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BOOK REVIEW: The Book of Beetles. A lifesize guide to six hundred of nature's gems (editd by Patrice Bouchard, Ivy Press, UK, 2014, 656 pages)

FEDOR ČIAMPOR JR.

Institute of Zoology, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava, Slovakia

Today, there are plenty of beetle books available on the market. They usually introduce readers to the biggest or smallest, strangely-shaped, or markedly-coloured beetle species. This generally proves to be fairly easy given the richness of morphological and ecological diversity within this order. Unfortunately, such treatments only capture a fraction of the world's Coleoptera diversity, use the same examples, and sometimes even the same pictures. That is almost all you learn about one of the biggest and most important animal groups in the world. The Book of Beetles (BoB) does not focus on any of the usual attributes, i.e., biggest size, most shining body or the longest nose. In spite of this (or maybe because of it), the BoB is exceptional.

While “offering only a glimpse“ of beetle diversity, this book is by far the most comprehensive colorful source of information about beetles, demonstrating much more than just their remarkable variation in form, size and color. It is, in my opinion, very nicely and uniquely structured, following the current system of classification for Coleoptera. Additionally, a 24-page introduction nicely summarizes the basic information necessary for further exploring the main part of the book. This introductory material includes an overview of the history of coleopterological research, general features of beetle morphology, classification, taxonomy, evolution and diversity, physiology and behavioral characteristics and also beetle conservation, and their relation to human society.

The core of the book includes 600 pages, with 600 beautiful photographs of beetles representing all 4 Coleoptera suborders, 160 families and many subfamilies. There are only 18 families missing if compared with the most recently published list of the Coleoptera families, and thus it is without doubt the best guide to beetle diversity. The beetles are determined to species, and the photographs are coupled with an actual size diagram, short list of characteristics, map of their distribution, and very interesting notes. For example, explanations for why some diving beetles have distinct yellow spots, that some beetles are active in the winter, or that there are beetle larvae which can give birth to new larvae can all be found, along with many other interesting things about beetles, can be found within. The selection of species included in the book followed several criteria like significance, life history curiosity, cultural and economic importance, or physical impression. Thus, the species included form something like a Coleoptera display-cabinet. In this book, you will learn not only that the diversity within beetles is enormous, but also begin to understand the diverse habitats that have likely produced the present day beetle diversity.

Since the book uses a scientifically valid and modern classification system for Coleoptera, it is much more than a picture book. It could be an essential tool for students interested in coleopterology or for beetle lovers looking for an orientation into the vast diversity of the biggest animal group in the world. The Book of Beetles begins with the words of Charles E. Darwin, and I believe he would like this book very much and certainly recommend it.