

BOOK REVIEW

Gaël R. Vande weghe (2010). Les Papillons du Gabon

In French; Soft cover; Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), Gabon. 424 pages, of which 132 are colour plates; ISBN-13: 9780982026342; US\$ 189 at www.nhbs.com

The publication of an excellent book on the butterflies of Gabon is greatly welcome. It needs to be placed in perspective, since books on the butterflies of tropical Africa are thin on the ground. However, the relatively modest fauna of South Africa was special, with serious publications dating back to the works by Wallengren and Trimen during the 19th century.

The first comprehensive account of African butterflies (now comprising more than 4,000 species) was that by Aurivillius 1898, without illustrations. This was rectified in 1925 with the publication of the African volume of "Seitz" under the sole authorship of Aurivillius. This magnificent effort was effectively the only overview of African butterflies till D'Abrera's pictorial volume on African butterflies in 1980, based on the collections of the British Museum (Natural History) in London. D'Abrera's book provided a great stimulus towards serious study of African butterflies. This was updated in three volumes (1997, 2004, 2010)

A year later, Berger (1981) published his massive, fully illustrated, book on the butterflies of Zaïre (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), a work that is very difficult to obtain.

Then Kielland (1990) reviewed the butterflies of Tanzania, though with very limited illustrations. He was followed by Larsen (1991) whose book on the 900 Kenyan butterflies was fully illustrated in colour, and rather more comprehensive than the Tanzania book. Heath et al. (2002) produced an excellent and up-to-date book on the butterflies of Zambia, with a CD-ROM illustrating all the species, but the text was rather summary. The most recent contribution was the comprehensive review of the 1400 butterflies of West Africa by Larsen (2005), with a considerable amount of historical, biogeographical, and ecological data.

"Papillons de Gabon" opens with a beautifully illustrated 30 page introduction to the ecology of Gabon and its butterflies, followed by the plates, and then a systematic account of the 1400 species known from Gabon or almost certain to be there. It is the first comprehensive review of Gabon fauna. Many species were recorded in various papers between 1890 and 1910 but mainly dealing with species new to science. The book is comprehensive and largely based on the studies by the author in the extensive system of national parks in Gabon with each species is placed in regional perspective. Most species can be identified directly from this book, except for groups where the genitalia need examination. The author was constrained by the amount of print space at his disposal; it would have been wonderful if more of his personal observations could have

been included. A particularly useful aspect of the book is that it also gives an insight into the butterfly fauna of neighbouring Cameroun on which virtually nothing comprehensive has been written, but which is strongly needed.

It is an excellent and well-presented book that does its author proud, and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) deserves credit for supporting its genesis and publication.

The book sells for about \$189 U.S.; that is about a dime per species. The three recent volumes by D'Abrera (1997, 2004, 2010) will set you back about \$1000.

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