

## Raymond Hoser, Bulletin of the Chicago Herp Society

**Book Review: *The Snakes of Sumatra: An annotated checklist and key with natural history notes*, (Second edition) by Patrick DAVID and Gernot VOGEL, Published by Andreas S. Brahm, Bucher-Kreth GmbH, Friedberger Anlange 14, 60316 Frankfurt/Main, Germany (e-mail: frogbook@aol.com). 260 pp. including 25 color photos on 8 pages. Soft Cover. ISBN 3-930612-08-9. Available from the publisher at same address for 54.80 DM, + postage of 4 DM (surface).**

I suppose that the title sums up the contents of the book. However in making such a statement I am probably not doing the book true justice. You see, unlike other checklists which tend to be brief in terms of size and detail, this book is not. Before continuing with my account of this excellent book, I'll talk briefly about the subject matter itself.

Sumatra is the third largest Island in the Republic of Indonesia, (the largest being New Guinea, second being Borneo, neither of which is wholly Indonesian territory). Like the entire nation it is located on or adjacent to the equator and it's climate tends to be tropical, although local variations to this theme occur in the many mountainous areas and rainshadow areas.

The geographical position of Sumatra in South-east Asia, accounts for the significant biodiversity of the Island, which contains 127 known species of snake, which is a slightly higher a number than found in most comparable areas.

In line with much of south-east Asia, most of Sumatra is heavily populated with people, although not as much so as nearby Java, to the east. No doubt this immense human pressure has had a negative impact on most species of reptile in the area, although the detail of this impact has been little measured. Although much of Sumatra remains covered by woodlands and other vegetation, little virgin (untouched by humans) bushland remains.

Although as the crow flies, Sumatra is fairly close to Australia, the herpetofauna there is essentially Oriental, meaning that it has little in common with what occurs in Australia. In spite of this, Australian readers will be familiar with the families of snake encountered there as some of the same families found there also occur within Australia.

Found in the seas of Sumatra are the same sea snake families as in Australia (many species in common). Found on Sumatra are the Typhlopidae (4 species), (one endemic to the island)(3.1% of snake fauna), Anomochilidae (1 species)(0.8%), Cyliophiidae (1 species)(0.8%), Xenopeltidae (1 species)(0.8%), Pythoninae (2 species)(1.6%), Acrochordidae (2 species)(1.6%), Colubridae (99 species) (22 endemics) (77.9%), Elapidae (8 species)(6.3%), Viperidae (9 species)(7.1%).

Many of these snakes, I find particularly interesting and my views seem to be shared by herpetologists elsewhere. The Blood Pythons (*Python curtus*) and Retics (*P. reticulatus*) are commonly kept as pets in the USA and Europe. The latter species is the longest extant species of snake on earth, allegedly exceeding 30 feet (nearly 10 meters). (I should mention that a zoo in the USA has had a million dollars on offer for over 50 years for a live snake over 30 feet and has not yet paid out the money).

The largest venomous snake in the world, the King Cobra (*Ophiophagus hannah*), is also native to Sumatra, which in line with many other species on the Island is also commonly found on the nearby Malay Peninsula and adjacent areas (the authors of the book list those countries). According to the authors of this book, it is known to reach a length of 5.65 meters, averaging 3-4 meters (adults).

Of particular interest to the herpetological community are some of the vipers found on the island, which seem particularly sought after by collectors elsewhere. If it were legal to keep some of these snakes here in Australia, I probably would.

Returning to the book itself, all 127 odd species of snake known to occur on Sumatra, as well as subspecies are covered in systematic and detailed order. This is in addition to other chapters which give detailed background information to put it all into perspective. It is perhaps best to simply list the contents which are given as follows:-

Introduction	9
The herpetology of Sumatra	12
Geographical background	12
Historical herpetological background	16
Material and methods	20
Systematic part	24
A synthetic list of snakes of Sumatra	24
Faunal composition	28
Annotated checklist	29
Typhlopidae	29
Anomochilidae	35
Cylindrophiiidae	36
Xenopeltidae	38
Pythonidae	40
Acrochordidae	44
Colubridae	47
Elapidae	142
Viperidae	157
Misplaced species	173
Species erroneously mentioned from Sumatra or of doubtful occurrence	173
A preliminary key to the snakes of Sumatra	179
Colour pictures	193
Acknowledgements	201
Summary	203
Resume (French summary)	205
Zusammenfassung (German summary)	207
Bibliography	211
References cited in text	211
A summary of references on the snakes of Sumatra	235
Gazetteer	237
Maps	247
Systematic index	249

I have included the page numbers to give you an idea of the approximate space devoted to each subject. In terms of appearance and coverage the book looks like a hybrid between a systematic checklist which includes all known synonyms (different scientific names for same species), describers, etc, with other detailed taxonomic notes, which then has superimposed upon that detailed information or summary of known information about each species in terms of biology, habits, etc. This makes the book a practical guide and reference for anyone interested in the snake fauna of Sumatra. In saying this, I suppose one of things that came out from a read of this book, was how little has been published about the habits and biology of many species, including common varieties. At least the authors are diligent in pointing out these gaps.

The bibliography is particularly detailed and it is clear, even with just a cursory glance at the book that the authors have done their homework. Noting that in recent times that there has been a bit of gap in terms of publications on Sumatra's snakes and nothing ever comparable to this work, this book will become a "bible" to those with an interest in snakes from this region.

The book also has an excellent foreword by imminent German Herpetologist, Fritz Obst. If space here permitted, I'd reprint parts of that foreword as his highly relevant comments are of use to all herpetologists and not just in relation to this book.

In terms of faults, I am not really in a position to judge the factual content of the book. The authors make their position clear in that they often quote directly from other published sources. Noting the inherent hazards in such an approach, it is likely that some factual errors may have crept into the book. However in fairness to the authors they also appear to have gone out of their way to check information as much as is humanely possible before printing. Many errors in earlier literature, particularly in terms of nomenclature have been corrected by these authors in an attempt to prevent them being repeated in the future. For this these authors deserve particular credit.

There are other comments I do make about the book in terms of potential improvement of later editions. There were only nine habitat photos and just 24 colour photos of snakes in the book. There were no black and white photos. In other words most snakes subject in this book were NOT illustrated. This is in my view without doubt the book's greatest fault. Because of the relative lack of descriptive information provided for most species (usually none), the usefulness of this book to lay observers and others with non-taxonomic interest in the snakes of Sumatra was greatly reduced. In my view this "defect" could cost the majority of the potential market, particularly in Sumatra itself.

The colour photos in the book were on the whole of uninspiring quality. Noting that for most species, high-grade photos were available I found this a pity, particularly noting the diligence with regards to other parts of the book's compilation.

In terms of illustrations, while it is accepted that colour photos add substantially to the print cost of a book, black and white photos printed straight onto the page do not. Whilst a preferred option would have been photos with the text descriptions of each species, the publisher should in my view have attempted to have a pictorial representation of as many species as possible. I'd strongly urge this in future editions, even if it means a series of black and whites as an appendix at the end of the publication.

A fault I found in the page design was the fact that margins on each page came slightly too close to the spine of the book for my liking. While a minor fault, I thought it detracted from the quality of the book.

The foreword by Obst would have been enhanced with a photo of the man at the end of the foreword and his signature. There was ample blank space at the end of his foreword (3/4 page) to fit both without altering design in any way, noting that to do this would not have added a cent to printing costs.

Notwithstanding my criticisms which are relatively minor, the book will remain in many ways a benchmark publication in terms of how regional checklists and guides should be compiled. The publisher should also be commended for printing a regional checklist/guide such as this as these publications are relatively high-risk in terms of profitability and will never guarantee them profits in the manner of an all-time best seller.

Although most Australian reptile people will probably not want to rush out and buy this book, I'd strongly suggest it as a worthwhile addition to the libraries of those with an interest in the herpetofauna of south-east and southern Asia.

As a final note, I have dealt with the same publishers in Germany on unrelated matters and found them extremely professional to deal with, meaning that the inherent difficulties in ordering from overseas are easily overcome (if they actually exist). To order a copy of this book or the Bucher Kreth catalogue, which is probably the best herp-book catalogue I have ever seen, simply write to their address at the top of this review. International Money Orders (IMO's) can be obtained without difficulty from any Australian bank.

#### **REVIEW BY RAYMOND HOSER**

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