Land Snails of British Columbia


The study of snails has certain advantages for a naturalist. For one thing, unlike birds or butterflies, they move slowly enough to be identified! However, anyone who has ever tried to identify snails will know that there is a dearth of readily accessible information out there to help with the task. This is a lack that Robert Forsyth has set out to remedy with his guidebook, providing help with the identification of 92 species of land snails and slugs found in British Columbia. This book is similar in layout and format to other recent guidebooks from the Royal British Columbia Museum, a handy 5.5” x 8.5” soft cover book, easy to slip into a backpack or daysack.

Each taxon is provided with a “species account” that consists of a description of the animal, its distribution, and its natural history (basically its habitat preferences). Each account also includes information on the etymology of the animal’s name, some remarks, usually dealing with taxonomic issues or species with which it may be confused, and references. The species are arranged in taxonomic order. These accounts form the bulk of the book (128 pages). Most taxa are illustrated by line drawings or black-and-white photographs. For the planispiral snails, the images generally include the upper (apical) surface, lower (umbilical) surface, and apertural view. For the conispiral snails, the images generally consist of an apertural view and a distal view. There are also 33 colour images, of which 23 are of slugs. These colour images are generally much crisper and more useful than the black and white photos. Forsyth includes some brief discussion of eleven other taxa that he considers of doubtful occurrence in British Colum-
continental divide in other areas of western North America. Oth-
er species are more widespread and some occur east of the Columbia, many native species described by Forsyth have wider distributions. Some are found in other areas in the Pacific Northwest, from Oregon to Alaska. Others are more widespread and some occur east of the continental divide in other areas of western North America. Despite its focus on British Columbia, there-
fore, this book has wider applicability in western Canada.

The remainder of the book offers useful supplemental information. An extensive introduction (19 pages) describes the biology of the animals, including, for the snails, some discussion of shell characteristics, which are important for species identification. There is also a checklist of the species described in the volume, and two dichotomous keys, one for snails and one for slugs, to help narrow down the selection to genus. Ten other keys are interspersed among the species accounts and focus on genera, such as Vallonia, Vertigo, and Arion, in which there are more than a couple of species. All the snails described are dextral coiling species, as are most land snails. Following the species accounts, there is a lengthy (14 pages) reference list, a glossary of terms, and a species index.

I obtained this book primarily to help with the ident-
ification of mollusc shell remains recovered from fine- fraction analysis of sediment samples from archaeological sites and other postglacial depositional contexts.

In these situations, the soft parts of the animals are not preserved and only the shells remain. Hence, identifi-
cations rely primarily on the morphology and structure of the shells. So I was particularly interested in the shell descriptions. In this regard, the book has been very helpful although I have noticed some limitations. My main complaint is that the line drawings are not reproduced well. This is a significant problem. On many drawings, the lines are faint and details of shell surface features and ornamentation are extremely difficult to discern. Moreover, Forsyth only provides one shell measure for each taxon. For the planispiral molluscs, he provides the width of shells, but not the spire height. For the conispiral molluscs, he provides the height of the shells, but not the width. The complementary measures can be approximated from the drawings, but it would have been useful to have them included in the text. The width/spire height ratio is an easily acquired descriptive character that helps discriminate different taxa.

Two additional sets of information would have made this book even more helpful. First, I thought each species could have been illustrated by a “dot map” showing the localities in British Columbia where it has been collected or observed. I imagine that the dots would have been very sparse for many species! Nev-
evertheless, such maps could highlight areas that may well repay survey and collecting effort. Second, it would have been useful to have a list of the accession numbers for the specimens that were studied to compile this volume. This is important so that in future scholars could re-examine the specimens to confirm and refine the taxonomy or acquire additional measurements and images. Because the Royal British Columb
ia Museum is the publisher, I assume that it may be the institution housing these collections. However, this information (that is, the institutional repository and accession numbers) could have easily been included, for example, in the species checklist, making such detective work unnecessary.

Compiling this volume obviously involved a formidable amount of painstaking work and study. I heartily commend Forsyth’s commitment to a neglected but rewarding faunal group. This book is a fine introduction to these animals and deserves to be on all western Canadian naturalists’ bookshelves. Anyone who pays attention to the information in this volume will never look at a snail on a rockery or a slug on a cabbage leaf in quite the same way again!

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