

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.

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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 Szczerbak died in 1998 at age 70 with the book still unpublished.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