



## **A SHORT NOTE ON THE HERPETOFAUNA OF THE PALINURO PENINSULA, CLIENTO, SOUTHERN CAMPANIA, ITALY**

FRANK D. BOWLES

*37 Albany Terrace, Dundee DD3 6HS, U.K.*

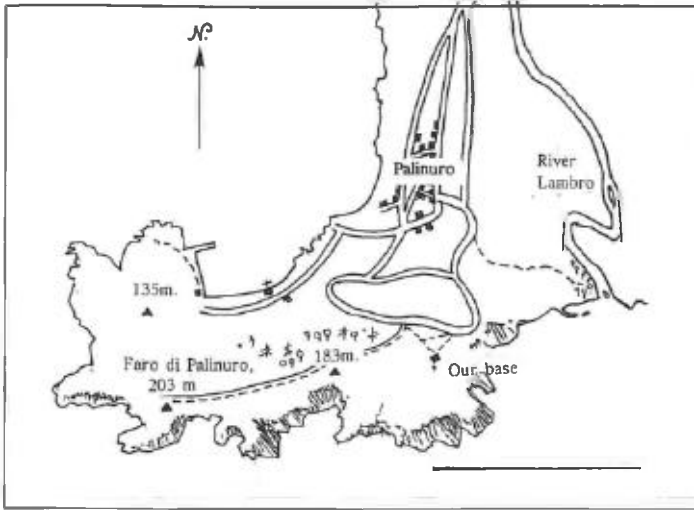
**T**HE Palinuro peninsula was visited between 11 and 25 May, 2001. As Campania had been visited by myself and my family before, it was assumed that there would be nothing particular of individual interest. However, despite the fact there were no species observed that had not been seen previously, there were unusual characteristics of the local herpetofauna that were worthy of note.

### **LOCALITY DESCRIPTION**

The Palinuro peninsula is just over two kilometres long and has an average width of about one kilometre. It juts westwards into the Tyrennian Sea, out of the mountainous, southwest-facing coast of the Cilento National Park, of which it is also a part, separated from it by the southern reaches of the River Lambro which enters the sea on its south coast. The north coast swings round in a gentle sandy bay, around which the little resort and fishing town of Palinuro sits. The south coast

rises from the valley of the Lambro to form limestone cliffs of about 170 metres, the highest point being above the southwest extremity, where the lighthouse called Faro di Palinuro stands at 203 m. The north-facing slope is in great part covered by mixed woodland, the sun-facing south is clad in typical Mediterranean scrub, and there is some intense cultivation along some of the banks of the Lambro.

During our visit the weather was very variable with several overcast days and a little rain. Midday temperatures averaged between 21 and 25° C. We had accommodation above the southern cliffs in one of several chalet-type buildings belonging to a hotel. These had gardens around them whose hedges and dry-stone walls provided habitat for four of the six reptile species observed on the peninsula. The banks of the Lambro demonstrated one of the other two reptile species and three amphibians. The remaining reptile was found on rough-cast house walls.



Palinuro Peninsula, Cliento. Scale bar = 1 km.

## SPECIES LIST

### AMPHIBIA

#### Bufonidae

*Bufo bufo*, Common Toad. Several tadpoles of this toad observed at many locations along the banks of the Lambro. Four newly metamorphosed animals seen struggling through vegetation on 22 May.

*Bufo viridis*, Green Toad. A large number of small, recently hatched toad tadpoles, very similar to those of *Bufo calamita*, seen crowding into shallow waters at the mouth of the Lambro. As the Natterjack is not found in Italy, we assumed they were the larvae of the Green Toad.

#### Ranidae

*Rana lessonae/Rana esculenta*, Pool and Edible Frogs. Several green frogs were seen. Some observed in an irrigation ditch bordering allotments were bright green in colour. Others inhabiting the mouth of the Lambro were mostly brown with green vertebral stripes. No specimens were caught and it was therefore impossible to identify the animals with any certainty.

### REPTILIA

#### Gekkonidae

*Tarentola mauritanica*, Moorish Gecko. This

fairly common lizard was seen on dry stone walls in a variety of locations ranging from stone dykes and out-houses high up on the peninsula to heaps of stones at the top of the sandy beach lying to the west of the River Lambro. They were often observed during the day in the shade of the eaves or any other type of shadow. The greatest number seen together were three on the gable end of a derelict outhouse. They were much more timid than *Podarcis sicula*, the ubiquitous Italian Wall Lizard, though one morning one was seen chasing off a male Wall Lizard who had invaded his territory. He rushed forward with great speed nearly causing the latter to fall off the wall with fright.

*Hemidactylus turcicus*, The Turkish Gecko. Only two of these slender, narrow-headed animals seen, the first, a juvenile, on 18 May, the second, an adult, on 23 May. Both were seen after ten o'clock at night, hunting insects on rough-cast walls illuminated by street lights.

#### Lacertidae

*Podarcis sicula*, the Italian Wall Lizard. We had seen this lizard before, near Sorrento, where it was unremarkable in appearance, distribution and habits. In Palinuro we found a very different animal which exhibited a vast range of individual liveries. Whilst more than half of the specimens seen resembled the southern variety illustrated in Arnold et. al. (1978), a large minority, both male and female, were a brilliant turquoise blue, like island specimens, particularly in the higher parts of the peninsula. The males were very big (up to 9 cm snout to vent) and very bold. The population was of very high density. There were lizards in huge numbers everywhere from the remote upland scrub down to driftwood at the sea's edge. They were mating and their rough courting ritual was in evidence all around. Two aggressive suitors were rescued from a bucket of water into which they had fallen fighting. Whilst held by hand they struggled with great vigour and surprising



*Podarcis sicula*. Photograph by author.

strength. The males seemed fearless of humans, jumping onto terrace café tables from adjacent stone walls to eat bits of bread, jam out of plastic containers and even scraps of chocolate. We had a very 'friendly' one on our hotel balcony whom I fed like a pet. His mate, however, kept her distance.

#### Colubridae

*Coluber viridiflavus carbonarius*. Western Whip Snake, the black subspecies. Whilst the second specimen, an adult about 135 cm in length, was seen basking on a south-facing slope to the north of the hotel car-park, at around 09:30 h, 18 May in a typical scrub environment, the first was observed swimming across the mouth of the Lambro, from an island to the west bank around 11:00 h on 16 May. This caused us some confusion as I was watching water snakes and a 140 cm long black snake swimming carefully with its head held about 10 cm above the surface of the water was initially identified as a melanistic Grass Snake (*Natrix natrix*). However the shape of the head and the smooth shiny scales made me dismiss the idea. Later in the day a whip snake was seen basking among dry thorn bushes in the vicinity of the river. A third whipsnake was seen fleeing a bank of a path descending a south-facing slope two days later.

*Elaphe quatuorlineata*, Four-Lined Snake. Literature about the national park showed a photograph of this animal, but we did not expect to see it on the peninsula. However we were to be pleasantly surprised, firstly on 23 May, when our

daughter, hearing what she thought was water trickling down a ditch beside a woodland path, investigated to find a huge 2 m long light brown snake with four longitudinal dark stripes down its back, slithering slowly through the undergrowth. It looked at least 7 cm thick and had a large long head. Another specimen, an immature example about 120 cm long and still possessing the juvenile markings of large charcoal grey blotches on an ash grey ground, was seen underneath a hedge growing at eye-level above a path in the hotel grounds at approximately 10:00 h on 24 May.

*Natrix tessellata*, The Dice Snake. A female about 95 cm long seen basking on a floating tree-trunk in the mouth of the river Lambro about 10:30 h on 16 May. Unlike Dice Snakes that I had seen on the banks of Lake Garda which had been a uniform grey in colour, this animal was greenish-brown with rows of round spots going down its flanks. Another snake was seen further up the Lambro, basking on the east bank in a clump of vegetation. We were wading across the river at the time and it, much alarmed, lunged into the water with considerable speed.

#### DISCUSSION

Most other areas of Italy that we had visited demonstrated unremarkable populations of *Podarcis* species, the occasional *Lacerta viridis*, and one or two of the commoner snakes. Whilst Palinuro revealed no examples of *Lacerta*, the abundance, behaviour and colouring of the Italian Wall Lizards and the strange aquatic behaviour of Western Whipsnakes, taken together with the abundance of two other snakes, two geckos and three amphibians makes this little Campanian peninsula very interesting to the herpetologist. Also the countryside is magnificent; wild as our Hebrides, and demonstrating Wolves, Wild Boar, several species of raptor, Ravens, Blue Rock Thrushes and many butterflies.

#### REFERENCE

Arnold, E.N., Burton, J.A. & Ovenden, D.W. (1978). *A Field Guide to the Reptiles and Amphibians of Britain and Europe*. London: Collins. 272 pp.