
Handbook: Indian Lizards, by B. K. Tikader and R. C. Sharma. 1992. Zoological Survey of India, Publications Division, Nizam Palace East, Calcutta 700 016, India. Indian Rupees 400.00/US\$ 32.00/£ 22.00. 250 pp.

INDRANEIL DAS

*Centre for Herpetology, Madras Crocodile Bank Trust
Post Bag 4, Mamallapuram, Tamil Nadu 603 103, India*

The scientific study of biological diversity in tropical Asia is in its infancy. In the midst of efforts to protect biodiversity, concerns have been expressed of the loss of expertise in systematic research and the retarded growth of systematic knowledge, surely the cornerstone of biological conservation. We don't even know which vertebrates occur in the region, far less the higher relationships between taxa. This, in turn, may potentially result in species loss: the failure to recognize distinct species is known to have caused species extinction (Daugherty et al. 1990).

Systematic research, which is poorly funded in India, is carried out almost exclusively by the staff of the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI), drawing upon the extensive collection started by the Asiatic Society of Bengal, although much has since been added by the Survey's own expeditions throughout the country, and even occasionally beyond our frontiers. This research has led to a virtual explosion of publications by its staff, primarily in the periodicals issued by the Survey (notably the *Records*, the *Memoirs*, and the *Occasional Papers*) as well as illustrated books (such as the *Handbook* series, which has covered arachnids, freshwater molluscs and turtles), brought out by the ZSI as a service to furthering our understanding and appreciation of India's rich and diverse fauna.

As might be expected, given an organization with a staff of over 1,000 and the lack of rigorous peer review, the quality of the work is highly heterogenous. Studies by the Survey have resulted in fundamental understanding of the biology and biogeography of our land (e.g., the Satpura Hypothesis of Hora, 1949). On the other side of the coin however, several major errors in the description of species purported to be new, many of which are not based on adequate series, are also attributable to the work of the Survey.

The goal of the *Handbook* series is to enable the man on the street to identify the Indian species. If the present work, written by an arachnologist (Tikader, a former Director of the ZSI, now deceased) and a herpetologist (Sharma, previously Deputy Director of the ZSI, now retired) is meant to help the layperson identify the local lizards and learn some basic facts about their biology, their objectives have not been realized. The mistakes begin on the cover of the dust jacket (similar to the book on turtles by Tikader and Sharma, 1985) of a male *Calotes versicolor* perched on *Cissus quadrangularis*, a xeric region plant, identified as "*Salea horsfieldi*" (sic), a species from the wet evergreen forests of the Western Ghats.