

Book Reviews

Dutta, S.K. 1997. **Amphibians of India and Sri Lanka (Checklist and Bibliography)**. ISBN 81-86854-01-0. xiii+342+xxii pp. Hardback. Published by Odyssey Publishing House, Acharya Vihar Commercial Complex, Room No. BS 2-3, Acharya Vihar, Bhubaneswar 751013, Orissa, India.

Although amphibian checklists for individual countries, states and regions within South Asia have appeared from time to time, their content has generally been of uneven quality and usefulness. The past decade has seen the publication of checklists of world-wide scope for many groups including Birds (Sibley & Monroe, 1990), Mammals (Wilson & Reeder, 1993) and Snakes (Williams & Wallach, 1989). A world checklist of fishes (Eschmeyer) is even now in preparation.

The only reference of world-wide scope for the Amphibia remains D.R. Frost's (1985) *Amphibian species of the world: a taxonomic and geographical reference*, now being prepared for a revised second edition. Regional checklists of amphibia can but build upon this.

Given this background, Sushil K. Dutta's *Amphibians of India and Sri Lanka* is a useful and usually reliable treatment. Happily, several of Frost's omissions have been included (e.g. *Philautus eximius*). In addition to the taxonomic list, the book also sports a useful bibliography, rather varied in its scope, including also references to publications on anatomy and biology. Occasionally, significant contributions to the literature (e.g. Dätz, E. 1925. Die Haut von *Ichthyophis glutinosus*, 2:173-204, pls. 4-7 in Plate, L. (Ed.), 1922-31, *Fauna et Anatomia ceylanica*. 4to. Verlag von Gustav Fischer, Jena, Germany. Vol. 2, 540 pp + 24 pls.) have been overlooked. This however, is to be expected in a work of such broad scope, especially given the complexity of the literature, much of which is rare or unavailable in the region itself.

The species accounts themselves are usually clear and the bibliography up to date. The entire text (excluding the Preface and Acknowledgements) appears to have been reasonably well edited, though some of the author's word usage is annoying, especially in a work that claims to be taxonomic, e.g., 'type' instead of 'holotype'; the word 'specimen' in a plural context. The bibliography could have been more scrupulous with regard to dates of publication (e.g. the date of publication of Gray's *Illustrations of Indian Zoology* is cited as 1834 when in fact the amphibian species that become available from that work were published earlier, in the preceding parts to that work; Günther's *Catalogue of Batrachia Salientia* was in fact published in 1859 and not 1858 as stated in the work itself). Perhaps less seriously, 'Boulenger (1891)' is cited several times without any indication as to which of the three works listed in the bibliography as having been published by Boulenger in 1891 (a, b, c) is being referred to.

Some of the 'Systematic notes' are vague and circular, and would have been better avoided. The discussion of *Philautus variabilis*, for example, occupies 25 lines of text and provides observations and opinions which are implicitly personal to the author, e.g., '*Philautus variabilis* is represented by a variety of colour morphs in Sri Lanka... This specimen [referred to by Boulenger (1891)] might be one of the species of *Rhacophorus* or the same as *P. eximius* with a conical papilla on the tongue...' Evidently the author has examined at least two of the five syntypes of *P. variabilis* (Dutta & Manamendra Arachchi, 1996: 163). He did not notice however that they represent clearly distinct species (Manamendra-Arachchi, pers. comm.). Had he done so, the entire discussion could have been avoided.

The test of the book however, is whether it is more useful than Frost's (1985 and on-going) treatment of world-wide scope. Dutta's book does treat some information omitted by Frost: collection registration numbers for types have been listed; the synonymy is sometimes embellished (not always accurately); and systematic notes provided (not always relevant—e.g. that the eggs of *Polypedates cruciger* are 2.0 mm in diameter and coloured pale yellow).

Taxonomists suffer from a disability however, in lacking the freedom to pick and choose their literature: it is thrust upon them. *Amphibians of India and Sri Lanka* is in print, and no one working on the Amphibia of this region should lack a copy.

Das, I. 1996. **Biogeography of the reptiles of South Asia**. ISBN 0-89464-935-3. 87 pp, 36 colour photos. Hardback. Published by Krieger Publishing Company, P.O. Box 9542, Melbourne, Florida, FL 32902-9542, U.S.A.

By and large, little of significance has been published on the fauna of South Asia since the British vacated the region half a century ago. Exploration has ground to a virtual halt, and the region's museums, once centres of unimpeachable excellence, have been shrouded in a mist of bureaucratic lethargy, producing little of value and curating but indifferently such collections as do exist. New literature on the biodiversity of the region has, by and large, comprised rehashed repetitions of old and out of date works, or conservation-orientated books dealing largely with the more "user-friendly" groups of vertebrates such as birds and large mammals. The gathering of new data has virtually ceased.

It is refreshing therefore to celebrate Indraneil Das's latest work on the biogeography of the reptiles of what used to be "Colonial India and Ceylon." Aptly, the book commences with a series of 36 excellent colour photographs taken by the author, immediately setting him apart as belonging to that rare tribe—*viz.*, the field-orientated scientists. The text commences with a useful summary of the characters of the physiographic zones recognized by Das. There follows a 21-page discussion of faunal affinities and discontinuities in the region based on data presented in the seven tables. Table 1 is a useful checklist of the reptile fauna of the region, recognizing 632 terrestrial and aquatic species from the region.

The conclusions highlight the region's high level of reptile endemism (63.7% of the species) and highlight the tropical moist habitats as the most species-rich areas for reptiles: both useful factors in conservation planning for the region. The close correlation between the ten physiographic zones recognized and their fauna is also demonstrated; although mooted intuitively by several previous authors, Das's confirmation using similarity indices is most convincing. Happily, Das resists the temptation to draw biogeographic conclusions beyond the reliability of the region's shaky taxonomic foundations and is conservative in the inferences he makes with regard, for example, to disjunct distributions.

What is more, the book is remarkably free of the annoying typographical errors that bedevil the otherwise useful checklists of Oriental lizards and snakes K.R.G. Welch et al., also published by Krieger. Its only fault is the lack of a comprehensive index, which would have made access to its wealth of useful information somewhat simpler.

R.P.