Turtles: The Animal Answer Guide

By Whit Gibbons and Judy Greene. 2009. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2715 North Charles Street, Baltimore, Maryland 21218-4363 USA. xiv + 163 pages, 45.00 USD.

Turtles: The Animal Answer Guide organizes a variety of basic information on turtles into a handy question and answer format. If anyone is qualified to write such a book it is this duo. Whit Gibbons, a professor emeritus at the University of Georgia, is a prominent turtle researcher, with turtle publications dating back to the 1960s, including editing the classic volume Life History and Ecology of the Slider Turtle. Judy Greene is the herpetology research coordinator at the Savannah River Ecology Laboratory. Together they have captured or recaptured over 30,000 turtles.

The book is divided into 12 chapters: Introducing Turtles, Form and Function, Turtle Colours, Turtle Behaviour, Turtle Ecology, Reproduction and Development, Foods and Feeding, Turtles and Humans, Turtle Problems (from a human viewpoint), Human Problems (from a turtle’s viewpoint), Turtles in Stories and Literature, and “Turtleology”. So, for example, in the chapter Introducing Turtles, there are questions such as What are turtles? Where do turtles live? When did turtles first evolve? What is the largest fossil turtle? And the chapter entitled “Turtleology” has questions like Who studies turtles? Which species are least known?

All of the 100+ questions are listed in the table of contents, making it easy to determine if a particular topic is covered. The questions were assembled from the most common questions the authors have been asked over the years. Can turtles see colour? Do turtles play? Where do turtles sleep? How long do turtles live? One obvious question that is missing is how long turtles can stay under water. The authors only partially tackle this topic, with the question Can turtles breathe underwater?

Overall, the answers are thorough without getting bogged down in excessive detail, although occasionally the answers are too cursory. For example, temperature-dependent sex determination in turtles is discussed, but not the possible reasons it evolved. There is also some overlap among the topics covered under different questions, and this can result in some discrepancies. Fibropapilloma, a tumour-causing disease, is discussed in the answer to two different questions. In one answer the authors correctly state that it affects some species of sea turtles, particularly the Green Sea Turtle (page 53), but in the other answer it states that it affects just Green Sea Turtles and it is unknown whether it will develop as a problem in other species (page 93).

Overall, though, this is a wonderful book. It is built on a solid foundation of the essential biological facts that you would expect in any decently written book on the subject, but it is also infused with wonderful tidbits of personal experience that come from spending a lifetime studying turtles.

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