

LITERATURE CITED

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Secrets of the Snake Charmer: Snakes in the 21st Century

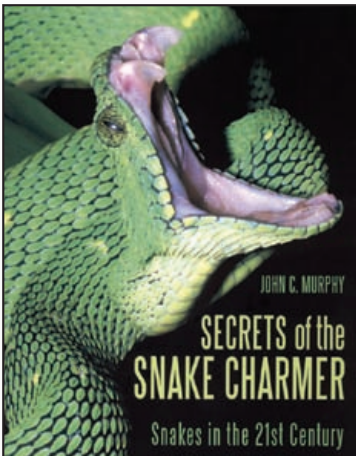
By John C. Murphy. 2010. iUniverse (www.iuniverse.com). xv + 400 pp. Softcover. US\$ 36.95. ISBN 978-1-4502-2126-9.

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Catching up with all the new knowledge being accumulated on snakes, published in diverse journals all over the world and in many languages, is a time- and energy-consuming exercise. This is particular-

ly true for the first decade of this century, which has already seen impressive progress on a number of aspects of snake biology and evolution. Fortunately for all naturalists and herpetologists, every few years one or more researchers seem to tackle this arduous task, for the benefit of the entire community. This is especially valuable when it is done by a skilled herpetologist such as John C. Murphy, who is an active field researcher and has an extensive experience in making scientific knowledge accessible to the public, as evidenced by his recent comprehensive volume on homalopsid snakes (Murphy 2007).

The new book is illustrated by 84 snake photos, plus two dozen others, mainly of other reptiles, as well as diverse drawings and figures. All are in black and white. It is thus definitely not a coffee table book, but rather a book to learn from. *Secrets of the Snake Charmer* focuses on snake research done during the first decade of the 21st century. Although

released in April 2010, the book deals with literature through the beginning of the same year. Literature references are not indicated in the main text, but the commented bibliography (pp. 321–380) is organized by chapter and thus easily allows the identification of sources of the information presented.

As noted by the author (p. xii) “snakes can serve as a window to open the ideas of ecology and evolution to people otherwise distracted by religion, junk TV, technological gadgets, and sporting events.” Although packed with information the book is written in an accessible style and makes a pleasant read for both professional herpetologists and amateurs. The selection of subjects dealt with in the main text (pp. 1–320) is wide: snake evolution, fangs and venom apparatus, predation, defense mechanisms, etc. The 14 chapters are themselves divided into numerous focal subtopics. Many topics are enlivened by the author’s anecdotes based on personal experiences in the field.

A weak point of the book is the ‘Index to Scientific Names and Authors’ (pp. 389–400). The text uses snake common names (e.g., Burmese Python, European Cat Snake, King Cobra, Little File Snakes, Vine Snakes) extensively, and it would thus have been useful to include them in the index as well. In many cases the common name is not associated in the main text with the corresponding scientific name, and the exact identity of the snake is thus not always easy to determine. Further, many scientific names cited in the main text are not included in the index (e.g., *Coelognathus radiatus*, *Colubroelaps nguyenvansangi*, Crotalidae, *Enhydrina schistosa*, *Enhydris polylepis*, *E. subtaeniata*, *Oxyuranus microlepidotus*, *Pseudonaja textilis*, *Vipera aspis*), or only at the generic level, or not for all pages where they are cited in the main text. Among the non-reptilian scientific names mentioned in the main text, some are listed in the index (e.g., *Felis catus*), some not (e.g., *Rattus villosissimus*). As for the scientific names, authors listed in the main text are not all listed in the index either, and in any case the utility of an author index in such a work seems limited to us. There are some mistypings, mainly in scientific names and proper nouns, but not to the extent that they detract appreciably from the book.

Despite the few negative points noted, we generally had an excellent opinion of this new book. It makes a very good read for anybody seriously interested in snakes and who wants to know more about them and we recommend it to both interested novices as well as seasoned herpetologists.

LITERATURE CITED

MURPHY, J. C. 2007. Homalopsid Snakes. Evolution in the Mud. Krieger Publishing Co., Malabar, Florida. viii + 249 pp.