

Guide to the Reptiles of the Eastern Palearctic. by Nikolai N. Szczerbak. Technical Editor, Michael L. Golubev. 2003. Krieger Publishing Co., Malabar, Florida. xvii + 260 pp. with 194 colored plates and 162 maps. Cloth. \$73.50. ISBN 1 - 57524-004-1.

Edward O. Moll

Adjunct Professor, School of Renewable Natural Resources
University of Arizona
e.o.moll@att.net

The reptilian fauna (161 species) of the vast region of the former USSR is poorly known to the English-speaking world because most information has been published in Russian. Further the most complete work on the herp fauna prior to this one, Bannikov et. al., *Guide to the Amphibians and Reptiles of the USSR*, was published in 1977 and is now quite dated. Professor Nikolai Szczerbak of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences and Director of the Academy's Zoological Museum in Kiev set out to rectify this situation by preparing a comprehensive guide to the USSR reptiles in English that included keys, range maps, and colored photos. Dr. Szczerbak was perhaps one of the few herpetologists of this region with the breadth of knowledge to carry out this daunting task. Being an enthusiastic field biologist, Szczerbak participated in some 60 expeditions to all corners of the former Soviet Union. He authored more than 250 scientific publications (including 28 books) on the systematics, distribution, and ecology of the herpetofauna of the region. However, Dr. Szczerbak died in 1998 at age 70 with the book still unpublished. Fortunately Dr. Michael Golubev, an authority on geckos of the USSR and one of his Szczerbak's former students, stepped in to see the manuscript through to publication.

The book is divided into four parts. Part I presents a brief geographical characterization of this large, varied land and continues with a short treatise on four herpetogeographic regions designated by the author, including species that characterize each. The remainder of the book is divided taxonomically with Part 2 dealing with the Testudines, Part 3 the Sauria, and Part 4 the Serpentes. Each part provides keys to the families, genera, and species along with detailed accounts for every species. Accounts include the scientific name, describer, and year followed by sections on distribution, natural history, conservation status, key references, and remarks (typically taxonomic in nature). Range maps accompany each account but include only the eastern Palearctic distribution and do not delimit distributions of subspecies (usually described in remarks). The book is unique in containing 194 colored plates representing all but one of the reptile species discussed. The extensive bibliography ends with the year 1996. The book concludes with an index to scientific names.

Generally, the book is concise and clearly written with a minimum of scientific terminology. Key references are provided for those wanting to delve for more scientific detail. The keys are simply written also, sometimes too much so. In an effort to reduce scientific terms some of the author's substitutes sacrifice clarity. For example, the ligamentous attachment of plastron and carapace in *Emys obicularis* is referred to as a "skin-like flexible crosspiece." The plates vary in quality from excellent to mediocre but are generally good and justify the price of this small volume. Using the combination of keys and photographs, any reader should be able to identify most of these poorly known species. This book would be a valuable addition to the library of any amateur or professional herpetologist interested in the Palearctic.



Singing the Turtles to Sea, by Gary Paul Nabhan. Hardcover. 2003. University of California Press. \$34.95 350 pp. ISBN 0-520-21731-4.

Dave Hyatt

Nabhan is an outstanding author, winner of a MacArthur "genius" grant among other awards and honors, and this book – his thirteenth - seems to me destined to exceed even his past works. The title of the book notwithstanding, his main focus is the Seri Indian or "Comcaac" native culture and the role of marine and desert reptiles of the northern Sonora region within that coastal Comcaac culture. The writing of this book was possible only through Nabhan's long-term knowledge of and ability to relate to the individuals of the Comcaac community; and as an occasional visitor to the principal Comcaac villages over the past 20 years, I can personally attest that such acceptance, familiarity and intimate knowledge could only be achieved by a rare outsider like Gary, in collaboration with the Seri Tribal Governors and their Traditional Council of Elders – or as Gary refers to them – "The Keepers of the Flame".

This book presents a wealth of fascinating information that helps us appreciate the uniqueness and mystery of this region of the world. For example, Nabhan points out that Mexico is home to 230 languages unspoken beyond its boundaries, placing it sixth among nations in terms of extant cultural diversity and endemic languages; while Mexico is second among all nations for harboring the greatest number of vertebrate animal species – at least 761 – that live nowhere else in the world; and the country is fourth in the number of flora with some 22,000 vascular plant species. An important element in the environment of the Comcaac are the islands in the northern Sonoran region, and the endemics that live on them, many of which are endangered, threatened, or deserving of special protection status. In particular, there are some 26 species

of reptiles in these latter categories, including the River Crocodile (*Crocodylus acutus*) – although the last crocodile probably hasn't been in the area for hundred years. Overall, the greater area occupied by the Seri, including the mainland, provides refuge for well over sixty species of desert reptiles and six marine species (five sea turtles and one sea snake).

And, interestingly enough, even the language spoken by the Seri is considered endangered because so few persons speak it. It may be pointed out that the two principal Comcaac villages of Desemboque and Punta Chueca harbor about 75 and 84 families, respectively, as of the mid-1990's although these numbers are constantly in flux.

Several of the cultural traditions of the Comcaac that are noted in the book should be mentioned. First, the title of the book, "Singing the Turtles to Sea" refers to the tradition of singing or chanting as the pangas or large canoes used by the Seri are taken to sea to look for the relatively elusive sea turtles as they are being harpooned. With the exception of the leatherbacks, which are generally considered undesirable for eating, the Comcaac regularly hunt and eat sea turtles by exception from the Mexican government. Another important cultural aspect of the Comcaac is the manufacture and sale of the famous ironwood carvings that first began to be commonplace around 1970, when the local Comcaac fisheries began to decline. These ironwood carvings were so well received, commercially, that Mexicans throughout the region began to emulate them, incorrectly claiming them to be "Seri", even depleting the local ironwood tree populations to a large extent in vast areas of the desert. And then there is the convoluted issue of conservation. While Comcaac populations have been described as ruthless in their pursuit of wildlife, and have been known to treat captured wildlife with less than great compassion; Comcaac hunters nevertheless have practiced a sort of sustainable hunting tradition of not completely depleting complete family units of wildlife and unnecessarily killing or wounding animals that they cannot take advantage of for food or other purposes. Furthermore, Nabhan describes recent programs such as that in Punta Chueca for a chuckwalla captive breeding exhibit to ensure that the Comcaac community remains involved in the utilization, protection, and celebration of its reptilian neighbors; as well as community-sponsored wildlife monitoring efforts involving capture, marking, weighing, and release of species such as birds.

The second part of the book consists of 57 pages of species accounts of the herpetofauna of the central Sonoran coast and its adjacent islands, with detailed information about 55 species including their scientific, English, Spanish, and Comcaac names as well as traditional and practical Seri lore and knowledge about each animal.

An excellent read, almost impossible to put down. Buy it or talk your library into buying it.

Raul Vega, Arizona Game and Fish Department, Douglas, AZ.

John C. Benson of Yucca Valley, CA. was arrested on an outstanding warrant by Arizona Game & Fish officers on 8/28/03. Benson, 34, was reportedly collecting snakes on Highway 80 near Douglas when officers Raul Vega and Gilbert Gonzales stopped his vehicle. Benson claimed to be moving a snake off of the road but a search of his vehicle revealed two snakes in cloth sacks.

Benson's girlfriend, Rhiannon R. Pinetron, 23, told officers that she had collected the snakes but she did not have a hunting license. A license check showed that Benson's hunting license privileges had been revoked. He also had a warrant for his arrest issued by the Bagdad Justice Court in Yavapai County for failure to pay fines to the court. The charges stemmed from the unlawful possession of a Gila monster.

Pinetron was cited for collecting reptiles without a valid hunting license and released. Benson was transported to Bisbee where he was booked into the Cochise County Jail.



SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT

Chiricahua Leopard Frog Recovery Team

Dennis Caldwell

The First Meeting of the Chiricahua Leopard Frog Recovery Team - Arizona Stakeholders Subgroup met at Ft Huachuca on Nov. 19th. Dennis Caldwell attended the Stakeholders meetings as a representative from the THS. This group is made up of ranchers, private property owners, land managers as well as conservation watchdog organizations, like the THS, interested in the recovery process. The group formed guidelines to govern the process of writing up a participation plan to facilitate implementation of the recovery plan. Additional meetings will be held around the state to allow for better input statewide. Members of this group will be able to voice their concerns regarding the recovery plan and work out recommendations on how the plan can be successfully implemented.

The THS recognizes this as an integral part of the success of this recovery. Most of the southern Arizona populations of Chiricahua Leopard Frogs disappeared from the mountain stream habitat that used to be their niche. The majority of the remaining populations are surviving in man made livestock watering holes, (cow ponds). For this reason, the private landowners and ranchers maintaining these ponds are being solicited to cooperate with the process and give valuable advice on what needs to happen to maintain these artificial habitats until the recovery of the frogs in their protected mountain stream habitat is successful.