

On vacation in southern France

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INTRODUCTION

This year (1998), I went on vacation to southern France, together with my parents. It was the third time that I visited this area to look for *Timon lepidus*. Our vacation lasted from August 29 to September 12. The summer of 1998 was extremely hot and dry in southern Europe. We were going to spend a week in Maussane, and a week in St. Rémy de Provence. Both towns are located at the base of Les Alpilles, a small but rugged and rocky mountain chain with an east-west orientation. The area is situated roughly between Marseille and the Camargue. To the south is an area that appeals to me very much: the Crau, the only remaining European rocky savannah (MEGERLE & RESCH, 1987). It was here that I first got introduced to the largest - and in my eyes the most beautiful - European lizard, *Timon lepidus*. The landscape is very impressive, barren and dry, but incredibly beautiful - especially in Spring.

We have visited the latter area on previous occasions. Les Alpilles are also very interesting. Another mountain, the Rochers de la Pène, which remains much lower and runs parallel to Les Alpilles, is especially fascinating.

Each area will be discussed later, accompanied by notes on the herpetofauna observed there.



Timon lepidus, male.

Photo: M.H.M. Arets

AROUND MAUSSANE

Upon arrival we were welcomed by the calls of the omnipresent cicadas and grasshoppers. During our first week, Maussane would be our home. This town is situated south of the mountain chain. To the left and the right of the road are rocks with small pine trees, low stone-oaks, and other vegetation. In these road sides we tried to find lizards or other reptiles. Inside the bungalow park we saw several Wall Lizards, *Podarcis muralis*, running on the walls.

On the next day we drove to Peau de Meau, a protected nature reserve on the Crau, along the Canal de Vergière. In order to visit Peau de Meau one has to purchase a permit in the Écomusée in St. Martin de Crau, for about fifteen French francs.

In and on top of an old stable for sheep, which now serves as a bird observatory, we noticed some *Podarcis muralis*, but there was no sign of *Timon lepidus*.

The same thing happened to us the year before, and in 1995. Even the pair of *Lacerta bilineata* that we saw near the irrigation canal in previous years was nowhere to be seen. We did find some *Rana esculenta* (?) and beautiful dragonflies here. Last year, we discovered a *Natrix maura* near the same canal. The canal is especially suited as a hunting ground for this snake.

On our way back to our bungalow I had to make an emergency stop, because I spotted a snake lying along the road side. It turned out to be a *Malpolon monspessulanus* with a total length of 1.25 m. The animal was injured at the head and on one eye. After I took some pictures I put the very subdued animal back in the road side vegetation. The next morning it was still there but a lot more lively already.

The morning of September 1 we reserved for a trip into the area on the left hand side of the road to St. Rémy, this area is situated at the base of Les Alpilles and has a southern exposure. The vegetation in this rocky garrigue slope consisted mainly of rosemary and pines. Here we saw a few *Psammodromus hispanicus*, about ten in total. Both adults and juveniles were found. Along a slope which was covered in grass and dense thorny shrubs, we spotted a *Lacerta bilineata*. It noisily disappeared into the dense underbrush. A large man-made hole along the same road revealed some more *Psammodromus hispanicus*. Their juveniles have an olive-brown coloration and are just as fast as their parents.



Psammodromus hispanicus, amidst vegetation.

Photo: M.H.M. Arets

LAC DU SALAGOU AND ITS SURROUNDING AREA

The vicinity of this lake supposedly is a good place to find *Timon lepidus*. According to Mark Lehouk (in AURORA et al., 1985) the more quiet western part of the reservoir would be the most suited for these wonderful lizards. Again, we found some *Psammodromus hispanicus* that ran off when we approached them. This area has a more open character, with bunches of grass and scattered thorn bushes. The rocks are maroon red, crumbly and heavily eroded. The hills are riddled with run-off ditches. Within these ditches one can find relatively large, rounded and polished rocks that are dark grey and very hard. These rocks looked like they might be great hiding places for reptiles.

Near a small tarmac road that led to the lake was a large field with rocks just like in the run-off ditches, except here they were in grass, bushes and blackberries. It seemed an ideal spot for reptiles. However, we unfortunately did not see anything. Possibly this was caused by the not so favourable weather conditions - it was very cloudy that day.

The road mentioned earlier, took us by vineyards that were surrounded with wide walls, built out of stacked rocks. A little bit further I saw a small snake escaping into a ditch - it was slender with black and grey markings, and measured approximately 40 cm. Near a small building in the

vicinity of the lake I found a juvenile *Natrix maura* underneath a reed mat. It had a zigzag pattern on its back and was approximately 100 meters from the lake.

About 100 m from the parking lot I heard a lizard run away. After a little while, the animal reappeared, it was a beautiful large male *Lacerta bilineata*. We also came across a concrete basin, covered in green algae and water plants. Inside and on the edges it was teeming with *Rana esculenta*.

According to local farmers it was too hot for *Timon lepidus*. They said that the lizards would appear again in a few weeks. However, I did find additional *Psammodromus hispanicus* in the hills north of the lake.

The low mountain chain, the Rochers de la Pène, is relatively rugged and consists of a light grey lime stone. The garrigue vegetation here includes species such as Wild Thyme (*Thymus serpyllum*), Crested Lavender (*Lavandula stoechas*), Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) and grass.

At the base of the mountains are fields of olive trees. In some low, creeping vegetation I spotted a snake escaping. It had a brown head and was distinctly marked with black pigment. The total length of this snake was approximately 70 cm.

A couple of hundred meters further I heard another snake escape. Underneath a smallish rock I found a *Malpolon monspessulanus*, measuring roughly 1.20 m. It instantly took off and rapidly disappeared into the underbrush. A little ways further a *Lacerta bilineata* disappeared between rocks and grass. In the actual mountain range I managed to find another six *Psammodromus hispanicus* that same day, even around noon when it was very hot.

Leaving Maussane towards Mouries en Eyguieres, on the left hand side of the road, is an area of open garrigue vegetation, which contains many Montpellier Sun Roses (*Cistus monspeliensis*), thorny bushes and pines. In this area we found many *Psammodromus hispanicus* too (five individuals). While leaving the parking lot we found a dead *Malpolon monspessulanus* of about 1.25 m, that was killed by traffic.

ST. RÉMY DE PROVENCE

At our second destination, bungalow park Les Patios in St. Rémy de Provence, we immediately saw many *Podarcis muralis*. During a short visit to the lake of St. Rémy we found a Mole Cricket (*Gryllotalpa gryllotalpa*), but no reptiles or amphibians.

We found a juvenile *Rana esculenta* during a night walk, and had a *Bufo bufo* visited us later that evening.

When driving back to Peau de Meau the next day, we found a dead snake in exactly the same spot where we saw a snake a few days earlier. It turned out to be a *Malpolon monspessulanus*, probably the same individual that was injured earlier.

Along the road across from the Etang des Aulnes we saw a juvenile *Lacerta bilineata* basking in the dry grass underneath a blackberry bush.

I must have examined at least fifty rock piles on the Crau, but unfortunately did not find a single *Timon lepidus*. Not even excrements or pieces of shed skin could be found. A situation that was very different two ears earlier. At the sheep stable l'Opéra across from Peau de Meau we spotted a small snake - most likely *Malpolon monspessulanus* - disappear inside the stable. We also discovered some *Podarcis muralis*, but here again no *Timon lepidus*.

Two days later we revisited the Rochers de la Pène, but this time the other side. In the mountain range's interior we found the *Psammodromus hispanicus* again, four individuals this time. I also saw a semi-adult *Podarcis muralis* with a uniform brown back. This was the only *Podarcis muralis* that I saw on a structure that was not man-made. At the southern exposed base of the Rochers we found two shed skins of *Malpolon monspessulanus* in the grass along rocky walls. They were quite large skins, each measuring about 1.50 m. On the way back, a large lizard ran from a rosemary bush - most likely a *Lacerta bilineata*. We crossed the road to visit a spot where we had seen two snakes on previous occasions, but they were not there. We did see another *Lacerta bilineata* escape into the bushes, and found some more *Psammodromus hispanicus*.

On September 9 we visited Avignon, the city of the popes. Its botanical garden was teeming with *Podarcis muralis*, most of them with intact tails. Maybe the large number of visitors to the gardens keeps their predators at bay.

On the plateau of the Les Baux citadel we saw *Podarcis muralis* everywhere again, and near the scattered bushes we noticed some *Lacerta bilineata* escaping.

On our last day it was raining, but it was not cold. We decided to go out and collect some plants for my rock garden and outdoor terraria. To our surprise we found an adult *Natrix maura* in the muddy ditch in front of the bungalow park, hunting for *Rana esculenta*.

This incident sparked my enthusiasm again, and in spite of the rain we decided to go and investigate a small area a little bit further down the road. This area consisted of a large, flat-bottomed hole, covered in grass, bushes, and some tall pines. Local farmers use these holes to dump their garbage, such as debris and tons, but also branches, roots and tree trunks. The first thing I found was a shed skin of a *Malpolon monspessulanus*, measuring about 1.85 m in its wet state. While turning over all kinds of debris I suddenly uncovered a *Malpolon monspessulanus*.

It was a relatively heavy-set animal of at least 1.40 m. I had no trouble catching it since it was not too hot. A little later I found a few more exuviae of *Malpolon monspessulanus*, the largest one measuring 2.10 m (while wet). There must be at least three large *Malpolon monspessulanus* living in this small area.

This turned out to be a nice conclusion to our vacation. But we already decided that next year our visit will be continued. Hopefully then I will be able to take some photographs of the snakes, and with a little luck also of my favourite reptile: *Timon lepidus*.

JUST ONE QUESTION

Why didn't I see a single *Timon lepidus* this year ? Maybe it was too hot, like all the farmers said? But then why did we see all these other lizards ? Was it too dry (BUSACK & VISNAW, 1989) or was there not enough food to be found, as is indicated in some publications (CASTILLA & BAUWENS, 1991)? Does anyone have any additional information or observations ?

ON VACATION IN SOUTHERN FRANCE

I visited southern France to search for *Timon lepidus* for the third time in 1998. Sites visited included (among others) Maussane, Lac du Salagou and the surroundings of this lake, St. Rémy-de-Provence, the surrounding hills of Le petit Crau and Avignon. I did not find *Timon lepidus* this time, but did see *Natrix maura*, *Malpolon monspessulanus*, *Lacerta bilineata*, *Podarcis muralis* and many *Psammodromus hispanicus*. There were not very many amphibians visible because of the hot weather.

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