A Report on a Herpetological trip to the N.E. Aegean.

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My wife and I visited this area of Greece between June 28th and July 28th of 1988. A report on this trip seems justified due to the relative lack of attention this part of the country has received from herpetologists. In addition the opportunity is taken to comment on other observations made on Greek reptiles in earlier years.*

Three main islands were visited; Lemnos, Lesvos and Chios, as well as the small islands of Agios Evstratios and the largest island of the Qinousses group. A map of the area is appended. It should be stressed that this was not a collecting trip but more one of observation in the hope that the results may assist in broadening our knowledge of the herpetofauna.

It is well known that the summer is not the optimum time for reptile activity. Despite the season some useful observations were made, though it is not pretended that the animals reported on here represent the sum content of the reptiles inhabiting the area. Searching was mainly done early in the day between sunrise and 10.00 am, and towards the evening and after sunset. In addition a lot of touring was made by car during the day and stops were made to investigate likely habitats, especially wooded areas, higher altitude locations, streams and thick areas of vegetation. The first week or so coincided with a spell of severely hot weather with air shade temperatures close to 40°C.

A description of the islands is given. Much habitat destruction has occurred in recent years, notably fires and land development, and we should all be concerned about the future of animal life threatened in this way.

Physiographical Report;

LEMNOS; This must be described as a barren island. There are virtually no wooded areas. The open hillsides are covered with phrygana and there is no dense scrub cover. Despite the arid

*Broggi (1978) gives an account of the herpetofauna of Lesvos.
appearance of Lemnos there is a certain amount of subterranean water which rises to the surface in places, notably on the west coast between Myrina and Kaspakes and inland towards Kornos. There is also a large shallow lake, dammed at one end, near Livadokhori. The Repanidi "Grass Lake" in the east is totally dry by early July and one can drive across it. The landscape is hilly rather than mountainous with a height of 430 metres in the northwest of the island. Terraced fields are few but there is extensive lowland cultivation, mostly vines. There are no olive groves on Lemnos.

AGIOS EVSTRATIOS; This lies 16 miles south-southeast of Lemnos and has a high point of 303 metres. Viewed from the sea it is evident that in former times there was much cultivation with plenty of terracing on the hills. There are several "green areas" in the vicinity of stream gullies marked by thicker vegetation and oleander bushes. A broad river bed extends inland from the port. In this region there are orchards, olive groves and cultivated plots. Interesting are the wooded areas, small in extent, but quite numerous and comprised of oak trees, some of which exceed 12 metres in height, giving a lot of shade. There are no conifers on this island.

LESVOS; Shows marked contrasts. Especially arid is the region in the northwest towards Andissa and the petrified forest. Further to the east, (Petra and Molivos), the coastal plain is well-watered before the landscape becomes more rocky and barren. The south of Lesvos has streams and rivers, notably the Vatera and Kato Stavros districts, which contained flowing water. Between Agiassos and Poliknitos there are vast undamaged pine forest with streams and small "wet" areas. The forests thin out a few kilometres before the village of Vassiliki. At the forest fringe there is a lake called "megalomimi". By mid-July this had nearly dried out to allow grazing by goats and sheep. The mountain village of Agiassos lies at an altitude of about 700 metres and the high point of the island, Olimbos, rises above it with a peak of 968 metres. The gulf of Geranos is bordered on its eastern side by wet lands containing reed swamps and cane beds. Lesvos has extensive and ancient olive groves in many places.

OINOUSSES is a group of small islands and islets 9 miles northeast of Chios town. Only the main island is inhabited. The region between the port and Kastro is cultivated and has trees, orchards and fields. The hills are open with light scrub and narrow valleys fall sharply away to the sea with tiny coastal plains. Up and inland from Kastro there is limited conifer woodland.
CHIOS; Dimitropoulos (1987a) has given a valuable account of this island. This summer fires have wrought terrible havoc on Chios, not only destroying mastic and olive plantations but also the natural forest. The damage to wildlife can only be described as catastrophic. Especially badly affected is the area near Volissos in the north west. This is given as habitat for the Mediterranean Chameleon, Chameleo chameleon, (Dimitropoulos 1987b). Also severely damaged is the environment near Emborio and Kalamoti in the south and between Chios town and Nea Moni.

SPECIES ACCOUNT;

**Amphibia**

*Rana ridibunda ridibunda* Pallas 1771

The close affinity this frog has with water restricts its local distribution. Despite this it is a successful and aggressive species with a wide range in Greece. On Limnos it was found near Myrina, Kaspakes and the lake near Livadokhori. The plentiful streams on southern Lesvos yielded many populations, often in large numbers. Sightings made included Petra, Agiassos, (where it occurred in streams in the pine forests), Megalolimni, (newly metamorphosed young), Skala Poliknitos and Vatera. On Chios this frog was only seen at one locality, a stagnant pool behind the beach near Limenas. No other surface water was found on Chios in late July, but see Dimitropoulos (1987a). No frogs were found on Agios Evstratios nor on Oinousses, though its presence on these islands cannot be excluded. The author has found *R.ridibunda* on Astipalia in the southeast Cyclades which has very little habitat potential.

*Bufo viridis viridis* Laurenti 1768

Only one example was found on Lemnos on a path on the outskirts of Myrina. It was located at 23.30 hrs. On Lesvos one newly metamorphosed youngster was found by day on damp ground near to Petra. Tadpoles, presumed to be of this species, were found nearby in a large stone trough fed by a spring. Active by day in the cooler months *B.viridis* becomes cryptic or nocturnal in the summer. Broggi (1978) does not list this toad in his account of the herpetofauna of Lesvos. This would appear to be a first record from this island.

**Reptilia** (Chelonia)

*Mauremys caspica rivulata* (Valenciennes 1833)

On Lemnos this terrapin was found in huge numbers, (estimated at least 250), in a deep stream between Myrina and Kaspakes. It is a tourist attraction to take a trip to visit (and feed) the terrapins who have overcome their shyness and congregate with
outstretched necks at ones approach. A stone bridge over the
stream offers a good vantage point for observation. Both fully
grown adults and juveniles were noted. Elsewhere on Lemnos the
animals were seen wherever there were pools and streams. On
Lesvos M. caspica was sighted at all the localities mentioned
under R. ridibunda. It was very common near Vatera in the river
that flows into the sea near the village and rather sporadically
in the mountain streams near Agiassos. In the heat of the day
it can be found on the river banks in the shade or in the water
itself. None were seen on the other islands.

Testudo graeca iberu Pallas 1814

On Lemnos four specimens were found near Myrina. One juvenile
was seen crossing a sandy track near the sea. The others were
detected having heard movement in thick undergrowth. Three
were encountered in the morning around 9.00 hrs, and one in the
evening at about 19.30 hrs. On Lesvos two tortoises were found,
one semi-adult beside a track amongst cultivation near Petra and
the other in open terrain amidst scrub closer to Molivos in the
same general area. The tortoises were identified by the thigh
spurs and in having only one supracaudal plate. T. graeca was not
found on the other islands. Dimitropoulos (1987c) lists it from
Chios along with T. marginata. He concludes that T. marginata must
have been introduced on Chios and I concur with his reasoning.

Sauria

Agama stellio stellio (Linnaeus 1758)

This lizard was only seen on Lesvos and Chios, and here but rarely.
Three were found on Lesvos, one in the northwest of the
island on a rock pile by the road near Andissa, and another in
similar circumstances between Keramia and Mytilene town, and a
third was seen running along the road near to Agiassos. All were
observed around midday when the air temperature was high. On
Chios only two were sighted towards the evening in rocky terrain
near Vessa in the southwest. The agama was not found on Lemnos
nor on Agios Efstratios or Oinousses. Its absence in the latter
case was surprising due to the islands geographical position and
much searching was done on Oinousses. Normally where A. stellio
is found it exists plentifully if locally. Further south down the
eastern island chain it is abundant, and especially so on the
central Aegean islands of Naxos, Paros, Mykonos and Delos. It
can reasonably be concluded that the agama on Chios and Lesvos is
nearing the northerly end of its range. An interesting parallel
can be drawn with its distribution on the Turkish mainland, (Clark
1973). On a collecting trip to Turkey in 1967 A. stellio was not
found north of Akhisar, a site inland and northeast of Izmir,
(Smyrna), on a rough parallel with Lesvos. However, in areas
where the agama is apparently rare it might be more profitable to
search more carefully for it. For example Stafford (1984) did
not find it on Corfu, and in his 1985 report mentions seeing only
one. I found it not uncommon on Corfu, but only in the region
of Benitses south of Corfu town.
Ophisaurus apodus (Pallas 1775)

Glass snakes from this area presumably belong to the subspecies "thracicus" - Obst, 1978.

O. apodus was only found on Lemnos and Lesvos. On the latter island one example was taken, a large adult which was later released. This was caught in an open field bordered with hedgerows at 8.30 hrs between Petra and Molivos. On Lemnos its population density seems high, higher indeed than I have noted anywhere else in Greece except the Distou Lake in Euboia. Only in Iran have I met such concentrations of O. apodus, namely at the eastern end of the Gulistan forest in the north of the country. On Lemnos eight specimens of this reptile were seen in the Myrina region, mostly between Myrina and Kaspakes in a small area near the coast. The habitation was vegetation-filled ditches, fields and light scrub. A few more were suspected by the characteristic "thrashing" sound this animal makes when moving rapidly through undergrowth when alarmed. Normally O. apodus takes fright and moves off rapidly when disturbed. One individual was seen basking on low spiny plants and was observed closely at only a few feet distance before making its escape.

Lacerta trilineata (Bedriaga 1886)

Broggi (1978) gives some information on the taxonomic status of Green lizards from Lesvos. No attempt is made here to comment on subspecific distinctions. This lizard was found on Lesvos and Chios. In summer it becomes especially shy, secretive and difficult to observe. On Lesvos its abundance could only be described as "occasional". It was observed by the roadside, in hedges bordering paths and tracks, around olive trees where it took refuge in hollow trunks and in vegetation on the margins of streams. Males were of a brilliant green with prominent blue ocelli near the forelimbs. Females were a duller olive/green/brown and retained the juvenile striping either in part or completely. One individual was completely brown with three white dorsal stripes and of subadult size. All the animals were much smaller than Green lizards from the Greek mainland and not much larger than adult L. viridis. Sight identification was often only possible after briefly glimpsing the animal in deep cover. On Chios only two were seen near Mesta. One a brilliantly coloured male and the other a female of slighter build with a marbled brown/olive patterning on a dull green ground. This latter lizard was not at all shy but was watched for some time moving leisurely in and out of vegetation on tumbled down terracing in olive groves.
Ophisops elegans ehrenbergii (Wiegmann 1835)

It should be said first that this appears to be the only small lacertid lizard in this area, *Lacerta danfordi*, known from Ikaria, Samos, Symi and Rhodes, has not been found on any of the islands reported on here either by me or any other researchers.

*O.elegans* was found on all the islands visited, yet only on Oinousses was it seen in reasonable numbers, and here mostly in the area between the port and Kastro. Both adults and hatchlings were sighted. Rarely was this lizard seen on totally open ground, but principally amongst vegetation on stony terrain, crossing a track or by the road verges. Mainly active early and late in the day* it was also seen, though in reduced numbers, in the early part of the afternoon.

So scant was its occurrences on the other islands that an accurate tally of the numbers was possible;— Lemnos 8, Lesvos 8, Agios Evstratios 1, Chios 4. Whether the lizard is as scarce as these figures imply is hard to judge. The reader is referred to Clark 1973 concerning the activity of this lizard in Turkey and the eastern Aegean islands of Ikaria and Samos south to Rhodes. Only on Kalẙmnos was *O.elegans* found in any quantity and collecting was done much earlier in the year. A similar disparity in population density was noted in Turkey.

**Serpentes**

*Coluber caspius* Gmelin 1789

I am not convinced that *C.caspius* and *C.jugularis* are worthy of specific rank, but will concede the point for the purpose of this report. The form found on the eastern side of the Aegean from Ikaria and Samos northwards belongs to *caspius*, and that south of Samos to Rhodes *jugularis*; see Clark 1973 on the distribution of this snake in Turkey and the forms *caspius*, *jugularis* and *schmidtii*.

This was the most commonly seen snake on the present trip being observed on all of the islands:— Lemnos 1 (+ 1 slough), Lesvos 7 (+ 3 sloughs), Chios 2, Agios Evstratios 1 (+ 1 slough), and Oinousses 2. The cast skins were clearly of this species with 19 scale rows at mid-body. The only possibility of misidentification was with *Malpolon monspessulanus*, but this snake is clearly identifiable with 17 scale rows at mid-body and the head shields.

* One specimen found foraging at dusk, (21.00 hrs.). (Lemnos)
It is of interest that Broggi (1978) does not include *C. caspius* in the herpetofauna of Lesbos. He visited the island in mid-April. On a trip to Kos in April 1986 I did not find this snake, and on Nissyros at the same time of year I only took one specimen.

The single specimen found on Lemnos was a juvenile found dead on the road and in a poor condition. On Lesbos the snake must be highly abundant. Local reports confirmed this view. I was told that it is encountered chiefly in cultivated areas where it feeds on rodents and is, at least to a degree, tolerated for this reason. Two examples were seen in close proximity in rock and scrub terrain near Petra and close to cultivation. One of these was caught, later released, as it tried to negotiate a steep bank towards cover. Another was spotted in the late morning crossing a sandy track at Vatera. It escaped into shrubbery. All the others were found having been killed by traffic. Judging by their condition and the time at which they were noted they must have been active fairly early in the day. Sites for these were Polikinitos, Agiassos and Plomari. In all cases the countryside was open with recently harvested fields and some olive and almond groves. The largest measured 170 cms. in total length and the other adults were not much smaller and over 150 cms. The supralabials were more or less distinctly marked with orange or pink, the bellies creamish, with a suspicion of pink on the subcaudals in some examples. A subadult found freshly killed just outside of Agiassos at 19.30 hrs was 55 cms. in length with a fawn/grey ground colour with dark speckling on the anterior half of the dorsum.

Diagnostic Data on two adult males from Lesbos are as follows:

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<td>Dorsals</td>
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<td>Ventrals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subcaudals</td>
<td>55*(paired)</td>
<td>105(paired)</td>
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<td>Anal plate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supralabials</td>
<td>8 + 8 (4/5 enter orbit)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Infracaudials</td>
<td>9 + 9</td>
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<td>Preoculars</td>
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<td>(lower in each case small)</td>
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*Tail damaged.

The single specimen from Agiassos Evstratios was seen at 13.00 hrs lying in partial shade given by the oak woodland about 2 kilometres from the port. It was watched for some time but made its escape into undergrowth when approached. Estimated size was
about 110 cms. Only two hours were spent on this island so this must represent a chance find or imply that the snake is quite common.

On Oinousses one dead specimen of C. caspius was found. It had been killed and its body hung over an abandoned vehicle. It was in a fairly advanced state of decomposition. The other specimen was caught at 7.30 hrs crossing a path amongst phrygana covered hillside. The weather was cool and windy. This was a young adult of about 100 cms. with 206 ventrals and 92 paired subcaudals. The juvenile cross barrings were still visible and the belly had a pronounced orange tint to the normal cream/yellow ground colour. Although two full days were spent on this island no more snakes of this species were found.

On Chios two severely damaged individuals were found on the road between Limenas and Elata in the southwest of the island. Dimitropoulos (1987a) comments on the very large Whip snakes from Chios; "the largest is 184 cms." I do not think this is unusual for caspius nor for jugularis. It is well known that this snake exceeds even two metres in length and my records from Lesvos would demonstrate that an average size of 170 cms is quite normal. Cyclades populations, in common with other snake species, are much smaller.

Coluber najadum dahli Schinz 1833

This was only found on Lemnos. A dead specimen some 80 cms long was seen at the base of a stone wall bordering a path on the outskirts of Myrina. There were houses, trees and gardens nearby. Dahl's Whip snake is a typical species of the offshore coastal islands, (Clark, 1969), Dimitropoulos (1987a) lists it from Chios. The snake is well known throughout Greece on account of its characteristic appearance and is known as 'Saita', which in Greek means 'arrow'. It was well described to me on Lesvos and it can certainly be included amongst the fauna of this island.

Eirenis modesta

A cast skin of this little snake was found on Lesvos on a path in open country near Petra. Definite records exist from Chios, (Dimitropoulos 1987a), and I found it there on an earlier visit to the island in 1969. Broggi (1978) also lists it from Lesvos. Elsewhere on the eastern Aegean islands it is widely distributed; Samos and Kalymnos, (Clark 1969), and Leros, (Dimitropoulos 1987a). I also found it on Symi living between cracks on the steep paved pathways in the town. Active by day during the spring, as I noted on Symi, it becomes secretive and hard to find in the summer time.
**Elaphe situla (Linnaeus 1758)**

Apparently first recorded from Lesvos by Broggi (1978), I found a single damaged specimen on the road just on the outskirts of Agiassos on the same island. This was of the striped morph. Both striped and barred forms are known to exist sympatrically. *E. situla* has a broad range throughout Greek territory.

**Natrix natrix persa (Pallas 1814)**

Only two snakes of this species were found, both on Lesvos. Dimitriopoulos (1987a) lists it from Chios. One of the Lesvos snakes was found dead on the road near to Petra. Another was observed in the same general area in the late evening at 20.00 hrs half-emerged from a stone wall bordering a path running through cultivated fields. It was motionless, alert with the head and anterior part of the body raised revealing the yellow/black checkered ventral surface. When approached it retreated back into the stone wall and could not be retrieved.

In his 1987 paper referred to above Dimitriopoulos does not mention this snake from Leros. I found it quite common in April 1967 (Clark 1969) and also on Samos in June 1966. The Samos snakes were found in a stream near to Karlovassi hunting for frogs after dark. I have also observed nocturnal activity at the Distlou Lake on Euboia in the early summer.

Although more often found in damp habitats the ability of *Natrix n.persa* to tolerate much drier environments, such as on the Cyclades, is well known; Bringbane (1985) and Gruber (1978). Its presence on Lemnos, Agiassos Evstratios and Oinousses cannot be excluded.

**Vipera xanthina xanthina** Gray 1849

Over the last twenty years since this snake was first recorded from Greece, (Clark 1968), the Ottoman viper has had its range greatly extended and is now known to exist from the northeast Greek mainland through the eastern islands south to Symi. Three vipers were found on Lesvos but only at one locality close to Petra in the north. The site was open cultivated meadow close to a deep dugout pool. The habitat was damp with thick grasses, reeds and bramble clumps, with a narrow but deep man-made channel partially overgrown and banked with stone-work. The vipers were seen around 9.00 hrs sunning themselves amongst the vegetation. One was photographed and a subsequent attempt was made to catch it so that it could be placed in a more favourable position for the taking of pictures. However, the snake reacted so aggressively and dangerously that it was considered prudent to release it. All of the snakes were estimated at rather over 100 cms. in length with a silver-grey ground colour and a continuous dorsal band. The lateral markings
were not clearly seen. Dimitropoulos, (pers. comm.), reported to me on his finding of a viper 96 cms. in length on Oinousses. This contradicts what I was told whilst there, namely that there are no vipers on this island. Clearly, although they can at times be useful, it is unwise to place too much credence in local reports!

In June 1984 I found *V. xanthina* on the island of Samos, a single specimen close to Marathokampos on the south coast. The snake in question was seen at 10.00 hrs sunning itself at the base of a stone wall in an olive grove. This was a very heavy bodied snake with a total length well in excess of 100 cms.

**Conclusions**

A summary table of the amphibians and reptiles inhabiting the islands under discussion is appended. This has been compiled from my own observations and from literature currently available to me. I apologise for any inadvertent omissions and any lack of acknowledgment to other researchers.

Although a considerable number of reptiles inhabit the region there is no obvious abundance - but one must obviously make some allowance for the season. Even so, the absence of "wall lizards", so plentiful in other parts of Greece, is a notable feature, as well as the thin population density of other normally evident species such as *A. stellio*. No geckos were found, despite searching at dusk and after dark, and although recorded from some of the islands they are clearly not common - contrast the abundance of *Cyrtothecystylus kotschyi* on the Cyclades. On the other hand two reptiles - *A. apodus* and *C. caspius* - were locally plentiful. Animals with particular habitat requirements such as *M. caspica* and *R. ridibunda* were discovered in considerable quantities on Lemnos and Lesvos. Clearly more research is needed, especially on the distribution of *V. xanthina* which appears to exist sporadically or else is difficult to locate due to its mode of activity and habitat preferences.

Maps drawn by Achilles Dimitropoulos (Not to scale)

Photographs by R. Clark.
Photo 3 - Oinuosses; arid country, habitat of Ophisops elegans (see Clark)

Photo 4 - Ophisops elegans ehrenbergii, the Snake-eyed lizard (see Clark)
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+ = present, according to available literature & author's investigations
- = unrecorded, does not imply absence
(+): unrecorded, but almost certainly present
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MAP 1
Localities visited:
1 - Mytilini  4 - Vassiliki  7 - Polychnitos  10 - Petra
2 - Kolpos Geras  5 - Agiassos  8 - Plomari  11 - Andissa
3 - Keramia  6 - Vatera  9 - Molyvos  12 - Sigri

MAP 2
Localities visited:
Chios: 1 - Chios Town  2 - Nea Moni  3 - Volissos
4 - Limenas  5 - Mesta  6 - Emborio
Oinousses:
Localities visited: 1 - Mornos 2 - Easpakes 3 - Myrina 4 - Livadochori 5 - Agios Evstratios

Map of the covered area - xxx xxx