
BOOK REVIEWS

Amphibians and Reptiles of Pakistan

by Muhammad Sharif Khan

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Price \$145.00 / £77.30

I have to be honest, the first response to this title – before one even beholds the actual book – is that \$145 is expensive. Most other national or regional herpetofaunal guides from Krieger are priced more modestly between \$40–80. So why the high price, and, more importantly, is it worth it?

Well first off, this is a 300+page book, not the more usual 100, 200+pages, but quantity is no substitute for quality and an additional 100 pages would not justify the price-hike. So it must be the contents – perhaps the publisher had to enter into a fierce bidding war with rival publishers. No, this is M. S. Khan, not J. K. Rowling and the title falls into what publishers like to tell authors is a niche market (great, brought down to earth by a biological term!)

To be honest I cannot explain the high price of this volume and possibly I think it would be more fairly priced around \$90–100, but I do know something about the gestation of this title. It has been some time coming, and now it has arrived it will certainly be a useful addition to the library of anyone interested in S. Asian or Middle Eastern herpetology.

I met M. S. Khan, as he seems to prefer to be known, back in 1996 at the *International Conference on the Biology and Conservation of the Amphibians and Reptiles of South Asia* in Kandy, Sri Lanka, and although we came from two completely different cultures we seemed to hit it off straight away. He seemed the epitome of a popular uncle or grandfather, quietly and wisely spoken, smartly attired in long white robes and white cap with a tidy white beard. I dread to think what he thought of me, slightly unkempt hair and beard, and mottled bush clothes (I was also doing a recce for a film on cobras at the time and had been slopping around in paddi-fields). We spoke

long and often during the conference and continued our correspondence afterwards when I returned to the UK and he to Pakistan.

Some years later he moved to the U.S.A. and asked me to retrieve a manuscript for him. He has agreed to write a book on the herpetology of Pakistan for a British publisher and sent over the first (and only) draft manuscript but the publisher had folded, and refused, or ignored, all requests to return the manuscript to its rightful owner. Could I do anything to help?

It took several phone calls and the threat of a personal visit but I did manage to retrieve the manuscript and forward it to Khan in the States. It was from that document, and his extensive knowledge of the herpetology of his homeland, that the author produced first *A Guide to the Snakes of Pakistan* (Edition Chimaira, 2002) and now *Amphibians and Reptiles of Pakistan*. So I know this title has undergone a long gestation and I feel slightly connected to it's being.

Returning to the volume in hand, the next thing one notices is its size. This is a large and relatively heavy hardback of the style apparently favoured by Krieger, they publish several other national herpetofaunas in the same format. This suggests it is intended as a library reference rather than a field guide, its dimensions preventing secretion in a large jacket pocket, its price ruling out being shoved in a smelly rucksack. Khan's 2002 *A Guide to the Snakes of Pakistan* might be better suited to the rigours and restrictions of fieldwork, but then that does not cover all reptiles and amphibians, and that is the point, to the best of my knowledge this is the first and only guide to the entire herpetofauna of Pakistan published in the English language.

The hardback cover bears a photograph of perhaps one of the most iconic South Asian reptiles, the Ganges gharial (*Gavialis gangeticus*), an adult male with snout protuberance, swimming in the shallows, obviously taken with a long lens with some movement-blur of the snout apparent, but none-the-less a good choice. Finding this wonderful creature on the cover of a book on Pakistan herps is particularly poignant since the

species is making a comeback in Nepal and India, where I have visited the Karnali and Chambli River populations respectively, but its future is still not secure within the national borders of Pakistan. Anything that can be done to highlight this fact must be considered positive.

Pakistan is located on that cross-over between South Asian and Middle Eastern herpetofaunas. It contains high mountains, plains and plateaus, alternating scorched and freezing deserts and the watershed of the mighty Indus River as it heads south to the Arabian Sea. The importance of the region was not lost on eminent herpetologists such as Robert Mertens (1894–1975) and Sherman A. Minton (1919–1999), both of whom contributed to the herpetological development of the author, and it appears Minton even edited the text before his death, a lasting stamp of approval, should one ever be needed. Kraig Adler of Cornell contributes a glowing Foreword and draws the reader's attention to the author's experience and knowledge spanning almost 40 years of research. Adler uses the term 'foremost expert' to link M.S. Khan with the herpetofauna of Pakistan, and you can't go far wrong with a recommendation like that.

The first seven of the twelve chapters are devoted to a checklist and keys to the species, and the four families of amphibians and approximately 26 families of reptiles (Khan does not recognize Pythonidae but does recognize Hydrophiidae and Crotalidae as distinct from Elapidae and Viperidae respectively, but then family level taxonomy is often a cause for debate). Chapter 8 might be termed a zoogeographic chapter since it examines the affinities of the Pakistan herpetofauna with those of the Middle East, the Indian Subcontinent and even Indo-China via the Indo-Gangetic Plain. Routes of invasion are considered and discussed along with the taxa which have entered from west, east and southeast. Chapter 9 considers how habitat, climate and flora affect the distribution of Pakistan's amphibians and reptiles with extensive species distribution charts, while Chapter 10 goes into more depth with regards to altitudinal distribution, again with excellent charts. Chapter

11 concerns snakebite, a major factor in Pakistan, which may suffer 1,000 fatalities a year. Conversely Chapter 11 is devoted to man's threat to the existence of reptiles and amphibians in Pakistan. All in all this is a very well rounded book simply packed with photographs, figures, keys and distribution maps. Each species account begins with a rather handy Diagnosis, which numerically lists the distinguishing factors for that species and saves the reader the effort of extracting such details from within the prose of a normal species description.

On the whole the colour plates are quite good and some are very good, some even originating from Sherman A. Minton's personal slide library, but there are a few disappointing photographs in this book. Virtually all the agamids seem to be either preserved specimens, recently dead specimens or specimens restrained with a pair of forceps or a loop of string. It is a fact today that good quality photographs help to sell books and a little time taken to achieve high quality results pays dividends. I appreciate, only too well, the difficulties of photographing fast-running diurnal lizards and I also respect that if a species is particularly rare, a photograph of a preserved specimen may be all that is available, but page after page of restrained or deceased specimens is a little disappointing, especially in a book of this price. Interestingly most of the snakes do appear to be living specimens, although a few are clearly dead, even eviscerated, and posing them in natural coils on a rock does seem slightly pointless.

However, a few less than perfect photographs cannot detract from what is a very useful and informative volume which will stand as the standard reference work on the amphibians and reptiles of Pakistan for a great many years to come. I am very pleased we were able to persuade the defunct UK publisher to relinquish that manuscript.

MARK O'SHEA