

BOOK REVIEWS

Mean and Lowly Things

Mean and Lowly Things: Snakes, Science, and Survival in the Congo. 2008. Kate Jackson. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts. 336 pp., 49 color illustrations and 2 maps. Hardcover — ISBN 13: 978-0-674-02974-3, ISBN 10: 0-674-02974-7. \$27.95.

For anyone who has conducted fieldwork in developing nations, this book inevitably brings back memories of one’s own experiences. Some of those memories are warm and fuzzy, such as the excitement of discovery, meeting new people who share one’s interests and obsessions, and, usually only after one’s return, the realization that one has survived another adventure. However, Kate Jackson’s tale also awakens recollections of frustration, discomfort, and even danger, at least some of which can be attributed to one’s own inexperience or outright stupidity. The synopsis used to promote the book summarizes both quite adequately:

In 2005, Kate Jackson ventured into the remote swamp forests of the northern Congo to collect reptiles and amphibians. Her camping equipment was rudimentary, her knowledge of Congolese customs even more so. She knew how to string a net and set a pitfall trap, but she never imagined the physical and cultural difficulties that awaited her. Culled from the mud-spattered pages of her journals, Mean and Lowly Things reads like a fast-paced adventure story. It is Jackson’s unvarnished account of her research on the front lines of the global biodiversity crisis — coping with interminable delays in obtaining permits, learning to outrun advancing army ants, subsisting on a diet of Spam and manioc, and ultimately falling in love with the strangely beautiful flooded forest.

The reptilian fauna of the Republic of Congo was all but undescribed, and Jackson’s mission was to carry out the most basic study of the amphibians and reptiles of the swamp forest, to create a simple list of the species that exist there — a crucial first step toward efforts to protect them. When the snakes evaded her carefully set traps, Jackson enlisted people from the villages to bring her specimens. She trained her guide to tag frogs and skinks and to fix them in formalin. As her expensive camera rusted and her Western soap melted, Jackson learned what it took to swim with the snakes — and that there’s a right way and a wrong way to get a baby cobra out of a bottle.

I have to admit I enjoyed the book. I liked Dr. Jackson’s straightforward prose and her matter-of-fact accounts of hair-raising events. However, I also came away with a sense of discomfort, which I attribute largely to the impression that the author, possibly as a consequence of having survived trials and tribulations most of us will never experience, developed a somewhat inflated impression of herself and her contributions to science. I don’t want to imply that the latter are inconsequential — establishing baseline data for a poorly known fauna is exceedingly important — but I got the distinct feeling that when Jackson equated her experiences in Africa with those in the United States, the former inevitably lost something in the comparison.

Yes, she experienced “interminable delays” in acquiring permits, largely attributable to local turf battles, an inefficient bureaucracy comprised of elements that never seem to talk to one another, maybe

even some corruption, and certainly some instances of individuals wielding their authority only to demonstrate that they could. While this is much less likely to occur in North America, it is a reality in the developing world that can be offset only by fostering the proper local connections over sometimes extensive periods of time. I wanted to see some acknowledgement of that fact, and instead got only one critique after another of how poorly the authorities dealt with her situation.

Also, although she obviously developed an appreciation for the people with whom she worked and maybe even came to like some of them, Jackson spent far more time expressing her exasperation with those who didn’t understand what she was doing and sought only to profit in some way from her presence. Rather than explain how foreign she must have appeared to the local populace and how truly bizarre her endeavors were perceived, or even acknowledge how “rich” she was in light of their day-to-day reality, she rants and raves excessively about the profit-mongering and those who merely got in her way. For the most part, I came away thinking that she really didn’t enjoy having to interact with folks who weren’t like her.

Finally, I was really disturbed by Jackson’s interaction with a student who was motivated by accounts of Africa and wanted to venture out on her own. Instead of taking advantage of the student’s excitement and enthusiasm to mentor a prospective biologist, she tells her to do it on her own: “‘Leaf through the atlas until you find a place you’re interested in and then just go there, and figure it out for yourself.’ ‘That’s what I did,’ I tell her.” After reading about just how she did that, especially considering the difficulties she encountered, I can’t figure out why, short of a sadistic streak or an inexcusable pomposity all too frequently associated with academic professionals, she would want to subject anyone to such often unnecessary adversities. Especially in light of the fact that Dr. Jackson is now an educator, I found that episode rather distressing.

Nevertheless, my perceptions of the author’s personality aside, she did survive and sometimes thrived under adverse conditions most field biologists will never experience, and reading her account of those adventures is both entertaining and worthwhile. I came away both a bit envious that I’ll never be able to lay claim to having endured anything like what Jackson withstood — and glad that I haven’t. Everyone with an interest in biodiversity should read this book, if only to begin developing an appreciation of those adventurous scientists whose quest for knowledge provides us with the little we know about the natural world.



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Wet Places

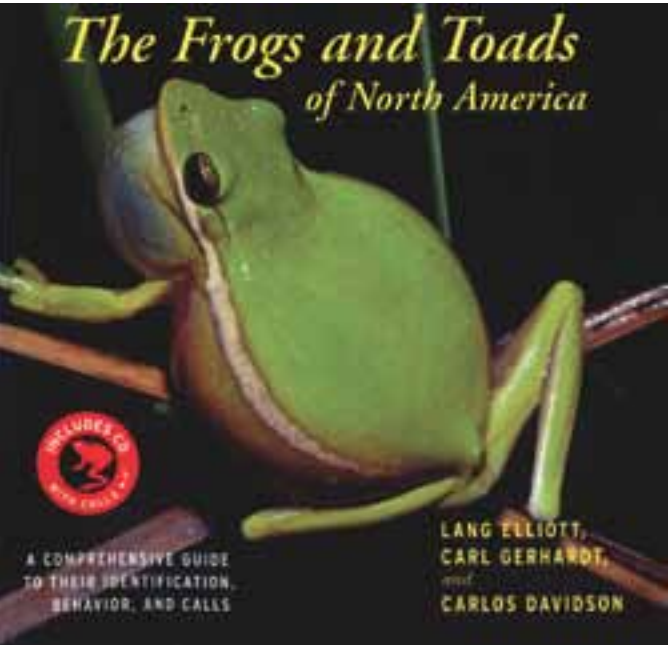
The Frogs and Toads of North America: A Comprehensive Guide to their Identification, Behavior, and Calls. 2009. Lang Elliott, Carl Gerhardt, and Carlos Davidson. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston and New York. 344 pp., innumerable color illustrations, distribution maps for all species, and a CD with recordings of calls. Softcover — ISBN 13: 978-0-618-66399-6, ISBN 10: 0-618-66399-1. \$19.95.

Legendary turtle conservationist Archie Carr said it best in his book *The Windward Road*: “I have always liked frogs. I liked them before I ever took up zoology as a profession; and nothing I have had to learn about them since has marred the attachment. I like the looks of frogs, and their outlook, and especially the way they get together in wet places and sing about sex.”

This exquisitely illustrated field guide is a tribute to that legacy. It provides photographs and descriptions of the 101 currently recognized species of frogs and toads found in the continental United States and Canada. Each species is covered in a minimum of two pages, with common and current scientific names, a range map, and a short discussion of appearance, range and habitat, behavior, and voice. All species accounts are illustrated, some profusely; many show calling males and a number depict color morphs of variable taxa. The most unique feature of this book, however, is the accompanying CD that features recordings of the calls of every species (except the two that never vocalize).

The book begins with a short introduction that features a Sigurd Olson quote that speaks of a “primeval chorus” and, somewhat unexpectedly, a 17th-century haiku. A brief overview of classification (just enough, but not too much) precedes an 11-page synopsis of anuran natural history (itself an introductory course in basic frog biology), a 4-page abstract of evolution and speciation (that addresses some of the challenges to understanding relationships of species in a dynamic world), and a 5-page summary of conservation issues that concludes with a section on “what you can do.” Next follow some “miscellaneous explanations” that range from how to coordinate use of the CD with the text to seemingly ever-changing scientific names. The individual accounts follow a list of species and recorded tracks. A section on “finding, observing, catching, and keeping” frogs, another on “the making of the book,” acknowledgements, credits, detailed descriptions of the recordings, a list of relevant sources, and an index to species and groups completes the volume.

The only flaws are minor. The size of the book facilitates an appreciation of the remarkable photographs, but resists convenient use in the field — a problem with a “field guide.” Also, as is clearly stated in the text, the phenomenally rapid acquisition of new information inevitably results in some scientific names being out of date. By listing newly coined combinations, the authors almost managed to stay ahead of the curve, but very recent work with species pre-



viously assigned to the genus *Eleutherodactylus* and the elevation of that group to a family of its own (Eleutherodactylidae) is not reflected, undoubtedly appearing just as this volume was in final production.

I must admit that I was predisposed to like this book. I share a common history with the senior author (Elliott). We learned much of what we know today from the late Dean Metter, whose undergraduate course in herpetology inspired us both. The second author (Gerhardt) served on my graduate committee and, although he probably wondered if I’d ever amount to anything, kindly kept it to himself. Nevertheless, the amount of information, the spectacular photographs, and the recordings speak eloquently to a quality that obviates any biases I may have brought to this review. Every time I open the book, I encounter a photograph that triggers a desire to get out and find frogs. Not only are the images diagnostic (essential for a guide), they provide insights into anuran biology that are better experienced only by spending time in wet places. The authors’ invitation to “relax to the choruses of the frogs” speaks for itself. And, who cannot like a book dedicated to its subjects:

“Last but not least, we applaud the frogs and toads themselves, who have given us the opportunity to celebrate their lives. We trust that humankind will keep their habitats healthy and diverse, so that they forever continue to delight us with their leaping, splashing, and calling.”

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