Book Reviews

ZOOLOGY

Bats

By Phil Richardson. 2011. A Firefly Book. Firefly Books Ltd., 66 Leek Crescent, Richmond Hill, Ontario L4B 1H1. 128 pages. $19.95 CAD. Paper.

Phil Richardson is to be congratulated for producing an informative and easy-to-read book about bats. The density of information is high and the level of accuracy is good. There is a wide range of illustrations introducing the bats. The sampling of bats is world-wide, but the focus is more European than North American.

The Table of Contents is simplified, making it easy for the reader to orient within the book. The index is thorough and helpful. The reader can learn about echolocation and behaviour, reproduction and diversity. There also is information about bat houses and conservation of bats. But the book is short (128 pages) and the depth of treatment of any subject is relatively brief.

There are places where the book could be more helpful. For example, many people are interested in "bat detectors", instruments that allow them to eavesdrop on the biosonar calls of bats. The topic is covered, but details are not provided either of suppliers or of the types of bat detectors available. But, with internet access, a reader can probably find a bat detector to buy.

While the book contains many illustrations, there is considerable variation in quality; many are disappointing. The photograph on the cover is an example: a good shot of a flying bat, but not really showing the animal to advantage. It is useful to be able to see the bat's face, and not when it is squinting. This having been said, my favourite picture is the one of a lesser long-eared bat on page 88.

The book presents an outdated classification of bats. The suborders Megachiroptera and Microchiroptera (vulgarized as microbats and megabats) are no longer current. There is no mention of the family Miniopteri-dae, although there is a photograph of a bent-winged bat (that belongs to this family). A book published in 2011 should have presented changes in our views of the classification of bats that have been in effect for at least five years. It is astonishing that a leaf-nosed bat from South and Central America, would be called a "vesper bat" (page 36).

In my opinion, the main drawback of the book is the absence of information about bats and disease. On page 87 there is one reference to the potential for blood-feeding vampire bats to spread rabies. There is no mention of Ebola, Hendra virus, SARS, or histoplasmosis – all diseases associated with bats. There are no details about how bat biologists can protect themselves against rabies or histoplasmosis. "Public health" does not appear in the table of contents or in the index. The photograph on page 117 of a young person holding a bat but not wearing gloves will be jarring to many people concerned about the hazards associated with handling bats.

I am sure that many bat biologists will appreciate the treatment of conservation and the introduction to the diversity of bats. Alerting the reader to the ravages of White Nose Syndrome in the American northeast is timely, but there is no mention of bats being killed at turbines at "wind farms". Many bat biologists would have expected information about bats and diseases that can affect people. It is difficult to give a public talk about bats and not mention rabies or histoplasmosis. One could not make a presentation about bats at a school without alerting the students to the reality that bats bite in self defence and you do not want to be bitten by one.

Bats are utterly fascinating and Richardson's book is a good starter … but the reader needs to approach it with caution because there are some things that the reader should know and will not find in the book.

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