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Sicily, 28.03. - 04.04.2009

The major issues of our spring trip to Sicily were the local herpetofauna and the orchids of that area. As we were not willing to spend a considerable part of our holiday in the car rushing from one place to another we focused on a single region of this big Island – the area of Syrakus.



Meadow near Floridia / Syrakus with view to the Aetna

The Syrakus area has three outstanding nature reserves: The Gorges of Pantalica with its impressive necropolis, the Cava Grande del Cassibile canyon and the Riserva Vendicari at the coast – that's more than enough program for one week! The mountains of this region consist of limestone and show a rich flora, only the higher parts of the Iblei mountains consist of volcanic rocks. During our stay, the sky sometimes was grey but the weather was warm (about 20 °C) and mostly dry.

#### Herpetofauna

For Sicily, 15 reptile species have been reported – but we only have seen 7. All in all, the area we have visited was densely populated by reptiles but the diversity was rather low. The dominating species has been the omnipresent *Podarcis siculus*: We came across that lizard at the sandy beach of Vendicari, the Papyrus-marshes of Fonte Ciane, in cultivated areas, on the peak of Monte Lauro...



Male *Podarcis siculus*: uni-coloured phase



Pyrenees, 2008 - 2016



Sicily & Aeolian Islands, 2008 - 2016  
6.6.2016



Spain, 2005 - 11.9.2015



11.7.2015



Spain, 29.8. - 14.9.2014



2016



Mallorca, 2016



Podarcis siculus: female



Podarcis siculus at Vendicari (chequered phase)



Podarcis siculus at Pantalica: note the red underside of this male. This is, according to our literature, characteristic for the subspecies *P. s. ciclopicus* and *P. s. medemi*, which occur on small islands off the Sicilian coast only. In contrast to that, the red underside of the specimen above is quite unusual for *P. s. siculus*, which occurs on the Sicilian mainland.



Cava Grande del Cassibile: Habitat of Bufo bufo spinosus



Podarcis waglerianus seems to be quite common as well but only in certain habitats. We noticed these lizards on the numerous meadows bounded by dry stone walls on the high plateau between Pantalica and Cava Grande del Cassibile.



Male Podarcis waglerianus

Northern Spain, 02 - 14.06.2011



Aegean Islands, 28.05. - 13.06.2011



Northern Spain, 25.09. - 03.10.2010



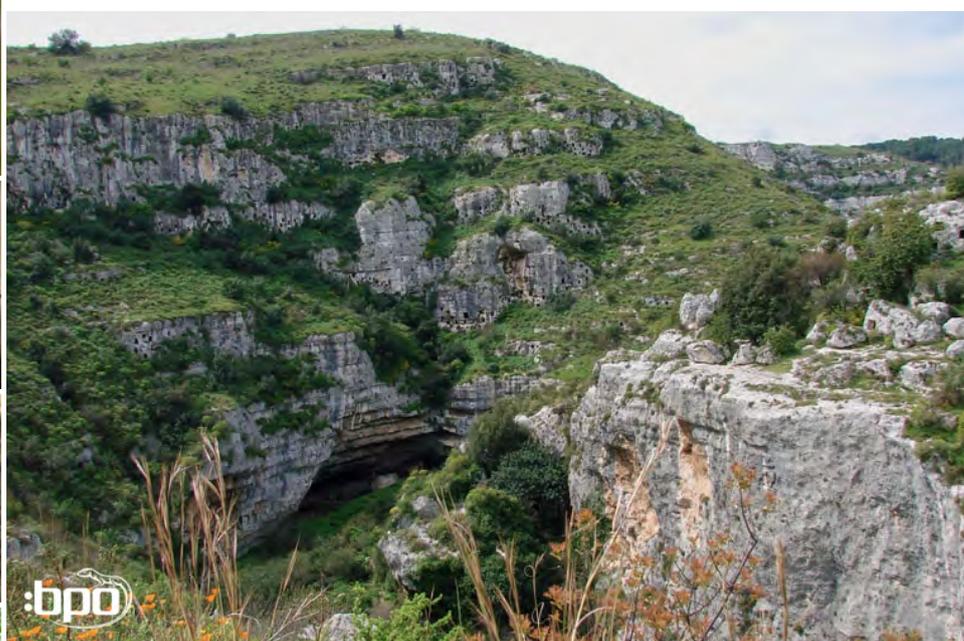
Alps, 03 - 17.07.2010



Another male...



Female Podarcis waglerianus



At the necropolis of Pantalica



*Lacerta bilineata* is represented on Sicily by the subspecies *chloronota*. We have seen most of these lizards close to water, in particular at Cava Grande del Cassibile, some of them in the mountains near Buccheri. For us, the lizards nearly looked the same as the Central European *L. b. bilineata* (maybe *L. b. bilineata* has stronger black speckles on its back).



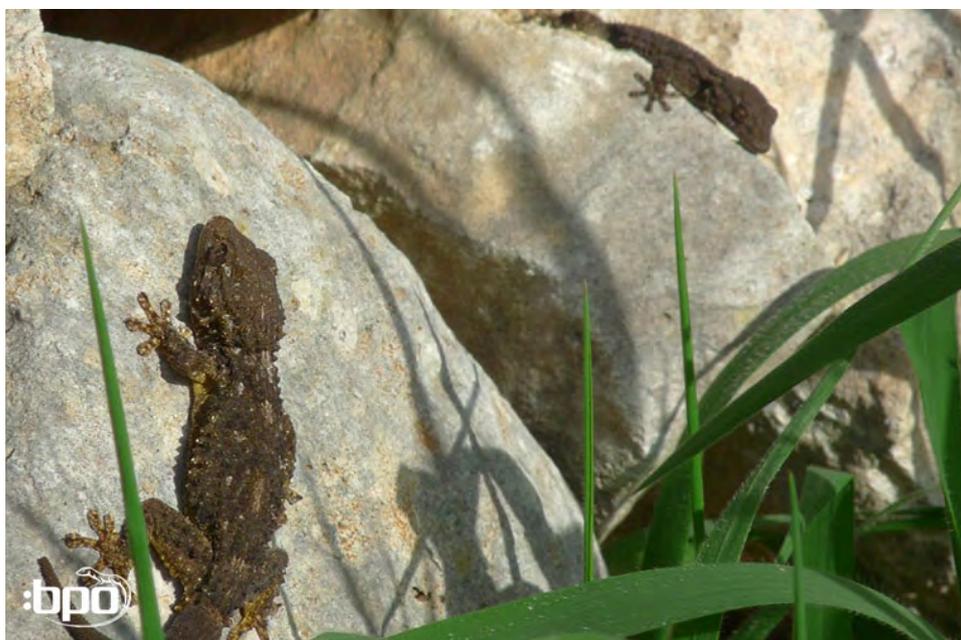
...also in dense vegetation the males can easily be spotted because of their blue throats.



Female *Lacerta bilineata* in a comfortable, relaxed position, sunbasking



Juvenile *Lacerta bilineata*



We also saw *Tarentola mauritanica* in a high population density. This may be a consequence of the fact that the complete region is covered by a dense network of dry stone walls – so there are plenty of capable habitats. We came across these geckos at the coast near Vendicari, in olive groves near Floridaia and on meadows near Pantalica. In contrast to this, we didn't notice the other gecko species on Sicily: *Hemidactylus turcicus*.



*Tarentola mauritanica* with yellowish underside



In particular on meadows, *Chalcides ocellatus* occurred in a striking population density. At some places we found nearly under every stone at least one skink. Overall, we saw dozens of them. In contrast to this, we didn't find *Chalcides chalcides*.



*Chalcides ocellatus*: the animals of the Italian subspecies *tiligugu* are bigger than the Aegean animals and show a darker colouration.

Obviously, *Hierophis viridiflavus* is common and widespread on Sicily. The Sicilian subspecies *carbonarius* shows an almost black colouration. In addition, we found several *Natrix natrix sicula* at the Anapo river. Unfortunately, we didn't see any other of the snakes species which occur on Sicily (*Coronella austriaca*, *Zamenis situla*, *Elaphe lineata*, *Vipera aspis*). We also didn't see *Testudo hermanni* and *Emys orbicularis*.



*Hierophis viridiflavus*



*Natrix natrix sicula*



Habitat of *Natrix natrix sicula*



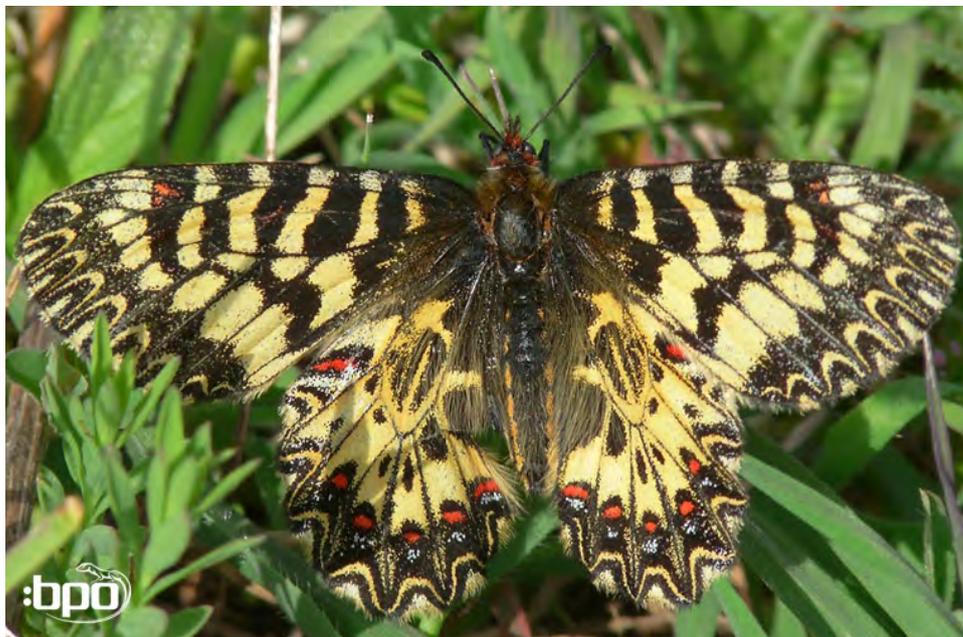
Portrait of *Natrix natrix sicula*



*Glaucopsyche alexis* on *Borago officinalis*



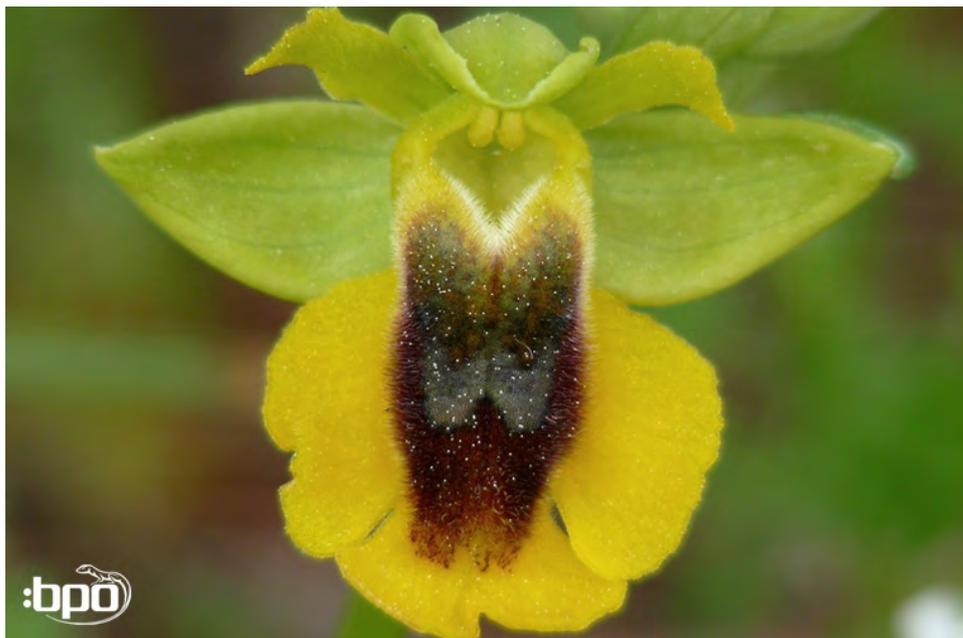
*Pseudophilotes batoni*



*Zerynthia polyxena*

#### Orchids

Early April is a good time for orchids on Sicily – we saw 24 species. Our highlights were *Ophrys bertolonii* and the endemic *Ophrys lunulata*. We found rich and extensive orchid sites on the complete high plateau between Pantalica in the north, Cava Grande del Cassibile in the south and Monte Lauro in the west. In particular the meadows were quite interesting. Although we didn't find very high numbers of orchids, we were able to find numerous species on most sites.



*Ophrys lutea*: often flourishing together with...



Ophrys sicula (left) and Ophrys bombyliflora (right)



Ophrys biancae



For us, it wasn't easy to identify Ophrys oxorrhynchos: Most of the orchids we had identified in situ as Ophrys oxorrhynchos turned out to be Ophrys biancae afterwards. The specimen above maybe shows at least some oxorrhynchos influence.



Orchid site at Florida



Ophrys bertolonii



Another Ophrys bertolonii: we really appreciate that species!



Left: *Ophrys speculum*, right: *Ophrys grandiflora*



Left: *Ophrys lunulata*, right: a beautiful hybrid: *Ophrys lunulata* x *grandiflora*



Coastal area at Vendicari: also in this region there are interesting orchid sites



Left: *Ophrys exaltata*, right: *Ophrys garganica*



Left: *Ophrys incubacea*, right: *Ophrys panormitana*



Left: Probably *Ophrys panormitana* with red lip, right: *Gagea* sp. at the peak of Monte Lauro



Romulea bulbocodium flourishing next to...



...Orchis longicornu and Orchis lactea



Left: Orchis papilionacea, right: Orchis lactea



*Orchis conica*: has a different inflorescence and different lip shape compared to *O. lactea*. It can be distinguished from the similar species *Orchis tridentata* and *Orchis commutata* by the green base of its hood.



*Orchis italica*

#### Species list

We have seen the following species during our stay in the Syrakus area:

1. *Aceras anthropophorum* (flourishing)
2. *Barlia robertiana* (withering)
3. *Ophrys bertolonii* (flourishing)
4. *Ophrys biancae* (flourishing)
5. *Ophrys bombyliflora* (flourishing)
6. *Ophrys exaltata* (flourishing)
7. *Ophrys garganica* (flourishing)
8. *Ophrys grandiflora* (flourishing)
9. *Ophrys incubacea*, (flourishing)
10. *Ophrys laurensis* (flourishing)
11. *Ophrys lunulata* (flourishing)
12. *Ophrys lutea* (flourishing)
13. *Ophrys obaesa* (flourishing)

14. *Ophrys oxorrhynchos* (flourishing)
15. *Ophrys panormitana* (flourishing)
16. *Ophrys sicula* (flourishing)
17. *Ophrys speculum* (flourishing)
18. *Orchis collina* (faded)
19. *Orchis conica* (flourishing)
20. *Orchis italica* (flourishing)
21. *Orchis lactea* (flourishing)
22. *Orchis longicornu* (flourishing)
23. *Orchis papilionacea* (flourishing)
24. *Serapias bergonii* (flourishing)

The home of European lizards - by Birgit & Peter Oefinger!