
ARTICLES

HERPETOLOGICAL NOTES ON THE ISLANDS OF LIPSI AND AGATHONISI, DODECANESE, GREECE

RICHARD CLARK

Vollenetoppen 3, 4842 Arendal, Norway

THE islands of Lipsi and Agathonisi were visited in the period June 15th to July 12th 1998. I can find little published herpetological literature on the former island and none at all about the latter. Chondropoulos (1989) lists *Coluber nummifer* and *Vipera xanthina* from Lipsi. The same author in his 1986 checklist of the Greek lizards makes no mention of any species from this island.

LOCALITY DESCRIPTIONS

Lipsi lies 12 km east of Patmos and 11 km north of Leros and has an area of 16 km². The island is hilly with a maximum altitude of 277 m. There is limited cultivation, mostly fields of barley and wheat with some olive groves and private vineyards. The landscape is dry and stony with typical low Mediterranean scrub. Although Lipsi receives plenty of visitors in high season, tourist development is low-key with only limited environmental disturbance in the vicinity of the port, the island's only village.

Agathonisi is the most northerly of the Dodecanese situated about 15 km north east of Lipsi. It is an example of 'unspoilt Greece' with no tourist development, although the harbour is a good anchorage and consequently utilised by yachts in the summer. However the island has now become attractive as a day trip destination from Samos. A concrete road connects the harbour with Megalo Chorio, the island capital, and continues further to the abandoned village of Katholika. There is also a road from the port to Mikro Chorio, a distance of about 500 m. Otherwise there are stony paths and goat tracks. There is little cultivation and the islanders earn a living from

livestock husbandry, mostly goats, and fishing. Near Katholika there are two fish-rearing complexes.

LIPSI

During my stay on this island I met Paul Perry, an Australian amateur herpetologist, who had also visited Lipsi. Without any prompting he described Lipsi as 'an island without lizards'. This was the remarkable impression I got. Despite long walks and much hard searching I failed to find any lizards at all. The ubiquitous Dodecanese species, the Starred Agama *Agama stellio*, and the Snake-eyed Lizard, *Ophisops elegans*, appeared absent. It would be unwise to exclude these species from the herpetofauna but if they occur they must be rare or very localised. The Green Toad, *Bufo viridis*, was found around Lipsi village, one adult and several juveniles, all as road kills. A single newly metamorphosed juvenile was seen alive on the margin of an artificial rain catchment system.

On my first morning at 07:30 I found a 72 cm-long *Vipera xanthina* lying dead on a stone wall by a path, Fig. 1. The snake was still showing signs of movement and could not have been killed more than a short time before. A villager who was passing told me that this species is common, but despite this assertion I failed to find any more. Andren & Nilssen (1986), in their monograph on Middle Eastern mountain vipers, refer to one specimen from Lipsi amongst the material they examined.

As stated in the introduction, *C. nummifer* is recorded from this island, but I found no evidence of this species.



Vipera xanthina from Lipsi, Dodecanese.
Photograph by author.

AGATHONISI

A good deal of the island was investigated on foot, distances being small. More concentrated searching was done in the vicinity of the port and the villages of Megalo- and Mikro Chorio. *A. stellio* was found everywhere, mainly on stone walls and rock piles and occasionally on open ground. Though less common, *O. elegans* was also evident in some numbers though it tended to be colonial and occasionally solitary. The Turkish Gecko, *Hemidactylus turcicus*, was found after dark. Two specimens were seen on a stone wall in a dry gully near the harbour and also on stone blocks under streetlights on the steep road up to Megalo Chorio. The owner of the pension where we stayed told me that this species used to be found on the walls there 'but not now'.

The locals assured me that there are no poisonous snakes on Agathonisi. The only snake species I found was *C. jugularis caspius*. A small individual was caught on open hillside in the vicinity of Katholika - total length 66 cm, tail 11 cm. A larger example was seen crossing the road above the harbour: estimated at around 130 cm. In the same area a tourist saw another and Paul Perry found a cast skin nearby. In the gully behind the harbour one was seen by a local. Near Mikro Chorio an unidentified snake was briefly glimpsed as it slipped into a stone wall. People told me that *Coluber j. caspius* was the only snake on the island. It was not feared and is recognised as beneficial because of its rodent-feeding habits.

The local name was given as Pondikalos or Pondikali. 'Pondikos' is the Greek for mouse. I was also told that this species is difficult to find, although on the basis of the number of specimens observed during my stay, either personally or by others, and taken into consideration the season it seems that this snake is probably common.

SUMMARY

The above report indicates an impoverished herpetofauna on both islands. However, Summer is not the best season for investigations and there are probably more species awaiting documentation. It is worth noting that the herpetofauna of both Patmos and Leros is richer. There are many small satellite islands in the neighbourhood of Lipsi and Agathonisi and these should make a rewarding study. A few days were also spent on Samos at the end of the trip but little was found. Reptiles and amphibians identified were *Rana ridibunda*, *Lacerta trilineata*, *Agama stellio*, *Ophisaurus apodus* and *Coluber jugularis caspius*.

REFERENCES

- Chondropoulos, B.P. (1986). A checklist of the Greek reptiles. I. The lizards. *Amphibia-Reptilia* 7, 217-235.
- Chondropoulos, B.P. (1989). A checklist of the Greek reptiles. II. The snakes. *Herpetozoa* 2 (1/2), 3-36
- Nilson, G. & Andrén, C. (1986). The Mountain Vipers of the Middle East - *The Vipera xanthina* Complex (Reptilia, Viperidae). Bonner Zoologische Monographien, Nr.20.