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NEW RECORD OF THE LONG-JAWED SQUIRRELFISH, *HOLOCENTRUS ADSCENSIONIS* (OSBECK, 1765), IN THE ADRIATIC SEA

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ABSTRACT

On 16 October 2025, a specimen of the long-jawed squirrelfish, *Holocentrus adscensionis* (Osbeck, 1765), was caught in the waters of Porto Montenegro, Tivat (Boka Kotorska, Montenegro). This finding represents the first record of this non-indigenous species in the inventory of Montenegrin marine fish fauna and the second record in the Adriatic Sea.

Key words: *Holocentrus adscensionis*, Holocentridae, bioinvasion, Boka Kotorska, Adriatic Sea

NUOVO AVVISTAMENTO DEL PESCE SCOIATTOLO, *HOLOCENTRUS ADSCENSIONIS* (OSBECK, 1765), NEL MAR ADRIATICO

SINTESI

Il 16 ottobre 2025, un esemplare di pesce scoiattolo, *Holocentrus adscensionis* (Osbeck, 1765), è stato catturato nelle acque di Porto Montenegro, Tivat (Boka Kotorska, Montenegro). Questa scoperta rappresenta la prima registrazione di questa specie non autoctona nell'inventario della fauna ittica marina montenegrina e la seconda registrazione nell'Adriatico.

Parole chiave: *Holocentrus adscensionis*, Holocentridae, bioinvasione, Boka Kotorska, Adriatico

INTRODUCTION

Climate change has been recognised as a major factor influencing Mediterranean biodiversity, alongside Atlantic influx, Lessepsian migration, and the introduction of exotic species by humans (Turan *et al.*, 2016). A similar trend is evident in the Adriatic Sea, where rapid biodiversity changes are occurring due to the increasing arrival of non-indigenous fishes and other taxa (Dulčić *et al.*, 1999; Lipej & Dulčić, 2004). The number of established alien species is expected to increase further in the near future, largely through the natural spread of populations already established in the central Mediterranean (Zenetos, 2010).

This paper presents a record of a non-indigenous fish species caught in the study area and explores possible explanations for its occurrence.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Boka Kotorska is an 87 km² fjord-like bay in the eastern part of the southern Adriatic Sea, with a

coastline of 105.7 km. It comprises three distinct areas – the outer bay (Herceg Novi Bay), the middle bay (Tivat Bay), and the inner bay (Kotor-Risan Bay) – and is characterised by unique hydrological, geomorphological, climatological, and biotic factors (Gamulin-Brida, 1983) (Fig. 1). On 16 October 2025, Zoran Ćuk, a local fisherman, captured a specimen of an unknown fish while stick-float fishing at night near the Porto Montenegro marina (42.431497° N and 18.691224° E) in Tivat, located in the middle bay (Boka Kotorska, Montenegro). The catch occurred at a depth of approximately 11 m over a muddy bottom. The fisherman photographed the specimen – which had a total length of approximately 24 cm – and released it alive. The photograph was subsequently provided to the authors for analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The specimen (Fig. 2) exhibited all the typical characteristics that allowed it to be identified as *Holocentrus adscensionis* (Osbeck, 1765): body



Fig. 1: Map showing the location (Porto Montenegro, Tivat Bay, Montenegro) where the specimen of the long-jawed squirrelfish, *Holocentrus adscensionis*, was caught.

Sl. 1: Zemljevid z označeno lokaliteto (lokaliteta Porto Montenegro, Tivatski zaliv, Črna gora), kjer je bil ujet primerek veveričjaka *Holocentrus adscensionis*.



Fig. 2: Specimen of the long-jawed squirrelfish, *Holocentrus adscensionis*, caught on 16 October 2025 in the waters of Porto Montenegro (Tivat, Boka Kotorska, Montenegro) (photo: Z. Ćuk).

Sl. 2: Primerek veveričjaka, *Holocentrus adscensionis*, ujet 16. oktobra 2025 v vodah marine Porto Montenegro (Tivat, Boka Kotorska, Crna gora) (foto: Z. Ćuk).

oblong and laterally compressed, reddish with alternating red and white horizontal stripes; head pointed, with large eyes; upper jaw longer than the lower and extending beyond the centre of the eye; area between preopercle and opercle bearing rows of serrations; dorsal fin lacking the white spots behind the spine tips that are characteristic of the congeneric species *H. rufus* (Greenfield, 2003). The photograph obtained from the fisherman clearly shows the typical striped coloration, the eleven dorsal spines of subequal length lacking the white spots, and the evident preopercular spine. The caudal lobes are elongate, with the upper lobe markedly longer than the lower (*sensu* Woods, 1955).

The species *H. adscensionis* is a reef-associated fish of the family Holocentridae, occurring in the western Atlantic ranges from North Carolina (USA) and Bermuda to Brazil (Woods & Greenfield, 1978), and in the eastern Atlantic from Gabon to Ascension Island (Ben-Tuvia, 1990). It inhabits depths from shallow tide pools to 180 m, most commonly

between 8 and 30 m (Wyatt, 1983). It is a typically nocturnal species, spending the day hiding in crevices and cavities, and emerging at night to feed, mainly on crabs and other small crustaceans (Greenfield, 1981). The Porto Montenegro is a large, modern marina; however, its piers, overgrown with rich epibenthic fauna, contain many crevices and cracks that offer potential shelter for squirrelfish. It is also possible that the species occurs in adjacent areas, but due to its nocturnal behaviour it could easily be overlooked.

Prior to this study, there were no records of *H. adscensionis* from Montenegrin waters. In the Mediterranean Sea, the species had previously been reported only twice: first by Vella *et al.* (2016) in Maltese waters, and later by Ciriaco *et al.* (2022) from the Gulf of Trieste in the Adriatic Sea. The arrival of *H. adscensionis* is likely related to the gradual warming of the Mediterranean Sea (Occhipinti-Ambrogi & Galil, 2010). Novel arrivals via Atlantic influx are relatively uncommon in

the Adriatic Sea, since the main recognised entry route for non-indigenous fishes is the Suez Canal, through which more than 100 immigrant species have entered the Mediterranean Sea (Golani *et al.*, 2021). Vella *et al.* (2016) also considered the possibility that this species might have been introduced into Maltese waters through maritime activities in major ports. Given that *H. adscensionis* typically inhabits tropical and subtropical waters with temperatures ranging from approximately 23°C to 30°C (Reef Life Survey, 2025), we assume that winter water temperatures in Boka Kotorska are too low for the species to survive and become established.

To date, only records of seven alien fish species have been published in Montenegrin waters – including *Pterois miles* (Tomanić *et al.*, 2022) – which is relatively few compared to other Mediterranean regions. Based on the three occasional findings of the long-jawed squirrelfish in geographically disparate areas of the Mediterranean Sea (Malta, the Gulf of Trieste, and Boka Kotorska), it is too early to speculate on its spread or potential establishment in the area. However, the experience with its close relative, the redcoat, *Sargocentron rubrum* (Forsskål, 1775), first detected in the basin eighty years ago off Palestine marine waters ((Haas & Steinitz, 1947) and now considered one of the most successful colonisers in the Mediterranean Sea (Azzurro

et al., 2014) demonstrates that some species can rapidly find a niche in a new environment, establish themselves, and begin to spread. Furthermore, two new squirrelfish species have been reported for the first time in the Mediterranean Sea in recent years, namely *Neoniphon sammara* (Forsskål, 1775) (Deef, 2021; Mehanna & Osman, 2022) from Egyptian waters and *S. caudimaculatum* (Rüppell, 1838) from Tunisian waters (Ghanem *et al.*, 2022).

Although the specimen described here was not preserved in a formal museum collection, as recommended by best-practice guidelines (*sensu* Bello *et al.*, 2014), high-quality photographic evidence provided reliable documentation for confirming the species' presence (Dulčić *et al.*, 2006; Kovačić *et al.*, 2020). This case underscores the important role of citizen science in contributing data on alien species.

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NOVI ZAPIS O POJAVLJANJU VEVERIČJAKA VRSTE *HOLOCENTRUS ADSCENSIONIS* (OSBECK, 1765) V JADRANSKEM MORJU

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POVZETEK

Ribič je 16. oktobra 2025 ujel primerek tujerodnega veveričjaka vrste *Holocentrus adscensionis* (Osbeck, 1765) v vodah marine Porto Montenegro (Tivat, Boka Kotorska, Črna gora). Gre za prvi zapis o pojavljanju te vrste za črnogorsko morsko ribjo favno in drugi zapis o pojavljanju v Jadranu.

Ključne besede: *Holocentrus adscensionis*, Holocentridae, bioinvazija, Boka Kotorska, Jadransko morje

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