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FIRST OCCURRENCE OF ARIIDAE IN CYPRIOT WATERS – A MAJOR CONTRIBUTION TO BIODIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

The Ariidae family (order Siluriformes) comprises over 160 species primarily distributed in tropical and subtropical marine and brackish waters. Herein we report the first occurrence of an Ariidae fish in Cypriot waters and the third record of this family in the Mediterranean. On 7 January 2025, a recreational fisher captured an unidentified fish near Limassol, Cyprus, at a depth of ~4 m. The fish was photographed and filmed before release. Available evidence confirmed its taxonomic classification within the Ariidae family. This record is particularly significant, as it represents the first documentation of an Ariidae and so another alien fish in Cypriot waters, expanding knowledge of Mediterranean ichthyofauna. It underscores the need for continued monitoring and further taxonomic investigations to assess the implications of this presence for local biodiversity and ecosystem dynamics.

Key words: Siluriformes, catfish, alien species, Mediterranean Sea, early detection

PRIMA COMPARSA DI ARIIDAE NELLE ACQUE CIPRIOTE – UN CONTRIBUTO SIGNIFICATIVO ALLA BIODIVERSITÀ

SINTESI

La famiglia Ariidae (ordine Siluriformes) comprende oltre 160 specie distribuite principalmente nelle acque marine e salmastre tropicali e subtropicali. Qui riportiamo la prima occorrenza di un pesce della famiglia Ariidae nelle acque cipriote, rappresentando la terza segnalazione per questa famiglia nel Mediterraneo. Il 7 gennaio 2025, un pescatore ricreativo ha catturato un pesce non identificato vicino a Limassol, Cipro, a una profondità di circa 4 m. Il pesce è stato fotografato e filmato prima di essere rilasciato. Le prove disponibili hanno confermato la sua appartenenza alla famiglia Ariidae. Questa segnalazione ha un'importanza significativa, in quanto rappresenta la prima documentazione di un pesce della famiglia Ariidae e quindi di una nuova specie aliena nelle acque cipriote, ampliando le conoscenze sull'ittiofauna mediterranea. Si sottolinea inoltre la necessità di un monitoraggio continuo e di ulteriori indagini tassonomiche per valutare le implicazioni di questa presenza sulla biodiversità locale e sulle dinamiche dell'ecosistema.

Parole chiave: Siluriformes, pesce gatto, specie aliena, Mar Mediterraneo, rilevazione precoce

INTRODUCTION

The Ariidae family (Siluriformes) encompasses 160 species across 30 genera with global distribution but a notable preference for tropical and subtropical regions (Froese & Pauly, 2023). Though primarily found in marine environments, they can also inhabit brackish waters in estuaries and coastal lagoons (Simier *et al.*, 2021). Species in the Ariidae family range from medium to large in size, with some exceeding 1 m in total length (TL). The head is large, rounded to depressed, and covered by a bony shield that is often rugose and visible beneath thin skin, although in certain species it may be obscured by thicker skin and muscles. While paired maxillary and mandibular barbels, totalling four or six, represent a distinctive and consistent feature across the family, the presence of a supraoccipital process extending backward medially to connect with the pre-dorsal plate is an identifying characteristic for many species. Ariid fishes lack scales and have a complete lateral line that branches posteriorly onto the upper and lower lobes of the caudal fin. The dorsal fin is short, with a serrated spine followed by soft rays. An adipose fin is always present opposite the anal fin, and the caudal fin is deeply forked (Nelson *et al.*, 2016). The pectoral fins have serrated spines and soft rays, while the pelvic

fins are equipped with six soft rays, modified in mature females. Coloration is typically grey, yellow, or brown, sometimes with black patches or a silvery lateral stripe, and the ventral side is paler or white (Acero, 2002).

Within the Mediterranean Sea, only two representatives of this family have been recorded to date. The Guinean Sea catfish, *Carlarius parkii*, was reported only once, in 1983, in the shallow waters of Haifa Bay, Israel (Golani & Ben-Tuvia, 1986). Its natural range includes the eastern Atlantic, from Cape Blanc to Angola, with occasional sightings along the Atlantic coasts of Morocco (Acero & Betancur-R., 2016). While the species was initially thought to have naturally entered the Mediterranean via the Strait of Gibraltar, its prolonged absence from intermediate locations has led some researchers to consider it cryptogenic (Zenetos *et al.*, 2022). More recently, in 2022, another species, *Ariopsis felis*, was recorded in Palestinian waters off the Gaza Strip on a single occasion, at a depth of 25 m on a muddy bottom (Salah *et al.*, 2024). The natural distribution range of *A. felis* encompasses the western Atlantic coast, from Massachusetts and the northern Gulf of Mexico to southern Florida (USA) and into Mexico (Froese & Pauly, 2023). The detection of this species in the Mediterranean raises questions regarding its introduction pathway and potential for establishment.

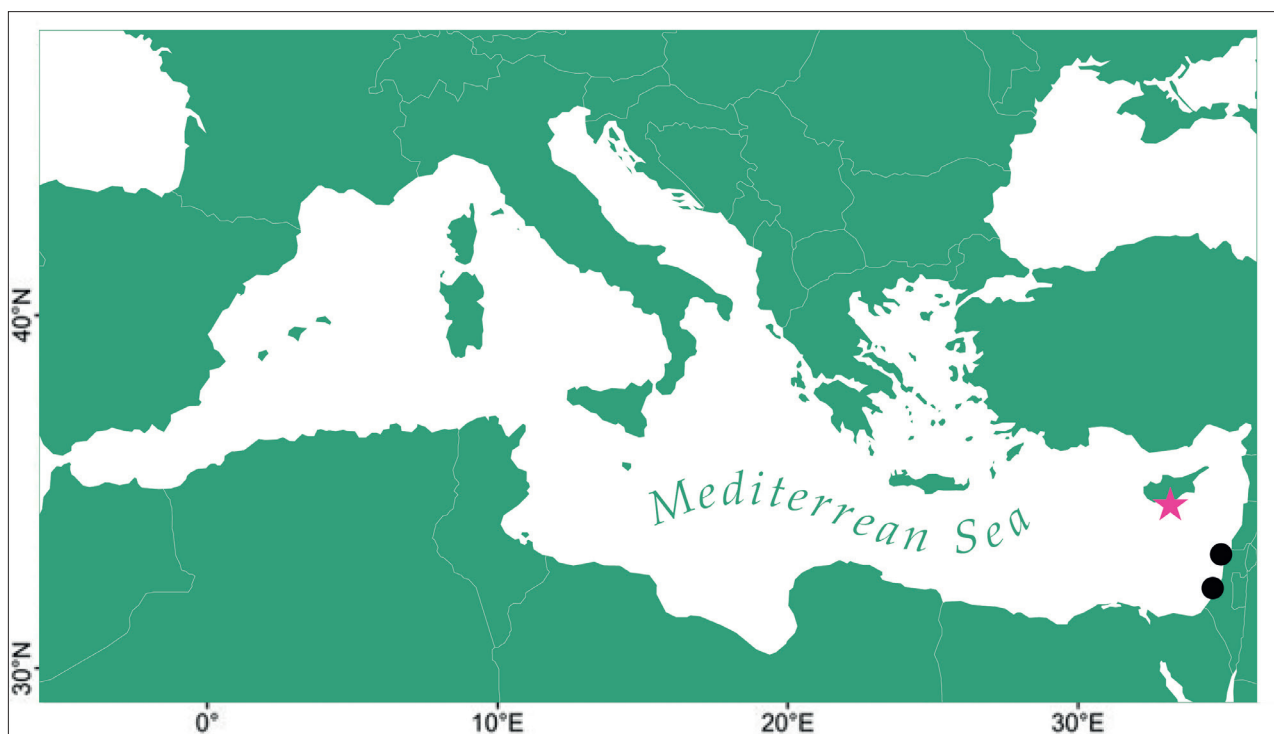


Fig. 1: Distribution map of Ariidae fish records in the Mediterranean Sea. Black circles indicate historical records, the reddish star denotes the new record.

Sl. 1: Zemljevid razširjenosti morskih somov v Sredozemskem morju. Črni krogi kažejo zgodovinske podatke, rdeča zvezdica pa ponazarja novi zapis o pojavljanju.



Fig. 2: Ariidae specimen observed in Limassol, Cyprus, on 7 January 2025 (©Antonis Pourgouris). Original video footage available at [\[link\]](#).

Sl. 2: Primerek morskega soma pri Limassolu na Cipru, posnet 7 januarja 2025 (Foto: Antonis Pourgouris). Originalni videozapis je razpoložljiv na [\[link\]](#).

Here, we report for the first time the presence of a member of the Ariidae family in Cyprus, marking the third documented occurrence of this group in the Mediterranean Sea. We also discuss potential introduction pathways and the implications for Mediterranean biodiversity.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

On 7 January 2025, an individual belonging to the Ariidae family was caught by a recreational fisher using a fishing rod from the shore, in Limassol, Cyprus (34.664056 N, 33.029972 E, Fig. 1), at a depth of ~4 m on a sandy bottom with seagrass patches. The capture site is located between Limassol New Port (~1.5 km away) and Limassol Marina (~0.6 km away). The fisher used fly larvae (*bigattini*) as bait. The fish was photographed and filmed before being released. Despite the lack of

a physical specimen, diagnostic features were assessed using available evidence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The photographs and video footage depicted a specimen with an estimated total length of about 20 cm displaying general characteristics consistent with the Ariidae family, including body shape, a distinct supraoccipital process, and a dark adipose fin (Fig. 2). However, key diagnostic features required for genus and species-level identification, such as serrated dorsal and pectoral fin spines and close-set nostrils, were neither clearly visible nor adequately evaluable. The absence of a physical specimen precluded examination of other critical taxonomic characters, such as tooth morphology and dorsal bony shield characteristics.

Despite previous Mediterranean reference records of Ariidae species, which include *Ariopsis felis* and *Carlarius parkii*, the possibility that the observed specimen belongs to a third, unreported species of this family cannot be excluded. This taxonomic uncertainty prevents a definitive identification of the specimen and consequently limits speculation about introduction pathways. However, the proximity of the capture site to Limassol's major port suggests potential human-mediated introduction through ballast water discharge.

While this pathway remains unconfirmed, the record is nonetheless significant, as it represents Cyprus's first documented Ariidae occurrence (considered alien in all Mediterranean contexts). Such findings reveal dynamic marine biodiversity patterns in the region, potentially driven by changing environmental conditions, anthropogenic influences, or biogeographic shifts. Given the identification challenges and uncertainties regarding potential establishment, further targeted studies are required to assess the species' population in the area and facilitate a more

detailed taxonomic characterisation. Enhanced monitoring efforts combining systematic scientific surveys with citizen science initiatives could be instrumental for detecting additional specimens and acquiring improved morphological and genetic data. The active involvement of local fishers, divers, and other stakeholders in reporting unusual catches or sightings will be essential for enhancing our understanding of the species' distribution and potential ecological impact. Furthermore, strengthening collaboration among researchers, environmental agencies, and maritime authorities will enable a more comprehensive and coordinated response to marine biological invasions, helping to mitigate the potential risks associated with the introduction of non-native species (Tiralongo *et al.*, 2020).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to warmly thank Antonis Pourgouris for reporting the observation of the fish belonging to the Ariidae family.

PRVO POJAVLJANJE PREDSTAVNIKOV IZ DRUŽINE ARIIDAE V CIPRSKIH VODAH – VELIK PRISPEVEK K BIODIVERZITETI

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POVZETEK

Morski somi (družina Ariidae, red Siluriformes) štejejo 160 vrst, ki so primarno razširjene v tropskih in subtropskih morskih in brakičnih vodah. Avtorja poročata o prvem zapisu o pojavljanju vrste iz družine morskih somov v ciprskih vodah in tretji zapis o pojavljanju vrst iz te družine v Sredozemlju. Sedmega januarja 2025 je rekreativni ribič pri Limassolu na Cipru na globini približno 4 m ujel neidentificirano ribo, ki jo je pred izpustom fotografiral in posnel. Izkazalo se je, da gre za vrsto iz družine Ariidae. Ta zapis o pojavljanju je pomemben, saj gre za prvi primer pojavljanja morskega soma kot tujerodne vrste v ciprskih vodah, in dopolnjuje vedenje o sredozemski ihtiofauni. Hkrati poudarja potrebo po nadaljnjem spremljanju in nadaljnjih taksonomskih preiskavah za oceno posledic prisotnosti te vrste za lokalno biotsko raznovrstnost in dinamiko ekosistemov.

Ključne besede: Siluriformes, morski somi, tujerodne vrste, Sredozemsko morje, zgodnje odkrivanje

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