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FIRST SUBSTANTIATED RECORD OF PAINTED EEL *ECHELUS MYRUS* (OPHICHTHIDAE) FROM SYRIAN MARINE WATERS (EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN SEA)

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ABSTRACT

The present paper reports the first substantiated record of the painted eel Echelus myrus *(Linnaeus, 1758) from the coast of Syria. The specimen measured 591 mm in total length, with a total body weight of 220 g. This record confirms the occurrence of this species in Syrian marine waters and the Levant Basin, filling the gap between the coast of Lebanon and other areas of the eastern Mediterranean, including the coast of Turkey.*

Keywords: *Echelus myrus*, Ophichthidae, distribution, Levant Basin

PRIMA IDENTIFICAZIONE COMPROVATA DEL MIRO, *ECHELUS MYRUS* (OPHICHTHIDAE), DALLE ACQUE MARINE SIRIANE (MAR MEDITERRANEO ORIENTALE)

SINTESI

Il presente articolo riporta la prima segnalazione documentata del miro, Echelus myrus *(Linnaeus, 1758), lungo le coste della Siria. L'esemplare misurava 591 mm di lunghezza totale, con un peso corporeo totale di 220 g. Questo ritrovamento conferma la presenza della specie nelle acque marine siriane e nel bacino del Levante, colmando il divario tra la costa del Libano e altre aree del Mediterraneo orientale, compresa la costa della Turchia.*

Parole chiave: *Echelus myrus*, Ophichthidae, distribuzione, Bacino del Levante

INTRODUCTION

The painted eel *Echelus myrus* (Linnaeus, 1758) occurs in the waters of the northeastern Atlantic, spanning from the Bay of Biscay to the coast of Portugal (Quéro *et al.*, 2003). South of the Straits of Gibraltar, *E. myrus* has been reported from Morocco (Lloris & Rucabado, 1998), Mauritania, and Senegal (Maurin & Quéro, 1981), extending to the Gulf of Guinea (Blache, 1968), and as far as Angola according to Bauchot (1986). *E. myrus* occurs throughout the Mediterranean, though somewhat more abundantly in southern and western areas (Bauchot, 1986; Golani, 2005), and in the Adriatic Sea (Lipej & Dulčić, 2010). The species is very rarely found off the Tunisian coast and has only been recorded in the southern Gulf of Gabès by Ben Othman (1971) and off Ras Jebel city on the northern coast of Tunisia (Rafrafi-Nouira *et al.*, 2015).

Eastward, *E. myrus* has been documented along the Mediterranean shore of Egypt and the coast of Turkey (Bilecenoglu *et al.*, 2014), as well as in the Levant Basin (Golani, 2005; Bariche & Fricke, 2020). The species had been previously reported from the Syrian coast by Sbaihi (1994), but no specimen was available for confirmation, nor does *E. myrus* appear in the fish species list compiled for this region by Saad (2005) and Ali (2018). Regular investigations conducted in the Syrian marine waters and the assistance of local fishermen have allowed for the capture of the specimen that is herein described and accompanied by remarks about the species distribution.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

On 3 June 2023, a specimen of painted eel *Echelus myrus* was captured by an angler at a depth of 9 m, off Jableh city on the Syrian coast (35°22′12.33″N, 35°54′50.82″E) (Fig. 1). All meristic counts and morphometric measurements, with the length recorded to the nearest millimetre and the total body weight to the nearest gram, are included in Table 1. The specimen was preserved in 10% buffered formaldehyde and deposited in the Ichthyological Collection of the Marine Sciences Laboratory, Faculty of Agriculture, Tishreen University, with catalogue number MSL 1/2023.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The specimen measured 591 mm in total length (TL), its total body weight was 220 g. Compared to the maximum TLs noted by Tortonese (1970) and Bauchot (1986), 800 mm and 1 m, respectively, it was a medium-sized specimen. It was identified as *E. myrus* based on the combination of the following diagnostic characters: body very elongate, compressed posteriorly, anus slightly anterior to midbody; snout subconical; anterior nostril tubular, directed downward and with trilobate edge, opening near snout tip; posterior nostril an oval pore covered by a dermal fold, opening before eye, in margin of upper lip; rictus of mouth below posterior edge of eye; dorsal and anal fins well developed, folding into a deep dermal groove; dorsal fin origin slightly behind pectoral fin base; teeth conical, long, slightly acute and curved on both jaws, shorter, almost granular on vomer; colouration greyish mixed with dark yellow or brownish, darker dorsally; cephalic lateral lines unpigmented; dorsal and anal fins blackish in posterior third, lighter anteriorly (Fig. 2).

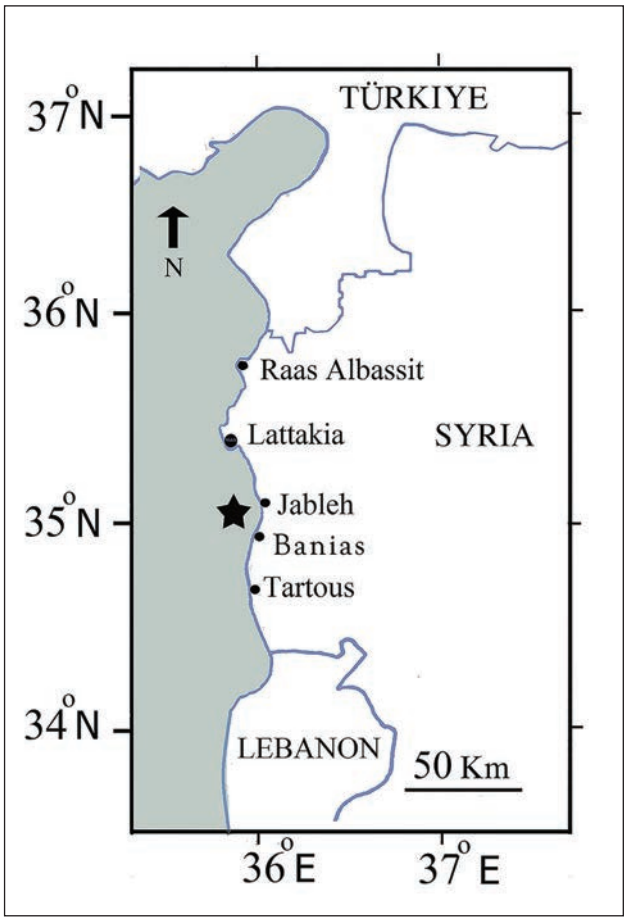

Fig. 1. Map of the Syrian coast with a star indicating the capture site of the studied specimen of *Echelus myrus* ***(ref. MSL 1/2023), off Jableh.***
Sl. 1: Zemljevid sirske obale z označeno lokacijo ulova (zvezdica) primerka vrste *Echelus myrus* ***(ref. MSL 1/2023) ob Jablehu.***

Tab. 1: Morphometric measurements in mm and as percentages of total length (% TL) recorded in the** Echelus myrus **specimen (ref. MSL-1/2023) captured off Jableh, compared with the respective data recorded in a specimen (ref. FSB-Ech-myr.01) captured off Ras Jebel in northern Tunisia (Rafrafi-Nouira** et al.**, 2015).
Tab. 1: Morfometrične meritve v mm in delež telesne dolžine (% celotne dolžine) primerka vrste** Echelus myrus **(ref. MSL-1/2023), ujetega ob Jablehu, v primerjavi s podatki primerka (ref. FSB-Ech-myr.01), ujetega ob lokaciji Ras Jebel v severni Tuniziji (Rafrafi-Nouira** et al.**, 2015).

Morphometric measurements	**This study (MSL 1/2023)**		**Rafrafi-Nouira *et al.* (2015) (FSB-Ech-myr.01)**	
	mm	%TL	mm	%TL
Total length	591	100.0	550	100.0
Body depth	29	4.9	23	4.1
Head length	57	9.6	42	7.6
Preanal length	250	42.3	250	45.4
Predorsal length	80	13.5	91	16.6
Prepectoral length	61	10.3	68	12.3
Dorsal fin length	491	83	457	83
Anal fin length	331	56	304	55.2
Pectoral fin length	17	2.8	7	1.2
Eye diameter	7	1.2	11	1.8
Preorbital length	12	2	15	2.7
Interorbital length	10	1.7	8	1.4
Length of upper jaw	18	3.1	28	5.0
Length of lower jaw	16	2.7	26	4.6
Meristic counts				
Number of pores in *linea lateralis*	114		103	
Pectoral fin soft rays	12		13	
Total body weight in grams	220		129	

The general morphology, morphometric measurements, meristic counts, and colour of the specimen were in total agreement with previous descriptions of the species by Dieuzeide *et al.* (1954), Tortonese (1970), Bauchot (1986), and Rafrafi-Nouira *et al.* (2015). This capture confirms the occurrence of *E. myrus* in Syrian marine waters and the species can therefore be included in the local ichthyofauna. This makes *E. myrus* one of the 3 species of the family Ophichthyidae present in the area, alongside the longjaw snake eel, *Ophisurus serpens* (Linnaeus, 1758), and the armless snake eel *Dalophis imberbis* (Delaroche, 1809), as documented by Al Shawy *et al.* (2019) and Capapé *et al.* (2021).

E. myrus generally inhabits soft bottoms up to 110 m in depth (Tortonese, 1970), however, horizontal and vertical migrations occur according to the season, with specimens approaching shallow coastal waters in spring and summer (Rafrafi-Nouira, 2016). The species is considered rare in all areas, but especially in Tunisian marine waters, where it holds low economic interest and is likely discarded at sea after capture (Rafrafi-Nouira *et al.*, 2015). *E. myrus* is believed to be a carnivorous species (Bauchot, 1986), and preliminary observations carried out on specimens caught off the northern Tunisian coast confirm this opinion (Rafrafi, pers. comm., 2023). Reproduction occurs at the end of summer off the Algerian coast (Dieuzeide *et al.*, 1954) and throughout

Fig. 2. A. The specimen of E**chelus myrus* **(ref. MSL 1/2023), captured off Jableh, scale bar = 100 mm. B. Insert with the arrow indicating the teeth of the same specimen, scale bar = 5 mm.
Sl. 2: A. Primerek vrste** Echelus myrus* **(ref. MSL 1/2023), ujet ob Jablehu, merilo = 100 mm. B. Prikaz, na katerem puščica označuje zobovje raziskanega primerka, merilo = 5 mm.

the summer in the Italian seas, as corroborated by the discovery of eggs with a diameter of 3–3.8 mm in the Straits of Messina (Tortonese, 1970). Taylan & Aydin (2021) provide additional information on certain aspects of the species' reproduction based on specimens from the Aegean Sea.

The capture of this specimen in Syrian marine waters confirms the presence of a viable population in the Levant Basin and fills the gap between the coast of Lebanon and other areas in the eastern Mediterranean, including the coast of Turkey.

PRVI UTEMELJENI ZAPIS O POJAVLJANJU PISANE JEGULJE, *ECHELUS MYRUS* (OPHICHTHIDAE), IZ MORSKIH VODA SIRIJE (VZHODNO SREDOZEMSKO MORJE)

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POVZETEK

Avtorji poročajo o prvem utemeljenem zapisu o pojavljanju pisane jegulje, Echelus myrus *(Linnaeus, 1758) iz sirske obale. Primerek je meril 591 mm v celotno dolžino in tehtal 220 g. Ta zapis potrjuje pojavljanje te vrste v sirskih vodah in v Levantskem morju, s čimer je zapolnjena vrzel o razširjenosti te vrste med obalo Libanona in drugimi območji vzhodnega Sredozemskega morja, vključno s turško obalo.*

Ključne besede: *Echelus myrus*, Ophichthidae, razširjenost, Levantski bazen

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