

BREVI NOTE / SHORT NOTES

NICOLA PILUDU, THOMAS HENDRY & JOHN J. BORG

BREEDING RECORD OF LOGGERHEAD TURTLE *CARETTA CARETTA*
(LINNAEUS, 1758) (*Reptilia Cheloniidae*) AT RAMLA BAY, GOZO (MALTESE ISLANDS)
AND A PLEA TO SAFEGUARD POSSIBLE NESTING SITES

Nidificazione della Tartaruga comune Caretta caretta (Linnaeus, 1758) (Reptilia Cheloniidae) a Ramla Bay, Gozo (Malta) e un appello per la protezione di possibili siti di nidificazione.

In the summer of 2012 a female Loggerhead Turtle *Caretta caretta* made local news when it was reported emerging out of the sea, coming up on the sand at Ġnejna Bay and started laying eggs. This was the first documented breeding record by a marine turtle in the Maltese islands in almost one hundred years. GULIA (1890) and DESPOTT (1915) reported that the Loggerhead Turtle bred in the Maltese Islands, GULIA (1890) stated that loggerhead turtles came ashore on sandy beaches to breed, while DESPOTT (1915) stated that “it has been known during that season (spring) to lay its eggs on our unfrequented sandy beaches, especially at Gozo”. There have been no documented nesting records following Despot’s contribution, although DEIDUN & SCHEMBRI (2005) report on a “second-hand” laying record that occurred in the first half of July 1960. A female turtle, of unknown species but possibly *C. caretta*, was spotted emerging from the sea at ir-Ramla tal-Mixquqa, Ġhajj Tuffieħa. The turtle was reported as having crawled up the beach, a distance of about 150 metres from the water’s edge, started excavating in the sand and deposited between 50 and 100 eggs. The turtle was reportedly between 50-60cm long and some 40cm wide with a light brown carapace and a yellow plastron. The authors were informed that both the turtle and all the eggs were taken and eaten.

In this note the present authors are reporting the finding of 9 eggs (3 hatched and 6 un-hatched) found along the southern end of Ramla Bay in Gozo on 31 March 2015. The eggs were found lying on the sand on the tideline, suggesting that the nest was disturbed by winter tides or the winter water flow coming down from Ramla Valley. Given the state of weathering, the eggs were assessed to have been laid in 2013.

PROTECTION MEASURES OF SANDY BEACHES

These findings, along with the 2012 Ġnejna breeding record, show that some individual turtles continue to frequent Maltese beaches to nest. GAROFALO *et al.* (2011) showed that specimens of loggerhead turtles taken locally and preserved at the National Museum of Natural History, Mdina, are genetically distinct from other Mediterranean populations. Suitable nesting sites are however



Figure 1 — The nine eggs collected on the sand at Ramla Bay.

extremely rare in Malta, due to the sheer nature of the coastline and overdevelopment. Management plans for the beach at Ramla Bay, as well as other key areas included in the Natura 2000 network (*i.e.* Gnejna, Ghajn Tuffieha), to promote the restoration of a Maltese population of loggerhead turtles is therefore strongly recommended.

It is suggested that the beach at Ramla Bay is closed down at night during the loggerhead breeding season, from late May to mid-August (BRODERICK *et al.*, 2002), in order to minimise noise, light and other source of disturbance. Additionally, it is suggested that a monitoring programme is initiated, with rangers carrying out daily surveys at dawn aimed at recording tracks from the previous night. Given the scarcity of suitable nesting sites in the Maltese archipelago and the subsequent human pressure inflicted on such beaches through recreational activities, the proposed measures are essential if loggerhead turtles are to become regular breeders in the Maltese islands.

Acknowledgements — We would like to thank Hannah Chisholm, Lenke Balint and Samir Whitaker for their help in collecting the eggs.

REFERENCES

- BRODERICK A.C., GLEN F., GODLEY B.J. & HAYS G.C., 2002. Estimating the number of green and loggerhead turtles nesting annually in the Mediterranean. *Oryx*, 36: 227-235.
- DEIDUN A. & SCHEMBRI P.J., 2005. A Report of nesting on a Maltese beach by the LoggerheadTur-

tle *Caretta caretta* (Linnaeus. 1758) (Reptilia: Cheloniidae). *Central Med. Naturalist*, 4:137-138.

DESPOTT G., 1915. The reptiles of the Maltese Islands. *Zoologist*, (ser. 4) 19: 321-327.

GAROFALO L., BORG J.J., CARLINI R., MIZZAN L., NOVARINI N., SCILLITANI G. & NOVELLETTO A., 2011. Genetic characterization of over hundred years old *Caretta caretta* specimens from Italian and Maltese museums. *Acta herpetol.*, 6: 27-34.

GULIA G., 1890. Erpetologia maltese. *Naturalista maltese*, 1: 14-15.

Addresses of the authors. — N. PILUDU, 17, 313 Heliopolis Court, St. Paul's Street, St. Paul's Bay, SPB 3410 MALTA; T. HENDRY, 17, 313 Heliopolis Court, St. Paul's Street, St. Paul's Bay, SPB 3410 MALTA; J.J. BORG, National Museum of Natural History, Vilhena Palace, St. Publius Square, Mdina - MDN 1010 MALTA.

