



BOOK REVIEW

California Amphibians and Reptiles

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California Amphibians and Reptiles. 2025. Robert W. Hansen and Jackson D. Shedd. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, USA. 520 pp. Paperback – ISBN 9780691249070. \$35.00.

California is home to over 200 species of amphibians and reptiles, which certainly warrants the state its own field guide. Thankfully, this highly detailed and extremely well-illustrated guide is now available. The book serves as an accessible field resource providing both comprehensive information as well as a deeper exploration of the incredible diversity of amphibians and reptiles found throughout California. With so many species to cover and the challenge of ensuring the book can be fully utilized by readers in the field or back at home, the authors have managed to find the perfect balance between these two functions.

The book is well-organized, beginning with an overview of California's varied ecosystems and how these influence herpetofaunal diversity. This introduction provides readers with an ecological context, which helps to enrich the understanding of species distributions. The next section, which focusses on the conservation of California's herpetofauna, includes summaries on climate change, invasive species, and the major emerging infectious diseases. The final few pages before the species accounts include diagrams highlighting the key morphological features of each group, introducing readers to the key terms used to describe them and differentiate between taxa. This is an important consideration, as the target audience for this guide includes wildlife enthusiasts that might not be familiar with the names of scales found on the heads of snakes or the scutes of turtles.

The bulk of the guide is devoted to species (and subspecies) accounts that include detailed descriptions of morphology, behavior, and habitats. These accounts provide information about diet, breeding, seasonal activity, and conservation status in addition to the information necessary for the identification of each taxon, highlighting similar species that could cause confusion along with a warning when a species is venomous. This balance between scientific rigor and accessibility

renders this book appropriate for professional field biologists, students, and dedicated enthusiasts alike. The authors also have provided the first images and species accounts for newly described species, ensuring the ongoing relevance and longevity of this guide.

Each species is illustrated with a photograph or, if more informative, an illustration (often of aquatic taxa). Additional images of diagnostic features, sexes, and life stages further facilitate identification. Particularly useful are dorsal and lateral views of most amphibian larvae, recognizing that encounters

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with earlier life stages are sometimes more frequent than finding adults. This addition is perhaps my favorite feature of this guide, as most only focus on the adults of species one might encounter. Including extremely detailed illustrations of the larvae of the most common species allows the user to quickly determine which species or genus they observed. For someone who is not at all familiar with species from California, I found this an extremely helpful tool that I wish more field guides adopted. All the images throughout are on white backgrounds and arranged in side-by-side series of plates, which allows for quick comparisons between similar species.

Current range maps are superimposed on a topographic map of California or, when necessary, smaller sections of the state when ranges are restricted. By demonstrating relief, readers can readily identify habitat associations and barriers to dispersal for some species. Also, the authors have made an effort to be as inclusive as possible by printing the maps in colorblind-friendly colors.

The final sections of the guide include an overview of taxonomy for some species, particularly when relationships are uncertain or when additional information is required. A list of relevant references, a handy glossary especially useful for readers unfamiliar with the pertinent terminology, lists of additional resources including websites, other books, museums, and herpetological societies, instructions for dealing with a venomous snakebite with a facing page debunking five myths about rattlesnakes precede an index and a species checklist, which some readers will see as a challenge to tick them all off.

One of the first guides to synthesize species identification information with natural history and distribution data for the state was *California Amphibians and Reptiles* by Stebbins (1972). An updated 2012 edition (Stebbins and McGinnis 2012) provided new and critical information on the species discovered in California since the publication of the original. Additional modern field guides to the herpetofauna of

California or the western US include McGinnis and Stebbins (2018) and Flaxington (2021), with some going as far as specializing on certain taxa (Taylor 2024). All are easily carried in the field and are accessible and informative, yet retain a high level of quality for the more curious and professional readers. Even those that are now out of date remain important additions to the library of anyone who is serious about herpetofauna in the region. However, none compare to this new guide by Hansen and Shedd, who have ensured that their guide contains as much relevant information as possible, while remaining accessible and portable.

Although the book is portable for serious field excursions, it might be a bit cumbersome for casual hikers not accustomed to carrying such references in the field. Some readers might want even more comparative plates or quick-reference charts to aid in distinguishing similar species. Some advanced readers might desire a deeper dive into discussions of molecular taxonomy, although this is really beyond the scope of a field guide. In general, however, the authors have provided an excellent field guide to the amphibians and reptiles of California that sets a high bar for guides to herpetofaunas in other regions of the United States and throughout the world. I see it as a valuable tool that will be used by many in coming years — and one I hope to put to use myself in the near future.

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