Macrovipera – the large vipers of northern Africa and western Asia

Within the genus Macrovipera we consider two different groups, which are also separated geographically.

The African mauretanica group and the Asian lebetina group.

Only one species, Macrovipera lebetina transmediterranea, brakes this rule and is distributed in northwestern Africa.

The “western” species (mauretanica and desertii) are more related to the Genus Daboia (Daboia russelli) and palaestinae, whereas the “eastern” forms (lebetina) are more close to Vipera (Montivipera) xanthina.

This is surprising, because all species within Macrovipera look (except colour and pattern) similar and lay eggs – Vipera palaestinae does it also.

There are the following (sub)species:
- Macrovipera lebetina lebetina
- Macrovipera lebetina euphratica
- Macrovipera lebetina obtusa
- Macrovipera (lebetina) turanica
- Macrovipera (lebetina) cernovi
- Macrovipera lebetina transmediterranea
- Macrovipera schweizeri
- Macrovipera mauretanica
- Macrovipera desertii
Most of all these (sub)species will be shown in pics.

The author was visiting populations in Morocco, Aegeaan islands and Turkey.

The first contact with Macrovipera he had at the end of the 70ies on the island Milos. This island, but also Kimolos, Sifnos and Poliegos have been visited many times during different seasons. Macrovipera schweizeri uses most of all habitats there, but clearly prefers the small valleys, in Greek called Potamos. They may be found basking close to the water, where they wait for birds, come to drink. In autumn they climb trees to catch birds, when they fly from Europe to the south. It was astonishing, who some can reach 1 or 2 meters up the trees. 2 vipers have been found on a figtree, the lowest branches about 1.5 meters above ground. As far as known three completely black Milosvipers have been found, but no pictures have been taken by the collectors. Only a very blurred Polaroid of some grey vipers together with one black I have seen at Mr. Kazouli in the late seventies.

In Turkey, I found Macrovipera lebetina obtusa along the southern coast and in the mountains of eastern Turkey. So they live from seallevel up to nearly 2.000 meters asl. Within the distribution area of Macrovipera lebetina they live in most different climate zones. From active all year round to hibernating about nearly a half year, like in eastern Turkey or at the northern slopes of the Hindukush and the deserts north of this mountain range.
Also the habitat use is very different. It was found along creeks, in stonewalls along fields, at rocky hillsides as well as in true deserts.

In Morocco I found Macro viper mauretanica in the surroundings of Marrakech, in the Sous-valley and in the Ouarzazate area. All findings have been close to water, not farther than one kilometer away.

Since the late 70ies and early eighties, together with Radspieler Clemens we are breeding different (sub)species, like Macro vipera schweizeri, M. l. lebetina from Cyprus, M. l. obtusa from Iskenderun, eastern Turkey and Armenia and M. l. turanica and cernovi from unknown (except one pair from about 60 kilometers south of Almati, Kasachstan) localities. Due to lack of time and place I stopped to keep these large vipers in the middle of the nineties, but C. Radspieler still keeps and breeds most of them.

A breeding success with Macro vipera l. lebetina from the island of Cyprus (1990) gave the first knowledge, that also these vipers are laying eggs and not giving birth to live young, as may be read in literature till today.

In one case, Macro vipera lebetina turanica laid eggs 97 days after mating (normally 100 to 120 days) and the young hatched after only two days (normally about 30 days).

In Macro vipera schweizeri, the rare red form may be bred with grey animals and all hatchlings may be red. On
the other hand, breeding with red father and mother will not give red young sometimes.