

Book Review

The Mammals of Nigeria

D.C.D. Happold

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402 pages

Price: R425,25

As might be expected from the price, this book is beautifully produced: good paper, nice clear type, strong hard covers, a good index and few typographical errors. Moreover, it is really two books, one excellent, the other not so good.

The first book is a comprehensive review of the mammalian fauna of Nigeria. Here the author has set himself a daunting task. As he points out, mammal studies in Africa have been heavily concentrated on the spectacular faunas of the eastern and southern regions of the continent. West Africa, by contrast, has been relatively neglected, for all its richness. As a result, there are many gaps in the accounts which are presented. Nevertheless, a brave attempt has been made to bring together available information.

Each species is described under the following headings:

Distribution — including a list of the localities of definite records with sources (a gazetteer of localities is given in an appendix).

It is a pity that the useful distribution maps are collected at the end of the book rather than being placed with the appropriate text.

Status — often unknown or speculative, but this should be seen as a spur to investigation rather than as a defect of the book.

Identification — including measurements. The descriptions are mostly good, crisp and useful, and are often illustrated by line drawings by the author's wife. All these illustrations are good, though some could have benefitted from the more positive use of dot shading seen in the best, which are outstanding (e.g. Figures 3.12 and 3.13). Attention is drawn where appropriate to similar species which might cause identification difficulties.

Ecology — this section is very variable in quality, having to rely too often on anecdotal material. But the manifest weaknesses serve a useful purpose in emphasizing the urgent need for comprehensive theriological investigations in this relatively neglected region.

Reproduction — the comments on 'Ecology', above, apply also to this section, where the phrase 'no information' crops up with regrettable frequency.

Taxonomic Notes — are appended where appropriate, and are often useful.

The photographic illustrations of species are collected, with the other plates, in the centre of the book. They are often good, but many would have been immeasurably more useful in colour.

Chapters 2 to 14 are devoted to the orders of mammals. These chapters, and sections within them devoted to suborders, families and so on, are provided with general introductions. Where appropriate, dichotomous keys to assist identification of specimens, and

summary tables of group membership within Nigeria are also provided. Criticism of these chapters centres on two aspects. First is the decision of the author to give priority to English 'common' names rather than Linnean names. It is true that many people find scientific names difficult to remember, particularly if they have no background in Latin and Greek; but many of these so-called common names are mere *buchnamen*, or vary from place to place, or can be confusing for a number of other reasons. Why, for example, is *Lemniscomys barbarus* the striped grass-mouse, while *Lemniscomys striatus* is the spotted grass-mouse? The fact that this is common usage elsewhere does not necessarily help the reader who happens to know what *striatus* means. And *Sylvicapra grimmia* has at least five common names, perhaps more. Scientific names are hard work at first, but the serious student needs their precision, and had better get used to them as soon as possible. It is noteworthy that the author himself does not use common names in his dichotomous keys.

The second criticism is of the text introducing orders and other groups. These introductions contain much elementary material which does not match the sophisticated descriptions which follow. But the zoologically unsophisticated reader might well be confused by being told that shrews are 'primitive' mammals; or by being given the unqualified information that bats are the only mammals capable of flight (what, then, are these flying-squirrels which turn up later in the book?). However, the popular, even at times racy, language of the introductions (presumably an attempt to woo the less sophisticated reader) should not deter the serious student from exploring the meat of these valuable chapters.

The second 'book', mentioned above, is an attempt to set the faunistic information of the first 'book' in its ecological context. The author fails in this objective mainly because he attempts to achieve too much. In Chapters 15 to 19 he discusses the ecology of the rain forest and savannas, with special reference to the mammals; he integrates earlier material under several general headings such as biomass, reproduction, numbers of species, etc.; and he finishes a review of the relationships between mammals and the human population. There is nothing wrong here in principle, except that the material of a comprehensive textbook has been compressed into 84 pages, under 56 separate headings. There is much valuable information here, and many large and useful tables, but the enormous coverage attempted, combined with the inevitable repetitions required by the layout, mean that the sections are highly synoptic and over-simplified. The necessary omissions are often important for true comprehension. The attempt to stimulate interest is commendable, but it is doubtful whether it was sensible to cram it into this expensive and in many other ways useful book.

Chapter 1 is a general introduction which is valuable in many ways, but suffers from the same defects as the last five chapters.

Throughout the book the prose is lucid and readable, only occasionally clumsy. Errors of spelling and syntax are refreshingly few, and the only irritating solecism is the persistent use of 'different to' rather than 'different from'. This book has many merits, and is a welcome addition to the literature on African mammals.

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