

# An unusual urban refuge for the crested porcupine, *Hystrix cristata* (Linnaeus, 1758) (Mammalia Rodentia): the ancient Catacombs of Priscilla in Rome (Italy)

Mauro Grano

Via Valcenischia 24, 00141 Roma, Italy; e-mail: elaphe58@yahoo.it

---

## ABSTRACT

In this note the author reports the unusual use of ancient catacombs as a daytime refuge for some specimens of crested porcupine *Hystrix cristata* (Linnaeus, 1758) (Mammalia Rodentia) belonging to the population of the Villa Ada urban park in Rome.

## KEY WORDS

Crested porcupine; *Hystrix cristata*; Rome; Urban Park; Villa Ada.

Received 12.09.2016; accepted 22.09.2016; printed 30.09.2016

---

## INTRODUCTION

The crested porcupine *Hystrix cristata* (Linnaeus, 1758) (Mammalia Rodentia) is a species of rodent belonging to the family Hystricidae. The adult *H. cristata* has a body length of about 60 to 83 cm, excluding the tail, and a weight from 13 to 27 Kg. This rodent occurs in Italy, North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa. It is sometimes asserted that the porcupine was introduced in Italy by the Romans, but fossil and sub-fossil remains suggest that it was probably present in Europe in the Upper Pleistocene. Recently the Italian distribution area has had a considerable expansion (Amori & Capizzi, 2002). At the end of 2010, *H. cristata* is recorded throughout the Italian region with exclusion of Friuli Venezia Giulia and Val d'Aosta (Mori & Sforzi, 2012). In the province of Rome the crested porcupine is widely spread and in some places is rather abundant (Angelici, 2009). The crested porcupine are active during the night (Corsini et al., 1995; Angelici, 2009) and spend most of the daylight hours in their dens located in natural or artificial caves or in underground tunnels (Monetti et al., 2005). They are particularly widespread in the agro-

forestry systems of the Mediterranean region. Occasionally can also be found in the green areas located within big cities, provided adjacent to a service area with abundant vegetation (Amori & Capizzi, 2002). Banks of streams and hedges are important wildlife corridors and are used as ways of expansion (Amori & Capizzi, 2002). Another hallway that allows crested porcupine easy expansion is consisting of railway lines (Gippoliti com. pers.).

## STUDY AREA

Villa Ada, an urban park in Rome (Central Italy) with a surface of 450 acres (1,8 km<sup>2</sup>), it is the second largest park in the city after Villa Doria Pamphili. It is located along Via Salaria, in the northeastern part of the city. Its highest relief is Monte Antenne with a height of 67 m above sea level (Fig. 1). The Catacombs of Priscilla are located in Via Salaria just in front of Villa Ada. These Catacombs are mentioned in all of the most ancient documents regarding Christian topography and liturgy in Rome; due to the great number of martyrs buried therein, were called

“*Regina catacumbarum - The Queen of the Catacombs*”. The galleries dug into the tuff, a soft volcanic rock used to make bricks and lime, have a total length of about thirteen kilometers, at various depths.

## RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The presence of the crested porcupine in Villa Ada has been known since the 80s (Angelici, pers. com.) and well documented (Zapparoli, 2009). However, what was not known is the habit of this rodent to use the long underground passages of the Catacombs of Priscilla as daytime refuge. In recent years, religious custodians of the Catacombs, have repeatedly requested the intervention of the Wildlife Rescue Centre Lipu of Rome to try to remove some specimens of crested porcupine which had chosen as a refuge the long series of tunnels that form the underground part of the Catacombs of Priscilla (Manzia, pers. com.). Three of the six entrances of Villa Ada are located along the Via Salaria, just opposite to the above mentioned Catacombs.

The crested porcupines spend the daylight hours in their dens located in natural or artificial caves or underground tunnels (Monetti et al., 2005). The long tunnels (about thirteen kilometers) are rarely

visited, the small distance and the ease of achieving, have made it possible the use of Catacombs of Priscilla as daytime refuge for the population of *H. cristata* of Villa Ada.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is grateful for the valuable information received by Francesco Maria Angelici (Rome, Italy), Spartaco Gippoliti (Rome, Italy), Francesca Manzia (Rome, Italy), Emiliano Mori (Massa Marittima, Italy), and Alessandro Sperduti (Viterbo, Italy). Also, a special thanks to Cristina Cattaneo (Rome, Italy) for her invaluable help.

## REFERENCES

- Amori G. & Capizzi D., 2002. Istrice in: Spagnesi M. & De Marinis A.M. (a cura di), 2002. Mammiferi d'Italia. Quad. Cons. Natura, 14, Min. Ambiente - Istituto Nazionale Fauna Selvatica, 309 pp.
- Angelici F.M., 2009. Istrice *Hystrix cristata* (Linnaeus, 1758). In: Amori G., Battisti C. & De Felici S. (a cura di), 2009. I Mammiferi della Provincia di Roma. Dallo stato delle conoscenze alla gestione e conservazione delle specie. Provincia di Roma, Assessorato alle Politiche dell'Agricoltura. Stilgrafica, Roma, 154–155.
- Corsini M.T., Lovari S. & Sonnino S., 1995. Temporal activity patterns of crested porcupines *Hystrix cristata*. *Journal of Zoology*, 236: 43–54.
- Monetti L., Massolo A., Sforzi A. & Lovari S., 2005. Site selection and fidelity by crested porcupine for denning. *Ethology, Ecology and Evolution*, 17: 149–159.
- Mori E. & Sforzi A., 2012. Review of the recent range expansion of the crested porcupine, *Hystrix cristata* L. in Italy. *Hystrix*, Atti del VIII Congresso Nazionale di Teriologia: 122.
- Zapparoli M., 2009. Mammiferi nelle aree urbane e suburbane della Provincia di Roma. In: Amori G., Battisti C. & De Felici S. (a cura di), 2009. I Mammiferi della Provincia di Roma. Dallo stato delle conoscenze alla gestione e conservazione delle specie. Provincia di Roma, Assessorato alle Politiche dell'Agricoltura. Stilgrafica, Roma, 249–264.



Figure 1. Study area: Northeastern part of Rome (Latium, Italy).