

Species Page

Research by Edward Vella



Photo: Mario Micallef

Mediterranean Parrot Fish (*Sparisoma cretense*)

Chances are that during any given dive, sooner or later a Parrot Fish (*Sparisoma cretense*) – Marzpan (Maltese) sighting is bound to happen! This is more than likely if the dive takes place along algae covered reef walls or among the boulders at the reef's base. Based on the numerous sightings, one gets the impression that Maltese waters provide the ideal conditions to support a numerous population.

Perhaps another reason for the large numbers is that the Mediterranean Parrot Fish is not much sought after food source for us humans! As perhaps happens with another grazing fish – the salema – the flesh of these fish is not very tasty, and has a soft consistency.

This species in fact is known to inhabit the lower shores of the Mediterranean, but recently, perhaps as a direct result of the general trend in increasing sea temperatures, it is being found more frequently in for example northern Italian shores.

Parrot Fish (*Marzpan*) - *Sparisoma cretense*

Being an herbivore, it has very developed incisors to enable it to graze on algae, but this food source is also supplemented by small crustaceans. Feeding is carried out during the day, at night it is bed time – in other words this is a diurnal fish (those active at night are of course called nocturnal – example – the octopus). Once settled in for the night, it tries to suppress its scent to protect itself from any nocturnal marauder by weaving a mucous secretion into an enveloping sac. The sea can become a very dangerous place at night – especially if you intend to sleep.

Very often, parrot fish are found in groups which may be quite numerous and consist of males and females, but there may also be communities overseen by a territorial male and a few females – and mentioning gender – parrotfish are all born female, but not all remain so – otherwise they would be long extinct no? The breeding season is from July to September. Those that become female will then begin to develop the colours. While the larger males are grey overall, females become mostly reddish with a large grey area approximately from behind the eyes up to the leading edge of the dorsal fin. The grey and the red are separated by a yellow band. Common to both sexes are the large scallop shaped scales that cover the entire body, and of course the highly developed and specialised incisors.



Photo: Joe Formosa



Photo: Tano Rolé

Apart from the Mediterranean, *Sparisoma cretense* is also to be found along the Atlantic shores from Portugal and down along the upper West African coast, however other related parrot fish species are to be found in the Caribbean down to the coast of Brazil.

Quite a lot of reef grazing going on down there!

All copyright reserved
Atlam Subaqua Club
Malta