

### 2.3 Grant's rockling, *Gaidropsarus granti* (Regan 1903) (Gadiformes: Gaidropsaridae) in the Central Mediterranean, with new records from Malta

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*Gaidropsarus granti* (Regan, 1903) is a rarely encountered deep-water fish species that was firstly described from the Atlantic Ocean and is often associated with deep coral communities (Bello, 2018). In the Mediterranean Sea it was first recorded in 1989-1990 (Orsi Relini & Relini, 2013), followed by a few other records in the region (Bello, 2018 and references within).

On the 5<sup>th</sup> May 2021 a local small-scale fisher caught a 298 mm long specimen (Fig. 8) west from the island of Gozo, Malta (coordinates: 36.00°N, 14.10°E), within the Maltese Fisheries Management Zone at a depth of around 290 m using bottom longlines. According to the fisher on the same day he also found another Grant's rockling in the mouth of a European conger, *Conger conger* (Linnaeus, 1758). After capture, the fisher communicated with the authors who identified the specimen following Orsi Relini & Relini (2013). The specimen had asymmetric brown- and cream-coloured reticulations over the head and the dorso-lateral area with a cream-coloured belly. The tail and tail peduncle had brown spots, with smaller sparse brown spots on the lower lateral area. The meristic counts were as follows: second dorsal fin = 59, pectoral fins = 21 and anal fin = 48 rays.

A tissue sample was genetically analysed for the partial 12S rRNA, 16S rRNA and cytochrome oxidase subunit I gene (COI) following Vella *et al.* (2016). The sequences were deposited in GenBank under accession numbers MZ574570 (12S), MZ574571 (16S) and MZ574564 (COI). Genetics validated species identity with the COI data showing a 100% match to KY370533 and KY250239, and 99.9% to KY250238, all representing *G. granti* collected from Spain, Mediterranean Sea (Barros-García *et al.*, 2017). BOLD search placed the specimen within BOLD:ABA2794 which belongs to the species. A 100% match for the 16S with KC980946 and a 100% match for the 12S with KC980975 both representing the same specimen of *G. granti* collected from the Azores (Francisco *et al.*, 2014). This study adds to the little genetic data currently available for this poorly studied species.

Records of *G. granti* in the central Mediterranean have been on the increase, highlighting the importance of further deep-water research to better understand the biology of this species and its interspecific interactions within the little-known deep-water communities in the region.

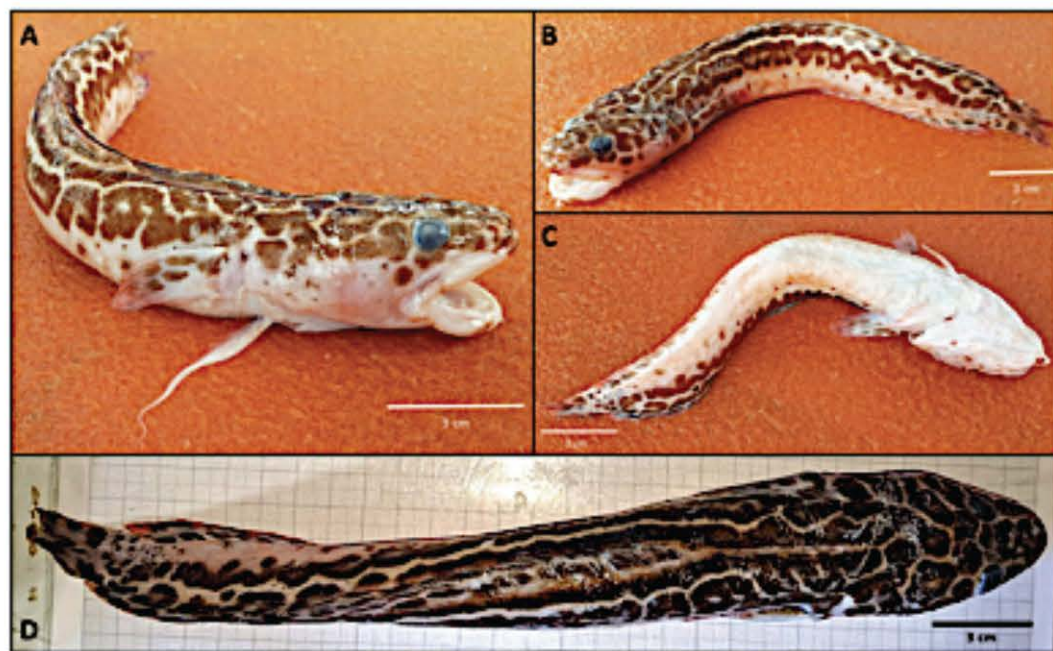


Fig. 8: Photos of the analysed *Gaidropsarus granti* from Malta. A and B - right and left lateral views respectively; C - ventral view; D - dorsal view (scale bars 3 cm).