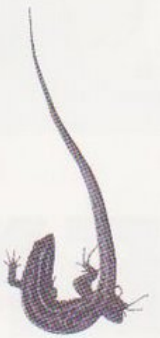


THE CONTRIBUTION of MALTESE REPTILES to AGRICULTURE



▲ Podarcis filfolensis

The lack of scientific knowledge has led to the persecution of Maltese reptiles. These creatures are not appreciated as much as they should be due to the society's myths and misunderstandings.

Instead of appreciating and benefiting from these creatures ability to help in various ways, peoples' minds are full of myths about these extraordinary animals. One common myth is that geckos carry skin diseases. Another one is that if a chameleon is placed on a red base, it pumps so much blood in its skin that it turns red and it eventually dies. Scientific studies show that reptiles are the least vertebrates that carry external pathogens due their tightly packed scaly skin, and any parasites that are found on their skin are all non zoonosis disease, that is they cannot be transferred to humans. Anyone who dares to take a closer look at herpetology (the study of reptiles) will remain impressed enough to except the fact that we must co - exist together with these reptiles. Reptiles have been recorded to exist in the Maltese islands for the last 100,000 years and several species have been recorded only on the Maltese islands (endemic).

Types of Maltese reptiles

There are twelve known species of Maltese reptiles.

The **Chameleon** *Chamaeleo chamaeleon* (*chamaeleontidae*) although not indigenous fits perfectly in the Maltese fauna. It can camouflage itself efficiently by changing the colour of its skin by levels of melanin (colour pigments found in the skin).

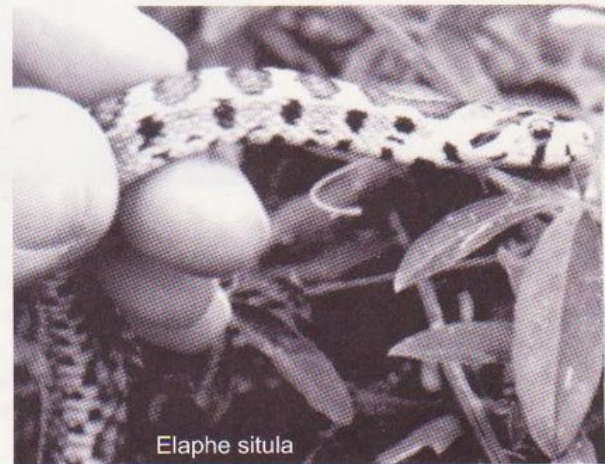
The **Algerian whip snake** *Coluber algirus* is the smallest snake found on the Maltese islands. This snake feeds on small to large insects and very small mammals. It only hunts by day, but due to its rarity, very little is known of the behaviour of the species.

The **Western whip snake** *Coluber viridiflavus* is the perfect predator because it is fast, aggressive and the largest in Malta. It is also the most common, and it is diurnal. Adults are black and white on the underside.

Another medium-sized snake and the most popular, is the **Leopard snake** *Elaphe situla*. It is the most coloured and it also varies frequently in colour intensity. Despite the meaning of its Maltese name (lifgja,) which in Greek means 'poisonous snake', the latter does not contain any venom, but kills its prey by constriction.

The fields are guarded at night by the **Cat snake** *Telescopus fallax* which is a nocturnal hunter and its eyes are perfectly adapted for night vision due to the extended pupils. It is the only poisonous snake found in Malta, but its venom is harmless to humans, and it is only strong enough to paralyse its prey. Two other nocturnal species of reptiles *Gekkonidae*, the Moorish and Turkish geokos *Tarentola mauritanica* and *Hemidactylus turcicus* are perfectly adapted to hunt at night. Their eyes are large and well adapted for night vision. Both species have special feet by which locomotion can take place on the finest surfaces such as walls and glass. The latter can be seen basking by day but prefers to hunt by night. The fauna of the Maltese reptiles have been protected by law since 1992, yet some species are on the verge of extinction. More awareness and education is needed so that we appreciate that reptiles help our ecology and are very beneficial indeed.

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Elaphe situla



Coluberviridiflavus