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FIRST RECORDS OF BLACK-HEADED BLENNY  
*MICROLIPOPHRYS NIGRICEPS*  
(*Osteichthyes Perciformes Blenniidae*) IN MALTA

SUMMARY

A new species of blenny *Microlipophrys nigriceps* (Vinciguerra, 1883) is reported for the Maltese Islands. At least three specimens were observed at Ir-Ramla tal-Mixquqa, a bay in the north-west of Malta.

RIASSUNTO

Viene riportata per la prima volta per le isole Maltesi una specie di blennide, *Microlipophrys nigriceps* (Vinciguerra, 1883). Almeno tre individui sono stati osservati e fotografati in una caletta della costa nord-occidentale di Malta, in località Ir-Ramla tal-Mixquqa.

INTRODUCTION

The Black-headed Blenny *Microlipophrys nigriceps* (Vinciguerra, 1883) is endemic to the Mediterranean Sea, with two subspecies: *M. nigriceps portmahonis*, which occurs in the southern Mediterranean, the Balearics and Cyprus; and *M. n. nigriceps*, which occurs in the northern Mediterranean from the Gulf of Lyon to the Aegean Sea. *M. nigriceps portmahonis* is distinguished from *M. n. nigriceps* by a black mark at the base of its tail. It is a benthic species that inhabits algae-covered caves and other dimly lit rocky habitats, and has been recorded at depths of 1-5 m. It is active by day and feeds mainly on small sessile invertebrates, as well as algae and detritus, and to a lesser extent on harpacticoids (WHITEHEAD *et al.*, 1986).

To date, 15 species of Blenniidae have been documented to occur in the Maltese Islands (CILIA, 1990; LANFRANCO, 1993; FALZON, 1999, 2009) and do not include the Black-headed Blenny. The species does appear (as *Blennius nigriceps*) in a book that largely deals with fishing and fish cuisine (FARRUGIA RANDON, 2001) but its occurrence is not supported by any evidence or reference. The present work reports the first documented records of this species in Maltese waters.

## METHOD

As the subjects were in very shallow water, observation by snorkeling was sufficient, aided by photography and filming using a digital camera with underwater housing. To minimize disturbance or stress, no artificial illumination was used (except camera flash) and at no point were the specimens caught or handled.

## OCCURRENCE

On 30 Aug 2013 a specimen of *M. nigriceps* at Ir-Ramla tal-Mixquqa (Golden Bay) was noted. The fish (Fig. 1) had a bright orange-red body, darkening to blackish-red in the head area, with a distinct blue-purple marbling most pronounced in the head and face, fading beyond the pectoral region. The flanks had a number of small white spots, with four larger spots along the dorsal edge. Next to the white spot on the caudal peduncle was a larger black patch covering most of the peduncle; this latter feature distinguished the specimen as belonging to the subspecies *M. nigriceps portmahonis*. The fish was about 25-30 mm in length.

The specimen was on a shady rock in very shallow water (ca. 65 cm) in a crevice among boulders along the infralittoral zone and just below the shoreline. The surface of the substrate was largely covered in various crustose coralline algae – including *Phymatolithon*, *Cruoria* and *Peyssonnelia* – with a green algal turf in the less shaded areas (Fig. 2). The weather on the day was overcast but on subsequent visits to the site sunlight was observed to reach only the exterior part for a period during the morning.

The fish was active and alert but typically shy (LOUISY, 2005), but it also appeared curious and stayed in the area, often only hiding behind a nearby edge on the rock, though never venturing into a sunlit area. It seemed to share the rock with up to five specimens of *Tripterygion melanurus* Guichenot, 1850 of varying sizes. The larger specimens of *T. melanurus* were sometimes



Fig. 1 — *Microlipophrys nigriceps*, a specimen from the third site (photo D. Falzon)

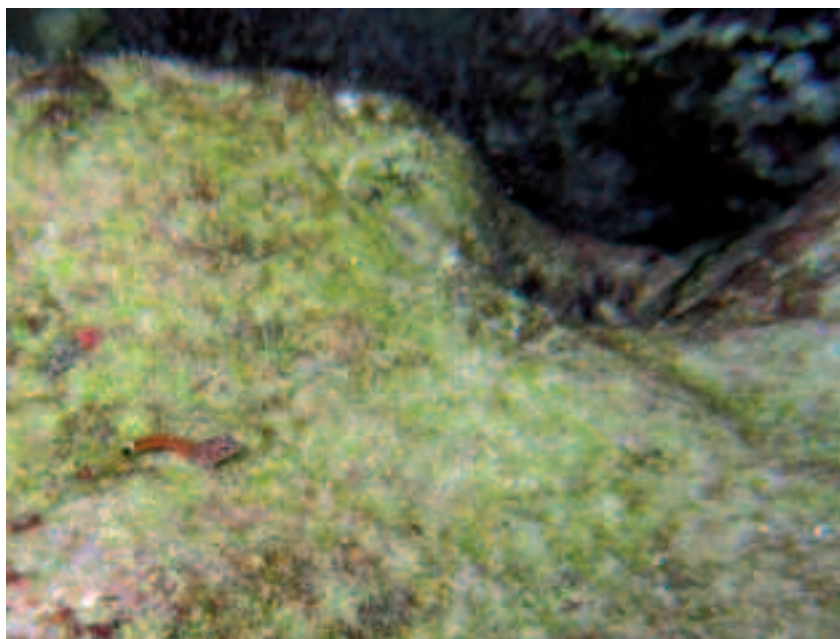


Fig. 2 — The immediate habitat where the first *M. nigriceps* was observed, with specimen in situ (photo V. Falzon)

observed to charge *M. nigriceps* and chase it a short way. At one point, a specimen of *M. nigriceps* was also observed and photographed in another, darker part of the crevice about 2.5 m from the original spot and at a depth of 1 m. This was possibly a second specimen.

Apart from *T. melanurus*, there were also a number of juvenile *Tripterygion tripteronotus* Risso, 1810 in the immediate area. A male *Thalassoma pavo* Linnaeus, 1758 and a large specimen of *Diplodus sargus* Linnaeus, 1758 patrolled the crevice regularly, with occasional short visits by small groups of mugilids. *M. nigriceps* was observed to shy away every time *T. pavo* passed across the rock (*T. pavo* has often been observed behaving aggressively towards species of blennies (M. A. Falzon, pers. comm.). As in all other shallow rocky parts of the bay, several specimens of the crab *Percnon gibbesi* Milne Edwards, 1853 were observed grazing on the algae in the crevice, and on one occasion a medium-sized *Octopus vulgaris* Cuvier, 1797 entered the crevice. On the underside of part of the overhang were a small colony of *Astroides calycularis* Pallas, 1766, and a number of the urchin *Arbacia lixula* Linnaeus, 1758 and the snail *Osilinus turbinatus* (von Born, 1778).

*M. nigriceps* was observed at this site on four out of five subsequent visits over the period 31 Aug–10 Sep. All visits were made in mid-morning.

Another specimen of *M. nigriceps portmahonis* was observed and photographed on 31 Aug at a second site, located ca. 40 m from the first site. The site was 8 m from the shore but also in very shallow water (1 m). The specimen was in a small cavity in a boulder lying on the seabed, with a roughly circular entrance at the top. The specimen was very similar in size and colour to the specimen observed at the other area. The flora inside this cavity was similar to that at the first site, with crustose algae on the walls and algal turf on the floor (Fig. 3); the turf was somewhat sparser here, however, and there was a colony of *Cliona* sp. Other fish observed inside the cavity at this site was a single *Tripterygion melanurus* and a juvenile *Scorpaena* sp. A subsequent visit on 10 Sep confirmed the presence of *M. nigriceps* still at this second site.

A third specimen of *M. nigriceps portmahonis* was observed and photographed on 27 Sep at another site ca. 18 m from the first site. The site was a shady cleft between a partly submerged boulder and some rocks, again in very shallow water (ca. 1 m) and about 5 m from the shore. The habitat was similar to the other sites, with the presence of crustose algae and patches of algal turf. Other fish observed inside the cleft at this third site was a large *Serranus scriba* Linnaeus, 1758, a juvenile *Epinephelus marginatus* Lowe, 1834 and one *Tripterygion melanurus*.

The sex of the *M. nigriceps* specimens in these observations was not determined.

It is possible that *M. nigriceps* occurs only at this particular site in the

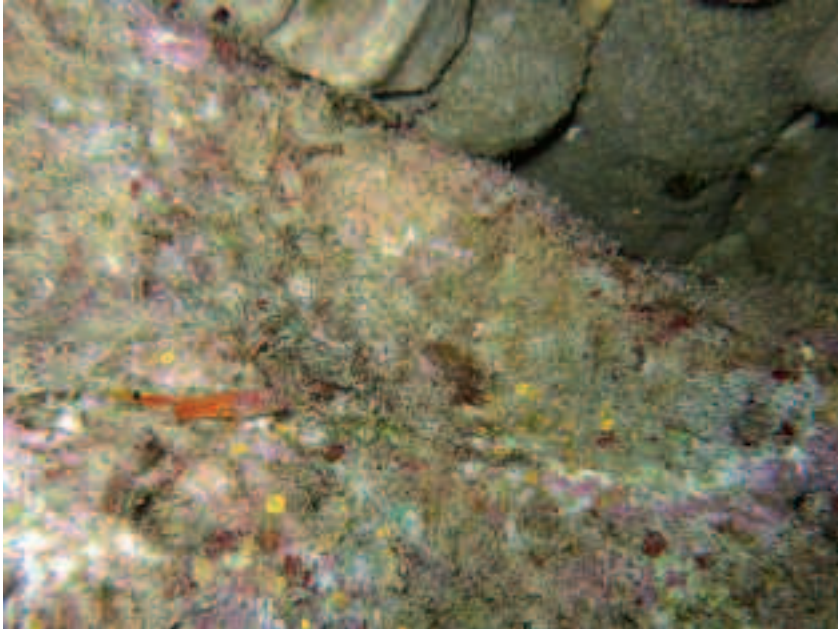


Fig. 3 — The immediate habitat where the second *M. nigriceps* was observed, with specimen in situ (photo V. Falzon)

Maltese Islands. However, considering the abundance of its habitat around the coast, it is likely the species is more widespread. *M. nigriceps* has probably been overlooked in Maltese waters due to its small size, retiring habits and narrow, dimly-lit habitat. The species may also have been overlooked due to its strong resemblance to *Tripterygion melanurus*.

It is proposed that the Black-headed Blenny be given the Maltese name *Budakera tad-Dell* (= Blenny of the shade).

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