

## Elephants

Elephants hold a special place in our affections; more so since the slaughters sponsored by the ivory trade have halved their numbers in Africa in the space of a single decade.

In *The Roots of Heaven*, written way back in the 1950s, Romain Gary perceived elephants as symbols of freedom. Now, riding on the wave of publicity generated by the ivory trade ban imposed by CITES at Lausanne in October 1989, a spate of books have appeared on the subject of the world's largest living land mammals.

*The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Elephants* (Salamander Books, London, 1991, ISBN 0 86101 556 8, 188 pp., HB £18.95), has been compiled by a panel of distinguished authors and consultants headed by Keith Eltringham, who spent many years working among the elephants of Uganda. In a clear and concise text, aided by excellent colour graphics and photographs, the entire story of elephants is set out, from their origins among the long-vanished mammoths and stegodons to their current and contentious relationships with humankind. The section on the social life of elephants, reflecting the work carried out by Cynthia Moss and others in Kenya's Amboseli National Park, is particularly absorbing. Touching as it does on the close kinship bonds, which bind elephants together through their long lives, and their extraordinary ability to communicate over long distances, it may help to explain why we find these giant creatures so fascinating.

Unlike most of the elephant books published in recent months it also gives generous coverage to the Asian elephant, with an excellent contribution

on its place in Indian history and mythology by Professor D. K. Lahiri-Choudhury.

In fact this book has everything except a clear condemnation of the greed for ivory, which had brought some elephant populations to within a few years of extinction. Indeed, the graphics in the section devoted to the ivory trade I found uncharacteristically confusing, because they tended to suggest, quite wrongly in my view, that the quota system put in place by CITES was driving down the ivory trade at the very time that poaching was at its worst, and failed to show how the price of ivory fell like a stone as soon as the trade was banned.

No such criticism could be levelled at *The African Elephant: Last Days of Eden*, by Boyd Norton (Swan Hill Press, Shrewsbury, 1991, ISBN 1 85310 291 1, 128 pp., HB £16.95), and *The African Elephant: Twilight in Eden* by Roger L. DiSilvestro (John Wiley and Sons Ltd, Chichester, 1991, ISBN 0 471 53207 X, 206 pp., HB £19.95).

Both carry a foreword by Dr Richard Leakey, Director of the Kenya Wildlife Service, who fought and won a desperate battle against the Somali bandits who were butchering his country's elephants during the run-up to the ivory ban. Both books also hint in the similarity of their titles at the impending tragedy, which has hung for so long over the African elephant.

Where Boyd Morton scores is with his vast experience as a magazine writer, which sends him to the front line of the poaching war and rewards the reader with first-hand reportage in which you can smell both the blood and the beauty of wild Africa.

Lavishly illustrated, with coffee-table format and generous

use of colour photographs, both authors plead for a permanent end to the killing of elephants for ivory. By the time this review is published, CITES will have met in Japan and the decision to maintain or to lift the ban on ivory trading will have been made. But regardless of the outcome in Kyoto, these books have a united message for the world with regard to ivory: don't buy it; don't sell it; don't wear it.

Brian Jackman.

## Other mammals

*Mammals of the Southern African Subregion* by J. D. Skinner and R. H. N. Smithers (University of Pretoria, 1990, ISBN 0 86979 8022, 771 pp., HB £58.50 plus postage from Russel Friedmann Books, Millhouse, Firebell Alley, Surbiton KT6 6JB, Tel: 081 399 3100, Fax: 081 390 8292). This is the 2nd edition of a book that first appeared in 1983. African mammals have been well covered by a number of excellent books. This is no exception and probably represents the best available text on the mammals of a specific region of Africa. The extensively revised text covers 338 species and there are new colour plates.

The Southern African subregion is taken to include mainland Africa south of the Cunene/Zambezi rivers and its coastal waters, including those of the Prince Edward Islands. But the book has a wider scope than the title suggests because extensive information on distribution, ecology and population biology is provided for those species that occur both within and outside the region. Each family account starts with a general overview and a taxonomic key to genera. A similar introduction is given for each

genus. The species accounts provide information on taxonomy, distribution, habitat, habits, food and reproduction. Each account also has an excellent distribution map covering the entire known range. The text is complemented by 38 excellent colour plates illustrating every species and is also enhanced by numerous line drawings.

The book will be invaluable to a wide variety of people. The text is scientific but sufficiently readable to be of interest to non-scientists and the comprehensive bibliography is of value in its own right. This will be the standard reference work for the mammals of the region for many years to come and despite the relatively high price it represents excellent value for money.

*Simon Mickleburgh.*

**Wild Cat Species of the World** (Basset Publications, Plymouth, 1991, ISBN 0 946873 93 3, 163 pp., SB £12.50) is a handy reference book written by Richard Green, an experienced zoo keeper and wild animals manager. After a brief introduction to the characteristics of the felid family, he treats each species separately, covering vital statistics, description, distribution, habitat, habits, breeding, development of young, status and systematics, ending with the International Species Indexing System (ISIS) numbers for the species and subspecies.

Green uses Hemmer's classification of the Felidae into 37 species, except for treating the Eurasian wild cat *Felis silvestris* and the African wild cat *F. lybica* as separate species rather than as subspecies. Whatever the views of various taxonomists, this is useful for reference because of the differences that exist in characteristics, range and habitat. This applies equally to

treating the lynx group as separate species.

Green includes the mysterious onza of the Sierra Madre Occidentale in Mexico, noting that it has 'not been fully accepted in scientific circles'. Length, weight and dental formula are taken from a 4-year-old female, alleged onza taken in Mexico in 1986. They are within the parameters of puma *F. concolor*, but several physical characteristics are said to distinguish the onza. It needs investigation by leading taxonomists.

Given how little is known in detail about cats in the wild, some statements in this book can be challenged, but that does not detract from its overall value.

*Peter Jackson.*

## Fish

**Fishes of the Great Barrier Reef and Coral Sea** by John E. Randall, Gerald R. Allen and Roger C. Steene (University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1991, ISBN 0 8248 1346 4, 564 pp., HB \$US60) is stunningly illustrated by the underwater photographs of Roger Steene and beautiful fish paintings by Roger Swainson. There is information on more than 1100 species, approximately 95 per cent of those known in the region.

Following the style of some of Randall's previous books, it contains a map, a general introduction, and family and species descriptions. There is a quick reference guide to 106 families and the introduction outlines some of the features of a coral reef, the study area, some of the threats it faces and some of the measures taken to protect this heritage. Some of the species listed are widely distributed in tropical oceans so the book will

also be useful outside its intended geographical range.

Information is summarized for each family and individual species are described, giving common and scientific names, distinguishing characteristics, distribution, some information on habitat preferences and abundance, and synonyms. For species with morphologically different phases separate photographs are included to aid in their identification. It would, however, have been useful to add subheadings throughout the text to make it easier for the reader to find information on specific topics.

Until recently, the most easily available information on marine and coral fishes has been restricted to commercial species. Now there is a growing awareness of the plight of marine fishes, in particular, those species that occur in the aquarium trade. It would have been extremely useful, therefore, to find more information on abundance as well as status in the wild, because we can no longer assume that marine fishes are safe just because they occur in such a vast area. The lack of this type of information in a book of this kind probably reflects our current state of knowledge regarding marine fishes in general. Considerable efforts are being made by international groups to address this problem. Nevertheless, in spite of this criticism, this new publication is extremely timely and will undoubtedly make a significant contribution to our present knowledge of coral reef fishes world-wide.

*Patricia Almada-Villela.*

Richard Fitter apologizes that in his review of Colin Willock's book (*Oryx*, 26, 54) he overlooked the account of the vicuña saga in Peru on pages 126–127.