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FIRST SUBSTANTIATED RECORD OF ARMLESS SNAKE EEL *DALOPHIS*
IMBERBIS (OSTEICHTHYES: OPHICHTHIDAE) FROM THE SYRIAN COAST
(EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN SEA)

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ABSTRACT

The present note reports the first record of armless snake eel Dalophis imberbis (Delaroche, 1809) from the coast of Syria. It describes the specimen and provides comments about its distribution. This record marks the easternmost extension range of the species in the Mediterranean Sea, but the establishment of a viable population in the Levant Basin remains questionable; more captures are needed to confirm this hypothesis.

Key words: *Dalophis imberbis*, description, morphometric measurements, extension range, eastern Levant Basin

PRIMO RITROVAMENTO DOCUMENTATO DELLA BISCIA DI MARE MEZZANA
DALOPHIS IMBERBIS (OSTEICHTHYES: OPHICHTHIDAE) LUNGO LA COSTA SIRIANA
(MEDITERRANEO ORIENTALE)

SINTESI

La presente nota riporta il primo ritrovamento della biscia di mare mezzana Dalophis imberbis (Delaroche, 1809) lungo la costa della Siria. Gli autori descrivono l'esemplare e commentano la distribuzione della specie. Questo ritrovamento rappresenta il punto più orientale dell'estensione della specie nel Mar Mediterraneo, ma la presenza di una popolazione vitale nel bacino del Levante rimane discutibile. Saranno necessarie ulteriori catture per confermare questa ipotesi.

Parole chiave: *Dalophis imberbis*, descrizione, misure morfometriche, range di estensione, bacino orientale del Levante

INTRODUCTION

The armless snake eel *Dalophis imberbis* (Delaroche, 1809) is reported from the eastern North Atlantic as far north as Portugal (Quéro *et al.*, 2003) and south of the Strait of Gibraltar, off Morocco (Lloris & Rucabado, 1998) and Mauritania (Maurin & Bonnet, 1970). Southward, the species is unknown between Senegal (Cadenat, 1951; Diatta, *pers. comm.*, 2021) and the Gulf of Guinea (Blache *et al.*, 1970; Leiby, 1990).

Following Bauchot (1986) the species is recorded in the wider Mediterranean, is probably rare off the French coast (Bauchot & Pras, 1980; Béarez *et al.*, 2017), but quite common in Italian waters (Bonifazi *et al.*, 2019). Likic *et al.* (2015) noted that *D. imberbis* is caught in low densities in the Adriatic Sea. Southward, the species spawned in the Bay of Algiers (Bauchot, 1986) but generally remains poorly known off the Maghreb shore, Algeria (Dieuzeide *et al.*, 1954; Refes *et al.*, 2010) and Tunisia (Bradai *et al.*, 2004).

Eastward, the species is reported in Greek waters (Papaconstantinou, 2014) and in the Turkish coasts (Bilecenoğlu *et al.*, 2014), and the Levant Basin constitutes its easternmost extension range in the Mediterranean Sea (El Sayed *et al.*, 2017; Golani, 2005; Bariche & Fricke, 2019). Routine monitoring has been conducted for several decades to assess the fish diversity in Syrian marine waters and several species unknown among the local ichthyofauna have periodically been found and described (Saad, 2005; Ali, 2018). Recently, a specimen of *D. imberbis* was collected for the first time in this area. The specimen is presented in this note and some comments are provided concerning its distribution in the local area and in the wider Mediterranean Sea.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

On 25 April 2020, a specimen of armless snake eel *Dalophis imberbis* (Delaroche, 1809) was caught with a hand fishing net off Tartous Beach, at 35° 86' 93" E and 34° 90' 39" N, at a depth of 13 metres, on rocky bottom (Fig. 1). It was delivered

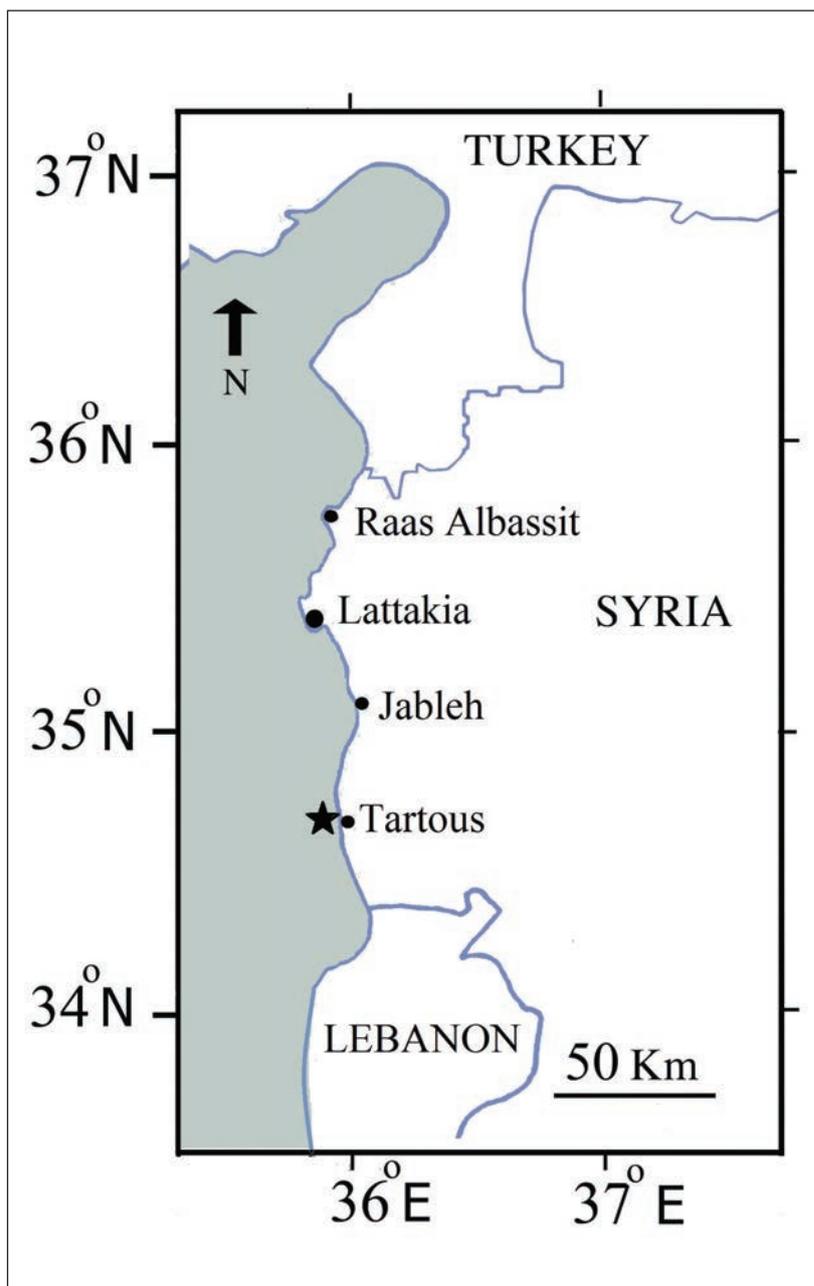


Fig. 1: Map of the Syrian coast indicating (black star) the capture site of *Dalophis imberbis* (off Tartous Beach).

Sl. 1: Zemljevid sirske obale z označbo lokalitete, kjer je bil ujet primerek kačaste jegulje (*Dalophis imberbis*), ujete ob plaži Tartous Beach.



Fig. Specimen of *Dalophis imberbis* (caught off Tartous Beach), Syrian coast, scale bar = 50 mm.
Sl. 2: Primerek kačaste jegulje (*Dalophis imberbis*), ujete ob plaži Tartous Beach (sirska obala), merilo = 50 mm.

to the laboratory for thorough examination following Bello *et al.* (2014). Some morphological measurements of the specimen were made and recorded to the nearest millimetre and the nearest gram (see Tab. 1). The specimen was fixed in 10 % buffered formalin, preserved in 75% ethanol and deposited in the Ichthyological Collection of the Laboratory of Marine Sciences and Aquatic Environment at Tishreen University, in Lattakia (Syria) under catalogue number MSL 23-2020-D. imb.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Syrian specimen (Fig. 2) was identified as *D. imberbis* via a combination of the following main morphological characters: body very elongate, snake-like and cylindrical, with similar thickness from head to tail, and scale-less; vent in anterior region of body; snout short conical, eye small compared to the head, dorsal part of head and lips covered with villosities; teeth slightly curved and conical; gill openings latero-ventral; caudal and pelvic fins absent, pectoral fins rudimentary, dorsal and anal fins low, placed in a deep dermal groove; colour of head, back and base of dorsal fin grey-violet, dotted with black, belly and underside of head yellowish.

The description of the species, including morphological characters, colour and morphometric measurements (see Tab. 1), is in total accordance with Tortonese (1970), Bauchot (1986), Quéro *et al.* (2003) and Bonifazi *et al.* (2019). *D. imberbis* could be added to the list of fish species recorded in the Syrian coast, completing the previous works of Saad (2005) and Ali (2018). Following Bonifazi *et al.* (2019), the scarcity of the species throughout its capture areas is probably due to

its low economical interest. The species is rather considered as common by-catch by fishermen (Busalacchi *et al.*, 2010). However, Bonifazi *et al.* (2019) reported records of massive beaching of *D. imberbis* from the coast of Ostia (central Mediterranean Sea), observed on 6 March 2017, after a huge wintry storm. Such a phenomenon

Tab. 1: Morphometric measurements and total body weight of *Dalophis imberbis* (caught off Tartous Beach).
Tab. 1: Morfometrične meritve in celokupna telesna masa kačaste jegulje (*Dalophis imberbis*), ujete ob plaži Tartous Beach.

Reference	MSL-23-2020-D. imb	
Morphometric characters (mm)	mm	%TL
Total length (TL)	260	100
Preanal length (LPA)	97.5	37.5
Predorsal length (LPD)	25.2	9.7
Prepectoral length (LPP)	21.9	8.4
Dorsal fin length (LD)	229.1	88.1
Anal fin length (La)	167.7	64.5
Pectoral fin length (Lp)	4.8	1.8
Body depth (H)	4.8	1.8
Head length (C)	20.1	7.7
Eye diameter (O)	1.3	0.5
Preorbital length (PO)	6.2	2.4
Interorbital length (Io)	1.5	0.6
Length of lower jaw	12.7	4.8
Total body weight (gram)	10.16	

could occur anywhere in the Mediterranean Sea because *D. imberbis* is commonly hiding in burrows in the sand and mud of shallow coastal waters at up to 80 m of depth (Bauchot, 1986).

The present capture of *D. imberbis* confirms the presence of the species in the Levant Basin,

and together with the captures reported by Golani (2005) and Bariche & Fricke (2019) marks the easternmost extension range of the species in the Mediterranean Sea. However, more records are required to establish the occurrence of a viable population of *D. imberbis* in the region.

PRVI DOKUMENTIRAN PRIMER POJAVLJANJA KAČASTE JEGULJE,
DALOPHIS IMBERBIS (OSTEICHTHYES: OPHICHTHIDAE), VZDOLŽ SIRSKE OBALE
(VZHODNO SREDOZEMSKO MORJE)

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POVZETEK

Avtorji poročajo o prvem primeru pojavljanja kačaste jegulje *Dalophis imberbis* (Delaroche, 1809) iz sirske obale. Opisujejo ujeti primere in razpravljajo o razširjenosti vrste. Gre za najbolj vzhodno pojavljanje te vrste v Sredozemskem morju. Kljub temu je prisotnost vitalne populacije te vrste v Levantskem bazenu vprašljiva. Za potrditev te hipoteze bi potrebovali več primerov pojavljanja te vrste.

Ključne vrste: *Dalophis imberbis*, opis, morfometrične meritve, širjenje areala, vzhodni Levantski bazen

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