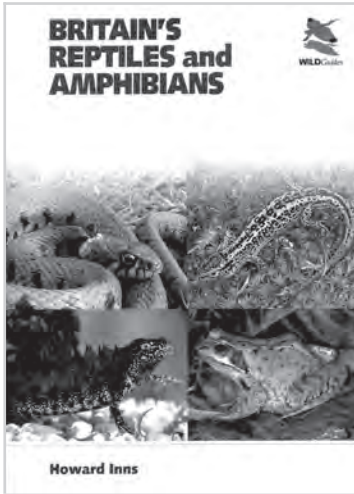

BOOK REVIEWS

Britain's Reptiles and Amphibians

Howard Inns
2009, WildGuides UK. 165 pp.



In its slimline, daysack friendly, paperback form, *Britain's Reptiles and Amphibians* packs a huge amount of information on British herpetofauna – both native and non-native, being void of waffle and padding. The book is more than simply an identification guide, with strands of conservation and ecology weaving throughout the text.

The foreword by Chris Packham begins with an anecdotal account of his first encounter with a grass snake discussing his “paradoxical fascination” with reptiles and amphibians. It provides a brief evolutionary synopsis, details distinguishing morphological characteristics and touches on the limitations incurred by ectothermy. The introduction is complimented by the first of over 200 photographs.

The introduction narrows its focus to British herpetofauna, the colonisation of both native and non-native species – putting them into a convenient tabular format with common name and “most recently accepted” scientific name – a nice little disclaimer for any future alterations! As the topic of distribution and status is opened, reference to population decline and range contraction is made, reinforcing the importance of these issues, and the

importance of alterations of land use.

A section on reptile and amphibian sites depicts landscape photographs of the types of habitat synonymous with British herpetofauna. These photographs convey more information than that of several paragraphs of text – a theme that is carried throughout the book. It then summarises the birth of herpetological conservation in the UK and tips on ‘herping’.

Whilst more seasoned naturalists may find the section on identifying reptiles and amphibians (e.g. frog or toad), a little redundant, it is a fantastic quick reference to those starting out, being accessible and succinct, and once again coupled with a suite of beautifully detailed photographs. More technical descriptions and charts also include differentiation of water frogs by leg length and notes on the appearance of amphibian larvae.

The book then switches into field guide mode, with a two page guide annotating the sub-headings and explaining annual activity clocks – a useful addition. The species accounts begin the lizards. A simple yet effective generic lizard diagram is provided to highlight the main features used in identification. The text then describes the life cycle, referencing ovipary and vivipary whilst introducing correct anatomical terminology.

Each species account provides detail on the appearance of the adult and hatchling forms as well as a description of a slough. Comparatively detailed sections on behaviour, reproduction, population and conservation, provide a greater insight into the wider ecology of the species in question.

The section dealing with snakes follows the same format with a simplified anatomical diagram and some explanation of taxonomy. The species account for the adder highlights in a large, red-bordered box, the potential danger posed by the mishandling and aggravation of adders. The photographic plates comparing the head scalation and side profile of the three snake species are effective at highlighting some of the diagnostic features.

The section on Chelonia is a nice inclusion, concentrating on marine turtles, and whilst it lacks the generic anatomical diagram it continues with its subtle use of scientific and anatomical terms. With

the leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*) being the UK's only regular visitor, this section is brief, but does not overlook other species that may occur in British waters as vagrants. Anthropogenic pressures negatively affecting this group are noted.

The chapters covering Anura and Caudata follow the previous format with both sections discussing life cycles, detailing the different stages and noting the dependence of metamorphosis on temperature. The species accounts vary slightly, owing to the differing life cycles of amphibians. Accordingly there are segments covering adult, tadpole/larva and spawn/eggs too. It also details the unique trait of anurans – voice.

The introduction into anurans takes a separate look at genetics of the water frogs, in a succinct manner, taking the time to explain the definition of kl. found in the scientific name of the edible frog. The section also reiterates the correct methods to distinguish between pool, marsh and the hybrid edible frogs, accompanied by a useful photograph depicting the correct handling technique.

The preface to newts includes a beautifully clear landscape plate of three palmate newt eggs at successional stages of development. The author once again brings in the use of technical terminology, such as spermatophore, with great ease, whilst touching on neotony – a phenomenon not uncommon in newts. This portion of the book does spectacularly well in providing clear underwater photographs detailing the appearance of all the lifestages, with the quality of the plates even managing to convey the differences in skin texture between species.

The inclusion of accounts of non-native species both established and otherwise, works well both as an intriguing spectacle and also as a tool to note the problems this may cause for our own native herpetofauna and the very current problem of escaped/released pets.

The book culminates in some practical advice on enhancing local amenities for herps, tapping into the popular trend of wildlife gardening. Furthermore, it provides some important information on legislation, tabulating species and their respective protective status. It also skims over Biodiversity Action Plans and IUCN classification criteria. The provision of useful starters for further reading along with

details of societies and equipment suppliers is a good platform for those readers wishing to further their interests.

Numerous topical issues such as chytridiomycosis, toad road fatalities and the detrimental effect of wall lizards on native common lizard populations are raised in this section, emphasising the author's passion for the long-term conservation of these animals. He also takes care to note the requirement of appropriate licenses to search for particular species.

Photographs are the most prominent feature of this book, depicting not just the species themselves (labelled either M, F or J for male, female and juvenile respectively), but also their habitats which is vitally important. They go further than detailing the form of each species and also touch on various colour morphs and behavioural traits, such as death feigning by grass snakes (*Natrix natrix*).

Britain's Reptiles and Amphibians is a comprehensive, well thought out book which is difficult to fault. It reads smoothly with only a few minor grammatical errors and the rather more obvious spelling mistake of "natterjack" in the caption of a plate on page 12. The text is informative, succinct and accessible. The author's ability to blend concepts such as chemoreception and metapopulations, simultaneously into the text without fear of alienating novices is one of the key successes of this book. The book portrays a holistic view of herpetology and conservation, being far more than an identification guide. The breadth of information and practical knowledge contained within its short 164 pages is testament to Howard Inns' experience and part in the development of UK herpetological conservation.

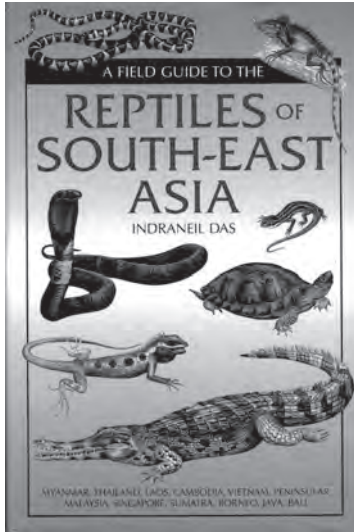
In short, this book will undoubtedly be of use to anyone with an interest in British reptiles and amphibians, from complete beginner, to seasoned naturalist and will most likely be a key guide for years to come. The added bonus of course, is by purchasing this book you are actively supporting the conservation of Britain's reptiles and amphibians – and what could be more appropriate.

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*A Field Guide to the Reptiles of
South-East Asia*

Indraneil Das
2010, New Holland Publishers Ltd. 376 pp.



When I heard that a comprehensive field guide to the reptiles of South-east Asia was due for publication I was very excited. The publication of a book on this subject is long overdue so I eagerly anticipated the arrival of this review copy. That anticipation and excitement quickly gave way to disappointment as I looked through the 74 illustrated plates. Several well known and acclaimed wildlife artists have been used to produce the plates and unfortunately the quality of the illustrations in some cases leaves a lot to be desired with some species looking indistinguishable or deformed. Some of the plates are exquisite. It is just a shame that they are not of a consistent quality.

Having used this book in the field I can say that the species information is very accurate and useful, as one would expect from such a distinguished author, save for the lack of a complete bibliography that has been referenced in the text. This I found particularly annoying when trying to follow up on information on a given species for which no reference can be easily found or seems to exist in the bibliography.

Unfortunately there are some serious errors contained within this book. In the introductory sections there is a diagram showing the definitions of scalation in a colubrid snake and while the names are in the correct position the head is upside down so that the supralabials are labelled as internasals, prefrontals and supraoculars. Some curious statements are made in the introductory text in the definitions of snakes and lizards. For example, the characteristics that are used to show the close relationship between varanids and snakes are also shared with heloderms, as well as several other groups of lizards. While there is a growing amount of evidence to suggest the close relationship between snakes and monitor lizards the statement is slightly ambiguous.

Then when attention is paid to the plates some serious editing errors have been allowed to go to print. Two plates that come to mind are: plate 1. Crocodylidae and Gavialiidae where the presence or absence of postoccipital scutes in marsh, and saltwater, crocodiles have been reversed; and plate 38. Acrochordidae, Anomochilidae and Pythonidae where all the species of the Pythonidae that occur in the region have been mislabelled so that, for example, the reticulated python (one of the most recognisable species of snake) is labelled as an Indian rock python and one of the blood pythons is labelled as a reticulated python! Unforgivable!

So, while this book is of use in the field and is obviously a very valiant effort at tackling what is certainly a vast subject, I am sad to say it has been seriously let down by poor editing and proof reading and inconsistent illustration. Without any prior knowledge of the herpetology and the herpetofauna of South-east Asia it is a very limited resource that needs to be used in conjunction with other material. Alternatively wait for the second edition (if one is published) in which these issues have been addressed. Let's face it - it is badly needed and I truly hope the author and publishers are pursuing this.

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