

Arboreal behaviour in Ocellated Lizards, *Timon lepidus* (Daudin, 1802): can trees play a role in species conservation?

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Several clades of squamate reptiles have evolved specialised morphological and behavioural adaptations for arboreal lifestyle, as exemplified by chameleons or vipers of the genus *Bothriechis* (Fischer et al., 2010; Arteaga et al., 2024). Lacertidae is a large family comprising 388 species (Uetz et al., 2025) distributed across Africa, Europe, and Asia, as far north as Indonesia (Zug et al., 2001). For some European species (with some introduced populations), the distribution extends across the Atlantic, e.g., *Podarcis siculus* (Rafinesque-Schmaltz, 1810), *Podarcis muralis* (Laurenti, 1768), and *Lacerta bilineata* Daudin, 1802 (Mitchell et al., 2008). Varying widely in size, lacertids have well-differentiated limbs and a tail capable of autotomy. They are recognised as predominantly terrestrial with a few arboreal (*Gastropholis* spp., *Holaspis* spp.) and saxicolous (*Iberolacerta* spp.) taxa. Arboreal lacertids

have developed adaptations, for example specific colouration, with green predominating, such as *Gastropholis echinata* (Cope, 1862), which lives in the canopy of dense forests in Cameroon, or the ability to glide from tree to tree, such as *Holaspis guentheri* Gray, 1863 in West Africa (Trape et al., 2012).

Arboreal behaviour is rarely described in European lizards, and references to this subject are mostly recent (e.g., Ayres and Domínguez-Costas, 2021; Llorca et al., 2023; Petrovan, 2023; Jablonski et al., 2025). Such behaviour has been described in the genus *Podarcis*, which tends to inhabit rocky environments. Thermoregulatory and refuge-seeking behaviour in trees is well known in *Podarcis hispanica* (Steindachner, 1870), with individuals climbing up to 5 meters in height observed – eight specimens of this species were found under the bark of the Maritime Pine (*Pinus pinaster*), and in holes in the Italian cypress *Cupressus sempervirens* (Malkmus, 2004). González de la Vega (1988) states that this species chooses trees (olive, horse chestnut, and palm) that offer good hiding places as its “residence” in the province of Huelva (southwest Spain). Three other species of *Podarcis* [*P. bocagei* (Lopez-Seoane, 1885), *P. guadarramae* (Boscá, 1916), and *P. virescens* Geniez et al., 2014] have been observed exhibiting arboreal behaviour (Galán, 2011; Ayres, 2020; Caiero-Dias, 2021; Ayres and Domínguez-Costas, 2021). Jablonski et al. (2025) recently presented over 300 records of this type of behaviour in lacertids, emphasising that it is surprising this phenomenon has not yet been described more extensively in the literature.

The situation is similar for one of the largest lizards of continental Europe – the Ocellated Lizard, *Timon lepidus* (Daudin, 1802). The distribution of this species is limited to the Iberian Peninsula, the French Mediterranean coast, extending westward to the south of the Massif Central, and along the Atlantic coast where it reaches its northern limit, Oléron Island and Vendée Department (Berroneau, 2012; Lescure and de Massary, 2012; Berroneau, 2014; Pottier, 2016; Baudran et al.,

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2023). The Ocellated Lizard is widely known as mostly terrestrial, originating from the driest Mediterranean landscapes, marshes, wet meadows, and large crop fields without shelter (Doré et al., 2015). The arboreal behaviour of this species is sparsely documented

(Cheylan and Grillet, 2004; Doré et al., 2015). Here we report 21 direct records of arboreal behaviour of *T. lepidus*. We present our observations from the oldest to the most recent in Table 1.

Table 1. Summarized data on the arboreal behaviour in Ocellated Lizards presented in this study. Height refers to the elevation at which a lizard has climbed in the tree. The remarks categorise the type of behaviour of the observed lizard, with the most important details from the observation denoted. Three categories are distinguished: Fled – rapid escape from the observer upon noticing him; Shelter – taking refuge in the tree’s space; Basking.

Record	Date	Life stage	Sex	Tree species	Height	Remarks	Author	Weather	Location (GPS & elevation)
1	June 1994	Adult	Male	Aleppo Pine (<i>Pinus halepensis</i>)	2 m	Fled: Took refuge upon being approached, then jumped to the ground.	GD	Not specified	43.6550°N 3.3623°E, 184.5 m
2	05 May 2008	Adult	Female	Hawthorn (<i>Crataegus</i> sp.)	~2 m	Shelter: Already positioned in the tree (Fig. 1A).	JN	25°C, light wind, clear sky	43.2567°N 3.1817°E, 9.3 m
3	09 June 2008	Adult	Male	Scots Pine (<i>Pinus sylvestris</i>)	~6 m	Shelter: Observed climbing the tree (Fig. 2).	OC	19–25°C, sunny, no wind/clouds	43.3335°N 6.5628°E, 111 m
4	05 May 2009	Adult	Female	Sessile Oak (<i>Quercus petraea</i>)	~1 m	Basking: On trunk; climbed higher parts to reach more sun rays (Fig. 1B).	MB	Sunny, windless, clear skies	45.0704°N 1.2876°E, 120.9 m
5	09 May 2012	Adult	Female	Cork Oak (<i>Quercus suber</i>)	~1.5 m	Fled/Shelter: Fled into the tree; took shelter in a hollow branch.	AR	Not specified	43.3332°N 6.4171°E, 105.9 m
6	10 April 2013	Adult	Unknown	Cork Oak (<i>Q. suber</i>)	~1 m	Shelter: Discovered inside a hollow branch.	AR	Not specified	43.3332°N 6.4171°E, 105.9 m
7	07 May 2016	Adult	Male	Almond Tree (<i>Prunus amygdalus</i>)	N/A	Shelter: Taking refuge under bark of a dead tree.	GD	Not specified	43.7510°N 5.2105°E, 140.1 m
8	12 May 2016	Adult	Male	Almond Tree (<i>P. amygdalus</i>)	~6 m	Fled/Shelter: Climbed the tree; likely living in tree cracks (Fig. 3A, B).	GD & JR	Not specified	43.7510°N 5.2105°E, 140.1 m
9	27 May 2016	Adult	Pair (M+F)	Almond Tree (<i>P. amygdalus</i>)	N/A	Basking: Pair on the tree; regular habitat use (Fig. 3C, D).	GD	Not specified	43.7510°N 5.2105°E, 140.1 m
10	23 June 2016	Adult	Female	Aleppo Pine (<i>P. halepensis</i>)	~3 m	Shelter: Took refuge; climbed in front of the observer (Fig. 1C).	JN	30–35°C, milky sky	43.5952°N 4.9822°E, 51 m
11	09 May 2021	Adult	Female	<i>Prunus</i> sp.	~1.5 m	Basking: On a dead branch; unaware of observer (Fig. 4A)	EL & AF	22°C, light breeze	43.7622°N 4.9668°E, 105 m
12	09 May 2021	Adult	Female	<i>Prunus</i> sp.	~1 m	Shelter: In a hole of a dead tree; only the head sticks out (Fig. 4B).	EL & AF	25°C, light breeze	43.7622°N 4.9668°E, 105 m
13	09 May 2021	Adult	Female	<i>Prunus</i> sp.	N/A	Basking: On the trunk of an old tree (Fig. 4C).	EL & AF	Light breeze	43.7622°N 4.9668°E, 105 m
14	10 April 2022	Juvenile	Unknown	<i>Prunus</i> sp.	1.5–1.7 m	Basking: On the tree trunk (Fig. 4D).	EL & AF	16°C, no wind	43.7622°N 4.9668°E, 105 m
15	30 April 2023	Adult	Male	<i>Prunus</i> sp.	N/A	Basking: In front of its refuge and on a branch (Fig. 4E, F).	EL & AF	19°C, light breeze	43.7622°N 4.9668°E, 105 m
16	18 April 2024	Subadult	Male	Oak (<i>Quercus</i> sp.)	~4 m	Fled: on the branches of the tree as the observer approached (Fig. 1D).	JN	~28°C, no wind	43.3869°N 3.1753°E, 32.3 m
17	18 May 2024	Adult	Female	Maritime Pine (<i>Pinus pinaster</i>)	~4.5 m	Fled/Shelter: Noticed observers; climbed and observed (Fig. 5).	MB & PZ	19–21°C, clear sky, no wind	45.0306°N 1.1896°W, 2.6 m
18	04 June 2024	Juvenile	Unknown	Holly Oak (<i>Quercus ilex</i>)	~1.5 m	Fled: Noticed observers and climbed the tree (Fig. 1E)	AF	22°C, light breeze, clear sky	43.2516°N 6.5076°E, 21 m
19	07 May 2025	Adult	Male	Aleppo Pine (<i>P. halepensis</i>)	N/A	Shelter: Climbing; froze still upon noticing the observer	JR	23°C, 80% clouds, mild wind	43.4505°N 3.5835°E, 32.1 m
20	21 May 2025	Adult	Female	<i>Acacia</i> sp.	3 m	Fled: Observed fleeing and climbing the tree	AB	27°C, clear sky, mild wind	43.5538°N 3.8366°E, 35.6 m
21	06 June 2025	Adult	Female	Maritime Pine (<i>P. pinaster</i>)	~4 m	Fled: Fled, climbed, then jumped down	MB	~33°C, clear sky, no wind	44.7379°N 1.2363°W, 13 m



Figure 1. (A) An adult female Ocellated Lizard in a large Hawthorn (*Crataegus* sp.). (B) A thermoregulating adult female Ocellated Lizard, climbing higher and higher as following the last evening sun rays. (C) An adult female Ocellated Lizard taking refuge in an Aleppo Pine (*Pinus halepensis*). (D) A subadult male Ocellated Lizard moving on the branches of an oak tree (*Quercus* sp.). (E) A juvenile Ocellated Lizard finding refuge on a Holly Oak (*Quercus ilex*). (F) An adult male Ocellated Lizard noticed its observer and froze, remaining motionless throughout the entire observation (approx. 5 minutes). (G) An adult female Ocellated Lizard climbing an acacia tree to a height of 3 meters, looking out for potential threats. (H) An adult female climbing a pine tree (*Pinus* sp.), observing its surroundings attentively. Photos by Jean Nicolas (A, C, D), Matthieu Berroneau (B), Auxence Foreau (E), Julien Renet (F), Alexandre Braut (G), and Thomas Archambaud (H).

In previous works concerning *T. lepidus*, the phrase “climbs trees easily” has been used in French herpetological literature for many years without providing much detail. Angel (1946) wrote about *Lacerta lepida* (former taxon name): “When pursued, it sometimes climbs pine trees.” Similarly, Arnold and Burton (1978) mentioned: “It generally lives on the ground, but climbs easily on rocks and even trees”, a sentence that conveys surprise at finding it in trees. The reference is retained in later editions of the book, without the emphasis on utilising trees: “climbs easily on rocks and trees” (e.g., Arnold and Ovenden, 2002). Matz and Vanderhaege (1978) first described “hollow trees” as the species’ habitat and repeated this notion identically in subsequent publications. In Böhme (1984), it is mentioned that it occasionally climbs trees. A few years later, Fretey (1987) specified that it “climbs olive tree trunks”. Followed by Le Garff (1992), he wrote in his book that it “climbs trees with agility”. This species is therefore mainly terrestrial but uses rocky areas and trees, as Corti and Lo Cascio (2002) added. The subsequent two works present two photographs of lizards in trees in the context of anti-predation behaviour (on an unknown deciduous tree and *Pinus* sp.), without providing more details, which may suggest that such

behaviour is rare (Cheylan and Grillet, 2004; Doré et al., 2015). Pottier (2003) reported on an escape behaviour from predators for this species by climbing a tree. Kwet (2009) stated that it takes refuge in trees when alarmed. Later, Pottier (2016) published a picture of *T. lepidus* climbing a Pubescent Oak (*Quercus pubescens*). The arboreal behaviour of this species is poorly documented and, unfortunately, in most cases, without providing further information: location, photographic evidence, context, behaviour, or specimen characteristics.

According to the scarce literature, their arboreal activity is typically associated with predator-avoidance behaviour, which aligns with the majority of observations we present here. Our observations, even though few, confirm this type of behaviour during the peak seasonal activity period of these lizards (Grillet et al., 2010). Additionally, we noticed that tree climbing has been considered to play a role in their thermoregulation, which has not been considered before. *Timon lepidus* are capable of climbing trees, particularly to catch the last rays of sunlight at the end of the day (much like lizards of the genus *Podarcis*) (Braña, 1991; Martín-Vallejo et al., 1995). We have also documented *T. lepidus* juveniles using trees for thermoregulation and escape, confirming the use of this habitat in three life stages (juvenile,



Figure 2. An adult male Ocellated Lizard climbed a Scots Pine (*Pinus sylvestris*), reaching a height of over 6 meters. Photos by Olivier Calvez.

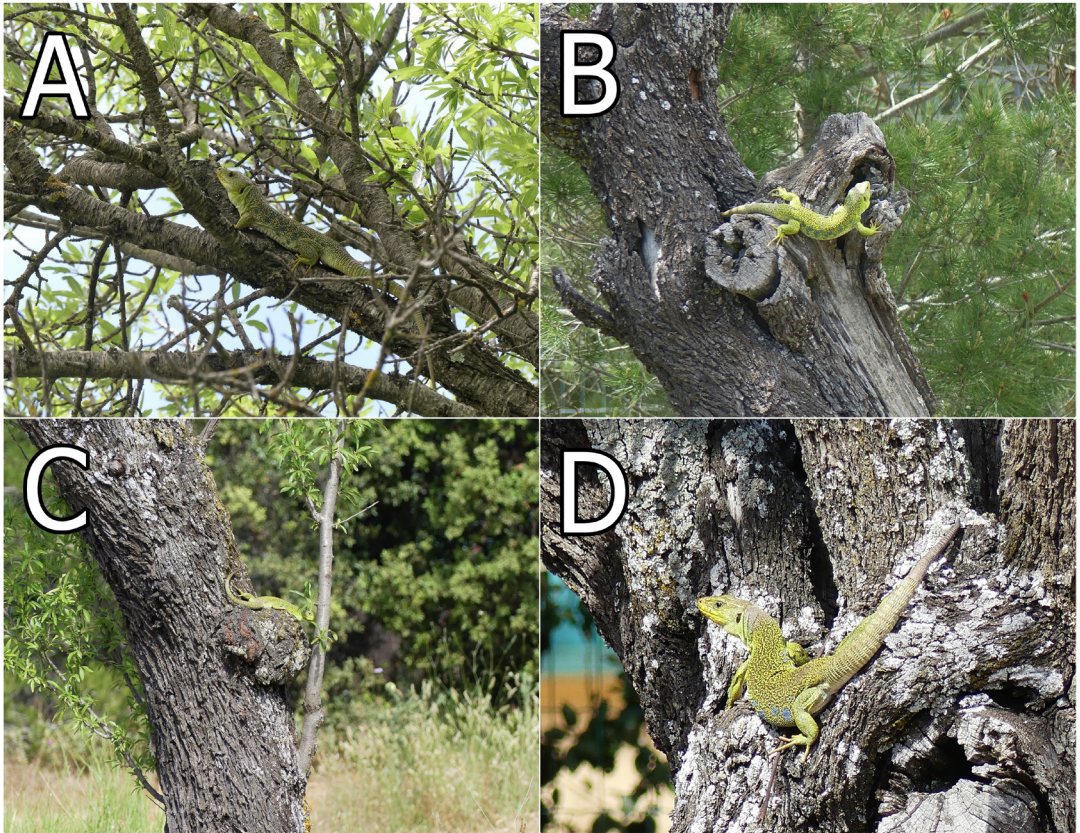


Figure 3. An adult male Ocellated Lizard moving along branches (A), then basking near its shelter (B). Adult female basking (C) and taking refuge in *Prunus amygdalus* in the same location, using tree crevices and hollows as shelter (D). Photos by Grégory Deso.

subadult, adult). It is also conceivable that *T. lepidus* exhibit arboreal behaviour more frequently when their environment is more wooded and without sufficiently opened canopies.

Timon lepidus are shelter-dependent squamates (Castilla and Bauwens, 1992; Diaz et al., 2006; Renet et al., 2022), and a hole in a tree can also serve as a shelter for this species, especially in habitats where other shelters are scarce. When the site appears to offer few shelters at ground level, hollow trees and their root systems may even serve as communal sites that support successful hibernation (Deso and Crouzet, 2022). The use of trees by *T. lepidus* can be various. They can utilise them for escape and movement through the habitat (climbing and jumping), use trees as refuges (remaining immobile at height and under cover for several hours), serve as diurnal and nocturnal resting sites, serve as spots for basking, and even for hibernation within root

systems. All this evidence clearly demonstrates the strong affinity of this species for occupying trees, and their hollows and crevices. They also adopt arboreal behaviour to feed on cicadas in June when they swarm, and in 2017, JN confirmed their habit of taking refuge on vine stocks (especially subadults and females), notably to gorge themselves on the bush-cricket of Tettigoniidae family (Jean Nicolas, unpublished data 2017). A less common but remarkable phenomenon is the use of modified anthropogenic shelters at height by lizards, which can also serve as roosts (Fig. 6).

The activity time of lizards is directly linked to interactions with the environment, thermoregulation, their morphology, physiology, and thermal preferences (Huey et al., 1983). In habitats with significant thermal heterogeneity, these animals may extend their activity periods to meet their thermal needs. The Mediterranean forests have been undergoing substantial changes

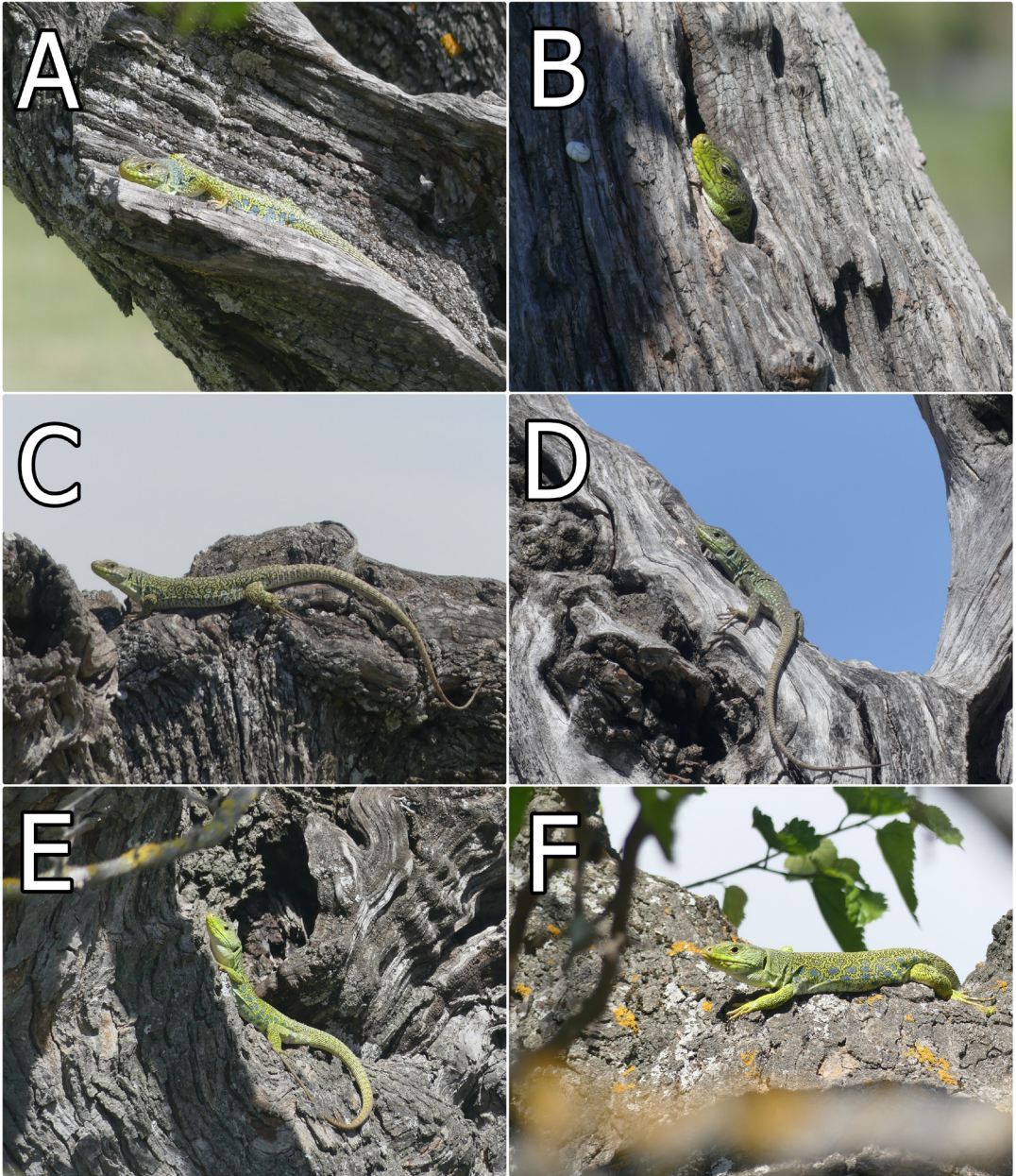


Figure 4. Five Ocellated Lizard observations from Eygalières (southern France): three adult basking females (A–C), a juvenile (D), and an adult male basking in front of its refugia (E) and on a nearby branch (F). Photos by Elisa Leplat.

for decades (Blondel and Bonin, 2018). Currently, traditional agriculture (e.g., cultivating olive trees), which offers greater herpetological diversity due to its high habitat heterogeneity (Canós-Burguete et al., 2023), is being replaced by the cultivation of woody plants (e.g., pine trees), which negatively affects this

aspect. Species need to adapt their behaviour to these changes in their changing environment, as long as this remains possible.

Based on the 21 records provided, *T. lepidus* demonstrate a significant use of arboreal habitats in southern and southwestern France for various survival



Figure 5. A sequence of images documenting an adult female Ocellated Lizard climbing a Maritime Pine (*Pinus pinaster*), immediately reaching a height of about 4.5 meters, after that stopping on a branch and carefully observing its surroundings. Photos by Przemysław Zdunek.

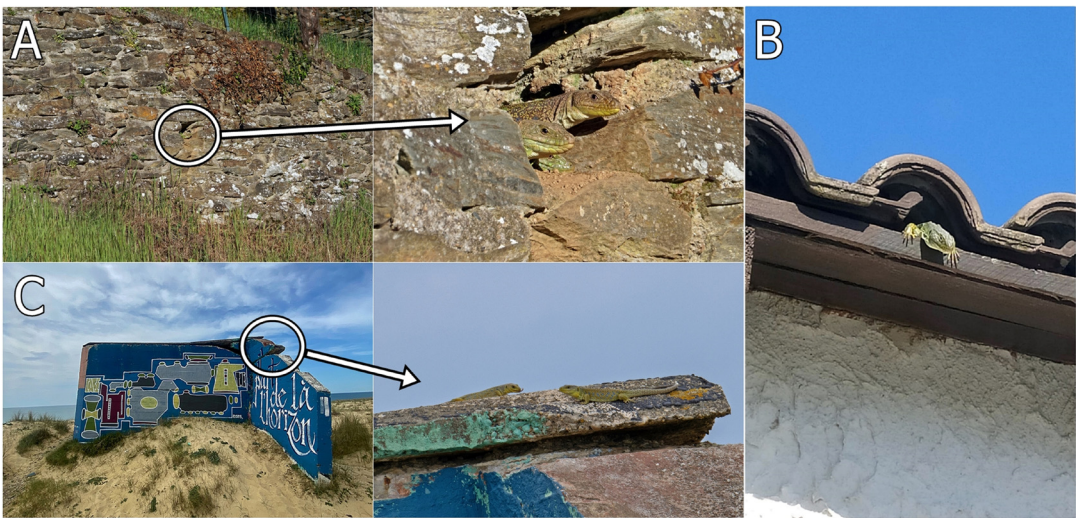


Figure 6. (A) Three Ocellated Lizard individuals sharing a shelter in a wall at a height of approx. 1.50 meters, Vieillevie (Cantal department), France, on 1 April 2025. (B) An adult male Ocellated Lizard used the roof as a refuge at a height of 2.50 meters in Sabran, France, on 31 March 2025. (C) On 23 May 2025, three adult Ocellated Lizards were observed on the top of a World War II bunker, basking at about 3 meters above ground, in the Landes department, France. Photos by Przemysław Zdunek (A), Jennifer La Rizza (B), and Thomas Archambaud (C).

strategies. The observations, primarily involving adults (86%), show that these lizards utilise trees at an average height of 2.6 meters, reaching up to 6 meters in Scots Pine and Almond Trees. Tree selection is dominated by the *Prunus* genus (38%) and various pines (33%), followed by oaks (24%). Behaviourally, the lizards use these structures most frequently to flee from potential threats (43%), but also for dedicated shelter in hollow branches or bark crevices (29%) and for basking to regulate body temperature (29%).

These observations have important implications for recommendations on the conservation and management of *T. lepidus*. The preservation of trees, particularly ancient trees with high ecological value and numerous cavities and microhabitats, can be significant for the maintenance of species (Costa et al., 2025). The use of trees by *T. lepidus* may signal ongoing habitat changes, heralding a decline in the heterogeneity of terrestrial microhabitats. *Timon lepidus* has been adapting to environmental changes over the last hundred years. The issue of land abandonment poses a particular threat to mainland populations of *T. lepidus* in southwestern France: the decline in sheep farming has led to the closure of grassland habitats and their gradual reforestation (Berroneau, 2012). As part of conservation and species management measures, consideration should be given to returning to traditional plantations that include crop species likely to develop habitats more favourable to reptiles, and to providing heterogeneous microhabitats and landscapes. Observations such as these, even as single events, can broaden the scope of information about the natural history and ecology of *T. lepidus*. By summarising our data (Table 1), we hope to facilitate future research on this behaviour and suggest its application in the conservation of this species.

Acknowledgments. We would like to thank our field companions, who also witnessed these observations: Thomas Archambaud, Nicolas Caron, Thierry Gagliano, Alexandre Hennion, Yann Jeandenans, Magali Orsi, Frédéric Pawlowski, and Marine Pezin. Thanks to Thomas Archambaud and Jennifer La Rizza for sharing their photos. Thanks to Matthijs van den Burg for excellent copy-editing. Special thanks to Loïs Rocher for finding some sources for us and Karol Walach, whose help we can always count on.

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