

## REPTILES, AMPHIBIANS OF THE MALTESE ISLANDS

SNAKES, GECKOS, LIZARDS, TURTLES, FROGS,  
FOUND IN MALTA

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The arid nature of our islands is a very suitable habitat for reptiles, for most of them thrive best in parched sunny lands. Although physical conditions are really ideal we have but few, but these few are extremely interesting. Our reptiles undergo no true hibernation, but they hide themselves in crevices or under stones in a semi-torpid state from December until the middle of February. The fact that none of our snakes are really dangerous is popularly attributed to the intervention of St. Paul who did not die as was expected after having been bitten by a viper as is related in the Acts of the Apostles. Personally I do not think that there were any poisonous snakes before the coming of St. Paul. The belief that our snakes were formerly poisonous probably arose from the fact that in other lands, the same snakes have been repeatedly confused with venomous vipers. Ronald Knox suggests that the snake which bit St. Paul was quite probably an imported specimen which had escaped from a ship.

With regard to lizards, in Malta, as elsewhere, double-tailed lizards are met with now and then but they are not a distinct species. Since lizards shed their tails and grow them again, it sometimes happens that an individual sheds it without complete release of one side of the tail and when the new tail starts growing, the two are carried side by side. In exceptional cases lizards may carry three tails.

This present article brings the list of Maltese reptiles and amphibians up to date. *Nothing* has been written on snakes since 1915 when the subject was treated by

G. Despott, M.B.E. An article on lizards from the pen of Baron G. J. De Fejervary of Hungary appeared in 1924. Before these two a list was compiled by Dr. G. Gulia in 1913. I shall now give my own list starting by snakes.

### THE SNAKES OF MALTA.

There are four different species of snakes in Malta: the Dark Green Snake, the Leopard Snake, the rare *Tarbophis algirius* which has not yet received a name, and the rarest of all the Cat Snake. The present writer has captured all four species.

*The Dark Green Snake (Zamenis gemonensis) Serp* (Maltese). This is a common snake inhabiting dry, stony and thorny localities. It frequently attains a length of five feet. There is a completely black variety of this snake with greyish underbelly known as *Z. gemonensis*, var *Carbonaria*. This is rarer than the common form, but in Comino this seems to be the contrary. One may often come across the shed skin of this snake, the skin being abandoned after moulting. This snake feeds on lizards and smaller snakes, as well as mice and eggs of birds that nest near the ground, such as the Marmora Warbler (*Bufula*), Grey Wagtail (*Zakak tad-dell*), Corn Bunting (*Durrajsa*), Short-toed Lark (*Bilbla*) and the Quail (*Summiena*). The snake itself is common at Buskett, Dingli, Zurrieq, Gnejna, Wied-il-Kbir, and the southern localities of Malta.

*The Leopard Snake (Coluber leopardinus,) Lijgha.* This snake is not as common as the preceding one. It is found nearer to buildings and shaded valleys. It frequently coils itself around branches of trees. It inhabits Southern Europe, especially Sicily, Italy, Greece, and it is considered to be the most graceful European snake. It varies in the background colouring of grey or yellow, but always possesses orange-brown or reddish, well defined blotches framed in black. It is usually a metre in length. I have caught specimens at Floriana, Marsa, Gnejna and many other localities.

*The Cat Snake (Tarbophis fallax or T. vivax.)* G. Despott includes in his list only the two foregoing snakes. G. Gulia before him, had also included the Cat

snake in his list, on the grounds that Giglioli had found it in Malta. Not having further evidence G. Despott did not accept it as one of our own snakes. But in 1927, Mr. Carm. Penza, former curator of the Argotti Botanical Gardens, found it in the General's Garden in Floriana. I myself can confirm this for I found a specimen in the Argotti Gardens in 1953. I am of the opinion that it should figure in our list. It can easily be distinguished from other European snakes by the vertical slit-like pupil. It grows to a length of one metre. It has a black dorsal design of a zigzag nature, with a row, on each side, of black blotches fitting alternately into the angles. The background colours are greyish and beautiful yellow. This snake is also recorded in stony places in Greece, Turkey, Asia Minor, Albania, Palestine, Egypt, where it is often believed to be dangerous to human beings, but its poison is only strong enough to kill its prey, which, according to Fleuchmann, consists of lizards, snakes and the smaller mammals. He also remarks that it dislikes extremes of heat or cold, and generally emerges from hiding in early morning and in the evening.

*Tarbophis algirus* snake. This is a species of snake in the same genus as the foregoing. As far as I know it has never been recorded by other writers. It was first found in Malta in 1927 by Mr. C. Penza in a ditch locally known as Foss tal-Bocci. The year after he caught another two in Marsa. In 1953 I myself found two specimens and another two were brought to me by my pupils at school. Again in May, 1954 I captured two young specimens. These facts seem to me to confirm its establishment in our Island. All the specimens which I caught myself or were brought to me, were found within Floriana, in the area from Portes-des-Bombes to Argotti Gardens. This snake is flesh coloured or yellowish with a series of black stripes, reaching from side to side of its body. The largest taken was 20 inches long.

#### GECKOS.

*Turkish Gecko (Hemidactylus turcicus) Wizgha.* Though not common it is sometimes found near or inside houses. When young it is dark with a banded tail, and

later it becomes lighter. It grows to a length of about four inches. Werner says that it is capable of changing colour. I rather think that this is a mistake. G. Despott in 1925 mentions casually, and without giving any Latin names, a house gecko (*Wizgha tad-djar*) which he claims to be found only in Comino. Most probably it is the usual *H. turcicus*.

*Wall Gecko (Tarentola mauritanica) Wizgha Sewda or Wizgha tal-Kampanja.* This gecko is very common in rural areas, and it grows to a length of six inches. Although its habits are nocturnal it likes to sun itself during the day on tree-trunks, vertical rock-faces and walls. There will be found the light and dark greyish forms which keep to matching surroundings for protection. By twilight geckos suddenly become very active, feeding on all sorts of insects, small lizards and other geckos. Their cries, made through their larynx, resemble the word "Gecko" but it is not very loud. It can only be heard well in the open country where large numbers of geckos congregate undisturbed during the night. Geckos are well distributed throughout the Mediterranean regions, especially on islands. They lay small white eggs with a leathery surface; they are difficult to catch and rear for they shed their tails very readily. The tail grows again in a month and then is less liable to come off. Geckos were formerly believed to carry leprosy, but though repulsive-looking, they are perfectly harmless.

*Ocellated Skink or Eyed Skink (Chacides ocellatus) Xahmet l-art.* This reptile is very common and often attains the length of ten inches. In Malta there is a light and a dark form, the latter being commoner. The hard scaly body and protected eyes allow it to dive and travel beneath sand, dust or soil at surprising speed. It feeds on insects. It suns itself continually in dry places, slinking quickly into some crevice if disturbed. It is very good for the terrarium.

#### LIZARDS, TURTLE AND FROG.

The lizards of our islands all belong to varieties and forms of the European Wall Lizard (*Lacerta muralis*), which has numerous sub-species, varieties and forms

distributed all over the Mediterranean regions, especially N.W. Africa, Central and S. Europe, Asia Minor etc., the most important being on islands. They inhabit arid, sunny places, and feed on all insects, spiders and young lizards. Their colours very considerably with age and sex.

*Maltese Wall Lizard.* (*Lacerta muralis*, var. *Despotti*. Fejerv.) *Gremxula*. Despott lists this common species as *L. muralis*; but De Fejervary pointed out that it lacks many characteristics of the typical form, and so renamed it as *L. muralis*, var. *Despotti*. As it is special to Malta I consider that it should be called the Maltese Wall Lizard.

*The Filfolia Lizard.* (*Lacerta muralis*, subsp. *filfolensis*). *Gremxula ta' Filfla*. On the small rock of Filfolia, lying about four miles off the southern coast of Malta, opposite Wied iz-Zurrieq, is found a black lizard with bluish or green markings. Its underside is brownish, greyish or yellowish. It grows to ten inches or more. Despott used the name given to it by Dr. De Bedriaga; *L. muralis* Var. *filfolensis*. But De Fejervary preferred it as a subspecies, and I agree with him.

*St. Paul's Island Lizard.* (*Lacerta muralis*. Var. *Kieselbachi*). *Gremxula ta' Selmunett*. This is just like the Maltese Wall Lizard, except for small black spots on the underside. G. Despott found it on the small island of Selmunett near St. Paul's Bay in 1913. He did not give it a Maltese or Latin name. But De Fejervary confirmed it as a variety, naming it after Dr. Julius Kieselbach.

*Fungus Rock Lizard.* (*Lacerta muralis*, var. *generalensis*). *Gremxula ta' Hagret il-General*. This lizard is very similar to the St. Paul's Island lizard, but it has larger spots. It was discovered by Gulia in 1914 on the small Fungus or General Rock near Dwejra at Gozo. He named it *Lacerta generalensis*, but Despott was sceptical about giving it a specific name, saying that it should not even be called a variety, but only a form, yet De Fejervary accepts it as *L. muralis* var. *Generalensis*. Gulia.

Giglioli was of the opinion that the lizard known as *Phyllodactylus* was found in our Islands. Dr. Gulia and

G. Despott did not include it in their lists, as they had never seen it. But in 1925 Despott said he saw it on Filfolia. I doubt such an assertion, since he did not capture it.

Lizards may lay eggs in captivity, but they have never been known to hatch. There is a method used in S. Italy by which lizards can be easily caught. A loop is made at the end of a long stem of grass (*Avena*) which is placed in front of the lizard and then quickly passed over its neck and lifted up.

*Loggerhead Turtle.* (*Testudo caretta*). *Fekruna tal-Bahar*. This is the only turtle that is indigenous to Malta. It is commonly taken and used for food in autumn, and less frequently in Spring. On rare occasions it has been known to lay eggs in the sand in Gozo. Dr. Gulia also includes *Testudo graeca*, *T. mauritanica*, and *T. marginata*, but I agree with Despott that they cannot really be called our own.

*The Painted Frog.* (*Discoglossus pictus*). *Zring*. This is the only frog found in Malta. It is extremely common and breeds throughout the year. It is an exclusive island species, and can be found in Sicily and Sardinia. There are two forms of our frog not mentioned by Despott: the form *Vittata* and the form *Ocellata*, the latter predominating.

Having glanced at our living reptiles it is interesting to note that the following fossil turtles have been found in Malta: *Testudo gaudense*, *T. robusta*, and *T. robustissima*, as well as the common toad *Bufo vulgaris*; the last three being found in Quaternary deposits.

For those who wish to know more about this subject, relevant matter from the following books would be of interest -- in fact they are, with this article, the only printed documents dealing with the subject: The Zoologist, Sept., 1915, Preliminary Notes on the Lacertian fauna of the Maltese Islands, by Baron G. J. De Fejervary (1924) and "I nostri rettili," by G. Despott, 1913 from the Archivum Melitense Vol. II, pp. 93-96. In another connection the story of the encounter of St. Paul with a viper in Malta can be read in the Acts of the Apostles Ch. 28, v. 3-6.