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A NEW RECORD OF *CLINITRACHUS ARGENTATUS* (OSTEICHTHYES: CLINIDAE) FROM THE TUNISIAN COAST (CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN SEA)

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ABSTRACT

The present note reports a new record of *Clinitrachus argentatus* (Risso, 1810) from Tunisian waters based on a specimen found in the stomach contents of a black scorpion fish *Scorpaena porcus* Linnaeus, 1758. The cline was only slightly digested, proving that the prey and the predator occurred in the same area. This finding extends the range of the species off the Tunisian coast, which was previously only reported from southern areas.

Key words: *Clinitrachus argentatus*, prey, predator, stomach content, *Scorpaena porcus*

NUOVO RITROVAMENTO DI *CLINITRACHUS ARGENTATUS* (OSTEICHTHYES: CLINIDAE) AL LARGO DELLA COSTA TUNISINA (MEDITERRANEO CENTRALE)

SINTESI

La presente nota riporta un nuovo ritrovamento di *Clinitrachus argentatus* (Risso, 1810) nelle acque tunisine, basato su un esemplare trovato nel contenuto stomacale di uno scorfano nero *Scorpaena porcus* Linnaeus, 1758. La bavosella d'alga era solo leggermente digerita, dimostrando che la preda e il predatore si trovavano nella stessa zona. Questa scoperta estende l'areale della specie al largo della costa tunisina, mentre in precedenza era stata segnalata solo da aree meridionali.

Parole chiave: *Clinitrachus argentatus*, preda, predatore, contenuto dello stomaco, *Scorpaena porcus*

INTRODUCTION

Clinitrachus argentatus (Risso, 1810) commonly occurs in shallow coastal waters of the north-eastern Atlantic from Portugal (Carneiro et al., 2014) to Morocco (Lloris & Rucabado, 1998). The species is known throughout the western Mediterranean Basin, the Adriatic Sea, the Sea of Marmara, and the Bosporus Strait (Wirtz & Zander, 1986), its eastward distribution reaching the Levant Basin (Golani, 2005; Ali, 2008; Bariche & Fricke, 2019). While southwards, *C. argentatus* is not reported from the coast of Egypt (El Sayed et al., 2017), it does occur along the Libyan shore (El Baraasi et al., 2019).

In Tunisia, *C. argentatus* was first recorded off Salakta, a city located on the eastern part of the coast, where Gharred (1999) observed 21 specimens, measuring between 29 and 76 mm in total length. Since then no additional of *C. argentatus* had been recorded in the wild although several studies focussing on the local ichthyofauna were performed (Bradaï et al., 2004; El Kamel-Moutalibi et al., 2009; Ounifi-Ben Amor et al., 2016; Rafrafi-Nouira, 2016). The present is a report of a new *C. argentatus* found in the stomach contents of a black scorpion fish *Scorpaena porcus* Linnaeus, 1758 during a study on the diet of this species (Rafrafi-Nouira et al., 2016).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The specimen of *C. argentatus* was found in the stomach contents of a black scorpionfish, *Scorpaena porcus* Linnaeus, 1758 caught on 21 October 2013 in a commercial gill net with a mesh size of 26 mm, off Ras Jebel, northern Tunisia, on rocky bottom partially covered by sea grass and algae, at $37^{\circ}14'331.84''N$ and $10^{\circ}09'52.35''E$ (Fig. 1). The scorpionfish was an adult male measuring 188 mm in total length (TL) and its total body weight (TBW) reached 142 g. The specimen of *C. argentatus* measured 48 mm TL and weighed at least 3.1 g (Fig. 2). The digestion slightly affected the distal end of its caudal fin and areas of its anal fin. Some measurements and meristic counts were recorded and summarised in Table 1. The specimen was fixed in 10% buffered formaline and preserved in 75% ethanol. It was deposited in the Ichthyological Collection of Institut Supérieur de Pêche et d'Aquaculture of Bizerte, located in Menzel Jemil (Tunisia), under catalogue number ISPAB Cli-arg 01.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Although it was slightly affected by the beginning of digestion in the stomach of *S. porcus*, the present specimen was identified as *C. argentatus*

through the combination of the following morphological characters: body flattened laterally, covered with cycloid scales deeply embedded in skin; caudal peduncle thin; head conical and more pointed than in specimens from the Blenniidae family according to Wirtz & Zander (1986); dorsal fin with deep incision, anterior part consisting of three spines, posterior part high, especially in its distal area, the meristic formula of dorsal fin similar to that recorded by Orlando-Bonaca & Trkov (2016). The colour of the specimen was orange-reddish with yellow areas, which was rather unusual compared to Orlando-Bonaca & Trkov (2016), who noted that the species is dark green or brownish with a marbled pattern, displaying some white or silver areas. Additionally, Orlando-Bonaca & Trkov (2016) added that the colour pattern of the species varies according to the macroalgal species used by *C. argentatus* as a hiding place, and can

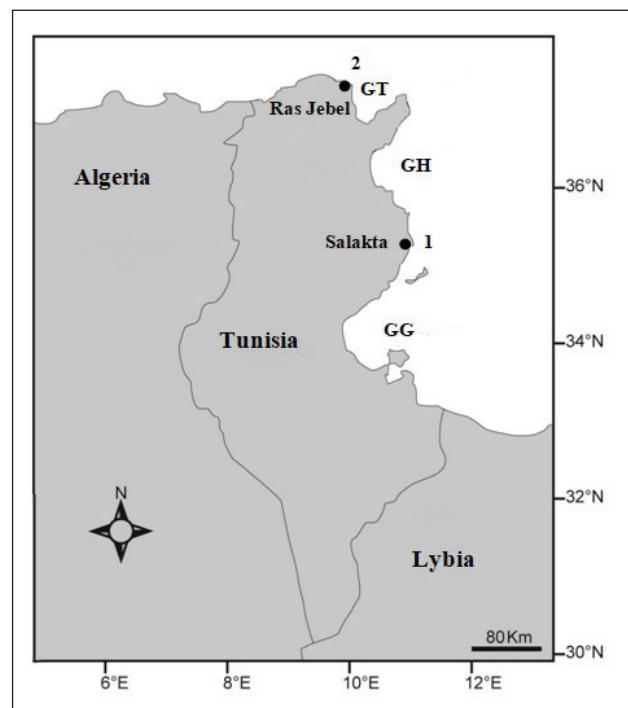


Fig. 1: Map of Tunisia indicating the capture sites of *Clinitrachus argentatus* in the Tunisian coast. 1. Off Salakta, eastern Tunisia (Gharred, 1999; Bradaï, 2000). 2. Off Ras Jebel, northern Tunisia (this study). GT, Gulf of Tunis. GH, Gulf of Hammamet. GG, Gulf of Gabès.

Sl. 1: Zemljevid Tunizije z označenimi lokalitetami, kjer je bila potrjena srebrnica (*Clinitrachus argentatus*) na tunizijski obali. 1. Salakta, vzhodna Tunizija (Gharred, 1999; Bradaï, 2000). 2. Ras Jebel, Severna Tunizija (ta študija). GT, Tuniški zaliv. GH, Hamameški zaliv. GG, Gabeški zaliv.



Fig. 2: *Clinitrachus argentatus* from the northern Tunisian coast (ref. ISPAB-Cli-arg 01), specimen found in the stomach contents of a black scorpion fish *Scorpaena porcus*, scale bar = 20 mm.

Sl. 2: Primerek srebrnice (*Clinitrachus argentatus*) (ref. ISPAB-Cli-arg 01), najden v želodcu rjavega škarpoča (*Scorpaena porcus*), ujetega na severni tunizijski obali. Merilo = 20 mm.

be brown, reddish, or purplish. The unusual colour of the present specimen could be explained by the chemical secretions of the predator affecting the prey's skin during the early phase of digestion.

The description, morphometric measurements, and meristic counts recorded in the present specimen were in total accordance with Wirtz & Zander (1986) and Orlando-Bonaca & Trkov (2016). Therefore, these patterns confirm the occurrence of *C. argentatus* in Tunisian waters and extend the distribution range of the species in the area. However, a migration of the species from southern to northern areas remains doubtful and improbable, as the species is not prone to long-distance migrations. Additionally, the presence of an only slightly digested *C. argentatus* in the gut of a *S. porcus* clearly demonstrated that the prey and the predator inhabit the same area. The non-occurrence of *C. argentatus* between Ras Jebel (northern Tunisia) and Salakata (eastern Tunisia) does not indicate that the species' distribution is fragmented throughout the Tunisian coast. *C. argentatus* is a rather overlooked species due to poor sampling efforts; similar instances were reported for other fish species in Tunisian waters (Rafrati-Nouira, 2016).

Similarly, the relative scarcity of *C. argentatus* throughout the wider Mediterranean Sea is probably due to the fact that it is a cryptic species inhabiting macroalgal assemblages and sea grass meadows at very low depths, where it is difficult to observe (Orlando-Bonaca & Trkov, 2016; Tiralongo et al., 2016). Additionally, such biotopes are poorly exploited by commercial fishing gears and colonised by small fish species generally belonging to the gobiidae and blenniidae families (Tiralongo

Tab. 1: Morphometric measurements with percentages of standard length (% SL), meristic counts, and total weight recorded in *Clinitrachus argentatus* from the northern Tunisian coast (ref. ISPAB-Cli-arg 01), specimen found in the stomach contents of a black scorpion fish *Scorpaena porcus*.

Tab. 1: Morfometrične meritve z deleži standardne dolžine (% SL), meristična štetja in celokupna masa srebrnice (*Clinitrachus argentatus*) iz severne tunizijske obale (ref. ISPAB-Cli-arg 01), najdene v vsebini želodca rjavega škarpoča (*Scorpaena porcus*).

Ref. ISPAB-Cli-arg 01	Value	
Morphometric measurements	mm	% SL
Total length	48	129.7%
Standard length (SL)	37	100%
Head length	7	18.9%
Eye diameter	3	8.1%
Pre-orbital length	4	10.8%
Meristic counts		
Dorsal fin rays	III + XXVIII/3	
Anal fin rays	?	
Pectoral fin rays	9	
Pelvic fin rays	2	
Total weight in gram	3.2 (?)	

et al., 2016). Therefore, misidentification between close related species cannot be totally ruled out. All these species are of low commercial interest and discarded at sea or not delivered in fish markets, but kept by fishermen for their own consumption. They are also affected by predation pressure for food, a good instance is herein provided by *C. argentatus*; Tiralongo *et al.* (2016) noted the occurrence of scorpaenid species such as *S. scrofa* Linnaeus, 1758 and *S. maderensis* Valenciennes, 1833, living together with small fishes, which are also their preferential prey (Hureau & Litvinenko, 1986). Additionally, shallow coastal waters are facing anthropogenic pollution, which progressively reduces benthic vegetation and negatively

affects fish biodiversity (Lipej *et al.*, 2003) and likely certain small species that inhabit these ecosystems, such as *C. argentatus* (Orlando-Bonaca & Trkov, 2016), as well.

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NOVI ZAPIS O POJAVLJANJU SREBRNICE *CLINITRACHUS ARGENTATUS*
(OSTEICHTHYES: CLINIDAE) IZ TUNIZIJSKE OBALE (OSREDNJE SREDOZEMSKO MORJE)

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POVZETEK

V pričujočem zapisu avtorji poročajo o novi najdbi srebrnice *Clinitrachus argentatus* (Risso, 1810) iz tunizijskih voda na podlagi primerka, najdenega v želodcu rjavega škarpoča *Scorpaena porcus* Linnaeus, 1758. Srebrnica je bila le delno prebavljena, na podlagi česar avtorji sklepajo, da plenilec in plen izvirata iz istega življenjskega okolja. Ta najdba dopoljuje spoznanja o razširjenosti te vrste vzdolž tunizijske obale, saj je bila doslej potrjena le v južnih predelih.

Ključne besede: *Clinitrachus argentatus*, plen, plenilec, vsebina želodca, *Scorpaena porcus*

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