

THE OCCURRENCE OF *ECHIMUM SABULICOLA* POMEL (= *E. CONFUSUM* DE COINCY) IN THE MALTESE ISLANDS

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ABSTRACT

The occurrence of *E. sabulicola* Pomel in the Maltese Islands is confirmed and its local history and status discussed.

The Lower Coralline Limestone plateau at Ta' Cenc and the valley of Mgarr ix-Xini in Southern Gozo are well known for their floristic interest. The area between them, however, locally known as "Ros in-Newwiela" seems to have been unexplored. It was in this secluded locality that on April 4 1992, the writer discovered several colonies of *E. sabulicola* growing in crevices of friable rock on the exposed Globigerina cliff-top. The associated flora included: *Anthemis urvilleana* (DC) Sommier and Caruana Gatto, *Darniella melitensis* (Botsch.) Brullo, *Daucus rupestris* Guss., *Senecio leucanthemifolius* Poirét, *Hedysarum glomeratum* F.G. Dietrich, *Minuartia geniculata* (Poirét) Thell., *Frankenia hirsuta* L., and *Gynandris sisyrinchium* (L.) Parl. Some robust specimens were also seen on the edge of the adjoining fallow fields, where they were also accompanied by *Avena barbata* Pott ex Link., *Hordeum leporinum* Link., *Hedysarum coronarium* L., and *Chrysanthemum coronarium* L.

E. sabulicola is a Western Mediterranean species. In Malta it was only recorded by Grech Delicata (1853) under the name of *E. maritimum* Willd. from Gnejna Bay, besides Arcangeli (1894) who mentions its occurrence in the Maltese Islands, possibly on the authority of Grech Delicata. Sommier and Caruana Gatto (1915), updating the name as *E. confusum* De Coincy, regarded Delicata's record as doubtful on the grounds that the latter's sole surviving specimen at the Valletta University Herbarium was, according to them, *E. arenarium* Guss. This, however, is debatable. These authors observe that the roots of *E. arenarium* cause a violet stain on the paper on which they are mounted, giving one to understand that it is a special characteristic distinguishing *E. arenarium* from other *Echium* species. This has been proved incorrect. In fact the roots of the specimens of *E. sabulicola* deposited at the writer's own herbarium caused the same violet stain. Could this erroneous assumption have influenced Sommier and Caruana Gatto in determining Delicata's sole seventy-year-old surviving specimen? They also state elsewhere in the same publication that the old specimens deposited at the Valletta University Herbarium were not in a reliable condition for identification. In their own words: "*Esso (l'Erbario Universitario di Valletta) e' in pessime condizioni, e rappresenta evidentemente soltanto un residuo di quello che fu: ed anche quanto resta e' spesso inutilizzabile per trasposizioni o perdita di etichette, o perche le piante sono tante guaste da non essere riconoscibili.*" It is

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improbable that Delicata could have mistaken *E. arenarium* for *E. maritimum* because he included both species in his flora together with their respective different localities and flowering periods. Both Borg (1927) and Haslam et al. (1977) include this species in their floras on the authority of Grech Delicata, the latter under the updated name of *E. sabulicola* Pomel. In the Gozo populations the writer noticed a constant morphological variation: the stamens are never exerted. In this respect the local plants are closer to *E. confusum* as described by Borg.

The present record removes any doubts there might have been on the inclusion of *E. sabulicola* Pomel as an important element in the Maltese Flora. The fact that Malta lies well within its range of distribution and its occurrence in all the nearby islands of Lampedusa, Linosa and Pantelleria suggest that it is of native origin.

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