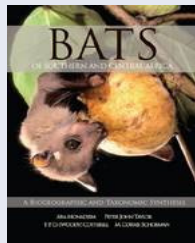




Bats for Africa

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Bats of southern and central Africa

Book Cover:



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Review Title:
Bats for Africa

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In his foreword to *Bats of southern and central Africa*, Steven Goodman states that, in synthesising over a century of research, the authors 'have done an exceptional job in making this information available to natural historians, bat enthusiasts and scientists alike'. I agree wholeheartedly with this sentiment; I also predict that this book will serve as a role model for other similar studies and rank amongst classic texts long after parts of it have become outdated.

One impressive aspect of the book, in addition to the excellent illustrations (photographs and line drawings), is the clarity of the text. The wealth of information presented is accessible, whether or not one is an expert in a particular area. This is just as well, because the subtitle, *A biogeographic and taxonomic synthesis*, does not begin to do the contents justice. The book comprises sections on museum collections and pioneering researchers, bat biology and echolocation, in addition to biogeography and the species accounts. The inclusion of a history of early research is important; too often our scientific forebears and their vital contributions are ignored. I am showing my museum roots when I say that it is also heartening to see acknowledgement of the value of museum specimens. This may be because two of the authors have spent parts of their careers in museums, but it is also because identification of some closely allied bat forms relies on cranial measurements and/or characteristics. As with every other section of the book, that on bat biology is thorough in its stated aim of providing an introduction to the subject. It is also to the point in that there are diagrams of roosting locations, which will help those looking for, and identifying, bats in the field. The section on echolocation explains the theory as well as the practicalities, right down to the equipment used.

The introduction to the species accounts explains what is included in each account and depicts the various features, cranial and external, employed in the descriptions. As a result, even without any anatomical knowledge, the descriptions are easily understood. The inclusion of photographs of mandibles is to be applauded; too often only crania are featured. My only quibble is that the occlusal surfaces of the lower teeth are not illustrated. There are also many identification matrices at the family, genus and species level, which help narrow down one's search. As is usual, the species accounts themselves generally include tables of measurements and distribution maps. However, the distribution maps include both the known distribution, based on museum specimens, and 'the predicted potential distribution throughout southern Africa, calculated from the georeferenced distribution records' (p. 59). It will be interesting to see how accurate these predictions turn out to be as more material is collected, assuming the taxonomy does not change too much in the meantime.

Novel additions to most accounts include not only photographs of crania (as mentioned) and external characters, but also diagrams of echolocation calls. The categories of information provided also differ from those often used in the past – not only is there a description, but key identification features are also listed. Apart from a category of 'Distribution, habitat and roosting', there is one on 'Foraging ecology', whereas previously conventional categories might have been 'Distribution and behaviour'. Although these new divisions may, to some extent, reflect differences between bats and other mammals, their greater precision also demonstrates advances in our understanding of the interaction of all aspects of form, function and environment.

There is a 40-page list of specimens in museums around the world, an impressive proportion of which were seen by one of the authors. For those they did not see, there are published references to identifications. This is one example of the great amount of detail that is included in the book, which is given in such a way that those not concerned with minutiae can skip it. Likewise, unless particularly interested, one can safely ignore the systematic notes. These are rather unconventionally given in a smaller font at the end of each species account but this makes sense because an interest in taxonomy is definitely a minority pursuit!

At just under 600 pages of close-packed information, this book works out at about R1 a page, which is good value for money. Certainly, anyone with an interest in African bats will need to have a copy. One could not ask for more in this book, except for the coverage to extend further up the continent than a maximum of 4°S. Perhaps, if we are lucky, there will be another volume covering the rest of sub-Saharan Africa.