

Morphological characteristics of the Libyan Jird, *Meriones libycus* Lichtenstein, 1823 (Rodentia: Gerbillinae), in Syria

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Abstract. Twenty-nine adult specimens of the Libyan Jird, *Meriones libycus*, were collected from semi-arid areas to the east and north of Damascus city. The external morphology and biometric measurements for these specimens are discussed. Skull, cheek tooth structure, phallus, glans penis and baculum shape are illustrated. In contrast to the other species of the genus *Meriones*, the first upper molar M^1 has four roots instead of three. The specimens studied are referred to the subspecies *M. l. syrius*.

Key words. Libyan jird, *Meriones libycus*, Mammals, Rodentia, Syria.

Introduction

In Arabia the genus *Meriones* is represented by seven species, four of which are known from Syria: *Meriones crassus*, *M. libycus*, *M. tristrami* and *M. vinogradovi* (HARRISON & BATES 1991). The Libyan Jird, *M. libycus*, has been collected from few localities in Syria (cf. KUMERLOEVE 1975): Deir ez Zhor (AHARONI 1932), the vicinity of Tall Abiad (MISONNE 1957), Karyatien, Khan Abou Chamate and the vicinity of Palmyra (HARRISON 1972). It was also mentioned by SERRA et al. (2007) from the Al-Talila Reserve near Palmyra. KOCK (1998) studied the gerbils and jirds of Syria and concluded that no further information could be obtained for the occurrence of *M. libycus*. SHEHAB et al. (2000, 2004) recovered cranial remains of the Libyan Jird from owl pellets collected from several localities in Syria. In neighbouring countries, Libyan Jirds have been recorded from semi-arid zones in Iraq (NADACHOWSKI et al. 1990), Palestine and Jordan (QUMSIYEH 1996, ABU LABAN 1999, ABU BAKER & AMR 2003, 2004), and it may occur in southern and eastern Turkey (MISONNE 1957, YIĞİT et al. 2006). The scarce information about this species in the literature dealing with the small mammals of Syria does not mean that there are geographical barriers limiting the distribution of this species in the region but rather that there is a lack of investigations, as mentioned by KOCK (1998).

The taxonomy of this species is beset with difficult problems. The subspecies *M. l. arimalius* was recorded from United Arab Emirates and Oman (HARRISON 1972, 1981), specimens from west of the Euphrates are referred to the subspecies *M. l. syrius*, while *M. l. erythrourus* occurs east of the Euphrates, and all the specimens described from Karyatien, Khan Abou Chamate, and the vicinity of Palmyra are referred to the form *syrius* (HARRISON & BATES 1991). The name *syrius*, described from Karyatien, applies to this species and probably represents a valid subspecies of *M. libycus* (QUMSIYEH 1996).

This purpose of this paper is to illustrate and to discuss the morphological characteristics of *M. libycus*, and also to contribute to our knowledge of the mammalian fauna of Syria.