

## Book Review:

### **ROBERTO SINDACO, ALBERTO VENCHI, CRISTINA GRIECO. *The Reptiles of the Western Palearctic. 2.***

#### **Annotated checklist and distributional atlas of the snakes of Europe, North Africa, Middle East and Central Asia, with an update to the Vol. 1.**

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The *Reptiles of the Western Palearctic* is the second volume of an ambitious project: to create a checklist and an accurate atlas for all the reptile species of this complex biogeographic region, a huge area of nearly 27 millions of square kilometers that includes about 690 reptile species. Gathering together all these data is a task that would deter anyone except Roberto Sindaco and colleagues. The realization of this project involved nearly twenty years spent traveling in remote areas for fieldwork (from the volcanoes of Canary Islands to the steppes of Kazakhstan) and thousands of hours entering taxon/locality records from obscure literature into a database, georeferencing them, and plotting data on maps.

The outcome of all these efforts is between my hands: a thick 17 × 24 cm hardcover volume printed on nice coated paper with the logos of *Societas Herpetologica Italica* and *Societas Europaea Herpetologica* on it.

From the perspective of snakes, the Western Palearctic includes regions that enthralled the zoologists since the Age of Enlightenment and other that were largely overlooked. Actually, by an herpetological point of view, Europe is probably the most investigated region of the world, as the earliest accounts go back to Aristotle, and comprehensive attempts of summarizing the knowledge of its ophidofauna were repeatedly published more or less in every decade of the past century. Conversely, little is known about the snakes of large areas of North Africa (Algeria, Libya) and Asia (e.g., Syria, Lebanon, Georgia, Afghanistan, Yemen, Oman, Iran) where the relevant data are scattered among hundreds of scientific papers or were drawn from individual field notes and collections housed in several museums.

The *Reptiles of the Western Palearctic* begins with six general sections that represent a slightly modified and updated version of the same chapters in the first volume (Sindaco and Jeremčenko, 2008). The first and the second detail the geographical extent and habitat types with the help of few (16) nice photographs of different landscapes; I wished a deeper coverage of these sections but this would be probably beyond the scope of this volume. Next are “Material and methods” with a list of the information provided in each species account and how the 52.000 records were selected and mapped. The status of the herpetological knowledge in the area is presented in the subsequent chapter with a list of reference text for each country and, sometimes, useful comments on outdated and inaccurate sources. Next are the chapters about the biodiversity and biogeography which probably represent the strongest point of this book since the distributional records here presented are an invaluable tool for this kind of analyses and the authors master these topics particularly well.

Conservation issues are the subject of the next chapter; these are dealt with heavy emphasis on shrinking and fragmentation of natural habitat, introduction of alien species, IUCN red list categories and legislation that leaves few room for “emotional” issues like pet trade or collection for scientific purposes.

The next part is the Annotated Checklist which represents the core of the book, a bulk of 350 pages considering the associated distribution maps (184 figures) and the colour plates. From the start, it is clear that the authors’ objective is to gather together all published information about

taxonomy, biogeography and distribution for each snake species. References are cited in the text, which greatly improves the book's usefulness and there is also a further list of maps data sources for each species. Every account starts with reference to the original description and type locality. This could be not particularly interesting for most of the readers but it must be stressed that it's quite unusual as most of the books usually just report author, year of description and the "restricted" type locality (that is often an unjustifiable emendation like for many species dealt by Robert Mertens). There is a distribution map based on a one by one degree grid for each genus (inserted in the text) and a map for each species (these are lumped together in a separate chapter); all the maps report the global distribution of taxa even if extralimital distribution include few dots and are often delimited just by a generic line.

I would like to spend few more words about the 342 images of snakes which cover most of the species treated in the book, even some rare taxa that I wasn't able to see depicted before; the quality of the images is outstanding with just two exceptions: *Gloydus himalayanus* and *Montivipera latifi*.

My opinion is that Reptiles of the Western Palearctic by Roberto Sindaco, Alberto Venchi and Cristina Grieco

is an invaluable reference for professional and amateur herpetologists, and I feel that it will be considered a reference text for the next decades; anyway readers should keep in mind that this book do not follow the general trend of most recent herpetological monographs so you will never find any identification keys or any data about the ecology or biology as the emphasis is just on taxonomy and distribution.

As final remark have to admit that I tried to find general mistakes and misspelled scientific names but to my shame the only ones I could find were included in the foreword that I personally wrote.

The book can be purchased at the cost of € 62.00 (or € 52.00 for S.H.I. members) at the publisher's website (<http://www.edizionibelvedere.it/>).

#### REFERENCES

- Sindaco, R., Jeremčenko, V.K. (2008): The Reptiles of the Western Palearctic. 1. Annotated checklist and distributional Atlas of the turtles, crocodiles, amphisbaenians and lizards of Europe, North Africa, Middle East and Central Asia. Edizioni Belvedere, Latina.