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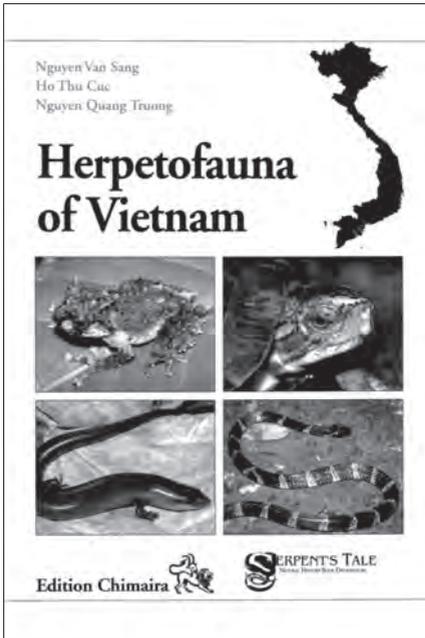
## BOOK REVIEWS

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### *Herpetofauna of Vietnam*

Nguyen Van Sang, Ho Thu Cuc  
and Nguyen Quang Truong

2009, Edition Chimaira,  
Frankfurt am Main, 768 pp.



When I first set eyes on 'Herpetofauna of Vietnam' I was immediately taken by its sheer size, for a small book it is a veritable tome. The first quick flick through the pages revealed why, a comprehensive checklist of all the 296 reptile and 162 amphibian species currently recognised in Vietnam, followed by an extensive set of high quality colour plates some 200 pages long. A closer look at the species accounts revealed the first downfall as very little in the way of ecological data or identification features for most species. I have to stop at this point and remind myself that this book is exactly what the blurb on the back cover says it is – a checklist for the herpetofauna of Vietnam.

By far the most interesting part of this book, at least as far as the text is concerned, is the chapter entitled 'Herpetological Exploration, Research and Conservation in Vietnam'. Written by Kraig Adler of Cornell University it describes the colourful

herpetological history of the country. Starting with the medicinal text of the Buddhist monk Tue Tinh (Nam Duoc Than Hieu circa C17-18) which listed those species that were considered to have medicinal properties (a grand total of 16).

Adler goes on to explain in great detail the exploits of the various European colonialists, in particular the French. All of the great 19th Century texts covering Vietnamese herpetology are detailed in this chapter as well as a detailed history of where the author's collections are held; unsurprisingly most of them are held in France. Some of the characters responsible for the stories covered will be familiar to most professional and serious amateur herpetologists – names such as Günther, Smith, Schmidt and Tirant.

Included in the introductory chapters are three maps, two of which will be invaluable when reading the species distributions in the checklist (for all except those with a detailed knowledge of Vietnam) in particular the physical and political maps. The third map (first in the book) of the wider region, enables the reader to orientate themselves, but is erroneously labelled as a 'Physical map of Southeast Asia' as it includes areas such as the Russian Federation, the Indian sub-continent, much of the Middle East, Japan and Indonesia. I suspect the reason for this is due to the ranges often covered by various species present in Vietnam. So in order to be correct the legend should read something along the lines of 'Physical map of Asia and Indonesia'. Or is that me just being picky!

As you would expect the checklist makes up the majority of this book, accounting for over 400 of the 768 pages, and is arranged in the standard systematic way. Each genus starts with comments about its taxonomic status. Species accounts are arranged as follows - taxonomic revisions, holotype where available, vernacular names (both English and Vietnamese), distribution by region in Vietnam, and by additional country (sometimes by region), references, comments on taxonomy.

The taxonomic revisions are very well researched and have obviously been heavily influenced by recent revisions such as Frost et al. (2006) and Malhotra & Thorpe (2000). The distribution by Vietnamese region is extensive

and particularly useful when used in conjunction with the aforementioned physical and political maps. The distribution of species in countries other than Vietnam is particularly useful when detailed regional distribution is given. It is unfortunate that this is not consistent, though the book may have been a great deal larger if this were the case. A quick analysis shows that 80% of amphibians, 60% of lizards, 90% of snakes, and 90% of chelonians are found in at least one country other than Vietnam (neither species of crocodylian found in Vietnam, *C. porosus* and *C. siamensis*, is endemic). The countries covered regularly by this book range from Iran in the West, to Japan in the East and down to Malaysia and Indonesia in the South. This simple fact makes this book useful for anyone interested in the herpetofauna of wider South East Asia.

Looking through the distribution information turned up some interesting pieces of information, for instance 12 out of 13 species of *Cyrtodactylus* (Gekkonidae) found in Vietnam are either known only from the type locality or from a small area within Vietnam. In fact the Gekkonidae show an amazingly high level of endemism in the country (accounting for more than half of the 50 or so endemic lizard species in the country).

The widest ranging of all the species in the book is the Blind Snake *Ramphotyphlops braminus* that can be found from Africa all the way to Guatemala, Mexico and USA via the Pacific islands. A quite extensive distribution, that took me by surprise. I am familiar with *R. braminus* from studying Latin and South American herpetology for some years, yet I had no idea that its range is so vast.

Given that the amount of information on the species is limited in terms of descriptions and morphometrics, the generally extensive reference list and the additional comments on taxonomy for each species could prove invaluable to researchers interested in furthering our knowledge of the herpetofauna of this region.

Following the checklist is an extensive selection of colour plates, some 200 pages long, containing superb photographs of most of the species found in Vietnam. In my opinion this is the 'crown jewel' of 'Herpetofauna of Vietnam' with, in most cases, photographs of specimens from multiple locations. The inclusion of such a set of colour plates makes

'Herpetofauna of Vietnam' shows how much the 'Frankfurt Contribution to Natural History' series has moved on compared to the earlier books.

One of the early volumes, 'Snakes of Sumatra' (David & Vogel, 1996), was one of the first detailed herpetological books I purchased in 1999. 'Snakes of Sumatra', although fantastic as a checklist with natural history notes, again lacked identification features but also had an additional setback - the lack of a comprehensive set of colour plates, which would have been extremely useful when learning what the species looked like just before one sets out on an expedition to a new area. The high quality of photography in the current publication is possibly due to the advent of affordable digital cameras meaning that it is easier to photograph herpetofauna in the field, compared to the early '90s.

'Herpetofauna of Vietnam' is a very commendable effort to summarise the current scientific knowledge of this subject, making this book a superb starting point for any herpetologist interested in Vietnam or the wider South-East Asian region. It is also an essential addition to the bookshelf of any professional herpetologist involved in research in this region. If anything 'Herpetofauna of Vietnam' highlights the paucity of the scientific community's knowledge and the need for further research into the ecology of its immense herpetofauna. Enough said I'm off to a well known travel agent to buy a plane ticket!

## REFERENCES

- David, P. & Vogel, G. (1996). *The Snakes Of Sumatra: An Annotated Checklist and Key With Natural History Notes*. Edition Chimaira. Frankfurt am Main, De.
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