

THE OCELLATED SKINK – 'IX-XAHMET L-ART'

Anybody who has gone for an early morning walk on the dunes backing such bays as Ghadira and Ramla tat-Torri in Malta or Ramla l-Hamra in Gozo is bound to have noticed the tracks of animals in the sand. The most conspicuous of these look rather like bicycle-tyre marks criss-crossing on the dunes but a keen eye will reveal a regular series of small depressions on either side of the central groove. These are the tracks of an animal characteristic of sand-dunes: the Skink or in Maltese, *Ix-Xahmet l-Art*.

There is only one species of skink in the Maltese Islands, the Ocellated Skink (scientifically, *Chalcides ocellatus*) so called because the back is patterned with white spots each encircled by a black ring giving the impression of numerous little eyes ('ocelli'). The ground coloration is grey to brown on the back and

becomes pale, almost white, on the underside. On the flanks the ocelli are closely packed and the black borders join together to give a dark streak spotted with white running down the length of the trunk. The Ocellated Skink is distributed over a wide area ranging from the southern Mediterranean, where apart from the Maltese Islands it is also found in Sardinia, Sicily, southern Greece, Crete and various small islands, to North Africa, Northeast Africa and Southeast Asia. However, individuals with the colour pattern described above are only found in a limited part of this range, specifically Algeria, Tunisia, Sardinia, Sicily and of course Malta and have been

The Ocellated Skink, *Chalcides ocellatus*, known in Maltese as 'Ix-Xahmet l-Art'
(Photo credit: P.J. Schembri)



described as a separate race: *Chalcides ocellatus tiligugu*. In other parts of the distributional range individuals have slightly different colour patterns and belong to different races.

Skinks belong to the lizard group and with the possible exception of the Chameleon, the Ocellated Skink is the largest lizard to be found on our Islands. Large individuals often attain a total length of some 30cm. On examining a skink the impression one gets is that the legs are too small for the body. Reduction of the limbs is a characteristic of the skink family and some species have minute, all but useless legs or even no legs at all! Unlike most lizards, skinks rely more on undulating their body in the manner of snakes than on pushing with the legs for locomotion. Even though the Ocellated Skink has quite well developed legs compared to some other species, it too progresses in a snake-like fashion. The tyre-like central groove in the sand is the track left by the trunk and the flanking small pits are those left by the legs as these push against the ground to aid forward movement.

Although characteristic of dunes, the Ocellated Skink is not limited to sandy coastal areas but also occurs inland where its preferred habitats are rubble walls, stone screes and boulder-strewn ground. The animals live in crevices in the walls or underneath boulders. In warm weather the skink is active during early morning and in the evening or even during the day if it is not too hot. However, being both secretive and very agile, few people see anything of this creature unless it is the tip of the tail disappearing down a crack! The animals are easier to find during the cold season. Being cold-blooded, skinks are not active then and spend winter in a state of torpor in shallow burrows which they dig in the soil underneath boulders.

The Ocellated Skink feeds on a large variety of insects, spiders and similar animals. It does not appear to have any preferences but will feed on any small invertebrate it can capture. Skinks manipulate the food with the tongue which is thick and fleshy and very rough. The Ocellated Skink is rather peculiar in that it is the only Maltese reptile to be ovoviviparous. This means that the female retains the eggs inside its body where they develop and lays them immediately before hatching so that the young are 'born alive'. Not much is known about the breeding biology of this species locally, but elsewhere the Ocellated Skink gives birth to between three and ten young.

The skink is still a common animal in our Islands although much less so than in the past. The main cause of this is destruction of habitats but to this must be added human persecution. In the past skinks were collected for use in pharmaceutical preparations but luckily this practice has been discontinued. Nonetheless some people still kill any skink or other



The skink, which is still a common animal in our Islands, spends winter in a shallow burrow dug in soil underneath boulders

(Photo credit: P. J. Schembri)

reptile they meet with for 'sport' or out of fear. The skink has a glossy skin and many people think that the animal is shiny because it secretes oil and is therefore 'unclean' and 'dangerous'. This is nonsense; the skink's skin is perfectly dry, the animal does not secrete oil and it is neither dangerous nor harmful. It is one of our few native reptiles and part of our living heritage and should be treated as such.

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FURTHER READING

- Lanfranco, G., (1957) Reptiles of Malta IV. The Skink. *The Sunday Times of Malta* 24.11.57 p.5.
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