

BOOK REVIEWS

West African Seashells by R. Ardovini and T. Cossignani published by L'Informatore Piceno, Ancona, Italy 2004. 320pp A4 Hardback, ISBN 88-86070-11-X. Price 102 Euros.

The molluscan fauna of West Africa is extensive, with many notable species and numerous endemics, however there is comparatively little literature on the region. The last general monograph on the area - M. Nickles' "Mollusques testaces marine de la Cote occidentale d'Afrique" was published over half a century ago and only covers some 459 species, whilst other more recent works have limited geographical coverage. It is therefore a pleasure to find a book which fills such a big gap in our bookshelves. The West African malacological province covered by this book is said to extend "from White Cape in Southern Morocco to the Northern coasts of Namibia where the Western Cape Province begins" (though maps in the book fail to show where the former is, and the latter should surely be the Southern coast of Namibia) together with offshore islands of The Azores, Canary Islands, Cape Verde Islands and Madeira.

The book commences with a short introduction and brief history of malacological research along West African coasts, both of which are trilingual being in English, French and Italian. There follows a 37 page systematic list giving scientific name, author and date of description for the 2,756 species recognised in this book as occurring in West Africa. It is noticeable how many of these have been recently described, some 646 in the 15 years prior to this book's publication - over 23% which gives a good indication of how rapidly our knowledge of this fauna is growing and equally how poor the fauna has been studied in the past.

The bulk of the book, some 240 pages, is devoted to full colour photographs of the shells, this is arranged systematically, interspersed with brief text sections (bilingual in English and Italian) introducing some, though not all, of the main Molluscan families with biological information and major bibliographical references. Each shell depicted is photographed separately allowing generally sharp focus, and with smaller species shown enlarged, though it must be said that the colouring of some of the plates shows an unnatural red/orange colour bias - particularly

apparent in *Haliotis*, *Terebra* and *Turrids*. In all there are some 2,060 photographs which, however, show only (!) 1,189 species - less than half the number given in the systematic list, though many species are shown here for the first time in a 'popular' book. I can understand the reason why many gastropods are shown in both dorsal and ventral view, but do we need ten photos of *Aequipecten commutatus* or seven of *Pagodula fraseri* some showing little variation, or five *Persicula persicula* - especially when the common subspecies *P. persicula avellana* is not depicted? I would personally have preferred less duplication in the plates and the depiction of more species. Anyone using this book needs to be aware that, while the plates show most West African species that a general collector is likely to come across, they do not depict all the species from the region, and must be carefully used in conjunction with the systematic list.

For reasons of space the authors have limited information below each photograph to: scientific name, without author or date or description - one has to turn to the systematic list for those; size, which is given in mm for the actual specimen shown - leaving one unsure whether this is an average, small or large specimen for the species; locality, which again is given for the actual specimen shown - leaving one unsure whether a species is widely occurring or has a very restricted distribution. It would have been difficult to give full distributions given space restrictions, but should have been possible for example with the many *Cones* endemic to the Cape Verde Islands to have included an abbreviation 'E' to indicate endemism. Since many countries are cited as localities, it would have been helpful had the authors included a map showing where the various national boundaries reach the coastline - though inserting a photocopy of this is easy and makes the distributions easier to interpret.

Inevitably, given the number of species covered, a number of errors and omissions have crept in. For example, in the systematic list *Natica marchardi* Pin, 1883 should read Pin, 1992; *Cymbium patulum* Broderip, 1786 should read

Broderip, 1830; *Polynices* should read *Polinices*; while *Hexaplex burghousi* (Tourmoeur, 1875) should read *H. bourgeoisi* (Tournouer, 1875) - though the generic position and validity of this as a recent species are both debatable. Numerous species should have the author's names in () - inexcusable in cases where the date of the genus is shown in the systematic list as post-dating the specific names. More surprisingly I could find no reference to the Volute *Plicoliva ryalli* Bouchet, 1989 although the species was described from Ghana, and features in literature cited.

More disconcerting than the errors and omissions though is the frequent inconsistencies one finds. Plates showing *Neosimnia spelta senegalensis*, *Homalocantha melanamathos* f. *chinii* and *Hexaplex varia* f. *clausi* when the systematic list only shows the nominate forms. Text which states that "*Distorsio smithi* (von Maltzan, 1884) is the only representative of this family along West Africa coasts" when the systematic list also includes *D. perdistorta* Fulton, 1938. *Pusia* treated as both valid genus and as a subgenus of *Vexillum*. *Conus byssinus* in the systematic list as a valid species, yet in the plates as a form of *C. pulcher* which itself is not in the systematic list although two other forms are shown there. *Bolma johnstoni* in the plates yet *Astraea johnsoni* in the systematic list. These are but a few examples.

The book has an excellent eight page bibliography, including details of many papers where the more recent species were described, as well as older works, together with an index. However the latter has no generic entries, only family and specific names are listed, and there are many omissions. Indeed most of those species treated in the systematic list but not shown in the plates are not indexed, a serious omission which ought to be corrected in any further edition of the book.

Considering the lack of previous literature to build upon this book is a remarkable achievement, the authors have succeeded in throwing some light on the 'Dark Continent', but users need to be aware that neither the plates nor the index are comprehensive in coverage, and need to use the systematic list to get the most out of this book. With species from the West African fauna also found in European, Mediterranean, South African and Western Atlantic waters this book has a use far beyond the confines of West Africa. It should find a place in any serious Molluscan library, and it is as well that the binding is strong as the book will inevitably be heavily used.

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