THE ALGERIAN HEDGEHOG "IL-QANFUD"

Most people are aware that a species of hedgehog (Maltese: *Qanfud*) occurs in the Maltese Islands, even if their only encounter with this animal is as a pile of dried skin and spines on a road where the unfortunate beast has been run over by a motor vehicle. Few, however, are aware that the identity of this species has only recently been established. The hedgehog has been mentioned in accounts of Maltese mammals ever since Gavino Gulia's *Repertorio di Storia Naturale* which first started publication in 1858, and which many consider to be the first scientific report on Maltese natural history. Gulia, and all subsequent authors, referred to the hedgehog of our Islands as the European Hedgehog (scientifically: *Erinaceus europaeus*) which is a species found over most of western Europe including Britain and Ireland. It was only Guido Lanfranco, writing in the *Times of Malta* of 21.2.63 who suggested otherwise. In his book on Maltese mammals published in 1969, Guido Lanfranco tells how he had never found any Maltese hedgehogs which corresponded to the European Hedgehog and how he finally sent a specimen to Gordon Corbet, an expert on European mammals at the British Museum of Natural History, to be told that the Maltese species was not the European Hedgehog after all but the Algerian Hedgehog, known scientifically as *Erinaceus algirus!* Like Guido Lanfranco, the author has never found any specimens of the European Hedgehog in the Maltese Islands, and neither have any of the numerous persons contacted by him. It therefore seems safe to assume that this species never existed in our Islands and that all previous reports of its occurrence were rather hasty identifications. It is quite easy to distinguish between the two species: the Algerian Hedgehog has a wide spine-free "parting" on the crown of the head while that of the European Hedgehog is very narrow.

The Algerian Hedgehog is a Northwest African species and in Europe is found on the southern and southwestern coasts of France, on the southern coast of Spain, in the Balearic Islands and of course in the Maltese Islands. This is a rather odd distribution pattern and from this and other evidence it is thought

Light and dark varieties of the Algerian Hedgehog

that the Algerian Hedgehog was introduced into Europe by man. There are two forms of the Algerian Hedgehog in North Africa which differ from each other in details of the skeleton, particularly the skull. One, the Western form, is called *Erinaceus algirus algirus* and occurs in Algeria; the other, the Eastern form, is called *Erinaceus algirus fallax* and occurs in Tunisia and Libya. In 1972 two German zoologists Franz Malec and Gerhard Storch made a careful study of the Maltese hedgehog and concluded that the Maltese animals were of the Eastern form and that they were introduced into the Maltese Islands from northeastern Africa by man in recent times. In his book, Guido Lanfranco mentioned that he found some variation in coloration in Maltese hedgehogs. In their study Malec and Storch characterized these differences and recognized two varieties of hedgehogs from the Maltese Islands; a light-coloured variety with whitish spines and a dark-coloured variety in which the spines have a median dark band.

Hedgehogs belong to a group of mammals called the Insectivora which literally means "insect-eating" but which refers to their dentition rather than their diet. The teeth of the Insectivora are sharp and pointed and are adapted for biting and piercing small hard-bodied animals such as beetles rather than for crushing and chewing. The Insectivora show many primitive features and are thought to have survived relatively unchanged since their evolution some 80 million years ago.

Little is known about the biology of the Algerian Hedgehog, locally. It is known to make its hiding place under dense shrubs and bushes such as tangles of bramble and it may also construct a shallow burrow in soft soil. Elsewhere in Europe the Algerian Hedgehog has a litter of some 2 to 7 young between June and September. Unlike the European Hedgehog the Algerian Hedgehog does not hibernate but during the colder winter days it becomes lethargic and may remain dormant in its hiding place for long periods of time. The Algerian Hedgehog feeds on a variety of invertebrates including insects, earthworms, snails and slugs. A specimen kept in captivity has been observed by the author to kill and eat a small Whip Snake.

Hedgehogs are noted for their ability to roll up into a ball for protection and the Algerian Hedgehog is also able to do this. When threatened the Algerian Hedgehog tucks its head in between the front legs and brings its hind legs to lie over its nose and eyes. At the same time powerful muscles in the skin erect the armature of spines on the back and flanks and in this way the soft belly, legs and head are protected and a potential attacker is confronted by a spiny ball. This defence mechanism can also be the hedgehog's undoing in modern times. Although the Algerian Hedgehog is sometimes active during the day, it is predominantly a nocturnal creature. The eyes are weak and sensitive to bright light. When confronted by the bright glare of a vehicle's lights at night, the hedgehog reacts in characteristic fashion – it rolls up into a ball and the result is more often than not a squashed pile of spines on the road. Hedgehogs have few natural enemies but motor vehicles are taking a heavy toll and an appeal is made to all drivers to be particularly careful when driving through our country roads at night to try and avoid running over these shy and retiring animals.

The Algerian Hedgehog showing the characteristic parling

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FURTHER READING

Gulia, G. (1858 *et seq.*) *Repertorio di storia naturale.* Anglo-Maltese: Malta.

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