



A photographic guide to snakes and other reptiles of India. Das, I., 2002. New Holland Publishers (UK) Ltd, London. 144 pp. GBP 7.99. ISBN 1-84330-125-3.

We are all well aware of how unique and diverse the fauna of the great Indian Sub-continent is, and its amphibian and reptile inhabitants are certainly no exception. Despite sharing a small fraction of its herpetofauna with Indo-China and the Sundalands, a large majority of Indian species, even genera, are

strictly confined to this distinct biogeographical realm. The breath-taking array of available habitats in this country covers a broad spectrum, ranging from the cold and harsh Himalayan mountains in the north to the warm, sun-kissed Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the south. And in between these two extremities of latitude, microclimate and habitats, some 490 species of reptiles have been discovered. With ongoing research interests in India, it is no doubt that this figure would reach 500 in a very short time.

After almost two centuries of herpetological work in India, a formidable number of publications would have been churned out from such a long history of research. However, the most complete works would undeniably have been by Malcolm A. Smith, who produced three separate volumes over a span of more than twelve years. He systematically covered the crocodiles and turtles in Volume I (Smith, 1931), the lizards in Volume II (Smith, 1935) and the snakes in Volume III (Smith, 1943). These valuable classics have long been regarded as almost indispensable references in the library of any herpetologist interested in the Asian arena. However, details that were previously described in a thousand words have now been painted in a picture, and compiled into a handy sized book that would fit snugly in your waist-pouch or daypack. A whopping 243 different species of reptiles (110 snakes, 98 lizards, 3 crocodilians, 32 turtles) are featured in Indraneil's most recent book, among other earlier titles by him.

Herpetologists or hobbyists who have merely confined their focus on the Southeast Asian fauna would bump into a number of 'familiar faces' while thumbing through this book, but at least two thirds of the cold-blooded creatures would invoke quizzical exclamations such as: "Is that a snake? Looks more like a worm!", "How do you pronounce *Ptyctolaemus*?", "Why does this lizard have a toad's head?", "This turtle looks like a 'Made in Hong Kong' toy!". Truly an eye-opener for those uninitiated with Indian reptiles. But for those in the know, this book serves as an update on nomenclatural changes (eg. the Indian Trinket Snake *Elaphe helena* [featured on cover] has been reassigned to the genus *Coelognathus*) and recently discovered species (eg. *Cnemaspis otai*, described by the author and Aaron Bauer in 1998).

By any standards, if the proverbial 'iceberg' of Indian reptiles were 490 species deep, the author has clearly far surpassed just 'the tip', having plunged to the midpoint at least, and surfacing with 243 species in tow, all for our viewing and learning pleasure. My sincere compliments to his tireless efforts, whose book now complements the earlier New Holland guide (Cox et al., 1998), which highlighted reptiles in Thailand and the Malay peninsula. We look forward to a similar work on the amphibians of India with eager anticipation.

LITERATURE CITED

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