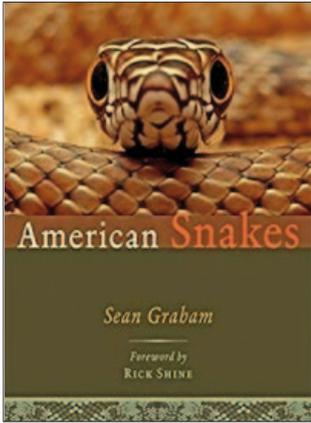


American Snakes

Sean P. Graham

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As the author says, this charming volume deals with “Snakes as American as apple pie.” Being a reader of the *Herpetological Bulletin*, you are probably someone fascinated by amphibians and reptiles. This is the only qualification needed for reading this excellent book. No special interest in American snakes is required, neither is any technical background since

from the start the author abandons Latin names, almost all technical jargon, and when discussing snake trunk musculature states “... these muscles, movements, and the diagrams that accompany them make my eyes glaze over ...”. This is a good starting point for writing an absorbing, personal account that will have you turning all the pages. Nevertheless, without detail and insight a book of this sort would not convey the real interest of American snakes. The biological detail is there; for example, when covering reproduction the author doesn’t shy away from explaining sperm competition, or when describing the ectothermic way of life he makes informative comparisons with endotherms. Furthermore, details of snakes are accompanied by vivid descriptions of important habitats interwoven with personal experiences communicated with excitement. In places you feel as if this is travel writing in the spirit of Theroux.

The book is just a little smaller than the standard coffee table volume and is beautifully illustrated with more than one hundred and fifty, well printed, high-quality photographs. Many of the images show snakes in fascinating micro-habitats, against interesting vegetation, or displayed against beautiful American vistas. In eleven chapters, this volume covers all you might expect about American snakes but there are also 14 special boxes describing inspiring herpetologists of the author’s acquaintance. These are young and old, male and female, famous and not so famous, and are role models from the past and for the future. The book’s eleven chapters slip seamlessly from one to the next and each one starts with a story based on the author’s or another’s experiences. After the ‘Introduction’ follows ‘Form and Function’ then two chapters devoted to first ‘A day’ then ‘A year’ in the life of snakes. Other chapters cover sex, food, snake eaters, defense and dangerous snakes. In connection with the latter, it was interesting to read that “There really is no such thing as a dangerous snake. But boy there are some stupid

people.”; a parody of the National Rifle Association? Then comes a chapter on snake invaders, mostly Burmese pythons in the Everglades. Finally, there are thoughts about snake conservation especially the efforts to protect America’s largest species, the Indigo snake, and the charming story of the New Mexico ridge-nosed rattlesnake, the only venomous species with federal protection. Towards the end there is an epilogue, an extensive reference section arranged by chapter, and finally an index. I learnt a lot from the book and special favourites of mine include the narrow headed garter snake that has adopted the way of life of a water snake and by convergent evolution has been shaped to look just like one, and the short-tailed king snake that eats only Florida crowned snakes.

The book is graced with a Foreword by Rick Shine, the distinguished Australian herpetologist. This is appropriate not least because the author was inspired to write ‘American snakes’ following the example of Rick Shine’s ‘Australian snakes – a natural history’. After Shine completed his doctorate he spent a few years in the USA which seemed not to have worked out that well, he admits to not understanding what American snakes were doing. Later he mistook a cottonmouth for a harmless water snake and spent a few days in hospital after which he says he came out with a renewed appreciation of the diverse and fascinating nature of American snakes. He concludes that readers of ‘American Snakes’ can develop a similar appreciation but without spending time in hospital. The retail price for this hardback book is around £22. I would recommend you put it on your birthday or Christmas list, whichever comes sooner, unless of course you are planning a stay in hospital.

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