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Island-Idyll and *Podarcis erhardii ruthveni* (Werner, 1930) on Alonnisos, Northern Sporades, Greece

HILDEGARD PASSARGE, 2019 February

With a parasitological comment by GUNTRAM DEICHSEL, Biberach an der Riß

Abstract

This article describes Alonnisos as a lovely and idyllic holiday destination for people interested in nature away from the crowd. An extensive series of pictures shows the whole range of variations in the colouring and marking of *Podarcis erhardii ruthveni*, and as a highlight a *Dolichophis caspius* is presented. 80% of the lizards observed displayed clearly visible mite infestation. GUNTRAM DEICHSEL comments on this observation in the appendix.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel beschreibt Alonnisos als liebenswertes idyllisches Urlaubsziel für Naturfreunde abseits der großen Touristenströme. Eine umfangreiche Bildserie zeigt die ganze Variationsbreite der Färbung und Zeichnung von *Podarcis erhardii ruthveni*, und als „Bonbon“ wird noch ein *Dolichophis caspius* präsentiert. 80 % der beobachteten Eidechsen wiesen deutlich sichtbaren Milbenbefall auf. GUNTRAM DEICHSEL nimmt im Anhang Stellung.

Alonnisos or Alonissos (I prefer the first spelling because it reflects the meanings *alon* = threshing floor and *nisos* = island - there are still four threshing places there.) is the third largest island of the Northern Sporades. It is very green and can only be reached by ferry. There are only a few hotels, so it is not flooded with tourists. It is about 65 square kilometres in size, 20 kilometres long and the broadest cross-section measures 5.5 kilometres.

The majority of the 2500 inhabitants live on the southern part of the island. The population of Chora or Old Alonnisos, the former capital of the island, comprises 60% British people and Germans and only 40% Greeks. During a heavy earthquake in 1965, many houses in the mountain village of Chora were destroyed and the population was forcibly relocated to Patitiri, today's island capital.



Fig. 1: Traces of the 1965 earthquake are still visible today

The picturesque old mountain village is located 250 m above sea level and is today the main attraction on Alonnisos. Many of the destroyed houses were lovingly restored. Pretty traditional houses, beautifully designed house entrances, quiet corners, dreamy alleys and unbelievably breathtaking vistas over the deep blue Aegean Sea were created.



Fig. 2-5: Impressions of Chora

Bougainvilleas, geraniums, and herb pots can be seen everywhere. Time stood still here. The village is car-free and loads are carried by donkeys there. Tourists populate Old Alonnisos only in midsummer. The art shops, boutiques, cafés and taverns are very inviting.

I decided to go to this small unspoiled island because of the many Giant Emerald Lizards *Lacerta t. trilineata* I expected to see there. My nice accommodation

“Fantasia House“ was situated in the old mountain village, a stone’s throw away from the main square. In the week from May 28 to June 4, 2018 I was the only guest there. On the first day, I roamed the upper part of the village, called Kastro. It resembles a small fortress because the crumbling stone houses there form a thick continuous wall.

However, this part is uninhabited, neglected and even completely destroyed.



Fig. 6: Unbridled flower splendour around an entrance gate



Fig. 8: An art shop run by a German



Fig. 7: Geranium with a visitor



Fig. 9: Ruin in Kastro



Fig. 10: *Podarcis erhardii ruthveni*



Fig. 11: Path through the pine forest

The ruins would form a very suitable habitat for lizards and other reptiles if there were not so many cats roaming around. Only a few Aegean Wall Lizards *Podarcis erhardii ruthveni* scampered shyly and silently into their hiding shelters.

I made my daily hikes starting from Old Alonnisos / Chora. From there I could reach many beautiful view points on foot. I was particularly fond of walking down the old donkey path to Patitiri. It also offers shady sections, a lot of unmanicured nature and notably many lizards. From some places I also had a view of the striking mountain cone with the

old mountain village of Chora. One can walk half of the way along a road towards pine forests. The view sweeps over old stone walls, olive groves, holm oaks and wild Judas trees, flowers bloom everywhere and the smells are beguiling. The paths in the pine forests are well accessible and pleasantly shady.

Some pines have bags hanging from them in order to collect the resin. In such a pine forest I was lucky on the very first day to encounter a Balkan whipsnake *Dolichophis caspius* and I observed it again regularly afterwards.



Fig. 12a: The discovered *Dolichophis caspius* at his morning basking place. Even an extremely cautious approach to less than 2 metres for a portrait picture (detail: Fig. 12b) was not successful - that animal was extremely shy.

I also liked to hike the paths around the highest elevation in the southwestern part of the village, the Kalovoulos. Many lizards were basking on the rocks. The ascent is well signposted and also worthwhile, but partly very sunny and difficult to hike due to scree. But the view of the neighbouring island of Skopelos and the deep blue sea is fantastic.



Fig. 13: Southwest view from my accommodation to two uninhabited islands and to Evia on the horizon.

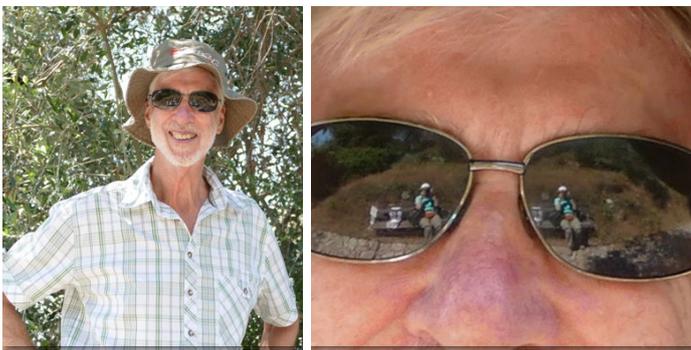


Fig. 14: My English informant and myself in the mirror images of his sunglasses

On the last day on the way back to the mountain village, I met an Englishman who made Alonnisos his second home. Asked about emerald lizards and snakes, he said that the harsh winter of 2017 (Alonnisos and Skopelos were completely snowed in, more than 100 trees were heavily damaged under snow load) was to be blamed for fewer reptiles being observed. He had noticed that as well.

What follows is a series of photographs of *Podarcis erhardii ruthveni* in various situations. The series documents the great variability in coloration and markings of this Aegean wall lizard within

a radius of 3.5 km around Chora, thus confirming the description by GRUBER (1986), „In der Körpergröße sehr variabel, Mittelwerte für KR schwanken je nach Inselpopulation zwischen 57 und 70 mm, Oberseite graubraun oder olivbraun, ohne Grünkomponente; Rückenzeichnung neigt zum Verblässen; ohne Occipitalstreifen; Parietalstreifen undeutlich; Temporalstreifen retikuliert; Superciliarstreifen beim Männchen meist fehlend, zeichnungslose sogenannte „olivacea“-Typen kommen vor; Unterseite weißlich-blaugrün oder grünlichgelb, häufig teilweise oder ganz orangerot bis rostrot;...“, however contradicting him w.r.t. green coloration which he denies.



Fig. 15: Male with green back coloring



Fig. 16: Male



Fig. 17: Bite on the tail



Fig. 18: Bite on the tail root



Fig. 19: Flank bite and completion of the mating act



Fig. 20: Male



Fig. 21: Female



Fig. 23: Female



Fig. 22: Male with olive green coloring



Fig. 24: Female



Fig. 25: Female



Fig. 28: Female



Fig. 26: Male in the moulting phase with olive green back coloring



Fig. 29: Portrait of a female



Fig. 27: This pair [27, 30] shares the resting place and seems to enjoy body contact, probably after mating.



Fig. 30: Pair



Fig. 31: Male with mite infestation



Fig. 32: Male with clearly recognizable mite infestation.



Fig. 33: Female with mite infestation

It is noteworthy that approx. 80% of the sighted animals were infested by orange mites on the posterior side of the upper part of the hind limb where it meets the side of the body, i.e. post-inguinal.

Conclusion

I did not have the luck to find the “many Giant Emerald Lizards,” finding only two of the 13 species mentioned by BROGGI (2010), but the days on Alonnisos were beautiful and the almost untouched nature and the

tranquility of the magnificent expeditions through the scenery were very relaxing. Alonnisos is (still....) an insider tip! The reader may decide whether I can be satisfied with my herpetological photo yield.

Parasitological notes by GUNTRAM DEICHSEL

Ca. 80% of the lizards observed by HILDEGARD PASSARGE on Alonnisos displayed heavy mite infestations at either post-inguinal position. I sought an identification of the mites and contacted experts for this reason.

ANN-KATRIN FAHL, Heidelberg, AXEL CHRISTIAN, Görlitz, and JOHANNES FOUFOPOULOS, Ann Arbor, Michigan, U.S.A., agreed that an identification of the mites by means of photographs alone is impossible due to the plethora of mite genera coming into question. An identification is only feasible under a microscope by examining mouth tools and bristles of extremities. CHRISTOPH HÖRWEIG, Vienna, took *Ophionyssos* as a possible genus into account, referring to FORNBERG (2017). Following my request, SILKE SCHWEIGER kindly examined 91 alcohol specimens in the herpetological collection of Vienna’s Museum of Natural History for mite infestation and was lucky. An identification of these mites in the arachnological department of the museum is still due. Once the identification is available it will be inserted here.

J. FOUFOPOULOS directed my attention to the existence of mite pockets in lizards which offer mites and chiggers an attractive place to live and feed. At first sight it seems a paradox that thus a host invites a parasite infestation. BENTON (1987) deals with this problem. REED (2014) examines the evolutionary advantage of mite pockets in fence lizards *Sceloporus* sp. According to REED, the advantage for the host is that by providing mite pockets the number of ectoparasites is limited to a bearable load. This is important for the host’s fitness, guaranteeing its survival despite the infestation. The hypothesis that mite pockets are located at either post-inguinal position in *P. erhardii ruthveni* is plausible after HILDEGARD PASSARGE’S observations.

Credit

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