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

The First Substantiated Records of Smoothback Angelshark *Squatina oculata* (Squatinae) from the Algerian Coast (Southwestern Mediterranean Sea) 143
Prvi utemeljeni zapis o pojavljanju pegastega sklata Squatina oculata (Squatinae) iz alžirske obale (jugozahodno 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 (jugozahodno 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 *Taeniurops grabatus* (Dasyatidae) from the Algerian Coast (Southwestern Mediterranean Sea) 199
Ulov okroglega morskega biča (Taeniurops grabatus) (Dasyatidae) iz alžirske obale (jugozahodno Sredozemsko morje)

IHTIOFAUNA

ITTIOFAUNA

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 GALDIES, 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
Sprejeda 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 ERGUDEN, 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 *Apogonichthyoides
pharaonis* (Osteichthyes: Apogonidae)
from the Syrian Coast
(Eastern Mediterranean Sea) 249
*Potrjeno pojavljanje faraonskega
kraljička Apogonichthyoides
pharaonis (Osteichthyes: Apogonidae)
iz sirske obale (vzhodno
Sredozemsko morje)*

Deniz ERGUDEN, 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 zaškrjarja
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 gološkrjarja
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

Al VREZEC

Bird (Aves) Descriptions of Joannes
Antonius Scopoli (1723-1788):
General Overview 327
*Opisi ptic (Aves) Joannesa Antoniusa 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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FIRST EVIDENCE OF THE PRESENCE OF *OKENIA PICOENSIS* PAZ-SEDANO, ORTIGOSA & POLA, 2017 (GASTROPODA: NUDIBRANCHIA) IN THE ADRIATIC SEA

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ABSTRACT

*The authors report the finding of some specimens (8 sightings) of *Okenia picoensis* (Gastropoda: Nudibranchia) at three different sites in Croatia (northern Adriatic Sea). Although this seaslug species has only recently been described, this record confirms its rapid spread throughout the Mediterranean Sea. This finding represents the first substantiated record in the Adriatic Sea.*

Key words: Heterobranchia, spreading, northern Adriatic Sea

PRIME PROVE DELLA PRESENZA DI *OKENIA PICOENSIS* PAZ-SEDANO, ORTIGOSA & POLA, 2017 (GASTROPODA: NUDIBRANCHIA) NEL MARE ADRIATICO

SINTESI

*Gli autori riportano il ritrovamento di alcuni esemplari (8 avvistamenti) di *Okenia picoensis* (Gastropoda: Nudibranchia) in tre diversi siti della Croazia (Adriatico settentrionale). Sebbene questa specie di nudibranco sia stata descritta solo di recente, i dati confermano la sua rapida diffusione in tutto il Mediterraneo. Questo ritrovamento rappresenta il primo ritrovamento documentato nell'Adriatico.*

Parole chiave: Heterobranchia, espansione, Adriatico settentrionale

INTRODUCTION

Heterobranch gastropods have been gaining increasing attention from the scientific community, with fresh evidence consistently being published in specialised scientific literature. A significant contribution to their knowledge also comes from citizen science, which is recognised for its efficacy in collecting valuable and dependable data for diverse research purposes, as highlighted by Langeneck *et al.* (2022). According to Trainito *et al.* (2022), the intense fascination with ‘nudibranchs’, along with the technological development of increasingly powerful cameras, and their widespread use by divers have made diving a basic documentation tool for most researchers, as demonstrated by Bohnsack (1979) and Cattaneo-Vietti & Mojetta (2021). Moreover, with the growing number of underwater photographers (Parera *et al.*, 2020), discoveries of new, rare, or lesser-known heterobranchs are rapidly shared through social media, leading to the publication of many new heterobranch detections (e.g., Fortič *et al.*, 2021; Kousteni *et al.*, 2022; Montesanto *et al.*, 2022; Trainito *et al.*, 2023). The team of authors gathered around this article testifies to the

well-established cooperation between underwater photographers and researchers, confirming it with a new sighting of *Okenia picoensis* Paz-Sedano, Ortigosa & Pola, 2017 in the northern Adriatic Sea. This species was originally described from the Azores by Paz-Sedano *et al.* (2017), who identified two colour patterns: one white with yellow tips of the rhinophores and cerata, and the other pale yellow with orange tips (Paz-Sedano *et al.*, 2017). The first record of *O. picoensis* in the Mediterranean Sea was reported by Pontes and Madrenas (2022) at four different localities in Malta and off the coast of Almuñécar (Granada), Spain. Later, specimens of *O. picoensis* were recorded in different locations in Sicily (Crocetta *et al.*, 2021; Lombardo & Marletta, 2021). Afterwards, Trainito *et al.* (2022) published the first record of this species in Sardinia and provided a comprehensive list of all thirty documented sightings in the Mediterranean Sea to date, based on published records and specialist portals (DORIS; OPK-Opisthobranchis). They noted that almost all the records were derived from reports by non-specialists. Trainito *et al.* (2022) concluded that the spreading of *O. picoensis* involves the entire Mediterranean Sea save the Adriatic Sea.



Fig. 1: Locations of sighting. The red square indicates the location of the investigated area in the Adriatic Sea.
Sl. 1: Lokacije opazovanj. Rdeč okvir označuje lokacijo raziskanega predela v Jadranskem morju.

Tab. 1: Findings of *Okenia picoensis* specimens in the studied area with data about dates, sites, coordinates, number of specimens, depths, and habitats.**Tab. 1: Podatki o datumih, lokalitetah, številu primerkov, globinah in habitatih najdenih primerkih vrste *Okenia picoensis* na obravnavanem območju.**

Date		Site	Coordinates		n	Depth (m)	Habitat
			N	E			
1	dec. 22	Kostrena	45.30323	14.48866	1	11	Rocky bottom on <i>Codium bursa</i>
2	apr. 23	Marco Polo Diving	45.34083	14.37235	3	7	Rocky bottom on <i>Codium bursa</i>
3	jun. 23	Girandella diving	45.07949	14.17512	1	27	Rocky bottom on <i>Codium bursa</i>
4	jun. 23	Marco Polo Diving	45.34083	14.37235	1	22	Rocky bottom on <i>Codium bursa</i>
5	jun.23	Girandella diving	45.07949	14.17512	1	17,5	Rocky bottom on <i>Codium bursa</i>
6	aug. 23	Kostrena	45.30323	14.48866	1	23	Rocky bottom on <i>Codium bursa</i>

Herein, we report the first record of *O. picoensis* in the Adriatic Sea and discuss the accompanying information obtained in the region.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

A first specimen of *Okenia picoensis* was found in December 2022 at a depth of 11 m in Kostrena (Rijeka, Croatia) (Fig. 1). Subsequently, in April and May 2023, three more specimens were discovered at a depth of 6-7 m at the Marco Polo diving site near Rijeka, not far from the first location (Tab. 1). Finally, in June, the species was observed in the waters off Rabac (reef near the Girandella diving centre) in the eastern part of the Istrian Peninsula at a depth of 17 m, and again in August in the Kostrena area at a depth of 23 m. The specimens were identified using the diagnostic features described by Paz-Sedano *et al.* (2017). The validity of the Latin name was checked against the World Register of Marine Species [WoRMS]. The specimen from Kostrena was photographed using a Canon M50 with a mini flash backscatter, while the specimens from Rijeka were shot using a Nikon D800 and a Seacam150 flash with a macro lens Inon ucl67. The first specimen is now housed in the collection of the Marine Biology Station Piran (NIB).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Eight specimens of *Okenia picoensis* (Gastropoda: Nudibranchia) were recorded at three different sites in Croatia (northern Adriatic Sea).

The discovery areas were characterised by rocky bottom boulders of varying sizes and small inlets covered with a sciaphilous assemblage at depths ranging from 7 to 27 m. All the individuals were found on *Codium bursa* algae. According to published monographs and scientific papers (Betti, 2011; Ciriaco & Poloniato, 2016; Zenetos *et al.*, 2016; Lipej *et al.*, 2018; Prkić *et al.*, 2018, Ciriaco *et al.*, 2023), the species had not been previously recorded in the Adriatic Sea (Fig. 2).

Since *O. picoensis* has only recently been described, its ecological and biological characteristics are still poorly known. This sighting is the first documented record of this species in the Adriatic Sea. Considering the map of all records summarised by Trainito *et al.* (2022), which confirmed records for all parts of the Mediterranean except the Adriatic Sea, a first record in the latter was expected. In the northern Adriatic, *O. picoensis* was found at shallower depths (6 to 17 m) compared to other areas, where depths ranged from 15 to 34 m (Orfanidis *et al.*, 2021; Crocetta *et al.*, 2021; Lombardo & Marletta, 2021; Trainito *et al.*, 2022).

According to Pola *et al.* (2019), to date, at least five species of the genus *Okenia* have been recorded in the Adriatic Sea: *Okenia elegans* (Leuckart, 1828), *O. mediterranea* (Von Ihering, 1886), *O. aspersa* (Alder & Hancock, 1945), *O. longiductis* (Pola, Paz-Sedano, Macali, Minchin, Marchini, Vitale, Licchelli & Crocetta, 2019), *O. problematica* (Pola, Paz-Sedano, Macali, Minchin, Marchini, Vitale, Licchelli & Crocetta, 2019). All of these were also reported in the northern region of the Adriatic. The present finding of *O. picoensis*

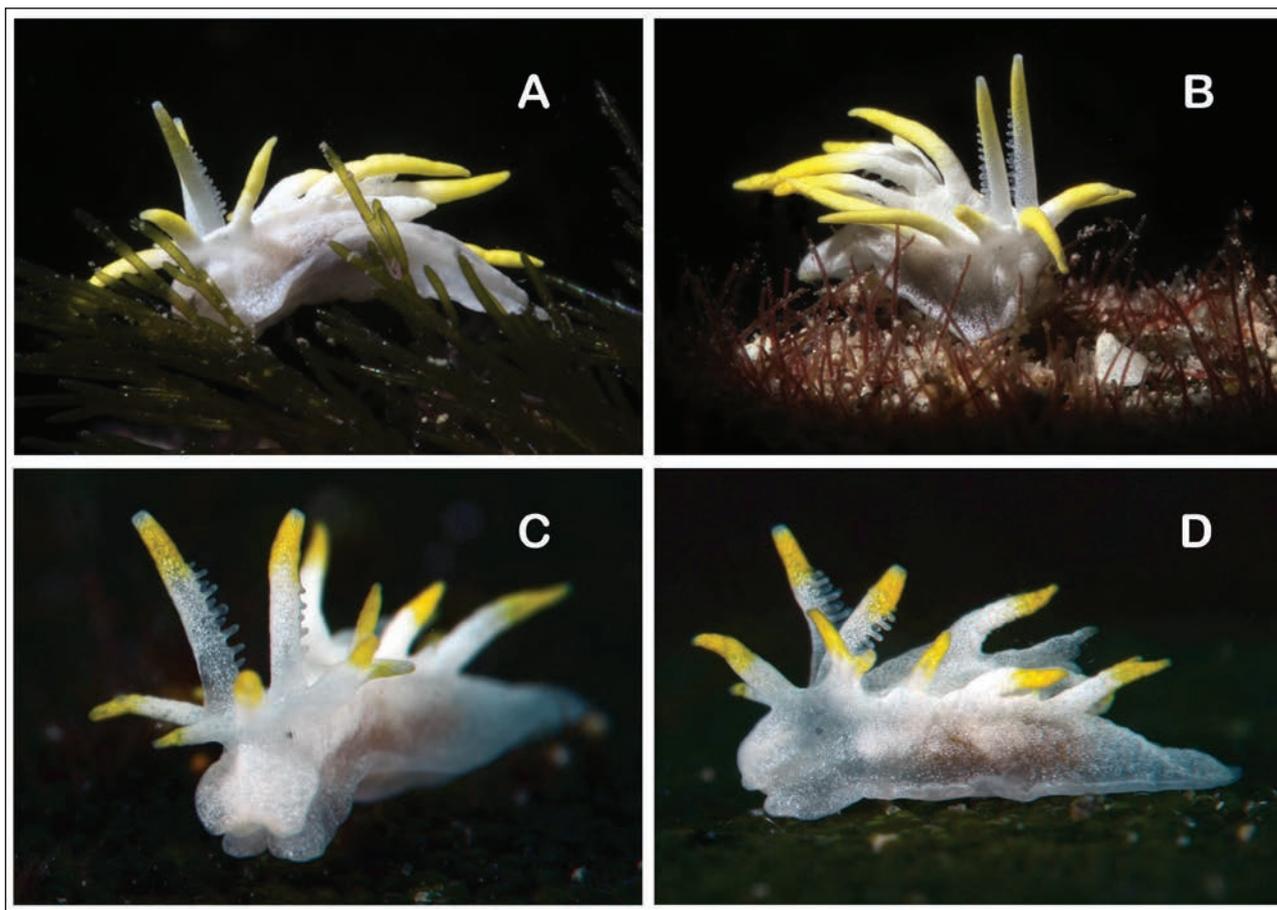


Fig. 2: A white morph of *Okenia picoensis*. **A, B** – a specimen photographed in Kostrena (Rijeka, northern Adriatic Sea) in December 2022 (photo: J. Vecchi); **C, D** – specimens photographed at the Marco Polo Diving Centre (Rijeka, Croatia) in April 2023 (photo: C. Scrigner).

Sl. 2: Bela različica vrste *Okenia picoensis*. **A, B** – primerek, fotografiran v Kostreni (Rijeka, severno Jadransko morje) v decembru 2022 (foto: J. Vecchi); **C, D** – primerka, fotografirana na lokaciji Marco Polo Diving Centre (Rijeka, Hrvatska) v aprilu 2023 (foto: C. Scrigner).

brings the total number of species in the Adriatic Sea to six for this genus.

Trainito *et al.* (2022) expressed some doubts regarding the status of *O. picoensis* as an alien species, suggesting that it might be more reasonable to consider *O. picoensis* a native species of the entire Atlanto-Mediterranean region. This consideration

raises the question whether the species has spread to the Adriatic from a specific part of the Mediterranean Sea or is simply a case of a previously overlooked nudibranch.

Due to its rapid expansion throughout the Mediterranean Sea, it is realistic to expect reports of this species from other parts of the Adriatic Sea as well.

PRVI ZAPIS O POJAVLJANJU VRSTE GOLOŠKRGARJA *OKENIA PICOENSIS*
PAZ-SEDANO, ORTIGOSA & POLA, 2017 (GASTROPODA: NUDIBRANCHIA)
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POVZETEK

Avtorji poročajo o najdbi osmih primerkov vrste Okenia picoensis (Gastropoda: Nudibranchia) na treh različnih lokacijah na Hrvaškem (severno Jadransko morje). Čeprav je bila ta vrsta šele pred kratkim opisana, pričujoči podatki potrjujejo, da se hitro razširja po Sredozemskem morju. Te najdbe predstavljajo prvi zapis o pojavljanju te vrste v Jadranskem morju.

Ključne besede: Heterobranchia, razširjanje, severno Jadransko morje

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