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VSEBINA / INDICE GENERALE / CONTENTS

SREDOZEMSKE HRUSTANČNICE
SQUALI E RAZZE MEDITERRANEE
MEDITERRANEAN SHARKS AND RAYS**Christian CAPAPÉ, Christian REYNAUD & Farid HEMIDA**

- The First Substantiated Records of Smoothback Angelshark *Squatina oculata* (Squatinidae) from the Algerian Coast (Southwestern Mediterranean Sea) 143
Prvi utemeljeni zapis o pojavljanju pegastega sklata Squatina oculata (Squatinidae) iz alžirske obale (jugozagahodno Sredozemsko morje)

Tanguy CARPAYE-TAILAMEE & Mattéo MAUREL

- Perspective on Great White Sharks (*Carcharodon carcharias*) in the Northwestern Mediterranean and Recommendations for Further Field Research 151
Pogled na velikega belega morskega volka (Carcharodon carcharias) v severozahodnem Sredozemlju in priporočila za nadaljnje terenske raziskave

Hakan KABASAKAL

- A Preliminary Social Media Survey of Sharks and Batoids Captured in North Aegean Sea Commercial Fisheries 165
Preliminarna raziskava o morskih psih in skatih, ujetih v komercialnem ribištvu severnega Egejskega morja na osnovi podatkov iz socialnih medijev

Farid HEMIDA, Christian REYNAUD & Christian CAPAPÉ

- On The Occurrence of Norwegian Skate, *Dipturus nidarosiensis* (Rajidae) on the Algerian Coast (Southwestern Mediterranean Sea) 187
O pojavljanju norveške raže, Dipturus nidarosiensis (Rajidae), ob alžirski obali (jugozagahodno Sredozemsko morje)

Alen SOLDO

- The First Record of Complete Albinism in Common Stingray *Dasyatis pastinaca* (Linnaeus, 1758) 193
Prvi zapis o najdbi popolnega albinističnega primerka navadnega morskega biča, Dasyatis pastinaca (Linnaeus, 1758)

Christian CAPAPÉ, Christian REYNAUD & Farid HEMIDA

- Capture of a Giant Round Fantail Stingray *Taeniurus grabatus* (Dasyatidae) from the Algerian Coast (Southwestern Mediterranean Sea) 199
Ulov okroglega morskega biča (Taeniurus grabatus) (Dasyatidae) iz alžirske obale (jugozagahodno Sredozemsko morje)

IHTIOFAVNA
ITTOFAUNA
ICHTHYOFAUNA**Nicola BETTOSO & Diego BORME**

- Recent Record of the Atlantic Pomfret *Brama brama* (Bonnaterre, 1788) (Scombriformes: Bramidae) in the Gulf of Trieste (Northern Adriatic Sea) 207
Recentni zapis o pojavljanju kostanjevke Brama brama (Bonnaterre, 1788) (Scombriformes: Bramidae) v Tržaškem zalivu (severno Jadransko morje)

Alan DEIDUN, Bruno ZAVA, Alessio MARRONE, Johann GALTIES, Arnold SCIBERRAS & Maria CORSINI-FOKA

- The Confirmed Occurrence of *Schedophilus medusophagus* (Cocco, 1839) and *Petromyzon marinus* Linnaeus, 1758 in Maltese Waters, Central Mediterranean 213
Potrjeno pojavljanje meduzojedca, Schedophilus medusophagus (Cocco, 1839), in morskega piškurja, Petromyzon marinus Linnaeus, 1758, v malteških vodah, osrednje Sredozemsko morje

Gianni INSACCO, Gildo GAVANELLI, Bruno ZAVA & Maria CORSINI-FOKA

- An Overlooked Finding of *Mola alexandrini* (Ranzani, 1839) in the Adriatic Sea 221
Spregledana najdba vrste Mola alexandrini (Ranzani, 1839) v Jadranskem morju

Borut MAVRIČ, Lovrenc LIPEJ, Jelena BELAMARIĆ, Dule BULAJA, Matea ŠPIK & Petar KRUŽIĆ

- Additional Data on the Bump-Head Sunfish, *Mola alexandrini* (Ranzani, 1839) in the Adriatic Sea 229
Dodatni podatki o pojavljanju grbastega morskega meseca, Mola alexandrini (Ranzani, 1839) v Jadranskem morju

Lana KHREMA, Amina ALNESSER, Adib SAAD & Christian CAPAPÉ

First Substantiated Record of Painted Eel *Echelus myrus* (Ophichthidae) from the Syrian Marine Waters (Eastern Mediterranean Sea) 235
Prvi utemeljeni zapis o pojavljanju pisane jegulje, Echelus myrus (Ophichthidae), iz morskih voda Sirije (vzhodno Sredozemsko morje)

BIOTSKA GLOBALIZACIJA
GLOBALIZZAZIONE BIOTICA
BIOTIC GLOBALIZATION

Deniz ERGUDEM, Deniz AYAS & Zafer KUŞATAN

The Presence of *Hippocampus fuscus* Rüppell, 1838, in the Northeastern Mediterranean Sea 243
Pojavljanje morskega konjička vrste Hippocampus fuscus Rüppell, 1838, v severovzhodnem Sredozemskem morju

Christian CAPAPÉ & Adib SAAD

Confirmed Occurrence of Pharaoh Cardinal Fish *Apogonichthyooides pharaonis* (Osteichthyes: Apogonidae) from the Syrian Coast (Eastern Mediterranean Sea) 249
Potrjeno pojavljanje faraonskega kraljička Apogonichthyooides pharaonis (Osteichthyes: Apogonidae) iz sirske obale (vzhodno Sredozemsko morje)

Deniz ERGUDEM, Deniz AYAS & Cemal TURAN

First Record of *Epinephelus areolatus* (Epinephelidae) from the South-Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey 255
Prvi zapis o pojavljanju rdečepikčaste kirnje Epinephelus areolatus (Epinephelidae) v jugovzhodnem Sredozemskem morju (Turčija)

FAVNA
FAUNA
FAUNA

Andrea LOMBARDO & Giuliana MARLETTA

First Record of the Marine Heterobranch *Spinoaglaja wildpretii* (Ortea, Bacallado & Moro, 2003) (Cephalaspidea: Aglajidae) in Sicily (Ionian Sea) with Notes on Its Biology and Ecology 263
Prvi zapis o pojavljanju morskega zaškrgarja vrste Spinoaglaja wildpretii (Ortea, Bacallado & Moro, 2003) (Cephalaspidea: Aglajidae) na Siciliji (Jonsko morje) z zapiski o njeni biologiji in ekologiji

Marco FANTIN, Saul CIRIACO, Lisa FARESI, Chiara SCRIGNER, Juri VECCHI, Domen TRKOV & Lovrenc LIPEJ

First Evidence of the Presence of *Okenia picoensis* Paz-Sedano, Ortigosa & Pola, 2017 (Gastropoda: Nudibranchia) in the Adriatic Sea 271
Prvi zapis o pojavljanju vrste gološkrgarja Okenia picoensis Paz-Sedano, Ortigosa & Pola, 2017 (Gastropoda: Nudibranchia) iz Jadranskega morja

FLORA**FLORA****FLORA****Amelio PEZZETTA & MARCO PAOLUCCI**

La flora di Lama dei Peligni (Abruzzo, Italia): aggiornamento sistematico e nuove segnalazioni 279
Flora občine Lama dei Peligni (Abruci, Italija): sistematična posodobitev in nove najdbe

MISCELLANEA**AI VREZEC**

Bird (Aves) Descriptions of Joannes Antonius Scopoli (1723-1788): General Overview 327
Opisi ptic (Aves) Joannesa Antonisa Scopolija (1723-1788): osnovni pregled

OCENE IN POROČILA

RECENSIONI E RELAZIONI
REVIEWS AND REPORTS

Mitja KALIGARIČ

Recenzija knjige: Podobe iz modrine 365

IN MEMORIAM**Elide CATALFAMO**

Ricordo del professor Guido Bressan 369

Kazalo k slikam na ovitku 371

Index to images on the cover 371

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CAPTURE OF A GIANT ROUND FANTAIL STINGRAY *TAENIUROPS GRABATUS* (DASYATIDAE) FROM THE ALGERIAN COAST (SOUTHWESTERN MEDITERRANEAN SEA)

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ABSTRACT

The authors document the capture of a large specimen of round fantail stingray *Taeniurus grabatus* (Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, 1817) from the coast of Algeria. The individual *T. grabatus* measured 2.90 m in disc width and its total body weight was assessed to 300 kg. The specimen stands as the largest known to date, probably surpassing other dasyatid species and warranting recognition as a giant specimen. Additionally, this capture serves as evidence that Algerian marine waters provide favorable conditions for the species to thrive, with a viable population already successfully established in the region.

Keywords: Stingray, *Taeniurus grabatus*, population, size, total body weight

CATTURA DI UN GRANDE TRIGONE AFRICANO *TAENIUROPS GRABATUS* (DASYATIDAE) LUNGO LA COSTA ALGERINA (MAR MEDITERRANEO SUD-OCCIDENTALE)

SINTESI

Gli autori documentano la cattura di un grande esemplare di trigone africano *Taeniurus grabatus* (Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, 1817) lungo le coste dell'Algeria. L'individuo di *T. grabatus* in questione misurava 2,90 m di larghezza del disco e il suo peso corporeo totale è stato stimato a 300 kg. L'esemplare è il più grande finora ritrovato e probabilmente supera altre specie di dasiatidi. Viene pertanto riconosciuto come esemplare gigante. Questa cattura serve inoltre come prova del fatto che le acque marine algerine forniscono condizioni favorevoli alla prosperità della specie, con una popolazione vitale già stabilita con successo nella regione.

Parole chiave: trigone, *Taeniurus grabatus*, popolazione, taglia, peso corporeo totale

INTRODUCTION

The round fantail stingray *Taeniurus grabatus* (Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, 1817) has been documented along the western African coast from Mauritania to Angola, as well as around the São Tiago Island in the Cape Verde archipelago and the Azores (Ben Amor et al., 2019). *T. grabatus* is distributed throughout the southeastern Mediterranean, with reports of its occurrences in Turkish waters (Tunka Bengil & Basusta, 2018), the Levant Basin (Golani, 2005), and the Syrian and Lebanese coasts, which represent the easternmost extension of its range (Ali et al., 2013; Bariche & Fricke, 2020). One isolated case recorded in the north Tyrrhenian Sea was an accidental catch by an artisanal fishing vessel (Serena et al., 1999).

A viable population of *T. grabatus* was initially documented in the Gulf of Gabès, southern Tunisia, by Capapé (1989), but subsequently – probably prompted by interspecific competition pressure from other dasyatid species and the rising temperature of marine waters due to global warming (*sensu* Francour et al., 1994) – the species migrated to the Gulf of Tunis (Boudaya et al., 2018) and further north to the area off the city of Bizerte (Ben Amor et al., 2019). *T. grabatus* also migrated westward, reaching the Algerian coast, where it was recorded for the first time (Capapé et al., 2023). Subsequent observations have corroborated the occurrence of *T. grabatus* in Algerian marine waters, with most of these specimens attaining considerable sizes, including the largest one described in the present paper.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

All *T. grabatus* specimens from Algerian waters were collected in a region located off the eastern coast, between Skikda and Annaba, at 37°10' N and 7°15' E (Fig. 1), in the period from 1999 to 2020, and landed at the great fish market of Algiers. The largest specimen, a female captured on 16 April 2016, was measured for disc width (DW), while the fishermen provided an estimate of its total body weight (TBW). Morphometric measurements were not feasible because the specimen was sliced and promptly sold for local consumption.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The specimen under study was identified as *Taeniurus grabatus* following McEachran & Capapé (1984) and Ben Amor et al. (2019): disc nearly circular, wider than long; the distal part of the tail was missing, but at its beginning, it appeared to be compressed and with a membranous fold underneath; dorsal surface almost entirely rough, exhibiting several rows of spines extending from the middle of the disc to the beginning of the tail; dorsal surface brown with irregularly arranged dark blotches and vermiculations, belly beige (Fig. 2).

McEachran & Capapé (1984) and Capapé (1989) previously reported that the maximum disc width of *T. grabatus* could reach up to 1 m. However, the specimen described by Ben Amor et al. (2019) surpassed this measurement with a disc width of 1.12 m, along with a total length of 2.7 m and

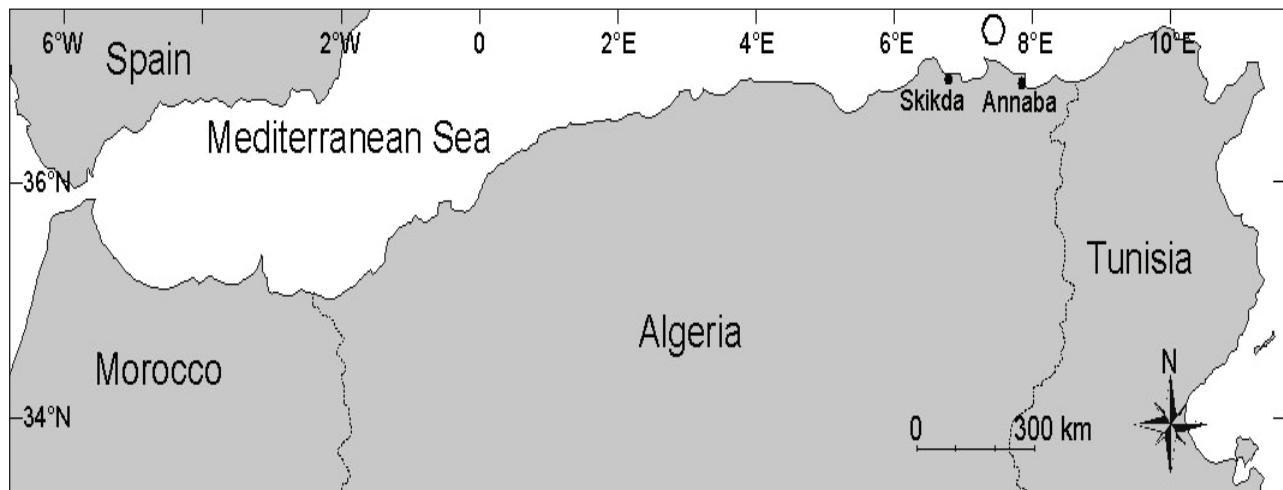


Fig. 1: Map of the Algerian coast, with a circle indicating the area between Skikda and Annaba where the giant female specimen of *Taeniurus grabatus* was caught (adapted from Capapé et al., 2023).

Sl. 1: Zemljevid alžirske obale s krogcem, ki označuje predel med Skikdo and Annabo, kjer je bila ujeta orjaška samica vrste *Taeniurus grabatus* (prirejeno po Capapé et al., 2023).



Fig. 2. Giant female specimen of *Taeniurops grabatus* captured off the Algerian coast, scale bar = 50 cm. Photo by Farid Hemida.

Sl. 2: Orjaška samica vrste *Taeniurops grabatus*, ujeta ob alžirski obali. Merilo = 50 cm. Foto: Farid Hemida.

a total body weight of 110 kg. It was considered the largest and heaviest *T. grabatus* ever recorded in Tunisian waters and possibly across the entire Mediterranean and beyond. In comparison, the present *T. grabatus*, with a disc width of 2.50 m and an estimated total body weight of 300 kg (but possibly more, as its tail was not preserved in its entirety to avoid sting injuries) was larger and heavier than the specimen from Ben Amor et al. (2019). Its remarkable size and weight could qualify it as a giant *T. grabatus* and one of the largest dasyatid specimens known to date. The

discovery of such a large specimen suggests that *T. grabatus* has found in Algerian marine waters the most favorable conditions for development and possibly reproduction on a global scale. Capapé et al. (2023) noted that the occurrence of the species in the region could be a result of migrations from the Tunisian coast, where the species is captured in relative abundance. While this hypothesis is possible, regular observations of specimens and information provided by fishermen indicate that a viable population of *T. grabatus* is now successfully established in the study area.

This discovery also serves as evidence that large elasmobranch species continue to inhabit the Mediterranean Sea; in fact, several instances of such species have been reported from the Maghreb shore for several decades, particularly off the Algerian coast (Hemida *et al.*, 2002; Capapé *et al.*, 2005; Hemida & Capapé, 2008; Hemida *et al.*, 2022). In full agreement with Giovos *et al.* (2019,

2022) and Kabasakal (2021), it is vital to implement a management plan within local fisheries that would involve an active participation of local fishermen, who already play an important role in preserving these species and preventing their possible extinction in areas where they habitually aggregate.

ULOV OKROGLEGA MORSKEGA BIČA (*TAENIUROPS GRABATUS*) (DASYATIDAE) IZ ALŽIRSKE OBALE (JUGOZAHODNO SREDOZEMSKO MORJE)

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POVZETEK

Avtorji poročajo o ulovu velikega primerka okroglega morskega biča *Taeniurus grabatus* (Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, 1817) iz alžirske obale. Meril je 2,90 m v premeru diska, težo pa so ocenili na 300 kg. Gre za orjaka, saj je do zdaj eden največjih izmerjenih primerkov, verjetno pa tudi eden največjih primerkov iz družine morskih bičev nasploh. Poleg tega ta ulov dokazuje, da alžirske morske vode nudijo ugodne razmere za uspevanje vrste, ki je v tem okolju že ustaljena, njena populacija pa je vitalna in sposobna preživetja.

Ključne besede: morski bič, *Taeniurus grabatus*, populacija, velikost, telesna teža

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