

NOTES ON THE HERPETOLOGY OF NORTH SINAI

SHERIF M. BAHA EL DIN

c/o E. B. S., Cairo Marriott Hotel, PO Box 33 Zamalek, Cairo, Egypt

Despite the fact that Sinai is, herpetologically, one of Egypt's better covered regions, there is still much to be learnt about its reptiles and amphibians. Sinai being part of a transition or integration zone between several zoogeographical influences: Saharo-arabian, Irano-tauranian and Saharan, is of great interest herpetologically. Several records and observations made in the course of the past few years, add to our knowledge of the reptiles and amphibians of the region; these are reviewed below:

Rana ridibunda

The species was found for the first time in Sinai in the vicinity of Rafah in June 1989, where it was found commonly breeding in stagnant ditches amongst cultivated coastal dunes. The species probably colonised the area recently following the increase of cultivation in the region and the increased availability of fresh water.

Hyla arborea

A single specimen of this species was collected from the vicinity of Sheikh Swaied (Abd El Shakour 1990). This is the first known record of the species from Sinai and Egypt. No further animals were found at that locality. However, Mr. Waheed Salama (pers. com.) reported to me that he had observed the species previously in orchards in the vicinity of El Arish. This represents nearly a 50 km extension westwards of the known limit of the species at Gaza.

Testudo kleinmanni

The status of this threatened species in Sinai (as well as throughout its entire range) is becoming increasingly precarious. A single specimen was found with a local inhabitant at El Teloul, on the southern shore of Lake Bardawil. The man claimed he had found the animal wandering just outside his house. Almost all bedouins from North Sinai questioned about this species stated that they no longer encounter it. However, there are two unconfirmed reports from the vicinity of El Gorah and 20 km south west of El Arish of single animals. There are also unconfirmed reports of a small population on the island of Um El Rumiya, Lake Bardawil.

A further record of interest concerning this species is the finding of remains of a single animal in a Brown-necked Raven's, *Corvus ruficollis*, nest, located in a tributary of Wadi Digla (about 50 km SE of Cairo) on 5 July 1991. Buskirk (1985) regarded the specimen from Bir Gindali (a few kilometres east of the above locality) reported by Marx (1968) as an introduction "well outside the natural range of *T. kleinmanni*". Mendelsohn (in Groombridge 1982) stated that the species does not occur further than 60 km inland from the Mediterranean. Bir Gindali is about 175 km from the Mediterranean.

Dermochelys coriacea

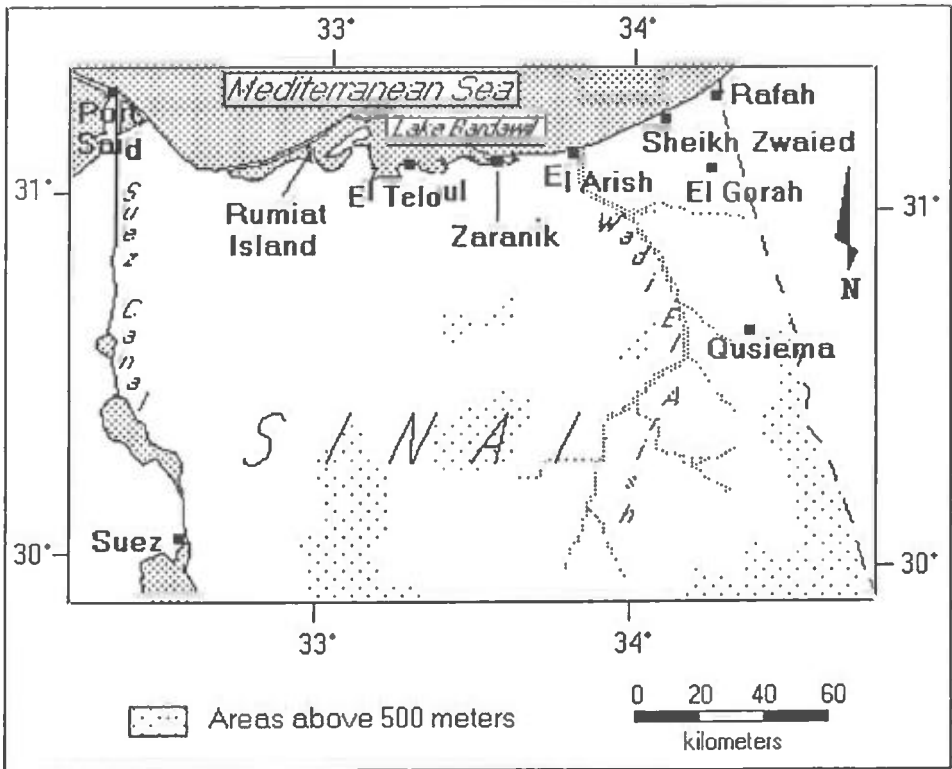
The species is reported in literature only from South Sinai coasts (Frasier and Salas 1984). Between 1985 and 1991 three large dead examples were found along the Mediterranean coast of Sinai; one of which was found at Zaranik, the two others at El Arish.

Trionyx triunguis

Baha El Din and Salama (1992), report the first record of a live specimen of this species from Sinai, which was caught in the Mediterranean off El Arish on 9 October 1990. Werner (1982) regarded the species as absent from Sinai due to the lack of suitable habitats. Kasperek and Kinzelbach (1992) suggest that the marine wanderings of this species in the eastern Mediterranean are part of its natural foraging pattern, rather than accidental strays.

Ophisops elegans

The occurrence of this species in Sinai has been debated for a long time. Hoofien (1965) argued that the locality "Furweila" where Barbour (1914) reported the species from Sinai,



Map of North Sinai showing most locations mentioned in the text

is actually in Jordan. Both Flower (1933) and Schmidt and Marx (1956) included the species amongst Sinai's herpetofauna based on this record; and Werner (1982) did not include the species in his review of Sinai's herpetofauna, even though he expected the species to be found in Sinai.

A sizeable population was found at Qusiema, in north east Sinai, for the first time on 4 May 1990. The animals found appear to be assignable to *O. e. ehrenbergi*, which is found in the Negev.

Mesalina rubropunctata

A specimen was collected 35 km south west of El Arish on 27 April 1992, representing the eastern most record of the species in Sinai.

Mabuya vittata

A single specimen was collected from El Arish, representing the first record of the species from Sinai (Abd El Shakour 1990). Werner (1982) doubted the occurrence of the species in Sinai based on the apparent lack of suitable habitats in the peninsula.

Ablepharus kitaibeli

A single specimen was collected on 1 August 1990 at El Qusiema, north east Sinai. The species was previously only known from the mountains of South Sinai.

Large scale agricultural projects (in progress and planned for the near future) will change the ecology of large tracts of desert land in North Sinai. These projects, which are irrigated with Nile water, will probably lead to the spread into Sinai of the reptile and amphibian taxa associated with the Nile in Egypt, such as *Bufo regularis*, *Ptychadena mascareniensis*,

Mabuya quinquetaeniata and *Psammophis sibilans*. Already a parallel trend can be observed with avian species. The above taxa have, over the past century, colonized the Suez Canal zone which was similarly supplied with Nile water, after the construction of the Suez Canal. It would be interesting to see how successful they will be in spreading into Sinai.

REFERENCES

- Abd El Shakour, A. (1990). *Ecological and taxonomic studies on reptiles of North Sinai*. Unpublished M.S. thesis, Suez Canal University, Ismailia.
- Baha El Din. S. M. and Salama, W. (1989). Some recent records of the Nile Soft-shelled Turtle, *Trionyx triunguis*, from Egypt. *Zool. Mid. East*, 6: 39-40.
- Barbour, T. (1914). Notes on some reptiles from Sinai and Syria, *Proc. New England Zool. Club*, 5: 73-92.
- Buskirk, J.R. (1985). The endangered Egyptian Tortoise, *Testudo kleinmanni*: status in Egypt and Israel. In: *Proceedings of the 9th International Herpetological Symposium on captive propagation and husbandry*, 3-51. Mc Keown, S., Caporaso, F. & K.H. Peterson (eds.). Thurmont: Zoological Consortium Inc.
- Flower, S.S. (1933). Notes on the recent reptiles and amphibians of Egypt, with a list of the species recorded from that kingdom. *Proc. Zool. Soc. London* 1933: 735-851, London.
- Frazier, J.G., and Salas, S. (1984). The status of marine turtles in the Egyptian Red Sea. *Biol. Conserv.*, 30: 41-67.
- Groombridge, B. (1982). *The IUCN amphibia-reptilia red data book: Testudines, Crocodylia, Rhynchocephalia*, Pt I. IUCN, Gland.
- Hoofien, J.H. (1965). On some herpetological records from Sinai and Transjordan. *Isr. Jour. Zool.*, 14: 122-127.
- Kasperek, M., and Kinzelbach R. (1992). Distribution and bionomics of the Nile Soft-shelled Turtle, *Trionyx triunguis*, in the eastern Mediterranean. *Zeitschrift für angewandte Zoologie*, 78: 137-159, Berlin.
- Marx, H., (1968). *Checklist of the reptiles and amphibians of Egypt*. United States Naval Medical Research Unit Nummer 3, Cairo.
- Schmidt, K.P. and Marx, H. (1956). The herpetology of Sinai. *Fieldiana Zool.*, 9: 21-40, Chicago.
- Werner, Y.L. (1982). Herpetofaunal Survey of the Sinai Peninsula (1967-77), with emphasis on the Saharan sand community. In *Herpetological communities: A symposium of the Society for the study of Amphibians and Reptiles and the Herpetologists' League*, August 1977, Scott, N. (d.) *U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Wildlife Research Report* 13: 153-161.