

Book Review

The Mammals of the Southern African Subregion

Reay H.N. Smithers

University of Pretoria, Pretoria, 1983
736 pp.
Price R100

A major new work of reference on the mammals of a zoogeographic region as important as Southern Africa is an event to be celebrated.

A book with 736 densely packed pages, some two thousand references and a weight of several kilos does not just happen. It is, of course, the culmination of an enormous effort by the author but its appearance is also indicative of a climate of interest, support and a potential readership which must help to sustain and stimulate an author and provide the financial backing for so large an enterprise.

This book received its initial impetus from the Mammal Research Institute of Pretoria University and its enthusiastic Director, John Skinner, but the Institute's good fortune in obtaining the services of Dr Reay Smithers is probably underrated in a foreword by the Chairman of the Institute's Council of Management.

With six important mammalian surveys or inventories behind him Reay Smithers has crowned a long and very distinguished career with *The Mammals of the Southern African Subregion*.

The book sets out to answer a widely felt need for an updated review of the mammals of Southern Africa and of the mass of information that has accrued since 1951 when Austin Robert's *Mammals of South Africa* was published.

Robert's book was the work of an elderly museum taxonomist poring over specimens. By contrast Dr Smithers has been an energetic participant in the explosion of field work that began in the sixties and has centred on the biology of living wild animals. He has put his main emphasis on habitats, habits, food, reproduction and, of course, distribution.

Dr Smithers understands very well that an animal is what it eats and his attention to diet and ecological habitat is, to my mind, the most significant and authoritative of his many contributions to knowledge in this volume. For example not only is the dietary ecology of some little-known viverrids explored in considerable detail but many of the data were collected by the author himself and his knowledge of animals in the field comes across in numerous ways.

Any reference work of this sort tends to reflect the uneven distribution of past research efforts so that the information on a popular group like the bovids vastly exceeds that on insectivores or bats. Presumably this imbalance explains why over a dozen pages can be devoted to the order, family and species of wild horses with separate profiles of two subspecies of mountain zebra, while there is no separate profile for a major subdivision of the insectivores, (which some consider an order in its own right), the erinaceomorphs, nor for the family Erinaceidae. Its South African representative, the humble hedgehog merits two pages.

However, it is as an inventory of a fauna that the work should be judged which means that species are the primary units, so that my quibbles about treatment of higher taxons are probably irrelevant to the central intention and function of the book.

The 'vertebral column' of this book is therefore a succession of the species, and the excellent species profiles are closely packed with well-researched data. It is perhaps reassuring for a general readership to have a decisive statement or opinion of each species' name and taxonomic status. Dr Smithers has provided this and his choices have been made on good authority. However, the uncertainties of nomenclature are the perennial uncertainties of biology which often provide a basis for further thoughts and research. For example, I would have liked some discussion on the status of the quagga in relation to the common zebra, and the samango monkey as regional representative of the *nicitans/mitis* group of monkeys. The taxonomy and zoogeography of such interrelated populations often imply broader problems of ecological adaptation and evolutionary history which are of significant general interest.

Comparison of related forms can be greatly assisted by illustration. The skull drawings by Clare Abbott are particularly good in this respect. The stippled, tinted portraits of species are a marked advance on the plates in Austin Roberts. However, a portrait of the common slit-faced bat has little resemblance to the living animal: (as the text says, it may be due to its having been overlooked)!

Maps are crisp and clear but the cartographer has had to face numerous difficulties. Is he dealing with a widely distributed but regionally variable form or a truly localized endemic? Can a well-known southern range be equated with a poorly known tropical range? What conventions will be used, single records on their own or joined up to enclose a total range? Should one employ question marks? Having faced these quandaries myself I can say I share Dr Smithers' dilemmas and generally find his solutions sensible. I did detect, however, a contradiction between the text that describes the migratory Wahlberg's bat making 'considerable movements' and a map which suggested a more narrowly restricted range.

Carping on such details should not obscure the central achievement of this book which is a major landmark in the literature on African mammals, and a storehouse of information that should be on the shelves of any students of African mammals. I know I shall be dipping into it for many years hence.

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