

## BOOKREVIEW

*Les couleurs et les vipères*, by Géniez, Philippe & Grillet, Pierre. 69 Photographs in colour and black and white. Drawings and maps. From the series 'Comment vivent-ils', Vol. 22. Atlas Visuels Payot, Lausanne, 1989. ISBN 2-601-02222-1.

Price: Ff 89.

By: Marcel van der Voort

\* \* \*

This book, beautifully illustrated with photographs, besides a preface containing observations on the morphology and biology of snakes, things worth knowing about hibernation, reproduction, the venom apparatus of some snakes and concluding, remarks in two main parts: the first part being about grass snakes and the second part about vipers.

The first chapter is divided into 'aglyphous grass snakes' and 'opisthophthalmous grass snakes'. From this division I conclude that in France all snakes are called grass snakes if they do not belong to the viper family. If one consults Grzimek's sixth volume on the 'Life of Animals' this seems to be confirmed: his summation of the grass snakes is as follows: Couleuvre à collier (*Natrix natrix*), Couleuvre léopardine (*Elaphe situla*), Couleuvre de Montpellier (*Malpolon monspessulanus*) (Grzimek, 1973, index).

Writing about the aglyphous species, the authors use their natural environment as a criterion for grouping them. Thus a division is made in (a) banks of rivers, lakes and ponds; (b) Railway embankments, old walls, hedges; (c) trees; (d) the Mediterranean area.

The following snakes are discussed one by one with regard to these habitats: (a) *Natrix natrix*, *Natrix maura*, *Natrix tessellata*; (b) *Coluber viridiflavus*, *Coronella austriaca*; (c) *Elaphe longissima*; (d) *Elaphe scalaris*, *Coronella girondica*, *Coluber hippocrepis*, *Coluber gemonensis*, *Coluber najadum*, *Elaphe quatorlineata* and *Elaphe situla*.

For the discussion of the opisthophthalmous species no grouping of habitats is used by the authors. The following species are discussed: *Malpolon monspessulanus*, *Macroprotodon cucullatus*, *Telescopus fallax*. Nor has a grouping been made into habitats when discussing the vipers, although the preferred way of living of several species is noted in full. The reason why is soon clear: many species of vipers live in many types of habitats and for this reason such a grouping criterion is not very practical.

I would like to note the species which are discussed: *Vipera aspis*, *Vipera berus*, *Vipera latasti*, *Vipera ammodytes* and *Vipera ursinii*.

The book continues with interesting observations on the predators of snakes, the relationship between snakes and man (with a paragraph on the effects of snake venom on man), and various details.

A table for identifying the snakes which are mentioned, an explanatory wordlist, nine charts of the habitats of the snakes which are mentioned and a reference list conclude the book.

In the 'Introduction' one reads that the authors undertook years of research in order to write this book. This research was done with a lot of pleasure and skill, as is demonstrated on every page; an easily readable book containing research material about the way of living, feeding, outward appearance etc. of the species in question.

As far as the lengths of some species are concerned, the authors maintain that they have found divergent material in comparison to other books. I myself have compared some of these findings with those mentioned in Trutnau's book, and in some cases there proved to be

even bigger variances. In his book Trutnau mentions that the size of *Natrix natrix* is seldom more than 1.5 m, whereas the authors mention a size of 1.8 m. According to Trutnau, *Natrix maura* does not grow any larger than 1 m, whereas Géniez & Grillet mention 75 cm as the maximum length. *Vipera latasti* is mentioned by Trutnau as a snake which on average is 60 cm or more, but seldom any larger than 80 cm in size. Both authors are under the impression that this species of *Vipera* grows to about 40-60 cm in size, and rarely any larger than 72 cm (Trutnau 1982 and 1988).

I do not think that I am sufficiently qualified to pass judgement on who may be right or wrong.

This little book is especially attractive due to the beautiful photographs of the animals and their habitats which are discussed. In many books about herpetology one often finds the same pictures, or the pictures are of animals in vivariums. This last type of pictures especially, does not appeal to me very much. This is something you will not find in the book by Géniez & Grillet; all the photographs were made on site and on account of that they are very attractive due to being originals. Talking about photographs of habitats Ken Welch, in his review of R. Hoser's work on Australian snakes and frogs (Welch, 1990) was of the opinion that these cannot be omitted in any serious book about herpetology, a conception to which has been complied in this book.

I thought that the price of this book was rather high when I first bought it (Ff 89), but I have already changed my opinion; the pleasure of reading and browsing through this book by far surpasses the cost of Ff 89.

To end with one suggestion: I bought this book in the bookshop that belongs to the Musée d'Anatomie which is situated in the 'Jardin des Plantes' on the Quai St.-Bernard in Paris. Never before have I seen such a collection of books about herpetology in stock in any bookshop. When in Paris one should really visit it.

## REFERENCES

Grzimek, B., 1973. Life of Animals. Part VI. Reptiles. Utrecht.

Trutnau, L., 1982. Schlangen im Terrarium. Band 2, Giftschlangen. Stuttgart.

---, 1988. Schlangen im Terrarium. Band 1, Ungiftige Schlangen. Stuttgart.

Welch, K., 1990. Bookreview of R. Hoser's 'Australian Reptiles and Frogs'. Litt. Serp. Vol. 10 (5): 212-213.

*Colour Guide to the Snakes of Sri Lanka* by Ansem de Silva. 1st Edition, 1990. Pp. i-vi, 1-130, Plates 1-12 (containing 69 colour pictures). A5, hardback + dust jacket. Published by R & A Publishing Limited, 3 Highfield Villas, Newlands Hill, Portishead, Avon, BS20 9AU, England. ISBN 1 872688 00 4. Price: £ 18.75 (p & p free, air mail £ 2.00 extra).

By Anton van Woerkom.

\* \* \*

I think it is a good habit when natural history books treat the animals they deal with as a part of a much larger system. This book is a good example of how to do this: geology, climate, rainfall, vegetation, Indian and Malayan affinities and origin of the snake families are discussed in the first chapter.

The second chapter deals with the relationships between man and snakes in Sri Lanka: various beliefs, traditions, practices and cultural traits, presented by family. It will be clear that the cobra, especially, plays a prominent role in Sri Lankan beliefs.

A very interesting chapter is the third one. It deals with venomous snakes, snakebite and snakebite treatment, ancient as well as modern. One of the first medical works that deals with venomous snakes (bite symptoms and medication) was written during the fourth century A.D. The chapter contains interesting facts on this subject.

In Chapter 4, identification key, the author leans heavily on earlier literature, however, it is not necessary the same style as that of the original author; look at the different use of markers between the families *Uropeltidae*, *Colubridae* and *Elapidae*. It would have looked better had the same style been used throughout the whole key. Also I do not like to see keys branch out as follows:

- a. Nasal suture goes to second labial
- b. Transverse rows of scales on body less than 275

These two branches are not concerned with each other and it would be preferable to avoid this arrangement.

Chapter 5 contains the main part of the book: Checklist of the snakes of Sri Lanka, it covers half of the total number of pages. It opens with a table on the distribution of snakes, arranged to their climatic zones. Only one species, *Ptyas mucosus*, occurs in all seven zones.

The checklist gives brief descriptions of all snakes: common names, natural history, distribution, status, references and remarks.

Four maps on altitude, climatic and vegetational zones and provinces of Sri Lanka round this book off.

Concluding we can say this book has been written by somebody who knows what he writes. It bears the spirit of a man who has spent his life in nature and with snakes. He not only crystallized a lot of information in this book, but also did it in a very readable and fascinating way, especially Chapters 2 and 3.

It is a valuable book for anyone interested in Sri Lankan and Southeast Asian snakes.