

A NOTE ON THE HERPETOFAUNA OF SOUTH-EAST CYPRUS

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INTRODUCTION

The curiosity of my family and myself had been aroused by articles in the *BHS Bulletin* about the herpetofauna of Cyprus (Demetropoulos & Lambert, 1986; Lambert 1987, 1988,) and we were pleased therefore to be able to make a visit there from 2 to 15 April 1989. Our enthusiasm dampened however, as the only available accommodation was outside the now notorious resort of Ayia Napa. Described by the guide books as a quaint fishing village with an ancient monastery, it has in fact been rapidly developed into a medium-sized resort catering mainly for northern Europeans. The original fishermen's houses have all long disappeared and the Venetian monastery remains as a peaceful anachronism amidst the paraphernalia of tourism that abounds in every direction. Ayia Napa is situated on the southern coast of Cape Greco which forms the south easternmost corner of Cyprus. Since the partition of the island in 1974, thousands of people from Turkish-held Famagusta 6 miles (9.6 Km.) to the north have crossed the frontier and settled in the once remote region of sandy beaches, dunes and undulating agricultural country. Not only the village of Ayia Napa, but also coves such as "Fig Tree Bay" on the east coast, formerly popular only with H.M. Forces in Cyprus, are being urbanised very fast. Despite the degradation of the coastal environment however, the herpetofauna in the area is still fairly rich, some species being much more common in the country immediately adjacent to the new developments than further a-field. Whether this is because the broken terrain and abundance of building materials create a better environment, or whether this is merely a temporary phenomenon created by transient reptiles fleeing the chaos is a moot point. A tract of country near the frontier is fortunately virtually unspoilt, but herpetological investigation is somewhat restricted by the vigilance of zealous guards. Börner (1974) has also made some observations on the lizards in the area, at Varosha, a suburb about a kilometre south of Famagusta, in December/January 1973/74. The weather was sunny with mid-day air temperatures about 21°. We explored the area by foot and bicycle, principal sites (Fig. 1) being:-

1. Shoreline between Ayia Napa and Nissi Beach.
2. Beach and hinterland running east from Ayia Napa.
3. Field edges and roadside between coast and Sotira Forest.
4. Degraded mimosa scrub and waste ground north of coast road at Nissi Beach.
5. Coast road between Protaras and the frontier south of Varosha.

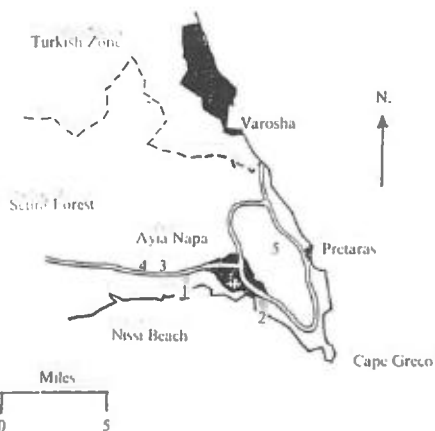


Fig 1. Sketch map of South-East Cyprus, showing principal sites (see text).

Species were identified using the fieldguide of Arnold, Burton & Oviden (1978).

SPECIES LIST

GEKKONIDAE

Cyrtodactylus kotschy

A small species found during the day under large stones at the top of the beach; at night it was seen by lamplight in concrete conduits at the edge of the main road west of Ayia Napa. An individual was observed late on the afternoon of 3 April basking in the company of *Ablepharus kitaibelii* on a tree trunk in the gardens of Ayia Napa monastery, apparently oblivious to the milling crowds of holiday makers.

AGAMIDAE

Agama stellio

Very abundant, particularly in areas at the edge of Ayia Napa where it could be seen basking on house walls, road edges, rubbish dumps, piles of broken stones and generally disturbed ground. Families would congregate on rock piles behind the beach. It was much less densely distributed in open countryside and on the hillside behind the village. At sunrise a family of six would warm up on the eastern wall of our apartment, sometimes making much noise running in and out of air vents, and so providing us with a 'natural alarm clock'! At sunset they retired beneath flat stones near their basking sites and could easily be caught, the warmth of one's palm quickly arousing them so that they vigorously scratched ones fingers in their eagerness to escape. The head to tail length of mature males was at least 30cm and their well developed limbs were large and muscular. During the day, the most dominant male (distinguished by the strength of orange pigment in the rhomboidal pattern down his back), would posture on the highest point of his territory, bobbing his head rapidly up and down before finally leaping to safety.

CHAMAELEONIDAE

Chamaeleo chamaeleon

One seen 7 April in the garden of a hotel on the shore east of Ayia Napa. With independently rotating eye-balls and strange rigid posture, it was "mincing" its way through a bed of succulents. Whether it occurred in the garden naturally or had been released, was difficult to determine. A large area of mimosa scrub adjacent to the hotel could have been its natural habitat.

LACERTIDAE

Acanthodactylus schreiberi

This Levantine spiny-foot lizard is larger (up to 10 cm snout to vent), than *A. erythrurus*, the species found in the Iberian Peninsula. The young are similar in colour to the European species, but the adults are a uniform sandy hue and almost devoid of markings. The lizards are frequently observed on the less disturbed dunes and sandy field edges, but seem to be retreating before the well maintained gardens of beach hotels that are being built everywhere. Several animals were observed flattened on paths used by moped riders.

Ophisops elegans

This is an attractively coloured and graceful little lizard and could be found everywhere where there was rough ground with some vegetation. The males have two narrow turquoise stripes running down the length of each side. We saw none with red tails. The 'Snake-eye' could be easily seen in basking individuals. This species seems to be holding its own fairly well against the onslaught of urbanisation.

SCINCIDAE

Ablepharus kitaibelii

This little skink which, like the last species, has no obvious eye-lids, could be observed basking early in the morning and in the evening. During the warmer part of the day, it could be found under old pieces of wood and flat stones in a number of locations near the shore. It also frequented field edges and waste ground in the suburbs of the town. It was generally very timid and fast moving, several attempts made to capture one were all unsuccessful. The species appears to be establishing itself in the newly created succulent gardens that surround hotels, restaurants and stalls associated with coastal developments.

TYPHLOPIDAE

Typhlops vermicularis

One specimen about 20 cm. long found under a stone about 19.15 hours on 14 April on the edge of the beach west of Ayia Napa. After being taken home and photographed, it was released the following morning. Superficially very worm like in appearance, its true reptilian qualities were revealed in the poise of its head as it began to glide around the converted coffee pot in which it was placed.

COLUBRIDAE

Malpolon monspessulanus

Two Montpellier snakes were found. One badly mutilated east of Nissi Beach on the afternoon of 5 April; the other an immature speckled specimen about a metre long which had recently been killed by what looked like a bite from a small mammal on its neck, south of the frontier at Varosha about 1600 hours on 9 April.

Coluber gemonensis

One 80 cm long snake was seen rapidly crossing the coast road just north of Protaras Bay about 16.20 hours on 13 April. It was probably this species because it lacked the 'frog-face' look of *Malpolon monspessulanus*, but equally probably it could have been *Coluber cypriensis*, a new species described by Schatti (1985) which at the time we were unable to identify.

BUFONIDAE

Bufo viridis

One adult found on two occasions (3 April and 12 April) under the same abandoned flooring tile in a rubbish dump between the coast road and Sortira Forest. The habitat was made up of somewhat degraded scrub with a small, newly built housing estate in the vicinity.

HYLIDAE

Hyla arborea

These tree-frogs congregate in great numbers at night in high walled water cisterns and were calling loudly. On returning the next day (4 April) to one such cistern, we were surprised to find only one yellow-coloured frog still there. Some of the cisterns that these little amphibians visited had walls over 2.4 metres high.

RANIDAE

Rana ridibunda

Abundant in low lying water cisterns near farms, and in streams on the edges of villages. Some specimens were very large (up to 17 cm.), and were drab brown in colour; a minority were uniformly light-green dorsally.

DISCUSSION

The sandy littoral of South East Cyprus provides a suitable environment for several interesting species of reptiles and amphibians. At present the lizard population has not yet been affected by the urbanisation of Ayia Napa and other lesser resorts in the area, though *Acanthodactylus schreiberi* seems to be retreating. Snakes, however, would appear to be rare. Fourteen days of careful surveillance only revealed two live specimens; a *Typhlops* on the beach and a Colubrid in relatively undisturbed countryside. Whilst the life-style of the subterranean Worm Snake may afford the species some protection from the development that is taking place, the Colubrid was seen at some distance from the environs of the town. We had expected to encounter many more whip snakes, for notwithstanding Cyprus's insularity, one makes many more sightings of 9 different snake species in other Mediterranean countries in spring. Even as far north as the Dordogne in France, *Coluber viridiflavus* can frequently be seen in a variety of habitats. In terms of conservation and other environmental considerations Ayia Napa would appear to have grown too big, the change of land use concomitant with development even causing the local inhabitants to depart from the area. If the herpetofauna in the south-east of Cyprus are to be preserved for posterity, then the littoral development should be controlled now.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr M.R.K. Lambert for his valuable comments for the preparation of the manuscript.

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