

# Book reviews

## **A Complete Guide to British Butterflies: their entire life histories described and illustrated in colour from photographs taken in their natural surroundings**

Margaret Brooks and Charles Knight  
Cape, 1982, £1095

The subtitle gives an accurate idea of the essential content of this book. The 60 native British Isles butterflies are presented, mainly as two page spreads, by colour photographs showing the eggs, first instar larvae, mature larvae and adults, together with brief notes on their distribution, habitats, phenology, food plants and variation. This main section is introduced by essays on butterfly biology, breeding butterflies in captivity, collecting, and photography. Although reasonably accurate in general, the section on photography in particular is somewhat misleading and occasionally inaccurate (e.g. high speed films do not have reduced exposure latitude).

Almost all the photographs were taken by Margaret Brooks from living specimens reared by her—a remarkable achievement. Sadly, the author's photography does not always live up to the task. The quality of the micrographs (eggs and first instar larvae) is poor, and many of the macrophotographs lack detail. A few set specimens have been included: these are appalling, being faded and damaged, indifferently photographed, and pinned against 'natural' backgrounds! Despite this, there are many good pictures, and the overall impression is pleasing.

This book gives tangible proof that it is now better to hunt the British butterflies with a camera rather than a net. However, the authors fail to give any insight into the investigative biology that has been done—or desperately needs to be done—using the British species. Nothing on Ford's ecological genetics and the meadow brown, no mention of Tinbergen's ethological studies of the grayling, or Dempster's work on the ecology of the swallowtail, nor Thomas's efforts to conserve the large blue, or Baker's new ideas on the migration of the small white—or the need to compare our marsh fritillary with the related American species studied in such depth by Paul Ehrlich and his school. So many important works for understanding our

butterflies and their needs—but the book does not contain a single reference! Brooks and Knight exist *in vacuo*. Even the BRC mapping scheme and Pollard's monitoring scheme pass unnoticed.

This book is praiseworthy because it presents, first hand, a very clear and useful account of the descriptive biology of our native species; frustrating because the photography could have been so much better and the text could easily have done so much more. Nonetheless, I welcome this work as an original book about British butterflies—and that, in these days of glossy production-line pot-boilers, is indeed a rarity.

R.I. Vane-Wright  
Department of Entomology,  
British Museum (National History)

## **Handbuch der Reptilien und Amphibien Europas Vol. 1 Echsen (Lizards Part 1)**

W. Bohm, (Editor)

## **Supplementary Volume of 'Handbuch der Reptilien und Amphibien Europas': Threatened Amphibians and Reptiles in Europe**

Rene E. Honegger

Akad. Verlag Weisbaden, 1981,  
DM 216·00 and DM 68·00

The *Handbuch* when complete is likely to remain the standard reference work on the European herpetofauna for many years to come, and it is to be regretted that it is only available in German. However, the supplementary volume on the threatened amphibians and reptiles, which is likely to be of greater interest to readers of *Oryx*, is in English.

Honegger's volume is based very closely on a report with the same title which he produced for the Council of Europe (Honegger, 1978), with a considerable amount of updating of the information. Although the present volume contains a considerable amount of very useful data, and for this reason alone is recommended to conservation-minded herpetologists, as a book it is unsatisfactory. There are three reasons: first, the lack of organisation within the book makes it extremely difficult to locate information on any

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given species. Second, the incompleteness of much of the data means that a fairly thorough working knowledge of the distribution of the species is essential in order to interpret many of the species' listings. Third, the categorising of the species as Endangered, Vulnerable, Rare and Indeterminate or Insufficiently Known, has always been problematical, but the present work shows how acute the problem is. For example, the natterjack toad, which is protected under British legislation as an Endangered species is listed as Indeterminate. This is presumably because, despite being endangered or even extinct over most of its northern limits, in Spain and other parts of its range it is often very abundant. However, the yellow-bellied toad, which in parts of Romania and Yugoslavia I have seen so abundant as to be breeding in cart ruts, is listed as Vulnerable, as is the green toad, which is more or less an eastern counterpart to the natterjack and like that species is abundant in the south, but declining in the north. It would have been more useful to have treated the status of each species country by country as has been done in the section on legislation.

Honegger's work highlights how little is known about the majority of Europe's amphibians and reptiles—in fact, it is a field in which the enthusiast can still make many exciting discoveries. As recently as the late 1970s a new species of toad, *Balaophryne muletensis* was discovered on Mallorca—listed by Honegger as Endangered.

Despite the shortcomings listed above, which are probably inevitable when a book is produced from a working report, Honegger's book deserves a place in any good library.

John A. Burton

### Reference

Honegger, R.E. 1978. *Threatened Amphibians and Reptiles in Europe*. Council of Europe, Strasbourg.

### Gone Birding

Bill Oddie

Methuen, approx. price: £6.95  
(hardback)

This excellently written little book is an autobiographical account of Bill Oddie's early exploits as a birdwatcher; contained in some 180 pages with numerous photographs and sketches by the author. It describes, in eight chapters, how Bill evolved from a young egg-collector into one of the most respected birders and active conservationists in Britain. For the last three years he has been helping raise funds for the ffPS, particularly as a team member in the sponsored birdwatch. I found the content particularly amusing, especially as we both seem to have experienced the same brushes with unsympathetic farmers, water bailiffs and their like—their 'Ois!' still ring in my ears too. It is not without its serious side however, for it illustrates how Bill acquired his expertise and how he managed to add considerably to the knowledge of Midland birds. He also highlights the fact that by constant coverage even the most unpromising places will eventually turn up good birds. It is particularly pleasing to see that he emphasises that quick, uncritical observations can lead to misidentifications, and illustrates this point by mentioning some of his *faux pas*—what an honest birder! For the reasons above, I cannot but thoroughly recommend this book to anybody who is a beginner, young or old, and suggest they try and follow Bill's techniques, excluding of course the egg collecting period. I'm sure the more experienced birder will also enjoy *Gone Birding*, as a little light relief from pouring over field guides, or when the weather is too bad to venture out.

Cyril A. Walker

Department of Palaeontology,  
British Museum (Natural History)