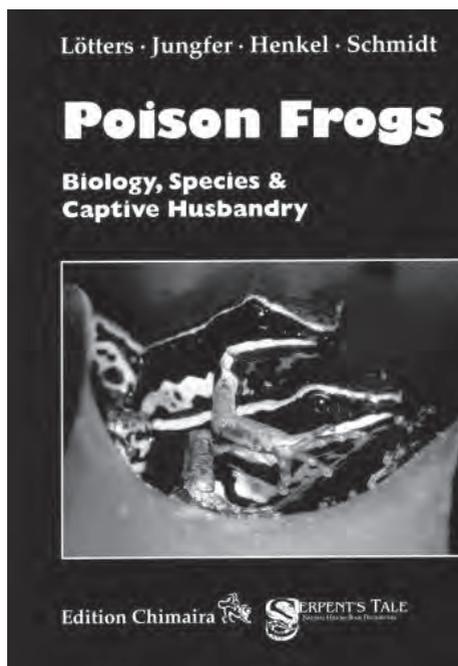


***Poison Frogs: Biology, Species
and Captive Husbandry***

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Friedrich Wilhelm Henkel
and Wolfgang Schmidt

(with a chapter on Diseases of Poison
Frogs by Frank Mutschmann)

2007, Edition Chimaira,
Frankfurt am Main, 668 pp.



In recent years we have come to expect the finest quality herpetological literature from Chimaira and this fat, information packed volume richly peppered with good-quality colour illustrations should please both herpetoculturalists and herpeto-bibliophiles alike! I think I can be said to fall into both of these groups (though one should seek professional help if one is of the latter!).

Part 1 of the book begins with an introduction to amphibian biology and taxonomy and describes the place of the superfamily Dendrobatoidea, (poison frogs) within the larger picture. Though books on other specialized groups may not require this, it is

sensible that it is included here because of the great variety of colour forms and degree of taxonomic revisions regularly found in dendrobatids. It is also early in Part 1 that the fact that the book has been translated from German becomes obvious. Though I can easily forgive the amusingly untranslated heading on page 300, section 1.2 is titled “Bauplan”. I had to look the word up and it means “Structural Drawing” apparently! Fortunately, it is obvious from the text that the “structure” or anatomy of a poison frog is being described, and reasonably accessibly too. Non-specialists may be put off by the occasional use of a technical term that goes unexplained but those of us who’ll buy this book probably won’t be. In fact the writing style throughout is easy-going and accessible and is complimented by the aforementioned illustrations and colour photographs. A great thing shown here that one hardly ever sees in books on poison frogs are photos and drawings of eggs and larvae and a short text section on “Tapoles” which, like all sections in Part 1, ends with a useful list of key literature on the subject.

Part 1 continues with a more detailed delving into dendrobatid systematics that will fascinate many (or you could just skim it!), and descriptions of all currently recognised dendrobatid families and genera. If, like me, you started keeping poison frogs when anything brown was “*Colostethus*” and anything with more than one primary colour was “*Dendrobates*” you’ll be simultaneously enlightened, educated, and slightly confused, but at least you’ll understand why nobody knows what you’re talking about these days! There also follow interesting sections on speciation in the group, skin toxins, ethology (with a good selection of in-habitat photos), reproduction, human uses and a section called “Into the present”. This latter discusses such issues as trade and the amphibian decline phenomenon.

Part 2 is devoted to poison frog husbandry. It builds well on the biological contexts described in Part 1 and addresses the issues faced in successful and responsible captive care of dendrobatids. A wide range of topics are addressed, from acquiring captive animals to life expectancy, and through everything in between including siting and designing a suitable terrarium and its

maintenance technologies, food for poison frogs, planting, decorating and captive reproduction. All are well-illustrated and again the reader is treated to valuable photographs of eggs and larvae, both being tended by their parents in the terrarium and being artificially reared. The experienced keeper will be inspired and the novice well-informed. As I write this, I'm beginning to wonder if anyone still has any offspring from the *Dendrobates truncatus* I used to breed?

Part 3 is the section on diseases of the dendrobatids, mostly with reference to those occurring in captivity but sensibly also covering chytridiomycosis (the fungal pathogen responsible for at least some amphibian declines - it can be found in captive frogs). Importantly, in context of the dendrobatid group, this section makes reference to problems of malformation and poor development usually attributable to bad diet, either during the tadpole stage or later (I personally found that these did not occur in animals properly raised during tadpole development).

The final part of the book, Part 4, takes up about half of its total pages! It is devoted to accounts of the species and groups of dendrobatids. The format is consistent throughout the accounts of each genus, beginning with a distribution map for each genus, descriptions of the status, distribution, habitat, biology, husbandry and breeding for each species. Over 70 species are covered but the authors limit themselves to the aposematic,

colourful, diurnal and generally toxic species so, if you're looking for details on *Mannophryne* spp., look elsewhere! Suffice to say, however, that most "keepers" will find this part of most interest. Species with different colour forms have often several photographs to cover the range of variation found. For *Dendrobates tinctorius* there are 18 high quality colour plates. Part 4 follows naturally from the sections on biology and captive husbandry and can be used as reference or read from start to finish. Indeed, this holds true for the whole book. Though there are various errata that cover a two-page sheet supplied with the book, they are easily forgiven. This fascinating book with its wealth of information and illustrations will prove a favourite of those who want to "collect" and dip into it, use it for reference, or read it avidly to increase their knowledge of the poison frogs and herpetology in general. It's such a shame, therefore, that it is not provided with an index!

Such a weighty and quality tome could be put in a bank vault and bequeathed to the grandchildren, or indeed be used to weigh down the back of a BMW that is stuck in the snow, but this would be a shame. I recommend that it is read and, having done that for the purposes of writing this review, I think I'm going to read it again.

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