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AUTHOR: Alexandru IFTIME, "Grigore Antipa" National Museum of Natural History, Bucharest, Romania < aiftime@antipa.ro >.

Herpetological notes on the Dodecanese Islands of Symi and Sesklia (Greece)

The following notes are an account of the herpetofauna observed during a visit to the Dodecanese island of Symi and the small nearby island of Sesklia in 2002. Nine days were spent on Symi and one day on Sesklia. Symi is about 13 km long from north to south and 8 km wide from east to west, with a total surface area of 58 km². The highest point is Mount Vigla (616 m a.s.l.). The island of Symi lies at the door to Asia Minor, 8 km from the Peninsula of Knidos and 7 km from the Peninsula of Tracheia. The distance to the Greek Island of Rhodes is about 40 km.

Symi is very dry and consists mainly of a limestone massif with steep slopes. In the middle and southern part of the island there are some wooded areas with *Cupressus sempervirens f. horizontalis* and *Pinus brutia*. While exploring the island between April 23 and May 1, 2002, it was not possible to find any wetland areas or flowing water. The rather cool temperatures were not very conducive to reptile observing. Early references to the herpetofauna on Symi

can be found in BOETTGER (1888), WERNER (1930, 1933, 1935, 1938) and WETTSTEIN (1953); more details are given in CLARK (1972, 1992) and BUTTLE (1995). The islet of Sesklia, which is only 1.5 km² in size, seems not to have been visited before. It belongs to the property of the monastery of Panormitis and lies about 1 km south of the island of Symi. In the centre there is a doline-like valley used for cultivations, while sheep and goats graze on the rest of the island. Table 1 lists the amphibian and reptile taxa known to occur on the Islands of Symi and Sesklia.

Bufo viridis viridis LAURENTI, 1768. BUTTLE (1995) said that no Green Toads were found on the island, but local information led him to believe that this species must live on Symi. Evidence of populations was found in the form of well-developed tadpoles in five artificial water cisterns on the top of the plateau. Adult toads that had been run over were seen in three different locations, including in the town of Gialos, above Pedi, and on the eastern high plain near Kokkimidis. Thus, the population of Green Toads on the high plain of Symi is assured, thanks to the artificial stands of water. In one of the larger cisterns near Ag. Konstantinos, the Green Toad larvae are in ecological competition with a small fish (*Gambusia affinis*, det. K. GROSSENBACHER and S. ZUMBACH, (Natural History Museum Bern). The tadpoles were only able to survive in a separate section that was free of fishes. The cisterns are, however, not designed in an amphibian-friendly way and do not promote reproduction.

Table 1: Amphibian and reptile species known to occur on the Dodecanese Islands of Symi (SY) and Sesklia (SE) (Greece). New records in bold italics.

<i>Bufo viridis viridis</i>	SY	-
<i>Testudo graeca iberica</i>	SY	-
<i>Cyrtopodion kotschyi steindachneri</i>	SY	-
<i>Hemidactylus turcicus turcicus</i>	SY	-
<i>Laudakia stellio daani</i>	SY	SE
<i>Lacerta oertzeni pelagiana</i>	SY	SE
<i>Ophisops elegans ehrenbergii</i>	SY	SE
<i>Ablepharus kitaibelii kitaibelii</i>	SY	-
<i>Mabuya aurata septemtaeniata</i>	SY	-
<i>Blanus strauchi</i>	SY	SE
<i>Coluber (Hierophis) caspius</i>	SY	-
<i>Coluber nummifer</i>	SY	-
<i>Eirenis modestus</i>	SY	SE
<i>Vipera xanthina</i>	SY	-

Testudo graeca iberica PALLAS, 1814. CLARK (1972) was the first to detect this species in the form of a small specimen. BUTTLE (1995) observed two adult specimens. He explains its rarity as resulting from the practice of killing turtles in cultivated areas. On our expedition on the island we observed a total of eleven specimens at four different locations: south of the Panormitis monastery near Troulos in a pine forest, on the southern high plain near Pervola on the edge of the cultivated land, on the western high plain in the phrygana near Kastro, and in the northern half on the cultivated land near Kato in the phrygana. They were strong animals with shell lengths of up to 25 cm. We did not come across any dead specimens, although there were finds in the fenced-off cultivated areas. The Spur-thighed Tortoise was not found on Sesklia.

Cyrtopodion kotschyi steindachneri (STĚPÁNEK, 1937). The only sighting was under fallen timber near Pontikastro above Chorio.

Laudakia stellio daani (BEUTLER & FRÖR, 1980);

Lacerta oertzeni pelasgiana MERTENS, 1959;

Ophisops elegans ehrenbergii (WIEGMANN, 1835).

The agamid and the two species of lacertid lizard dominate the herpetofauna on the island of Symi and are common at all altitudes. *Ophisops elegans ehrenbergii* is also frequent in the phrygana, in thinned woods, and around walls. The occurrence of all three species on Sesklia was confirmed.

Ablepharus kitaibelii kitaibelii (BIBRON & BORY, 1833) was observed only in the needle litter of a pine forest south of the Panormitis Monastery, Symi.

Blanus strauchi (BEDRIAGA, 1884). A specimen about 15 cm long was seen under a stone on Sesklia, but none were observed on Symi, unlike what was reported in BUTTLE (1995).

Hemidactylus turcicus turcicus (LINNAEUS, 1758) and *Mabuya aurata septemtaeniata* (REUSS, 1834) were not found during our stay on the islands.

Coluber (Hierophis) caspius GMELIN, 1789. W. KAUFMANN (Balzers) observed

one specimen near Chandes on the high plain on the edge of the cultivated land. A shepherd's description leads us to expect it on Sesklia as well.

Coluber nummifer REUSS, 1834. A dead specimen was found on the country road to Gialos, Symi.

Eirenis modestus (MARTIN, 1838). A specimen approx. 50 cm long was found on the edge of a path near Ag. Dimitri Lakkos on the western high plain of Symi. Surprisingly, another was spotted near Apostolos Paulos on Sesklia (observed by Peter GOOP, Vaduz).

Vipera xanthina (GRAY, 1849). An Ottoman Viper was spotted in the form of an approximately one metre long specimen on a concrete path on the Kokkinides high plain, Symi.

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AUTHOR: Univ. Doz. Dipl. Ing. Dr. Mario F. BROGGI, Swiss Federal Institute for Forest, Snow and Landscape Research (WSL), CH-8903 Birmensdorf, Switzerland < mario.broggi@wsl.ch >.

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