

Southernmost European island record of *Malpolon insignitus* (GEOFFROY DE ST-HILAIRE, 1809)

The genus *Malpolon* FITZINGER, 1826 comprised two species, the Circummediterranean and Near East Montpellier Snake *M. monspessulanus* (HERMANN, 1804), and the North African to Southwest Asian Moila Snake *M. moilensis* (REUSS, 1834), until most recently when the genus underwent a taxonomic revision (BÖHME & DE PURY 2011) resulting in the generic separation of the above taxa and the resurrection of PETER'S (1862) name *Rhagerhis moilensis*. The distribution of *M. monspessulanus* involved three continents: its native territory, North Africa (the genus originated from the typically African Psammophinae subfamily, KELLY et al. 2003), Europe and Asia, including all the Mediterranean coastal regions, with the exception of the Italian Peninsula, thereby forming a biogeographical gap (DE HAAN 1999).

For decades, three distinct subspecies were recognized: *Malpolon m. monspessulanus*, occurring in Southwest Europe, Morocco and coastal Algeria, *Malpolon m. insignitus* (GEOFFROY DE ST-HILAIRE, 1809), ranging from east Morocco to western Syria, and *Malpolon m. fuscus* (FLEISCHMANN, 1831), distributed in southeast Europe and Turkey as far as western Iran (DE HAAN 1997). CARRANZA et al. (2006), based on morphological and molecular analyses, suggested elevating the subspecies *insignitus* to full species status comprising two subspecies, *M. insignitus fuscus* and *M. insignitus insignitus*. In this revised view, Greek populations formerly attributed to *Malpolon monspessulanus fuscus* are assigned to *M. insignitus fuscus*.

Malpolon insignitus fuscus (FLEISCHMANN, 1831), is widely distributed in Greece from sea level up to 2,000 m a.s.l., occurring in phrygana, maquis and woods (VALAKOS et al. 2008). The Eastern Montpellier Snake is among the commonest snakes of the country, widespread throughout the mainland and also found on most Ionian and several Aegean offshore islands (CHONDROPOULOS 1989; VALAKOS et al. 2008). However, it is completely absent

from the Cyclades, and the islands of Crete and Kythira, the last being closest (8.3 km) to the island of Elafonisos, from where its occurrence is reported here for the first time. To the best of our knowledge the nearest island harboring *M. insignitus* is Hydra at the Argolic Gulf (CLARK 1970).

Elafonisos is a small island (area: 19 km²) located only 570 m off the coasts of the south Peloponnese (36°29'N, 22°58'E, Fig. 1). According to PAUSANIAS (2nd century A. D.) the island was connected with the mainland in antiquity and home to a thriving population of red deer (*Cervus elaphus*), a fact that is reflected in Elafonisos' name, the 'Island of Deer' (from Greek *elafos* – *ἐλάφος* and *nisos* – *νῆσος*, meaning deer and island, respectively). During a field survey from 14 to 15 September 2011, the authors recorded three *M. insignitus* specimens at different sites of the island. One adult was detected while crossing a road in the northwestern part of the island. A juvenile was seen to bask at the base of a big rock and escaped immediately after noticing our presence. Another juvenile was a fresh, almost undamaged road-kill from the east of Elafonisos. The little male (hemipenes present) individual (total length: 690 mm, head width: 21 mm, head height: 12 mm, head length: 32 mm, body mass: 70 g) was preserved in alcohol and added to the Herpetological Collection of the Museum of Natural History of Crete (accession number MNHC 80.3.54.62).

The finding of three specimens in 24 person-hours spent searching in the field, within a distance of less than 9 km, speaks in favor of a population density, comparable to the levels reported by TABACHISHIN (2011).

This is the first record of *M. insignitus fuscus* on the island of Elafonisos, though this species is common on the neighboring mainland of the Peloponnese (CLARK 1968) where it was reported, among various other places, from the prefecture of Lakonia to which Elafonisos belongs (BUTTLE 1987). Together with the populations from the islands of Rhodes (but see BADER et al. 2009) and Kastellorizo (VALAKOS & PAPANAGIOTOU 1985) which are, however, situated on the continental shelf of Asia, this record at about 36°30'N, is the southernmost European island record of the species.

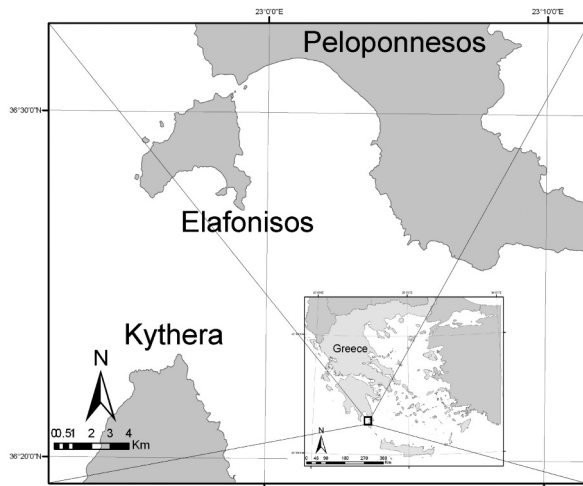


Fig. 1: The island of Elafonisos is located off the west coast of the easternmost peninsular appendage of the South Peloponnese (Greece), northeast Mediterranean Basin.

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