

FLORA AND FAUNA OF THE MALTESE ISLANDS

THE FRESHWATER CRAB

The Freshwater Crab (Maltese: Qabru) is the only freshwater crab on the island and the national invertebrate of Malta. The species found in the Maltese Islands is endemic and was given the scientific name of *Potamon fluviatile lanfrancoi*, in honour of Guido Lanfranco, the renowned Maltese naturalist. It was figured in the 5c coin of the Maltese Lira.

Scientific Name: Potamon is derived from the Greek word 'Potamos', meaning river or stream, while fluviatile means found in rivers. It is also known as the Mediterranean Freshwater Crab or Maltese Freshwater Crab. The Maltese name Qabru is derived from the Arabic 'Qabr', same as the Maltese word 'qabar' meaning tomb. Most probably, this refers to the holes that these crabs excavate in the soft earth along valley beds where they spend most of the daytime hours.

Description: Adult males may reach a carapace length of five centimeters, while females are generally smaller. Like many other crabs, the body is roughly square, with the reduced abdomen tucked beneath the thorax from which five pairs of legs are attached. The first pair of legs is armed with large claws. Fresh Water Crabs can live up to 12 years. Mating can be either fast or a lengthy affair, since it can last from 30 minutes to over 20 hours. The female crab carries the eggs in her pleopod, an appendage found on the abdomen, until they hatch into young crabs.

Distribution: This species has a scattered distribution across the Mediterranean, from the Iberian Peninsula eastwards to mainland Greece northwards into the Balkan region. It is also present on several islands including Sicily and Malta. Locally, it occurs in a number of sites where fresh water is present throughout the year, including Baħrija, San Martin, and Santa Maria in Malta, and Lunzjata Valley in Gozo.

Status: The population of the Fresh Water Crab is in decline due to loss of habitat, lack of water in summer and illegal collecting.

Habitat: Occurs in overgrown habitats with clear flowing water. Unfortunately, not a common habitat in the Maltese islands, hence it's scattered distribution.

Conservation: A legally protected species at European level, which makes the Freshwater Crab a protected species in the Maltese Islands. A well-planned conservation effort to safeguard both the crab and its habitat is fundamental for the preservation of this species.



The Maltese 5 cents coin (1986-2008) portraying the Freshwater Crab

