Acanthodactylus erythrurus - Spiny-footed Lizard

The genus Acanthodactylus comprises about 40 species in the arid areas of Africa and Asia. Surprisingly, Acanthodactylus erythrurus is the only European representative of this group. In Europe, only the nominate subspecies occurs.

It inhabits large parts of Spain (except the north) whereas its distribution in Portugal seems to be patchy with populations in the eastern part of the country and an isolated occurrence at the Lisbon and Alentejo coast. It prefers open habitats and may be a quite conspicuous lizard in coastal dune areas. With the "fingies" on their spiny toes, they are able to move rapidly on loose sand. These beautiful but shy and fast lizards can best be observed basking at cooler temperatures in spring or autumn.

Adults show a camouflage pattern whereas juveniles with their distinct stripes and red tail are quite conspicuous. The red tail seems to be some kind of anti-predation strategy as it distracts from the lizard's body.

The Spiny-footed Lizard frequently co-occurs with the Iberian Psammodromus species. From these, Acanthodactylus erythrurus can be easily distinguished by its characteristic back pattern: Acanthodactylus erythrurus has two continuous light vertebral and light dorsolateral lines. A Psammodromus hispanicus, Psammodromus occidentalis and Psammodromus edwardsianus, these lines are interrupted to black and white bars which generate a "checkered pattern".

Subadult Acanthodactylus erythrurus (see below) may have similar patterns but at this stage they are much bigger than the small Psammodromus species.

From Psammodromus algirus, Acanthodactylus erythrurus can be distinguished by its light vertebral lines and the black markings on its back. The latter one can also be identified by its strongly keeled scales.
Female: P / Sines, 19.04.2017 - Females often show reddish undersides of tails and hind legs.

Subadult: E / Cartagena, 13.11.2016 - Note the yellow lateral dots.
Juvenile with characteristic stripe pattern and reddish tail. E. San José (Almería), 15.09.2018.

The “Desierto de Tabernas” (Almería). In this bare landscape, Acanthodactylus erythros occurs in remarkably high numbers.