

Habitat preferences of the Levant Green Lizard, *Lacerta media israelica* (Peters, 1964)

(Reptilia: Lacertidae)

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Abstract. The Levant Green Lizard, *Lacerta media israelica* (Peters, 1964), is a rare and declining lizard species that is classified as regionally vulnerable in Israel and Lebanon. We found information about historical observations of this species at 42 different locations. During field work at these and 12 additional locations between March and July 2009, we found 35 individuals at 21 different sites. Sixty-six percent of formerly inhabited places appeared not to be inhabited by the species anymore. *L. media israelica* inhabited heterogeneous plots, with an average of 30% herbaceous and shrub layer, moderate slope angle and a high proportion of woodland cover. Most observations occurred at the margins of anthropogenic installations and near woodland sites, such as fruit plantations, car parks, trails and traditional pasture landscape. To conserve populations of the Levant Green Lizard, it will be important to maintain landscape heterogeneity, including extensively used semi-open shrubland areas (such as local garigue or ‘batha’) for the protection of this species.

Key words. Mediterranean Lacertid, microhabitat, landscape heterogeneity, ecotone.

Introduction

“Green Lizards” (*Lacerta* s. str., also known as the “Emerald Lizards”) are a polytypic lineage within the genus *Lacerta*. This complex of closely related species is of considerable conservation concern, and consists of eight species belonging to three groups: *L. agilis* (*L. agilis* Linnaeus, 1758), *L. viridis* (*L. viridis* Laurenti, 1768, *L. strigata* Eichwald, 1831, *L. bilineata* Daudin, 1802, *L. schreiberi* Bedriaga, 1878) and *L. trilineata* (*L. trilineata* Bedriaga, 1886, *L. pamphylica* Schmidtler, 1975, *L. media* Lantz & Cyrén, 1920) (BÖHME & CORTI 1993, NETTMANN 2002, ÜÇÜNCÜ et al. 2004, GODINHO et al. 2005). Green Lizards are distributed throughout Europe, especially in the Mediterranean region, and their southeastern distribution limit is in the Middle East (BERGMANN & FRITZ 2002).

Lacerta media is considered to be of ‘least concern’ in the IUCN Red List, but its population trend is currently declining (IUCN 2010). According to the Israeli Red List, the subspecies *israelica* is ‘regionally vulnerable’, and its distribution is rapidly diminishing in Israel and Lebanon (BOGIN et al. 2004). For instance, the last recorded sighting of the species in the Judean Mountains was in 1970 (BOGIN et al. 2004, AGASYAN et al. 2008) and the species is also considered locally extinct in other locations, such as Lower Nahal Oren in the Carmel region (NEVO et al. 1996). Reliable data on population size and fluctuations of current populations are lacking, which poses a challenge to the design of appropriate conservation measures.

Geographic isolation negatively affects populations of the Emerald Lizard, both in Israel