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AN UPDATE OF THIN-TOED GECKO *TENUIDACTYLUS BOGDANOVI* (REPTILIA, GEKKONIDAE) POPULATION STATUS IN ODESSA CITY, UKRAINE

The new data regarding the current status of Bogdanov's thin-toed gecko population in Odessa city are presented. A population density of lizards is relatively high. Fourteen individuals of *T. bogdanovi* (21.4 % of juveniles) were found at the "Moldavanka" historical district on an area of circa 3.75 hectares in late July — early August 2017. The positive dynamics of urban gecko's population allows considering *T. bogdanovi* as naturalized adventive species — Turanian faunistic element in the fauna of Ukraine. The gecko's population increase and steadily expands distributional area to several dozens of hectares, what was confirmed by indirect evidence. The scientific significance of only European population of *T. bogdanovi* is also highlighted. Photos of Bogdanov's thin-toed gecko in its habitats in Odessa city are published for the first time.

K e y w o r d s: Gekkonidae, *Tenuidactylus bogdanovi*, Odessa, Ukraine, population, distribution, abundance, naturalized adventive species.

Introduction

The natural populations of Gekkonidae lizards have a limited distribution in the European part of the former Soviet Union. Thus, the Crimean (Kotschy's) gecko, *Mediodactylus kotschyi danilewskii* (Strauch, 1887), occurs along a narrow strip of the Southern Coast of the Crimea, while the Caspian, or North-Asian even-fingered gecko, *Alsophylax pipiens* (Pallas, 1811) is known only from territories eastward Volga River (Szczerebak, Golubev, 1986; Ananjeva *et al.*, 2004). It is noteworthy, that the *terra typica* for both aboriginal species lies in the Eastern European part of their ranges.

Moreover, it has been found recently that 2 species of genus *Tenuidactylus* Szczerebak et Golubev, 1984 have local distribution in

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Eastern Europe. A stable population of the Caspian thin-toed gecko, *T. caspius* (Eichwald, 1831), has been discovered in the historical center of Astrakhan city at the Lower Volga (Pestov *et al.*, 2009). The range of this species has significantly expanded in recent decades due to transport communications, especially at the Caucasus Isthmus (Kukushkin *et al.*, 2017, in press). The second identified as the Turkestan thin-toed gecko, *T. fedtschenkoi* (Strauch, 1887), has been surprisingly found in Southern Ukraine, where it forms a viable population in “Moldavanka” historical district of Odessa city (Duz’ *et al.*, 2012). A revision of the genus *Tenuidactylus* revealed it is to be divided into two species based on molecular, genetic, and morphological characters as well as ethological (acoustic) data. One of them (“plain form”), which inhabits predominantly Uzbekistan and prefers clayey substrate of river valleys, has been recently described as a new species — Bogdanov’s thin-toed gecko, *T. bogdanovi* Nazarov et Poyarkov, 2013 (Nazarov and Poyarkov, 2013). In turn, the “rock form” restricted to bedrock outcrops of the Western Pamir foothills retained its *idem* species name (*T. fedtschenkoi*). *T. bogdanovi* was proved to reside in Ukraine and included to the checklists of European reptiles (Glandt, 2014, 2015).

The occurrence of alien Gekkonidae species in Ukraine has been repeatedly highlighted (Duz’ *et al.*, 2012; Nazarov and Poyarkov, 2013; Kukushkin, 2013; Glandt, 2015; Nekrasova and Kostiusyn, 2016; Kukushkin *et al.*, 2017, in press.), and even in popular science publications (Kukushkin, 2012), though the data remain extremely scarce, since all confirmed findings date back to 2014. During the 7th Congress of the Ukrainian Herpetological Society in Vilкове (Odessa region) the area of Prokhorivska Street (former Tiraspol Tract) in the old part of Odessa city was examined by afternoon and evening on October 14th and 17th, 2013¹. The most promising sites as the habitats of this species were courtyards and gateways of time-worn multi-storey houses in the north-eastern part of this street. Despite a favorable weather (air temperature was above 20 °C in the daytime and about 18 °C at the beginning of evening twilight together with the suitable high air humidity) geckos were not found. However, it was revealed that the residents are aware of geckos that occasionally penetrate the apartments. Thus, we managed to inquire that on October 16th, 2013 (the day preceding our first search), single individual of *T. bogdanovi* was caught and photographed in the apartment at Prokhorivska Street 17. Furthermore, a resident reported an adult gecko was observed on the house wall far above the ground by late evening on May 27, 2014. As far as we know, no targeted surveys of the gecko in Odessa have been done. Therefore, an update of *T. bogdanovi* distribution in Odessa city and the monitoring of the only European locality of this species are top issues.

Materials and Methods

The surveyed plot includes a part of Prokhorivska Street adjacent to Myasoyidivska Street as well as the beginning of General Vatutin Street, and has the area of about 0.43 km². Its configuration is close to a rectangular triangle with a catheti’s lengths of 1.11 and 0.77 km, and a hypotenuse of about 1.35 km. The altitude is circa 55 m a. s. l., the minimum distance from the Black Sea along a straight line is almost 3 km. Geographical coordinates and distances on sites not accessible for direct measurements were obtained using Google Earth web application.

¹ — The search of *T. bogdanovi* in Odessa was organized in October 2013 by the group of zoologists including O. V. Kukushkin (Karadag Nature Reserve, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, Theodosia), A. N. Yaryhin (I. I. Schmalhausen Institute of Zoology, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, Kyiv), A. S. Matvyeyev (Danube Biosphere Reserve, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, Vilкове), A. Yu. Malyuk (Zoological Museum of the National Museum of Natural History, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, Kyiv), D. A. Shabanov and A. V. Korshunov (V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University, Kharkiv), as well as S. A. Cherlin (Leningrad Zoological Garden, St. Petersburg).

The gecko records were conducted by the first author at night of July 31th and August 1st to 2nd, 2017. The weather conditions were favorable, since in Odessa within the 3^d decade of July 2017 the upper air temperatures limit in the daytime was 33–37 °C, and lower at night — 18–20 °C. The air humidity at that period fluctuated within the range of 38–94 %, and the only rain was on July 28th. At the days of study the air temperature was 23–27 °C and air humidity 55–66 %.

The geckos were traced and photographed during thorough check of suitable habitats. They were not seized and transferred from sites of their first observation; in general, any interference with the natural course of events was minimized. Animals were photographed with Nikon D 610 camera (objectives Nikon AF 18–135 3.5–5.6 ED G and Nikon AF 70-300 4.5–5.6 ED G, flash unit Nikon Speedlight SB–800), what was useful for identification of individuals during short time interval basing on original photos.

Along with the search, we interviewed twelve local residents from adjacent houses.

Results

The schematic map of the targeted area with 2.5 km track is shown on Fig. 1. According to previous records (Duz' *et al.*, 2012) supplemented with the survey data, geckos inhabit almost entire territory we cross-checked by and even went far beyond. However, we detected the lizards only within 3.75 ha plot (250 m in length and up to 150 m in width).

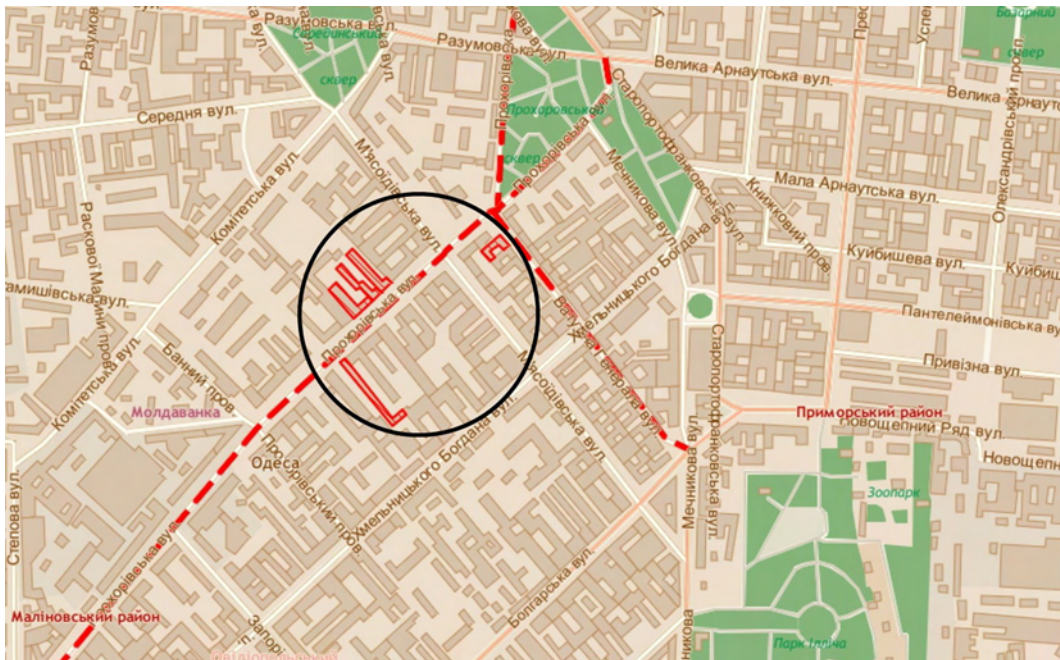


Fig. 1. A surveyed area of Odessa city: dash line indicates the main tracks of the observer; bold lines highlight the contours of the buildings, where the geckos were discovered.

Five *T. bogdanovi* individuals, 3 adults and 2 juveniles of different age, were observed on July 31, 2017 between 22.30 and 23.30 on the walls and on the entrances to two- or three-story residential houses on Prokhorivska Street adjacent to Myasoedivska Street, which were built from the shell limestone before the October revolution. Three individuals were identified on the house N 12, and two — on N 18. Next night, 1st to 2nd August 2017, between 22.40 and 01.40 at the same street 11 geckos were registered, including first-year juvenile. Two of them were recorded repeatedly. Four specimens

were found on the walls of building N 12, three specimens on N 18, and two — on houses NN 14 and 31. Moreover, 2 individuals were observed also on the house N 4 on General Vatutin Street in north-eastern part of the surveyed site.

Thus, within 2 days of observations, 14 individuals were registered, including 3 juveniles (Fig. 2 *a-d*). The maximum concentration of geckos was recorded at the residential house N 12 (geographical coordinates 46°28'14.03''N, 30°43'15.87''E), where 7 individuals (a half of all geckos observed) were found during both days. However, such uneven spatial distribution of geckos' findings is most likely due to the limited observation time and/or stochastic events. The actual number of lizards must be



Fig. 2. Different *T. bogdanovi* individuals in habitats of the species in Odessa city: a–c — adults, d — juvenile specimen.



significantly higher than the estimated values, since only the lowest parts of the panels and not all courtyards and gateways were available for the detailed study (Fig. 3 a, b). Due to the abundance of construction debris, fences, temporary buildings, private territories, indoor patios, etc., many promising locations were impossible to approach. Geckos were observed on vertical surfaces at a height from 2 to 6 m above the ground (usually 2–3 m) on the walls disregarding their exposure.

They were usually located at a distance less than 1.5 m from the sources of artificial light, e.g., under street lamps with incandescent and gas-discharge lamps of cold and warm light (Fig. 4). At the same time, the lizards avoided the direct light of the LED flashlight, immediately hiding under the wooden ceilings, behind the door frames, gas pipes, power cables, etc. As

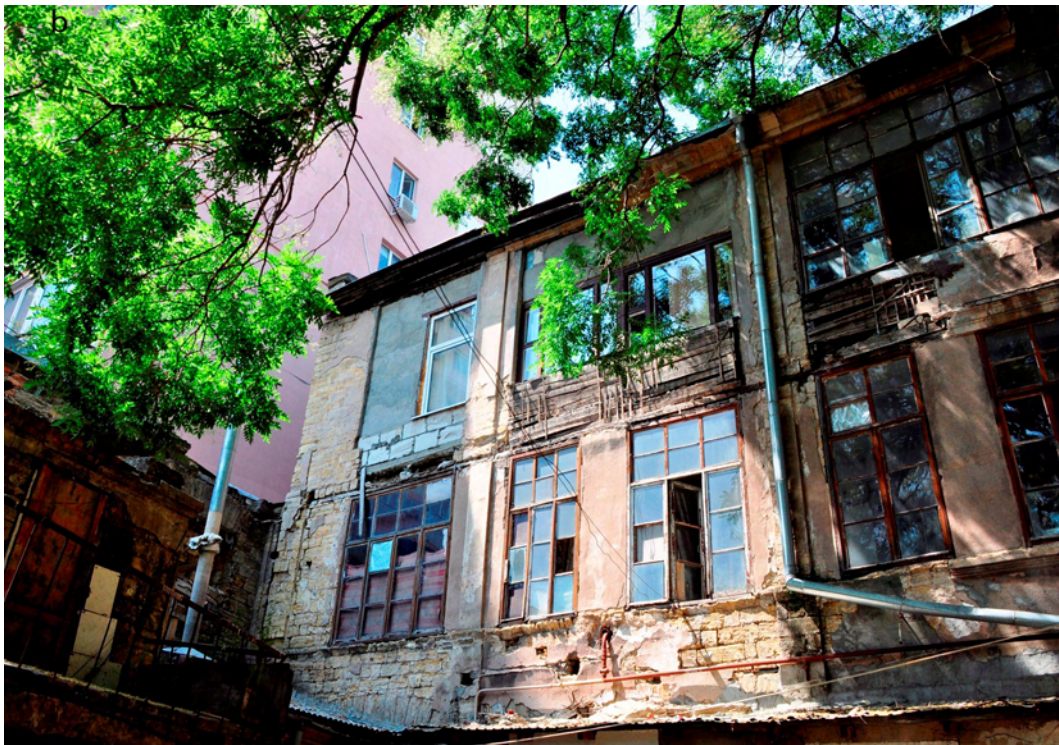


Fig. 3. Habitats of *T. bogdanovi* in the historical area “Moldavanka” in Odessa city: *a* — residential house, *b* — manufacturing facility.

a rule, they were alone keeping large distances from each other, however, once two adults were found at a distance of about 0.8 m between them sitting on the wall of one of the buildings under a dim lantern.

Like the majority of thin-toed geckos, *T. bogdanovi* is characterized by mixed daily biorhythm. A diurnal, crepuscular or nocturnal activity prevails in different periods of the year. In the second half of the summer in Odessa they were active mostly after sunset. Although, according to locals, the lizards were occasionally spotted in the afternoon. The residents of Prokhorivska Street frequently spotted geckos during renovation of the apartment buildings especially under the roofs. During the winter 2015–2016, geckoes were aggregated in groups of up to 5 individuals. This behavior suggests communal winter hibernation and was already documented for *T. bogdanovi* within its native range and also known for other *Tenuidactylus* and *Mediodactylus* species (Szczerbak and Golubev, 1986; Kukushkin, 2005). Hibernating groups were reported at winter in many locations of Prokhorivska Street.

Two of 14 geckoes resembled the gravid females with large eggs.

Domestic cats are deemed to be the main predators of geckos in synanthropic habitats. According to the survey of local residents, the cats in Odessa successfully prey geckos. Despite these data, predator pressure on this population apparently is not significant, since a single individual of fourteen observed geckos had a short regenerated tail. Remarkably all geckos were extremely cautious keeping high above the ground.

The residents of Moldavanka district are mostly indifferent to lizards. These geckos were usually identified by locals as “Crimean”, although one of the interviewees pointed the geckoes might be accidentally introduced with cargo from Vietnam. An elderly woman reported the flowing of a gecko into the bed, which caused illness and death of sick man (so called “evil eye”). Negative superstitions regarding synanthropic geckos are documented everywhere (Frembgen, 1996). Thus, the lizards are similarly deemed in Greece (*M. kotschy* Steindachner, 1870 *sensu lato*, and Mediterranean house gecko,



Fig. 4. Typical location of *T. bogdanovi* under street lamp during crepuscular and nocturnal phase of activity.

Hemidactylus turcicus (Linnaeus, 1758)), where the natives consider them to be evil spirits from the Otherworld, and strive to kill them (personal observations of the first author in rural areas of Crete and Alonissos islands).

Discussion

The population of *T. bogdanovi* in Odessa occurs in several dozens of hectares and has sufficiently high density. The data on natural history of *T. bogdanovi* in Ukraine is extremely scarce. However, one can assume that such peculiarities of the species reproductive biology as 2 clutches per season, larger clutches size compared to other *Tenuidactylus* species (some females lay up to 3 eggs simultaneously), and the age of puberty onset of 18–22 or even 12 months (Bogdanov, 1965; Szczerbak and Golubev, 1986) favor to the increase of population growth and the rapid expansion of range. The northern location of the population is not limiting factor in this case, since many areas within *T. bogdanovi* native range has harsher continental climate compared to the Pontic steppe region. It was found that the small lizards efficiently use the limited biotope, and the key limiting factor at the northern boundary of their range is the presence of suitable habitats, while the climatic factor is less significant (Wirga and Majtyka, 2015). Numerous facts of the formation of *M. kotschyi sensu lato* populations beyond the northern limits of their native range, including inland areas with continental climate (Kukushkin, 2004; 2009; Novarini, 2012; Urošević *et al.*, 2016; Koynova *et al.*, 2017) supports the statement of previously cited authors.

At the same time, the successful naturalization of *T. bogdanovi* in Eastern Europe is a curious example of “saltatory” resettlement of the species at a distance of circa 3000–4000 km. Among almost a hundred species of the non-systematic group of Palaearctic “naked-toed” geckos perhaps only naturalized in U.S.A. rough-tailed bowfoot gecko, *Cyrtopodion scabrum* (Heyden, 1827), can be a comparable example of long-distance migration accompanied by the expansion of its historical range (Babb, 2014). However, this Frontier Asian species was introduced to the other continent through the sea gates, since its populations resides mostly on the seaboard in the close proximity to the docks, while the passive resettlement of *T. bogdanovi* occurred most likely via the land means of transportation.

T. bogdanovi individuals currently comprising the only European population were imported with cargo from Uzbekistan (Duz’ *et al.*, 2012). However, it should be noticed that the specific pathways and time of adventive species resettlement usually remain unknown. Since the naturalization of the Turanian species in Europe without their intermediate findings in the western part of Middle Asia and Kazakhstan seems quite enigmatic, it cannot be excluded the geckos have been released in Odessa city by an unknown amateur before 1990s (possibly, in the beginning or in the middle of the 20th century). This population remained unknown until early 2010s.

In most cases, data on the formation of adventive reptiles populations are absent due to low abundance at the initial stage of colonization and narrow distribution restricted to seaports, transport terminals, military units, etc. Small-sized geckos and true lizards could persist for a long time in hidden anthropogenic habitats being identified accidentally. This point in line with recent findings of the common wall lizard, *Podarcis muralis* (Laurenti, 1768) in the merchant port of Reni on the Danube River and on the pumping station near Cahul Lake, Odessa region (Matvyeyev *et al.*, 2013), and the Lebanese lizard, *Phoenicolacerta laevis* (Gray, 1838), the typical East-Mediterranean species, residing the small Dzhikha fortress near the mouth of Enguri River in Georgia (Tarkhnishvili *et al.*, 2017). It can be confidently predicted that in the Northern Black Sea region the populations of such successful colonists as *T. caspius* and *H. turcicus* would be also found in close future (Kukushkin, 2013; Matvyeyev *et al.*, 2013; Kukushkin *et al.*, 2017, in press.).

Many representatives of Gekkonidae are stenotopic species with the narrow-local or sporadic distribution that tend to be linked to the specific anthropogenic or urban landscapes. No negative effects on other animals and/or humans have been reliably recorded (Urošević *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, it would be a mistake to categorize geckos as an invasive elements putting them on a par with such harmful or potentially harmful invaders as *Xenopus laevis* (Dauduin, 1802), *Lithobates catesbeianus* (Shaw, 1802) and *Trachemys scripta* (Schoepff, 1792) (Böhme, 2000; Ficetola and Scali, 2010). Regarding *T. bogdanovi* we suggest definition “naturalized adventive species”.

Currently, the accidental introduction of exotic species is a negative phenomenon. At the same time, allochthonous populations could be convenient experimental sites for the study of ecological adaptations and other “subtle issues” of population biology. Less than 50 years ago, definitions “introduction” and “invasion” were not considered as synonyms and in early papers, the “introduction” did not have any negative meaning. In the former Soviet Union, the experiments on the acclimatization were performed not only for warm-blooded animals, but also for amphibians and reptiles. While releasing of fur-bearing animals, commercial birds and fish species into the nature was the practical task with some evident economic effects, the release of reptiles had no practical impact. Though it allowed solving such basic issue as the influence of environmental factors on microevolutionary processes and on animal adaptations to new conditions (Szczerbak, 1964; Nekrasova and Kostiusyn, 2016; Kukushkin *et al.*, 2017, in press).

In this context, single European population of *T. bogdanovi* acquires important scientific value. Monitoring of the dynamics of gecko’s population in the areas of their most frequent finds, along with the survey of residents, would clarify the distribution boundaries and natural history of this new for the fauna of Northern Black Sea region lizard species.

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О СОСТОЯНИИ ПОПУЛЯЦИИ ТОНКОПАЛОГО ГЕККОНА *TENUIDACTYLUS BOGDANOVI* (REPTILIA, GEKKONIDAE) В Г. ОДЕССА, УКРАИНА

Представлены данные о современном состоянии популяции тонкопалого геккона Богданова в г. Одесса. Плотность населения ящериц достаточно высока. На рубеже июля и августа 2017 г. в историческом районе «Молдаванка» на площади около 3,75 га было выявлено четырнадцать особей *T. bogdanovi* (21,4 % этого числа составляли ювенилы). Положительная динамика городской популяции с полным на то основанием позволяет считать *T. bogdanovi* натурализовавшимся адвентивным видом (туранский фаунистический элемент в фауне Украины). По косвенным признакам, геккон увеличивает численность и продолжает расширять область обитания, которая на сегодняшний день достигла нескольких десятков гектаров. Обсуждается научное значение единственной европейской популяции *T. bogdanovi*. Фотографии геккона Богданова в среде его обитания в черте г. Одесса публикуются впервые.

К л ю ч е в ы е с л о в а: Gekkonidae, *Tenuidactylus bogdanovi*, Одесса, Украина, популяция, распространение, численность, натурализовавшийся адвентивный вид.

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ПРО СТАН ПОПУЛЯЦІЇ ТОНКОПАЛОГО ГЕККОНА *TENUIDACTYLUS BOGDANOVI* (REPTILIA, GEKKONIDAE) В М. ОДЕСА, УКРАЇНА

Представлено відомості щодо сучасного стану популяції тонкопалого геккона Богданова в м. Одеса. Щільність населення ящірок є вельми високою. Наприкінці липня — на початку серпня 2017 року в історичному районі «Молдаванка» на ділянці площею близько 3,75 га було виявлено чотирнадцять особин *T. bogdanovi*, причому 21,4 % склали ювенільні особини. На основі позитивної динаміки міської популяції можна вважати *T. bogdanovi* натуралізованим адвентивним видом (туранський фауністичний елемент у фауні України). За непрямыми ознаками, геккон збільшує чисельність і продовжує розширювати територію проживання, яка на сьогодні сягає кількох десятків гектарів. Обговорюється наукове значення єдиної в Європі популяції цього виду. Вперше опубліковано фотографії геккона Богданова в середовищі його існування в межах м. Одеса.

К л ю ч о в і с л о в а: Gekkonidae, *Tenuidactylus bogdanovi*, Одеса, Україна, популяція, поширення, чисельність, натуралізований адвентивний вид.