



**Walker's Marsupials of the World.** Ronald M. Nowak. The John Hopkins University Press, 2715 North Charles Street, Baltimore, Maryland 21218-4363, USA. 2005. 226 pp. Price: US \$22.95.

This book brings together a wealth of information on a unique group of mammals, the marsupials, which comprise diverse forms distributed across almost 300 species and found predominantly in South America and Australia.

The book basically consists of two parts that complement each other well. The first part, constituting virtually one-third of the entire book, is the introduction written by Christopher Dickman, University of Sydney, Australia, an expert on marsupials. It consists of a detailed discussion on marsupials with particular focus on their taxonomy, morphology, distribution, diet, life histories, importance and conservation.

The information within each broad section spans across all the detailed aspects of marsupial biology. Each, well packed with information, has ample references for readers who might like a more detailed discussion. For example, in the section on reproduction, the author browses through almost every aspect of reproduction that is unique to marsupials, both contrasting as well as comparing those common between marsupials and other placental mammals.

Conventionally, marsupials have been clumped under a single order. This book, however, recognizes marsupials as a Super-Order, with seven distinct orders within it, described in the section on taxonomy and evolution. This distinct ordering appears to have an advantage over the more conventional one, as it is able to highlight much more clearly, the ample variation displayed by this major group of animals.

The author, however, fails to adopt a conclusive stance regarding the evolution

and dispersal of marsupials, as discussed in the section on taxonomy. One has to nevertheless acknowledge that debates on the evolution of life forms are rarely ever conclusive, and the author is perhaps justified in taking a neutral standpoint, thus being able to provide an unbiased representation of the debates involved. Especially interesting is the debate on their divergent evolution in the Americas and Australasia as well as their dispersal through Antarctica during the breaking up of the Gondwana land mass. Illustrations of hypothesized taxonomical arrangements as well as of the important suggested routes of evolution and dispersal, nonetheless, would have added to the clarity of the book and perhaps aided in a better understanding of these complex issues.

The book does justice to the topics of morphology and reproduction; however, some illustrations or photographs of a few exemplary cases of morphological specialization would have made this section more interesting. Similarly, discussions on the distribution and patterns of diversity seem unnecessarily long, and could have been made more concise with the addition of illustrative maps and tables. To cite an example, details on the division of opossums, as described by some scholars, could have been made far more accessible by adding a few key illustrations.

The section on diet and resource requirement seems exhaustive with adequate information on the topic. A small error in this section, however, concerns the usage of the phrase 'resource requirements'. As is well known, the existence and distribution of faunal types often depend not just on food but also on availability of mates and specific habitat structures. Inclusion of information on these topics would have done justice to the usage of the phrase 'resource requirements' apart from the term 'diet' in the heading.

The last section on the conservation status of marsupials sums up the current status of populations of marsupials across their domain of distribution fairly comprehensively. It also neatly categorizes the major factors that seem to have led to the threatened status of numerous species, and sadly, the extinction of some. However, the discussion on conservation measures necessary in order to protect endangered marsupials seems all too brief. A few examples of successful conservation programmes that have led to the recovery of the population of certain species (for instance, the Tasmanian devil) could have

been detailed. Also, as an addition, a list of the status of different marsupials according to the IUCN categorization (as an appendix) would have been helpful to researchers and conservationists, although individual threat status has been mentioned in the subsequent section, the species information catalogue.

The second portion of the book, spanning the remaining two-thirds of it, is an orderly arranged catalogue of generic accounts of the different marsupials, with information on their taxonomy, morphology, reproductive biology and conservation status.

Most accounts are provided with at least one photograph of a representative type of the generic taxa. Almost all the photographs are of live specimens and in black and white. Here, an additional drawn plate of a typical specimen would have been extremely useful in identification, since photographs are not particularly helpful in displaying distinctive features of particular faunal types. Also, a more orderly classification of specific information categories within each account would have been useful to the reader in locating specific information regarding each species. Finally, a small-sized map displaying the distribution of the taxon accompanying each generic account, would have made the volume more useful.

The book is, however, a promising one and stands out in terms of providing accurate information, compared to other books of a similar genre. It completely follows the standards set by previous volumes on other mammals, including primates, in style and content, and presents an appealing piece of work to the scientist as well as the non-scientist alike. Illustration of the geological timescale, comparison charts for length, weight, temperature and area, as well as the conversion table are useful additions to the book as they aid immediate referencing while reading. This book is highly recommended to anyone about to embark on any kind of research on marsupials, as well as those who would just like to learn more about this unique group of animals.

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