

## **Wolfgang Wüster, *Herpetological Review* 29 (1998): 64.**

**The Snakes of Sumatra. An Annotated Checklist and Key with Natural History Notes**, by Patrick David and Gernot Vogel. Edition Chimaira, Frankfurt am Main. 260 pp. ISBN 3-930612-08-9.

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Interest in Southeast Asian herpetology has been growing steadily over the last few decades. This has been reflected in a growing number of comprehensive publications on the snakes of several countries, such as Cambodia (Saint Girons, 1972), Thailand (Cox, 1991) and Malaysia (Tweedie, 1983), and several further works are in preparation. However, several countries have remained insufficiently covered by this expanding literature, and foremost among these is Indonesia. The last comprehensive lists for that country are those of de Rooij (1917) and de Haas (1950), both of which are now outdated. Several works have been published on the faunas of various islands (in den Bosch, 1985; van Hoesel, 1959; Hodges, 1993; Stuebing, 1991), but the herpetofauna of Sumatra has received scant attention. The publication of David and Vogel's book on the snakes of Sumatra is thus a valuable addition to the literature on the herpetofauna of southeast Asia in general and Indonesia in particular.

After the foreword and introduction, the book starts with 8 pages on the geography and herpetofauna of Sumatra, including a brief history of past herpetological research on the island, and this is followed by 4 pages on materials and methods and a list of the 127 snake species recorded from the island. A substantial part of the introduction is devoted to a discussion of the high species richness of the Indonesian snake fauna and its causes, with much emphasis being placed on the effect of physical, ecological and climatic diversity; it seems strange that the most obvious cause, namely the fact that Indonesia straddles two major faunal regions and consequently includes much of the diversity of both, is not taken into consideration.

The main part of the text consists of the individual species accounts. These contain the following information: primary systematic data, including original name, describer, year, reference and type locality (including current name, where appropriate); a partial synonymy, containing synonyms specifically relevant to Sumatra; taxonomic comments, addressing problems of nomenclature or systematics; locality records on Sumatra; total range of taxon; ecological notes on the Sumatran population (principally published altitude data); natural history notes, containing a summary on what is known of the natural history of the species; and a list of other subspecies and their ranges in the case of polytypic taxa.

It is worth noting what is not included in the species accounts: there are no descriptions of the individual species (although differences between some pairs of similar species are mentioned in some cases), and the types are not cited. In both cases, the reader is told that this information is "readily available in the literature". This reviewer feels that a list of name-bearing types would have been useful, and would not have required much additional space. The relevant literature may be "readily available" to those with large museum libraries a few yards down the corridor,

but this is not the case for many university-based researchers.

This systematic part is followed by an annotated list of species which had been previously reported for Sumatra, but probably do not occur there, and a key to the families, and, within families, to all species. The key includes the species of doubtful occurrence, which will facilitate their identification if their presence on Sumatra is eventually confirmed. The keys rely mostly on scalation characters, which will facilitate the identification of living specimens. In some cases, simpler characters might have been found: the pattern of *Daboia russellii* would probably be a better character for distinguishing it from other vipers than the number of dorsal scale rows! In the case of the Elapidae, the key is potentially confusing at point 4, as Sumatran specimens of *Naja sumatrana* are not necessarily uniformly black: many specimens show light crossbars, and some are various shades of brown or tan rather than black.

The impressive bibliography includes approximately 500 references, some annotated. The bibliography is generally very up-to-date, with large numbers of recent references. The final part of the book consists of a very useful gazetteer of the island, which also includes current spellings of older names.

Illustrations come in the shape of ink drawings of the head of several species (generally excellent, but in some, excessive shading obscures important scalation details, e.g., the supralabials in *Trimeresurus borneensis* on p. 161), and a section of 33 small colour photographs, representing 9 habitats and 18 species. The quality and choice of photographs is rather disappointing: the plates appear distinctly faded in the two copies of the book that I have seen, and the quality of several of the shots is rather poor. This is presumably due to the fact that photographs of Sumatran specimens are rather thin on the ground.

This book represents a welcome preliminary account of the snake fauna of Sumatra. It will be useful for anyone concerned with the herpetofauna of that island, and the gazetteer and comprehensive bibliography will make it useful to anyone with natural history interests in Indonesia.

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