

PETER STAFFORD, SNAKES

Snakes. Peter Stafford.

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This is a book published by The Natural History Museum in London. This world famous museum has just begun a new series of nature books. The books that have already been published cover: one plant group, one animal species or one ecosystem. The titles that have appeared are about the deep sea, lichen, coral fish and snakes. These books are written to give the reader information about a particular subject in a more accessible way.

Peter Stafford is a biologist for the museum, who has previously written 'The Adder' and 'A guide to the reptiles of Berlice' (1999). In the last ten years he has made numerous expeditions to Berlice in preparation for this latest book. The wide range of snakes in Central-America was the subject of his research and gave rise to the writing of his book 'Snakes'.

The back of the book promises a concise and richly illustrated introduction to the world of snakes. The average L.S. - reader knows more than the target group, general interests, for this book. Still this book is one to recommend. What a fine book! It begins with a stylish cover. Your initial positive impression of the book is

confirmed by leafing through the book: the good layout, the nice letter type, the clear drawings and wonderful photo's.

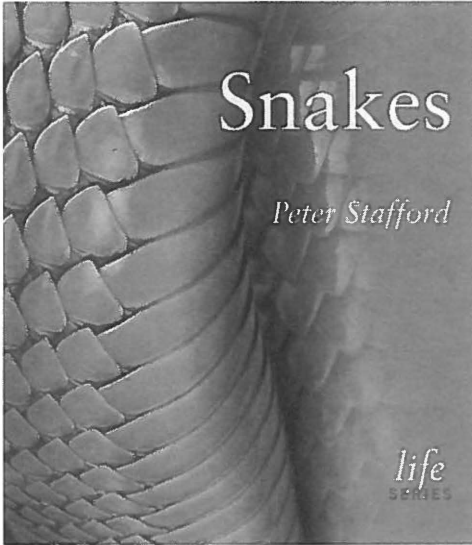
The book consists of three sections: a general section, a section where snakes are covered per family and outlined with articles throughout the book.

In the chapter 'Structure and Lifestyle' Stafford talks about things in general: evolution, anatomy, eating habits, reproduction and protection against beasts of prey. These subjects are concisely explained in a vivid no-nonsense manner of writing. What makes it more enjoyable for the more well read reader, are his descriptions of the 'exceptions' to the general rule. I'll give a couple of examples:

- He states that it is not always possible for sea snakes to find a rough surface to shed their skin. Some species get around this problem by tying their bodies in knots and shedding their skin by rubbing 'skin against skin'.
- Some snakes have a specifically coloured tail tip to entice their prey. The African *Thelotornis capensis* seems to use its bright red tongue for the same purpose.
- Snakes normally eat their prey whole. As an exception to the rule Stafford mentions one, the *Fordonia leucobalia*, that breaks the legs off a crab if it is too big to swallow.

In the second section the author describes each family briefly. In a few cases it is so brief, that he does not go further than naming the genera in one or two sentences. For example, the Colubridae family with





around 300 genera and about 1500 species is covered in 17 pages. 9 pages of text, not including the photos. The genera *Elaphe*, *Lampropeltis*, *Pituophis*, *Bogertophis* and *Senticolis* are covered in one sentence with the statement that they constrict their prey and can be found in certain regions. Next it is said that the *Lampropeltis getulus* will not think twice about attacking venomous snakes, such as copperheads, rattlesnakes and coral-snakes. This, along with two photos (of *Elaphe situla* and *Pituophis catenifer*) is all for this genera that you will come across in this book.


Because this book is part of a series, the format and size was already decided. This will have limited the author in the amount of text that he could supply. But still, with this limitation as fact he could continue pretty well. In his selection of the covered species he still knew how to express the large diversities and complexities amongst snakes. This was only reinforced by the wonderful photos of species that you do not see every day.

Other families, including the 'primitive snakes', receive in comparison more attention. And it is much more pleasant to read. During the course of the book Stafford gives you the necessary pieces of information. I'll list a few:

- Certain sand-boas use their hardened scales on their tail to let the mother mouse bite on during the plundering of her nest.
- Stiletto snakes have adaptations to their teeth, so that they can attack their prey in small underground passages.
- Mamba is a word in Zulu that means 'big snake'.

Personally I found the articles outlined in the book very enjoyable. There are fifteen throughout the book with a maximum length of one page. The chosen subjects are diverse and original. Again it seems that the choice of subjects are inspired with the wish to present the snakes in all their diversity. I'll give you again two examples:

- Blind snakes are on the owls menu. It is known that *Otus asio* (an owl from the U.S.A.) catches blind snakes and takes them to their nest and are not eaten there but can escape. Some of the snakes that have escaped stay in the nest. They stay alive by eating the larvae of parasitic insects. These larvae can be responsible for the possible loss of an owls eggs. It has been shown that there are more hatchlings per clutch of eggs in nests where *Leptotyphlops dulcis* are present.
- In the sixties (from the previous century), biologists became aware that on the island of Guam, certain bird species had drastically declined in numbers. In 1987 there were several species on the point of dis-



tinction. The native lizards and bats were also declining considerably. After research into the cause it was found that the culprit was *Boiga irregularis*. This snake was introduced to Guam by accident in a ships cargo shortly after the Second World War. Within 40 years the animal could be found in most parts of the island and was threatening the native avifauna. To try and limit the damage from *Boiga irregularis* they captured as many as possible and placed populations of the threatened bird species in zoo's. Some bird species were already extinct.

The book closes with a glossary, an index, a list with recommended books, herpetological associations and internet web-sites. All in all, this is a good buy for beginners and for the more advanced because next to a thorough introduction to the snake world, it covers the large diversity of this world.

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