

Rare Animals of India

Edited by Natarajan Singaravelan. 2013. Bentham Science Publishers, P.O. Box 446, Oak Park, IL, USA, 60301-0446. 280 pages, 36.00 USD, electronic.

This is the first time I have reviewed an e book. I got my copy by contacting the publisher (<http://bentham.science.com/ebooks/a-z.htm>). I went to their site and clicked a Login button that led me to a 'Download' button where I was able to save the pdf file of the book (25 Mb file size) to my computer. The normal download is subject to a one time purchase/fee for the book.

This book has twelve chapters covering twelve animals or groups of animals. It does not cover the "poster animals" — Bengal Tiger, Asian Elephant and Greater One-horned Rhinoceros. The animals in this book are Caecilians, Reptiles of Western Ghats, Agamid Lizards, Indian Gharial, Forest Owlet, the Vultures, Shortwings, Salim Ali's Fruit Bat, Hispid Hare, Bengal Marsh Mongoose, Hoolock Gibbon and Snow Leopard. The book is fascinating in two ways.

The first way is the content about the animals. The first chapter on Caecilians was fascinating for me. I know little about these animals so most of the text was new information. I find it strange that some amphibians look like earthworms or snakes and they live mostly underground. It seems there are 200 or so species of Caecilians, of which only 36 species known from India. My guess is that much of the country is too dry, Most of these live in the Kerala Region of the Western Ghats, the area covered in this book. The text provides an insight into the lives of these weird creatures and, of course, how to identify a dozen or so Indian species. There are photographs of both the animals and their habitat. The raging question that built as I read was how do I find one. The authors cover this issue, but it is not a tempting process — you must dig and dig and dig ...

The chapter on Endangered and Enigmatic Reptiles of Western Ghats covers two species of turtles, five of geckos, 25 lizards and 68 snakes. This is far too much for one chapter and many species are included as part of a checklist only. Some of this is annotated and a number of species have photos (a few as road kill!). All of this is helpful, but I would like to have seen more.

Agamid Lizards covers only three of the 48 Indian agamid species, but this coverage is more satisfying. The text provides good information on the species and the range maps are most helpful.

Last year I was delighted to see seven Hoolock Gibbons and one Slender-billed Vulture (more later). The call of the Hoolock Gibbon is one of the great songs of the wild. This year, when I return, I hope to see the Indian Gharial. This crocodile has long jaws to use with its fish diet. Sadly it has declined dramatically and now needs a special effort to find it. The authors have provided a portrait of this poor beast and the reader will learn much about Gharial life. Faced by numerous threats the future looks sad for an animal with a 100 million-year ancestry. Captive breeding and re-intro-

ductions have had poor success as the problems of habitat loss etc. have not been solved.

The Forest Owlet was considered extinct for 113 years until found by two American ornithologists in 1997. The authors detail their search for this bird and summarise the known knowledge. The most bizarre reason I have heard about for the destruction of owl eggs is to take one to a witch doctor, who coats it in soot. This egg is kept under a pot and the next day a number is divined in the soot. This is a lucky number that the gambler uses for the day.

Shortwings, also known as Blue Robins, live in high-elevation forests or sky islands in the Western Ghats. Like many birds in limited habitats they are in trouble. Among the results of this study the researchers found several under storey birds, including Shortwings, were infested with ecto-parasites.

Salim Ali's Fruit Bat was identified in 1972 from a 1948 specimen. The current research has shown this cute mammal is actually more numerous and widespread than originally thought. It is still a rare bat and needs to remain on the endangered list.

The Hispid Hare disappeared from 1956 to 1971. This author's intent was to find out more about this elusive beast and get an idea of population density. This he did by counting droppings and attempting to catch specimens. For all his efforts he saw only 13 and netted two.

The Bengal Marsh Mongoose is one of those species that have been split from a larger population (in this case from the Small Indian Mongoose). This split is not accepted by all authorities. Comparing photos, it is hard to see a difference. The creature I saw in the dry Kolkat Botanical Gardens last year, I am still convinced was a Small Indian Mongoose. The author says the Bengal Marsh Mongoose was fairly common in Salt Lake City (a suburb of Kolkat, now mostly shopping centres etc.), but habitat destruction has made them rare.

India is home to nine species of vultures which have been venerated for centuries. They are the most efficient scavengers and their drop from more than 100 million to the low thousand has caused major environmental and social consequences. The decline is blamed on the use of veterinary drugs such as diclofenac. Slender-billed Vultures now only number around a thousand, so I was happy to see my single bird. The authors explain the biology of vultures and the work being done to save them. The efforts to census the existing populations, saving orphans, breeding and re-introduction programs are covered in some detail.

The other way this book is interesting is the language. I do not believe that I misunderstood any of the author's messages, however the text is full of errors.

There are numerous examples of strange word orders (e.g., Thus, the egg hunters (especially tribal people) are regularly visited those identified areas for easy collection of delicious eggs. I am sure this means — Thus, the egg hunters (especially tribal people) regularly visit the known areas to collect the (delicious) eggs).

Many readers will find some of the language technical, which is fair, but I sometimes felt the love of large words went too far. For example, using anthropic (the anthropic principle is the philosophical consideration that observations must be compatible with the conscious life that observes it) when the word anthropogenic makes more sense; or pupation (To become a pupa.) instead of population. Some words seem to be simply mis-typed like bail (property pledged to a court) instead of bait. Others are correct words in the wrong place such as “it’s wider (than what?) throat” instead of “its wide throat.” Then there was the classic “poisonous or non-poisonous snakes and frogs” which I think means “venomous or non-venomous snakes and poisonous or non-poisonous frogs.” Some words are purely Indian and are not familiar to non-Indians

(Bands — body of water ?, Goonch — a catfish, beel — lake or is it a flooded paddyfield?). It seems the word tribal (plural tribals) is used in India as a noun as well as an adjective.

The text is often repetitive, sometimes in the same sentence and generally in the same paragraph. An example is “Recognised easily by its extremely long and slender beak-like snout” and “easily distinguished ... by the long and narrow snout.” The use of animal names is inconsistent. Sometimes the common English names are used with all words capitalized, or partially capitalized or all in lower case. Sometimes only the scientific names are used.

Despite the editing problems this is a valuable contribution to our knowledge. Those of us who have been privileged to visit India once, always want to return. Amid the masses of humanity you can still see wildlife, and this book shows the value Indians place on their heritage. It is well worth reading for visitors and residents of this fabulous country.

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