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## The presence of the black rat *Rattus rattus* on Fungus Rock (Maltese Islands)

John J. Borg<sup>2</sup> & Joe Sultana<sup>3</sup>

The presence of *Rattus* sp. on Fungus Rock was first noted on 26<sup>th</sup> May 1988, when one of the authors (JS) visited the islet and collected droppings of rats. These droppings were also examined by Prof. P. J. Schembri (Biology Department, University of Malta) who confirmed that they probably belonged to rats and consisted mainly of woody vegetable fibres with some insect exoskeletal remains, mainly of beetles. During this visit it was also noted that rodents had eaten plants of the famed "Maltese Fungus" *Cynomorium coccineum*.

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<sup>1</sup> "Russet" Zebbug Road, Attard, Malta. [cgb@maltanet.net](mailto:cgb@maltanet.net)

<sup>2</sup> National Museum of Natural History, Vilhena Palace, Mdina, Malta. [john.j.borg@gov.mt](mailto:john.j.borg@gov.mt)

<sup>3</sup> Dar ta' Gajdoru / 3, Gajdoru Street, Xaghra, Gozo XRA 104, Malta. [joesultana@maltanet.net](mailto:joesultana@maltanet.net)

The present authors have visited Fungus Rock five times since 2000 primarily to monitor the Cory's Shearwater, *Calonectris diomedea*, population breeding on this islet. Part of this monitoring includes the investigation of rats' predation on the species. Many droppings corresponding to those of the Black Rat *Rattus rattus*, as described by Macdonald and Barrett (1993), were noted in many different parts of the islet. On one occasion a freshly dead racing pigeon bearing a yellow ring (06-3158 Malta 2002) was found partly eaten by rats. A rat was taken from the islet on 17th May 2003 and was later identified as being a Black Rat *Rattus rattus*. Identification of the specimen was also confirmed by Dr. F. LoValvo of the Museo di Scienze Naturali di Terrasini (PA).

The measurements of this specimen in mm are as follows:

Head/body: 175; Tail: 220; Hind foot: 32.8

Cranial – Condylbasal length: 42.6; Nasal Length: 15.9; Superior dental file 6.5; Lower mandible 24.2.

These measurements fall within the range of those given for *Rattus rattus* by Toschi (1965), Hufnagl (1972), Van Den Brink (1977), Niethammer & Krapp (1978), and Macdonald & Barrett (1993). See also Fig. 1.

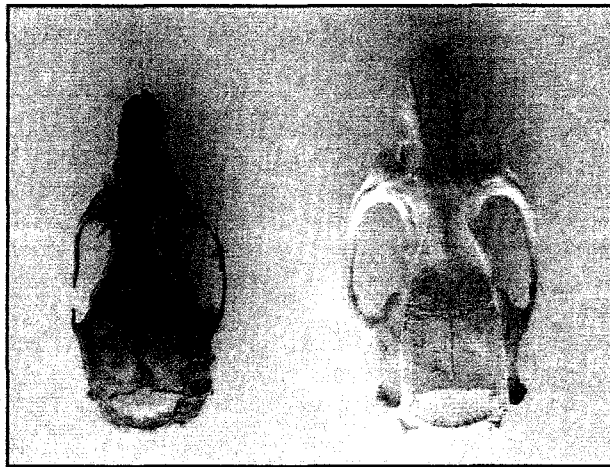


Fig. 1. Skull of *Rattus rattus* (left) taken from Fungus Rock and one (right) of *Rattus norvegicus* for comparison. Both skulls are deposited at the National Museum of Natural History, Mdina, Malta. (Photo: Joe Sultana)

The species could have reached the islet either by swimming (the shortest distance is at Ir-Ras at the north point of Dwejra Bay, a distance of ca. 17 m.), or more likely that it has been present since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when cables set for the use of the 'basket ferry' joined Fungus Rock to Gozo. Rats are well known to be able to walk on tight ropes. In harbours mooring cones (rat excluders) are sometimes set on the mooring ropes to keep rats away from reaching ships.

In a recent publication Baldacchino & Schembri (2002) state that the Brown Rat *Rattus norvegicus* occurs on Fungus Rock, without giving any conclusive evidence. No mention of the presence of the Black Rat *Rattus rattus* on the islet is made. Unfortunately no systematic rat trapping programme has been undertaken on the islet or, as far as we are aware, anywhere else in the Maltese Islands, and the range and status of the two *Rattus* species are still very poorly documented.

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