

BOOK REVIEW

Encyclopedia of Marine Gastropods by Alain Robin. Jointly published by AFC (Association Française de Conchyliologie) and ConchBooks 2008. ISBN 978-3-939767-09-1 480p A4 Hardback. Approx £58.

Almost the whole of this book is devoted to illustrating shells. Some 461 full colour plates illustrate over 5,200 species of gastropod. Since nearly all the species have both dorsal and ventral views shown, and some have triple views – all cowries get additional side profiles – while other species have multiple specimens shown there must be well in excess of 11,000 individual images. The shells, all superb quality specimens, are shown against a uniform black background with between 8 and 20 species (16–40 images) to the page depending on layout and size of reproduction. Smaller species are generally enlarged helping greatly with identifications. The quality of photography is excellent, sharp and with good natural colour. Most of the photographs were taken by the author, with others contributed by over a dozen specialist collectors. Indeed the book could be considered a collective work for the specimens illustrated are drawn from the collections of numerous – largely French – private collections. This has naturally given the book a geographical ‘bias’ with many specimens from former French colonies and French Overseas Territories – New Caledonia, Djibouti, Réunion, Martinique, French Polynesia, Marquesas, Tahiti etc. – a welcome change when compared to other shell books from the English speaking world.

The large number of species included means that a sizeable library would be needed to give the same coverage, indeed many of the species have not previously been illustrated in generally available books. The inclusion of many recently described species – *Semicassis thachi* Kreipl, Alf & Eggeling 2006; *Dentiovula luna* Omi 2007; *Chicoreus franchii* Cossignani 2005; *Lyria boucheti* Bail & Poppe 2004 to name but a few – means that this book serves to supplement all but the most recent family monographs, while the inclusion of a number of recent type specimens is also welcome.

Broadly the book follows the latest systematic arrangement at family level, but there are numerous genera, often those with few species or smaller sized species, omitted. Indeed there are

whole families unrepresented – no Vermetidae, no Siliquariidae, no Triphoridae, no Rissoiidae, no Pterapods etc. As one would expect the strongest representation is within the families most popular with collectors. Cones, Cowries, *Murex*, Volutes and Strombidae alone account for 155 of the 461 plates, roughly one third of the book. This is not to say that other groups are not well represented, 149 species of Nassariids, 113 species of Neritidae, 108 species of Ovuliidae for example. In some families, Epitoniidae and Columbellidae, the genera are alphabetically arranged within the family and the species alphabetically within the genus, nice and easy to follow. In other families the genera seem to be more randomly arranged, although this is often for pragmatic reasons, fitting genera into plates with appropriate enlargement/reduction for greatest clarity, though the species are still alphabetically arranged within the genera.

There is a strange mixture of splitting and lumping at the generic level. In the Ranellidae, *Cymatium* is used in the strictest sense while; *Ranularia*, *Monoplex*, *Septa*, *Guttarium*, *Lottoria*, *Turritriton* and *Reticutriton*, all generally treated as subgenera of *Cymatium* are here treated as full genera. In the Costellariidae in contrast the genus *Vexillum* is treated as one monolithic genus ignoring the subgenera despite the fact that there are two successive alphabetical lists of species which correspond to the subgenera *Vexillum* (*Vexillum*) and *Vexillum* (*Pusia*). One is thus never certain whether a genus is being used in a broad or narrow sense.

Below each plate the caption for each species illustrated gives the scientific name, locality details and an indication of size – and I will return to these later. The text is in white on a black background which is clear to read and looks good alongside the plate, but which is impossible to annotate to make corrections or notes. All the emphasis is on illustrating as many species as possible and the constraint on space for text means that there are virtually no comments on habitats, whether a species is from deep

water or from mangroves etc, similarly there are no comments on rarity. Particularly irritating is the lack of details of synonyms, thus we find *Neritina wagiensis*, *Ficus papyratia* and *Pleuroplaca clava* with no references to *N. communis*, *F. communis* or *P. persica* respectively. Regardless of which name is considered as valid, without the synonyms it is often not possible to relate species treated here to another book or to an old label with any certainty. The general lack of comments indeed make some of the illustrations misleading. The beautiful frilled specimen of *Nucella wahlbergi* is the deep water form (*N. wahlbergi* fm *lindaniae* Lorenz 1991) although not noted by habitat or name, and very different from the more common shallow water form. Two of the four illustrations of *Haliotis diversicolor* show the pale green colour one associates with specimens commercially farmed in aquaculture, although without comments on habitat one cannot be certain. Occasionally the selection of specimens too may be misleading. *Buccinum undatum* is illustrated by a sinistral specimen and the forms *carinatum* and *acuminatum*, all interesting to see, but, for collectors unfamiliar with the European fauna, a more 'normal' specimen might be better for identification.

Given the constraints on space for text I am surprised that authors' names are given in full throughout. Why use Linnaeus instead of Linné or simply L.? A single page listing the many commonly used abbreviations for authors' names would have given more space for text throughout the book. It is strange too to find authors' names used unsystematically, thus we find both Born and von Born, and within a few pages Suduiraut, de Suduiraut and Guillot de Suduiraut. Sometimes the Sowerbys are differentiated as I, II and III sometimes not even within the same page dealing with the same family. Just as authors are given in full so we find the generic name given in full for every entry, when by following standard practice and abbreviating the genus to an initial after the first use on each page the author could easily have made space for more text.

Where the captions give information on locality this is restricted to data for the specimen illustrated, rather than as a distributional range for the species, usually simply given as a country of origin. The country names are given in English rather than French forms (presumably for marketing purposes) which is very helpful,

but restricting the data causes numerous problems. In many cases the data is too narrow, for example *Rapana venosa* "Italy" when the species naturally occurs in Japan/Korea was accidentally introduced into the Black Sea and spread thence into the Mediterranean. *Thais nodosa* "Brazil" when the species occurs on both sides of the Atlantic. *Conomurex persicus* "Syria" when the species only reached the Mediterranean as a Lessepsian migrant from the Red Sea. At the opposite extreme *Volutaconus bednalli* from northern Australia – yet all are here listed as from "Australia". Surely compass points could have been added within available space. It is impossible to differentiate between a localized endemic and a widespread species since a single locality will be cited for both. In the Cowries, *C. caputdraconis* from "Easter Isl. Chile" and *C. caputserpentis* from "Bora Bora, French Polynesia" yet the first is an island endemic while the second is widespread throughout the Indo-Pacific. Where a country has more than one coastline it has been necessary to indicate which is referred to. A random page gives "Canada (Atlantic)", "Mexico (Pacific)" and "France (W)", yet this is not consistently done. Colombia has long coasts on both Pacific and Caribbean and some entries indicate which a specimen comes from but other entries do not. Honduras has a small Pacific coast and a far longer Caribbean coast but none of the entries take this into account, all simply read "Honduras". Several dubious localities have crept in – the Australian endemic *Bankivia fasciata* shown from Mozambique, the Western Australian *Conus dorreensis* from Oman, and the Indo-Pacific *Xenophora pallidula* from Brazil – even in the unlikely event that these individual specimens were found living in these localities and represent range extensions or introduced populations the localities cited are misleading at best. None of these problems would have occurred had a distribution range been given rather than an individual location.

Similarly, just as the locality is given for the specimen illustrated, the size cited is for the individual specimen illustrated. Again this causes confusion since it is never clear whether this is a dwarf, giant or 'normal' specimen. *Haliotis midae* is "65.2 mm" yet adults of the species are more normally 150–170 mm. *Patella mexicana* which can reach 350 mm is "89 mm" and *Busycon contrarium* which can reach 400 mm is "85.2mm". A 67 mm

Harpa costata is illustrated alongside a 69 mm *Harpa costata laetifica* which is generally regarded as a dwarf form of the former. I cannot help feeling that the reason dorsal and ventral views of the same specimen are, generally, shown is that this allowed a single size and location to be cited. Giving distribution/size ranges would have enabled different specimens to be used for dorsal and ventral views, more useful for showing variation, although a single specimen could still have been used for rarer species.

There is what one might describe as the 'usual crop' of typos – *Volutopsis norvegicus* instead of *V. norvegicus*, *Trivia artcica* instead of *T. arctica*, *Clithon squarrosa* instead of *C. squamosa*, *Nerita umlaasiana* instead of *N. umlaasiana*, *Stmatella* instead of *Stomatella* and one could go on. The author Melvill alone appears as Malvill, Melville and Mekvill. The texts for *Marginella mosaica* and *M. musica* are crossed. There are also a number of plain misidentifications. The *Xenophora* illustrated as *X. pallidula* on plate 168 fig 6 is almost certainly *X. corrugata* form *tulearensis*, the misidentification is all the more surprising as while Reeve is correctly cited as author for the other three figured specimens of *X. pallidula* this specimen has Stewart & Kosuge as the author and they did describe *tulearensis*. On plate 456 fig 3 reportedly shows *Cancellaria angasi* Crosse yet that is a West African species while the specimen shown comes from Australia, being in fact *C. spirata* Lamarck, 1822. Incidentally, *C. angasi* is the correct name for the West African species widely shown (including here) as *C. uniangu-lata*, true *uniangu-lata* is a European fossil species. Plate 389, fig 12 reportedly shows "*Amalda aureocallosa* (Shikama & Oishi 1977) 18.1 mm Mozambique", here two species with similar names seem to be confused. *Amalda aureocallosa* (Shikama & Oishi 1977) from the East China Sea and exceeding 33 mm and *Ancillista aureocallosa* Kilburn & Jenner 1977 from Mozambique which reaches 24 mm. Looking at the shell, and given the locality and size cited I am fairly certain this should be identified as the latter. I am sure that many of the errors occurring result from mis-reading labels or accepting labels/data supplied with specimens for illustration without checking with other sources.

Perhaps more surprising than the errors are the omissions. Entries which omit author details, which omit locality details or which omit size

details. In three cases (plate 369 Fig. 12R, plate 431 Fig. 8 & plate 454 Fig. 10) there is no text at all relating to the figure, in each case the text seems to have been squeezed out of the 'field' for printing. It is also surprising to find the same shell illustrated under different names. *Drupa speciosa*, correctly shown, on plate 268 reappears as *Thais speciosa* on plate 272, and while *T. speciosa* is a valid species it does not come from the locality cited and looks totally different. *Acanthina spirata*, correctly shown, on plate 273 reappears as *Nucella spirata* on plate 276 yet with different size and locality data.

The index manages to squeeze the 5,200 entries into eleven pages, there are five columns to the page and ten entries to the column inch. The text is so compressed that in longer entries the type begins to merge. There are no generic entries making it difficult to find a genus quickly, irritating if one is trying to identify something and can recognize the genus but not the species. Although I have only had cause to look up a few dozen index entries I have found four species not listed – *Semicassis thachi*, *Beringius turtoni*, *Volutopsis norvegicus* (sic) and *Beringius frielei* – which does not inspire much confidence in the index. There is no bibliography, apart from the index and one page of acknowledgements the only text is the foreword, bilingual in French and English so each half a page long, in this the author states "This book displays over 5,200 species of marine gastropods and is designed to help the general collector identify shells in his collection. It is not intended to be a scientific work". Undoubtedly this book will enable collectors to compare specimens with illustrations for identification, and one would not expect a work like this to be a scientific revision in any way, but the emphasis on including as many illustrations as possible at the cost of textual information to my mind makes this book less useful than it could have been.

I found many frustrations in using this book, and it undoubtedly offers most to those who already have a very good working knowledge of the subject and can 'interpret' the scanty text. Having said that it will certainly become a standard reference work, the sheer number and range of species in one volume ensures that. Anyone who has an interest in tropical marine shells will need to have a copy of this book, but it has to be used with caution rather than treated as

authoritative. The price is very modest, considering the high quality and number of colour plates. With all its faults, this book can be highly recommended.

I am told that a companion volume dealing with bivalves (and other groups?) is in the pipeline. I cannot wait.

Kevin Brown