

SHORT COMMUNICATION

**Second record of the Malabar grouper
Epinephelus malabaricus (Bloch & Schneider, 1801)
from Maltese waters**

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Abstract

On 6 July 2025, a specimen of the Malabar grouper *Epinephelus malabaricus* (63.4 cm TL) was captured off Marsaxlokk Bay, southeastern Malta. This represents the second confirmed record from Maltese and central Mediterranean waters, following the first in 2011. The observation indicates a possible low but persistent presence, suggesting the early stages of establishment of this Indo-Pacific Lessepsian immigrant in the region.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific species, Lessepsian migration, central Mediterranean, Mediterranean Sea

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The Malabar grouper (*Epinephelus malabaricus*) is native to the Indo-West Pacific and is a Lessepsian immigrant to the Mediterranean Sea. The earliest confirmed Mediterranean record is a specimen collected off Nahariya, Israel, in 1966, which Heemstra and Randall (1993) subsequently identified as *E. malabaricus*. An earlier Israeli record published as *E. tauvina* (Ben-Tuvia and Lourie, 1969) was misidentified as *E. malabaricus* by Randall and Ben-Tuvia (1983), but later examination showed this specimen to be *E. coioides* (Heemstra and Randall, 1993). Its distribution in the Mediterranean remains sparse and localized, with most records confined to the Levantine Basin and two from the Egyptian coast (2012–2022) (Farrag *et al.* 2025). The first record from the central Mediterranean was a specimen caught inside the Grand Harbour, Valletta, Malta, in July 2011 (Schembri and Tonna 2011). That record represented both the first Maltese and central Mediterranean occurrence, and the species has since been regarded as a non-established alien in the Maltese Islands (Borg *et al.* 2023).

On 6 July 2025, a single specimen of *E. malabaricus* (total length 63.4 cm) (Figure 1) was caught by a small-scale fisher using trammel nets on a sandy seabed outside Marsaxlokk Bay, southeastern Malta (35.82°N, 14.55°E) at an approximate depth of 25 m (Figure 2). The specimen was photographed shortly after capture but was not preserved.



Figure 1. The specimen of *Epinephelus malabaricus* caught off Marsaxlokk, Malta on 6 July 2025. The fish had a total length of 63.4 cm.
Photo by Luke Cutajar. Scale bar: 10 cm.

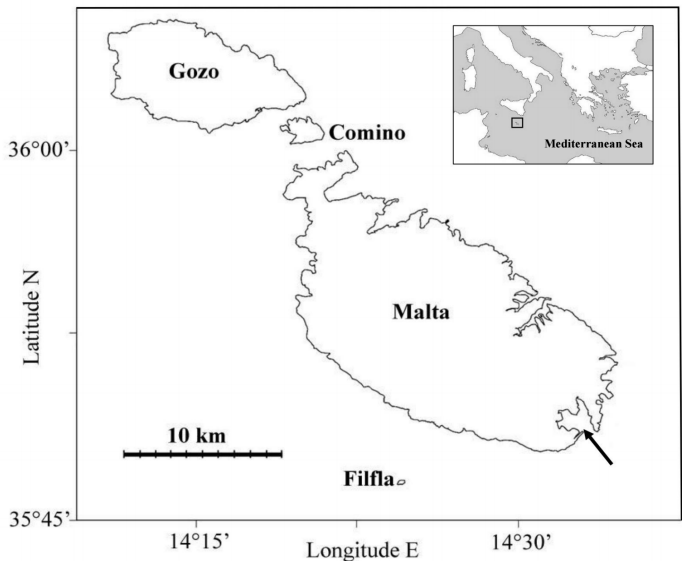


Figure 2. Map of the Maltese Islands showing the locality of capture of the specimen reported here (arrow)

The fish exhibited the diagnostic features of *E. malabaricus*, notably the presence of irregular white spots and blotches on the head and body contrasting with a dark brown ground coloration with darker vertical bars (Figure 1). These characters clearly distinguish it from the similar *E. coioides* (orange to reddish brown spots,

lacking white blotches and with a lighter brown ground coloration with more conspicuous darker bars). Identification was confirmed by comparison with the description in Heemstra and Randall (1993) and verified photographs from the CIESM Atlas of Exotic Species (Golani *et al.* 2021).

The present record constitutes the second confirmed occurrence from Maltese waters and the central Mediterranean as a whole. Considering the time interval between the two captures (2011 and 2025), and the distance between the capture localities (~8 km apart), this may suggest either a low but persistent presence, or the onset of establishment in the region. Continued monitoring is warranted, particularly given Malta's position as a biogeographical bridge between the eastern and western Mediterranean.

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Author contributions: A.S. collected data and photograph. A.S. and P.J.S. identified the species. P.J.S. wrote the initial manuscript draft with input from A.S. Both authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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