

Field notes — Kurze Exkursionsberichte — Excursions en bref

***Kretania psylorita* FREYER (Lepidoptera, Lycaenidae). Discovery of a new locality in Crete**

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Summary

A number of observations on *Kretania psylorita* FREYER made in the Psyloritis Mountains in Crete in July 1986 are presented where the species is now menaced by anthropogenic activities. A new colony was discovered in the Dikti Mountains, about 60 km East of Mt. Ida (locus typicus). The habitat corresponds to the classical "Astragaletum" and is fortunately less easily accessible.

Kretania psylorita FREYER was described in 1845 as an endemic mountain species from the Psyloritis (Idhi) range in central Crete, in the Aegean sea. The highest peak in these mountains is Mt. Ida (2,456 m), which Greek mythology identifies as the place of Zeus' childhood. Various authors subsequently confirmed these findings (H. REBEL, 1916 ; E. TRONÍČEK, 1949 ; R. F. BRETHERTON, 1969 ; L. G. HIGGINS, 1973).

During a stay in Crete from July 1st to 20th, 1986, we devoted particular attention to this species. Unfortunately, we found that the "locus typicus" of *psylorita* is endangered. In fact, its former geographical isolation, in a mountainous region with difficult access, no longer exists : a wide road suitable for motor cars has replaced the original footpath that once necessitated a walk lasting several hours to reach the locality from Anogia. The habitat has been even more seriously damaged by the construction of a ski lift for winter sports.

During the first week of July both males and females were very abundant on the slopes of Mt. Ida, from the Nida plateau (1,300 m) to the top. This apparently disagrees with the data of other authors, e.g. REBEL, who found the species in mid June. *K. psylorita* is distributed unevenly throughout its habitat, becoming less common at high altitudes. It becomes active early in the morning, with a rapid and irregular flight over the bushes of a thorny *Astragalus* species that are the main component of the vegetation (Astragaletum). It also rests on these plants and on the ground, especially on stones



Fig. 1. The habitat of *K. psylorita* on the Dikti Oros Mountains.



Fig. 2. *Kretania psylorita* on *Astragalus*.

or to drink moisture from the soil. When frightened it darts away with a rapid and jerky flight. It is then hard to see on account of its dull brown colour and small size.

Only a few *Rhopalocera* flew synchronous and sympatric with *psylorita*, the most common of which was *Coenonympha thyrsis* FREYER, particularly at the foot of Mt. Ida; *Polyommatus icarus* ROTT. and *Hipparchia cretica* REBEL were found only occasionally.

E. TRONÍČEK (1938) defines the association of symbiotic species, including *Zerynthia cretica* REBEL (which flies earlier), *Colias crocea* FOURC., *Pararge megera lyssa* DSD. and *Vanessa cardui* L., as well as those listed above, as "Polyommatetum psyloritae".

Our subsequent excursions were to other mountains on Crete. From Omalos (1,000 m), on the western side of the island, we climbed the Leuka Oros (White Mountains) or Lefka Ori group to the top of the arid Mt. Gigilos, without entering the Samaria Gorges and ignoring the inner slopes of the higher Lefka Ori. *K. psylorita* was not found in these areas, on account of the lack of suitable habitat.

A very interesting and noteworthy finding was the discovery of *psylorita* in the Dikti Mountains (whose highest peak reaches 2,148 m), on the eastern side of Crete, about 60 km from Mt. Ida.

On July 10th, 1986, after driving to the picturesque Lassithi plateau, with its 1,000 windmills, and having reached the village of Psychron, one of us (G. LEIGHEB) walked up to the cave which is reputed to be the birthplace of Zeus (Dikteon Antron) and then went on further up the mountainside, which is strewn with boulders and holes, to a valley crossed by a path. In the background could be seen the highest peaks of the Dikti Oros, still partly covered with snow. Having passed numerous rocky buttresses, after a few hours walk, he reached the slopes of the highest peaks. From 1,300 m upwards, the vegetation shows the same features as the "Astragaletum" on Mt. Ida. The first specimens of *psylorita* were captured resting on the ground near a small spring at an altitude of approximately 1,500 m. About 30 other specimens were observed within a range of about half a kilometre. This colony was undoubtedly less numerous than the one on Mt. Ida. Both sexes were still fresh, in spite of the fact that it was the second week of July. The butterflies are absolutely identical with those collected in the type locality. Among those collected, specimens corresponding to forms "*caeca*" COURVOISIER and "*obenbergeri*" TRONÍČEK were not exceptional.

Discussion

The discovery of a new colony of *K. psylorita* suggests that certain endemic species considered to be strictly restricted to a single relict biotope may in fact be more widely distributed, albeit in scattered and isolated colonies. Systematic investigation of less easily accessible areas is often lacking.

Another feature to consider in the case of mountain species is the considerable variability of the flight period in relation to the climatic conditions. It is therefore not surprising that *psylorita* was found in mid-July rather than in June, which is considered its typical flight period.

A comparison between the classical biotope on Mt. Ida and the one on the Dikti and Lefta Mountains actually suggests the possibility that this species may be present on all of the three main mountain ranges of Crete, which are in fact not very far apart. The discovery of *psylorita* in this new locality on the Dikti Oros groups should therefore not be considered surprising, and it seems probable that it will subsequently be also discovered in the Lefka Ori.

Entomologists should search for new unexplored areas rather than collect repeatedly in the same localities !

References

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Zoologisch-Botanische Datenbank/Zoological-Botanical Database

Digitale Literatur/Digital Literature

Zeitschrift/Journal: [Nota lepidopterologica](#)

Jahr/Year: 1990

Band/Volume: [13](#)

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Artikel/Article: [Field notes — Kurze Exkursionsberichte — Excursions en bref
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