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*LIPOPHRYS DALMATINUS* (*Pisces Perciformes Blenniidae*),  
A NEW SPECIES FOR MALTA (CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN)

SUMMARY

A new species of blenny, *Lipophrys dalmatinus* (Steindachner and Kolombatovic 1883) is reported for Malta. A small and localised population was first discovered in 2005 in a shallow area of Marsaxlokk bay in the south of the islands. In 2008 a specimen was captured and photographed. Characteristics of the species, habitat, and fish assemblages in the area are documented.

RIASSUNTO

*Lipophrys dalmatinus* (*Pisces Perciformes Blenniidae*), specie nuova per Malta (*Mediterraneo centrale*). Viene segnalata per Malta *Lipophrys dalmatinus* (Steindachner et Kolombatovic 1883), specie di Blenniidae in precedenza non nota per l'isola. Nel 2005 è stata trovata una popolazione localizzata nella baia di Marsaxlokk, nella parte meridionale dell'isola, nel 2008 è stato catturato e fotografato un individuo. Vengono fornite informazioni sulla specie, sull'habitat e sulla comunità ittica.

Fourteen species of the family Blenniidae have been definitely recorded in the Maltese islands. A further two have been recorded but are considered doubtful by recent sources, including the present author (see recent survey of authors and recorded species in FALZON, 1999). This brief paper reports on a newly-discovered small population of a fifteenth species.

*Lipophrys dalmatinus* (Steindachner and Kolombatovic 1883) has been recorded in several areas around the Mediterranean littoral, as well as off Portugal. It occurs on filamentous algae-covered rocky terraces at depths of 1 to 1.5 m, sometimes in brackish water. It is predominantly active during sun-

light, otherwise hiding in piddock holes or barnacle shells. The male attracts females in the spawning season (May to July) by nodding movements of the head. Attracted females spawn in the resident hole of the male, which guards the eggs. Its food consists of benthic meiofauna, especially harpacticoids, as well as algae (WHITEHEAD *et al.*, 1986).

None of the seven sources on the ichthyology of the Maltese islands records the species (TRAPANI, 1838; GULIA, 1861; DESPOTT, 1919; JENNINGS, 1979; CILIA, 1990; LANFRANCO, 1993; FALZON, 1999).

The species was first noted by the present author on 11<sup>th</sup> June 2005 at a site known as Il-Fossa in Marsaxlokk bay. The site is characterised by a shallow area of rock and boulders (sparsely covered with filamentous algae) below east-facing sea cliffs which are about 10 m high. The first record was of a spawning male in a piddock hole in a moderately sized stone in ca. 1.5 m depth. The site was revisited on 21<sup>st</sup> June when the same fish (?) was still occupying the same piddock hole. On this second occasion, a second male was noted in another piddock hole ca. 5 m away, as well as a female swimming freely in the same area. The same (?) two males were again noted occupying the same piddock holes on 26<sup>th</sup> June, when one, possibly two, females were noted swimming freely. Attempts to take a live specimen using a hand net were not successful; the males were impossible to dislodge from their holes and the female(s) proved very fast and elusive. The next visit to the area was on 24<sup>th</sup> June 2008, when a total of four individuals were seen in exactly the same spot – three spawning males, all in piddock holes in moderately sized stones in 1-1.5 m depth, and a free-swimming female. On this occasion one of the males left its piddock hole very briefly and was captured with a hand net, photographed extensively (Fig 1), and released in situ.

Prolonged snorkelling sessions by the present author in similar habitats around the Maltese coast have so far produced negative results. Although we are not in a position to be conclusive on distribution (that would require a comprehensive survey of Maltese inshore waters), it would appear that *L. dalmatinus* is a localized species possibly restricted to the one locality referred to in the present paper.

Fig. 1 shows the male captured and released on 24<sup>th</sup> June 2008. The diagnostic features are the bright spawning colours of the head [citron yellow (contrast with *L. canevae*) and dark 'mask'], small size (= 32 mm), absence of tentacles/protuberances, very shallow notch on dorsal (contrast with *L. canevae* especially), and tessellated light olive-brown vertical bars extending to belly (contrast with *L. adriaticus*, a similar species not recorded in Malta). The dorsal fin-rays, clearly definable in the photo, are XII+16 (XIII+15 for *L. canevae*; XII+14-15 for *L. adriaticus*) (see ŠOLJAN, 1963, BATH, 1977; WHITEHEAD *et al.*, 1986; RIEDL, 1991; MILLER & LOATES, 1997).

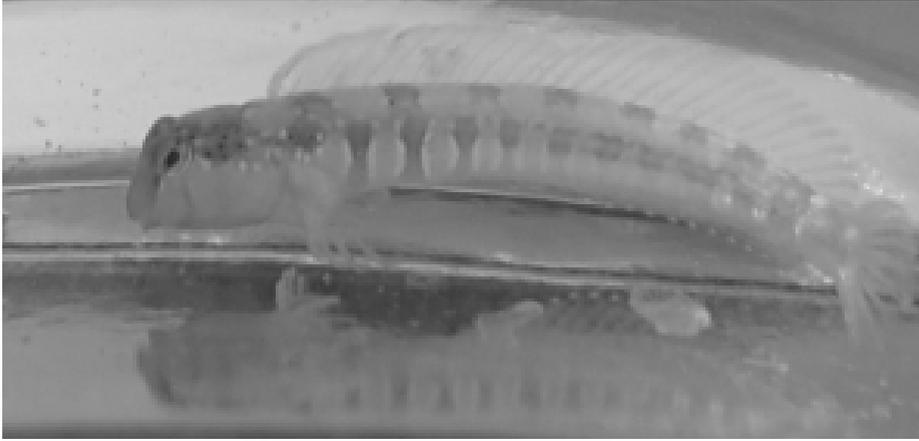


Fig. 1 — *Lipophrys dalmatinus* (Length = 32 mm). Il-Fossa, 24<sup>th</sup> June 2008.

The blennioid assemblage in the study site at Il-Fossa as recorded over five observation sessions consisted of *Parablennius sanguinolentus* (very common with up to 50 individuals seen in one session), *Parablennius incognitus* (common, up to 15 individuals seen in one session), *Aidablennius sphyinx*, *Parablennius zvonimiri*, and *Coryphoblennius galerita*. Other fish species noted were: *Scorpaena porcus*, *Serranus scriba*, *Serranus cabrilla*, *Epinephelus marginatus*, *Apogon imberbis*, *Diplodus annularis*, *Diplodus vulgaris*, *Diplodus sargus*, *Oblada melanura*, *Sarpa salpa*, *Sparus aurata*, *Mullus surmuletus*, *Chromis chromis*, *Coris julis*, *Thalassoma pavo*, *Symphodus ocellatus*, *Symphodus rostratus*, *Symphodus tinca*, *Symphodus roissali*, *Labrus* sp., *Tripterygion tripteronotus*, Gobiidae sp., and Mugilidae sp. The grapsid crab *Percnon gibbesi*, first recorded in Malta in 2001 (BORG & ATTARD-MONTALTO, 2002), is abundant in the area. During the observation sessions several were noted feeding voraciously on algae in shallow water among boulders, including those on which *L. dalmatinus* was recorded.

It is proposed that the species be given the Maltese name ‘Budakkra zghira’ (‘small blenny’).

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