



**Scientific Name:**

*Chamaeleo chamaeleon*

**Synonym:**

*Lacerta chamaeleon*

**English:**

Mediterranean Chameleon

**Maltese:**

*il-kamaleonte*

The Mediterranean chameleon is a small reptile known from North Africa, Southern Europe and Western Asia (the Middle East). In Malta, it was introduced from North Africa in the 1850s by Protestant missionaries in a private garden in St. Julian's, from where it escaped and spread to the rest of the island, including Gozo. The body is flattened from side to side with an average length of 30 cm, with females often being considerably larger than males. It has a small beard of scales and its head is crested on top with some hard scales that extend to the top of its back. The toes of the feet, each equipped with a sharp claw, point in two separate directions, and together with its long tail, facilitate grasping of branches.

The colour of the chameleon is variable; its skin can turn lighter or darker but it is normally greenish or yellowish-brown with paler markings. Even though such camouflage helps the chameleon to stalk its prey, as well as helps it hide from predators, studies show that chameleons change their colour in response to temperature and light stimuli and as an expression of their mood. In fact when alarmed, it turns to a dark colour, inflates its body with air, and opens its mouth wide to appear larger and fiercer.

The Mediterranean chameleon has excellent eyesight. Its protuberant eyes can be moved independently of one another and have a full 360° vision, helping it locate its prey. It usually feeds on a wide range of insects which are caught by its long and protractible tongue. The chameleon is usually solitary and lives on trees, shrubs and low-growing vegetation. It defends its territory and only tolerates members of the opposite sex during the mating season, between mid-July to mid-September. In order to lay eggs, the female leaves the safety of its tree and deposits between 20-30 eggs in the soil. In the past chameleons were captured and sold as pets, but today, legislation is in place which protects these peculiar creatures.

The chameleon is legally protected in the Maltese Islands, and its disturbance, keeping, killing, sale or trade are prohibited.

