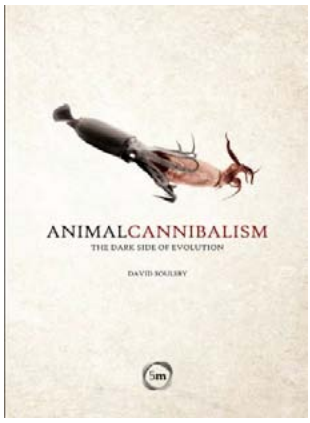
Animal Cannibalism: The Dark Side of Evolution

David Soulsby 2013

Publisher: 5m Enterprises, Sheffield. 585 p. ISBN: 9780955501166



With a title like Animal Cannibalism; The Dark side of Evolution, who can resist sitting down and reading this book with some fava beans and a nice Chianti? However, this book is no 'light bedtime reading' and should be considered more of a reference book to turn to when investigating inter and intra specific relationships between organisms. The culmination of over twenty-five years' worth of personal observations and research into the subject; who would of thought that a 'chance' observation of a simple cannibalism event between armoured bush crickets in southern Zimbabwe would result in such a comprehensive account of cannibalism in vertebrates and invertebrates.

Animal Cannibalism is a hugely informative and comprehensive desk resource that has exquisite attention to editorial detail. With 410 pages of content; including 21 colour plates and 95 pages of references, the book incorporates an authoritative evaluation of papers, notes, thesis, documentaries and personal accounts enthusiastically collected by the author throughout his quest. Being sensibly split down into two parts; invertebrates and vertebrates, the book makes for easy interrogation or in my case flipping straight to Chapters 6 and 7; amphibians and reptiles (respectively). There are however nine chapters in total encompassing micro-organisms and lower vertebrate groups such as jellyfishes and anemones (Chapter 1), arthropods (Chapter 2) and molluscs and echinoderms (Chapter 3), to vertebrates; Fishes (Chapter 5), Birds (Chapter 8) and mammals (Chapter 9), with an interesting chapter on Cannibalism in palaeontology (Chapter 4) to set the scene.

Each chapter summarises which five aspects to cannibalistic behaviours; (1) killing of victims; (2) gaining food resources from victims; (3) size-dependent interactions; (4) density-dependent interactions, and (5) inter-specific competition are expressed amongst that group. The effects of the cannibalistic act; (1) regulation of population size or density; (2) modification of population size or sexual structure; (3) creation of cyclical or chaotic population fluctuations; (4) population stabilization, depending upon other interactions, and (5) population bistability are also estimated. Additionally the book goes further in highlighting any important cost of cannibalism in the transmission of harmful pathogens or toxins.

None of the content will come as much of a surprise to any herpetologist or ecologist who actively reads around the subject, as many of the accounts relate to incidents of cannibalism which are readily recorded. In the case of reptiles and amphibians, these predominantly comprise; eating of sloughed skin, kin, smaller individuals and incidental occurrences where; two snakes feeding on the same prey item, when snouts meet, the larger snake will go on to swallow the other along with the prey item. There are tables present at the end of each chapter which also provide additional useful examples of observed or reported cannibalistic behaviour and reference to the literature where the observation was cited; broken down by species.

An interesting casual read and potentially invaluable desk reference for researchers; reducing the amount of time undertaking background searches, this book provides a relevance to herpetologist and a wider audience alike. Its price [at £25.00] makes it an affordable book to have on the bookshelf, although caters specifically for a particular niche.

STUART GRAHAM

Sevens Road, Rawnsley, Cannock, Staffordshire.
Email: stuartgrahamuk@hotmail.co.uk