A Guide to the Reptiles of Belize


Not long ago, the naturalist seeking to identify reptiles in what was then called British Honduras had to rely on the arcane publications of academic herpetologists, often consisting of annotated checklists of amphibians and reptiles of neighboring Guatemala, and Mexico. Those works were technical and unsuitable for a general readership; none could be described as user friendly. Today visitors to Belize can choose from several popular guides that treat the fascinating reptile fauna of that country. The volume by Stafford and Meyer is a recent addition to the field.

Following a brief preface in which the authors assert that their volume “...provides a complete guide to these animals ....” they give a synoptic overview of the history of herpetological exploration in Belize. This section concludes with a statement concerning the use of dichotomous identification keys, a short section on organization of the species accounts, and a brief comment on the illustrations.

Chapter 1 is a miscellany describing the climate, physiography and vegetation of Belize, and the habitats of Belizean reptiles, defined primarily in terms of vegetation. Four maps (Figures 1–4) present information on elevation, rainfall, political subdivisions (districts), and physiography. In the text, elevation and rainfall are given in English units with metric equivalents, whereas Figures 1–4 provide English units only. There are 18 color plates of habitats, including a spectacular view of Victoria Peak. Included is a tabulation of reptile species by physiographic region (Table 1), by affinity with neighboring regions (Petén, Yucatán, and Honduras; Tables 2–4), and faunal resemblances among the three physiographic regions within Belize (Table 5). Two paragraphs are devoted to species of possible occurrence. The chapter concludes with a section on natural history, where diet and feeding, diel activity, seasonal activity, reproduction, coloration and defense, and parasitism are briefly discussed in general terms.

Crocodilians, turtles, lizards, and snakes are treated in Chapters 2–5, respectively. Identification keys (in English only) are provided to Families, Genera, and Species.
Each of the 122 species accounts includes a brief description of the species (metric units only), a description of the typical habitat, a comment on distribution of the species in Belize and throughout its geographic range (no distribution maps), a section on similar species, remarks (including comments on behavior, reproduction, and diet), and a key reference.

Most species accounts include one or more color photographs, usually of living specimens. The photos are attractively placed within the species accounts. Of some concern, however, is the fact that 45 of the 163 color photographs illustrate specimens that are extralimital to Belize and thus not always strictly representative of Belizean forms. For example, the Pygmy Snail Sucker, Sibon sanniola, is illustrated with a photo (Plate 146) of a specimen from Yucatán, which differs markedly in color pattern from the Belizean form, the latter originally described as a separate species. A more serious example involves the Blue Spiny Lizard, Sceloporus serrifer, illustrated with a photograph (Plate 65) of a specimen from Texas which very likely represents a different species, S. cyanogenys, as the authors acknowledge, and which bears little resemblance to S. serrifer in Belize. There are three black and white photos illustrating details of scutellation, and twenty-four exquisite pen and ink drawings by Stafford. These, especially those illustrating the heads of snakes, materially enhance the attractiveness of this volume and compare favorably with the finest such illustrations ever produced of Middle American reptiles.

Production values are generally high. A few photographs appear slightly out of focus in my review copy (e.g., Plate 95) or slightly underexposed (e.g., Plate 104), but most are good to excellent, and identification of many species can be had simply by reference to the photographs. The ‘P’ is missing from (P)late 35, and some lettering on Figure 18 appears broken or smudged.

Errors are relatively few. The authors mis-cite Meyer and Farneti Foster’s 1996 book on the frogs and toads of Belize as Garel and Meyer and Farneti Foster (1996), and they neglect to mention Garel and Matola’s 1996 guide to common snakes of Belize, although that work appears in the literature cited. Neither do they cite Beletsky’s 1998 ecotraveller’s wildlife guide to Belize and northern Guatemala, which treats the common vertebrates of Belize, including many reptiles. In the key to the species of Leptodeira the authors state that there is no postorbital stripe in L. septentrionalis when in fact their Plate 126 reveals clearly the presence of a postorbital stripe in that species.

The welcome inclusion of a section on the treatment of snake bite at the end of Chapter 5, authored by David A. Warrell, sets this guide apart from all others that deal with the reptile fauna of Belize.

Appendix 1 provides a tabular summary of ecological information for each species, and Appendix 2 provides a distributional summary, including a gazetteer and a map of Belizean localities. This is followed by a glossary of herpetological terms, a list of references, and an index to common and scientific names.