

## Book Review

DUGUET, R. & F. MELKI (Eds., 2003): Les Amphibiens de France, Belgique et Luxembourg. – Collection Parthénope, Éditions Biotope, Mèze (France), 480 pp., ISBN: 2-9510379-9-6. In French. Price: EUR 43 (EUR 50 incl. CD)

More colour and more volume – this appears to be a common trait of many new books on the herpetofauna of Europe, in particular those at regional and national levels. As a result the boundaries between identification guide, distribution atlas and handbook become more and more obscure. The newly available book by the Association pour la Connaissance et l'Étude du Monde Animal et Végétal (ACEMAV), edited by RÉMI DUGUET and FRÉDÉRIC MELKI, condenses for the first time the present state of knowledge of the (at least partially) French-speaking countries of Europe, i. e., France including Corsica, Belgium and Luxembourg. The book therefore fills a particularly blatant gap as such a treatise has so far been missing, and this in spite of the fact that this is an almost proverbial “batrachophilous” region. As a consequence, several pages deal with details on the consumption of frogs’ legs, and we learn that more than 2970 tons of frogs’ legs are imported annually by France, 2100 tons by Belgium and 34 tons by Luxembourg (as of 1999). This example already illustrates the dedication to detail of the altogether eighteen authors who have contributed to the individual chapters.

The first 200 pages or so deal with the position of the amphibians within the animal kingdom (Chapter 1), basics of amphibian biology (Chapter 2), biogeography and ecology (Chapter 3), and the relationships between amphibians and humans (Chapter 4). Here, the authors take a really wide sweep and portray, for example, a large cross section of various tropical amphibians in order to position the European families within a comprehensive context. The various aspects of amphibian biology are outlined by means of photographs, and the same is true for the various regional types of habitats. The individual species are furthermore categorized biogeographically as per their distributional patterns. A lot of space is dedicated to the explanation of these patterns through historical geological/climatic processes. Another focus lies on amphibian conservation, and here the numerous regional exemplifications, both positive and negative, make for particularly interesting reading. Detailed instructions are

provided not only for conservation strategies, but also for cartographic work and the estimation of population densities. The latter aspect is of particular importance for this region as data collected so far has in the past been subject to in some cases harsh criticism due to the fact that cartographic results from all over France were incorporated in a central databank rather indiscriminately.

The more general chapters 1 through 4 are followed by a “Cahier d’Identification”. This is much more than a simple dichotomous identification key. It begins with a series of about half-page long and comprehensively illustrated portraits of the various genera, followed by similarly structured ones of the individual species. Characteristic identification traits are pointed out clearly, and there is a free-standing picture in original size of each species. Although the multitude of pictures may appear somewhat confusing at times, this is probably the most effective way of facilitating reliable identification – at least when one deals with a relatively limited amphibian fauna and not, for example, hyper-diverse tropical groups. The subsequent paragraphs then contain “Cahiers” also for clutches of eggs and larvae. Here, drawings or photographs of the oral features of tadpoles are wanting, though.

The second half of the book consists of monographs of the species of amphibians living in the specified region. Introduced species, such as *Rana catesbeiana* or *Xenopus laevis*, are treated with the same thoroughness as native ones. Every species is portrayed in numerous colour photographs. The authors have opted for a rather unconventional manner of illustrating geographical distributions in that the occurrence of a species is shown per Département or Province with its relative commonness being indicated through colour coding. Sonagrams of their vocal expressions complement the accounts of anurans, and (for a minor extra charge) a CD with the respective recordings comes with the book.

The book uses the numerous excellent photographs as its basis. It contains far more than 400, mostly large-format photographs plus a wealth of smaller ones – such as the free-standing pictures of relevant identification traits in the species accounts. And to all these are added many line drawings and graphics! One may almost be tempted to say that on occasion there is a little too much of all the good and the multitude of pictures (some round, some rectan-

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gular, some free-standing) make some paragraphs appear confusing.

This is, however, not to say that the text and informational content would need to hide behind them. Besides the generally excellent snapshot of the current state of knowledge there are – well concealed – even scientific novelties, such as the first detailed description of the advertising call of *Rana pyrenaica*. The altogether very high standard of the book also shows in the consistent usage of certain specific terms (like, for example, the so far unusual yet very useful term “imago” for juvenile amphibians in the year of their metamorphosis). The editors must be congratulated on having managed to streamline the contributions of the various teams of authors to such a degree!

Single oversights are obviously next to impossible to avoid in a work of this volume. But who is really interested in the misspelling of a German vernacular name (“Korsicher Feuersalamander”)? Equally negligible in the light of the lush illustration is that photographs of the ventral sides are absent for most anurans.

One point of criticism of greater importance is, however, that hardly any of the colour photographs

provide locality data for the figured specimen. For the very reason that there are so many specimens figured for each species, information as to where exactly a specimen originates could have proved very useful indeed. It would also have befitted the rather scientific character of the book, and the publishers of the “Parthénope” series would be well advised to include such information in future volumes. Similarly, I missed the referencing to existing literature in the text. Although there is an extensive bibliography at the end of the book, and each species account contains a listing of the most important relevant literature, it would have greatly enhanced the enormous effort of the team of authors if it were in each case recognizable which information was taken from existing literature and which referred to data not published before.

In all, these points of criticism are hardly of any consequence. What must be stated is that there is now a book on the amphibian fauna of francophonous Europe that – being really excellent in both its scientific content and printed execution – sets a new benchmark for the future.

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