

SOME REPTILES OF CORFU

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INTRODUCTION

Corfu, second largest and best known of the Greek islands, lies off the extreme North West coast of Greece, being in fact much closer to Albania. It is approximately forty miles long by twenty miles wide, at the widest point.

This geographical position gives Corfu the typical long, hot and dry Mediterranean summer, with a surprisingly cold and rainy winter. The winter rainfall (and northerly position) makes Corfu perhaps the most lush and green Greek island. Even in midsummer the olive groves and dark green Cypress trees certainly appear so, in stark contrast to the barren hills of Albania, only a few kilometres away.

Along with thousands of other English tourists, I visited Corfu in early August, long captivated by Gerald Durrell's description in his book "My Family and other Animals". Mid summer is, of course, not the ideal time to see much Mediterranean herpetofauna as many species aestivate during the hotter months, whilst others become nocturnal. Indeed the most immediate feature was the lack of small lizards.

I intend to describe the herpetofauna seen in four rather different areas of the island visited during my holiday.

ROCKY HILLSIDES AND OLIVE GROVES

As a generalisation, Corfu is more rocky and mountainous in the north, with flatter, more agricultural land in the south.

The most striking features of the northern area are the olive groves with dry-stone terracing. Every possible site on the steep hillsides is exploited and the terracing must represent thousands of man-years of work. These terraces must do wonders to prevent soil erosion, partly explaining the green appearance of the island, and also afford a multitude of cover for reptiles.

The first creature seen was a Montpellier snake (*Malpolon monspessulanus*) crossing the road in the heat of the day. It appeared to be searching for prey along cracks in the rock face at the roadside, and rapidly dashed into a pile of underbrush when approached closely, although it held its ground initially. According to some locals I spoke to, snakes were common in this area and snake bite was a "big problem". Presumably the snake in question was the Horned Viper (*Vipera ammodytes*).

Another local told me that this particular area was sprayed with insecticide by air in order to keep down the number of mosquitoes. This could possibly explain the lack of small lizards here, although the lack was apparent all over the island. The only lizards I saw here were a juvenile lacertid basking on a rock (probably *Podarcis taurica*), and a gecko, *Hemidactylus tauricus*, seen on a mossy wall at twilight. "Stone turning" was extremely unprofitable here, as it was on most of the island. This was because I found the ground as dry under rocks as out in the direct sun, and so I think most reptiles would seek the deeper refuge of the dry stone walls. The sloughed skin of a snake (whip snake?) was found whilst searching one such wall.

FARMLAND NEAR LAGOON

There is a lagoon situated on the south west coast of Corfu, and the land around it is much flatter than that of the previously described area. The area was farmed, though this seemed a fairly casual activity — while wandering through a grassy meadow I suddenly realised that I was in the middle of a patch of water-melons! The fields were interspersed with grassy areas, heathland with heather growing, as well as being dotted with the ubiquitous olive trees.

My first find was a spring-fed pool, shady and beautifully cool. Swimming round the perimeter of the almost circular pool was a small eel. The crystal clear water fed a small stream but at this time of year it was dry, the water sinking into the ground after only a few feet. Basking on the bank was a small Stripe-Necked Terrapin (*Mauremys caspica*). The habitat of this terrapin must have been an area measuring approximately two by three feet at this time of year! Although small, the terrapin seemed healthy, and was not suffering from the algal infection of the carapace described later.

I next saw a large green lizard basking in the full heat of the afternoon sun at the side of a field. On being disturbed, it flashed away into the heather. However, as I have also noticed in France, these creatures are great "frauds". They only move at this tremendous pace for a few yards, and then lie still, relying on camouflage. By keeping fairly still and carefully scanning the undergrowth I could see the lizard quite clearly. It was apparently *Lacerta viridis* although Corfu is one of the few Greek Islands where *L. trilineata*, the Balkan Green Lizard occurs with *L. viridis*. Incidentally the two species are very similar in appearance and have been known to interbreed.

The third reptile found in this particular habitat was Hermann's Tortoise (*Testudo hermanni*). After searching for about two hours out in the blistering sun I came across two individuals which were very sensibly buried in a shady leaf-filled ditch, under the roots of a fig tree. This species is commonly imported into the United Kingdom and lacks the thigh-spurs of *T. graeca*. The larger of the two, with a carapace length of about 20cm appeared healthy, but the smaller one (15 cm) had a very battered shell, with some large chips missing. However, the edges were worn smooth and the creature seemed none the worse for its disfigurement.

Also possibly of interest, I found a large black and brown striped centipede under a rock. Its body was almost as wide as my finger.

RIVERBANKS AND GARDENS

This area was on the banks of a river near the island capital, Kerkira (Corfu Town). It consisted of the vegetation actually growing along the banks of the river, and the surrounding areas or gardens or allotments, with some woodland.

It was here that I actually saw some small lizards. They were Dalmation Algyroides (*Algyroides nigropunctatus*). The first was seen on the wall of a tumbledown church. This was at about 5 pm, as the sun was beginning to lose its heat. However, the lizard still kept to the shade. This lizard is not a great lover of sun, and appears to behave more like a skink than a lacertid. The first one seen was an adult in breeding colours and was quite a striking animal with bright pillar-box red flanks. On the return journey, almost at twilight, the reeds and piles of cut vegetation along the river bank were filled with the rustles of these lizards. One was also seen on the trunk of a pine tree, moving round to keep out of sight in the manner of a squirrel.

Coming to a less steep and more open part of the river bank I disturbed a snake which appeared to shoot away across the tops of the low bushes like an arrow, almost without seeming to flex its body. On keeping still for a few minutes, I realised that this snake — like the green lizard — was a "fraud", in fact it had only moved a few yards and then remained immobile. It was a Dahl's Whip Snake (*Coluber najadum*), and I was surprised to find it in such a moist riverine environment, being under the impression that the favoured habitat of most whip snakes is dry, rocky areas.

This species is unmistakable in appearance, having diamond-shaped black markings with olive green background for only the anterior quarter of the body, the rest of the animal being a dull mid-brown. When seen alone, the effect is striking but seen in its natural habitat, needless to say, the camouflage is almost perfect.

On wandering away from the river slightly, among the farmlands, allotments and gardens, I asked several people I met if there were any tortoises in the area, by the simple expedient of knowing the Greek word for "tortoise" and sign language. The most common response was an enquiry as to whether or not I intended to eat the reptiles! Eventually, however, a family in their garden began searching in response to my question and handed me a tiny, beautifully marked *Testudo hermanni* with a carapace length of about 5 cm. I estimate it must have been that year's hatchling.

Although quite late in the evening, the tortoise was found under a pile of garden cuttings. This, combined with my earlier observation on the species, has led me to believe that *Testudo hermanni* may be almost nocturnal at this time of year in Corfu, and this was borne out later in the holiday when a friend told me she saw a tortoise moving along the edge of a road well after dark. This seems somewhat different to the behaviour of the Southern Greek Marginated Tortoise (*Testudo marginata*) which seems to need very bright light intensities for foraging.

SWAMP

Inevitably, the most "profitable" area, both in species and individual numbers, was found on the penultimate day of the holiday. It consisted of a wide, flat valley between two low hills, on the North East coast of the island. Presumably a river flowed in the wetter seasons, but at this time of year the area consisted of several shallow lakes and soft, evil-smelling mud, heavily overgrown with reeds.

The most numerous reptile here was the European Pond Terrapin, (*Emys orbicularis*). There were some very large specimens basking on tussocks out in the middle of the lake. In the relatively small area of these lakes I estimate there were several hundred individuals. This concentration was probably because of the low water levels. The water, which felt almost at blood-heat, was teeming with fish fry, and the terrapins could be seen feeding voraciously. By sitting quietly on an old boat half submerged in the mud, I was able to watch the feeding technique. The terrapins would work their way into the shore, driving the fry before them, and would then snap them up, their heads striking out in all directions. Indeed, they were so engrossed in feeding that it was a simple matter to pick up any that wandered near enough to the boat. The fish also attracted a pair of kingfishers, and many species of dragonfly could be seen, one having a striking bright red abdomen.

Rather less common than *Emys* was the Stripe-Necked Terrapin, *Mauremys caspica*. All the specimens found were considerably smaller (about half the size) of the average *Emys*. The first one found was lying with head and legs submerged in the mud, possibly aestivating, although others were seen feeding in the manner of *Emys*. All *Mauremys* examined had algal growths on the carapace as described by Arnold and Burton. This often resulted in the top layer of shell, together with the layer of algae rubbing off when the terrapins were handled. Indeed, a few *Emys* were seen with a similar condition, one individual having algae growing from the top of the head, giving the appearance of hair. Also much to my wife's disgust, the specimen of *Mauremys* which I asked her to hold for photography had a small leech attached to its underside!

The other inhabitants of the swamp were Grass Snakes (*Natrix natrix*) and its prey the Marsh Frog (*Rana ridibunda*). The Greek form of the grass snake is quite unlike the subspecies found in Western Europe, having bright yellow stripes running longitudinally down its body. The first impression was that they were very similar to the North American Garter Snakes, although on closer examination the head is that of a typical grass snake. Most of the snakes were seen swimming. Some quite large specimens were seen, one estimated at almost five feet in length.

Finally, the only amphibian seen on Corfu was *Rana ridibunda*, which could be seen leaping to escape from the grass snakes as they approached.

I would like to point out that whilst exploring this swamp the ground was very soft, and I would advise anyone in a similar area to proceed with care. Several times I found myself going from ankle-deep to knee-deep mud within a few paces of each other.

All specimens were released in the field after examination and photography.

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