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THE SECOND RECORD OF OILFISH, *RUVETTUS PRETIOSUS* (GEMPYLIDAE), IN TUNISIAN WATERS (CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN SEA)

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ABSTRACT

The paper reports the second capture of a rare teleostean species, the oilfish, *Ruvettus pretiosus* Cocco, 1833, in Tunisian waters. The specimen measured 133 cm in total length and weighed 25.1 kg. It was captured in northern areas of Tunisia. The scarcity of *R. pretiosus* in the study area is probably due to the fact that this species inhabits deep, poorly exploited bottoms and has a low commercial value.

Key words: *Ruvettus pretiosus*, Tunisian waters, distribution, central Mediterranean, extension range

SECONDO RITROVAMENTO DEL RUVETTO, *RUVETTUS PRETIOSUS* (GEMPYLIDAE), IN ACQUE TUNISINE (MEDITERRANEO CENTRALE)

SINTESI

L'articolo riporta la seconda cattura di una rara specie di teleosteo, il ruvetto, *Ruvettus pretiosus* Cocco, 1833, in acque tunisine. L'esemplare misurava 133 cm di lunghezza totale e pesava 25,1 kg. È stato catturato nelle zone settentrionali della Tunisia. La scarsità di *R. pretiosus* nell'area di studio è probabilmente dovuta al fatto che questa specie vive su fondali profondi e poco sfruttati e ha un basso valore commerciale.

Parole chiave: *Ruvettus pretiosus*, acque tunisine, distribuzione, Mediterraneo centrale, range di estensione

INTRODUCTION

The oilfish, *Ruvettus pretiosus* Cocco, 1833 is widely distributed in tropical and temperate waters throughout the world (Nakamura & Parin, 1993). The species is known along the north-eastern Atlantic shore, from the British Isles to Portugal (Quéro *et al.*, 2003) and south of the Strait of Gibraltar, from Morocco (Lloris & Rucabado, 1998) to South African waters (Smith & Heemstra, 1986). *R. pretiosus* is also commonly caught off the Canaries, the Madeira Archipelago and the Cape Verde Archipelago (Parin, 1986); recently, it has also been found off the Senegalese coast, where it was previously unknown (Capapé *et al.*, 2019).

R. pretiosus was discovered for the first time in the Mediterranean Sea off Messina, in the Strait of Sicily, and has been sporadically landed since in the fish markets of southern Italia (Tortonese, 1975). *R. pretiosus* is not reported from the Mediterranean coast of France (Quignard & Tomasini, 2000), but occurs in the Adriatic Sea, where it is considered as rather rare, mostly present in northern areas (Bettoso & Dulčić, 1999).

In the eastern Mediterranean, Tserpes *et al.* (2006), Peristeraki *et al.* (2008) and Kampouris *et al.* (2013) reported *R. pretiosus* in the Aegean Sea, and Golani (2005) off Israel. Conversely, El Sayed *et al.* (2017) did not report the species off the Mediterranean coast of Egypt, but westward, it was recorded for the first time in Libyan waters, off Benghazi (Elbaraasi *et al.*, 2007). Along the Maghreb shore, the species probably occurs in Morocco (Lloris & Rucabado, 1998), it has been reported from the Algerian (Refes *et al.*, 2010) and the Tunisian coasts (Ben Amor *et al.*, 2010). Routine monitoring conducted in this latter area and collaboration with experienced fishermen have allowed the observation of the *R. pretiosus* specimens described in the present paper, which also provides some comments concerning the species distribution in its new area.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

On 14 May 2020, a specimen of oilfish *Ruvettus pretiosus* was caught by longline, hooks baited with the European pilchard *Sardinella pilchardus* (Walbaum, 1792). The capture occurred in an area located off the north-western coast of Tunisia (Fig. 1), at a depth of 300 m, on rocky sandy bottoms, 36°46'55.22' N and 11°30'11.90' E, together with the white grouper *Epinephelus aeneus* (Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, 1817), some scorpaenid species, the conger eel *Conger conger* (Linnaeus, 1758), the longnose spurdog *Squalus blainvillei* (Risso, 1826), and the brown ray *Raja miraletus* Linnaeus, 1758.

The total length and morphometric measurements were recorded to the nearest millimetre and total body weight to the nearest gram (Tab. 1). The specimen was fixed in 10% buffered formaldehyde, preserved in 75% ethanol and deposited in the Ichthyological Collection of the Institute des Sciences et Technologies de la Mer, Tunis-La Goulette, Tunisia, under the catalogue number INSTM Gem-rup-01.

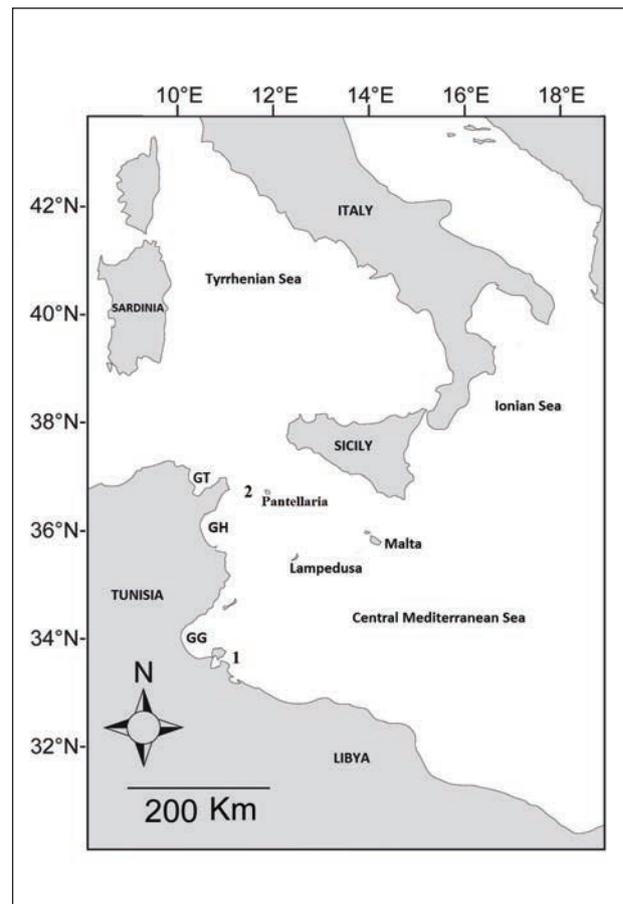


Fig. 1: Map of the central Mediterranean Sea, showing the Tunisian coast: 1. Capture site of the first recorded specimen of *Ruvettus pretiosus*, in the southern area (Ben Amor *et al.*, 2010). 2. Capture site of the second recorded specimen of *R. pretiosus*, in the northern area (present study). GG: Gulf of Gabès. GH: Gulf of Hammamet. GT: Gulf of Tunis.

Sl. 1: Zemljevid obravnavanega območja in tunizijske obale: 1. Lokaliteta ulova prvega primerka vrste *Ruvettus pretiosus* v južnem predelu (Ben Amor *et al.*, 2010). 2. Lokaliteta ulova drugega primerka vrste *R. pretiosus* v severnem predelu (pričujoča raziskava). GG: Gulf of Gabès. GH: Gulf of Hammamet. GT: Gulf of Tunis.

Tab. 1: The morphometric measurements, meristic counts, and total body weight of the oilfish *Ruvettus pretiosus* (ref. INSTM Gem-rup-01) caught from north-eastern Tunisian waters.

Tab. 1: Morfometrične meritve, meristična štetja in celotna telesna teža primerka vrste *Ruvettus pretiosus* (ref. INSTM Gem-rup-01), ujetega v severovzhodnih tunizijskih vodah.

Reference	INSTM Gem-rup-01	
	mm	% TL
Total length	1330	100
Standard length	1100	82.71
Forked length	1230	92.48
Head length	305	22.93
Eye diameter	52	3.91
Snout length	135	10.15
Pre-anal length	785	59.02
Pre-dorsal length	336	25.26
Upper jaw length	172	12.93
Pectoral fin length	149	11.2
Ventral fin length	92	6.91
Length of anal fin base	223	16.77
Body depth	23	17.29
Total body weight (kg)	25.1	
Counts		
First dorsal fin rays	XIV	
Second fin dorsal rays	16 + (2 finlets)	
Ventral fin rays	I-5	
Anal fin rays	II-14	
Caudal fin rays	17	

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present specimen was identified as *Ruvettus pretiosus* via the combination of the following main morphological characters: body oblong, semi-fusiform and slightly compressed; snout rounded, not particularly produced; lower jaw extending slightly anterior to upper jaw, but rounded and with no conspicuous fleshy tip on either jaw, upper jaw

reaching to mid-point of eye at least; two detached anal and dorsal finlets; caudal fin widely forked, without caudal keels; belly keeled by bony scales between pelvic fins and anus; small cycloid scales, interspersed with rows of sharp spiny tubercles; body uniformly brown to dark brown, but lighter brown on the sides and belly (see Fig. 2).

Main morphometric measurements, including percentages of total length (% TL) and meristic counts (see Tab. 1) agree with previous descriptions of this species (Tortonese, 1975; Parin, 1986; Nakamura & Parin, 1993; Ben Amor et al., 2010; Capapé et al., 2019) allowing us to note that the present capture constitutes the second substantiated record of *Ruvettus pretiosus* from the Tunisian coast. With 1330 mm in TL and weighing 25,100 g, it was slightly larger and heavier than the first record, which measured 1220 mm in TL and weighed 21,750 g. According to Parin (1986) the maximum size for oilfish is 2 m standard length, 3 m according to Nakamura & Parin (1993), for specimens from Pacific Ocean usually between 1000 and 1500 mm total length (Parin, 1986). Both specimens caught from the Tunisian coast could be considered as still juvenile.

Over a period of 12 years, only 2 specimens of *R. pretiosus* were caught in the Tunisian coast. The first capture occurred off Zarzis, southern Tunisia, at a low depth, although *R. pretiosus* preferentially inhabits deep and locally poorly exploited bottoms. Such scarcity of records indicates that the species is only sporadically caught in the area and this opinion was confirmed by information provided by local fishermen (Ben Amor et al., 2010).

This second capture of *R. pretiosus* indicates the limit of the species' extension range in Tunisian waters and suggests a possible migration from southern towards northern areas. However, Tortonese (1975) noted that the core of the Mediterranean population of *R. pretiosus* is restricted to Italian seas and the northern Adriatic. Therefore, migration from the Italian seas to the northern Tunisian coast cannot be totally ruled out either. Conversely, Tserpes et al. (2006) noted that in Greek swordfish fishery the main bulk of by-catch is composed of oilfish. Therefore, occurrences of viable populations of *R. pretiosus* in some Mediterranean regions remain a suitable hypothesis. The scarcity of the species in local fish markets is probably due to the fact the species generally inhabits deep bottoms, which are poorly exploited. Additionally, the flesh of *R. pretiosus* is not particularly appreciated or widely used for human consumption due to its purgative effects if eaten in larger quantities (Nakamura & Parin, 1993). Therefore, the species has a low economical interest and is mainly discarded at sea.



Fig. 2: The *Ruvettus pretiosus* (ref. INSTM Gem-rup-01) caught in north-eastern Tunisian waters, scale bar = 200 mm. Insert showing the head of the same specimen, scale bar = 100 mm.

Sl. 2: Primerek vrste *Ruvettus pretiosus* (ref. INSTM Gem-rup-01), ujet v severovzhodnih tunizijskih vodah (merilo = 200 mm). Izrez prikazuje glavo istega primerka (merilo = 100 mm).

During the last few decades, several thermophilic species have appeared throughout Mediterranean due to the tropicalisation of the sea (Francour *et al.*, 1994), affecting the Mediterranean ichthyofauna, in which several alien species seemed to have successfully established since the early 1900s according to Golani *et al.* (2017), after having migrated from the Red Sea (Lessepsian migrant, *sensu* Por 1978) and/or the

eastern tropical Atlantic (Herculean migrant, *sensu* Quignard & Tomasini 2000). *R. pretiosus* appears to be more abundant off the western African coast and has been commonly observed in Senegalese fish markets, for instance (Capapé *et al.*, 2019; Diatta, *pers. comm.* 2021). A possible Mediterranean recruitment of the species originating from these latter areas cannot be dismissed, even if it needs confirmation *via* further records.

DRUGI ZAPIS O POJAVLJANJU VRSTE *RUVETTUS PRETIOSUS* (GEMPYLIDAE) V TUNIZIJSKIH VODAH (OSREDNJE SREDOZEMSKO MORJE)

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POVZETEK

Avtorji poročajo o drugem zapisu o pojavljanju redke vrste ribe kostnice, *Ruvettus pretiosus* Cocco, 1833, iz tunizijskih voda. Primerek je meril 133 cm v dolžino in tehtal 25.1 kg. Ujeli so ga v severnem predelu Tunizije. Redkost te vrste na obravnavanem območju je verjetno posledica dejstva, da prebiva na bolj globokem in slabše izkoriščanem dnu, poleg tega ima nizko komercialno vrednost.

Ključne besede: *Ruvettus pretiosus*, tunizijske vode, razširjenost, osrednje Sredozemlje, širjenje areala

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