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OCCURRENCE OF RETICULATED LEATHERJACKET *STEPHANOLEPIS DIASPROS* (MONACANTHIDAE) IN THE CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN SEA, AND A NEW RECORD FROM THE TUNISIAN COAST

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ABSTRACT

The authors describe and comment the capture of a specimen of reticulated leatherjacket Stephanolepis diaspros Fraser-Brünner, 1940. This is the first capture for this species made in the Gulf of Hammamet in eastern Tunisia. Such a record also fills the gap in the distribution of the species in Tunisian waters, which could be considered as the core of the species in the central Mediterranean Sea and perhaps in the entire Mediterranean.

Key words: *Stephanolepis diaspros*, extension range, Gulf of Hammamet, eastern Tunisia

PRESENZA DI MONACANTO RETICOLATO *STEPHANOLEPIS DIASPROS* (MONACANTHIDAE) NEL MEDITERRANEO CENTRALE E NUOVA CATTURA IN TUNISIA

SINTESI

Gli autori descrivono e commentano la cattura di un esemplare di monacanto reticolato Stephanolepis diaspros Fraser-Brünner, 1940. L'evento rappresenta la prima cattura della specie nel Golfo di Hammamet, nella Tunisia orientale. Il ritrovamento aiuta a riempire le lacune inerenti la distribuzione della specie nelle acque tunisine, che potrebbero venir considerate come il centro della presenza della specie nel Mediterraneo centrale e forse in tutto il Mediterraneo.

Parole chiave: *Stephanolepis diaspros*, range di estensione, Golfo di Hammamet, Tunisia orientale

INTRODUCTION

Since its first record from the Levant Basin (Steinitz, 1927), the Lessepsian migrant reticulated leatherjacket *Stephanolepis diaspros* Fraser-Brunner, 1940 has progressively migrated toward western areas (Golani, 1998). Viable populations are successfully established in the central Mediterranean Sea (Tortonese, 1986) and in Turkish waters (Taskavak & Bilecenoglu, 2001).

In the former area, *S. diaspros* found favourable environmental parameters for reproduction and development, especially in Tunisian waters, for example, in the Gulf of Gabès in the south (Zouari-Ktari et al., 2008; Zouari-Ktari & Bradaï, 2011), and northwards, off Bizerte and in the Lagoon of Bizerte (Bdioui et al., 2004; Shaiek et al., 2019). Additionally, the northernmost extension range of the species reached the area off Tabarka, close to the Algerian border (Ben Amor & Capapé, 2008).

Recent investigations conducted off the eastern Tunisian coast, mainly in the Gulf of Hammamet, supported by the assistance of fishermen aware of fishing grounds, allowed the collection of the specimen of *S. diaspros* described in the present paper.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The specimen was caught by trawl with 40 mm stretched mesh size on 30 January 2021, in the Bay of Monastir, the Gulf of Hammamet, eastern Tunisia ($35^{\circ}46'36.94''$ N and $10^{\circ}51'12.75''$ E; Fig. 1). The capture occurred at a depth between 30 and 35 m, on sandy-muddy bottom partially covered by seagrass and algae. The *S. diaspros* was caught together with cephalopod species, such as the common octopus *Octopus vulgaris* Cuvier, 1797, and teleost species, including the European seabass *Dicentrarchus labrax* (Linnaeus, 1758), the red mullet *Mullus barbatus* Linnaeus, 1758, the salema *Sarpa salpa* (Linnaeus, 1758), and the red scorpionfish *Scorpaena scrofa* Linnaeus, 1758. Abundant samples of ocean grass-wrack *Posidonia oceanica* (L.) Delille, 1813 were also collected during the trawls carried out in the Gulf of Hammamet. The recorded morphometric measurements, length measured to the nearest millimetre following Ben Amor & Capapé (2008), weight to the nearest gram, and meristic counts are summarised in Table 1. The specimen was fixed in 10% buffered formalin, preserved in 75% ethanol, and deposited in the Ichthyological Collection of the Institut National des Sciences et Techniques de la Mer of Tunis (Tunisia) under catalogue number INSTM-Ste-dia 01.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The studied specimen was identified as *Stephanolepis diaspros* following previous descriptions

by Tortonese (1967, 1986), Golani et al. (2017), Dulčić & Pallaoro (2003), Bdioui et al. (2004), and Shaiek et al. (2019). It displayed a brown-to-grey colour, with dark posterior areas and sinuous grey lines on the sides, while dark bands in the caudal fin were not visible (Fig. 2).

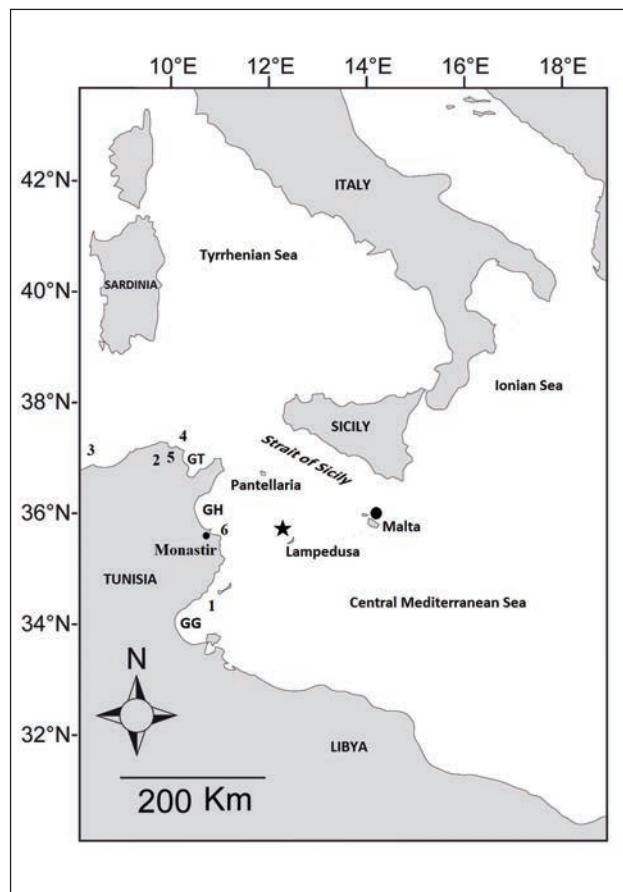


Fig. 1: Capture sites of *Stephanolepis diaspros* in the central Mediterranean Sea. 1. Gulf of Gabès (Chakroun, 1966). 2. Lagoon of Bizerte (Bdioui et al., 2004). 3. Off Tabarka (Ben Amor & Capapé, 2008). 4. Off Bizer-te (Shaiek et al., 2019). 5. Lagoon of Bizerte (Shaiek et al., 2019). 6. Bay of Monastir, Gulf of Hammamet (this study). The black star and black circle indicate the captures of the species in waters surrounding the Island of Lampedusa and the Island of Malta, respectively (Deidun et al., 2015).

Sl. 1: Zemljevid lokalitet, kjer so bili ujeti primerki vrste *Stephanolepis diaspros* v osrednjem Sredozemskem morju. 1. Zaliv Gabès (Chakroun, 1966). 2. Laguna v Bizerti (Bdioui et al., 2004). 3. Tabarka (Ben Amor & Capapé, 2008). 4. Bizer-te (Shaiek et al., 2019). 5. Laguna v Bizertie (Shaiek et al., 2019). 6. Zaliv Monastir v zalivu Hammamet (ta raziskava). Črna zvezdica in črni krog kažejo lokaliteti, kjer so bili ujeti primerki v okolici Lampeduse in Malte (Deidun et al., 2015).

Tab. 1: Comparison of morphometric measurements, meristic counts, and total body weight recorded in the specimens of *Stephanolepis diaspros*, collected in the Bay of Monastir, Gulf of Hammamet (ref. INSTM-Ste-dia-01), northern Tunisian coast (FST-STE-diasp1), and the Lagoon of Bizerte (ISPAB-Ste-dia-01).

Tab. 1: Primerjava morfometričnih meritev, merističnega štetja in skupne telesne mase, zabeleženih pri osebkih *Stephanolepis diaspros*, ujetih v Monastirju v zalivu Hammamet (ref. INSTM-Ste-dia-01), ob severni tunizijski obali (FST-STE-diasp1) in v Laguni Bizerte (ISPAB-Ste-dia-01).

References	INSTM-Ste-dia 01		FST-STE-diasp1		FSB-Ste-dia-01	
Measurements	mm	%TL	mm	%TL	mm	%TL
Total length (TL)	125	100.0	154	100	215	100
Standard length (SL)	104	83.2	125	81.2	185	86.05
Head length	27	21.6	34	22.1	55	25.6
First predorsal length	32	25.9	41.1	26.6	49	22.6
Second predorsal length	58	46.2	72.4	47.01	95	43.9
Preanal length	59	47.5	74.3	48.2	97	45.4
Prepectoral length	34	27.1	42.9	27.8	49	23.0
First dorsal fin length	6	4.9	7.6	4.9	13	6.3
Second dorsal fin length	41	32.9	51.8	33.6	73	34.2
Anal fin length	37	29.8	47.2	30.6	66	30.6
Pectoral fin length	10	8.5	14.3	9.2	9	11.6
Caudal fin length	22	17.9	28.8	18.7	25	25.8
Maximal body length	48	38.4	60.3	39.1	86	39.8
Minimal body length	9	7.2	12.4	8.1	-	-
Eye diameter	5	4.2	6.8	4.4	11	5.3
Interorbital length	8	6.7	11.6	7.5	12	5.8
Preorbital length	16	13.0	21.3	13.8	36	16.6
Postorbital length	5	4.1	6.8	4.4	6	2.9
Meristic counts						
First dorsal fin rays	I		I		I	
Second dorsal fin rays	33		33		31	
Anal fin rays	31		31		31	
Pectoral fin rays	13		13		13	
Caudal fin rays	I+10+I		I+10+I		I+10+I	
Total weight (gram)	71		61		196	



Fig. 2: Specimen of *Stephanolepis diaspros* collected in the Bay of Monastir, Gulf of Hammamet (ref. INSTM-Ste-dia-01), scale bar = 30 mm.

Sl. 2: Primerek vrste *Stephanolepis diaspros*, ujet v Monastirju v zalivu Hammamet (ref. INSTM-Ste-dia-01), merilo = 30 mm.

The capture of the specimen more probably occurred during its migration from the southern area, where the species lives freely in the wild, than from the northern area, where an established population can also be found, inhabiting the Lagoon of Bizerte

(Shaiek et al., 2019), a restricted area communicating with the open sea by a narrow navigation canal (Harzallah, 2003; Ounifi-Ben Amor et al., 2016). Apparently, the specimen was captured together with large *S. salpa*, probably adults, which are considered almost exclusively herbivorous (Bauchot & Hureau, 1986). *S. diaspros* feeds on a large variety of benthic invertebrates, and sometimes on algae and plants (Zouari-Ktari et al., 2008). Therefore, competition pressure between herbivorous fish species and *S. diaspros* remains generally limited, since the latter also find available food in the seagrass meadows they inhabit (El-Ganainy & Sabra, 2008).

At present, *S. diaspros* is known throughout the Tunisian coast, although the capture of a single specimen in the Gulf of Hammamet does not constitute sufficient evidence to draw any conclusions about the real status of the species in this area. Further records are needed to confirm the hypothesis of a successful establishment of a *S. diaspros* population in this eastern Tunisian region. However, the present record fills a gap in the distribution of the species along the Tunisian coast. Conversely, it appears that *S. diaspros* is successfully established in two areas; the Gulf of Gabès and the Lagoon of Bizerte. Morphometric measurements and meristic counts recorded in specimens from these areas are practically identical (see Tab. 1), suggesting that the same population may be inhabiting the two separate areas. However, the plausibility of such a hypothesis would have to be verified by means of molecular tools and genetic analysis. *S. diaspros* remains abundant in Tunisian waters, to the point that this region could at present be considered the core area of the species in the central Mediterranean Sea, and probably in the wider Mediterranean as well.

POJAVLJANJE AFRIŠKEGA KOSTOROGA, *STEPHANOLEPIS DIASPROS*
(MONACANTHIDAE), V OSREDNJEM SREDOZEMSKEM MORJU
IN PRVI PODATEK ZA TUNIZIJSKO OBALO

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POVZETEK

Avtorji poročajo in razpravljajo o najdbi primerka afriškega kostoroga, *Stephanolepis diaspros* Fraser-Brünner, 1940. Ta je bil prvič najden v zalivu Hammamet v vzhodni Tuniziji. Ta primer je zapolnil vrzel v razširjenosti te vrste vzdolž tunizijske obale in predstavlja pomembno območje te vrste v osrednjem Sredozemskem morju in morda v celotnem bazenu.

Ključne besede: *Stephanolepis diaspros*, širjenje areala, zaliv Hammamet, vzhodna Tunizija

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