

Historical and recent records of the Mediterranean Monk Seal, *Monachus monachus* (Hermann, 1779) from Maltese waters

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ABSTRACT

The Mediterranean monk seal, *Monachus monachus*, has only extremely rarely been recorded from Maltese waters as a vagrant but there have been at least two sightings in the past three years. Here we collect together and review documented historic and recent records of the monk seal from Maltese waters aiming to make this information more accessible to a broader audience, as much of it is currently only available through social and news media.

Keywords: Mediterranean monk seal, conservation, Malta

INTRODUCTION

The Mediterranean monk seal *Monachus monachus* (Hermann, 1779) is the sole extant species of the genus and considered one of the rarest pinnipeds globally, as it has faced severe population declines due to human persecution, habitat destruction, and other anthropogenic pressures (Karamanlidis *et al.*, 2016). Historically abundant across the Mediterranean and Black Seas, as well as the eastern Atlantic coasts, the species' range has contracted significantly, with current known reproductive populations largely confined to Cap Blanc (Mauritania and the non-self-governing territory of Western Sahara), and Madeira in the Atlantic, and Greece and Turkey in the Mediterranean (Bundone *et al.*, 2019; Karamanlidis *et al.*, 2023). However,

recent signs of recovery have allowed for the estimation of a current monk seal population of 815–997 individuals (Karamanlidis, 2024), and classify the species as "Vulnerable" on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List of Threatened Species (Karamanlidis *et al.*, 2023).

In recent decades, there has been an increasing number of extralimital sightings of the monk seal beyond its known breeding range, particularly from places where it had been absent for decades, including Lebanon, Israel, Libya, and the Adriatic and Tyrrhenian Seas (reviewed and summarised by Karamanlidis, 2024; see also Bundone *et al.*, 2019). This may indicate a potential recolonization, or at least sporadic visits, to

areas where the species was previously thought to be extinct.

Evidence of monk seal occurrences in Maltese waters date back to ancient times but there are no indications that the species has ever bred in Malta or even that it occurs as anything but very rare vagrant individuals. In the light of recent sightings of the seal in Maltese waters, the aim of this report is to document historical and recent sighting of the species, contributing to our understanding of the species' historical and current distribution in the central Mediterranean. Lanfranco (1969) lists two 'documented' historical records of the monk seal from Maltese waters: a "*mostro marino*" [marine monster] beached at Mellieha Bay by a storm in 1642, reported and illustrated by Abela (1647), and an individual sighted at Rinella at the mouth of the Grand Harbour in the late 1850s and reported by Gulia (1858–1859). Baldacchino & Schembri (2002) report that in 1998 the skipper and crew of an Italian coastguard vessel working in Maltese waters some 26 km west of the coast of Malta (35°49'0.01"N, E14°4'59.9"E), observed an individual seal swimming at the surface a few metres away from the vessel before diving and disappearing after a few minutes.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Here we present a previously unpublished, recent record of an individual *Monachus monachus*, from Maltese coastal waters and have collected together recent sightings of the monk seal in Maltese waters, which have only been reported in social and news media.

We have searched for and collated all reports of recent sighting of monk seals in Maltese waters and extracted scientifically relevant information from these. We also attempted to contact the original observers to

obtain more information but in most cases, we have had no response.

RESULTS

A single individual Monk Seal that was observed on 17th October 2021 at Ras id-Dawwara on the east coast of the island of Malta (35°52'09.2"N, 14°21'06.4"E) at 15:15h (Fig. 1). The day was sunny with dispersed clouds and the animal was swimming at the surface in open water some 20 m deep, about 500 m offshore. The coast in the area consists of cliffs with emergent caves. The seal swam for about 10 minutes, dived once for approximately 5 minutes, and then swam out to sea and out of sight of observers on the cliff top. During the time the seal was close to shore it was photographed and videoed using a mobile phone. Images and videos were posted on social media but are restricted access.

In July 2024, three sightings of seals were reported from Malta. The first was by two boatmen, who sighted and videoed a seal off the coast of Malta. The video was initially uploaded on social media, but starting on 6th July, this sighting was then reported on by multiple local newspapers and news portals, including by the national broadcaster (The Malta Independent 6th July 2024; Malta Today 6th July 2024; Times of Malta 6th July 2024; TVM News 6th July 2024). No information as to where off the coast this video was recorded has been made publicly available. This video shows a seal with a rounded head bobbing at the surface at a rather large distance from the boat.

Two days later (8th July), an image of what was definitely *Monachus monachus*, grabbed from a video taken by a member of the diving enterprise Dive Systems Malta, was published in a local newspaper; the online edition of the same newspaper carried the actual video from

which this image was grabbed (Times of Malta 8th July 2024). This video showed an individual *Monachus monachus* at close quarters. On the basis of coloration this appears to be a female (Adult males are dark brown to black over most of the body, while adult females are usually medium to dark grey above and paler below). The animal was swimming slowly along a cleft in very shallow water in what appears to be a semi-submerged cave or deep overhang, presumably to maintain distance between it and the divers videoing it using artificial light. No publicly available information on where this video was taken has been made available, apart that it was

off the southwest coast of Malta.

The third sighting was a short video posted on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/matthew.xuereb.31/videos/1584878498735663/?rdid=hvGDye9VkfWi5IUg>) which showed what again is definitely an individual *Monachus monachus* swimming about two metres from the shore at the surface and then diving. According to what the authors posted on Facebook, this video was made on 12th July 2024 at Blue Lagoon, which is a narrow channel (submerged valley) between the islands of Comino and Cominotto (36°00'48.0"N, 14°19'24.3"E).



Figure 1. *Monachus monachus* photographed from the clifftop at Ras id-Dawwara, some 500 m from the shore (35°52'09.2"N, 14°21'06.4"E) by Terence Camilleri. The length of the seal was estimated to be approximately 2m. The map shows the location of this sighting (red star) and that of the Blue Lagoon sighting (blue star).

DISCUSSION

The Maltese language has several names for the monk seal: 'bumarin' also spelt as 'bumerin', 'foka', 'haruf il-baħar', and 'għoġol il - baħar' (Serracino Inglott, 1975; Aquilina, 1969; 1987), and it has also been

referred to as 'monka' (Aquilina, 1987). Hearsay, mostly due to fishers and other sea-users, has it that 'bumerin' are very occasionally encountered in Maltese waters. However, Lanfranco (1969) points out that the

vernacular name ‘*bumerin*’ is applied by sea-users to other marine mammals apart from the monk seal, especially Risso’s Dolphin (*Grampus griseus*) (G. Cuvier, 1812) because of its rounded head, broadly similar to that of a monk seal. Moreover, the septuagenarian full-time Maltese fisher interviewed by Brincat & D’Avenia (2014) as part of their research on the linguistics of maritime terminology, including Maltese names for fish and other marine animals, recognised a photograph of the monk seal as ‘*bumerin*’ but applied the name ‘*monka*’ to a cetacean of uncertain identity. Therefore, anecdotal reports of must be considered unsubstantiated, especially if based on vernacular names.

The illustration by Abela (1647) is a fanciful drawing and can be variously interpreted; however, from the description provided including the length (“*sette palmi*”, which, assuming this was the Sicilian unit in use at the time, is estimated to be equivalent to 1.69 metres) and the depicted rounded head and two pectoral appendages with claws, Lanfranco’s assignation of this creature to *Monachus monachus* is plausible. Gulia (1858–1859) gives a good description of the colour of the individual he reported, which is that typical of *Monachus monachus*.

Although both the image of the 2021 Ras id-Dawwara individual reported here, and the video of that of the 6th July 2024 show seals, they are of too poor quality to enable certain identification even if they very likely are *Monachus monachus*. Note that this species is not the only pinnipede that occurs in the Mediterranean. The hooded seal, *Cystophora cristata* (Erxleben, 1777), has been recorded multiple times along the coast of Spain in the Alboran Sea (Bellido *et al.*, 2009), while there is a record of a harp seal, *Pagophilus groenlandicus* (Erxleben, 1777), also from the Spanish coast of the Alboran Sea (Bellido *et al.*, 2007), one of a Harbour seal, *Phoca*

vitulina Linnaeus, 1758, from the Ebro Delta (Fundación CRAM, 2008), and of a Grey seal, *Halichoerus grypus* (Fabricius, 1791), from the island of Ibiza (Balearic islands) (Solomando *et al.*, 2023).

Contrariwise, the very clear videos of the 8th July and Blue Lagoon animals leave no doubt that these are *Monachus monachus*. They may even show the same individual. The video of the 8th July animal shows distinctive scars and marking on the side and abdomen which may be used to uniquely identify it; however, the video of the Blue Lagoon animal is too brief and only shows the head and back of the animal and does not allow a comparison to be made.

Three (possibly four), sightings of seals have been reported from Maltese waters in the past 26 years, of which at least two were made in the past three years. This spike in sightings of an animal that is practically never seen in this area may be linked to both the increasing number of sea-users equipped to record any unusual event, and also due to the recovery of the Mediterranean monk seal population which has resulted in a number of recent extralimital records from Albania, Italy, Israel and Egypt (Bundone *et al.*, 2019; Panou *et al.*, 2023; Karamanlidis, 2024), and Montenegro, from where the first sightings in the 21st century (2023 and 2024) have been recently reported (Varda, 2024). Intermediate occurrences between the eastern Mediterranean (Turkey and Greece) and the Atlantic coast represent critical evidence of possible ecological connectivity and potential gene flow between the two isolated population clusters.

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Istorijski i nedavni nalazi Sredozemne medvjedice, *Monachus monachus* (Hermann, 1779) u vodama Malte

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SAŽETAK

Sredozemna medvjedica, *Monachus monachus*, je izuzetno rijetko zabilježena u prolazu u malteškim vodama, ali su u posljednje tri godine zabilježena najmanje dva viđenja ove vrste. Ovdje smo prikupili i pregledali dokumentovane istorijske i nedavne nalaze Mediteranske medvjedice u malteških voda sa ciljem da učinimo ove informacije dostupnije široj javnosti, s obzirom da je veći dio njih trenutno dostupan samo preko društvenih mreža i medija.

Ključne riječi: Sredozemna medvjedica, očuvanje, Malta