

Merulempista turturella (Zeller, 1848) new to the Maltese Islands (Lepidoptera: Pyralidae, Phycitinae)

Jonathan Agius

Abstract

The genus *Merulempista* Roesler, 1967 and the species *Merulempista turturella* (Zeller, 1848) are reported for the first time from the Maltese Islands. Distribution and habits of the larvae and adult are included. A Maltese name is proposed for this new record.

Keywords: Lepidoptera, Pyralidae, Phycitinae, *Merulempista turturella*, new record, Malta Islands.

Merulempista turturella (Zeller, 1848) nueva en Malta
(Lepidoptera: Pyralidae, Phycitinae)

Resumen

El género *Merulempista* Roesler, 1967 y la especie *Merulempista turturella* (Zeller, 1848) se menciona por primera vez para Malta. Se incluye la distribución y hábitat del adulto. Se propone un nombre maltés para este nuevo registro.

Palabras clave: Lepidoptera, Pyralidae, Phycitinae, *Merulempista turturella*, nuevo registro, Malta.

Introduction

Merulempista Roesler, 1967 is a small genus of fifteen described species distributed in the Palaearctic, Indomalayan and the Australasian ecozones with 10 species found within Europe (Slamka, 2019). *Merulempista turturella* (Zeller, 1848) is known from the Canary Islands, Spain, Mallorca, France, mainland Italy, Sicily, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt and Israel. The genus is characterized by the male gnathos distally hooked, the sclerotized costa often produced to a distal process, and the female antrum deeply concave at middle and greatly extending backward posterolaterally (Yingdang, 2011).

Material

The species has been recorded from several coastal locations across the Maltese islands. MALTA, Ghadira Nature Reserve 9-IX-2021, 4-X-2021, 28-II-2022, 16-V-2022, 1-VI-2022, 10-X-2023; Simar Nature Reserve 14-IX-2021, 11-X-2021, 28-II-2022, 22-III-2022, 06-III-2023; Salina Nature Reserve 31-VIII-2022, 05-X-2022; Gozo, San Blas 26-VIII-2022.

Discussion

In the Canary Islands, the larvae of *M. turturella* (Zeller, 1848) have been observed feeding on the

flower buds and the delicate flower parts of *Tamarix canariensis* Willd (Slamka, 2019). They typically inhabit saline open environments and similar biotopes where their host plants grow. Interestingly, all the specimens found in both Malta and Gozo were in such habitats. While, so far, there is no documented evidence of these larvae in Malta, it's important to highlight that *Tamarix africana* Poir, is one of the most prevalent tree species in the areas where these specimens were discovered. However, it is worth mentioning that even though they are less common, *Tamarix gallica* L. and *Tamarix parviflora* DC., can be found on the Maltese Islands. *T. gallica* L. is present in all the three nature reserves maintained by BirdLife Malta, albeit in much smaller numbers than *T. africana* Poir. Consequently, it is highly probable that *Tamarix africana* Poir, serves as the primary food source for the larvae of *M. turturella* (Zeller, 1848).



Figure 1. *Merulempista turturella* (Zeller, 1848) and its habitat - MALTA, Ghadira Nature Reserve, 1 ♂, 10-X-2023, J. Agius leg.

Conclusion

The species is new to the Maltese lepidoptero fauna. I propose the Maltese name “*Merulempista tal-faxxi skuri*”, after the ante-medial vertical lines crossing the forewings.

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Jonathan Agius
166 'Infinity'
Vjal ix-Xarolla
MT-Zurrieq, ZRQ1617
MALTA / MALTA
E-mail: jonagius@msn.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4875-0524>

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