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BOOK REVIEWS

Atlas des reptiles du Cameroun

Laurent Chirio and Matthew Lebreton

2007. Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, IRD, Paris. 688 p.

This “Atlas” is an atlas in both the older, geographic meaning and the more recent use of this term for a volume of photographs. Weighing in at 1½ kg and 688 pages, this treatment of the reptiles of Cameroon is a heavyweight to hold, let alone to carry anywhere! The weight results from the luxuriant production we have come to expect of IRD, with abundant and sometimes superfluous use of colour for diagrams as well

as photographs. An introductory 20 pages provide background on geology, geography, climatology, topography and vegetation with maps of vegetation and administrative districts but not climatology or topography. The core of the book (621 pages) is a systematic listing of Orders and Families and within the latter of each species by its scientific name in alphabetical sequence. The last is a welcome divergence from the usual practice of grouping by supposed affinities which is familiar to none other than a few aficionados. Indexes to scientific and French vernacular names appear at the end (pages 678–685) but not to English vernacular names although these are given in the text.

Each species gets a double page treatment with a left page of text providing information on the known geographic distribution within and without Cameroun, advice on how to identify and where it is to be found, conservation status and a recent bibliographic source; on the right a coloured photograph of the species accompanies a coloured map of Cameroon with locality plots distinguished according to whether they are supported by specimens now in the Paris museum (MNHN) collection or based on published or sight records.

By way of analysis the systematic 'core' is preceded by a geographic analysis (p. 22–24) which attributes the 8500 specimens of 274 species collected from about 1000 localities to half degree squares of latitude and longitude and is followed (p. 658–667) by biogeographic and habitat analyses; unsurprisingly the greatest number of species occur in the western evergreen forests.

It is a revelation that after the collections and publications by many earlier researchers – Sternfeld, Mertens, Monard, Perret, as many as four geckos (of a total of 26), three skinks (total of 33) and two colubrid snakes (total of 90) have been described as new species since the year 2000 and in the present work four agamids (of total of 11), four skinks and three snakes are listed as “n.sp.” although it is more than likely that some of these “new” species will be found to have been described from outside Cameroun. A measure of how much our knowledge has increased is to compare Perret’s (1961) list of 119 Cameroun snake species with the 152 listed in this work – an increase of more than one quarter. Some species date much earlier but have been treated as variants of other species only to be more recently disinterred from synonymy e.g. *Atheris subocularis* Fischer, 1888 rescued by Lawson *et al.* (2001) from synonymy with *A.squamigera*; others were long considered subspecies but are now given full species rank e.g. *Mehelya savognani* (Mocquard, 1887), treated as a subspecies of *M. capensis* but given species rank by Broadley (2005).

The only serious criticism of this work is the uneven quality of the photographs which range

from excellent to abysmal! The admirable plan was to illustrate every species with a photograph and in some cases there is little to choose from but in many cases the lighting, focussing or composition of the authors’ own photographs are – I regret to say, substandard. Furthermore, the text sometimes contradicts what is to be seen in the photograph e.g. *Thrasops jacksonii* is described as “uniformément noire” but in the photograph appears white tinged with yellow! Too often the snakes are obviously posed dead. It is to be hoped that the popularity of this volume will lead to further editions in which inadequate photographs will be replaced.

The price of E58 translates to UK £50 + £10 postage/packing which is about twice the cost of Bons & Geniez (1996), the Amphibians and Reptiles of Morocco, but that is half the length and covered only 98 species of reptiles; this volume is not as expensive as may first appear and certainly is worth getting.

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