

The interests of visitors to East African parks and reserves, once centred on the 'Big Five', have broadened considerably over recent years, obliging today's safari guides to be clued up, not just on the mammals and the birds, but across the whole spectrum of natural history.

To this end, it is incumbent on guides to be continually adding to their knowledge in 'specialist' fields that, not long ago, would have been deemed peripheral to their line of duty. Two difficulties have arisen: (1) that, in some 'specialist' fields, there is still no widely available literature for our region, and (2) that where books can be had, these tend to be bulky (too bulky, some, to lug around in the field) – and expensive.

To fill this void, we safari guides have turned – increasingly – to books produced in South Africa. While most such books feature only species found in southern Africa, the overlap with East Africa (anywhere between 40 % and 80 %, for most terrestrial faunas) is sufficient to be of help. The Tarboton *Field Guides* to the Dragonflies and the Damselflies [of which the latter is reviewed elsewhere in this issue, on p. 70] are good examples.

Now, however, there is also a proliferation – from South African publishers, notably Struik in Cape Town – of publications specially targeting our region and its parks and reserves. The latest such offering is a small (pocket-sized) 'Photo-

## 'Niggling flaws'

A PHOTOGRAPHIC GUIDE TO  
SNAKES, OTHER REPTILES  
AND AMPHIBIANS OF EAST AFRICA

by Bill Branch

Struik, Cape Town; 2005

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Reviewed by Brian W Finch

graphic Guide' from Struik to a selection of East Africa's more commonly encountered reptiles and amphibians. This Guide's compiler, Bill Branch, is a herpetologist at South Africa's Port Elizabeth Museum.

A conservation-minded tone is reflected in the new Guide's Introduction, and in its Dedication, which reads: "To the Kihansi Spray Toad, *Nectophrynoidie asperginis* – a small victim of development." (The precarious existence of this species, around a waterfall on Tanzania's Udzungwa Escarpment, is threatened by a hydro scheme.)

At first glance, as it so portable (while also being relatively easy on the pocket), this Guide would appear to be the ideal aid

to identification in the field. The photography is, for the most part, excellent – not least so, the front cover image of a South-eastern Green Snake (although Branch calls this a 'Green Water Snake'). The fact that frogs, toads, and caecilians are included, as well as the reptiles, is a particular bonus: in that many of us – tour guides, as well as general nature enthusiasts – have until now been almost wholly in the dark when it comes to the amphibians.

With respect to the reptiles, we are still benefiting from the superb, comprehensive *Field Guide to the Reptiles of East Africa* by Spawls *et al.*, first published in 2001. This is a substantial book, however, and – in being priced now at about KSh 4,000 (the equivalent of nearly US\$ 50) – it is prohibitively expensive for some. A pocket reference, then, designed for use in the field, is an attractive proposition, especially if one also has, at home on one's shelf, a copy of Spawls *et al.* to consult between safaris for all the finer details.

Since my own knowledge of reptiles outside Kenya is still quite poor (and confined even then mainly to the lizards), I cannot comment authoritatively on the selection – and the treatment – of all the species that are featured in Branch. I can say, however, that there are, in the taxonomy used, some

medically significant snake. Branch cannot ever have seen a live one.

The main picture of the Puff Adder (another medically significant snake) shows a South African colour form entirely unknown in East Africa. Indeed, of the 200-odd images in the book that are credited to Branch (that is, excluding the ones supplied by other photographers), I should say that no more than 20–25 were taken in East Africa. And in the text, Branch writes about 'summer' and 'winter', as if unaware that these terms have no meaning in East Africa.

So, why – given Branch's reputation as a sound herpetologist – is this book so full of errors? The answer is simple: Branch has spent only a few weeks in East Africa. His herpetological fieldwork in the region consists (in so far as I am aware) of one two-week consultancy for Tiomin at Kwale, on the Kenya coast, and a short trip to Nairobi and the highlands.

Branch, then, has very little practical field knowledge of East African reptiles and amphibians. He has not published any scientific papers (that I know of) on the East African reptile fauna. And he cannot tell what is common from what is not. So this book is just a showcase for his – admittedly superb – photographs. One reason why so

## Worse than just a 'duff book'

Steve Spawls comments ...

A Londoner who went to live in South Africa in the early 1970s, Bill Branch has established himself as one of southern Africa's foremost herpetologists, having a string of publications to his name. He is also an accomplished photographer.

How, then, does he manage – in his *Photographic Guide to the Snakes, Other Reptiles and Amphibians of East Africa* – to make so many rudimentary mistakes, to leave so many glaring omissions?

To this question I shall return, but for now let me concentrate on spelling out some of the book's failings ...

The omissions first: Branch has included roughly half the reptile species on record for East Africa, but has left out several species that are common and/or widespread in the region, and which – as such – ought to appear in any selective reptiles guide. Examples are Battersby's Green Snake, the Striped Bark Snake, the Tree Skink, the Elmenteita Rock Agama, and the Kenya Dwarf Gecko.

Perversely, though, Branch has included species – such as the Dwarf Crocodile, the Fawn-headed Snake Eater, and the Forest Hinged Terrapin – with only a peripheral distribution in East Africa. Known from just a few specimens, these animals do not belong among the region's core fauna, and so should not be included at the expense of more significant species.

In some of the photographs, moreover, the reptiles Branch has chosen to depict are of colour phases not seen in East Africa. The Red-headed Rock Agama he shows is of a central African phase. The Banded Water Cobra he pictures looks nothing like the ones from Lake Tanganyika. And nowhere in East Africa have I come across a Spiny Agama resembling the one shown in this book.

Branch also makes some curious mistakes. The Black-necked Spitting Cobra he shows is a West African specimen. (The brown form, common along the Kenya coast, is not shown.) He makes no mention either of the pink neckbands that are such a useful diagnostic feature of this species' highland form – and this, bear in mind, is a

obvious discrepancies between this book and Spawls *et al.*, making any novice's bid to learn from both works in tandem very confusing indeed!

What is more, Branch offers no explanation for these discrepancies, which include several changes to the common and/or the scientific names of species (even those of some East African endemics!). Take the first few entries, on the Typhlopidae family (of Blind Snakes), and then try comparing these with the species accounts in Spawls *et al.* You will very soon tie yourself in knots, and this – sadly – occurs throughout.

A consistent usage of the names for species is one of the cornerstones of advancing understanding in any field of natural history. So, where there already exists a hugely authoritative and widely recognised regional publication, any variance should – if it cannot be avoided – then at least be explained.

There are in Branch also a few (presumably) unintentional name changes: Speke's Hinged Tortoise, for example, is presented (on page 114, as well as in the Index) as 'Spek's Hinged Tortoise'. The 'Nose-horned Viper' (known to us as the Rhinoceros-horned Viper) is given a NW Tanzanian distribution in the text, when – as the map correctly shows – it is found only in the NE (at Amani).

Featuring several obscure *Philothamnus* Green Snakes, but

many widespread species are absent is simply that Branch does not have images of them; he would have the pictures, had he spent any length of time in the field here.

All told, Branch's book is of about as much use to naturalists in the field as a Guide to the Common Birds of our region would be, without reference to such ubiquitous species as the Pied Crow and the Lilac-breasted Roller. This is no crime, however; we could excuse a duff book that is visually appealing, and which suits everyone's budget, even if it does have limited value in the field.

The problems with Branch's book do not stop here, however. Incorporated in the book is something very much more sinister: Virtually all the distribution maps in the book are identical to the equivalent maps in our *Field Guide to the Reptiles of East Africa* (Spawls, Howell, Drewes, and Ashe, A and C Black; 2001).

The only exceptions to this pattern of similarity occur where very recent taxonomic work has split a group (the Bark Snakes, say), in which cases Branch's maps reflect the changes. One could argue that the

omitting the one – Battersby's Green Snake, common around Nairobi – that people are most likely to see, seems rather strange, to say the least. (Or, is it that Branch just happens not to have a good image of this common snake?)

Moving on to the lizards, I was alarmed to find that yet another of our most common reptiles – the widespread orange-headed, turquoise-bodied agama, *A. (a.) lionotus* – is misrepresented; for, while the map shows the correct distribution, the photograph is of a red-and-blue-black reptile more closely resembling the central African form of the Common Agama, *Agama agama*.

Two of the *Lygodactylus* Dwarf Geckoes, *angularis* and *capensis*, are not shown as occurring in Kenya, when I have photographed the former on the Shimba Hills, and both are treated in Spawls *et al.* as present in Kenya. The gecko *Cnemaspis*, which I have often photographed foraging at night at Amani, is described as diurnal.

The map for the Yellow-headed Dwarf Gecko shows a widespread distribution in Kenya, when in reality the species occurs only in the extreme SE, well to the south of Mombasa. Moreover, this form is treated as *picturatus*, whereas in Spawls *et al.* (where *picturatus* refers to the White-headed Dwarf Gecko) it is *luteo-picturatus*



maps used by Branch represent a community of knowledge; that his maps are the same as ours only because both show the true distribution of the species. But here is a curious thing: We made mistakes on some of our maps. Here and there, a town's name was transposed, or a computer glitch left an area of unintended blank space, or two maps became mixed up...

That Branch's maps embody these same mistakes seems odd, to put it mildly. If he had direct knowledge of what species occur in East Africa, and of where they live (or if he had produced his maps independently, using museum records along with the literature), then his maps – surely – would be devoid of our mistakes.

Struik, as South Africa's foremost nature publisher, has produced many good, and some outstanding, books – Keith Coates Palgrave's *Trees of Southern Africa*, for example, or Sinclair and Ryan's *Birds of Africa south of the Sahara*. In its haste to collar the East African market, however, Struik has also produced some inaccurate,

Confusingly, the White-headed Dwarf Gecko – treated as *mombasicus* in Branch – is given a tiny coastal distribution either side of the Tanzania–SE Kenya border, when in fact its Kenyan distribution is more akin to that shown on the map for the Yellow-headed. Have the two maps been transposed, I wonder? While *Lygodactylus* is undeniably a confusing genus, such variance from the established literature should be justified.

Niggling flaws like these (and I could list many others) are perhaps inevitable in a book compiled outside the region for which it is intended.

This is reflected too in the seemingly arbitrary overall selection. How, in any selective treatment of 'common' East African reptiles (and amphibians) can a question so fundamentally decisive (in terms of which species to include) as that of relative abundance be gauged reliably from afar?

Unfortunately, such flaws detract, again and again, from what is otherwise a most attractive-looking and user-friendly publication. While welcoming new publishing interest in our region's natural history, Struik and other South African publishers (and authors) might do well, on any future titles covering East Africa, to exercise greater responsibility and care over checking their facts – while also showing more respect for existing, hard-won stores of local knowledge.

southern-African-centred publications. (In 2003, Struik published what was touted as being the ultimate popular work on African palaeontology, by an author who thought, *inter alia*, that Olduvai Gorge is in Kenya. If you don't believe me, then read Lee Berger's *The Official Field Guide to the Cradle of Humankind*. Scientific reviewers, of course, savaged the book.)

Naturalists living in East Africa and members of the region's wider public are the consumers of these books. We have a voice, and can choose whether or not to buy such books – and whether or not to create profits for their authors and publishers. If we feel we are being short-changed, then we should make our feelings known.

This particular book, purporting to be a Photo Guide to East African Reptiles and Amphibians, is the work of a South-African-based author with little knowledge of his East African subject matter. And yet, neither his editor nor his publisher seems to feel that such basic knowledge is important.

Do people in East Africa feel the same way? Most publishers today have websites and contact addresses. We need to tell them exactly how we feel about offerings they are directing at us. If we don't, then maybe they will never know – or care.