

## A SHORT NOTE ON THE HERPETOFAUNA OF GOZO

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### INTRODUCTION

The only direct reference to Gozo that we have been able to find in herpetological literature is that pertaining to *Podarcis filfolensis*. It would seem that this little neighbour of Malta is under-recorded, and we therefore decided to visit it this summer. We stayed in an old farm house in the west of the isle outside St. Lawrenz for the three weeks from 29 June to 20 July 1988, and, because of the small size of the place, were able to explore several individual habitats on foot during the cooler parts of the day.

### GEOGRAPHY

Gozo, separated from the north-west coast of Malta by five miles of sea, is roughly leaf shaped; nine miles long and five miles broad. Except for a few sandy beaches in the north, the coast is rocky and precipitous. The chief characteristics of the countryside are the truncated conical hills formed by layers of different types of limestone. The population of 30,000, who for the most part inhabit relatively large but well confined villages, cultivate the countryside by meticulously terracing these uplands for growing tomatoes, melons and a few vines.

The climate is southern Mediterranean, and during the time that we were there was extremely hot with temperatures frequently climbing to over 40 degrees C.

### PRINCIPAL SITES

1. House and gardens in and around the village of St. Lawrenz.
2. Field edges and roadsides between St. Lawrenz and Victoria, Xlendi, Dwejra Bay and Hekka Point.
3. Limestone hills and plateaux including Ghasri Hill and the plateau of Ghajn Abdul, with its Neolithic cave dwellings.

### SPECIES LIST

#### GEKKONIDAE

##### *Hemidactylus turcicus*

Common inside and outside of most of the older limestone houses. There were nine 'residents' of our house, including three half grown pinky-white translucent specimens about 7cm long which prowled around the inside of the mosquito mesh on the kitchen window. On the outside walls one very large gecko (which we first thought was a *Tarentola mauritanica* because it was well over 13cm long) stalked moths and crane flies that were attracted to the light on the corner of the house. A smaller animal who often invaded the vicinity was frequently robbed of its catch.

#### LACERTIDAE

##### *Podarcis filfolensis*

Very abundant everywhere in all habitats. Several would come into the house and stalk flies and small crustaceans on the floor. These lizards and those in the immediate vicinity resembled the illustration in Arnold & Burton "A Field Guide to the Reptiles and Amphibians of Britain and Europe". However up on the Ghajn Abdul plateau we found several large males which were black in colour speckled with large round lime-green spots. We wondered whether they were similar to those described in Arnold inhabiting Filfol Rock off the Maltese mainland.

#### SCINCIDAE

##### *Chalcides ocellatus*

Five sightings on or under stones on road sides and field edges. One particularly good sighting



was rudely interrupted by the sudden appearance of a very vigorous full-grown *Coluber viridiflavus*. In colour and size they resembled Sicilian animals.

#### COLUBRIDAE

##### *Coluber viridiflavus*

Twenty-three sightings of this most abundant snake, including three just outside the kitchen door. They were of the black race and ranged from the house to high up the hillsides on rocky ground denuded of vegetation by the heat of the sun. Half-grown specimens were a dark bronze colour. The largest snake we saw exceeded 140cm in length. Skin castings were to be found everywhere, the nearest to the house being only 45cm from the kitchen door.

#### DISCUSSION

Although Gozo is highly cultivated and supports a relatively large population, the four reptile species that we had identified were very plentiful. Like many small islands Gozo demonstrated only one representative species of each family, lack of variety being compensated for by abundance. We searched intently for the other three snakes found on the Maltese mainland: *Telescopus fallax*, the rare *Coluber algirus* and the very scarce *Elaphe situla*, but to no avail. The large number of *Coluber viridiflavus* would probably have exterminated them, even if they had ever been present in Gozo.

We also looked for amphibians: *Discoglossus pictus* and the endangered *Bufo viridis*, both recorded in Malta. However the almost complete lack of water and the very high temperatures that occurred at that time of the year would have caused them to aestivate, even if they had been present.

#### REFERENCES

- Arnold, E.N., Burton, J.A. & Ovendon, D.W. (1978). *A field guide to the reptiles and amphibians of Britain and Europe*. London: Collins. 272 pages.
- Matz, G., Weber, D. (1983). *Guide des amphibiens et reptiles d'Europe*. Neuchâtel - Paris: Delachaux & Niestlé. 292 pages.