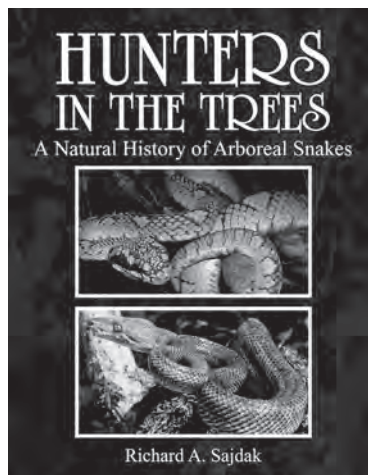


Hunters in the Trees: A Natural History of Arboreal Snakes

Richard A Sajdak
2010, Krieger Publishing, 171 p.



Although at first a little hard to categorise, this is an enjoyable and accessible book that I found at times to be slightly similar in tone and delivery to the two recent Mark O'Shea books (*Venomous Snakes of the World/Boas* and *Pythons of the World*). As with those publications there is a mix of anecdotal observation and scientific fact illustrated by plenty of pictures. The author obviously has a great love of snakes in general and arboreal species in particular, and this enthusiasm comes across well.

The book starts with a chapter entitled 'What is a Tree Snake?' An apparently easy question until you attempt to answer it concisely! Many snakes utilise trees should opportunities for hunting, basking, sheltering or escape arise but would not automatically be described as arboreal. It seems that representatives of at least half of all snake families have been recorded in trees at some point while not necessarily being classed as arboreal and a number of these are mentioned here. The focus of this book, however, are those species that have specialised adaptations leading to an arboreal way of life beyond the opportunistic use of trees seen in many species. It is these morphological and behavioural adaptations that are the focus of the following four chapters.

Chapter 2 covers shape, size and mobility of arboreal snakes and includes a lengthy discussion of the blood flow system and its associated costs, using the giraffe as an extreme example for comparison. Colour, pattern and camouflage are looked at in the next chapter and provide an easily digestible and fascinating read. In contrast I found the chapter entitled 'The Greatest of Ease' – describing the ability of tree snakes to move about so fluidly in their environment – to be as hard work in places as some of the movements described. Some more diagrams would have helped to describe the various modes of locomotion, as it does when showing the amazing take-off sequence of a paradise flying snake *Chrysopelea paradisi* in the more readable section covering gliding and 'flying'. The chapter closes with an interesting, albeit brief, discussion of rainforest types around the world and how this affects the distribution of the various gliding snake species.

Chapter 5 starts with a nice ecological account of niche separation and feeding guilds before looking at the prey and foraging modes favoured by different groups of tree snakes occupying different niches. Defence and habitat use are also discussed. The remaining sections of this book focus on the various 'groups' of arboreal snakes, organised by prey types and/or foraging mode, beginning with the vine snakes (and very briefly the African twig snakes), and then moving on to frog-eating species (the obvious such as *Chironius* and *Leptodeira* as well as some that did not immediately spring to mind such as tree cobras of the genus *Pseudohaje*). Bird eaters are covered as well as the fact that arboreal snakes are often on the menu for bird species. The generally larger or more venomous mammal eaters feature in their own chapter and then the less well known invertebrate eaters such as the slug-eaters and snail-suckers. The chapter on boas and pythons is followed by a discussion of venomous arboreal species.

The final chapter is about cat snakes and focuses mainly, and not surprisingly, on the invasive brown tree snake *Boiga irregularis* which has had such an impact on the Pacific island of Guam. Although hugely damaging to the native fauna of the island it is difficult not to be impressed by the adaptability

and shifts in behaviour patterns demonstrated by this species after its arrival.

Throughout the book there are many good photographs illustrating some of the amazing variety of arboreal snake species. These include two depicting the truly bizarre Madagascan leaf-nosed snake *Langaha madagascariensis*, a logic-defying predation attempt by an Asian vinesnake *Ahaetulla prasina* and many other stunning species. A modest list of citations is provided, which may appear scant compared to other specialist herpetological books but is certainly enough to get the reader on the trail of further information.

I would have liked to have seen some more information regarding the evolutionary aspects of arboreal snakes, how they are related, and why they have come to occupy the places they do and the different niches within their habitats. Perhaps that is the real achievement of this book. It leaves you wanting more due to the many 'snippets' of information provided! Some of the highlights for me include the ongoing 'duel' between woodpeckers and grey/central ratsnakes *Pantherophis spiloides* in the north American pine forests and a truly fascinating account of the relationship between screech owls and Texas threadsnakes *Leptotyphlops dulcis*. This latter section leads into what appears at first to be a strange digression to cover the largely fossorial threadsnakes and blindsnakes (*Leptotyphlopidae* and *Typhlopidae* respectively) but in fact reveals a surprising arboreal aspect to the ecology of these species.

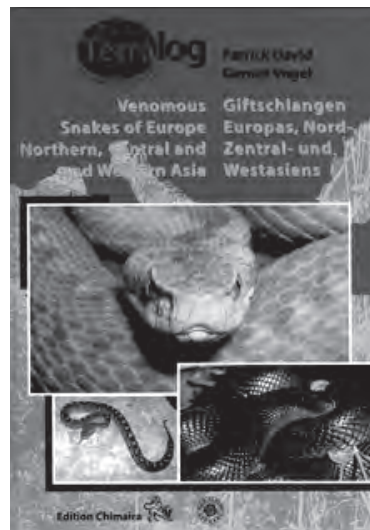
The book remains largely non-technical throughout but avoids 'dumbing down'. It will provide a lot of information to someone new to arboreal snakes, while at the same time leaving tantalizing trails for a more experienced herpetologist to follow. As a catalyst for inspiring further research I think this book works very well, while also being a good, generally very readable overview of the relevant species with some good photographs to illustrate the diversity described.

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Venomous Snakes of Europe, Northern, Central and Western Asia

Patrick David and Gernot Vogel
2010, Terralog, Edition Chimaira, 160 p.



This is the third of Edition Chimaira's Terralog series focussed on venomous snakes. For those who are not familiar with the Terralog series let me introduce you to it. What Edition Chimaira have set out to do is to produce a catalogue of all the species, including subspecies and their myriad of colour forms, of reptiles known to science in a pictorial form. So what we have in this, the 16th volume, is a catalogue of high quality photographs of all the species of venomous snakes known from Europe and Northern, Central and Western Asia.

As well as being a great source of inspiration to the snake enthusiast, and light bedtime reading rather than being a heavy going scholarly tome, this book is a useful aid to field identification as the photography is top class with many images of unusual colour variations that are not normally seen as well as habitat shots and distribution maps for each species and subspecies. At the beginning of the book there is a detailed, and well referenced, explanation of the taxonomy the authors have chosen to follow in both English and German.

The main issue I have with this book is that as well as producing an identification guide Edition Chimaira have chosen to also have a husbandry

aspect to the Terralog series that is limited to a series of symbols that appear as legends below each photograph. While there is the obvious benefit of bringing these species to the enthusiast's eye there are some inherent flaws in encouraging the captive husbandry of obscure subspecies or colour forms some of which have extremely limited ranges and are highly vulnerable to being collected from the wild, something that should be discouraged by publishers, hobbyists and professionals alike. It is the only responsible thing to do. Added to this is the fact that the guidelines for husbandry contained in this book are extremely basic at best.

When one starts looking in detail at the meanings of the symbols it becomes apparent that there have been some oversights that range from being frustrating to potentially irresponsible and erroneous. At the frustrating end of the scale is the fact that the order in which the symbols appear under the photographs is different to that in the section where they are defined. Additionally some of the symbols that refer to different things such as demeanor and food preferences are similar but have completely different meanings. For example, a snake that is considered to be of limited danger is indicated by a face with a straight line for a mouth and a dangerous snake has face with a downturned mouth - fine, except that under diet there is a smiley face that indicates omnivorous tendencies. Not only is this slightly confusing but I do not know of any snake that is omnivorous, the

definition of which, according to the New Oxford American Dictionary is '(of an animal or person) feeding on food of both plant and animal origin'. Apparently according to the authors, for example, the saw-scale viper *Echis carinatus sochureki* is an omnivore.

At the potentially irresponsible end of the scale is the use of the symbol indicating that a species is only suitable for experienced keepers. Why is that a problem? Surely that is a good thing when it comes to keeping any animal responsibly! Well, in principal I agree but then considering every snake in this book is venomous then they should all have this symbol. Surprisingly they do not, and I question why a European adder *Vipera berus* has this symbol and a species such as a Palestinian viper *Daboia palaestinae* does not. Whether venomous species should be kept in a domestic setting by anyone, regardless of their experience, is controversial.

While it would be more appropriate for any information about husbandry to be kept to a detailed book dedicated to the subject, if one ignores the symbols and concentrates on the fact that what you have here is a marvellous collection of photographs of some stunning snake species then this book is well worth the money. As is a bottle of correction fluid to remove the husbandry guidelines.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

DEAR READERS - This is the last *Herpetological Bulletin* from my term as editor. I wish to take this opportunity to thank the council of the British Herpetological Society for the opportunity and for their support during my time as editor.

It has been insightful managing and designing the *Bulletin*. I have enjoyed its production and meeting so many professionals and keen amateur herpetologists from around the globe.

I especially thank John Baker (Co-editor) for his dedication to detail during the editing process and for the long, interesting and often late night discussions on herpetofauna. John's efforts

significantly improved accuracy and he also continues to help secure more UK content for the publication. Thanks also to Roland Griffin for his enthusiasm in managing the Book Reviews section over the years and for his keen eye in promoting the *Bulletin* to potential authors.

I thank my family for moral support during the many weekend hours spent at the computer. I also thank Bruce Clark for printing the many editions and for guidance on production. Finally I thank all the authors for their contributions and patience that has continued to ensure the *Bulletin's* popularity.

Dr. Todd Lewis