.2. The architecture and training process of the ANN used in this research are given in 2.3. Results are presented in  
 Section 3. followed by a conclusion in Section 4.

## 2 Experiment setup

### 2.1 The modRSW Model

65 The modRSW model (Kent et al., 2017) used in this research represents an extended version of the 1D shallow water equations,  
 i.e. 1D fluid flow over orography. Its prognostic variables are fluid height  $h$ , wind speed  $u$  and a rain mass fraction  $r$ . Based on  
 the model by Würsch and Craig (Würsch and Craig, 2014) it implements two threshold heights,  $H_c < H_r$ , initiating convection  
 and rain production, respectively. Convection is stimulated by modifying the pressure term to remain constant where  $h$  rises  
 above  $H_c$ . In contrast to Würsch and Craig (2014), the modRSW model does not apply diffusion or stochastic forcing. The  
 70 model is mass conserving, meaning that the domain mean of  $h$  is constant over time. In this study, a small but significant model-  
 intrinsic drift in the domain mean of  $u$  is accounted for by adding a relaxation term. This term is defined using a corresponding  
 time scale  $t_{relax}$ , as  $(\bar{u}_0 - \bar{u}_t) \cdot t_{relax}$ . Depending on the orography used, this model yields a continuous range of dynamical  
 organization between regular and chaotic behaviour. We pick one simulation from each extreme and compare results to identify  
 general and flow dependent aspects.



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**Figure 1.** Schematic of training data generation process. A HR run is coarse grained to LR to generate model truth. Each model truth state is  
 integrated forward for one time step using LR dynamics. The difference between the obtained states and corresponding model truth defines  
 the desired network output (red arrows), while the preceding model truth defines the network input.



## 2.2 Training Data Generation

80 Conceptually, the ANN's task is to correct a low resolution (LR) model forecast towards the model truth, which is a coarse grained high resolution (HR) model simulation. The coarse graining factor in this study is set to 4. A training sample (input-target pair) is defined by the model truth at some time  $t_n$  and the difference between the model truth and the corresponding LR forecast at  $t_{n+1} = t_n + dt$ , respectively (see Figure 1). To generate the model truth, HR data are obtained by integrating the modRSW model forward using the parameters shown in Table 1.

Model Parameter	Symbol	Value	Notes
HR gridpoint number	$HR$	800	-
LR gridpoint number	$LR$	200	-
Time step	$dt$	0.001	-
Domain size (non dim.)	$L$	1.0	-
CFL	-	0.5	-
Convection threshold	$H_c$	1.02	-
Rain threshold	$H_r$	1.05	-
Initial total height	$H_0$	1.0	-
Rosby Number	$Ro$	$\infty$	-
Froude Number	$Fr$	1.1	-
Effective gravity	$g$	$Fr^{-2}$	-
Beta	$\beta$	0.2	-
Alpha	$\alpha^2$	10	-
Rain Conversion Factor	$c^2$	$0.1 \times g \times H_r$	-
Wind Relaxation time scale	$t_{relax}$	$dt$	-
<b>Orography Generation</b>			
Maximum wave number	$k_{max}$	100	-
Maximum Amplitude	$B_{max}$	0.1	-

**Table 1.** Model setting parameters

85 Orography is defined as a superposition of cosines with wavenumbers  $k = 1/L, \dots, k_{max}/L$  ( $L$  domain length). Amplitudes are given as  $A(k) = 1/k$ , while phase shifts for each term are randomly chosen from  $[0, L]$ . All states and the orography are subsequently coarse grained to LR, resulting in model truth (LR1). Each LR1 state is integrated forward for a single timestep using the modRSW model on LR with the coarse grained orography, resulting in a single step prediction (LR2). The synchronized differences  $LR1(t_i) - LR2(t_i)$  then define the training targets corresponding to the input  $LR1(t_{i-1})$ , which



90 includes the orography. A time series of  $T = 200000$  time steps is generated for both orographies, of which the odd time steps are used for training and the even time steps for validation.

### 2.3 Convolutional ANN

A characteristic property of convolutional ANNs is that they reflect spatial invariance and localization. These two properties also apply to the dynamics of many physical systems, such as the one investigated here. They differ from e.g. dense networks  
95 by the use of a so called kernel. This vector is "moved" step by step across the domain grid, covering  $k$  grid points at each position. At each position, the dot product of kernel and current grid values is computed, determining (along with an activation function) the corresponding output value.

The ANN structure used in this research is described in the following. 5 hidden layers are applied, each using the *ReLU* activation function. The input layer uses *ReLU* as well, while the output layer uses a linear activation function. All hidden  
100 layers have 32 filters. The input and output layer shapes are defined by input and target data. The kernel size is set uniformly to 3 grid points. Biases are applied throughout the ANN.

The loss is determined during training by comparing the ANN output to the corresponding target. A standard measure for loss is the mean squared error (MSE). However, any loss function can be used to tailor to the application. For example, additional terms can be added to impose weak constraints on the training process, as for example done in Ruckstuhl et al. (2021). This  
105 possibility is exploited here to impose mass conservation in a weak sense. The constraint is implemented by penalizing the deviation of the square of domain mean  $h$  corrections from zero. The loss function is defined as

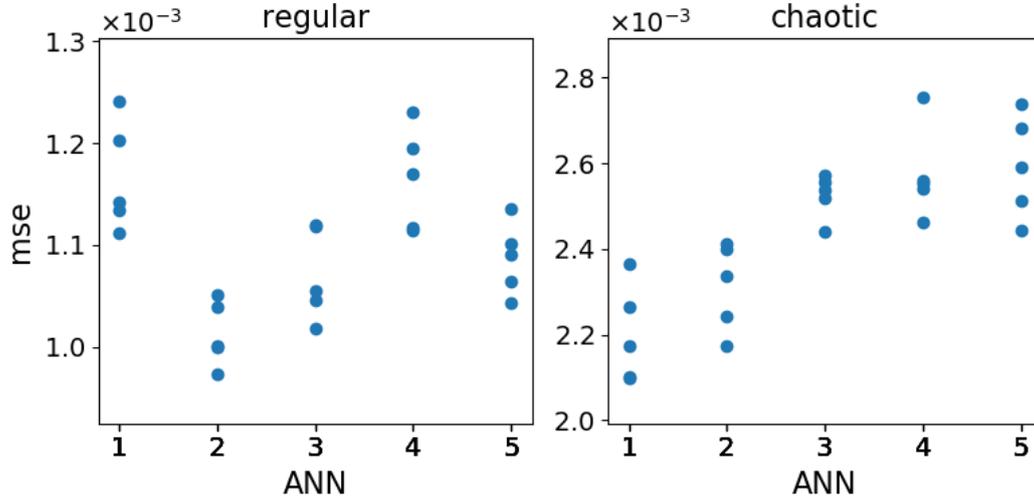
$$MSE(y_{out}, y_{target}) + w_{mass} \cdot (\overline{\Delta h})^2 \quad (1)$$

where the second term represents a weighted mass conservation constraint. In this expression, *MSE* denotes the mean square error,  $w_{mass}$  is the mass conservation constraint weighting,  $\Delta h$  are ANN corrections for  $h$  and the overbar denotes the domain  
110 mean.

The Adam algorithm with a learning rate of  $10^{-3}$  is used to minimize the loss function over the ANN weights in batches of 256 samples. Since the loss function is typically not convex, the ANN likely converges to a local minimum. To sample this error, we repeat the training of each ANN presented in this paper with different initial weights 5 times. The initial weights are drawn randomly. For all ANNs a total of 1000 epochs is performed.

## 115 3 Results

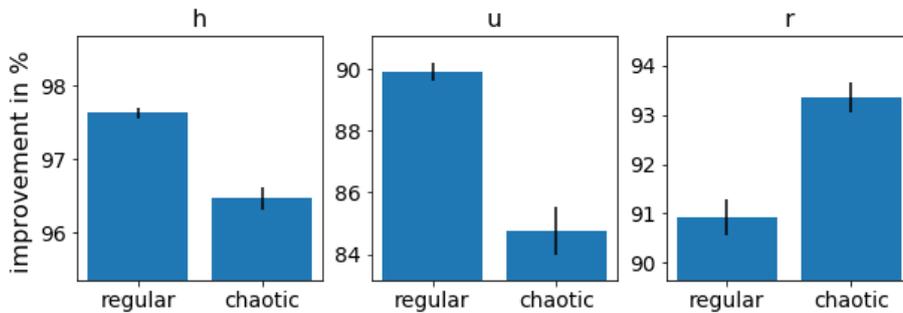
We performed a series of experiments designed to investigate the feasibility of using an ANN to correct for model error due to unresolved scales. In section 3.1 we first explore the performance of the ANNs trained with the standard loss function, the MSE. Next, the weak constraint is added to the loss function as in equation (1) and the benefits are examined in section 3.2.



**Figure 2.** Loss function value (mse) of validation data corresponding to the last 5 epochs of the training process (y-axis) for each trained ANN (x-axis).

### 3.1 ANN with standard loss function

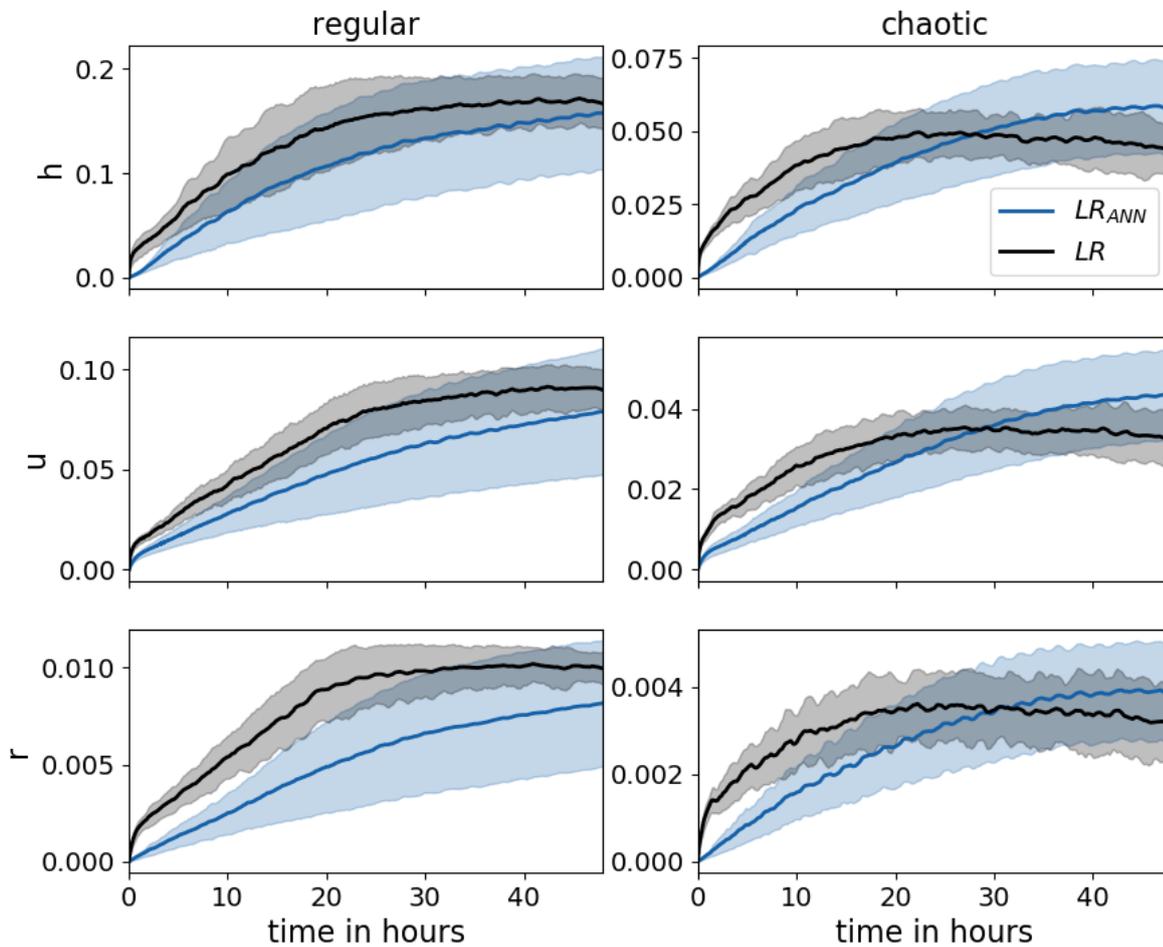
120 Figure 2 illustrates the variability among the 5 ANNs with different initial training weights, versus the variability among the last 5 epochs of each ANN for both orographies. Since neither the ANN nor the epoch number seems to dominate the variability of the loss value, we use both to sample the total ANN variability, resulting in  $5 \times 5 = 25$  samples for each ANN training setup that is presented in the remainder of this paper.



**Figure 3.** Mean (bars) and standard deviation (error bars) of the RMSE of ANN corrected single time step predictions of the validation data with respect to the model truth, expressed as improvements in percentage with respect to the RMSE of the corresponding uncorrected LR single time step predictions, for the regular and chaotic case (y-axis) and for variables *h* (left), *u* (middle) and *r* (right).

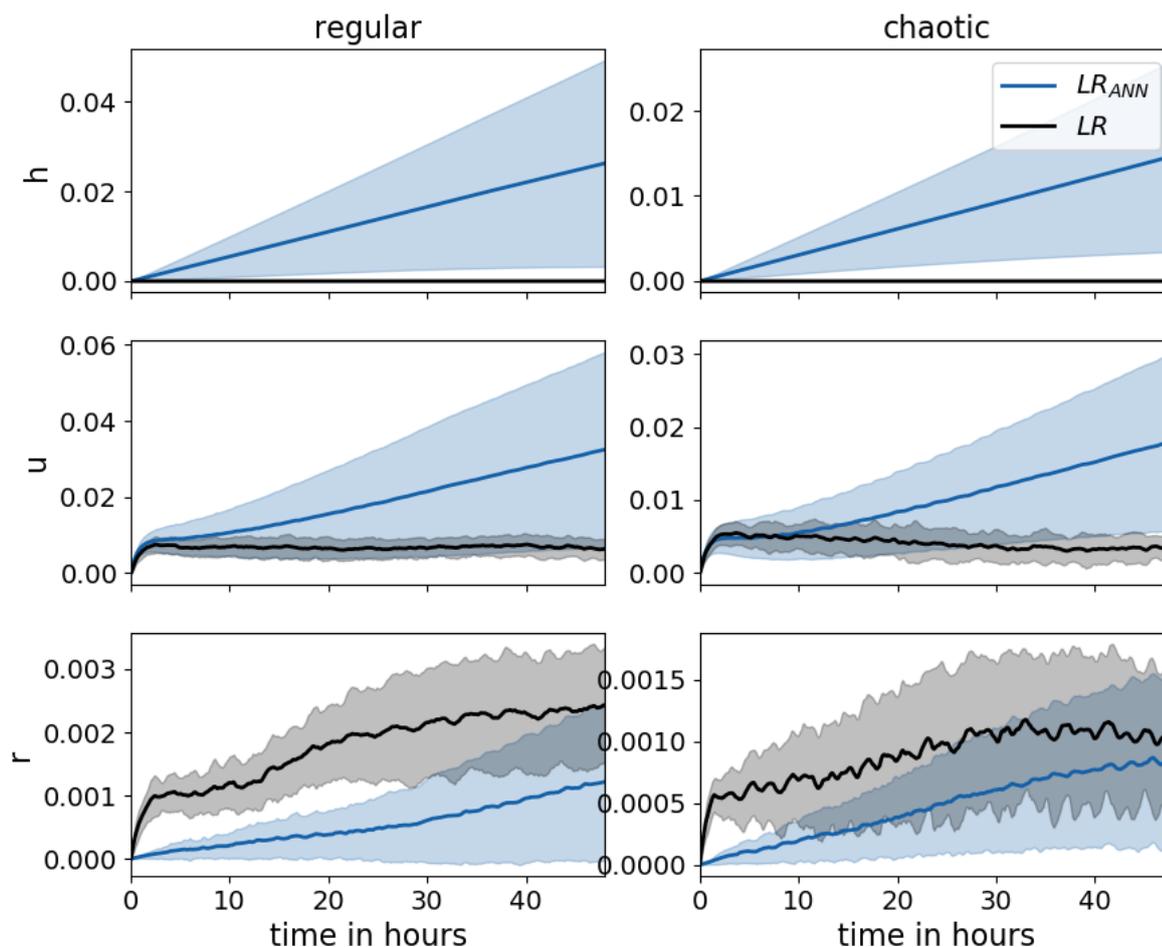


Figure 3 shows the improvement of single time step predictions when the trained ANNs are applied, calculated from root mean squared errors (RMSE). The bars show the the averaged RMSE of the prediction after the ANN is applied divided by the average RMSE of the prediction before the ANN is applied times 100. The error bars indicate the standard deviation over the 25 samples. The improvements are large for both the chaotic and regular case.



**Figure 4.** RMSE evolution of 48-hour forecasts for the respective model variables of  $LR$  (black) and  $LR_{ANN}$  (blue), averaged over 50 initial conditions and in the case of  $LR_{ANN}$  25 ANNs. The shaded region depicts the standard deviation of the RMSE.

Next we examine the effect of the ANN on a 48-hour forecast. Here we compare a LR simulation with ( $LR_{ANN}$ ) and without ( $LR$ ) the use of the ANN. Both simulations start from the same initial conditions as the model truth. This is repeated for 50 initial conditions, each 2 hours apart. The results in terms of RMSE with respect to the model truth are presented in Figure



**Figure 5.** Same as Figure 4, but for the absolute error of the spatial mean of the variables.

4. Note that the shaded region for  $LR_{ANN}$  includes the variability due to the ANN and the initial conditions. The RMSEs corresponding to the regular case are higher than for the chaotic case. This is because the regular case exhibits a repeating pattern of long-lived, high amplitude convective events (not shown). In comparison, the chaotic case produces short-lived perturbations with very small amplitude (not shown), leading to smaller climatological variability.

135 For both orographies the ANN has a clear positive effect on the forecast until the error of  $LR$  saturates, after which the error of  $LR_{ANN}$  continues to grow. For the chaotic case this leads to a detrimental impact of the ANN after about 30 hours. It is not surprising that  $LR_{ANN}$  deteriorates as the forecast lead time increases, since the ANNs are not perfect (as opposed to the data they were trained on) and the resulting errors accumulate over time, leading to biases. This is clearly visible in Figure 5, where



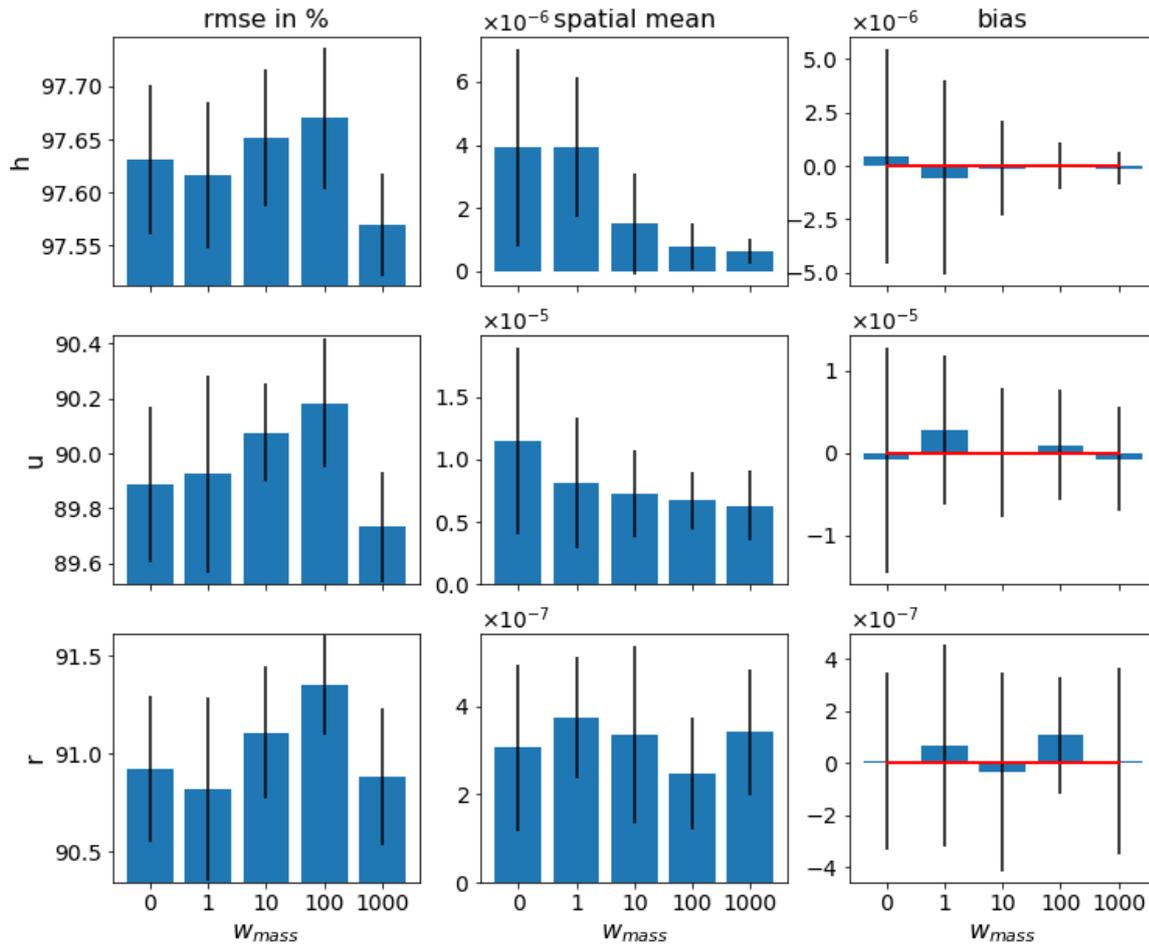
it is seen that the domain mean error of  $h$  and  $r$  diverges, in contrast to  $LR$ . It is worth noting that the domain mean error of  
140  $r$  for  $LR$  is the result of a negative bias in the amount of rain produced, caused by the coarse graining of the orography (not  
shown). This bias is partially (sometimes over) corrected by the ANNs. The divergence of the domain mean error of  $h$  is the  
result of applying ANNs that, in contrast to the model, do not conserve mass. This leads to accumulated mass errors, causing  
biases in the wind field due to momentum conservation and a change in probability for the fluid to rise above  $H_c$  and  $H_r$ . We  
therefore investigate if reducing the mass error, by adding a penalty term to the loss function of the ANN, can increase the  
145 forecast skill further.

### 3.2 ANN with mass conservation in a weak sense

We have trained ANNs with mass conservation weightings  $w_{mass} = 1, 10, 100, 1000$ . These weightings result in a contribution  
to the loss function of roughly 0.2%, 0.7%, 2% and 5% throughout the training process respectively (not shown). Note that the  
ANNs presented in the previous section correspond to  $w_{mass} = 0$ .

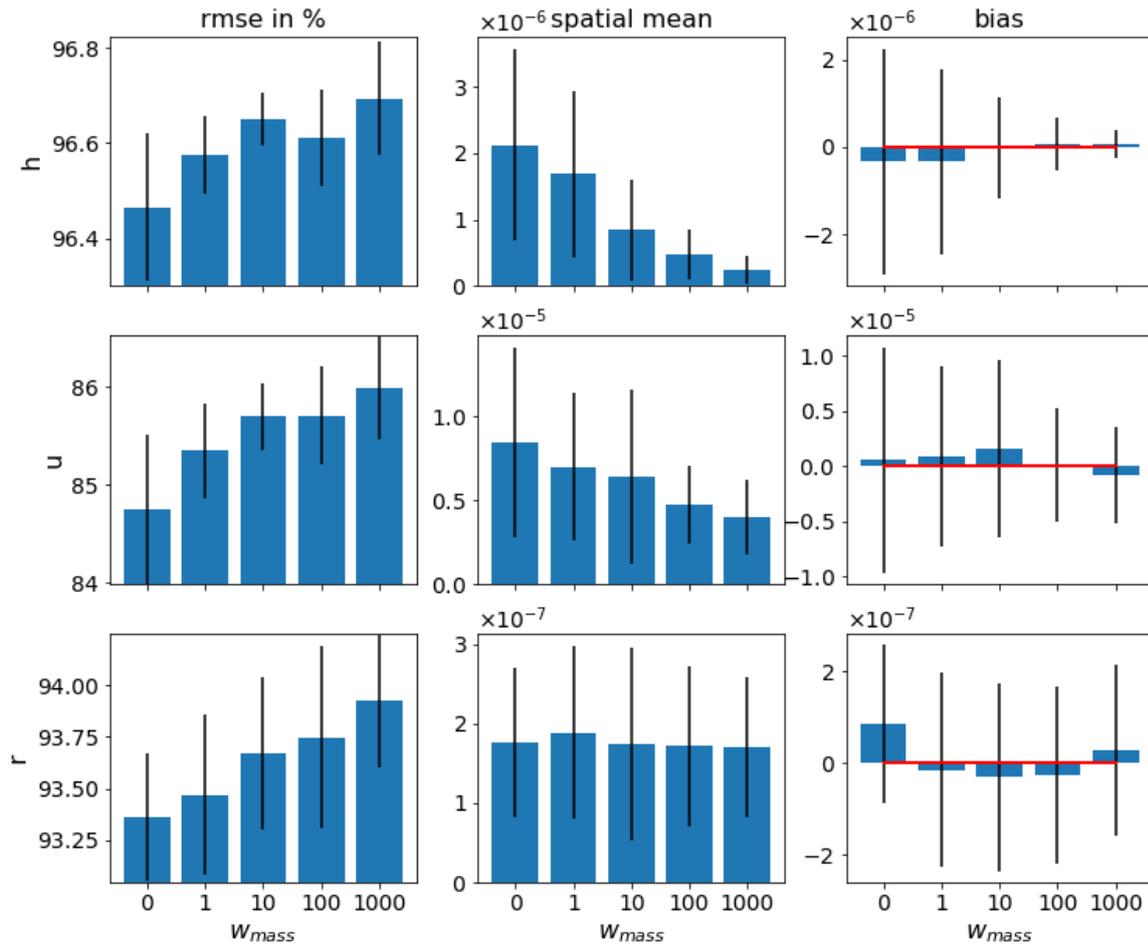
150 Figures 6 and 7 show the single time step predictions improvements for both orographies. Clearly, the mass conservation  
penalty term in the loss function has the desired effect of reducing the mass error for both orographies, though for the regular  
case a weighting of  $w_{mass} > 1$  is necessary. As hypothesized, reducing the mass error also has a positive effect on the domain  
mean error of the wind  $u$ . The standard deviation of the bias is much larger than the mean bias for all variables and both  
orographies. We believe that the mean bias would go to zero as the sample size (which is now only 25) increases. This indicates  
155 that single ANNs do not have a preference for either a positive or negative bias. The decrease of standard deviation of the bias  
as  $w_{mass}$  increases confirms the correlation between the mass error in  $h$  and the wind bias. Contrary to what we expected, the  
RMSE does not generally go up when  $w_{mass}$  is increased. It even seems to go down for all variables. We do see the RMSE  
for  $w_{mass} = 1000$  going up for the regular case, which indicates that there is threshold after which the penalty terms becomes  
detrimental to the RMSE. For the regular case this threshold lies between  $100 < W_{mass} < 1000$  and for the chaotic case it lies  
160 above  $w_{mass} > 1000$ , assuming it exists at all.

Figure 8 presents the mean RMSE of the 48-hour forecasts for all weightings. The weak mass conservation constraint has  
the desired effect on the forecast skill. For the chaotic case, about 10 hours in forecast quality is gained. For the regular case  
the exact number is unclear since the RMSE is still lower than  $LR$  and has not yet saturated after 48 hours. However we can  
say that it is at least 30 hours. As hypothesized, Figure 9 indicates that the divergence of the domain mean error of the wind  $u$   
165 is delayed as the weighting  $w_{mass}$  is increased. This in turn positively affects the domain mean of the rain  $r$ . To support these  
claims we look at Figure 10, which shows the correlation between the bias in  $h$  and the bias in wind  $u$  and rain  $r$  respectively.  
The wind bias becomes almost completely anticorrelated to the mass bias as the forecast lead time increases. In the single step  
predictions we did not detect a correlation between the mass bias and the rain bias. Figure 10 however demonstrates that this  
correlation is established after a few time steps, likely when the change in probability of crossing the rain threshold resulting  
170 from the mass bias has taken effect. We also note that the smaller  $w_{mass}$ , the stronger the correlation. We hypothesize that as  
the mass bias weakens, other causes for introducing domain mean biases in the wind and rain field become more significant.  
Such other causes may for example depend on the orography, or the state of  $u$  and  $r$ .



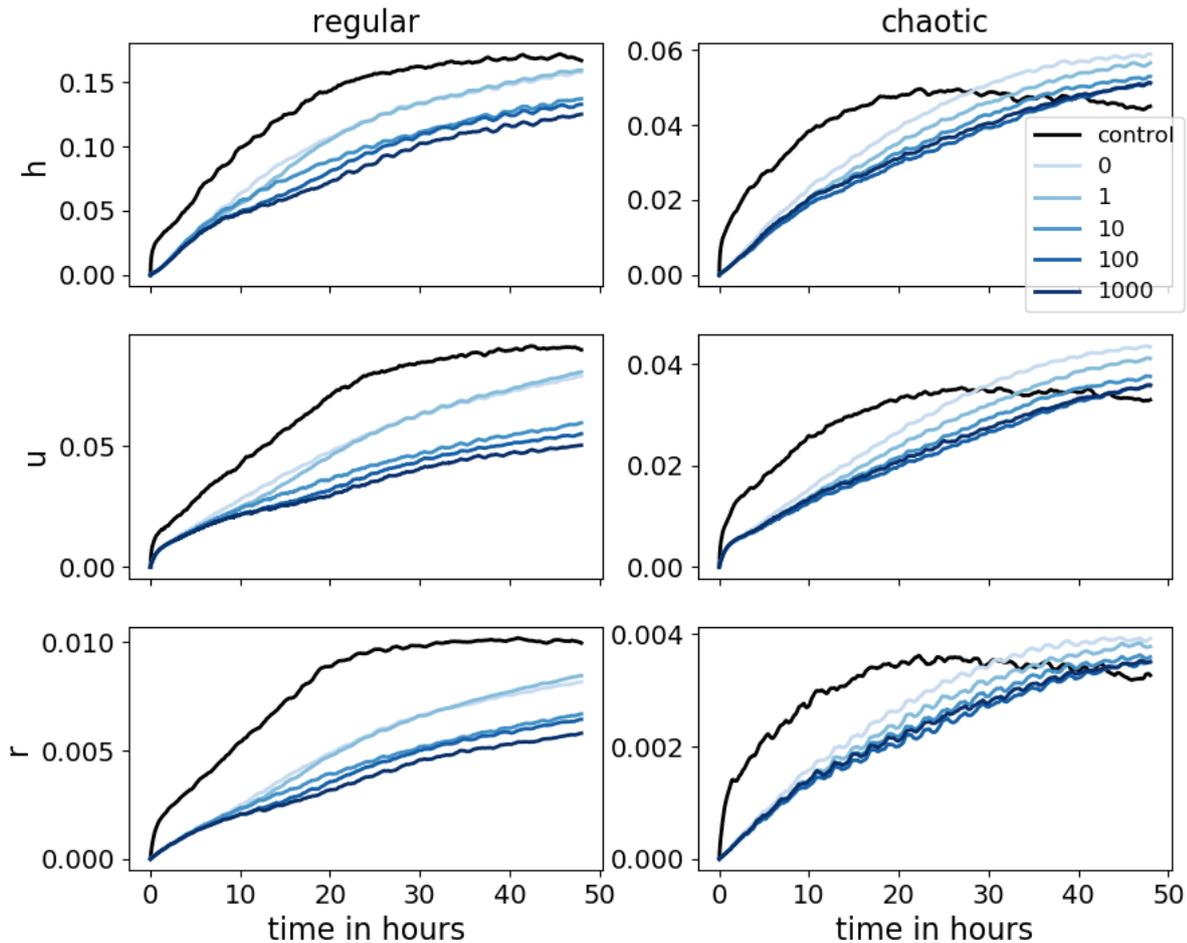
**Figure 6.** Mean RMSE expressed in improvement as in Figure 3 (left), absolute error of the spatial mean (middle), and bias (right) of the validation data for the different weightings (x-axis) and the respective model variables (rows) for the regular case. Error bars indicate the standard deviation and the red lines in the right panel indicate the zero line.

Next we look at the variability of the forecast errors in Figure 11. Here we look at the variability due to the initial conditions, the ANN, and the combination of both. For small weightings the variability due to the ANN seems to dominate the total variability. However, as the weighting increases, the variability due to the initial conditions takes over. This again confirms the benefits of adding the mass penalty term to the loss function, as it demonstrates decrease in sensitivity of the forecast to the training process of the ANN.



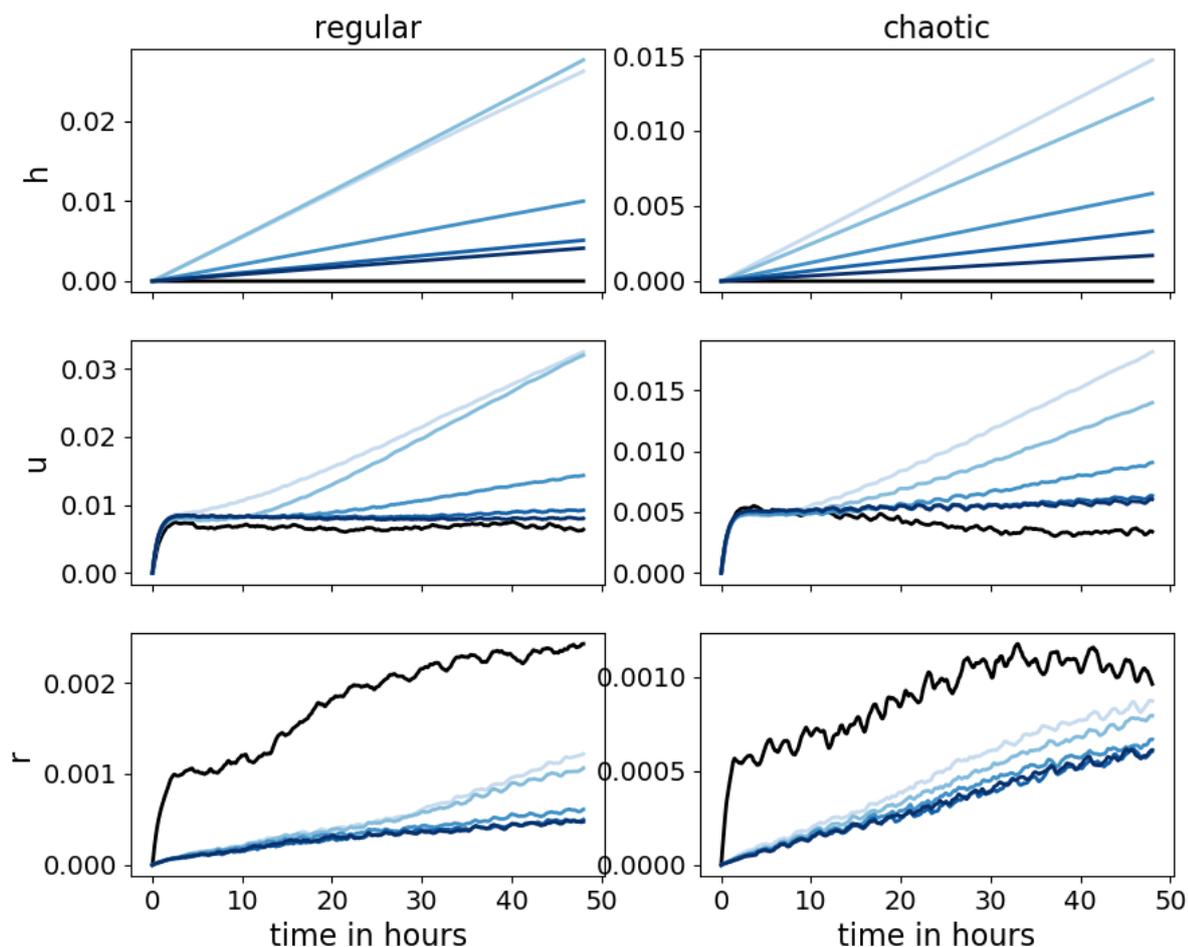
**Figure 7.** Same as Figure 6, but for the chaotic case.

Based on the subjective interpretation of the human brain of a hand full of animations of the forecast evolution, it appears that convective events produced in the LR run are wider and shallower than in the coarse grained HR run, likely due to the smoothing of the orography. As discussed before, this results in a lack of rain mass, but also, via conservation of momentum, a drift in the wind field. The convective events in the LR simulations are therefore also increasingly misplaced as the forecast lead time increases. The ANNs are capable of sharpening the gradients of the convective events, leading to highly accurate forecasts of convective events up to 5-10 hours. After this, spurious, missed and misplaced events start to occur, although the forecast skill remains significant up to at least 24 hours, in contrast to the LR simulations, where the forecast skill dissolves



**Figure 8.** RMSE evolution of 48-hour forecasts for the respective model variables of  $LR$  (black) and  $LR_{ANN}$  for the different weightings (blues), averaged over 50 initial conditions and in the case of  $LR_{ANN}$  25 ANNs.

185 after just a few hours. A snapshot of the state for the chaotic case is presented in Figure 12. Here, the correlations between the 3  
 variables is nicely visible. Between grid points 100 and 125, the fluid height  $h$  of  $LR$  is exceeding both the convective initiation  
 and rain threshold, in contrast to the other simulations. As a result,  $LR$  has produced spurious rain mass at this location and the  
 wind is underestimated. Directly right of this spurious convective event in  $LR$ , the roles are exchanged: The fluid height of  $LR$   
 does not reach the thresholds, and therefore lacks rain and overestimates the wind speed. The same correlations are discernible  
 190 between grid points 50 and 75, where the ANN with  $w_{mass} = 0$  slightly overestimates the fluid height.

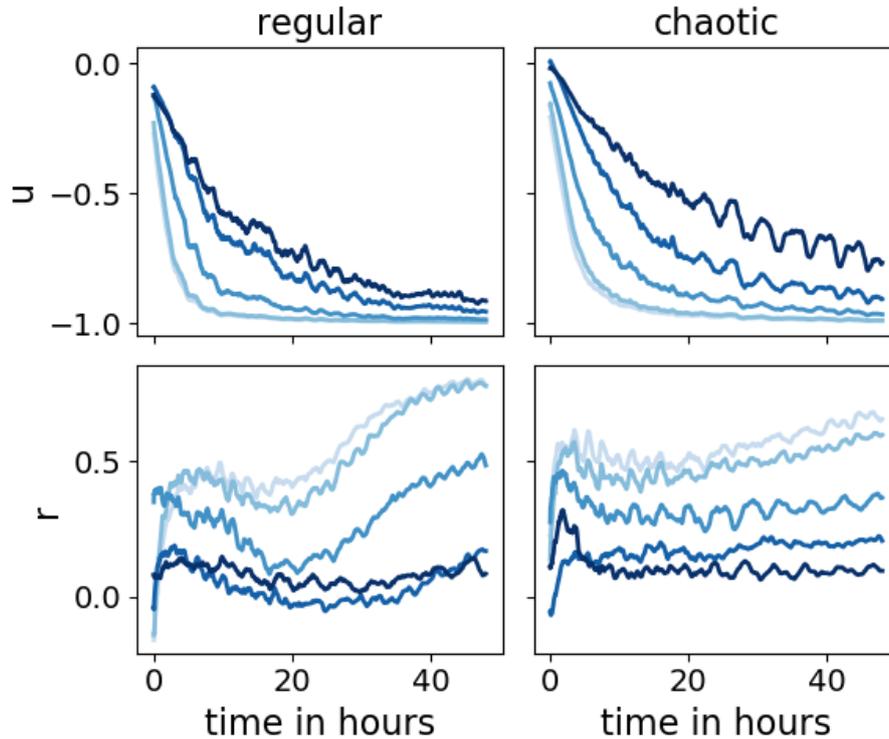


**Figure 9.** As Figure 8, but for the absolute error of the spatial mean.

#### 4 Conclusions

In this paper we evaluated the feasibility of using an ANN to correct for model error in the gray zone, where important features occur on scales comparable to the model resolution. The model that was used in our idealized setup mimics key aspects of convection such as conditional instability triggered by orography and resulting convective events including rain. As such, this model is representative for fully complex convective scale numerical weather prediction models and in particular the corresponding errors due to unresolved scales in the gray zone. We considered two cases, each with a different realization of the orography, leading to two fairly different regimes. One where the convective events are large and long-lived, and one where the

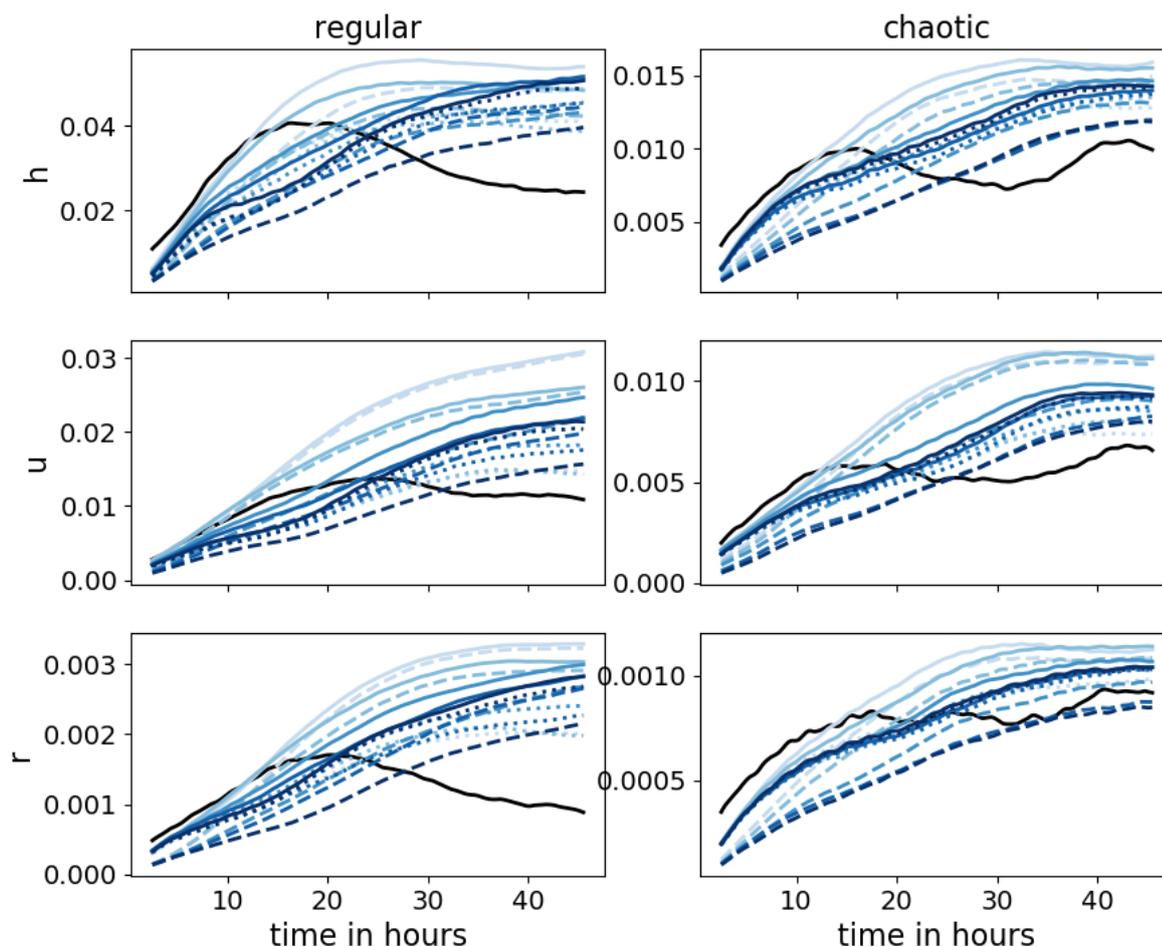
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**Figure 10.** Correlation of the different weighting (blues) between the bias of  $h$  and the bias of  $u$  (top row) and  $r$  (bottom row) for the regular (left panel) and the chaotic (right panel) case. See Figure 8 for the legend.

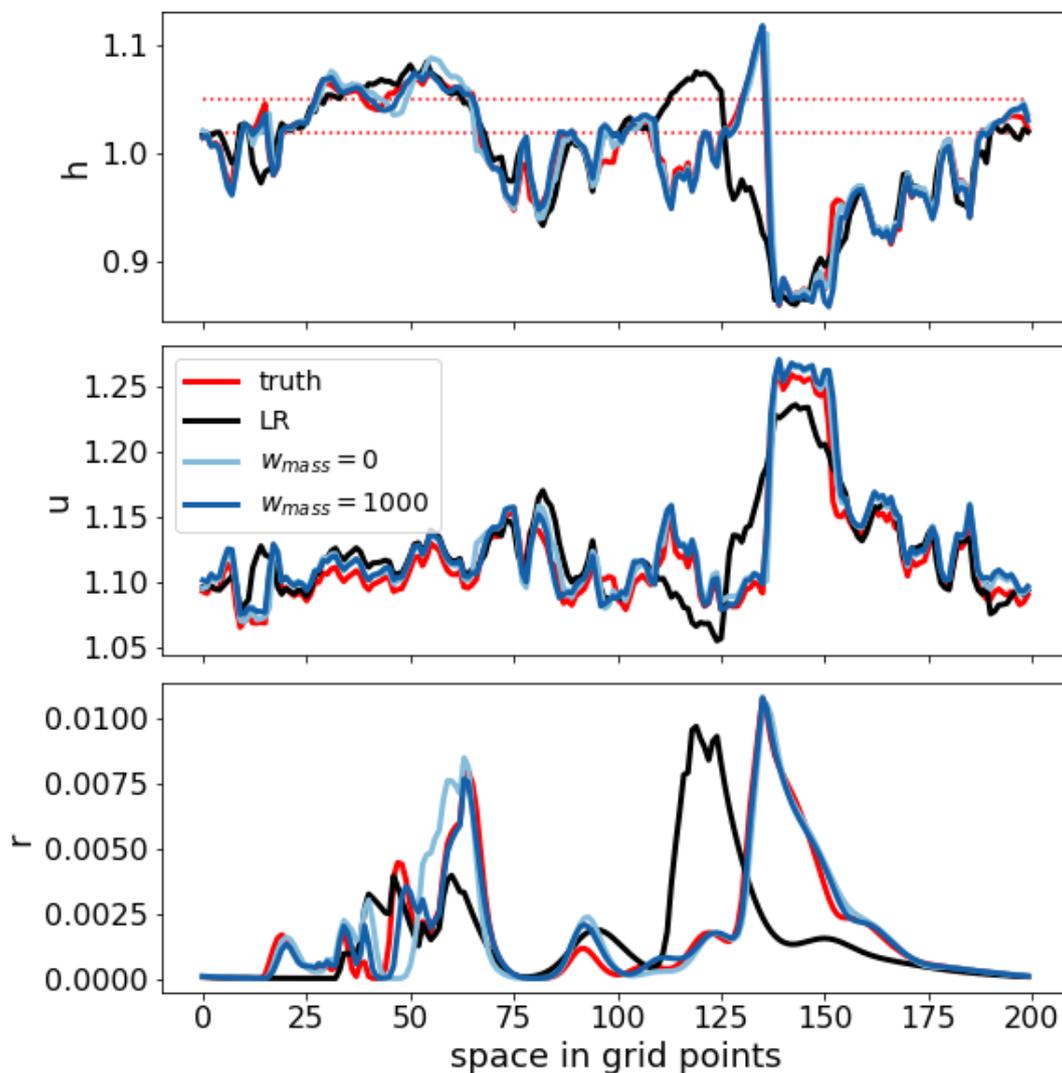
convective events are small and short-lived. We refer to the former case as regular and the latter case as chaotic. We showed that the ANNs are capable of accurately sharpening gradients where necessary in both cases to prevent the flattening of convective events that is caused by the low resolution model's inability to resolve fine scales. For the regular case, the RMSE is still significantly lower than the low resolution simulation ( $LR$ ) after 48 hours. For the chaotic case, the RMSE surpasses  $LR$  after about 30 hours. Since the ANNs are not perfect, their errors accumulate over time, deteriorating the forecast skill. In particular, the accumulated mass error causes biases which are not present in  $LR$ , because the model conserves mass exactly. We therefore investigated the effects of adding a term to the loss function of the ANN's training process to penalize mass conservation violation. We found that reducing the mass error, reduces the biases in the wind and rain field, yielding better forecasts up to 10 hours for the chaotic and 30 hours for regular case in terms of RMSE. Such positive effect of mass conservation was also found in for example Zeng et al. (2017); Ruckstuhl and Janjić (2018); Ruckstuhl et al. (2021). Furthermore, we showed that including the penalty term in the loss function reduces the sensitivity of the model forecasts to the training process of the ANN.

While these results are encouraging, there are some issues to consider when applying this method to operational configurations. On a technical level, the generation of the training data and the training of the ANN can be costly and time consuming



**Figure 11.** Evolution of the standard deviation for the different weightings (blues) of the RMSE over both ANNs and initial conditions (solid), over ANNs only and averaged over initial conditions (dashed), and over initial conditions only and averaged over ANNs (dotted), for the regular (left panel) and the chaotic (right panel) case. See Figure 8 for the legend.

215 due to the requirement of sufficient HR data and the cumbersome exercise of tuning the ANN. The latter is a known problem that can be minimized through clever iteration of tested ANN settings, but cannot be fully avoided. Depending on the costs of generating HR data, it could be considered to use observations instead, as done by Brajard et al. (2021). They use data assimilation to generate HR data from available sparse and noisy observations. Aside from saving computational costs by replacing HR simulations with data assimilation, it might offer an advantage on a different issue as well: the effect of other model error. In contrast to what was assumed in this paper, in reality not all model error stems from unresolved scales. By using observations



**Figure 12.** Snapshot of the state variables for the chaotic case of a 5-hour forecast for the truth (red),  $LR$  (black), and  $LR_{ANN}$  corresponding to weightings  $w_{mass} = 0$  (light blue) and  $w_{mass} = 1000$  (dark blue).

of the true state of the atmosphere, all model error is accounted for by the trained ANN. On the other hand, the training data contains the errors inherited from data assimilation. It is not clear which error source is more important and therefore both approaches are worthwhile investigating. Not only to improve model forecasts, but also to gain more insight in the model error itself and its comparison to errors stemming from data assimilation.

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*Code availability.* The provided source code (<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4740252>, Kriegmair et al., 2020) includes the necessary scripts to produce the data.

*Author contributions.* RK produced the source code. RK and YR ran experiments and visualized results. SR provided expertise on neural networks. GC provided expertise on convective scale dynamics. All authors contributed to the scientific design of the study, the analysis of  
225 the numerical results and the writing of the manuscript.

*Competing interests.* The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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