



## First confirmed record of the blunthead puffer, *Sphoeroides pachygaster* (Osteichthyes: Tetraodontidae) off the Algerian coast (south-western Mediterranean)

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**Abstract.** A blunthead puffer *Sphoeroides pachygaster* (Müller & Troschel, 1848) was recorded for the first time in the Algerian waters, off the eastern region close to the Tunisian border. The specimen was an adult male; it measured 330 mm in total length and weighed 650 g.

**Key words:** distribution, migration, Algerian ichthyofauna, Maghreb shore.

**Resumo. Primeiro registro confirmado do baiacu *Sphoeroides pachygaster* (Osteichthyes: Tetraodontidae) na plataforma argelina (sudoeste do Mediterrâneo).** Um exemplar do baiacu *Sphoeroides pachygaster* (Müller & Troschel, 1848) foi registrado pela primeira vez em águas argelinas, águas fora da região leste próximo à fronteira da Tunísia. O espécime foi um macho adulto, com 330 mm de comprimento total e peso de 650 g.

**Palavras-chave:** distribuição, migração, ictiofauna argelina, costa de Maghreb.

The blunthead puffer *Sphoeroides pachygaster* (Müller & Troschel, 1848) is a relative deep water species, found between 100 and 500 m of depth, and distributed circumglobally in tropical and temperate waters (Shipp 1990, Sampaio *et al.* 2001). *S. pachygaster* presents a widespread amphiatlantic distribution, off the western Atlantic, the species was reported from New England to southern Brazil (Golani *et al.* 2002), while off the eastern Atlantic, the species was recorded from Irish waters (Wheeler & Van Oijen 1985), the Bay of Biscay (Quéro *et al.* 1998, 2003), off Portugal (Albuquerque 1954-1956). The species is known to be reported south Strait of Gibraltar, from off Morocco, Senegal (Séret & Opic 1981) to the Gulf of Guinea (Blache *et al.* 1970, Shipp 1990), southward probably to South Africa (Smith & Heemstra 1986). The species is also reported from the Indian Ocean (Golani *et al.* 2002) and the Pacific (Hardy 1981).

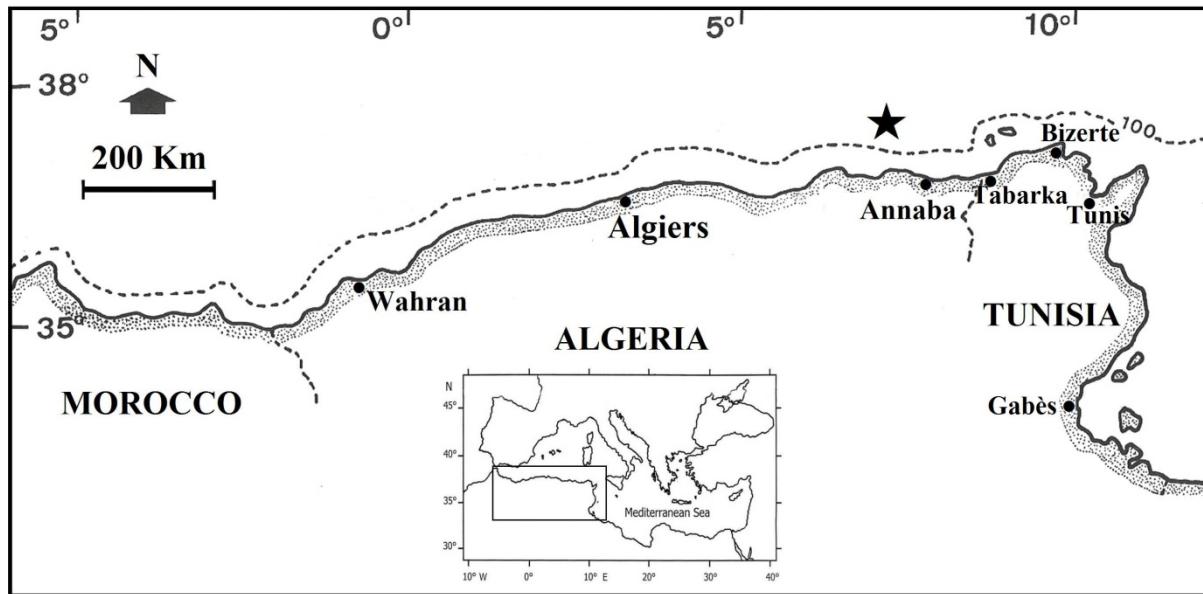
*Sphoeroides pachygaster* formed a well

established population in the Mediterranean Sea, where it was reported to date, at least 26 times between the first record off Mallorca, Balearic Islands, which occurred in 1979 (Oliver 1981), and 2004 according to Psomadakis *et al.* (2006). Recently, three additional records were reported by Peristeraki *et al.* (2006) and Ligas *et al.* (2006, 2007). The species was reported from Adriatic Sea, Aegean Sea, Italian seas, the eastern Levant Basin and southern Tunisian coast. Although the 'core' of the Mediterranean population seems to be located off the southeastern Tunisian coast, especially the Gulf of Gabès (Bradaï *et al.* 2004). Golani *et al.* (2002) wrongly considered the occurrence of *S. pachygaster* as probable off the Algerian coast, due to fact that no specimen being available for confirmation despite investigations were regularly conducted during four decades at Algerian fishing sites and fish markets.

However, on 22 November 2008, a

specimen of *Sphoeroides pachygaster* was trawled at a depth of approximately 150 m, on sandy-muddy

bottom, at about 20 km west to Annaba, in the eastern region of the Algerian coast (Fig. 1).



**Figure 1.** Map of the Mediterranean showing the Maghreb coast and capture site (black star) of the specimen of *Sphoeroides pachygaster* off the Algerian coast.

The specimen was weighed to the nearest gram and measured to the nearest millimetre; all measurements with percents of total length (% of TL) and counts are summarized in Table I, following Ragonese *et al.* (1997). The specimen was photographed (Fig. 2), preserved in 5% buffered formaline, and deposited in the Ichthyological Collection of the University of Bab Ezzouar (Algiers), Faculté des Sciences Biologiques, under the catalogue number FSB/HAL IV B 12.

Identification was made by skin completely smooth with total lack of scales, spines and body plates; one lateral line on each side convoluted; body inflatable, with large head and snout rounded; with a beak-like jaws with two large teeth on each jaw forming a dental plate with entire cutting edge; eyes big and ovale with a flat interorbital space; dorsal fin single placed in front of the similar shaped anal fin, pelvic fin absent and caudal fin truncated or slightly concave; colour greyish on dorsal surface with brownish spots, belly whitish pale grey, caudal fin base dark. Both macroscopic and microscopic examination allowed to consider the specimen as a mature adult male, no food was found in the gut.

Morphology, colour, morphometric measurements and meristic counts of the Algerian blunthead puffer agree with previous descriptions (Tortonese 1986, Ragonese *et al.* 1997, Golani *et al.* 2002, Psomadakis *et al.* 2006). Nevertheless, slight variations were observed when compared with

material from the south-western Atlantic (Sampaio *et al.* 2001).

This recent finding is the first well-documented and confirmed record of *S. pachygaster* off the Algerian coast. Consequently, *S. pachygaster* could be considered at present as a new additional species for the Algerian ichthyofauna.

Records of the species generally occurred in the western and central Mediterranean, suggesting a migration from the eastern Atlantic through Gibraltar Strait. However recent findings in the eastern Mediterranean cannot exclude the possibility of a lessepsian migration (*sensu* Por 1978), according to Psomadakis *et al.* (2006), but also a more ancient presence of *S. pachygaster*, mainly in the south-eastern Mediterranean according to Relini & Orsi-Relini (1995) who referred to ancient literature (see Golani *et al.* 2002). The specimen described in this note was captured in the eastern area close to the Tunisian where the species is substantially established, so a migration from the Tunisian waters where the species is substantially established cannot be totally excluded, as it was the case for the filefish *Stephanolepis diaspros* Fraser-Brünner, 1940, a lessepsian migrant. This species develops and reproduces in the southern Gulf of Gabès (Zouari-Ktari *et al.* 2008), it migrated northward in Tunisian waters and was found in a brackish area the Lagoon of Bizerte (Fig. 1) by Bdioui *et al.* (2004) and more recently off Tabarka, city located close to the Algerian border (Fig. 1) by Ben Amor & Capapé

(2008). Similar pattern could explain the occurrence of *S. pachygaster* in Algerian waters, but this

suitable hypothesis needs to be confirmed by genetic methods prior definitive statement.

**Table I.** Morphometric measurements and meristic counts carried out on the specimen of *Sphoeroides pachygaster* captured off the Algerian coast.

Morphometric measurements	in mm	% of TL
Total length (TL)	330	100
Standard length	295	89.4
Head length	100	30.3
Head width	70	21.2
Head height	60	18.2
Eye horizontal diameter	21	6.4
Eye vertical diameter	21	6.4
Interorbital space	30	9.1
Snout length	40	12.1
Postorbital length	35	10.6
Width of pedunculum	35	10.6
Width of gill opening	25	7.6
Predorsal length	215	65.2
Preanal length	225	68.2
Dorsal fin length	25	7.6
Dorsal fin base length	11	3.3
Anal fin length	30	9.1
Anal fin base length	11	3.3
Pectoral fin length	30	9.1
Caudal fin length	38	11.5
Body thickness	90	27.3
Body height	90	27.3
Nostrill greatest diameter	6	1.8
Nostrill lesser diameter	4	1.2
Internarial space	30	9.1
Meristic counts		
Dorsal fin rays		8
Anal fin rays		8
Pectoral fin rays		15
Caudal fin rays		10



**Figure 2.** *Sphoeroides pachygaster* captured off the Algerian coast (scale bar = 50 mm).

## Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank two anonymous referees for helpful and useful comments that allowed improving the manuscript. They are also grateful to Si Hadj Aissa, carreau n° 9, at Algiers Fishery who kindly provided the specimen of *Sphoeroides pachygaster*.

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Received February 2009

Accepted April 2009

Published online May 2009