



BOOK REVIEW

A Guide to the Snakes of Papua New Guinea by Mark O'Shea. Independent Publishing, Independent Group Pty Ltd., P.O. Box 168, Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. ISBN 9980-916-96-6. Price £32.00

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Few types of books are as eagerly awaited as identification guides, especially when they deal with regions that have not been previously covered. Papua New Guinea has a rich and varied snake fauna comprising about 100 species in six families and this book gives descriptions and additional information on all of these. Mark O'Shea has made numerous visits to Papua New Guinea in order to compile his guide and has been especially active in the fields of snake-bite and conservation.

The book gets straight down to business with two pages of first aid instructions in the event of snake-bite, in English and Pidgin. Acknowledgements, publisher's information, contents and a foreword come later. These are followed by sections giving background information on snake biology, human interactions with snakes, conservation and the treatment of snake-bite (by David Warrell and David Laloo).

The main thrust of the book, though, is concerned with the identification of snakes (and legless lizards) from Papua New Guinea and includes a key to families and, where necessary, keys to genera and species. Each

species account takes from a few lines to a full page depending on the available information - several secretive species are poorly known - and each account includes a description, notes on habits and habitats, and distribution, both within Papua New Guinea and beyond, where appropriate.

Certain species have additional taxonomic notes; recent revisions to species that occur in this region have made life difficult for herpetologists in general and for writers in particular and every attempt has been made to keep the reader informed of current opinions. Notably, a new genus of blind snakes, *Acutotyphlops*, erected by van Wallach, is listed, which contains a species formerly placed in *Ramphotyphlops*, two species that were previously synonymised with this species and an entirely new species, *Acutotyphlops kunuaensis*. Similarly, two new species of *Typhlops*, yet to be formally described, are also included. The 'new' generic names for Australasian pythons, recently proposed by Kluge (1993) are followed, as they are now generally accepted (including the loss of *Chondropython*, which is now included in *Morelia*).

Wherever possible, each species account is supplemented by at least one colour photograph, although this has not always been practical, presumably through lack of material. Some photographs are of preserved museum specimens. Distribution maps are arranged together towards the back of the book and are of very high quality, both in their design and the information they contain. Certain maps are complemented by small habitat photographs, which is a nice touch. A gazeteer

of placenames, a glossary and a comprehensive bibliography are also included.

Does the book live up to its long-awaited promise? In my opinion, yes. Being the first author to tackle such a difficult region is beset with pitfalls but Mark O'Shea seems to have avoided most of them. Later editions might be needed to incorporate corrections and additions that will inevitably come to light once the book has been in circulation for a while but, in the meantime, anyone wanting an thorough overview of the snake fauna of Papua New Guinea will not be disappointed. At present, the easiest way to obtain a copy of the book in Europe is direct from the author:

Mark O'Shea, 46 Buckingham Road, Penn, Wolverhampton, WV4 5TJ, England.

■ LITERATURE

- Wallach V. (1995). *A new genus for the Ramphotyphlops subocularis species group, with a description of a new species*. *Asiatic Herpetological Research* 6:132-150.
- Kluge A. (1993). *Aspidites and the phylogeny of pythoniine snakes*. *Rec. Aust. Mus.* 1993(19):1-77.